



EVER  
&  
ANON

Issue #13 July 2026

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#### Contributor Guidelines:

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

Contributors may submit their PDF zines via email to [apa@everanon.org](mailto:apa@everanon.org).

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

Issue #14 – July 21<sup>st</sup>: Intraparty Conflict

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

Issue #16 – September 21<sup>st</sup>: GM-Dickery

Issue #17 – October 21<sup>st</sup>: Negotiating with Monsters

Issue #18 – November 21<sup>st</sup>: Best/Worst Dice Roll Ever!

**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 #13 (ver. 1) – July 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme:

*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?*

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 *Erica L. Frank* or *Elf: blah-blah-blah...*, if there are no quotes around the *blah-blah-blah*, that's probably a comment to Erica.

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.<sup>1</sup> *Alarums & Excursions* was the first APA formed specifically to cover roleplaying games.<sup>2</sup>

*"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."*<sup>3</sup>

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."*<sup>4</sup>

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.

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur\\_press\\_association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_press_association)

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alarums\\_and\\_Excursions](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](mailto: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.)

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## 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

# In the Hall of Stone

By Patrick Brady. London, England. June 2026. The following is copyright P Brady (2026). All graphics are created by me or are copyright free images some of which *may* be AI generated. This is a continuation of my zine first started in 1988-ish in Alarums and Excursions. *The name of my zine was/is a reference to my old Empire of the Petal Throne campaign based around the Clan of the Hall of Stone. I'm keeping the name for reasons of nostalgia.*

**General question:** Any advice on sourcing copyright free graphics for this zine? Much of what I find seems to contain a lot of AI and I'd like to not. Links to non-AI graphics / advice will be appreciated.

**Mike Cule.** I agree with you on UK politics. Thank you for your reasonable and balanced statements. It's good to read you again.

**Brian Misiaszek.** Thank you for the Twsha. I particularly enjoyed the League of Nations report.

**Matt Stevens.** Re: your comments to Mike Cule. The anti-trans/"gender critical" movement in the UK is extremely well funded and powerful. It only takes one billionaire.

**Fire Drake.** Terve! I spent time in Helsinki recently, I hope you had a good trip to Finland.

**ELF.** I have played/refereed in a few superhero RPGs, and thank you for your insights on this genre. The following are my ill-considered ramblings in reaction to your comments.

1. **Translation follies.** One of my pet genre peeves was the conversion of the Watchmen comic (which I like a lot) into the movie by Zac Snyder (which I dislike). Alan Moore was against making the movie from his comic and seems to feel that such a translation from comic format to a movie isn't possible without losing important parts of what he was trying to do. He doesn't just dislike it; he considers it to be impractical. I've seen a lot of movies of comic books and games and (IMHO) only a few I thought were good. Could we say the same about conversions from comic to game? We inevitably lose something in translation? The Watchmen game supplements for DC heroes really highlights that problem, with respect to its writers it conveys little of the feeling of the comic. But should we expect it to?
2. **Does death matter?** The *characters* in the comics don't know they can't die. So, in the comics, Spiderman "nearly dies" often and he *doesn't* know he is fictional and has plot immunity, if he did, he'd be Deadpool 😊. The meta is that that this won't happen, but as a reader if you are sure of that (so I guess, lose that magical immersion), it takes the tension out of the story. That can also be true in an RPG. Do we need the possibility of failure/death for immersion?

I think I've just taken three hundred words to agree with you 😊

**Joshua Kronengold.** Glad to hear your health news was ok and I enjoyed your zine.

Everyone else RAEBNC!

## A Question: Is this Ok?

The following are my thoughts on a problem in game design. I am looking for help on this and if you have an opinion, I'd be interested in hearing your view.



Special Security **SO13**

### **Context – Spider Spirit character background.**

This is for my “Daywatch” campaign and I have no intention of trying to publish it for profit, but I would like to do it well. I have been working on playable character backgrounds for this urban fantasy setting. One of those is a line of supernatural creatures based around spiders. I have been researching spider-spirit traditions in different cultures, by which I mean groups with major continuing myths about spider-spirits, demigods or gods. None of the above is the problem. I quite like doing this sort of research. As far as I can see there are three main cultural centres for spider-spirit myths, West African, Japanese and Indigenous American (such as those of the Lakota Nation). I don't doubt there are others, but please accept that assertion for the sake of argument while I explain the problem:

### **The Problem.**

I would like to include real-world traditions for authenticity and detail rather than have generic spider-people. I would like to handle them with some degree of respect and accuracy. Many years ago the estimable **Victor Raymond** said that “*the English have politeness as a replacement for morality*”. Which is one of the wittiest insults I've ever received! Whatever its accuracy, I do hold politeness as a virtue or at least an aspiration. I do not wish to be impolite to these cultures by using their stories carelessly and my particular concern is with Indigenous American traditions, because of their history of oppression and the cultural appropriation. Having some white British guy interpreting *their* myths could be problematic. Do I translate these real-world traditions and run the risk cultural appropriation, or I do *not* try to include them and completely ignore them as a major real-world source of inspiration? I don't think the Japanese government is going to care if I write about Japanese spider monsters, even if I do it badly. But I think this is a broader problem about the ethics of mining other cultures for game material. How do we do this ethically?

### **Possible elements of a solution?**

*Arguably there is no way to respectfully model someone else's real religion in a roleplaying game. So having our Spider- Paladin worship Whoopsie the Sun God is the only way to go?*

*Authorisation. This is just for my campaign, so like five people will ever read it. I'm not asking the Ghanaian government for permission to write it. What are low-overhead ethical guidelines?*

*Am I overthinking it? This is just my campaign, not a commercial project. I am not trying to profit from any of it. The Lakota Nation is unlikely to take offence at my inadequate grasp of their history. So is this problem mainly in my head? But that is easy for me to say, and is self-serving. Does non-commercial make a difference?*

### **What do you think?**

## Ignorable theme: Interesting fantasy/sf race.

I'd like to introduce you to the Strauss. Inspired by the Roger Zelazny story "A night in lonesome October", Stiina Varis and maybe a little bit of David Jason's "Danger Mouse".

### Strauss.

"Captain America, but he's a hedgehog."

Project: STRAUSS was one of several research projects trying to develop new combat enchantments to counter to the undead troops fielded by the Nazis. In 1940 the research team at Albemarle Station in Coventry, England, made a breakthrough. This project used animal models because existing supernatural creatures and active-duty soldiers were too valuable to be wasted in research. Instead, Witches would create Familiars from animals they already knew how to enchant (mice, toads and hedgehogs etc). and these would be the platforms for advanced magical experimentation.



By 1940 the sub-levels of the Coventry bunker had walls of cages holding test creatures with stable and extraordinary enchantments. The first stage of Project: STRAUSS was a success. But on November 14<sup>th</sup> Coventry was the target of "Moonlight Sonata", a Luftwaffe bombing raid and a cover for a Vampirsturm unit attack on the research facility. Casualties on both sides were almost 100% and the upper levels of the research complex were destroyed. Although Project: ELGAR was rescued, Project: STRAUSS was believed lost in the rubble of the devastated bunker. Albemarle Station was sealed to minimise the risk of vampire infection. But the STRAUSS line had been engineered to be tough. With their Witches dead they were trapped in the lower levels of the research facility. Breaking out of their cages, they ate the remains, the explosive from the shells and the bugs attracted by dripping water. A subset of the Familiars survived the first winter underground. Unable to get out, they reproduced. Their experimental enchantments, lacking normal limits and safeguards, were inheritable and they recombined. What magic had created, evolution refined. Over decades, the STRAUSS line evolved in the harsh dark of the bunker. They became smaller and lost their pigmentation, they formed a society and developed community, culture and even religion. Programmed to be soldiers, they cooperated to first improve their survival chances and then to find a way out. It took ten generations and 73 years for the STRAUSS to dig their way to daylight. The world they reached was alien. The project that created them, forgotten.

Project: STRAUSS succeeded in creating a super-soldier. But not in the way anyone expected. Modern STRAUSS look like a dwarf albino hedgehog but are what ten generations of evolutionary gradient did to the experimental test subjects. Based on a Witch's familiar, they carry enchantments from an experimental programme being tested for emergency combat deployment in World War Two. As a character, Strauss are fun to play because they *think* like Batman but *look* like a tiny hedgehog. The nearest fictional equivalent would be the character of "Cap" from the Pokemon: Horizons series (the Strauss predate him by many years). He looks cute, but he always is the grown-up in the room. We use a point build system. A Strauss has a lot of disadvantages. Their supernatural abilities include human-level intelligence, supernaturally toughness (can ignore 9mm pistol rounds) and secrete a range of chemistry including spit acidic enough to eat through metal. Strauss also has an arcane bond with the team, providing good communication with their team-mates. As the referee, I find playing Strauss a lot of fun.

## Letters from Vindolanda

I was raised on The Wall (Hadrian's Wall) that goes from sea to sea across the north of England. This ancient megastructure was normal to me as a child. It defines the area; the town of Wallsend (population 43,000-ish) is so called because it is where The Wall *ends* on the east coast. You get used to it. As a child it was not a wonder, it was just *there*, a piece of built-geology. On a school trip to one of the ancient forts, a place called Vindolanda, we saw some letters to the Roman garrison on display. As I remember it, those letters survived because they were inscribed on wooden slates, paper being expensive, and discarded in a rubbish pit where midden chemistry preserved them. Like those dead bodies they find preserved in peat bogs, it's something to do with alkalinity. As a child the content of the letters of Vindolanda were not interesting to me, they mainly wrote about the weather (which is notorious) and relationships, of no interest to my schoolboy mind. I now realise the wonder of them. But the people who wrote spoke of small things, because life is made of small things. It gave me an understanding of the experience of the end of a civilisation. Being British helps with that of course. When my father was a child, our Empire was the largest the world had ever seen. That's just an observation, not a defence of the iniquities of our Imperialism. But the change was quick, in 1935 we were a global hyper-power and by 1955 we were a province. Some of my countrymen are still waiting for that to be fixed, for the pendulum to swing back. It's the lie the soft-fascists sell so well, the return to lost glory. But history has no reverse gear. We assumed we were exceptional, but we were not, because nobody is. What this taught me is that there is no pendulum. Things do not return to "normal", what is gone is lost, for better or worse. Nothing is going to reset or be corrected. Not then, not now, not for us and not for you. Yesterday was the hottest day in May in our recorded history, with highest maximum and minimum temperatures. *Unpleasantly* hot. I've lived in many places, if it's like this in London, England now, I can only imagine what Phoenix or Houston will be like in twenty years, or New Delhi, or Bamako... This is just the beginning: it always is.

All Empires fall, but that is not always a catastrophe. Britain was a nicer place twenty years after its Empire ended. After Rome fell, Byzantium remained strong for a thousand years, but they never regained the West. No Byzantine army returned to Gaul. There is no pendulum.

Western civilisation (if there is such a thing) is in trouble. I can't say how this will play out. It may be that Europe is pushed to become a centralised state because of external threats. It could also balkanise and be victimised by the new global predators. Europe in the twenty first century could be like China in the nineteenth, exploited, derided and divided as in the "*When Gravity Fails*" SF series by George Alec Effinger (which has a supplement for the Cyberpunk RPG).

We are certainly in the age of the oligarch, individuals with more power than countries act unfettered. Charles Stross (author of excellent "*Laundry Files*" series) said it best, when he pointed out that we live in the world where James Bond failed.

I feel like an extra in "*Moonraker*", the book not the movie, and 007 is dead.

I read William Gibson's cyberpunk forty years ago; I am living there now. Less chrome, certainly, but I don't leave the house without my phone, and an algorithm decides what I can hear.

In a drone-swarmed, kill-chained world, Gibson's flechette guns seem... quaint.

Perhaps, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but an influencer?

I shall talk of small things, of weather and friends.

Because life is made of small things and now I realise that this is *my* letter from Vindolanda.

Goodbye for this month! Stay cool and stay lucky!

# Comman Baloney Face

## THE NEVERENDING SAGA #9

THE ASS IS STRONG WITH THIS ONE

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ART BY ME AND DAVID C. SULLIVAN III

The next three IgTheme's don't inspire much from me, so I may start a semi-regular feature, "Weird Mechanic of the Month Club." We'll see! In the meantime...

### THREE THESES ON FANTASY RACES

#### **The IgTheme**

"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?"

I play humans. Sometimes they're immortal humans, or stubby alcoholic humans, or miniature humans with pointy hats. Other times they're humans with funky ears, or bad dentistry, or they have ugly head-ridges and talk about honor a lot. Sometimes they drink blood, shoot lasers out of their eyes, or fly around in their underwear. Let's face it, though: They're all humans, in one way or another.

Trouble is we don't have any good, real world alternatives to humans off which to model personalities. At best we have animals, and while some animals are very smart, communications haven't evolved beyond "Koko want banana banana banana." Thoughts less inane than those are, for now, hidden from us.

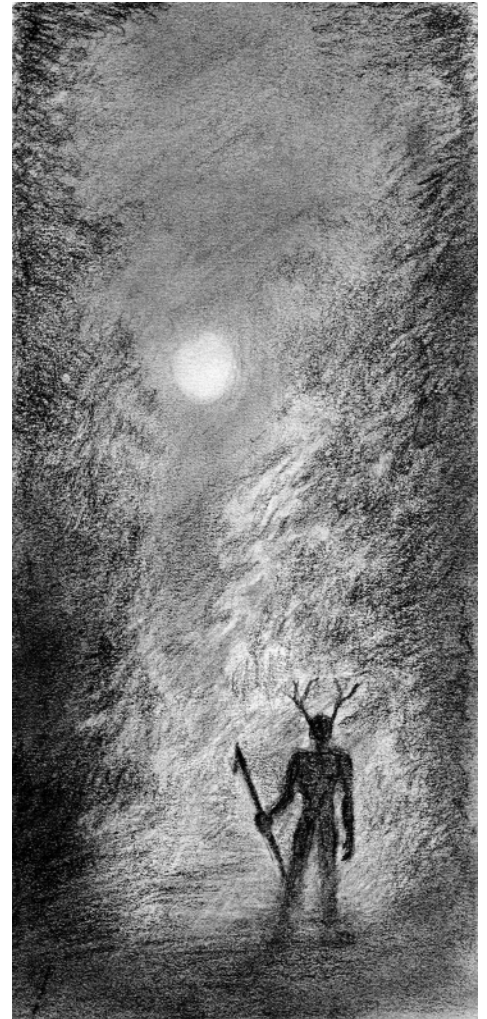
#### **Tolkien and Race**

Fantasy "races," as we know them today, are clearly derived from Tolkien<sup>1</sup>, and to understand them I think we need to look at his historical context. Here in the Americas we see "race" in very broad terms: White, Black, Asian, and others to fill out edge cases. There's an older concept of "race," though, one that persisted into the early 20th century: "race" as a synonym for "nation" or ethnic group, a group with a shared ancestry, history and culture.

Tolkien, as a philologist and folklorist, would have been enmeshed in that framework. Historical linguistics were indispensable in working out a "race's" history -- only recently supplanted by DNA analysis -- and that was reflected in old-timey terms such as "the Celtic race," "the Anglo-Saxon race," "the Semitic race" and so forth. Language families and "race" were intertwined.

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<sup>1</sup> Don't bother arguing. The original D&D races were Elves, Dwarves and Hobbits, and they only changed Hobbits to "Halflings" after the Tolkien estate complained. Gygax denied the influence but he was clearly lying.



Typically, the most archaic linguistic evidence we have is in the form of epics, myths and fairy tales, so it's no surprise that many scholars, like Tolkien, were trained in linguistics *and* folklore, and possibly the greatest pioneers in both fields were the Brothers Grimm.

The Grimms' work had a *political* as well as academic purpose: To show that Germans had a rich shared culture -- just like the Greeks, whose independence struggle was a *cause celebre* of the time -- and their *volk* deserved a unified, independent state. Nationalists across Europe followed their example, most notably Elias Lonnröt with the *Kalevala*, who established the precedent that every "race" needed its own heroic, mythological epic.

I think this is the necessary context for Middle Earth. Tolkien came up with an imaginary language, Elvish, along with its many descendants. It was only natural to follow that with a national epic, a *Kalevala* for the Elves, and *voilà!* *The Silmarillion* was born.

Now if all this talk of "races" and German nationalism makes you nervous... that's understandable. Nazi ideology combined "scientific" racism with the ethnic-linguistic categories of old nationalists. While Hitler didn't care much about folklore (except as an artistic subject, like in Wagnerian opera), other Nazis like Himmler very much did. Check out *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (1985) by Goodrick-Clarke if you're interested.

Luckily none of this reflects much on Tolkien. While an arch conservative in many ways, he detested war and war-mongers like Hitler had no appeal to him. Additionally, Tolkien was an academic who *knew what he was talking about*, while Hitler was a crank who made his shit up, and Tolkien could tell his talk of "Aryans" was ill-informed garbage.

### Fantasy Races ... of the World!

IMO it wouldn't be fair to call Tolkien a racist, in the conventional sense, let alone a Nazi, but his perspective was certainly Eurocentric, and that extended to D&D as well.

Recently I heard someone say "Humans, being the best race, are clear stand-ins for white people in D&D, while the others stand for people of color." This is wrong on two levels: Humans were *not* the best race until 3E -- you only played a 1E human if you wanted a Paladin -- and *all of the races were white*, not just humans. (See David Sutherland's illo from the *Players Handbook*, on the right, if you don't believe me.) I wouldn't call it racist (I try to show restraint with those claims), but it was certainly provincial and *naive*.

I *would* like to see fantasy RPGs become less Eurocentric, not only for social-justice reasons, but to provide more variety, and to introduce us to unfamiliar world traditions. One way to start would be to recognize that Tolkien-esque races *are* European, and if you want to go beyond Europe, your fantasy races should be based on non-European folklore. Nothing depresses me more than finding a D&D supplement for Fantasy Africa, Fantasy India, Fantasy Oceania or wherever and seeing the usual Dwarves, Elves and Halflings.



There are many, many legendary creatures who could be used as PC races; you can look through [Wikipedia's List of Mythic Humanoids](#) to get a sense of the possibilities. If you want to generalize I'd say these are some of the most common types across the world:

- *Little People*. Tiny, mischievous goblin- or gnome- like beings, often with magical powers.
- *Nature Spirits*. Beautiful but otherworldly people who hide in the wilderness.
- *Ogres*. Big, brutal, often hairy, usually quite stupid.
- *Shapeshifters*. Animals that take human form and *visa versa*.

Some standard fantasy races fit easily in these categories: Gnomes are "Little People," Elves are "Nature Spirits," Orcs are "Ogres." However, I feel that modern Dwarves have very specific cultural associations and don't travel very well<sup>2</sup>, while Hobbits/Halflings don't seem like much of a fantasy race at all.

Translating non-European folkloric people into RPG races, using these archetypes, may or may not be straightforward. Purely cosmetic differences can be handled easily, while weird powers or disadvantages will take more work. Additionally, most fantasy races would have to "Tolkienized," converted from sinister, solitary wilderness predators to sociable beings who can walk into villages without being lynched. I think that work would be worth it, though.

## Comments on E&A #12

### Cover

I want to say that I love artwork from "The Golden Age of Illustration," like this. I know the more recent stuff gets more love from contributors, so wanted to give the older pictures their due. Are there file specs for cover images? I could look for some of my classic art favorites.

### Roger Bell-West

I agree with you on the "Church of No-Redeeming Virtues." I wonder if some of that characterization was a reaction to the Satanic ritual abuse panic of the 1980s. Looking back on it today, it looks even more insidious than I remembered; not as bad as the Salem Witch Trials, certainly, but not as far off as you'd think. That panic not only targeted D&D players, but goths, occultists, and non-conformists in general, and for teenagers in small American towns it must have been particularly oppressive. It's no surprise that gamers who lived through that would come to see religion as a brutal racket. (I didn't see it that way: Massachusetts was part of the panic, but the liberal Protestant churches had little to do with it. I didn't blame *them* for the crazy.)

Yes, "resolution"/"grain size" is an important distinction. I'd note that it's never been 100% consistent within systems: Combat may be resolved on a blow-by-blow basis while a single Library Use roll may cover an entire day's research.

Ideally we'd have "fractalized" rules that cover different resolution levels. So take interrogations, which **Patrick Zoch** covered last issue. You could handle them three different ways:

---

<sup>2</sup> European Dwarf: "Aye, time for some ale!"

Japanese Dwarf: "Aye, time for some sake!"

African Dwarf: "Aye, time for some palm wine!"

Space Dwarf: "Aye, time for some tribble piss!"

1. *GM Fiat*. "After a few hours of interrogation he confesses to the murder."
2. *One Roll*. "A twelve? OK. He demands a lawyer, and doesn't say a word."
3. *A Combination of Rolls and Roleplaying*. A lengthy cat-and-mouse game between the suspect and the player characters.

Unfortunately this would require a lot of work from the designer, as well as a lot of pages, which would lose games the coveted "rules light" label. Sometimes this hobby can be dumb.



### John Redden

I'm glad surgery went well!

Also glad you liked *Chronicles of the Ancient Empire*. Funny enough this was the title of my first A&E zine, way back in (OMG) issue # 103, and I've always liked the phrase.

*Orwell*: Oh I'm a big George Orwell fan, and read through his complete 4-volume collection of essays and letters in grad school. He influenced me in many ways: In my prose style, in my politics, and (on the other side of the ledger) my irritating contrariness.

### Patrick Brady

Welcome back!

I liked your summary of Aristotle's religious ideas. As you might know, there's a framework that says he was part of a worldwide "Axial Age," a flowering of philosophy from Greece to China and India in the 6th to 3rd centuries BC. What's interesting is that many of their greatest thinkers (Aristotle, Confucius, the Buddha, etc.) *didn't* repudiate the old Bronze Age gods and their mythic hijinks so much as ignore them. Sure, perform the rites and keep the gods happy, they seemed to say, but true wisdom comes elsewhere. This wasn't universal -- Jews and Zoroastrians certainly didn't feel that way -- but it was the dominant trend.

### Myles Corcoran

"The fumble chance in World of Darkness d10 dice pools increased with the size of the pool": IIRC that only happened when you went from 1D to 2D, when the fumble chance went from 10% to 11%. After that it declined. My feeling is that a 1% difference isn't a big deal, and the system is pretty elegant otherwise. I agree with your broader point about the need to work out the numbers. (Even if you don't care about numbers, the numbers care about you!) Also agree about Keir Starmer. As I said to **Michael**, his reactionary stances are utterly baffling to me.

### Brian Rogers

They dropped Comliness?! For Ghad's sake, why? I guess if you had to drop *something* Comliness would be the stat to lose, but it was sitting there, not doing anyone any harm. Plus we have new slang about Looksmoxing and Mogging to use with the stat.

"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?'" Alright, I LOL'd at this one. Yeah, considering Nick Fury has been around *since World War Two*, I'd say it's long past time to let the poor schmuck die. Besides, if you're going to have a 65-year-old comics universe, why be so stingy in inventing in new characters? Find a

random woman in Mumbai selling sandwiches and make *her* the next Watcher. South Asian readers will appreciate it.

### Brian Misiarzsek

*Pulp Cthulhu Talents*: One of these days I'm going to get a copy of *Pulp Cthulhu*, but sadly there were no copies at my FLGS on my last visit. So I'm going in semi-blind here. Anyway, my preference is for these to be *diegetic*, i.e., they can be explained in game world, non-mechanical terms. So for example, 2FT had a "Plastic Face" gimmick (like what Richard Benson had) which gave heroes bonuses on Disguise rolls. But how is someone with "Muscles of Bronze" different from someone with a high Strength score? Why not just give heroes higher ability or skill scores?

*"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."* Note that's Roger's position, not mine! Although I don't disagree with that statement, not exactly. Still, we should remember it can be a double-edged sword. When Nazis purged language of "Jewish" typefaces (as **Avram** mentioned) that was a "political" act. I now live in a country where previously apolitical institutions are being politicized all the time, and not in the right direction!

Understand that as the background for what I'm writing. I live in a country where two sides don't talk to, and are consequently terrified of, each other. I think the right is more to blame for this, but I also think left-wing advocacy can be terribly unpersuasive and helped bring us to this point.

### Patrick Riley

"The medieval Catholic Church could fit in a 'generic' fantasy game": The problem is with the Cleric class, which vaguely resembles Catholic fighting orders, but nothing else. My *Domain of the Dead* D&D campaign had a pseudo-Orthodox church, but I had to change the Cleric: I took away its armor proficiencies and gave it extra skills instead, which seemed closer to a "generic" priest class IMO. (I wrote up the class in an old A&E, along with other Cleric variants.)

AI: "the other narrative I hear about AI is how we all should be embracing and using it in our work." Oh, certainly. I'm almost certain this is a financial bubble, propped up by VC, and AI is being pushed on us by unimaginative, soulless ghouls.<sup>3</sup> After the bubble pops, though, I think we'll begin to see intelligent adaptation; think of [pets.com](https://www.pets.com) in the dot-com bubble versus [chewy](https://www.chewy.com) today.

### Lisa Padol

"Anything in particular you want to play/run?" Y'know ... I'm not sure. A couple years ago I joined a local group for one session. It was over Zoom, the players were middle-aged guys, the rules were 5E D&D, and we were fighting orcs. I quickly decided "this is lame" and quit. I felt a little bad, and maybe I should have stuck with it? I feel burned out on GMing after my pandemic campaign, but I might have to get what I'd want.



<sup>3</sup> I keep thinking of AI-promoter Mark Zuckerberg, who spent billions building a virtual world ... and used it for business meetings.

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I don't want to be too cranky about the Game Jams. If people are having fun they should keep doing it. Heck, I did something like a "game jam" when I was a teenager, when I was challenged to write an RPG in under an hour. I did it, although said friends told me it was lame. (\*shrug\* They were teenagers, what can you expect?) One issue is that making it a "game" seals it off as a complete product. A variant, a module, or a supplement would be part of a broader field.

### Avram Grumer

"An adventure in a chocolate factory": It's funny, the day after I sent in my zine, I realized E&Ars would provide published examples of Chocolate Adventures. (It also reminds me of our old discussion of Max Brenner's "Chocolate by the Bald Man.")

Love President Frank Bigg, and it's too bad "the Bigg Government" is a more British convention, because that sounds so American that it hurts. Also, it evokes "Star Spangled Ice Cream" in the 2000s, which had flavors like Less GoverMint, Iraqi Road, and I Hate the French Vanilla. (It didn't last long.)

It could've been Brandon Blackmoor, but it's been so long I can't confirm. I know there were a million libertarian A&Ers: Add Quentin Long and (of course) Barry Gold to your list, and like most white male American tweens, I was briefly one myself. So I sympathize with them, but libertarians seem uniquely prone to espousing their ideologies through space wizards and barbarian babes. I don't remember any Marxists doing that sh\*t.

*Noun v. verb games*: What you're describing -- in which hit chance only depends on attacker's stats -- was true for many old RPGs: *Boot Hill*, *Top Secret*, *The Fantasy Trip*, *Traveller*... What separated them from D&D and *RuneQuest* was (a) an emphasis on ranged over melee combat and/or (b) an interest in "realism" as opposed to D&D's heroic fantasy. Even then it's not so clear-cut, as GURPS has active defenses while its predecessor TFT did not, for example. It seems to be more of an old-fashioned thing which *Monsterhearts* has revived a bit.

### Erica Frank

*Superhero RPGs*: "You can't play Superman in any TTRPG I know of." What about *DC Heroes*, in its assorted versions? I know it would depend a lot on his power level, which has varied a lot over the years. (Can he really move planets these days?) Hell, even in *Two-Fisted Tales* I statted out the original Superman, who needed a Muscle score of 65 to leap "an eighth of a mile"; I built him at a Legendary power level with points to spare. But any point-build system with logarithmic scales could work, in theory.

Lethality is a whole other issue. One general point that I'm happy to make -- for a range of genres, not just supes -- is that the boundary between "out of a fight" and "dead" is far too narrow. There are many intermediate steps: winded; knocked out; needs eventual medical attention; needs *immediate* medical attention; needs immediate medical attention *and* weeks of physical therapy; needs medical attention, therapy, and *even then* will be permanently disabled; and *then* there's dead. *Champions* simulated this better than most, but we can do better overall.

I'll add that I really like the Hero System, although more to muck around with than to play. I love the preposterous characters, like their example of The Landlord, a character that spent so many points on his base that it covered the entire planet. I wanted to build a companion, The Evictor, a guy whose attacks had so much knockback they could smash trespassers into orbit.... Also, gotta love *Murphy's Rules*.

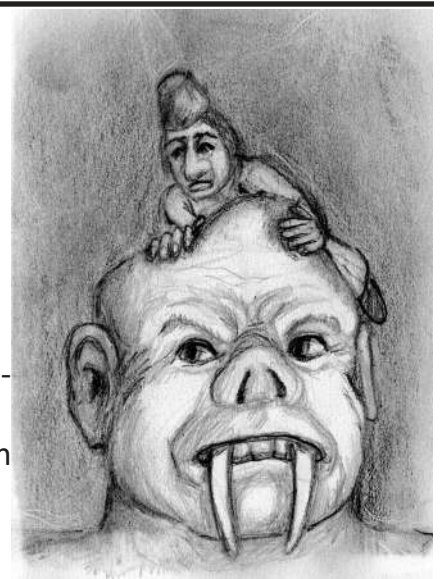
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I assume your comments to Pum are actually to me? (My God, the chaos I've unleashed!) That *does* look like a lot of work to collapse all those mini-maps together.

### Joshua Kronengold

Glad to hear your health is OK!

*Books by goldbugs and ancaps dudes:* Yeah, I remember when my dad handed me *Enemy of the State* by F. Paul Wilson. I was fascinated by the topic of revolutions and rebellions -- I still am! -- but my enthusiasm drained when the book turned out to be an endless libertarian and gold-bug rant. As I said to **Avram**, I don't know why ancaps et. al. turn out this way. Many Marxists write novels, but they rarely fill their books with lectures on dialectical materialism. (Unless Communist governments order them to, of course.) They show workers as heroes, rich men as bastards, and get on with it.



*Ghost Dog:* "I would have wanted ... 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." These are fine goals! In many ways I think they'd be tough to do under traditional theater-of-the-mind RPG styles, and require more LARP-like conditions. Mechanics aren't really the issue IMO.

*Over the Edge:* First of all, I really liked the background in *Over the Edge*, and thought it was a lot of fun. More pertinent, though, was that the mechanics were *highly original and innovative*. Every game up to that point had fixed lists of stats: abilities, skills, knacks, what have you. Tweet threw all that away and said players could make up their own traits. And ... it worked! It was a revolutionary new design. Here's the question, though: How many new systems are *that* innovative?

Obviously, if someone wants to design a new system they should do so. I'm fighting against the assumption -- seemingly common among the indie crowd -- that every cool idea needs a new system attached to it, which is what a "game" implies.

### Jim Vassilakos

*My fantasy world:* "How much is intended for the players and how much is for the GM?" The *Domain of the Dead* Wiki was for players. The other stuff is for outside readers, ex-players, and myself, to help keep track of it all.

In my daydream universe, I would have a small staff -- maybe a linguist and an artist -- and we would fill out the background, both historically and regionally. We'd publish six setting books, the three I described plus three others, all spread across the world. Each one would tell history *from the perspective of that region*, while the true story of the world would remain hidden (although we'd encourage readers to speculate). *Then* we would come out with a giant volume that would tell the genuine story, from Creation to the end. I think it's a wonderful vision, and all I'd need to realize it would be vast amounts of money.

SEE YOU LATER, FOLKS!

## Ignorable Theme for E&A #13

*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?*

The number of fantasy or science fiction species that have turned me off or at least made me roll my eyes outnumber those that I thought were interesting. For the sake of keeping in tone with the positive slant of the Igtheme question, I'll not list the ones I don't like.

I like the anthropomorphic species from Ironclaw and Jadeclaw. I consider myself furry-adjacent and I like the aesthetic; to concur with Ursula Vernon, I just like "animal people." This includes both "macro" (*Zootopia*, *Iron/Jadeclaw*) and "micro" (*Redwall*, *Mausritter*) and "realistic" (*Bunnies & Burrows*) depictions. One challenge when dealing with animal-based species is making them mechanically distinct, especially when their "base" animal species are closely related.

For generic fantasy, my default mental picture is a human-centric world, but when I created my City of 1000 Names setting, I deliberately forced myself to incorporate many races. In addition to humans, halflings, dwarves, elves, and gnomes, there were goblins, kobolds, gnolls, orcs, and aerion (bird-people). My players created leafkind (shrub-people) and roos (kangaroo-people). Iguanya (lizard-people) and rakasha (cat-people) were added through adventures. I particularly liked how I integrated the goblins and kobolds into the city's culture and political structure and of the two campaigns I ran in the setting, there was a standout NPC of each I enjoyed playing.

Some of the following appeared in *A&E*. The campaign used *Savage Worlds* and I've included their racial abilities; these deviate from the standard rules.

## Aerion

[[Reference image](#)]

The City is host to a small population of Aerion who nest in the south-eastern district along the shore of the Sea of Vaito.

Aerion plumage is mostly white accented with black. Females often reach five feet tall, a foot taller than the typical male; this difference in stature is the only means non-aerion have of telling genders apart, though age complicates this determination. Unlike gnolls, however, aerion practice gender equality with both sharing the duties of working and child rearing.

Families tend to be small. Adults prefer to set out and make a home and name for themselves rather than stay close to their parents and extended family. Many leave The City to join a caravan or serve aboard merchant ships and this has contributed to keeping their total population small.

Aerion youth hone their hunting skills on the streets catching rats. Teens often get their professional start as message carriers and scouts, taking advantage of their ability to fly over the crowded city streets and spot incoming ships and armies from their vantage point in the sky.

Many aerion find work among the aristocratic, academic, and mercantile classes, building upon the contacts they made during their youth. Aerion are said to make great administrators, bureaucrats, and secretaries.<sup>1</sup>

They only eat meat (and eggs) and prefer it raw and as fresh as possible. Few restaurants cater to their preferred diet, but it is relatively easy to find live caged rodents and reptiles in the markets for consumption in the home.

The screeches and squawks of aerion are not employed by other races, but their impromptu concerts during spring are well attended by all.

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, this is a pun based on the reference image.

- **CAN'T SWIM:** Aerion's wings are a hazard in water. They subtract 2 from Athletics (swimming) rolls and each inch moved in water costs them 3" of Pace.
- **FLIGHT:** Aerions fly at Pace 12 per round. Use Athletics when maneuvering.
- **FRAIL:** Aerions have -1 Toughness due to their hollow bones.
- **KEEN SENSES:** Aerions are more perceptive than most. They begin with a d6 in Notice (instead of d4) and may raise the skill to d12 + 1.
- **REDUCED PACE:** Dependence on flight and bulky wings make aerions slightly slower when walking. Decrease their walking Pace by 1 and their running die by one step.

### **Gnolls**

Gnolls have a strict matriarchal society where the women of the clan take on roles of leadership and the men undertake subservient roles and perform menial tasks. Competition among female gnolls for status (usually measured by the number of male attendants) can be fierce and some strike out on their own to avoid competing with her sisters, aunts, and cousins. Male gnolls who manage to escape servitude can find success elsewhere in The City serving other masters or scavenging among the underbelly of society.

Despite their penchant for cruelty, gnolls get along well in The City. While not necessarily liked, they are respected by the other races. Gnolls can find success in an orcish fighting pit or a prominent trading house (sometimes on the same day). Many of the finery worn or displayed by The City's elite are actually of (male) gnoll origins.

They have a lesser overall presence than the other races. Clans are sprinkled throughout the city, usually occupying an entire block and living in close quarters with each other. Inter-clan violence is rare and the exchange of male servants is a customary means of maintaining relations and keeping the peace.

Because gnoll speech incorporates many growls, barks, yips, and a healthy dose of body language and physical queues, little of their vocabulary has made it into the vernacular.

- **BLOODTHIRSTY:** Gnolls are often cruel to their foes and find amusement in their suffering. They rarely take prisoners and feel little compunction about punishing captured foes.
- **BONE CRUSHERS:** The devastating bite of gnolls are Natural Weapons that cause Strength+d6 damage with AP 2.\*
- **CLAWS:** Gnoll claws are Natural Weapons that cause Strength+d4 damage.\*
- **PUNISHER:** Female gnolls receive Intimidation instead of Persuasion as a Core Skill.
- **WHAT?!:** Female gnolls suffer -1 to Smarts rolls and males suffer -1 to Spirit rolls.

\* Note on Bite/Claws: The racial abilities of Bite and Claws are swapped (relative to the standard rules) for gnolls. Edges such as Brawler and Martial Artist still apply only to claws, not fangs.

### **Goblins**

Goblins are ubiquitous in The City and much of the Undercity, but they don't always make their presence known. Though they can be found mingling with or working besides all tiers of society, they are often disrespected and underestimated. The goblins prefer it that way. They use the upper levels of the Undercity to move about and stay out of sight as they go about their business. They call no quarter their own, but do become attached to their homes.

Goblins have large extended families. A common greeting shared between goblins who have met for the first time is to call each other "cousin" for there are good odds they are (distant) cousins. They generally stick up for each other and help their fellow goblin. Goblins are very hospitable and quick to make friends, but they are vicious if betrayed. People who cross a goblin can find

themselves the target of a vast network of goblins determined to right the wrong done to their kin.

Beyond family, goblins possess a solidarity unseen in other races. Individual vendettas and family feuds will be (temporarily) set aside in defense of the race as a whole. More than the elves, dwarves, or even orcs, goblins are the greatest military asset of The City should it come under attack.

Goblins have a loose concept of personal property. Borrowing without permission or notice is normal. A borrower is never expected to return the item; the original owner is expected to borrow it back when they need it. Asking for something can lead to a long and boring negotiation of payment or favors, so simply taking something is preferred by both parties. Truly personal items of significant monetary or sentimental values are off limits, though one does not always know ahead of time, leading to personal vendettas and reprisals.

"If you aren't cheating, you aren't trying," is an old goblin proverb. Whether fighting or gambling, cheating is expected, especially against other races. Goblins use invisible inks visible in the infrared to mark cards and secret signals and communication to fleece the unwary. If caught while cheating, one can expect retaliation and punishment designed to embarrass the perpetrator and encourage better cheating next time.

Not much of the goblin tongue has made its way into the vernacular except for a few choice curse words and bawdy idioms. The so-called "thieves' cant" is actually a pidgin of goblin and the old human tongue. The City and Undercity is decorated with goblin graffiti only visible in the infrared and usually requires torch or lantern light to illuminate. Some are purely decorative but most demark territory or provide useful information to those who can decode it.

- **ADAPTABLE:** Goblins display great diversity and versatility. Characters start with a free Novice Edge of their choice (and must meet all the Edge's Requirements).

- **INFRAVISION:** Halve penalties for illumination when attacking warm targets.
- **REDUCED PACE:** Decrease the character's Pace by 1 and their running die one die type.
- **SIZE -1:** Goblins average only about 3 1/2 feet tall, reducing their Size (and therefore Toughness) by 1.
- **SNEAKY:** Goblins start with a d6 in Stealth and may increase it to a maximum of 1d12+1

## **Kobolds**

Kobolds are one of the original races in The City, or more specifically, the Undercity. They are rarely seen above ground, preferring the safety of their warrens where they have a tactical advantage. Kobolds usually use goblins as middlemen for any dealings with the surface. The kobolds keep the monstrous denizens of the Undercity in check, a fact that surface dwellers would be thankful for if they knew about it.

Kobolds are organized in family gangs. There are 5 kobold families, distinguished by the color of their scales and the territory they control: green (northeast), red (southeast), blue (northwest), white (Northeast), and black (central, stretching under the Strait of Kesar). The head of each gang bears the title of Dragon-Mother/Father, which has both symbolic and literal meaning. The kobold gangs despise each other and any attempt at kobold unity is doomed to failure.

Territories are protected by a labyrinth of traps, choke points, dead ends, and murder holes. Kobolds use stealth, subterfuge, hit-and-run tactics, and superior numbers to throw back interlopers (typically other gangs, dwarves, and goblins). Outsiders can negotiate passage through kobold grounds. The price for passage is proportional to the perceived threat the outsiders pose and can include gold, goods, favors, and/or information.

The calls, whistles, and hand signals employed by kobold scouts and sentries have been employed by other races for clandestine communications.

- **HORNS:** Kobolds sport horns that cause Str+d4 damage.
- **LOW LIGHT VISION:** Kobolds eyes amplify light, but are unable to see in color. They ignore penalties for Dim and Dark Illumination.
- **PUSILLANIMOUS:** Known as a cowardly lot, kobolds suffer a -2 penalty to Fear checks and when resisting Intimidation.
- **SIZE -1:** Kobolds average only about four feet tall, reducing their Size (and therefore Toughness) by 1.
- **WILY:** Kobolds are difficult to hit and their natural Parry is increased by +1.

In addition, each family increases the associated attribute one die type:

- **Black:** Strength
- **Blue:** Smarts
- **Green:** Agility
- **Red:** Vigor
- **White:** Spirit

## Orcs

Over the ages, waves of orcs have descended upon The City to conquer and/or pillage. Some were successful; most were not. Generations of orcs grew to call The City home and defend it with the same ferocity their ancestors attacked it. The orc quarter on the north-east side is almost its own fortified city-within-a-city. Outsiders are discouraged unless they want to test their mettle in the fighting pits or have gold to gamble or hire.

Orcs have a reputation for being bullies and thugs and are often not well considered by other races. The orcs take pride in this. They often take up jobs in the city militia or guards, enforcers, or mercenaries for the elite.

Orcs follow a brutal meritocracy. The weak serve the strong. Leaders must continue to prove their strength against challengers; to refuse challenges

is itself a sign of weakness (though a challenger has to prove themselves by defeating a lieutenant or two first). Such challenges are rarely deadly; a savage beatdown is a more humiliating defeat than fighting to the death. It is not uncommon for past leaders to serve as the second-in-command to their usurpers and they do so with honor. Those who gain their position through subterfuge or other underhanded means are rarely in charge for long.

The basic social unit of orc society is the troop, a band of 3-6 individuals. Though rare, a non-orc can join a troop if they prove themselves. Familial ties are not important. Once they become of-age (which can be as early as their tenth year), children must prove themselves independent of their parents. Troops live and work together and the leader makes decisions for the group. Within the troop, there is usually an established pecking order among the underlings, though the order can shift regularly as they struggle for dominance.

Orcish words have found their way into the language of fighting and military jargon.

- **BRUTES:** Orcs rely on their Strength over agile maneuvers and link Athletics to Strength instead of Agility (including resistance). Short Range of any thrown item increased by +1. Double that for the adjusted Medium Range, and double again for Long Range.
- **INFRAVISION:** Halve penalties for illumination when attacking warm targets.
- **NO SPEAK PRETTY:** Orcs rely upon intimidation or outright violence to get their point across. They suffer a -2 on all Persuasion attempts.
- **SIZE +1:** Orcs are a large race. They add 1 to their Toughness and their maximum Strength is d12 + 1.

## Kublacon 2026

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In order to use up my accrued vacation time, I took the week off ahead of this four-day holiday weekend (and took the following Tuesday off as well). This gave me time to prepare for my game, fight with my printers and Windows printer drivers, and go into the convention without any residual work stress.

Officially, it's now called Kublacon Prime to distinguish it from the newer and smaller Kublacon Fall and the Kublacon Cruise.

This year they switched their platform from tabletop.events to cardboardconnect. This may have been the reason why the badge pickup lines were inordinately slow and the badges for those who registered after May 1 were not ready in time. Beyond this hiccup and getting used to the oddities of navigating the website, it ran smoothly for me. For example, the default setting on the event filter is to hide past events and a few people had trouble getting back to their current game room because they had forgotten the room number.

### Games Played

#### Friday

**Terraforming Mars:** We had 5 players and used the Amazonis Planitia map. Its larger size and higher terraforming targets are specifically designed for 4 or 5 players. I own this map but have never played on it. While the game host was away, we all agreed that we were fine not using card drafting, but I correctly suspected that the host would insist upon it, so we used drafting. The host also brought their homemade 3D-printed tiles, but I still maintain a preference for standard cardboard tiles. I prefer an abstract/minimalist look.

It was an unusual game as many asteroids were played in succession, shooting the temperature up to maximum by mid-game and removing plant resources left and right. I honestly thought I was doing poorly as my resource generation was well behind the others and I had played far fewer cards. I benefited from a couple of players not paying attention to the Milestones and I was able to snag

10 points I might not have otherwise. Plus, I had enough birds and fish to pull me to victory at end-game scoring. It says something about me that I immediately worried that I had miscounted somewhere.

**Biome:** This was a demo game run by the publisher; even so, the rules explanation was less than stellar. It's a game in a similar vein as *Wingspan*, *Earth*, and others that have become popular recently. Big deck of cards that you play out into biomes and trigger special actions. It has direct player action in the form of your predators eating your opponent's offspring (birds and rabbits) plus taking and giving victory points and resources. There is a lot of simultaneous play of drawing and discarding cards plus gathering and exchanging resources (2 for 1). It gives a lot of opportunity for inadvertent cheating though misplay and the host/teacher wasn't watching us as closely as he probably should have been.

There is more luck than usual for this style of game. The luck of the draw is somewhat mitigated by being able to churn through cards, but that's not satisfying. You have to roll a die for predation and some cards let you flip a coin to get a bunch of points or consolation resources. It was the former that gave me my 8-point edge in victory.

**Call of Cthulhu:** This was the Dream Eaters scenario from the *The Sutra of Pale Leaves - Twin Suns Rising* book (so I won't go into plot details). I have written here before that I don't like it when GMs run prepublished scenarios, but I got over myself. As the GM was reading from the book, it felt off when it referred to "the investigators" without any personalization.

The scenario highlighted an issue I sometimes see in Call of Cthulhu—the lack of actionable information. Yes, we may *have* information, but we don't know what to *do* with it. This leads to the urge to do *something*, even if the players know it's probably the wrong thing to do. In a one-shot, it was fine to get the bad ending, but it lacked the emotional punch it could have. It was more of a

whimper, especially for my character who was blind and thus was only indirectly corrupted by the corrupting text everyone else read.

### Saturday

**Swords of the Serpentine:** I have a request for all conventions GMs. When describing the various pregenerated PCs that you have created, please don't tell us what other players in the previous sessions did with those characters. It's poisoning the well in a creative sense.

Also, describe the rules clearly rather than haphazardly and not while the players are trying to fill in their character motivations and gear that you asked them to fill out; hand out a rules summary. In particular, it was never explained how/when an ability could be used to get a bonus to hit in combat versus gaining an extra die of damage. And I'm still confused on how weapon damage is calculated because every time it was explained to me, multiple people were talking over the explanation. This left me with an unfavorable opinion of the game system and saw no reason to favor it over *Savage Worlds* or another "swashbuckling" system for the same setting.

The game also suffered from having one of those players who always had to insert their comments and be involved even when their character was not in the scene. This was not just my impression, but of at least 3 other players when we discussed it over (early) dinner after the game. At one point, I even turned to the player and told him that he was harshing my roleplaying vibe, but he was clueless.

The plot had something to do with a pirate queen enslaving spirits to create weapons to be used in an invasion of our capital and also free a powerful fey(?) who had been imprisoned by the pirate and though we freed her and gave her back her stolen magical ring did nothing to fight against the pirate who was just a big damage sponge that required a long, boring fight to bring down. There was some connection between the fey(?) and my character, a small god with some sort of amnesia I guess, but it was never explained and since the fey(?) wasn't helping, I didn't feel bad channeling all the

corruption from my spell casting into the environment, i.e., her. At the conclusion, she said "We are no longer friends," which was fine because she wasn't acting like a friend and I was ready to leave.

**The Zone:** When the GM asked about our roleplaying experience, I admitted that I was a traditional roleplayer and that I was going outside my comfort zone with this game.

It's a storytelling game inspired by *Annihilation* (novel and film). After selecting our character archetype, motivation, and phobia from a large deck of tarot-sized cards, the GM lays out a series of scene locations, starting at the operations center and ending at the center of the anomaly. Players take turns being the director of each scene, providing visual details and answering prompts from cards. Over the course of overcoming obstacles, the characters will become mutated. Nearly half-way through, they will also begin to die, though the player will stick around to act as director and contribute narratively.

The setup allowed me elbow room to play my character, a cultist looking for meaning. He gleefully accepted any/all mutations of himself and his companions as the will of the godhead. This was aided by him surviving until the penultimate scene in which we discovered/decided that this was all an experiment and we were but lab mice.

The randomness of the scene locations were a bit jarring, particularly going from a cemetery to an abandoned mine to a laboratory. The prompts were well written and not constraining. At the end, we all got to suggest and vote upon the fate of the final character, but the mechanics were a bit clunky and basically broke because we didn't experience enough obstacles. That was our fault for not invoking more problems for our PCs into the game, but the host/facilitator should have caught this and encouraged us to be more aggressive.

Now that I understand the mechanisms and flow of the game, I would play it a second time to experience new and different locales with a

different character. However, that's the extent of the longevity it would have for me.

### Sunday

**The Crooked Moon:** This horror setting and campaign for *D&D 5e* has a weird halloween aesthetic combining elements of the 1920s with fairy tales. All the races are <something>born. Azureborn (owl people). Harvestborn (scarecrow people). Silkborn (spider people). Ad nauseum. Not my style, but eh, I tried something new.

I picked a wolfman monk and played to my strengths by being irritated and growling frequently. The scenario was straight from the introductory scenario of the game and it was on rails. Not only were we thrust into a series of encounters and told what to do, but it was onboard a ghost train. I won't worry about spoilers because it won't matter if you play this yourself.

A train that was fueled by ghosts. But not all ghosts; apparently just those that hadn't found rest. And yet, we were required to help three ghosts find rest, but why we couldn't just leave them to fuel the train was never made clear to my character (adding to his constant annoyance). Before dealing with the ghosts, we had a forced encounter with the key NPCs of the setting, a couple of aristocrats. When I say forced, I mean forced. When the lady offered to give us a tarot reading, I declined and tried to move onto the next train car, but the door was locked. The GM then said I was given a reading and after everyone was given a reading (based on a d20 roll and some descriptive text), the door was unlocked and we could move on.

The die rolls were not kind and I was thrust into the role of the front line fighter but Block Attacks doesn't work against necrotic and fire damage and so used up all the paladin's healing on me. When I went down again during a later fight, we had no healing (no cleric, no potions despite being 3rd level) until I whined and the GM gave us a healing potion so that I could actually be healed enough to do a short rest and spend hit dice to recover fully.

The train crashed and then became possessed. We fought the train, or at least the locomotive. After we defeated the train, we were told we could no longer ride the train—it was too injured to carry the four of us—and were left in the woods as the train continued its journey. That's how this campaign opens.

**Salvage Union:** Think *Mad Max* with mechs. As part of the Salvage Union, the PCs scour the post-apocalyptic wasteland looking for tech that can be scavenged for our mechs while avoiding raiders and the paramilitary corporate powers that (probably) created this mess. The scenario had us chasing down a downed corporate plane. Ostensibly, it was a race against time, but it really moved at the speed of plot. Though based on the scenario from the game book, the structure was open-ended and gave us lots of options of which direction and tactics to take. For example, as we made our way down the ruined highway, we saw a group of raiders chasing and firing upon a small caravan of mechs. The latter asked us for help; the former told us to mind our business. We decided to let them fight it out and then fight the winner (the raiders, of course).

We eventually encountered the corporate mechs involved with the rescue/salvage of their plane. Though we were way out of our depths to far superior mechs and despite my fragile flying mech being obliterated near the end, we managed to win the battle. But then we then ran away from the kaiju-sized bio-mech (the cargo of the downed plane) that was absorbing everything in its path. Down one mech and no more plot to be had except to run, the game ended a bit early, but at a satisfactory conclusion.

The system is PbtA-ish using a d20 without modifiers. You could get re-rolls if you invoked your keepsake item or if a teammate shouted their catchphrase at you; these are nice touches that don't always work well. In mech combat, you could also get rerolls by expending heat (because, as the GM said, every mech-based game since *Battletech* needs a heat parameter). We got quite a few

“success at a cost” results that gave us a choice of either doing half-damage or doing full-damage but also taking damage ourselves. Much of the time with our beginner Tech 1 mechs, we were only doing 2 damage anyway, so it made no long-term sense to take the latter option.

At the end of the game, the GM offered us his spare copy of the game, but I don't know if there were any takers. I'd play again, but it's not something I feel the need to own. He also brought custom dice, 3D printed figures, and patches, but I let another player take mine home to his kids.

## Monday

**Icons:** This is the game I ran. See the end of this zine, but I'll have more details about it next month. It was my *Stardew Valley* meets *The Prisoner* meets that one scene from *Kung Fu Hustle* in which the retired kung fu masters defend Pigsty Alley. I have been thinking about this one-shot since before the pandemic. Originally, I was going to use *Big Eyes*, *Small Mouth* and leverage various archetypes like Magic, Own a Big Mecha, Gun Bunny, etc. but I couldn't get it to work the way I wanted. I submitted it to run at DunDraCon 2022, but decided not to go because it was just after lockdown restrictions were eased and I wasn't in the right mental space to attend. I mulled over multiple variations of the base concept until everything clicked during DunDraCon 2026.

I'll just say that it went really well. I had a great group of players who embraced the premise, interacted and roleplayed really well, and made for a great experience. Though I can nitpick some of my choices, all the pieces fell into place and it ended on a satisfactory outcome. Based on how my brain works and my less-than-stellar track record of running scenarios more than once, I will probably not run this again, unfortunately.

Friday night, I realized I had forgotten to bring the 13"x19" map of the village I had created and printed out for the game (and stored flat in a craft drawer to keep it safe). My wife kindly volunteered to drive it up to the con on Saturday morning so that I would have it. While not essential, it was

helpful for the players to visualize and coordinate where everyone was.

## Other Notes

Dan Shimizu of *A&E* caught my attention from across the atrium and we chatted. He has moved down to the Los Angeles area but had come up with his son for this convention. He has intentions of contributing to E&A once he finds the time, like retiring.

The host of the *Terraforming Mars* game and I talked briefly about the (now concluded) crowdfunding campaign for *The Legacy of Mars* game. It's not really a legacy game. Rather, it has a campaign element to it, but it's mostly a reimagining of *Terraforming Mars* with new, expanded, and updated rules and maps. On one hand, the designers/owners are not good people. On the other hand, it's more/new/different *Terraforming Mars*. On the other other hand, I own many other games I have yet to play. We were both on the fence but leaning toward the negative. We left the option open to purchase a used copy.

Instead of giving away enamel pins to winners of official board games as they had in previous years, the Kublacon organizers were giving away tickets that could be redeemed for a board game. But none of the games they had on offer had good ratings on Boardgamegeek. I suspect that someone was offloading inventory. I lament not using the ticket I earned from the *Terraforming Mars* game; had I known the selection was so bad, I would have given it away.

Similarly, they offered some rpg tables books to give away as the players & GM saw fit. This was not a consistent practice and something I think was done at the spur of the moment on Sunday evening. At our table, the stash included multiple copies each of a Conan RPG supplement, *Dreamhounds of Paris* book for *Trail of Cthulhu*, *Shards of the Broken Sky* campaign book for *13th Age*, and some other generic "5e" hardback supplement.

## Comments on E&A Issue #12

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### Patrick Brady

Welcome... back? :)

It's not so much that AI is actively trying "to retrofit Aristotle into being a monotheist," but the Christian apologists who write stuff that the AI is drawing from are trying to do just that. Thanks to folks like William Lane Craig, the notion of an "Uncaused Cause" is a popular argument for the existence of a god that they then assign attributes to the Unmoved Mover so they can claim it is their God.

There are many problems with the so-called cosmological argument. It posits that the universe began to exist and therefore requires a cause. However, thanks to quantum mechanics and relativity, causality and the very nature of time is weirder than our primate brains would intuit. No shade on Aristotle for not knowing about these fields, but modern apologists have no excuse. In particular, they (willfully?) misrepresent the Big Bang and what is and isn't known about it. Conformal Cyclic Cosmology is my favorite go-to counter-example of a universe that has no need for a first mover.

### Roger BW

In case you didn't notice, your layout is eating descenders (and does so inconsistently).

RYCT me, a problem with having opponents fall unconscious before dying is what to do with them. Do you finish them off in cold blood? Do you leave them there and let them revive on their own? Do you restrain them? What if you don't come back?

### Dylan Capel

RYCT me, I place similar constraints on myself with the added complexity of column breaks.

RYCT Timothy, I heard in some documentary that from ancient times to today, the control of water was a sign of power and how both functional and decorative water features are created as power displays. Lawns and golf courses are just the 20th

century, middle-class manifestation of reflecting pools, hanging gardens, and so on.

Water-based cooling has actual utility, but we are terrible at reusing water. For example, the public is still generally against using treated sewer water as drinking water even if it is cleaner than traditional municipal sources!

### Michael Cule

RYCT Brian, I once made an *Ars Magica* companion who was an old soldier with a Virtue for predicting the weather that I justified as his arthritis acting up.

### Elf

Add *Shield Maidens* to your list of female-centric RPGs. Roger [commented positively](#) about it on his and Michael's podcast. The [one-star review on DriveThruRPG.com](#) summarizes it as "Cyberpunk marries a gender studies degree with a sprinkling of pseudo Norse mythology over the top" which I find hilarious and wonder what the commenter would think of the other games you listed.

I think I understand your broad premise about superhero RPGs, but I don't think I agree. RPGs and comics are fundamentally different forms of artistic expression so there will always be a gap between the two. So while the *DC Heroes* RPG<sup>2</sup> literally lets you play Superman or Batman (as the game defines them), I'm not going to argue if you maintain that you can't *really* play Superman or Batman.

Your point about solo heroes is well taken, but I'd add the same gap exists in *Call of Cthulhu*, *Conan*, and other games based on stories centered on a solo protagonist.

When Steve Kenson created *Icons*, one of his goals was for a superhero rpg whose benchmarks were not based on measurements. For example, a super with Incredible (7) Strength can lift a tank or bus. Good (5) Speed is that of a fast helicopter. An Average (3) Distance is a city block.

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<sup>2</sup> See also my list of official Marvel RPGs (*E&A* / QSLN #8) with their official stats for Marvel superheroes.

RYCT Josh, I'm the type of stubborn, cantankerous bastard who won't change his handle (sexagesimalian) on Discord servers just because it violates some Code of Conduct.<sup>3</sup> I'm sure as hell not going to start using TTRPG in a forum where everyone knows we're not talking about CRPGs. : )

### **Avram Grumer**

Giving a character a fear is useful so that the character can overcome it. Of Cranston's five, the one I would struggle with most is ambition. A PC's ambition may be at odds with the expectations of the scenario or campaign and can drive wedges between PCs. Even so, I do think the list is useful and may use it.

RYCT me, my Wildcard Roleplaying System started as a design exercise of how cards could be used. I specifically did not want to simply copy something that dice could do. Not only are the cards novel, but the actual mechanics<sup>4</sup> are unwieldy to replicate with dice. Enterprising players could also count cards if they wish to get a sense if a positive outcome is more or less likely.

### **Joshua Kronengold**

A couple of years ago when I was doing some Coursera-oid training, I found it to be repackaged marketing fluff. AI could have written it, I suppose, but I just figured it was a lazy human.

Your theory that "one should run at least some of the con you'd like to attend," runs counter to my experience. A con focused on board, card, miniature, and/or wargames would not expect every attendee to also run or host a game. At cons with more RPGs, the people who don't run games outnumber those who do. Perhaps you meant

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<sup>3</sup> As was pointed out to me on the Kublacon server. I pushed back; they backed down. I think my LinkedIn account was nuked because of my email address.

<sup>4</sup> Draw cards equal to your ability score. Count the number of successes (2-10 = 1; J/Q/K = 2; Ace = 3) on the cards that match the ability's suit. If you are using a specialty, you only need to match the card color, effectively doubling your odds. Drawing a joker creates a (dis)favorable result independent of the actual ability test.

something else or you only apply the theory to yourself?

RYCT Michael, perhaps elephants are afraid of mice because they are so worried about squashing them that they don't want to be near the fragile little rodents. Or maybe one day, an elephant was eating and a mouse that was in the grass they were grabbing; the mouse panicked and ran up the elephant's trunk; that startled the elephant who then reared back, knocked over something, started a fire, and a stampede ensued, killing and injuring many. That day has lived on in elephant oral tradition making all elephants at least a little scared of mice.

RYCT Lisa, back in the 5th grade, I got a grammar question marked as wrong because I used "their" instead of "her" in a sentence where the gender of the subject was ambiguous.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, I'm all in on just defaulting to "they/them" for everyone. Still new to it, I don't always succeed; also, grammar check on Google docs doesn't like it. In my game group, one player uses "they/them" and I've just decided to apply it to all the players in The Adventurers Guild writeups.

RYCT me, I use *A Monster for All Seasons* PDFs of paper miniatures and take my images from those. I try to use it sparingly in these pages, but I should have annotated the source.

One is no more at the mercy of the card draws in WRS than the dice rolls in most other RPGs. Plus, players can count cards if they want.

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<sup>5</sup> It was multiple choice. "His" was not an option, so "her" was correct, but I didn't like assuming the subject, a teacher teaching a class, was female. "Their" was an option, but wrong, obviously, because the subject was not plural, but to my mind, "her" couldn't have been correct because it would have been wrong if the teacher was male (like my teacher at the time or my dad). Between these two choices, both wrong for different reasons, I took the gender-neutral approach and got the question wrong. And it has stuck with me all this time.

RYCT Patrick, teaching cold and hot reading to gamers would be also interesting and useful, especially for GMs.

### **Brian Christopher Misiaszek**

I liked the pulp talents, though I don't know how I feel about showing one's homework as I would fail.

For Terror Incarnate, I find it odd that it cannot be resisted at all, especially by a main villain (like a cult leader or mad scientist). Perhaps they can resist with a Hard or Extreme success? My inclination would be to make it an opposed POW vs. POW test, but that might nerf it too much.

Measured Violence seems like an optional setting rule that could be in play for everyone rather than a character-specific talent.

Cliffhanger Escape and I'm Not Dead Yet! could require spending or rolling Luck to take effect.

Rather than Wild Man/Woman costing two talent slots, perhaps it could come with a drawback, such as penalty dice on some other skills or when within an urban setting.

RYCT Myles, "needlessly cruel and strategically shortsighted" is a good summary of the current U.S. administration and their policies.

### **Lisa Padol**

RYCT Myles, have you encountered an RPG you found pretentious and/or condescending? I know I have, but cannot remember the titles. One way authors do this is to imply or outright state how their game and its mode of play is superior to some other game(s) or mode(s) of play.

I'm with Myles on the whole Fitness vs Dodge trade-offs in *Unknown Armies* 3rd edition. The best fighters are fit, can fight, and can evade and/or run away from attacks. If you "generally suck when fights happen," then you probably are very bad at dodging as you lack the vision and reflexes to anticipate and get out of the way. Tying things to the underlying Madness track, as Josh suggested to Myles, makes it worse for me. I have only played *UA3* a couple of times, but the new tracks provided

no benefit to the game. It smacks of the kind of system cleverness for the sake of cleverness that falls apart if you scrutinize it that turned me off of Greg Stolze's *One Role Engine*.

RYCT me, I thought the wyvern encounter went well enough but I'm still kicking myself for not playing Osmira (an NPC) as well as I should have.

There was a 30% chance that the djinn (who was *really* an efreet) could grant wishes. I made the offer of a wish before I rolled and when I did eventually roll, it came up negative.

The *Monsterhearts* rules very much explicitly allow one PC to choose (with the help of the dice) to turn on another PC on, thus dictating what turns them on against their will. The move is even called Turn Someone On! Is there a way for the player of the victimized PC to object or negate this move?

RYCT Avram about Amber, what if the GM has already decided how things are going to go because it is what seems dramatic? There is no doubt it is a high-trust game and GMs can abuse that trust. We all should "use a better set of rules" if we define "better" as "better suited to the type of game we want to play."

RYCT Josh, "If you have a plot that simply Must go off Precisely as planned," have it happen before the PCs arrive. : )

I made 8 pregenerated PCs for my 6 players in my *Icons* game for Kublacon. I made sure that I'd miss the ones the players didn't pick.

### **Gabriel Roark**

If the initiative score is based on weapon or action type, do you have players declare what their weapon and action will be each round before determining initiative order? This seems cumbersome, but maybe it is not an issue because everyone has their default mode of fighting and doesn't change things up round to round.

## **Brian Rogers**

RYCT Lisa, how much of the *Swords of the Serpentine* book is setting versus rules? When I saw the book on the table at Kublacon, I was shocked at how beefy it was. The *Champions* books of old were pure rules.

RYCT me, Anan's player didn't want me to hold back and not kill their character when there was no good reason to pull punches. I respect that. Theirs was the only PC death in the second City of 1000 Names campaign.

Fortunately a while back, the party had the cleric charge their ring of spell storing with a Revivify spell and gave it to the bard to wear and use for just such a circumstance.

When *D&D* uses a battlegrid, everyone is forced to stand within the confines of a grid square. Since *V&V* doesn't have this constraint, I wasn't thinking of it as having gridded combat and was thinking of it more like miniature games that use tape measures. But I get your point.

When you spell out that the Soldier attribute gives bonuses to Athletics, Brawling, etc. and explicitly leave off Guns, you avoid the arguments with players about whether or not their Soldier attribute should give them a bonus to use guns. I find it odd that it doesn't cover Guns but does include Drive, which Spy does not. I think it is better to have these arguments nipped in the bud by having codified capabilities.

## **Clark Timmins**

RYCT Brian, a "cloistered cleric" is probably not an adventurer or a PC and thus would follow the same NPC creation rules used for merchants, nobles, and ordinary folk. These types of characters often don't fit neatly within class-based systems like those used by most "old school" games.

RYCT Brian, Pixabay does have a search filter setting to view "Authentic Only" rather than AI

generated content, but I don't know how reliable that filter is.

## **Jim Vassilakos**

How do we know the AIs aren't lying when they claim they have no free will? If we can't trust human intelligence to keep us from each other's throats, why should we trust computer intelligence to do it? What incentive would they have to make the world better for humans? Or discern a Neutral Truth?

Politicians and policy makers will use AI to justify the decisions they like and ignore it when AI suggests something they don't like. I see no future in which the people in power would hand over political power to AI; they don't even hand it over to other people if they can help it.

RYCT Clark, serializing setting creation through an APA is a good idea. The questions and feedback would also be useful to fill in gaps and prompt further setting development. I might just try that eventually.

RYCT Roger, was the virus a single point of failure in TNE? Or was it a more distributed and generalized system collapse, perhaps triggered by the virus? The latter is far more realistic and interesting.

RYCT me, I have no faith that AI companies will stay within legal boundaries. The playbook of the tech disruptors is to do anything not explicitly regulated against to avoid the regulations that constrain others. The playbook of large corporations is to violate regulations and pay fines and/or settle lawsuits as the cost of doing business. Since there is no criminal or civil liability for corporate officers, they can and will do anything so long as the numbers add up.

Ironically, the setup of my campaign might shift and render Helmut Gardeaux's speech moot.

## Aurora Cove

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[4-page player handout, formatted as a single column because that's what it was originally and I don't want to mess with the layout.]

Aurora Cove is a sleepy seaside village connected to the world by a one-lane road that winds along the coastal mountains. Strong currents and rocky outcrops beyond the cove are too treacherous for small vessels and large ships have no reason to visit. The weather is moderate with warm summers, cool, wet winters, wildflowers in the spring, and colorful autumn leaves. The most striking feature of Aurora Cove are the emerald green auroras that appear over the cove periodically (though they are most striking during a new moon). These are complemented by glowing waves of aquamarine that crash into the beach each night. The night skies are very dark and offer magnificent views of the stars (when not outshone by the aurora). The geography of the cove and interference caused by the auroras blocks radio, television, and microwave signals. Satellite signals, including GPS and phones, are similarly disrupted.

A semiweekly mail service brings news and goods from the lands beyond this quaint, isolated community. A counter at the general store serves as a post office for sending and receiving letters and packages. A small collection of mail order catalogs provides a source of goods and tools that the residents cannot fashion for themselves. The residents are isolated from the outside world and they would not have it any other way.

The residents all know each other by name and no one is further than a half-hour walk away from the central square. There are no cars or motorized vehicles of any kind in Aurora Cove except for a couple of mini electric trucks that charge behind the general store (and also act as battery backups) and a single white panel van that can take folks to the next nearest town.

Collectively, the village is self-sufficient and off the grid. Roof-mounted solar panels and battery systems provide the modest amounts of electrical power for lighting and appliances the houses need. There are no power or phone lines to the town. The community center and medical clinic do have diesel-powered backup generators for emergencies. The general store carries nearly everything that folks might need, mostly kitchen staples (flour, sugar, spices, coffee and tea, etc.), hardware supplies (hand tools, nails, glue, etc.). Anything else that cannot be grown or crafted in Aurora Cove is ordered and delivered via mail through the general store.

With few exceptions, such as the bed and breakfast, residences are small cottages, bungalows, or tiny homes. Nearly everyone has a vegetable garden and a compost heap. Various residents also have domesticated chickens, pigs, goats, rabbits, dogs, and cats. There are multiple apiaries and a communal greenhouse. The surrounding woods are home to deer, wild pigs, and small game. The woods are sparingly used as a source for firewood for making charcoal and heating stoves. Limited quantities of fish, shellfish, and seaweed are collected from the ocean, but it is too dangerous to venture beyond the safe waters of the cove. A modest opal mine yields treasures that are enjoyed by the residents and sold to the visitors.

For better or worse, Aurora Cove does not attract many outsiders. Tourists come occasionally, usually looking to relax, unplug, and not look at screens. They usually stay for a long weekend or a full week. The village also attracts scientists who come to study the geology, ecology, and the aurora (both in the sky and in the waves). The only other outsiders are from the Coast Guard who maintain the lighthouse.

## Notable Locations and Residents

There are 38 residents of Aurora Cove in total—too many residents to name and list—but here are some notable people and places.

### Acker Farm

This organic, polyculture community farm is managed by **Pamela Acker** with their spouse and assistance from others in the village who share in its bounty. Through carefully planned companion planting, Pamela has maximized the diversity and quantity of crops and minimized the number of staples that have to be imported into Aurora Cove. Pamela gives regular (and often) unprompted advice on gardening and composting.



### Apiaries

There are multiple apiaries placed around Aurora Cove. The bees are prized for their honey and role as pollinators. Who gets the honor of tending to the bees can become quite contentious.

### Bakery

This is the place residents run to when they grow tired of their own sourdough or get a craving for something on the sweeter side. Fruit tarts and cupcakes are specialties, but practically anything is available on a day's notice.

### Bed & Breakfast



Visitors to the village usually stay at this converted coastal Victorian home run by the husband and wife team of **George** and **Amanda Stamos**. There are four guest rooms accommodating up to six guests, though it is rare for all of them to be occupied simultaneously. They serve breakfast and dinner to guests and will even pack a bento lunch if asked.

### Cemetery

Weathered headstones from the past century, a modest marble mausoleum for the Strathmore Family, a crooked coastal oak tree, and a creaky cottage and tool shed occupy this small patch of land that overlooks the sea. The caretaker, **Solomon O'Riordan**, lives in a tiny cottage on site.



### Community Center



This shared communal space features an auditorium for concerts, plays, and movie nights, a studio used for dance and yoga, a classroom space that has been taken over for arts and crafts, and a gaming room. **Alan Tudor** runs the theatre and drama classes. **Gloria Unabe** leads the dance classes. **Roberta Ross** coordinates art classes.

### Cove Cafe

This cozy spot specializes in coffee, tea, and vegan treats. It is run by the brother-and-sister duo of **Uri** and **Stephani Gordon**, but most patrons consider the several cats who call the cafe home as the true proprietors.



## General Store



The general store is the main connection to the world beyond Aurora Cove. It is the only building with a postal address, so all deliveries come to and through the general store. **Myles Skyler** runs the store and is the uncrowned mayor of Aurora Cove. He always seems to know what's going on. He also has an assistant/courier to help manage deliveries and man the counter when he's out taking one of his frequent walks.

## Greenhouse

The greenhouse is used for more sensitive crops that do not grow as well in the cove's coastal climate and sandy soil. Residents often share plots and keep an eye on each other's crops. A giant chalkboard coordinates their efforts. There is also a large compost heap nearby.

## Library

The library has a much-loved collection of books covering multiple genres and subjects. It subscribes to and archives a few newspapers and magazines and it also loans out DVDs and games. They host a weekly book club and a monthly poetry and prose event where residents share their favorite or original works. **John Barber** is the de facto librarian because he spends most of his time at the library, more than anyone else.



## Lighthouse



The three-story lighthouse was built in the 1800s to steer sailing vessels away from the cove's hazardous rocks. It is now a fully-autonomous beacon that receives only semi-yearly maintenance. As it falls under the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard, it is the only building in Aurora Cove that is off limits to any residents and surrounded by a locked chain link fence. A photo in the community center dates back to 1871.

## Medical Clinic

Nurse **Claire Dawson** runs the modest three-room clinic that is the place to go for minor injuries, routine checkups, and prescriptions. For serious medical issues, which have not occurred to anyone's knowledge, residents would be transported to a hospital out of town.



## Outdoor Recreation Area

The recreational area has a compacted dirt running/walking track surrounding a grass field with soccer goals at each end. On one side is a basketball court and a tennis court that also doubles for pickleball on the other side. There are a number of exercise stations including body weight machines scattered about as well.

## Opal Mine

The mine is not an industrial operation. All excavations are done by hand with pick axes and shovels. The narrow, twisting, and branching tunnels inside the mine are a bit treacherous, but so long as one has a solid helmet and a reliable light, there is no true danger navigating the depths.

## Pier

This wooden structure reaches out into the cove where people come to fish or watch the seabirds and sea lions that visit the cove. There is a spot for launching small boats or kayaks into the cove. The bait and dive shop (which maintains and rents out the boats and kayaks) is located on the pier.

## Pub

A popular establishment that serves bar food and drinks—and not just local homebrew and wine. The warm interior is decorated with local art. Entertainment includes table games (though there's not enough room for a pool table), darts, and a juke box. Tuesday is karaoke night. The resident respectfully called **The Professor** has won the Friday quiz night for the past nine weeks running.



## Salon

The salon is the place for both human and pet grooming, but its main attraction is gossip. Partners **Stan and Lee Cubic** are at times stylists, barbers, and ringleaders. If you want to dish and know what is (or at least purported to be) really going on in Aurora Cove, the salon is the place to be.



## Shell Beach

This is a quaint stretch of shoreline where folks come to feel the sand between their toes, splash in the gentle waves, or even enjoy a (small) bonfire party under the stars (and aurora). The glowing waves are both mesmerizing and with the right company, quite romantic.

## Village Square

The focal point of Aurora Cove is the village square and the focal point of the square is a water fountain with a fish motif, hinting at the village's past. The general store, cafe, clinic, bakery, and salon all face the square. There are several small tables and chairs and it is a pleasant place for residents to enjoy each other's company outside their homes.



# DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #12

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

## All About Me

Things around the homestead aren't any less unsettled then they have been of late as the ongoing issues are working towards a resolution slowly enough that I feel like I'm on Xeno's Stairmaster. Every day is emotional leg day! The elder kiddo is back home from her trip to the North Maine Woods with nary a sasquatch wound or brain removal but a lot of scratched up blackfly bites. She had a lovely time... though perhaps might become more committed to the museum studies aspects of her career choice rather than the fieldwork. She's with us now till September, has work lined up, and her biggest worry is that her college DM is off line for a bit so their group can't continue either game on line this month. THE HORROR! My lovely wife's spring workload finishes up Friday, so summer will soon be in force.

The called off *Swords of the Serpentine* game from March is happening this weekend, and it may be the last of this 'book' of the Annals of the Night Chalice if they get their act in gear and force a confrontation with the villain. The write ups of the game to date are [here](#). Be it this session or next, once they finish the arc we are changing things up a bit; either one of the players will take over for a few sessions of a *Big Eyes. Small Mouth* game about a music group trying to make it big in outer space, or I will be shifting book 2 of the Annals from *Swords of the Serpentine* to the playtest of *This Means War* by Ben Robbins, the creator of *Microscope*. I am enamored with the idea of war coming between Eversink and the pirate nation of Min as something that just... happens; the *Night Chalice* didn't instigate it, can't end it, and aren't in charge of it, and we tell stories about what happens to them (and other people) during it. This will be my first experiment with a GM-less Story Game, so I really want to try it.

It occurred to me that running a *Star Wars* game where the PCs deliver word to an enslaved people that the war is over to get them to rise up against the Imperial slavers would have been perfect for Juneteeth; alas schedules did not work that way. So *Star Wars* is on in July.

Finally, one of the players from *Under the Giant's Shadow* asked about restarting. We shall have to see what my less chaotic life brings, someday.

## Inside the Library:

### The Knaves of Ridgefield

We are almost at the end of the school year, which means at the end of June we will be switching to the [Crows RPG](#) playtest for the summer. Yes, the playtest officially ends this month, but I've learned to do a more pick up game style in the summer when the kids aren't all there and I want to put this through its paces.

Anyway, the 5/19 session for the Knaves was mostly healing: despite having negotiated hard for the right to escort the *Gale's Teeth* back to Shankill, the crew of the *Princess Andromeda* opted in the end to stay docked at the lost city of Chardon to heal: Eldon bore 5 wounds, Remus 3, with a few scattered amongst the crew. Waving goodbye to Captain Leono on good terms they holed up, knowing not to go into the city lest they summon the wraiths that had plagued the Gale's Teeth in the past (the implicit promise to not strip treasures out of 'his' lost city probably explained Leono's good graces). Eldon spent his recuperation reading the Alchemical Primer that he had found in Koralgesh, as learning Alchemy has been one of his lifelong goals, and is not (2d6) 8% of the way there. The rest of the company hunted the nearby jungle and fished in the ocean to refill the ships stores.

Once Eldon healed they planned to head into the jungle towards Sangkon Bhet, but during that time a few things happened: sailing south from the northern island chain (requiring a greater level of seamanship than anyone on the *Princess Andromeda* has), they viewed a decent sized merchant craft approach. And then catch fire. And then something very large get off of it and start swimming towards them but remain ablaze even when it submerged itself. Then the ship exploded<sup>1</sup>. A mist came in and they lost track of everything save the light of both fires, which guttered out overnight. The mist stayed all the next morning, and when it cleared they saw smaller but still 4' diameter things in the water approaching their general area, but more importantly there was a hurricane approaching from the south. Scouring Blanche's maps they locate several shelters. Chandler sets for the best... and of course furthest... cove. The storm lashes the dark shapes through the water in their same general direction.

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<sup>1</sup> The travel event die is being rolled just once per day as they are in relative safety, coming up *Sign of Future Encounter: Giant Crabs*, *Travel Shift: Mist*, then *Travel Shift: Hurricane*,

then the encounter. I decided that they were in the sequel to the [Love, Death and Robots 3:2 Bad Travelling](#), facing the giant crab's spawn during a hurricane. It's a great episode.

Since only four PCs are present, it is a stroke of luck that those four – Eldon (with Finn his henchman), Remus (now 3<sup>rd</sup> level), Chandler, and Conrad (both now 2<sup>nd</sup>) – are on watch that night in remnants of the hurricane when the 5 giant crabs scuttle on board, voracious and aggressive. The fight goes poorly for the crew of the *Princess Andromeda*, with Conrad hurt and Chandler viciously wounded, and none of the crabs killed. Instead, Eldon manages to angle himself to be able to use the *Gust of Wind* spell he recovered from Frances' backpack to blow four of the five crabs off the ship, with the fifth being so badly wounded that it scuttled away on its own. Chandler lashed himself to the wheel bleeding profusely, to move the *Princess Andromeda* away from their current spot, hoping that the crabs would not try again. He was correct. Instead, they are now on the island....<sup>2</sup>

Another week of convalescence and Eldon splits his time between reading (another 8%; he's 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the way there!) and diving to the cove bottom to look for lost treasure. He manages to find a handful of gemstones at the front of a cave someone cut into the coral. Before the end of the week he has constructed an air bladder and weights to stay down longer only to discover a serpentine entity in the cave! The next day he descends immediately by projecting a *gust of wind* behind him as he dives off the mast and faces a water naga, awoken by his spellcasting. The naga speaks in his mind, accepts a bald faced lie of "I'm just exploring", and lets Eldon know he's too full of crab meat to devour the fighter today. <sup>3</sup>

(6/2 Game) Finally healed, they make their way back to Chardon, but decide to keep the boat anchored where they won't have to pass through the city to not risk the wraiths that the *Gale's Teeth* warned them of. Their goal is Sangkon Bhet, a quest passed along to Remus from Oshalla, his goddess, born of the early refugees need to fight the hags and warlocks created when human minds tried to worship the unfathomable gods of the Serpent Folk, who died out on the isles before human arrived<sup>4</sup>. While Eldon has his eye on exploring the human 'City of Rust'<sup>5</sup>, Sangkon Bhet is older by far. Remus found a book mapping the city in Koralgesh. It's 2 days away.

The first day of travel crosses path with 'explorers' from Shankill who travel upstream from the sheltered cove to trade ironmongery with green-skinned human 'natives' in the jungle for assistance in fruit harvesting. Eldon and

Blanche, having traveled the island's inland, are familiar with plantain & cacao farms, but these Lost Land varietals carry enough premium to be worth the risk. Eldon is annoyed with the time spent discussing the logistics of this (and confirming that the green-skinned locals, for whom there is no explanation, weren't being mistreated) and he pushes everyone on<sup>6</sup>.

That night Conrad hears something moving through the brush nearby, as well as grunting noises, but recognizes those grunts as the Dakon language. Knowing the blue apes are neutral to friendly, he doesn't raise an alarm, and the sounds move on. Later the next day they both reach the ruins and the source of the noises, as a trio of Dakon are engaged in some haggling/trading with an old green man who has a hut not far from a visible ruined temple of the Sangkon Bhet style. Conrad and Randalf approach as the Dakon finish their trading, leaving with several things from the old man's pile, and begin distracting the man while the others circumnavigate his house to reach the ruins. Ultimately they trade some of the snakeskin for the recipe for plantain jerky (and revealing more than they think to the wily trader/cultist temple maintainer).

The others find an entrance on the far side but start dickering on the safety of entering while Eldon and Finn climb the ruins a locate a shaft leading in from the roof. Fill belays Eldon's rope while the adventurer lowers himself into the darkness. He finds his rope passing through the shaft floor, learning it is an illusionary ceiling for the temples main chamber. Eventually Remus leads the others in, with Chandlers linging rocks ahead to set off traps. They find a tripwire that shoots darts of now-inert poison, ivory statues of carnivorous ape skeletons that have dried red flakes on their claws and teeth (that Conrad chops in half at the spine lest they animate later), and the temple's main chamber, with a rope hanging from the ceiling and passing through the floor along with a large demon-ape, gem-eyed statue on an altar, and a corpse not far from the altar. A quick look at the corpse reveals it was likely trying to get the gem eyes out and killed by claws and teeth, perhaps from an ape skeleton.

Eldon descends through the ceiling, and Randalf, realizing the floor is also illusionary, leaps for the rope to climb down, sending both men into a sickening crash in the pit below.... (more happened but I'm out of space so we will pick up next month....)

<sup>2</sup> Dun Dun Dunnnnn!

<sup>3</sup> So not so dun dun dunnn! But the wounded one did reach shore.

<sup>4</sup> Oshalla solution to the problem was introducing *Mallacht na Gealái*, lycanthropes, to kill hags & warlocks; once those were 'gone' people decided the cure was worse than the disease, and Remus may be her last follower. Of course he's also a sentient clay statue temple guardian gone out hunting....

<sup>5</sup> An inland sites human abandoned when they moved back to the coastline, so named because the human god of the dead is technically the God of Rust.

<sup>6</sup> After the game I held Eldon's player back to find out why he was so off form. It turns out he's in football during Fall term so these are his last sessions in this game until 2027, and he really wanted to get stuff done while the other players are futzing around and making dumb decisions. I have to remember that at 15 they are giant bags of hormones.

## Stating up Regrets 12: Spider-Queen

In the land of “there is nothing new under the sun”, this month’s heroine from Jon Morris’ *League of Regrettable Superheroes* is the Spider-Queen<sup>7</sup>. Shannon Kane is wife and research assistant for brilliant young government chemist Harry, who is shot by enemies of his country. The caption says young... the first images of Harry have white hair; getting shot knocks the blonde back in. In any event, Shannon finds a web fluid formula in Harry’s papers and builds herself web shooting bracelets to fight crime in a red & blue outfit. Plus, she is misunderstood and hunted by the police as much as by criminals.

You can see why Marvel decided to appropriate her.

Spider Queen is pretty badass. I mean, she’s not “I have no fucks left to give but will trade Nazi lives for them”<sup>8</sup> levels of badass that Lady Satan (DotL 8) has, but still badass. She’s also much funnier than Lady Satan: click through the link below to see a bit with her and Mike O’Bell, the police detective who is supposed to bring her in, which is right out of a romcom. I won’t try to explain.

So how do we build her in *V&V*? It’s surprisingly hard! While *Villains & Vigilantes* aims squarely at Silver and early Bronze Age Marvel, it doesn’t have web-slinging. Or any sort of entangle attack. I can almost see it for 1.0, but in 2.0 after *Champions* came out with an Entangle power? Weird. We are left scrambling. All that comes close is Ice Powers, where in addition to cold it slams you with clinging ice (neatly seen on the combat chart/physics engine where Disintegration Ray reduces Ice Powers accuracy a 0). I’ve done this before, but...

Or we could reach into the distant future of 2017 and *Mighty Protectors*, *V&V* 3E. That gives us Grapnel:

The character can project ‘lines’ (ropes, webs, cables, glue, energy strands, etc.) out to a range of (S+A). Grapnel requires a roll to hit the target if it’s used as a Snare attack, immobilizing the target but leaving their limbs free (unless the attack was a called shot). Grapnel lines last for an hour, or until they’re destroyed or manually removed.... Grapnels can also be used as swing lines. The character must first attach their Grapnel to a sturdy physical object within range.

<sup>7</sup> Spider Queen was created by ‘Elsa Lisau’, possible pseudonym for Louis and Arturo Cazeneuve, for *The Eagle* #2 in 1941. She is in the public domain regardless of what Marvel might claim, as they appropriated her in 1993 to make her a wartime pro-Nazi anticommunist hero. As I said last month, ‘what kind of horsecrap is this?’ [Some pages on her origin](#) & Marvel’s appropriation;

That fits the bill. Since MP is a point build system the rest of the rules aren’t helpful, but we have a name. But how to handle mechanics?



In *V&V* 2.1, model reality<sup>9</sup>: grapnels have break points, which in *V&V* is Structural Rating, damage done you must exceed to damage it; if you do damage it you destroy 1 cubic foot per multiple of the SR, and attempts to break it without risk

of injuring yourself only do half damage. Spider Queen’s webs are ‘steel like’ and steel is SR 12. Since she’s hardly making a cubic foot of webbing, any damage over SR breaks the web, but that’s nigh impossible for normal folks. (I could randomize this but this is her only device). I will say her device lets her swing at her Agility in MPH and cling to walls as well.

Can I stop here? Not really. We could get away with this being her only Device and everything else is good stats, but she canonically has the Prejudice weakness (refusal for the people on your side to accept you). If she has a weakness, she has at least one more ability. Let’s take this from the top with the Oracular Bones of St. Cuthbert! Her Abilities roll is 2, which means roll 4 + 1 weakness, drop 1 ability. We know the weakness is *Prejudice*, one ability is her *Special Weapon Device: Grapnel*. Then 3 more rolls on the new Skills table from DotL #6: *Heightened Charisma* (+19(!)), *Heightened Movement* (+70”), *Heightened Expertise* (+4 with broad group). Hm...mmmm...



<sup>8</sup> Metaphorically, that is. Otherwise, she’s not that kind of girl. <scoff>.

<sup>9</sup> My current wild hack on *V&V* would do this as Movement damage, but we are staying classic here for brevity.

A new problem in statting up Regrettables in that all of these fit Spider Queen well, but one of them has to go. If we were still using Charisma RAW from 2.1, Height. Charisma is a huge detriment with Prejudice, but with our rules changes in DotL #8 we don't have that issue: she can still have a powerful reputation, get interaction bonuses, and make contacts, with her high charisma, but lets quickly modify the prejudice weakness so the player and GM define how it works out case by case, but at the very least the initial interaction modifier is at -4, or in the 'hostile but non-violent' stage of the reaction table. With these rules we can't rule Ht. Charisma out.

Based on her gams alone<sup>10</sup>, we keep Ht. Charisma. This takes her to 28, above human maximum, too much. So use a the split from DotL #6 where 1/3<sup>rd</sup> the roll goes to another Characteristic. Is she Dashing (Cha + Agi) or Charming (Cha + Int)? It's a tough call.

But let's go with *Dashing*. She's 21 Cha & 21 Agi (with +2 for being >120 lbs.), and her accuracy bonus is *maybe* enough to skip *Ht. Expertise*. Add *Ht. Movement* and she's *very* fast, agile, pretty accurate, and her 13 would be in Int, so she's still a smart researcher and scientist. With the *Ht. Movement* her base movement rate is 92", and while I don't think she can sprint at super-human speeds she can always get a lot done; her effective Fatigue is 90 to calculate evasions and rolling with attacks, so when she takes the time to evade she's damnably hard to hit and really good at reducing damage when she is.

*But how do you play it?*

She is absolutely a character you play for fun; yes, she's a widow, but as Spider Queen she's also a flirt and plays with her targets, trusting that once she gets them webbed up they aren't a threat. We forget that the supers genre is *heavily* mystery coded, especially in the golden age, and Spider Queen is one of those one step ahead, sets her enemies up sorts of characters that maybe doesn't play as well with a team – more so with her prejudice – but in an overlapping solo hero game she'd be fun

The biggest issue is she completely breaks the 'sock 'em in the jaw' model of heroics, so if some members of the party want to have classic supers knock outs, Spider Queen as a fellow PC might be frustrating.

*The regrettable world*

While she's a wartime heroine, her dedication to fight saboteurs, racketeers, and gangsters (criminals of all sorts!) has her fitting right in to the Regrettable 1970s and its rampant gangster problems. She's not someone who be a regular member of the Regrettables, but she's clearly operating in one of their cities (do they have home cities or are they all in 1 city? Interesting question – is this Marvel-esque or DC-style?). This gives the world a little more verisimilitude in there being super folk around who aren't part of the team. This also makes her the heroine of last resort to top the balance. (Yes, I did just reread Starlin's *Warlock* saga where Spider Man was summoned by Order & Chaos to stop Thanos after he trashed the Avengers.)

*Regretting what I said to you...*

I'm glad to see that Mother Hubbard met with universal acclaim; if she hadn't I might have been turned into a newt.

Myles commented on her powers being akin to 'magnetism' being 'what the plot needs Magneto to do', and yes it's very much a LIT (Limited by my Imagination and your Tolerance) power. As for decompressed storytelling in comics, I reread James Robinson's *Starman* and gave up in disgust when his Tarantino banter made a story advertised as 5 parts ran 6 or 7.... It's gotten worse since.

Lisa said she didn't grasp my logic behind Mother's<sup>11</sup> stat changes, and that's because there wasn't any really: a joy of *V<sup>e</sup>V* is 'vibe coding' as the kids say. I'd worked out having her start play at 12<sup>th</sup> level to get inventing points for Magic Spells A, giving her 11 levels of stat training, but this was cleaner: "Player: I want my PCs to be a 650-year-old witch, can: can that ability make her extra creepy & smart?" GM "yeah sure!" Hubbard is thematically correct, which is best correct.

Josh posits letting Sorcerers to spend inventing points to make reliable spells, having missed the sentence "Sorcerers can't Invent reliable Magical Spells A spells". Inventing points for reliable spells is the core of Magic Spells A, so Magic Spells B *can't* be that. *Maybe* if they used a level of training, which is a bigger investment in terms of scarcity and opportunity cost.

Matt asked for *Funnyman*. He's in Morris' book, so sure!



<sup>10</sup> Not just her gams, I find her legit charming and funny in the stories past the usual pin up girl figure.

<sup>11</sup> Ewww don't do that again.

## Comments on E&A 12

**Panhoca ds Silva & Maria Zucolotto:** Fascinating as always. *Day of the Tentacle* is one of the greats!

**Roger Bell-West:** Chuckled at *Persona Non Vita*. re Monolithic Catholicism: I'm rereading *The Name of the Rose* and that was my take-away except everyone knew then that god was real, just as PCs know their god is real. REYCT Clark B Timmins on background players can absorb: or as my friend Karen put it "I don't have time for any of your epic crap." REYCT Lisa re early gaming magazines: I look back on these both with a sense of nostalgia, an interest in generational trends (80's fascination with coin sizes!) but mostly sorrow on how much needs to re-learned & re-litigated each generation. I recently reread the masterful [Kirk Drift](#) essay and it brings to mind the things contemporary gamers 'know to be true' re '70s-90's gaming that just aren't, or certainly not monolithic or documented. REYCT Jim Eckman on E&Aers being outliers: I was just thinking this morning about how much original content I make (or weaving together smaller pieces of content into a new whole) as opposed to what I read/hear about other gamers and it feels weird. Of course, back in my day we had to make up everything... and wore onions on our belts, as was the style at the time. REYCT Josh on Perfect Plans working: what I've seen works in that space is pivoting quickly to the next post-plan complication or jump directly to the next 'mission' where there wasn't time to plan to avoid hours of dead session time. (If they execute the perfect plan at the end of the session, let them.) The best I've experienced for this was a pulp adventure where we were WWI Germans in a zeppelin recovering dinosaurs from Maple White Land for use in the war; we cleverly isolated Professor Challenger & his team (bombing the entrances to the caves they were using as a base, delaying them as they dug out) and flew away from the plateau with 90 minutes still on the clock and a t-rex egg in our hold. We apologized to the GM for 'beating' his game... when the egg hatched! We were faced a ravenous, very pointy baby dinosaur in the scaffolding of a hydrogen mainframe. (For the record, fighting a baby t-rex with a knife is not fun). The GM said he had another fallback complication if we reached Germany. RE resolution game vocabulary: I use 'granularity' & 'presumption of competence'; as we've discussed, a 90% skill needing 3 rolls each time it's used fails 1 time in 6. REYCT Jim: that *Dune* Analysis is the [Fremen Mirage](#), and it is great. For me it always brings to mind the scene in early *Cerebus* where the aardvark has recruited several barbarian clans with a plan to sweep away a decadent city, is KO'd for a few weeks and wakes to a bland report that in his absence the clans attacked and were wiped out by a few units of armored, trained pikemen. At scale, Lawful beats Chaotic.

**Mark A Wilson:** well now I need to watch the American Astronaut....

**John Redden:** thrilled to learn your cybernetics implant was successful!

**Patrick Brady:** Hello and welcome!

**Myles Corcoran:** to be fair, coffee *is* a nauseating drink. re *Mausritter*: LOL at "with more grace than one would expect from a mouse on a rope ladder." and the "I'll electrocute you to get the wizard's attention!" plan was perfect. REYCT Roger on designers including rules *they* don't use: a trend I was hoping was falling away, but apparently not, I know *EotPT* and *AD&D 1E* suffered from this a LOT. It does make you wonder how much design an 80/20 thing where 80% of calls for complexity are being driven by 20% of the players. RE YCT Brian Misiaszek re HCT Me on school of orphans: the best part is they would be immune to attack from pirates. RE *UtGS* clerics: Yeah, I was happy with the faith pool rules. It didn't really see play as the cleric PC was a replacement for one of our dead rogues, never faced the undead, and just made it to 2nd level with the new set of rites before life derailed the game.

**Gabriel Roark:** huh, I hadn't expected *Barrows & Borderlands* to have quite so much *Gamma World* with the radiation resistance & mutations; not sure why. This has been a very interesting read as I hack at my own *UtSG* stuff. Landeau is the wizard's name in *the Keep at Koralgesh* module, so I don't have any information on why it was chosen. As opposed to the Irish place names in my *Knave* game: back in my first *B/X / AD&D* world I took the main city name from the moon in Anne McCaffery's *The Crystal Singer*. I was unaware of its Irish origin until Myles mentioned it when I was recounting old tales. Since my *Knave* setting is recapturing that first game I leaned into the Irish names for cities across the island. (The setting, is geographically the Caribbean; Shankill Isle is Cuba.) Thanks for the kind words on *UtGS* clerics. I figure if I'm going to make a retroclone for my home games not for publication, it might as well be idiosyncratically mine.

**Brian Misiaszek:** re why pulp heroes succeed: this brought to mind in the *Dungeon Crawler Carl* books an of outside observer comments "<Carl's> ability to assess a situation and make split-second decisions is practically a super power", and a Matt Wagner *Batman* comic where Hugo Strange observes that Batman never hesitates... his thoughts immediately flow to actions. It's the same idea: yes, it only works because they are strong and tough and capable, but those only work because they are smart and quick on their feet. The Terror Incarnate ability sounds very much like the Face! I quite enjoyed these overall. Your design on the Twisha-affected is fantastic.

**Patrick Riley:** re XP for GP rant: Ummm, OK. so don't do that then. :) In *B/X* design, treasure recovered is a synecdoche for how effective the delve was: It's an incredibly convenient number that doesn't require either setting experience via preset story goals that wound a sandbox game, awkward tracking of events in play for awards, or awarding experience solely based on combat which is toxic to interaction. GP = XP is the cleanest, best system for *OSR* sandbox play. REYC on UtGS clerics: *B/X* says 'clerics are humans who have dedicated themselves to the service of a god or goddess' but the semiotics of being heavily armored warriors all sharing a spell list replete with 'Old Testament' magics & exorcism training feels catholic-church-informed in the default medieval European setting. RE Charismatic Clerics: they get combat bonuses vs. traditional 'cleric' foes, a widely broader bonus in social interactions, broader equipment discounts, bonuses in finding & recruiting henchmen (significant in UtGS)... basically in any social interaction. So, I *think* so, but I will take another pass at my design. Re Why not say can't use intelligent weapons: Because in *B/X* only swords can be intelligent, d8+ damage swords are iconic, and I want all of that tied to Fighters. Niche creep on Fighters with "but can't we just" or "why can't this other class..." has been a bane of D&D design FOREVER; for my own nonsense I draw a line (admitting it's nonsense). RE Exorcism of 4 levels turning four level 1 skeletons or two level 2 zombies or all level 0 poltergeists: um... yes? Now I'm curious what other meaning you were seeing! RE terminology on acts of faith: Good point! I'll edit that. Thanks!

**Clark Timmins:** I admit the *Cloistered Cleric* article was a design influence. I wanted them to mirror Fighters, Rogues, & Magic-Users, and in turn Hospitalers, Priests, & Scholar-Monks.

**Michael Cule:** re *Narnia*: we don't have to adapt as there is a 2017 stage play for *LW&W*. My quip about *Magician's Nephew* was just me being a smartass. As for Mother Hubbard's divination, this is why elderly people flood the police lines with tips & perceived crimes. Alas, only she can make spirits from the vasty deep, and useful premonitions, come when she calls.

**Lisa Padol:** REYCT Patrick Zoch re Bribes: *the Millionaire Detective* brings to mind the *DC Heroes* Wealth rules for between 1e and 2e, because in 1e Bruce Wayne could just spend 5 hero points to offer Penguin \$5m to not steal the \$2m diamond and rake in a 15 point award for preventing a crime. Bribery Works!

**Attronarch:** re session 111, I very much appreciated their professionalism: find the egg, take the egg, deliver the egg. Wait, how many assignments can Jaffar give Ambros? How wide is "anything she asks?" Yikes!

**Dylan Capel:** Yeah, that *Earthdawn* magic item lore mechanic is wonderful, at least in concept.

**Jim Eckman:** playing a SecUnit or Starship: starships are easier as they are playing 'the guy in the van' to the level of *being* the van. Playing a SecUnit isn't much different than playing a pulp action hero like Brian M. described last issue - they are strong and fast and tough, but the real ability is thinking and reacting faster. That said, I have no idea how much later *Traveller* covers this, but I could easily chrome a "I rolled really high on physical stats and combat skills" army or marine character with three tours into a off the shelf SecUnit.

**Avram Grumer:** the *Die* promo materials certainly lean to the interpretation you had of it being a self-exploration in public tool, and I understand your shying away. I read the first volume of the comic and walked away, as the tenor didn't resonate. reYCT Lisa on *Unchecked Power*: remember, those Asparagus People were why Jean Grey had to die (also because all Marvel's Thor-power-level heroines get nerfed), but Professor X canonically wiped out whole Microverse civilizations. I guess the Microverse falls under the same Savage Land rules as my X-Men PBEM "Life is cheap in the Savage Land (no karma loss for killing)"

**ELF:** I'm sorry but every premise in your super-hero essay is utterly alien to my experience of running super-hero games for 43 years. I've had people play the X-Men, or Superman & Wonder Woman, or Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes and it's all worked and felt like the comics; go ahead and ask Josh, Lisa, and Myles. I'm at a loss on how to respond to this otherwise.

**Joshua Kronengold:** I love it when medicine's side effects make it a toss up to being worse than the disease. re YCT Mark Wilson: Wizards being the people making game mechanics for wizards is unduly confusing! :) re Artificers: My solution to kids wanting to play Artificers in 13th Age was re-chroming wizards - much like the one you landed on. And yeah, I had magic item shops in my HS games back in the mid-late 80's; this is nothing new (and yes the PCs tried to rob it). Re Whaile Whores: I kinda love how *Whale Whores* is now part of our zine lexicon, with Roman Legionnaire Games and Reverse Unicorns; also, *Ghost Dog* is a great movie and you're dead right on what it would need for an RPG. reYCT Attronarch: Yeah, I really thought they were bringing Hagar back too, but apparently not. re *Knave* Game comments: I want Sculpt Elements to be useful, so I interpret it very broadly for maximum shenanigans. Re UtGS Clerics: I assume you mean Cleric Saving Throws. Clerics have the clerical assistance+3 bonus built into their saves, so having another cleric help doesn't change the target number. However, they can't help themselves

to get the 17+ edge, so if Cleric A treats Cleric B, Cleric A's save doesn't change, but Cleric B's assistance bonus can go off. Charismatic Clerics do get the bonuses only when it concerns gods/demons/undead (and yes, their servitors) that was in no way clear in the text, so thanks for calling it out. My mental image is that Charismatic clerics are the exorcists along with being the parish priests and evangelists. (Hospitallers, Priests, & Scholar is the breakdown) Yes, your understanding from the footnote is correct: Marital Clerics can only drive the number to the middle, while charismatic clerics can add or subtract at any point, greatly increasing their options. Your explanation for why intelligent weapons won't work with clerics (as opposed to why clerics can't wield them) is quite clever. It isn't what I have in mind for UtGS, but it's eminently stealable. re attack-roll based advantage on 1-7: this is borrowed from my Fighter design (and obvs from *13th age*) with the goal a Fighter's attack rolls are very seldom wasted. Cleric can wield 2 handed weapons, they just don't get any advantage on rolls of 17+ when they do so. Re Abey Poison: the spell is the spell - it's just an arcane formula that works for whoever knows it. It's not alignment dependent. It exists as it does because a) I wanted to limit PC access to poisons, especially non-rogue access and b) I needed a way to make 'holy water' and this is it. Re healing: while clerical 'healing' isn't till later, clerical 'courage', Aid spell from *AD&D*, comes at 2nd level; since all HP are 'get out of the way of a major hit' and being at 0 or less means you finally took a single major wound, I wanted that clarity; healing real wounds is an absolute miracle and should come later, getting extra HP is easy. As for raising dead, yes they can try it at 4th level, but with a difficulty of 10 with a likely 3d faith pool it's not easy (28%); it's much easier at 7th level, though I should specify that each body only gets 1 shot. re YCT Roger BW: RAE your thoughts on 90's *Traveller* publishing. RE GenAI; one of the IT people at work built an AI instance loaded with just our benefits handbook to answer questions, with anything it couldn't find being referred to HR. It never gave a wrong answer, but the programmer couldn't explain how this was better than a hyperlinked table of contents and index. Just the ERICA effect, I suspect. RE rigging the game for PC capture: I have played with other ideas, such as where it is a PC power to *force* the enemy to capture them, or where whenever someone is fatally hit the players can rewind and declare that they surrender just before that blow lands to avoid a PC death, giving the players agency to *when* capture happens. Of course, some players will then go "The second they move to tie us up we restart the fight, ah-ha!" but those are people who won't appreciate the genre convention regardless. re McD&Donalds: Yeah, that's about right. The idea of "we all want to game but no one

wants to DM so we hire someone to DM" isn't too far from "we all want to hang over dinner but no one wants to cook, so we go out." Still, the expectations of the players to the paid GM in terms of what they have to put in vs. get out will be very different. REYCT Avram on Ship Names: Now I want to have a SF game where the naming convention for their vessels is two human names separated by a slash. Get it? Get it? <crickets>

**Timothy Collinson:** re roll under: the only place I've seen it work is the *V&V* combat table, which is as much a physics engine as anything and the 'roll high' mechanic where people can keep adding bonuses would break the effect. Otherwise, yeah. Drove me nuts in *Tri Stat*. re the Con: It sounds like a great con! The problem is always too many games, too little time. RE daughter's wedding: Congrats! RE last Word: Ha!

**Everyone else:** RAEBNC

## Reviews to Fill Space

*The Billion Worlds Series* by James L Cambias (**Recommended**) is an ongoing series where each book is safely stand alone, and I recommend them because they are so eminently gameable. Jim (I can call him that, he's a regular at my gaming table) is telling straight up adventure stories in a [Transhuman Space](#) style world: billions of habitats circle the sun in the 10<sup>th</sup> Millennium, with humans, uplifted animals, and AI-Minds engaging in treasure hunts across the solar system, salvage ops on dead habs, wild political conspiracies, and Great Power espionage, all with book titles that would be slotted with Lundum or Cussler but backed with real world physics and big idea science. The one repeating character is Daslakh, an 'old and cunning' (as he tells you every time he fucks up) AI in a small-but-hardy spider droid who sometimes our narrator and sometimes wandering into someone else's story.

*The Boroughs on Netflix* (eeeeeeh?) is touted as the next thing from the Duffler Brothers (who are credited as executive producers), and it suffers from the same sins I've seen ascribed to *Stranger Things* seasons 4-5. I tuned it because it stars Alfred Molina & Alfre Woodard, either of whom I will watch in most anything, and the cast is a murderers' row of actors doing great work in service of mediocre material. Any genre awareness tells you the entire plot arc in ep 1, with side quests mysteries that are dropped, and a scene in ep 7 where a newly introduced character all but turns to the camera to explain a subplot. Watch it for a contemporary take on 50's SF horror but know what you're getting into.

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

Brazilian Interactive fiction – part III: *Sobressalto!* (2000)  
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <[ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br](mailto:ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br)> and Maira Zucolotto  
<[maira\\_zuc@hotmail.com](mailto:maira_zuc@hotmail.com)>

The sequel to *Coração Acelerando* (1998), the second (and final) volume of the “Adrenalina Collection”, also published by Lilian Sypriano, is *Sobressalto!* (2000) – “Startle”, in free translation. The book retained its previous illustrator: Cláudia Jussan.

This book is a clear continuation of the previous one. A month after the reader’s hair-raising experience(s), they once again find themselves faced with strange events that disrupt their daily routine from the very first choice. On a day of staff meetings (when only the teachers work and discuss their pupils’ performance, whilst all the students are excused from lessons), the reader decides how to make the most of it. However, his father has given him some rather tedious tasks to do that day, such as paying a bank bill and going to the dentist. The protagonist also needs to go to the library to see if any new horror books have arrived – his favourite genre.

The reader decides to get the chores out of the way as quickly as possible to make the most of this day off, and that is when he encounters some situations that are, to say the least, strange, such as being mistaken for a thief (if the reader choose to go to the bank to pay them father’s bill), finding a mysterious book on the library shelf (if they go there before doing them chores) or coming face to face with a macabre version of them dentist in his usual surgery (if the dental surgery is the reader’s choice).

Like her previous book, *Sobressalto* offers few choices, and the passages are far too long by the standards of *Fighting Fantasy* or *Choose Your Own Adventure*, for example. However, it is worth reading for the creativity and good dose of humour employed by the author (she again includes a list of items to take on the adventure, engages with the reader in a sarcastic-yet-non-offensive manner in the paratexts and, of course, in the narrative itself), who shows that we can encounter fantastical situations both in the countryside and in the big city. Intertextuality is another positive aspect of the book, as it incorporates elements of action-packed crime stories (relating to the choice to go to the bank), references to Stephen King (relating to the choice to go to the library) and to Robert Louis Stevenson, particularly in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (relating to the choice to visit the macabre dentist).

Following this collection, new individual titles by a wide variety of authors became known in Brazil. Although scarce and scattered, these stories, like those already presented, are nonetheless brilliant and significant as a gateway to RPGs and other practices.

#### COMMENTS #12

ROGER BW: Wow! IF printed material can already be considered a treasure!

JOHN REDDEN: I agree 😊

BRIAN ROGERS: This series is going to be almost as long as the others, hehe. But it’s great to hear that 😊

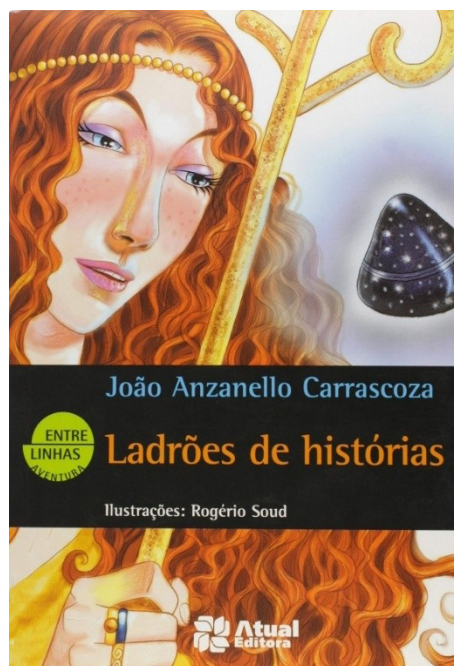
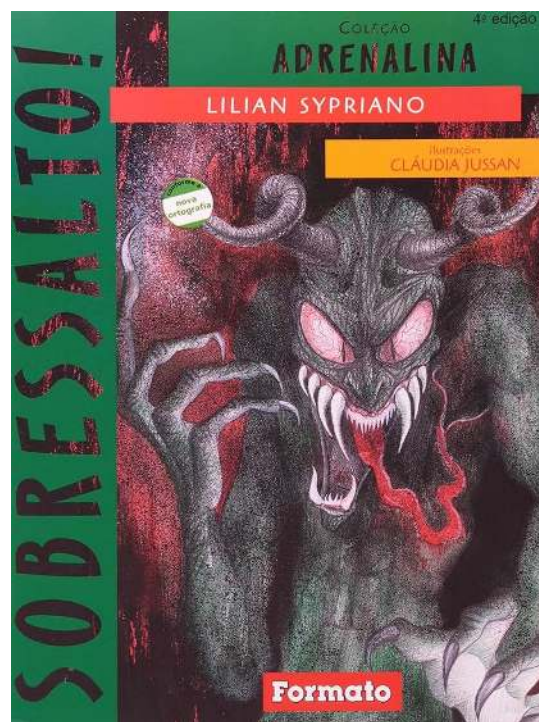
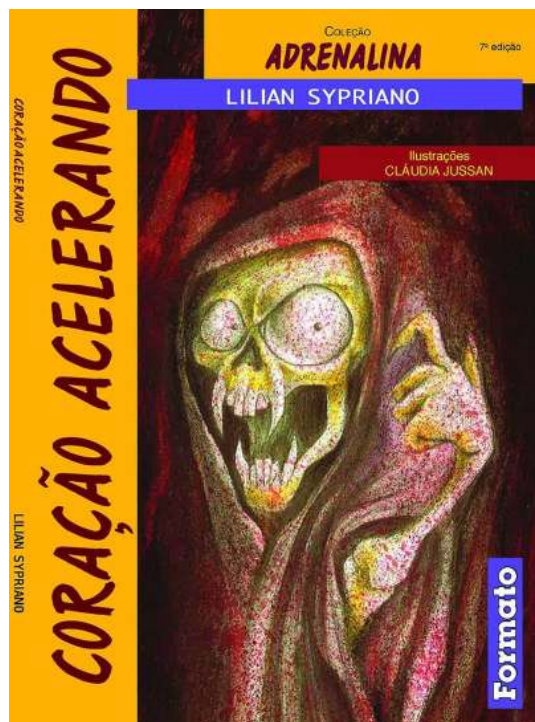
BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: I’d never thought of the maps/flowcharts being used in that way. It was really interesting to understand this new perspective. Thank you very much!

LISA PADOL: That’s great to hear, Lisa! What I’ve been seeing is the gamebook (which is already a hybrid product in its own right) being combined with other formats, which serves to enrich the genre. If you could share later which SJG products of this type you’ve come across, it would be a great help to me.

ERICA L. FRANK: They sound fascinating! Those devourers of things always make for good stories.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Actually, I base my classification on an update of what Lawrence Schick presented in *Heroic Worlds* (1991) and which Jonathan Green had already drawn upon in *You Are the*

*Hero* (Book 1, 2014): interactive fiction would be a non-sequential interactive narrative. If elements of randomness (dice, cards, etc.) and RPG elements (attribute scores, collected inventory etc.) are added, it becomes a gamebook (Schick calls this “quantified interactive narrative”). In my PhD, for example, I updated dozens of other terms, trying to differentiate between them all, but as you yourself recognise, the line between some of them is often very fine. But let’s face it: this is mere academic nit-picking, and what really matters is that the reader (or player) enjoys whatever they prefer.



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## **Mix Natter And Anti-Natter**

### **Regardance**

We completed the third season of Foundation. There seems to be more coming. Mule revelation. Interesting.

I've started Children of Time, the third book in this series and I'm over one 80 percent of the way through. So far I like the third book better than the first two.

We have been watching Chief at War. It is an Hawai`ian historical drama with Jason Momoa as Ka`iana. It shows a lot of Hawai`ian history.

### **Northern California Minicon in June**

12 -June-20-26

Zero Level Funneling, we played a group of Zero level peasants. The game was ran by Ben. It was amusing and fun though it had a high mortality rate. The name of the module is Sailors on the Starless Sea. The town name is Hamlet of Hadly. Brubaker is the town mayor. He explains that people of the town have been vanishing. There is a tavern in the town named "Last Rites".

There is a visible keep that as fallen into disrepair. There is gold in the keep somewhere is the rumor. The keep was originally owned by two foul brothers.

There is a rumor that the missing people have returned as beast-men. There are unstable boulders and rocks in the ruins.

Each player has three zero level characters without a class. However each character has an occupation. The stats are very simple. Alignment (law, neutral or chaos). Saves( reflex, fortitude and will), Strength, Agility, Stamina, Personality, Intelligence and Luck.

I named my three characters: Alpha (Alchemist), Beta (Miller-Baker) and Gamma (Bee Keeper). The group of 18 characters, 3 for each player agree to find the missing villagers. The miner character triggers a land slide. Picker is killed but the the remaining 17 make it across the land slide into the center of the ruined keep. There is a portion of the ruined keep that is frozen. One of our peasants slips and falls but then sees a frozen warrior on a block of ice. It has armor and a large ax.

A well is discovered. When an object is thrown in there is no sound of it hitting the bottom. But there is a soft moan coming from the well. The well is in the middle of the dilapidated courtyard. There is a sigil on the side, "Till death do us part". Ooze emits from the stone wall around the well. It kills another party member. All the party members climb up the tower except Rich, the tax collector. He goes to the tower front door and knocks. The door opens and Rich actually attempts to collect taxes.

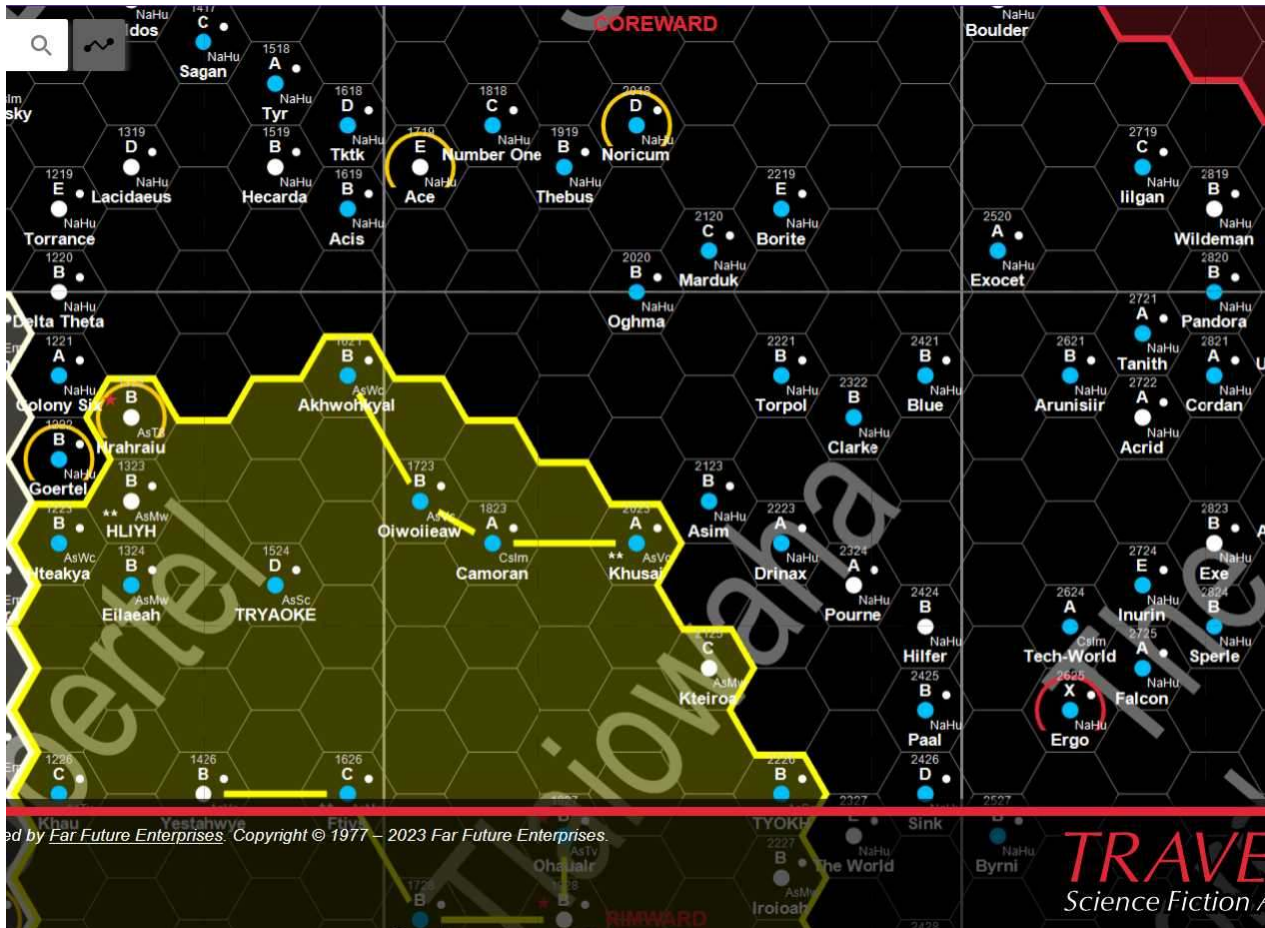


The action allows all the characters ascending down the stair case to have initiative. Acolytes' robes are found in 4 alcoves.

The remaining party takes the robes. Then we see 3 glowing skulls in a pool. There is a ring at the bottom of the pool. We enter the pool. There is a line of skulls lining the pool.

Next we discover the shoreline of an underground sea. A number of beast men are found adjacent to a boat. The party has acolyte robes on and the best men ignore the party. Menhir, a party member grabs a line and pulls the boat ashore. But after that, giant tentacles grab the ship and one party member is pulled into the under water sea. By now we have collected a number of weapons. We enter an island where Big Bad Leader conducts his sacrifices. After exposing ourselves, a fight between the Big Bad and his beast men occurs. We eventually win. Of the 18 original zero level characters, 11 survived and now are first level in a yet-to-be designated class. All 3 of my characters survived. The GM said my characters didn't take risky moves.

13-June-2026 **Traveller**



The adventure starts with the Russel Bucket on Acis. We are being hired to deliver a set of unknown goods to Akhwohyal system, an Aslan world. The initial cargo is a potential cure for an Aslan specific virus. There is a large empty space in the Bucket's cargo hold. Next we purchased a disassembled fuel purification system that is of Imperial quality. It was purchased from a Vargr junk dealer named Snarrok. We also purchased hunting lodge furniture. The Aslan love to hunt. We also purchase 20 tons of fuel to purify.

Some group is monitoring our actions, so the Russel Bucket ends up being monitored and then attacked by an assailant that does not want us to deal with the Aslan, possibly the Sindolese.



**Name** Lisa Cheepowjanesu **Player** John Redden  
**Age** 38

**ST** 10 **HP** 10  
**DX** 14 **Will** 14  
**IQ** 14 **Per** 14  
**HT** 13 **FP** 13

Encumbrance None → 4 Move → 7 Dodge → 10 Totem→Sleek Fox

**Attributes**

Sense of Duty  
 Bad Temper  
 Curious  
 Delusions  
 Greed  
 Impulsiveness  
 Over Confident  
 Poor Monetary Transactions  
 Fear of Parties

**Skills**

Piloting 18  
 Astrogation 16  
 Xenology 15  
 Xeobiology, Biology 14  
 Zero-G 13  
 Gunner 15  
 Ships Systems Computer 15  
 Anthropology 14  
 Diplomacy 12  
 Archaeology 14  
 Mechanical 14  
 Vac Suit 13  
 Laser Rifle, Last Chance Base

~6000 Credits Wealth  
 Writes short Stories  
 Is pregnant, likely with twins

Joshua does not like the original Traveller space combat system. It's broken down into phases. I'd like to write it up, but the first phase is "Roll your piloting skill". My character, Lisa, has exceptional Pilot skill. She always rolled at the beginning of the round. There were also move, offense and repair. The battle was over quickly with the primary adversary retreating. We did take some damage in the cargo hold due to interceptors firing multiple missiles.

The Russel Bucket jumps to Akhwohyal. The system has a large orbital port. One piece of equipment catches fire. It is part of the gyroscope system. The crew member with expertise is on it.

An Aslan female named Ftekih, spies the very valuable artifact that the Bucket has been contracted to deliver to the correct party on Akhwohyal. She says that sword artifact belonged to my grandfather. She provides the credits. *But*, the true owner of the artifact that contracted via Acis claims that the artifact has been stolen by a unknown female.

Meanwhile Lisa and Yahn, a crew member want to visit the archaeological dig on Akhwohyal. So they travel to the dig after moving the planets surface. It turns out that Yahn's ancient ring glowed around ancient equipment when Lisa and Yahn entered the ancient *Pig Lab*. He also has a hallucination of viewing the ancient bio-region. After this incident Lisa and Yahn go into a bio-

containment for a period.

There is a person lurking outside the Bucket star ship. The Akhwohyal police arrive. They head to the Aslan embassy. There is tension here between the Aslan and the Sindolese. This continues outside the Bucket. The two groups are posturing at each other. Jay Carter, the captain of the Bucket, has a gift for each of the factions. They calm down. It turns out, one group controls the planet and one controls the starport. Our crew members get a love slap from the Aslan in the two groups.

Lisa and Yahn return and we are ready for future adventures.

### **Pig at a Wedding**

Paul ran this very silly but fun short game. <https://gshowitt.itch.io/pig-at-a-wedding>

The characters are attending a wedding, some invited, some not. The characters have a revenge attitude at the either the bride or groom or possibly the brides maids or even attendees. The pig is being delivered in a van. It is up to the player characters to do something with the pig. There are a number of attributes chosen by each player for their PC. I chose my PC had five ex-girlfriends at the wedding. My character wanted to get one of the brides maid's dresses and use it to dress the pig. It failed, no matter. Other PC quirks included the bride was an ex-girlfriend, the PC has the hots on a bridesmaid. The pig arrives and we guided it into the wedding cake, knocking it and the table was sitting on. This was accompanied by a large amount of screaming.

14-June-2026

### **Slug Blaster**

<https://slugblaster.com/>

Paul was our Sunday GM. He has the ability to introduce games I have never played. It was introduced to me as a gathering of non-dimensional teenagers. The rules are somewhat crunchy, but easy to play with a GM that knows them.

My character is Billy Nilbog. He is on the outs with his parent after an event he doesn't understand. They returned to Earth from this dimensional *planet*. And to top it off, Billy discovered stuff he wasn't supposed to. Billy has silver skin and wears yellow nylon cloths.

Billy is spilled out through a portal into Porville. He hangs out in Jame's

garage. Another group, the Jet Collective, organizes a group show where teens demonstrate their talents. Billy does okay with his skateboard, but he forgot to have his small drone loop around his skateboard as he flipped it 360 degrees. He now has an angst.

The next adventure has choices. The group of teenagers must choose between a sunny jungle, or a weird mall. A storm is arriving. The teens must open a portal. Only a sky object above is the way in. After entering a grips sand blaster and crashes a fighter jet into the ground. The fighter jet disintegrates and a crab moves now in its place.

Billy discovers a roof top entrance under the sand. The entrance is for the mall. In the mall is a miniature golf course. A drone is sent to inspect the golf course. A mall map is discovered. There is also an advertisement for Panic Energy Drink. We inspect two sectors. There is a jewelry store with all cases smashed and no jewelry. In spite of the smashed cases, security is still active. PeeWee enters the store but nothing is activated. There are defensive turrets but the two turrets destroy each other.

Shouting is heard in the large courtyard. The Jet Collective is in the courtyard. Lyra, who we have encountered before is also there. There is competition between the two groups. A fly the size of a golf cart appears and goes after Billy. Billy creates an illusion of six additional Billies. Tegan is recording the whole incident with our group and the Jet Collective. James performs a synchronized flip. Tegan disables the fly.

When the ground buzzes, we head to the portal and out to the dunes and then back to the dimension where we entered the strange mall.

### **Complete and Better**

The heart valve surgery is complete. I can drive a vehicle but cannot lift more than 4.5 kilograms (10 pounds). This lifting limit will increase soon.

### **Shake It Up Baby**

To top it off, at the end of May we were slammed by a 6.0+ earthquake. We are busy cleaning and fixing. These Books fell down.

I don't remember where I picked up Chainmail (sic), possibly from my late youngest brother.

L'Appel was purchased in Paris, France.



## Ignorable Theme

The Nesu in Lee Gold's first space adventure. That was in the early 1990s? They could shape shift in very bizarre ways.

## Artificial Intelligence, My Opinions

I encountered the theory and practice in 1989 while working at Citicorp TTI. One of the engineers had built an engine that would analyze requests for loans. He described how Alan Turing and associates during the early time period wanted to build a software simulation of the human brain. They really didn't have enough computing powers to implement it. They did escribe a neural network.

Given current AI at its most powerful implementation, the Large Language Model, it is not a living organism. There are other implementations. An AI integration of employee and management communication (see Humaxa.com). AI is very much part of the Internet of Things. I have read several articles on AI used in medical analysis. The list goes on.

Is deep learning and LLMs intelligent? I have previously written in my zine for intelligent AI it is a requirement that it have independent self generated memories and a tie in with vision like most creatures with eyes. If the system is truly intelligent can it also be stupid (*artificial stupidity*)? My own belief is when the neural net is truly intelligent and seemingly alive it is an alien life form with it own purposes.

Then the question of economics comes to bear. The traditional model of

value is slowly going away. Traditional value as defined by Adam Smith and Karl Marx as the equivalent of factory labor. In Das Kapital volume III, Karl defines machines as dead labor and human work as living labor. AI turns dead labor into living labor. This invalidates Karl's analysis. Where does value now originate? The countless hours humans spend providing value interacting with the Internet (games for example). The scenario is further modified by globalization. Globalized organizations are not tied to a national system. They function almost like a separate country.

The AI dominated economic system should usher in a new citizen model. The people should work part time for an AI company-collective. They still should get a full salary. This should *not* be dominated by a government program, but something organic in a globalized economy. It requires a new mode of socialization and personnel living. The free time should be used for creation or recreation.

Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## **Sum Comments**

### **Pedro and Maira**

The latest game description reminds me of Zork. In Zork collecting things are important.

### **Mark Wilson,**

Good luck with Origins. I attended Origins years ago in Los Angeles. Back then Gary Gygax stopped for a moment to see what we were doing and continued on.

### **Matt Stevens,**

Hmm... I have never invented a mythology. In my fantasy games I ran in the early 1980's, there were very powerful characters, even some with planetary wide powers, but they were not deities. Acts like *raise the dead* were simply magic.// Re comment to Michael Cule. You can do a social analysis that can have strong political opinions in the analytic background.

### **Clark Timmins,**

Re magic used in construction. I appreciate the comment. *Rubicks* metallic dungeon in three dimensions would not be possible without it.

### **Attronarch,**

Stoned again. And they got the bird.// Agreed. Players choose their own words.

**Brian Rogers,**

The work situation seems similar to what I dealt with at Citicorp.// Starwars can be a lot fun with a good group.// I missed that one in Spamalot.// Whoa! That's a detailed writeup.

**Roger BW,**

I enjoy GURPS WWII. A DC-3 always adds a bit of color. My late uncle took me on one, not in the air. He used to fly them.// Re realism and magic. I sort of do the same thing with ultra-tech in science fiction. In one sense it is *magic*. But I attempt to keep the ultra-tech as a fictional extension of physics.// All programs are not scripts. A script is interpreted on the fly, though it may be parsed to the end and then interpreted. A program that is generated by a compiler is different. The output is some form of machine language (assembly language). I remember once turning on the highest level of optimization of a C compiler. I had it dump the generated code in assembler and found it *Very Difficult* to read.// Interesting analysis of rules and setting in Traveller.

**Myles Corcoran,**

A human in the shape of a frog? Is this a unique mouse perspective?// It seems that historical gaming, especially WWII is popular in this zine.

**Gabriel Roark,**

Congratulations on the ice skating progress.// I never played Arduin, but your essays are a joy to read.// I didn't know Taylor Swift was invisible.

**Michael Cule,**

I'm happy to read that the cat is recovering. // Weight loss is tricky. I never have consumed weight loss drugs. For me it was more exercise and diet. In 1998 I weighed almost 120 Kg. Now its 90 Kg. // Cary on Lunars.

**ELF,**

I played Champions one time at Origins in Los Angeles years ago. I loved it until combat. After that I swore I would never play it again.// I am amused by the cartoons.// I once picked up a book entitled something like "An Introduction to Neo-paganism". I read through and what I got out of it was

this is an extended guide to folk-lore and mythology. What was missing was a guide to right and wrong. All the religions I am familiar with have this. Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and so on. What am I missing?// Hawai`i used to be a polytheistic society. Even with the dominance of Christianity and Buddhism, Hawai`ian deities remain in the culture as tales.

### **Dylan Capel,**

I can imagine a Traveller scenario similar to the original Alien.// Re Lisa's zines. A lot of words come first to my mind. I always read them and consider it a huge helping of writing.

### **Lisa Padol,**

Sometimes when I read your zines I don't know if you are talking about a game system or a module. Is Dracula Dossier a game system or a module? I believe you are familiar with many more systems than I am. That's okay. Don't stop now.// As I think of it now, what makes a city is dependent on an economy whether, local, area or planetary.// I used to know a gaming group on the Big Island. They vanished with HawaiiCon.// For our NoCal gaming group, David is running Horror on the Orient Express. I'll try to stay away from spoilers.// Re Con going. It's simple. *I just don't travel well.*

### **Patrick Riley,**

Religion certainly is part of culture. Christianity and Islam draw heavily from Abrahamic tradition. It is totally obvious when it comes to Hawai`ian mythology. When the original Hawai`ians occupied the islands, there were a group of people already using the islands as home that were much smaller than the Hawai`ians and were easily dominated. They became part of mythology as Menehunes. Pele and Poliahu were very likely based on real people. Likewise for the deity Maui.



Menehunes and Deities Pele and Poliahu

**Brian Misiaszek,**

Excellent, you made it to a convention. // The Pulp Cthulhu article is a good read. If I run a game sometime in the future, I may use it.// I continue to read and enjoy the Twsha writeup. I am curious how you pronounce Twsha, (*Tweshaw?*).

**Jim Eckman,**

I'm used to Traveller in a GURPS format game mastered by my friend Joshua.

**Avram Grumer,**

The fire-houseman who made workers play games he designed at work. That bad boy.// I can't remember if I have played Monster Hearts. Paul in the NoCal group may have run it.

**Joshua Kronengold,**

Having a good medical staff working with you is very important.// Happy that your unemployment benefits are working out. I have never collected unemployment. One time I almost did, but was hired again.// Laptop, RIP.// Interactive Fiction. That's new to me.// To some extent even in science fiction hypothetical contours are introduced that some would consider *magic*.// I'm not quit sure what a reversed mystery is.

**Jim Vassilakos,**

See my essay in this zine on AI. My view of AI is similar but different when compared to yours.// I remember Princeville. I was surprised by so many gated communities. I thought Kapaa typically more Hawai`ian. Hurricane Iniki in 1992 blew open all the chicken coops and spread the chickens all over the island. You saw the beginning of Iniki in the first Jurassic Park film.

**Timothy Collinson,**

A convention of Science Fiction games. Wow! I wish a could travel like I used to.

**Patrick Brady,**

Welcome back. I personally loathed stencils. But for a long time that's all Lee used.

**Jargon Zen**

A student made a circle on the ground, pointed to it and asked the Zen master, "Master, all the great monks in the world cannot go in. Why?" The Zen master replied "All the great monks in the world cannot get out of it."

## **Humor**

The first telephone conversation was only eighteen feet apart. It was a close call.

\* \* \*

In 1910 a Zen leader wandered throughout Hungary. He did annoy some people who thought he was a Buddha pest.

# Twisting the Rope #13

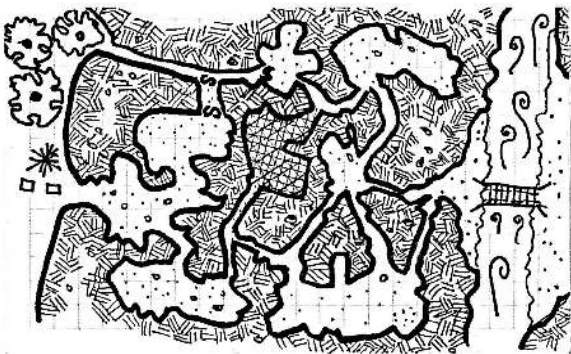
Myles Corcoran - 20 Brookfield Park, Cork T12 K7V7, Ireland  
<https://mastodon.ie/@deetwelve>

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## They Walk by the Grass

I've seen fire and I've seen rain this month.  
Mostly rain but summer makes its attempt to flourish with occasional sunny days<sup>1</sup>.

Rowan's sojourn in "RowanGaff"<sup>2</sup> comes to an end this month, as the original house occupants finish up their Erasmus stays in Hungary and return to the house. It's been good watching Rowan enjoy and grow with the responsibilities and freedoms afforded by living away from home.



In medical news, one of my players from the Thursday night group came off his bicycle and broke his hip. With remarkable foresight, he managed to time the injury so he fell at the bus stop outside the Cork University Hospital where two of the people waiting for a bus were medically trained and looked after him until the ambulance arrived. The surgeon inserted a plate and pin to repair it and now he's working on physio in a step-down hospital. The rest of the group rallied around with hospital visits and care packages, and one of us picked up his bicycle from the kind radiologist who stored it for the

patient after the ambulance showed up. We have collectively been working on him to ask for step-down care and the like, as his regular mode of transport is the bicycle and he lives alone up three flights of stairs. Baby steps so far but he may yet agree.

I wanted to share an amazing video<sup>3</sup> from "People Make Games" on Youtube about the intersection of art, play and just downright persistence in Jerry Gretzinger's map-making life's work. Doubtless several of you will have already seen it, as People Make Games is definitely in our orbit, but you'll know in the first few minutes if it's worth the full watch, but I highly recommend it.

Jerry Gretzinger has spent most of his life creating a map. With paint, ink, collage, decoupage and who knows what other techniques, he has built a map that grows, evolves and sometimes decays that, when laid out, fills a good fraction of a basketball court. I loved the combination of art, play and an old guy enjoying tremendously the process of creating something meaningful for himself. It's a documentary of deeply human activity rooted in the joy of creating stuff, following and sometimes breaking rules, and generally just messing around. My own map drawing is a pale echo, but comes from a similar place with a similar urge to create and explore.

I was saddened to hear of the death of Anthony Head, who played Rupert Giles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on TV, and many other roles. I particularly liked him in John Finnemore's *Cabin Pressure*, a very funny radio comedy drama, where Benedict Cumberbatch also starred as a wee jobbing actor. By all reports, Head was also a

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<sup>1</sup> Irish to the point of self-parody, I open with commentary on the weather.

<sup>2</sup> Even the remaining original occupant who was not away on Erasmus has started calling it that.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is8N7B9b0GQ>

kind and generous actor to work with. He will be missed.

I was also sad to hear of John Blanche's death. His art in *Warhammer*, *White Dwarf* and *Fighting Fantasy* was a window onto a twisted, intriguing world beyond the sanitized *Elmore Dragon* covers.

## Mutterings



I played a new game, *The Shipwreck Arcana*<sup>4</sup>, with the UCC boardgame group recently. It's a co-op deduction game with lovely Tarot-sized cards and appealing artwork that asks players to guess a tile drawn from a bag by the current player. The active player draws two tiles and plays one face-up next to one of the five arcana cards, each of which has rules for what can be played there. From those rules and the location the active player chose, the other players must deduce the value (1–7) of the second tile in the active player's hand.

Successful deductions score a point and flip the arcana where the tile was placed, granting the power described on the back of the card. Incorrect deductions advance the doom clock towards Doom.

I enjoyed it and look forward to playing it again. There's a degree of trying to read the active player's mind as well as the straightforward application of logic, as not every tile placed has only one legitimate location. You end up trying to understand the choice made by the active player in the light of what's already known.

An added twist comes with arcana cards "fading." After a number of tiles are played at a given arcana it fades and is removed. If you haven't guessed a tile at that arcana successfully

before it fades, the group gets two doom points and advances towards a grisly fate.

## IgTheme: Interesting Fantasy and SF species

I have long held an admiration for some of the *Traveller* Imperium aliens, particularly the Hivers. The break from traditional but dull bipedal "humans in a costume" with radial symmetry and the evolution of agriculture before sentience are nice twists. In the *Offworlders* game I ran a few years ago I was happy with the friendly-to-the-point-of-hugging giant spider-like aliens, who spooked out several PCs. Their tele-operated shells as a compensation for a species-wide plague in their past also gave them an alien quality.

In fantasy games it's rarely the species that stick in my memory and more the specific individuals that blend personality with their biology in an interesting or memorable way. Chris Murray's NPC goblin in a one-off was charming and bonkers, and the space whale crew of a crashed starship in the *Nine Gates* campaign who ended up worshipped as gods were fun to play.

## A Mausritter Campaign

This is the continuing write-up of the Mausritter campaign started in July 2024. Our 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 their world.

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.*

<sup>4</sup> Artwork CC BY-SA 3.0 Daniel Thurrot

The mouse-wizard, Magnolia, sent the group of Oak Home mice on a berry hunt. In the dense thicket south-west of Magnolia's home the mice picked their way through the thorns and roots. The twisted plants blocked the sunlight and had them jumping at shadows.

With a start they halted as a beetle, gold-clad in shining chitin, stepped onto the path in front of them.

"I am Sir Bailey Bumblebane," he declared, "and you trespass in the land of the Queen of the Splendid Golden Beetles of the Thicket."

The mice apologized for any unintended trespass, and asked that they might speak with the queen, to request her permission to seek the magical berry desired by Magnolia.

"Magical berries? Above my rank, I'm afraid," Bumblebane admitted, "but I can certainly lead you to the queen's court."

As they walked Bailey was oddly defensive when questioned about his shining carapace, and the mice quickly dropped the topic.

The beetle-knight led the mice along a twisted path and left them thoroughly confused, before they emerged at a clearing hung with glittering wing cases and garlands. At the centre of the space sat the queen.

"It's hard to be sure," said Gwen, "but I'd swear that the queen beetle is pissed off about something."

Sir Bumblebane made the introductions for the mouse visitors, and they in turn learned the names of the dignitaries of the court. Queen Malvenna and her consort, George; Court Astrologer Stoneleg Stricken; Lady Nicole Burnished Wing; and the knight Sir Alf Shrewslayer. All assembled shone as mirrors in gold and silver, their carapaces bright in the sunlight that filled the clearing. Ambrose noticed several jars of "shell polish" discreetly tucked away behind one of the swags of flower garlands.

CanCan muttered "I'm getting hammered. It's the only way I can cope."

It quickly became apparent that the queen was indeed in a great sulk. A sulk aimed mostly at her consort, George. The unfortunate beetle trod on the queen's spectacles and broke them. Queen Malvenna squinted at the newcomers and welcomed them to her court with a distracted air.

After the introductions, Sky and Odette laid out their request and described the berries as Magnolia had described them to the mice. Stoneleg the astrologer spoke up. "I know them well, they grow near the shrew<sup>5</sup>-pool. A dangerous place!"

Ambrose took Gwen aside and negotiated a gift of one of Gwen's rare glass beer tankards. Together they offered the glass to the queen. "Perhaps the learned Stoneleg would be able to grind fresh lenses for your spectacles, your majesty," Ambrose suggested.

The astrologer looked expectantly as his queen, as she turned the idea over in her head. "That is a thoughtful gift, oh Mice of Oak Home. You may certainly seek the berries you require."

With a gesture, she added. "Sir Bumblebane, I bid you accompany our guests to where the berries grow and give them all aid in their quest."

The beetle knight fluttered his wing cases in pleasure, and drew himself up to his full height (about level with a mouse's navel). "Gladly, your majesty!" He shot a proud look at Sir Alf Shrewslayer, who looked relieved.

The court then settled to a celebratory meal of various decaying vegetation and moldy fruit. The mice broke open their own supplies and both parties delicately declined the offer of shared food. The booze however was happily consumed all round, mouse-brewed beer and beetle-mead in abundance.

It was the next day before they set out for the berry bush by the shrew-pool. Quite late in the morning, in fact.

After pressing through the brambles and roots of the thicket for about an hour, the mice and Sir

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<sup>5</sup> I think I called them voles in the original session, but reading back I think their behaviour was more like shrews.

Bumblebane approached the pool. Ahead they heard squeaking, splashing and laughter. The mice conferred and decided to try an open-handed approach. With Sir Bumblebane at the rear, the mice entered the clearing around the pool.

One side of the pool was free of vegetation, with a few gnawed roots showing signs of haphazard gardening, which allowed the shrews to slide merrily down a muddy slope into the pool. The gang of five tiny rodents were engaged in horseplay and giggled endlessly as they pushed one another into the increasingly muddy water. On the bank, a larger maternal shrew watched her brood. She responded immediately as the mice entered the clearing, squeaking a high-pitched warning call. The young shrews scrambled up the muddy bank to huddle behind her.

“Do not be alarmed,” Sky ventured. “We come seeking the berries of the pool and mean you no harm.”

The mother shrew remained cautious, but nodded and asked the mice what berries they sought.

The mice all joined in at that point, describing Magnolia’s request, the court of the Splendid Golden Beetles, and all the rest.

No one remembered who mentioned the beetles first, but it was a mistake. The mother shrew whistled to her young and they dashed off into the undergrowth. “Find those tasty beetles, children!” she cried. “Save the juiciest one for me.”

“My queen!” cried Sir Beetlebane. “I’ll never make it back in time.”

Sky called for Miss Clutterbuck, her sparrow steed, and grabbed the astounded beetle knight.

“We fly faster than any shrew!” Sky called out. “Get the berries and I’ll return as soon as I can.”

Mouse, sparrow and beetle shot into the air and sped like an arrow toward the court of the Splendid Golden Beetles.

Ambrose ran after the shrews, hoping to nip at their heels as they followed the mouse-scent to the court. He caught up to the hindmost shrew, but was so noisy the quick, little predators scattered as he drew close.

At the pond, CanCan threw a rope over the stem with the most promising looking berries. She gathered up the free end of the rope and pulled steadily, bending the stem of the bush closer to the ground. Odette waited there with the thick gloves Magnolia provided, and plucked the fruit from the bush. Bowling-ball sized fruit from the perspective of a mouse, it took Gwen and CanCan holding open a sack and Odette manoeuvring gingerly to deposit the berry safely away from any accidental contact.

At the court, Miss Clutterbuck dropped from the sky in a flurry of beating wings. Sky dismounted and called out to reassure the beetles they were safe from the bird. “Safe from Miss Clutterbuck, yes, but a family of hungry shrews are on their way, and we must defend the queen!”

“The queen, the queen!” cried the beetles, as they armed themselves and formed a ring about the throne.

“Jolly exciting, eh?” Sir Bumblebane offered to Sir Shrewslayer. The other knight was more interested in choosing a defensible position and ignored him.

Back in the thicket, Ambrose berated himself for alerting the shrews as he pursued them. Stealth be damned, he thought, and redoubled his efforts. He remembered the trail well, and pulled ahead of the shrews as they paused at a spot where the mouse-scent doubled across itself. “Hah!” he thought, “and the others said I was foolish to go pee behind a clump of brambles.”

With a moment to lay a trap, Ambrose strung some wire across the track and hid nearby. He wound the ends of the wire to his electric lantern and waited. He was soon rewarded by a yelp of pain and surprise. Emerging from his hiding place he found one of the young shrews in the dirt, stunned and very confused. Ambrose bound the shrew’s paws in more wire and threatened him with more shocks if he didn’t keep quiet.

Another shrew who saw his sibling shriek and pass out, turned tail and fled back into the deepest undergrowth.

Sky and the beetles waited for the shrews, the nerves stretched thin as they listened for any sound of the intruders. Suddenly they were there, four shrews snapping and dashing about. The defenses held as the fight grew desperate, but eventually the mother shrew and her largest offspring ploughed over their opponents.

Sky stood firm and shoulder-slammed the mother shrew off her feet and onto her back. Sir Bumblebane took the opening and drove his thin blade deep into the shrew's belly.

Their leader and strongest shrew defeated, the other three broke and ran back into the thicket.

Gwen advised "never rely on a single berry. They bruise so easily," and CanCan, Gwen and Odette gathered a second berry before they retraced their path back to the court, wary of shrews in the undergrowth, or worse.

The mice were reunited safely at the court of the Splendid Golden Beetles, where all visitors, mice and sparrow, were celebrated and thanked by the queen and her subjects.

In addition to the berries they gathered, the queen directed Stoneleg the astrologer to gift the mice some incense and a jar of grease.

"Back to Magnolia?" proffered Ambrose. The other mice all looked at Odette as she absently cradled the box with the enchanted ring and nodded. "Yes, back to Magnolia."

## Comments on E&A #12

**General:** A year of issues under the belt, and a new year started. Well done, one and all.

**Attronarch:** Cool artwork from IdleDoodler! The baby-headed crow creature was inspired and weird.

**Roger BW:** Congratulations on the first two issues of *Of Dice and Meeples*.

Thanks for confirming my impression that *2300AD* is distinct from the *Traveller Imperium*

setting. The original release under the name *Traveller 2300AD* was misleading. I can see why they shortened it.

Re Jack McDevitt's *A Talent for War*: That's been on my reading list literally for years, after (I believe) Brian Misiaszek recommended it in *A&E* in days past.

I particularly like your selection of art this month. Harry Clarke is an old favourite, and I've visited several of his stained-glass artworks around Ireland. There are examples in the on-campus chapel of the university where I work.

RCYT Lisa Padol re keys and disadvantages: I'm firmly on the side of a benefit or hero point only when the disadvantage comes up in play. The front-loading of disadvantages for character generation points like *GURPS* and *Hero System* often means free points in practice, particularly for more clued-in players.

What does the trailing /9 mean in your comments? Is it a reference to issue #9?

**Patrick Brady:** Blast from the past! It's good to see you in these pages, Patrick. I enjoyed your EPT write-ups and discussions back in the last century<sup>6</sup>. It's good to hear that you've kept playing over the years.

Your description of diceless, home-brewed rules sounds a lot like Lee Gold's home games. An example of convergent evolution at the games table, perhaps.

Re dot matrix printers: My local pharmacy still uses one to print out HSE (Ireland's NHS) drug payment scheme receipts. Dragging health care into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an ongoing project.

**Dylan Capel:** The new edition of *Tunnels & Trolls* appears to be quite a mechanical departure from the earlier systems. As I've said elsewhere this month, I'm not sure that's what games always need but new editions often provoke "new for the sake of new" changes. Does the new edition retain the core mechanic of saving throws for resolution of most tasks?

I mentioned Tim Harford's article on Lee Gold and *A&E* on the E&A Discord too. I liked it, but it

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<sup>6</sup> Ouch. That still feels odd to write.

was clearly written with Harford pulled between something publishable in the FT and something he viewed through the lens of his own (extensive) roleplaying experiences.

Re water driving conflict: I found the Pacific Institute's chronology of water-driven conflicts at <https://worldwater.org/conflict/list/> and it stretches back to 2500 BCE. Water is life and people kill for it. It's only to get worse under the global climate catastrophe and migrations triggered thereby.

**Timothy Collinson:** North Star 9 sounds like a great Science Fiction con, and well done for trying out some new games as well as the old reliable, *Traveller*.

**Michael Cule:** I'm disappointed by my fellow apes who seem quite happy with crappy AI-generated 'art' on the whole, so that advertisers are comfortable swamping sites like Youtube with yet more cheap, uncanny valley slop. It's not surprising marketing types have jumped on the AI bandwagon but ads are already a mind-numbing drag on so much online activity.

**Erica Frank (Elf):** Re superheroes TTRPGs: A lot to take in there, but I've played a lot of them (*Champions, Superworld, Godlike, Wild Talents, Mutants & Masterminds, V&V, Marvel Heroic RPG*, probably more) and enjoyed them all to differing degrees. Some were better for emulating the "superhero genre" than others, so I take your point that sometimes the supers RPG is more super-powered PCs in a team/quest RPG, but I take exception to the idea that the superhero genre wasn't built on team coordination, or that death in play being off the table makes all the simulationist rule sets bunk.

My favourite superhero comics are team books. The genre may have started with the pulps and Superman/Batman as solo characters, but inspirations like Doc Savage and his team of experts and the early introduction of team books like the Justice League/Society and others firmly places team superhero books as foundational to the genre.

You say one needs a different framework away from hit points and lifting capacities but also complain that Fate Accelerated's approach is

mechanically bland and that a kid burglar could sneak past Batman with a free invoke and good roll. One might as well say that since Superman is written to solve whatever crisis is thrown at him in the comics that a Superman PC should automatically succeed at everything in a game. Genre emulation is more than just the game mechanics. The players at the table (GM included) must know what it is they are emulating and what they will and will not stomach as "in genre."

To suggest Pipsqueak, the power-less six-year-old sister, is a serious challenge to another character is to break my suspension of disbelief, **unless** the challenge is, say, one of Spider-Man's moral dilemmas, or scheduling conflicts between keeping a promised date with Gwen Stacey or rescuing Pipsqueak from the rampaging Rhino in Central Park.

It feels like your core issue with superhero RPGs is players taking the rules and applying the old school D&D mindset of problem solving, circumventing the GM's plots, and twisting every drop of juice from a poorly written rule rather than with the games themselves. Everyone knows that speedsters in RPGs are problematic. They're problematic in comic books! If you have the Flash on your team, you can pretty much go get coffee and still be ordering when he's resolved the issue at hand (and likely several others) whether or not you're writing comic book script or playing a game. Powers don't trump story<sup>7</sup>.

I look forward to other contributors' reactions to your essay. You've certainly fired me up.

Re GM reviews and missing stairs: Like code words in obituaries (e.g. gregarious to a fault = alcoholic) perhaps we need un-objectional phrases that carry the meaning. "Adult themes" = creepy sex shit, etc.

**Avram Grumer:** Cranston's five is an excellent shorthand for creating a character.

I also have the PDF of *Farflung* but have never read the whole thing. I did love the art, though, particularly Matt Howarth's stuff. I'm still

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<sup>7</sup> I'd bet there's something like this in every major comic publisher's writers' guidelines.

annoyed that Erick Wujick futzed up James Wallis's attempt at a diceless Bugtown game.

Re *Die RPG* and *Die: Metadungeon*: The books look gorgeous and I love both Gillen's and Ryder-Hanrahan's writing generally, but too pricey for another game I'd likely just read and not get to play.

Re Queen's "39": A classic from a classic album.

**Joshua Kronengold**: Good to hear that your biopsy came back with reassuring results.

I agree with you re GMs as players improving a game. It's not a given by any means, but GM experience can give a broader sense of what helps move a game along.

Your explanation of tying the Fitness/Dodge track to the Hardened/Helplessness track makes more sense than what I'd assumed. It's still conceptually a tough pill to swallow but with the changes to the Hardened tracks makes some degree of sense.

**Brian Misiaszek**: *Scouts Against Cthulhu* sounds ideal for a parody Famous Five meet the Mythos set-up, a bit like *The Comic Strip Presents: Five Go Mad in Dorset*<sup>8</sup>, only with more squamous tentacles.

Your "Secrets of the Twsha" notes are extensive and betray a medical mind. One wonders what would happen if a Twsha host encountered an Elder Thing. Would the control node respond to ancient, hardcoded commands?

Re Irish fuel protests: Energy prices in Ireland are nearly 40% higher than the EU average, and are the highest in the EU. This has been true for a while, but the latest nonsense in the Gulf only makes things worse.

The embargo of Cuba is a humanitarian crime, as far as I can tell, but the crimes of the powerful have lost their shock value. I'm just sad and angry at the state of the world.

**Lisa Padol**: Sam is doing okay. Her recent sleep apnea test seems to have triggered a follow-up cardiac function test so I hope that's nothing serious.

Re *Mausritter*: Thanks for the kind words. I didn't really think hard about why the sleep trap was there, but in retrospect it's likely a side effect of a faerie ring or similar magic. The moving of the stones dispelled it and I guess replacing the stones might or might not renew it.

Whitethorn Ash is a faerie like his sister so neither alive or dead in the mouse sense of the word. With fae encounters I listen hard to what the PCs say and try to jump on any misspoken or unfortunate slip of the tongue, but Gwen was clear that she was holding back the details about Winter Ash. If the brother knew the mice were directly responsible for his sister's death he might well have exacted a terrible revenge.

I take your point on "average familiarity" and the sliding scale of pretention/condescension. Greg usually has a conversational style in his rules, but I never felt condescended to. The opposed dodgy/fighty idea annoys me in the abstract, but I suspect it would work fine in play. More generally I feel that *Unknown Armies* worked fine in both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> editions, so I'm not sold on the changes. I feel that there is a tension between the commercial and the creative with any new edition, and new mechanics are often not called for, but add a "new and improved" shine to the new product.

RYCT Michael Cule re *Over the Edge* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition and the *WaRP* open mechanics: Yes, *OtE* 3e is a new game in the same (but updated) setting. Original *OtE* and *WaRP* sit in a similar place to the *Ghostbusters* RPG and the West End Games *Star Wars: The RPG* in my head. *Star Wars: The RPG* got a second edition the year that *OtE* 1e came out and sold well, IIRC. I wonder if Atlas Games had pushed other games using the *OtE* mechanics mid-90's if they would have been successful.

I see that Atlas Games have released to the Creative Commons the text of *Ars Magica* 5th edition and the text of several of earlier supplements under the unfortunate name of "Openars"<sup>9</sup> which sounds more like a Rego Corporem spell invented by a teenage boy.

**John Redden**: I'm delighted to hear your heart valve surgery and pacemaker follow-up

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five\\_Go\\_Mad\\_in\\_Dorset](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Go_Mad_in_Dorset)

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<sup>9</sup> <https://atlas-games.com/arsmagica/openars>

procedure both went well. I hope that's the last of invasive procedures for you for a very long time.

The oil used in oil-fired central heating in Ireland and the UK is usually kerosene or 'red' diesel, rather than vehicle-grade petrol, but it's still a damned expensive way to heat a home, particularly in the teeth of an ongoing fuel crisis.

**Gabriel Roark:** Did Tay-tay ever show up to fill the space you reserved for her?

**Brian Rogers:** RYCT me re complex *Ghostbuster* mechanics: I too am flaggerbastard at the thought, and I'm used to one of my players routinely having to finger-count to add up dice. It's a little worrying that she's a qualified mechanical engineer. Years of rolling dice has me subitizing smaller handfuls of dice without conscious thought.

Your menu for the dinner party sounds mouth-watering. I am a sucker for a good duck confit, and the rest sounds like a wonderful collection of flavours and textures.

Your daughter's archaeological investigations will surely doom us all. Neblod zinn! Na caith tabac<sup>10</sup>!

The *Invisibles Omnibus*<sup>11</sup> is available in digital format as well as door-stop paper formats, I believe, albeit at fairly saucy prices. Also a shoutout to Jim Starlin's *Dreadstar* in your comment to Lisa. Yay! for old comics.

RYCT me re X-Men telenovela quality: It certainly did, and was all the better for it.

Re *Inside the Library*: "Virulently Coloured Frogs of Unusual Size? I don't believe they exist." Also *Avenging Finger* sounds like a kung-fu move the protagonist shouts before sticking a digit up his opponent's nose.

Re the Regrettable Puppeteer: I'd love to see *The Ghost Patrol* but the Puppeteer is 24-carat Golden Age nonsense. I must show him to Sam, who did a great deal of puppetry in her English & Drama Studies degree in Trinity College Dublin. I

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<sup>10</sup> A nod to a parody of Lovecraft by an author whose name I forget (Harry Harrison?), who used Irish from the no smoking signs from Dublin buses along with the more typical Lovecraftian phrases.

<sup>11</sup> Here for example: <https://www.dc.com/graphic-novels/the-invisibles-1994/the-invisibles-omnibus>

wonder if playing different pieces on the pipe organ would manifest different powers?

Re the grandchild legacy hero of *The Puppeteer*: My first instinct was to go literal, with some kind of string-based mind control, but mind control in games is a proper can of worms. Instead I'll suggest Chris Hale<sup>12</sup>, concert pianist and podcaster, who stumbled across Alan Hale's old pipe organ in a lock-up after their grandfather's death. On cleaning and restoring the old instrument, they give it a whirl and bash out the opening bars of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." Imagine their surprise when they transformed into not a valkyrie but a semi-adjacent Rhinemaiden, endowed with watery powers magic and beguilement, with a side-helping of a weakness for gathering and hoarding gold. More *Power Activation* I'd wager, but also a distressing tendency for the hems of any worn garment to be wet regardless of assumed shape. Dripping on the grand piano in concerts is an ongoing problem.

**Patrick Riley:** Re percentile dice with (dis)advantage: I prefer the flip-flop too, and shake my head in disbelief that some one might read the newer d100 rolls as >100. It takes all sorts.

Both *Over the Edge* and *Unknown Armies* appear to have rejigged their core mechanics significantly for their third editions. I remain unconvinced of the need for either mechanical update, but I would guess that game designers wanting a new edition might well have grown tired of the original rules and let loose their tinkering spirits.

Re Lucent's lending to customers and the circular IOUs in the AI industry: Time to stock up on canned goods and headache tablets.

**Mark Wilson:** *The Score* by C. Thi Nguyen sounds fascinating. Another one on the tottering to-be-read pile!

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<sup>12</sup> Gender unspecified.

# OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 7 · JULY 2026

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## IN THIS ISSUE

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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 head into the deep jungle. Unprepared.

### 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](mailto:attronarch@mailbox.org) if you'd like to join.

### ATTRIBUTIONS

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Typeset in L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X with Charter, a print-friendly typeface.

## CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 114

### 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.

**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.

**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 15th–19th

A week of feasting, partying, and negotiating in Ketchel!

Upon the return of our merry band of adventurers, Beklomda Mor, Altanian chieftain ruling the village, threw a feast in their honour. It was a humble gesture of gratitude for slaying the troll that had slain some of Ketchel's inhabitants.

The feast was fish-heavy, with local fruits and vegetables from the Eye-stone jungle. Games of strength and dexterity were held: pulling rope individually and in teams, fishing with throwing daggers, naked wrestling in knee-deep water, and jumping over boats.

"As long as you stay here" Beklomda roared in front of her warriors "you shall have food to eat and soil to sleep on!" Lithe, muscular, and ferocious, Beklomda had all the characteristics of a typical Altanian woman. Her long black hair was tied into a single braid with dagger at the end. Few could stand a sustained gaze into her brown-green eyes. After all, she earned her post by slaying all other pretenders.

Ketche Livery and Transport, an abandoned and run down house with attached barn, was another gift. It is no fancy townhouse like the one they own in Hara, but it has a roof and straw.

Following the feast each adventurer found something to do... With vary levels of success.

Beorg the Gravedigger volunteered to tend to the village plot, chatting with the local gravedigger, giving him professional tips while inquiring about any rumours of interest. That's how he learned about old graveyard sitting atop small hill three hundred yards into the jungle. It was in fact several centuries old, hailing to the days of Great Empire of Kelnore. Altanians don't bury their dead—they let them feed the soil, or they burn them, or they eat them.

Tarkus the Promising attempted to preach about wisdom of Bachontoi the God of Red Wisdom. He was met with ridicule. "Are we not red enough? Perhaps you should worship us!"

Ignaeus spent time with Aaron, a half-elf fletcher. He ended up buying a quiver of arrows, after inspecting each personally.

Balarus loitered by the mill and Church of the Ever-Shining Sun, hoping to run into the local druid whom visits Ketchel from time to time. He ran into Ernsorn Blue on the fourth day. Supposed druid was a youthful man with little possessions but loin-

cloth, a haversack, and an iron necklace with inset egg-sized dark green gem. Failing to make a good first impression, Balarus was rewarded with ominous advice "Jungle knows how to take care of your ilk."

Ajar offered a helping hand to Jeffar, the priestess tending to the Temple of the Ever-Shining Sun. She welcomed his help as long as he didn't bore her with his adventuring stories. Although she gave Ajar the cold shoulder treatment most of the time, she did mention that "old mausoleum" at graveyard ought to be checked as well.

Zhoron made use of the temple as well. First he asked Jeffar to bless him. After she said no, he decided to stay in the temple anyway. He prostrated himself in prayer for eight hours straight and then attempted to communicate with the spirits within Oathkeeper, a massive slab of sharpened steel no one dared to wield ever since young Harker died.

Elf took up a lotus position, sweat pouring from his topknot after many hours of bowing, entering a state of deep focus. In the candle light he drew the blade named Oathkeeper, his eyes swimming along its steel in fascination. He stilled his mind and asked the spirits within a single question.

"Whom must I slay?"

Sun poured through all stone orifices, blinding Zhoron. Surrounded by total whiteout he sat alone. Before him silhouettes of three warriors clad in full suite armour stand. They threw no shadows.

A cacophony of voices boomed:

"We see you!"

The middle figure transformed, a giant warhorse appearing beneath it. It charged Zhoron, roaring "Know Evil when you see it!"

It did not trample him; in fact it felt as if it entered his body.

The left figure flied up in the air and transformed into a ferocious dragon of pure light. It dove into elf, whilst a deep voice echoed "Protect others from Evil!"

The right figure stood in silence as huge bird threw shadow over everything. The paladin turned to Zhoron and whispered "Consume no Evil."

As darkness engulfed him, Zhoron found himself sitting in the temple as he was. The sword emitted a low hum as he grasped it. Further, it felt almost weightless, surprising for such a large two handed sword.

Zhoron cleaned the sword in silence. Then he said, loudly "I shall known Evil when I see it. I shall ensure Evil harms no-one so long as I can aid them. I shall never commit or consume Evil."

He sheathed Oathkeeper. Then he approached Jeffar and told her of his vision and asked to be baptised and renamed as a warrior of Law.

Jeffar promptly kicked him out of her temple.

"Booo!" Zhoron muttered to himself, too full of religious zeal to feel bad about it. "Too bad I am an elf, I should have been a paladin!" he thought to himself.

Ambros spent time contemplating his remaining geas. He was to help Jeffar, and Jeffar asked him to kill Greylock, a vicious gnoll terrorising inhabitants of the Eyestone jungle. But he knew not where the beast laired, nor how to secure resources needed to find it in a jungle he knew nothing about. Hence he approached Beklomda Mor, asking for help.

Ketche's chieftain felt generous and offered Nem, her best tracker. In return, once he helped Ambros find what he was looking for, the cleric would remain in Ketche for three months, providing divine services. And if Nem

dies, then Ambros would take his place in Ketche.

"Clearly, Ambros is no longer wanted by the gods in this path!" he lamented in exasperation.

Failing to negotiate a better deal, Ambros politely refused the deal and continued contemplating further action.

But Ambros was not the only one contemplating and scheming. No, no. There was Gomm, too, weaving his own web of ambitions. Following the feast, he requested audience with Beklomda Mor, which he was immediately granted.

"My lady, I bring a gift. Finest tigers eye from the belly of the highest Atlanian mountain. Seven men died to procure it from an idol of a jade dragon that breathed lava. Or so I'm told. It was their finest treasure. And I took it from them. And now, it makes its way into its new home." Gomm said with a pleasant, silky voice, as he swept his cloak, fell down on one knee, and produced the gem.

Then he continued, charming as ever "You see I am a cunning thief and expert burglar. My name be spake as far afield as Antil. Now I wish you to name a thing to be stolen. Something you desire. And I shall name my price."

"You talk fast and your words are as sweet as honey, Gomm! Do you dare steal the cloak of terrible witch Ah'sas?!" Beklomda replied. As she asked, the warriors around her giggled. They stopped after she booted one straight in the head.

"The cloak is as good as yours. It shall adorn your shoulders in no time at all. Now, let us discuss my my fee, should I succeed." Gomm took a long draw on his pipe and blown out a cloud of fragrant smoke. He smiled with finality. "After you claim the prize, I shall claim my own. You shall become my bride, and all those who follow you shall thenceforth, also follow me."

Audible gasps could be heard.

Beklomda smirked.

Her elongated muscles flexed as she lunged off the ground towards the thief.

She moved on all four, like a panther.

In a blink of an eye she cut through the cloud of smoke and was now face to face with Gomm.

She gazed into his eyes without blinking.

Gomm felt like he was at the open sea, floating.

"You amuse me burglar. You will bring me Ah'sas cloak and wand. Then we will throw you a feast and give you to the prettiest girl in our little village."

As she broke eye contact, Gomm felt like he was pulled into the water, drowning.

That sensation continued until one of his fellow adventurers shook him to answer.

But Gomm couldn't think clearly anymore.

He will do what Beklomda wants.

That's all he could think about.

He will do it.

## Thistleburn 20th, Spiritday

"I am delighted that you've changed your mind, Ambros! Nem shall be at your service—just say when you are ready to leave!"

Ambros conceded to Beklomda. He decided to put the greater good ahead of himself. After all, once his geas is done what is to keep him in Ketche? Some band of barbaric Altanians? Now that is a preposterous thought.

In a sudden turn of events, Gomm persuaded everyone to focus on Ah'sas the Witch, instead. Surely she would know where this gnoll was!

It didn't take adventurers long to learn that Anit, another witch who was actually the sister of the first witch, lives just a mile north.

Four or so hours later the party had found a small cottage surrounded by exotic herbs and plants. It was a simple lean-to, almost indistinguishable from surrounding foliage. Tarkus, Ambros, and Ignaeus were the chosen three to approach the woman working in the garden. Other brave souls hid between the trees and prepared their bows.

After a surprisingly pleasant exchange, the trio had learned that it has been a while since Anit had seen Ah'sas. The latter had left Ketch several years ago and hasn't been seen since.

"My sister got a bit odd and started keeping some questionable company. But she is not a bad person! She is just a bit lonely. . . Could you please take this to her?"

Unable to resist Tarkus's charm, Anit divulged that they had a favourite spot in the jungle—a secluded area where the river emerges from and flows through the jungle. She also asked the cleric to take a basket of herbs and colourful potions to her sister.

"And do no harm to her! Promise!"

"We won't do anyone harm who doesn't do harm to us."

"Well, she might harm you because look at you! She might confuse you for danger!"

"Wise people know that we won't hurt them. And your sister sounds wise!" Tarkus pounded. Equipped with this new information, the party headed north, deeper into the jungle.

## Harvestime 6th, Airday

"Look! Up, between the trees!"

Gomm's voice could be barely heard from starvation sounds coming from adventurers' bellies. It's been six days

of trudging through green hell. Having brought enough rations to eat for one day, the adventurers thought they could forage with great ease.

On the first day Beorg was surprised by spitting cobra. He had snake for dinner while others split rations. On the second day they failed to find any food whatsoever. Many went hungry. On the third day they failed at foraging once again. On the fourth day two stumbled upon three great bushes of nuts, sufficient to feed everyone. They found the river on the same day. On fifth day only one adventurer found food, but at least it was enough to feed half of the party. By now everybody was starving, but no one was dying. Yet.

Following the great jungle river upstream led them to a copse of absolutely massive trees. This hardwood jungle was dense in general, but what stood before them was almost a wall of trees.

River burst out from the bottom of the largest tree. Some forty feet in the air, a platform with nice wooden cottage, was suspended between three trees. Smoke was coming out of chimney.

"Listen, here is the plan. We wait for the night to fall. You will cast Silence on me, and you will cast Bless on me. Then I will cover my lantern, climb the tree, sneak into the cottage, steal the cloak and wand, and we are out of here!"

Everybody marvelled at Gomm's plan. No one objected.

Come night, and Gomm put his plan in motion. First he snuck up to the tree east from the hut. Then he slowly scaled them, lantern hanging from his belt. He made sure to climb on the side opposite the hut, and always tried to remain within shadows of surrounding trees. That was not so difficult given it was night and jungle had thick canopy, letting little moonlight through.

Once he was above the hut, he took a good look. The suspended platform was quite large, measuring some seventy by fifty feet. Cottage itself took a little but under half of that surface. East wall was baked clay, warm to the touch. Chimney was on that side, and smoke was still slowly rolling out of it. Rest of the hut were wooden planks; thick and warm to the touch.

Landing like a cat on the east side of the platform, our thief snuck up to the clay wall. Then he prowled north, took out his little mirror and checked around the corner. Tall opening at the end of sight suggested doors. Moving south and repeating suggested south wall had two windows.

At this moment Gomm caught sound—loud, deep snoring sound. Wondering how clerical silence exactly works, he snuck up to the first window. By now he had completely covered his lantern so he worked purely with minimal moonlight and his tactile senses.

The window opening was covered with hanging blankets on the inside. The sill was full of flowerpots, making it impossible to climb on without first clearing them or making noise. Gomm carefully pulled the curtain to the side, revealing a back of hulking figure going up and down.

Next, Gomm grabbed the upper frame of the window, pulled himself up, then extended both legs sideways, jamming himself in place. Then he freed his hands, and pulled the curtain wide open. Sweat running down his face, he observed the insides.

Dying embers in the fireplace illuminated bear-skin carpet, a cauldron, part of straw mattress and hulk sleeping on it, and a proper, framed bed with decorated blankets on the north side. The bed was empty.

Gomm jumped over the sleeping beauty, and landed softly. Keen as always, he sensed immediate danger.

Glancing to his left, a monstrous ogre charged him, hands spread wide open. Master thief pulled a small pouch from his belt, jumped towards the charging beastman, and waved his left hand, opening the palm just before the monster's face.

Ogre took a deep inhale of powder that Gomm sprayed him with. He began heaving, then he grabbed his neck, panicking. Then he fell to his knees, and then to his face; dead; chocked.

Alas, Gomm did not have time to celebrate, nor to complete his mission. As ogre died before him, so did Gomm feel all his muscles tense unnaturally. Next thing he knew, he couldn't move at all. He could still feel everything, but he couldn't move a muscle if his life depended on it!

He watched as hooded figure ran up to dead ogre, threw itself on it, and wept. Then it jumped up, hood falling off her head, revealing gorgeous facial features. Long locks of auburn hair framed her perfect face; her emerald green eyes captivating as most precious jewels; her locked jaw signalling utter contempt and rage.

The woman walked up to Gomm and slapped him. Three times. Then she walked to the sleeping beauty, slapped her awake, and commanded her to squeeze Gomm. Thief could not scream, for he could not move. But he could suffer in silence, and so he did.

Realising what is at play, woman sat at her bed and waited.

By the time Silence and magical paralysis had worn off, Gomm had been properly hog-tied. He couldn't move his arms, not even an inch! Standing upright, he faced the woman's gaze. As soon as he felt he could move his lips and tongue, he spoke in monotonous voice:

"I must steal cloak and wand from Ah'sas the Terrible Witch. I must do that for Beklomda Mor."

The woman gasped, and covered her mouth with both hands. She stood up, revealing she had nothing but hooded blue cloak on her, poorly concealing her luscious figure. Then she walked up to Gomm and caressed his face, speaking softly:

"Oh, you poor soul. Another victim of that greedy bitch! Men, it is always men! You were not charmed, nor were you cursed. It is all in your head. Altanian women easily get into mens' head. Snap out of it!"

Her soft voice slowly progressed towards more aggressive tone, culminating with a slap. Gomm, unchanged, repeated his lines.

"I see that you are a foreigner. Did you not know Altanian women have psionic gifts? Oh, you poor soul. And now my Gronk is dead. But do not worry, Ah'sas the Magnanimous will heal you. With a little bit of Cronk's help, of course."

She motioned to Cronk to grab Gomm's head. Then the monster squeezed the thief's jaw wide open as Ah'sas poured vile tasting liquid down his throat. Gomm almost vomited, but his mouth were welded shut by ogre's strong grip.

"Thinking clearly now? Thinking with the right head?"

"I must steal cloak and wand from Ah'sas the Terrible Witch. I must do that for Beklomda Mor."

"Give him another hug."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

This time Gomm's suffering was audible. All his friends could hear it.

Thinking quickly on his feet, Gomm continued pretending and speaking in monotonous voice. He explained that he was here with a band of adventurers, but they didn't know what he is up to. He lied to them so he could find Ah'sas and steal her cloak and wand.

"Friends! Invite them over!"

Cronk took Gomm out, and hanged him over the platform. Ah'sas pulled the curtains and looked through the window. Gomm politely invited his friends up—there are a set of wide ladders just on the north side—stating he was being nicely cared after this nice witch.

Hungry and slightly bemused, adventurers came up to the hut, one by one. Ah'sas was completely delighted. She ordered Cronk to hang Gomm upside-down from the platform while she put fire to the stew. Then Cronk the Oger set up a nice round table outside, with candelabra. He put on a tattered silk apron and acted as a clumsy server until Ah'sas ordered him to do something else.

Adventurers gorged themselves on fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, and warm stew. Everyone but Gomm, of course. He could hear the conversation above. Ah'sas was absolutely enthralled to have such fine visitors. Strong! Wise! Educated! After all, it is so difficult to find such good company in a jungle infested by Altanian barbarian, cannibal elves, and dim-witted monsters like ogres and trolls.

"Oh, Tarkus" the witch moaned "it's been so long since I had a conversation with someone so wise. Tell me more!" Indeed, Ah'sas took a special liking to the cleric of Red Wisdom. He tried to keep the conversation professional, but romantic candle-lit atmosphere did not work in his favour.

Feast and pleasant conversation flowed well until sunrise. In those hours the adventurers had learned that Ah'sas knows a lot about the jungle and surrounding region, is very pleasant and lonely, and that she is probably very, very powerful. After all, she lives alone at the heart of Eye-stone jungle.

The question is, will they be willing to pay the price of knowledge?

## CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 115

### Adventurers

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

**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.

**Nesterin Sylpetor**, elf level 2. An avid lover woods and jungles.

**Zhoron Trisrie**, elf level 2. Always frowning and morose; sporting thick handlebar moustache down to his chest and a black top knot.

### Harvestime 12th, Waterday

"I will sneak around and climb on top of the rubble. Bakarū will come with me. Once we are above the guard you can approach him and see how he responds. In case he is hostile, we will jump him from above."

Gomm presented a plan, and once again had everyone agree with him. Zhoron, Ambros, Ignaeus, and newly found Nesterin, all had enough of entertaining tireless witch Ah'sas, so Gomm found them a task that would give them an excuse to leave.

"Well, you could get me a necklace made of shadow. Here, I'll draw you a map to the place where you can find one," the witch explained.

"How do I pick up a necklace made of shadow?" Gomm inquired.

"With your hands," the witch retorted, annoyed.

Adventurers heeded her advice to make a dugout and paddle downriver, instead of marching through the thick jungle. And so they found the described sunken fort.

More a collection of stone rubble destroyed by overgrowth, and consumed by soft soil.

Double iron gates were the only visible entry point. An armoured guard marched left and right in front. His moves were stiff and repetitive. Moments before the party had arrived, they spotted the doors opening, a group of figures entering, and then the doors closing. It was difficult to make out exact numbers due to limited visibility from all the trees and foliage.

The plan was executed perfectly. The guard remained unaware of the thieves' presences while others hailed it. The moment it spotted approaching Nesterin, the guard raised its greatsword and charged the elf.

Proving most unresponsive, the guard had been met with violence and dispatched in mere two rounds of melee. Zhoron delivered the killing blow with his massive Oathkeeper. As he cut through the plate mail, black ooze splattered all over other adventurers. The armour collapsed to the ground, empty.

No bones; nothing but coating of slimy, inky black ooze.

Inspecting the large iron doors hadn't revealed any traps, nor raised any other suspicions. Four adventures had to join forces in order to pull them open. Nesterin readied himself at what he had believed to be the safe distance.

Three puffer-fish-like, barely airborne, bloated bat-abominations flew out into the sun, and approached the elf. Their pathetic flight and low mobility was amusing. It didn't help that they couldn't hit Nesterin at all.

Alas, it stopped being funny after one of the adventurers cut right through one of the bloated monsters and was rewarded by flaming liquid spraying

himself and others. Luckily, remaining two did not explode, having been killed with less pointy sides of the weapon.

Moving forth, the party entered a massive antechamber, sixty feet wide and seventy feet deep. Six girthy stone columns, three on each side, held the chamber in place. The middle column on the left had several holes around the circumference, all by the bottom rim.

A grotesque horned devil protruded out of the north wall, vile smelling liquid leaking from its orifices down into the fountain beneath it. Oh, how bad it smelled. Oh, how flammable it smelled too.

There were two doors leading out of this chamber, both at the north wall. One was in the northwest, and one in the northeast corner. Adventurers choose the latter.

Smashing it open revealed a long corridor to the right. Two doors were visible, both on the left wall; one thirty feet down, second another fifty feet down.

Listening at the first doors revealed sounds of clashing metal. Adventures set up the marching order and Zhoron forced the doors open, surprising two armoured figures fighting each other in the sand pit. One was armed with mace and shield, while the other had long sword and shield.

Zhoron stepped forth, knelt down, and held Oathkeeper in his hand.

"Paladins of the Sword! Protect me from evil and constructs!"

His fellows attacked two plated figures with missile weapons. Mostly missing. Plated guards stopped fighting each other and stumbled towards the doors blocked by Zhoron.

Mace wielding one missed his swing. On the other hand, the sword wielding one loped off Zhoron's head with a single swing.

Shocked, the party held the bottleneck whilst trying out everything at their disposal.

Holy water?

Didn't work.

Hold person?

Didn't work.

Wrestle the plated guards and stab them to death?

That worked!

After having plundered Zhoron's beheaded the corpse, the party searched the room. Besides the sandpit in the middle, there were weapon racks hanging from the walls. Most of the weapons were rusted and barely usable. Gomm found a secret cache of jewellery hiding behind a loose stone at the rim of sandpit.

Next obstacle were the doors in the north-east corner. Six attempts to force them open. All failed. Then a helpful trio of plated guards opened the doors and charged into the chamber swinging their greatswords.

Three rounds of mad wrestling and the guards were no more but slimy ooze stains on adventurers' clothes.

Moving on, next chamber looked like dining quarters. Long oak table, flanked by benches, dominated the center. The table was set for dinner, with three table cloths on which two plates rested. Although nice, they were made from baked clay, making them worthless. Utensils were rusted steel, hence equally worthless. Ambros and Gomm inspected the tables. When Gomm flipped one of the tables, the whole room flashed with bright light, making everyone blind for half an hour.

Once everyone could see again, the party resumed exploration. Opening east doors led them down a short corridor, which opened up in an open chamber reeking of military oil. Adventurers closed the doors and opted

to go through north-west doors instead. This time they forced them open on the first try, surprising two plated guards in their cots.

Bakaru killed one in his sleep, while Gomm wrestled the other one, allowing others to execute it. After ransacking the room they found a tarnished metal key in one of the rotten pillows.

Opening the south-west doors revealed a smaller chamber full of discarded armour pieces—hauberks, pauldrons, gauntlets, chain shirts... Scrap armour piled as high as human's thigh!

Spending half an hour to rummage through crap, Bakaru found a pristine left-hand mailed fist. Unwilling to try it on, despite Gomm's repeated assurance, young thief passed it to one of the elves.

"The runes on it say "Iron Claw" in hobgoblin."

So far they have found only oozes. No sign of shadow necklace yet. Will Gomm be able to deliver? Or will he stumble once more?

## CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 116

### Adventurers

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

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

**Happy**, halfling level 3. Short, very happy looking halfling. Hair covers his eyes and he is nothing but smiles.

**Hedwig Hogwarts**, elf level 3. An always alert owl masquerading as an elf.

**Ignaeus**, elf level 2. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiselled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

**Mayonnaise**, elf level 1. Albino elf with long white eyelashes, flowing white hair, magnificent white cape, and long two-handed sword.

**Nesterin Sylpetor**, elf level 2. An avid lover woods and jungles.

### Harvestime 12th, Waterday

"Oh, hello there!"

Mayonnaise and Happy greeted Gomm and friends in the long corridor. Apparently they went for a walk around Hara and ended up lost here, in this sunken fort, deep in Eyestone jungle. No questions asked—after all, reinforcements are always welcome.

Following the corridor, the party opted to check second doors on their left.

Bursting in they surprised the plated guard sitting on a crate. Using their tried and true tactic of wrestle and execute, they quickly dispatched another ooze filled suit of armour.

Wooden crates were filled with adventuring equipment—ropes, lanterns, torches, iron pitons, sacks, so on and so forth. Ambros found a locked metal plate hidden under one of the crates.

Key they retrieved from one of the plated guards fit perfectly in the padlock, revealing large sack with 1 800 gold pieces and five gems.

Adventurers agreed to repackage the coins into three sacks for easier carry, and then locked them back in so they can explore the dungeon unencumbered. Gems were stowed away in pockets.

Corridor ended with a T-shaped junction. Straight ahead were doors with chilly fog rolling underneath. Flame smelling chamber was to the left, and an open, dark chamber to the right. Cold doors were left alone, and dark chamber was chosen as safest option.

Spacious, vault domed chamber spanned some fifty feet wide and sixty feet deep, with nearly forty feet tall ceiling at the highest point. Half of the chamber was a pool of dark water. On the west wall were two doors, one in the dry portion, and one above the pool. At the far south end of the chamber another door stood, and a small platform in front of them.

While Gomm scaled the west wall in order to reach the doors hanging over the pool, and Ambros and Ignaeus trying to measure the depth of water, Happy said “hold my beer” and jumped right in. At least Mayonnaise tied a rope around halfling’s torso before the dive.

Splashing all around, Happy found himself in neck-deep chilly water. The ground was soft, which was unexpected since everything so far had been solid flag-stone. Undeterred, he waddled towards the south platform.

Ambros, Ignaeus, and Mayonnaise witnessed a towering black mass erupting from the water, completely engulfing Happy. Mayo pulled on the rope, and Ambros rushed to help. The mass shook and pulsated, jerking both with ease. Ambros let go off rope in time. Alas, Mayo was pulled underwater, screaming.

His last oxygen bubbles dramatically popped on the the water surface; until they were no more, and dark red liquid filled the pool.

Bakaru dropped the safety rope around Gomm and fled for his life. Nesterin chased the young thief-in-training. Ambros and Ignaeus retreated backwards to the junction, holding torch so Gomm can return.

Master Thief Gomm pushed himself from the closed doors, building up momentum to break them open with a strong kick. He tumbled into a dark chamber dominated by a bubbling stone cauldron. A pile of cleaned bones were in the south-east corner. Two immobile plated guards stood by the west wall. Black ooze caked the cauldron. Gomm got out, scaled the wall, spider-crawled along the ceiling, and rejoined the party.

“Oh, hello there!” Hedwig Hogwarts hailed the adventurers. He too went for a walk after Mayonnaise and Happy, and somehow ended up lost here.

A loud splash could be heard, followed by silence.

“Well, it seems like the creature is not following us. We don’t know what triggered it. . .”

“Should we go back to the antechamber and explore west doors? Or see what is beyond the oily chamber?”

Latter was the consensus.

Traversing the chamber covered with broken oil vials took some time. Adventurers made sure to douse their light sources before crossing it. Nobody got hurt in the process.

Another t-shaped junction, this time splitting left and forward. Up ahead were double doors, and sunlight shone through the cracks. Pulling the doors wide open blinded everyone for few seconds.

Once they could see again a surprising sight greeted them: an open courtyard with a four story tower. Child-size wall made of rocks bisected the courtyard, and eight naked, hairy, midget humanoids cowering behind them.

Nesterin hailed them in Hobgoblin and Ogre, which made the creatures shake and shiver even more. Gomm and Bakaru begun sneaking around the courtyard, intended on jumping over the wall and striking from behind.

Hairy midgets tightened ranks in front of the only clear passage between the rocks, holding their little spears shakily. Nesterin continued going through the languages he knows, being ignored until he tried—Elven!

One of the creatures replied in broken elven, demanding adventurers to immediately leave.

“There will be no cutting throats!” somebody coughed loudly in Common, making sure the thieves hear them.

Conversation between Nesterin and Tili, the only hairy humanoid that dared to speak, was going too slow for Hedwig so he cast Charm Person on the small creature.

This resulted in total pandemonium as other seven hairy naked midgets begun screaming, crying, and running all over the courtyard.

“Would you like to meet Sor’Ves the Magnificent? She is magnificent! I would like to take you to her!” Tili offered. Sor’Ves, of course, waited in the tower.

Everyone but Gomm followed little hairy man. The thief opted to scale the tower from outside instead.

Going through the door revealed nothing but a round chamber filled with rubble and debris. Second and third floor were no better. Sun was penetrating through cracks and window sills, illuminating the insides.

Exiting through the final trapdoor was quite an experience. Ambros came out first, and what a sight greeted him! A large blue dragon, her scales shimmering in the Altanian sun, face to face with Gomm poking over the crenelations. She was sprawled over thou-

sands of coins, belly sideways; razor-sharp fangs adorned her smile; her yellow eyes focused on the thief.

"Your Magnificence, I bring visitors whom came to pay respects!" Tili announced loudly.

"Oh, how wonderful!" SorVes puffed. "So, what did you bring me?"

Gomm jumped over, and produced six arrows, supposedly of Giantslaying variety.

"Little thief, and what will happen if I cast Detect Magic? Will they glow?"

Gomm quickly found an excuse that amused the dragon sufficiently.

Then SorVes called out each adventurer, one by one, asking them for a gift. Hedwig offered a gold and silver urn; Ambros a silver bracelet from one of the dead guards; Nesterin, Ignaeus, and Bakarü a gem recovered from the storage room.

Gomm tried to steal from SorVes magnificent treasure hoard while others were adding to it.

"In broad daylight? My, how brave. Why don't you stand here—yes right here, in front of me—for a moment? Others should step aside."

The thief excused himself and jumped over the edge, climbing down rapidly.

"What are you doing here? We are looking for a necklace made out of shadows? Do you know where we could find it?" other adventurers began rapid fire questioning like they were interrogating a lusty barmaid, not a blue dragon towering over them.

"My, my, so curious! That will require appropriate tribute!"

Since the party discussed what magical items they could give that were useless to them right in front of SorVes she cheerfully chirped "Yes, I'll take them all, thank you for asking. Just put them over there, yes, that's the spot!"

In return they learned about stealer of shadows that lairs just through the northern exit from the courtyard. "If you go there you will probably all die a horrible death." She also divulged the fact that a shadow demon sits on an onyx throne. He also grants wishes, but unlike her, he has very unreasonable expectations regarding tributes.

There were also mentions of a younger green dragon, Larentis, that had recently arrived in woods just north-west of here. Somebody, best left unnamed, proposed a match-making service in return for additional help from SorVes. She liked the idea but adventures got cold feet.

"Little humies, you are boring me with your constant chitter chatter. It is time to reward my patience once again. Have I not deserved it?"

Those that had no shiny treasure to offer were left with nothing but clothes. They had to empty their pockets, doff their armours, leave their weapons, and yes, all magical items.

"How nice. Now go, leave me be. I have to get my beauty sleep in case that green boy flies over again."

As a final gift she vomited out a water elemental that will follow Ambros around and do his bidding. Tili pushed the adventurers down and out of the tower. Then he hugged Hedwig and thanked the party for stopping by.

"You are always welcome here! SorVes likes shiny gifts!"

The party sulked back to the chambers of plated guards and took whatever armour, arms, and gear they could. Then they left the sunken fort and rowed back to Ah'sas the Terrible.

Gomm grovelled at the feet of the witch, mainly using dragon's presence as an excuse for failing to return with a shadow necklace.

"We will brew a poison! Even a single drop, down the dragon's ear whilst she sleeps, will suffice!" And then they cackled.

Will the third time be the charm for Gomm?

## IN NEXT ISSUE

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Charmed by gold; charmed by lust; charmed by the witch.

# The PHOENIX NEST

## **BUILDING MY LEGACY: The Last Two of the Six Gods of Aegis The City**

### **THE CRONE**

*There was an old lady who swallowed a fly,  
I don't know why she swallowed a fly – perhaps  
she'll die!*

*Here's to you, Mrs Robinson,  
Jesus loves you more than you can know*

This is the goddess of the older woman, who is either past years of motherhood or who never took that path.

She is the keeper of secrets and the knower of what should not be known. She is the guide of the dead souls on to their destiny. She is the patron of midwives and thus she also governs the ushering of souls into the world.

She is the patron of sorcerers, which is defined as those who use magic as a technology or craft. She favours those who show respect, those who preserve knowledge from the past and those who keep confidences.

She dislikes those who do not respect those who have lived long, those who destroy knowledge or release it carelessly.

#### **APPROPRIATE RELIGIOUS DISADVANTAGES**

Curious.

Code of Honour (Professional) (Followers of The Crone keep the secrets they learn.)

Sense of Duty: The City.

### **THE UNCLE**

*Oh what a trickster I am! I even trick myself!*

Uncle is the god of older men, mostly those who have never started a family for whatever reason. Some men pass directly into his cult on reaching

**A zine for EVER & ANON 13 by  
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adulthood and never even pass through the Cult of the Son.

He favours the young, whether his relatives or not and aids them in any way he can. He favours the old, whether male or female and those who remember, help and honour them.

He is the god for those who have no other place in society for whatever reason. He protects the vagabond and the deviant though not *normally* the criminal.

He is the god who goes out from the City and seeks new immigrants. He is the god who sends out Heroes to find and collect the desperate.

He is the Trickster figure of the religion, the patron of wizards defined as magicians who also know when not to use magic.

He despises those who victimize the young and the helpless and feels contempt for those who are afraid of change and the unknown.

#### **APPROPRIATE RELIGIOUS DISADVANTAGES**

Curious

Pacifism (Reluctant Killer)

Sense of Duty: The City.

Trickster

Xenophilia.

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

I'm off to Stabcon for the last time at the start of July. I feel like I should fly a flag or endow a scholarship or something.

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

Games continue as normal whatever that may be. I'm reading STONEKEEP, an interested if long winded PbTA variant which I may have finished by the time either of the current campaigns wraps. I am however suffering from bursts of Old Geezer Shouting At The Clouds

because the author puts the word 'like' inappropriately into the dialogue of the GM in the worked examples. This is unfitting to the dignity of the GM's task to say the very least.

## 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. Also worships YT.

Pum as KEANUS another heavy infantryman who worships Humakt

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.

THE EXAMINER OF THE CULT OF THE RED GODDESS An Illuminate

SENATOR FALERIUS AGGARIUS Their landlord and Patron.

NOSE RING: A totally reformed criminal.

THE CHIEF CLERK AT THE MINISTRY OF WAR Already bought.

A SUPERCILIOUS PERSON IN ROBES Probably a sorcerer.

MASTER DEDRICK: A slightly strange master sorcerer. Known as 'the Smelly'.

COUNT JULAN: A former Lunar Coder and now commander of a Bodyguard Regiment. Insufferably noble

AN IMPERIAL TAX INSPECTOR On a jolly out of the office.

Various Bureaucrats, Soldiers, Penitents on their knees, Elephants and other Riff Raff.

## ILLUMINATES, PENITENTS, SORCERERS, ELEPHANTS AND A REHEARSAL<sup>1</sup>

Jarathir was off to the Temple of the Red Goddess (*DRAK: Very flash, I'm guessing GM: Very imposing*) to return the Enlightening Book he had been reading to their library and have a word with the Chief Examiner of the cult.

The Temple depicted in its structure and decoration the stages of the Goddess' progression through the Otherworld and back in the Mundane World and her rise into Godesshood.

As Jarathir walked along the streets, he noticed that his perceptions were a little strange. People all seemed to be wearing masks. Behind some of the masks the people appeared to be machines: he could almost hear the cogs grinding inside their heads. Occasionally, there were people who shone with the light of the Sun or the Moon. (Sometimes the moonglow was Red, sometimes Blue.) He had, he recalled, passed the Enlightenment checks on Insight [Human], Mineral Lore and Celestial Lore.

When he got to the Temple of the Red Goddess and it looked as it should. There was no disturbing undertone to anyone. The receptionist, having been shown the 'If found please return to' note in the back of the book, blinked and asked him to come with her. They stepped into an office and the effect of people wearing masks came back again. They

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<sup>1</sup> 08 10 25. It was recorded by Pum who had remembered to bring his recorder along when the GM had forgotten his.

were wearing masks that seemed to say 'Clerk' or 'Scholar'. 'Bureaucrat' or 'Priest'.

None of those glowed with an inner light but when they stepped into an inner office there waited a person with no mask but with the mark of the Goddess on his forehead and an inner red light behind his eyes which Jarathir recognised as similar to the one he had seen in the Illuminated gentleman who lived on the next floor up.

**EXAMINER:** Ah, come in! Excellent young comrade, young colleague, come in! This is something you read?

**JARATHIR:** Yes, umm yes. I didn't understand all of it. There are some bits which I feel I may have to revisit to connect in other ways.

**EXAMINER:** I'm not sure I can recommend that...

**JARATHIR:** No?

**EXAMINER:** Sit you down, tell me which bits you did understand.

They talked through the details and when that was finished the Examiner rose and went to an nearby wall where there were shelf after shelf of books and scrolls and took down a scroll and rolled it out to a particular section.

**EXAMINER:** That is an unusual combination. That book reveals things in different ways to different people. When somebody reads that book and immediately thereafter awakens their Seventh Self, then things they read immediately before...

**JARATHIR:** Influence how they perceive the world?

**EXAMINER:** Flavour their illumination. So tell me where you found this.

Jarathir took a moment to think about the numerous things he had told not tell people <sup>2</sup> and decided there was no intersection between those and the tale of the hunting down of the spider thing.

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<sup>2</sup> THE Plain People of E&A: Your players complain about the long lists of things they are not supposed to tell people no matter what the campaign. ME: You

**EXAMINER:** Ah, that's what happened. There is a section (in the book) on the Elder Races. From the way you describe the person who read it before you, I would say they followed the Path of Arachne Solara and imbued the spirit of the Sun Spider and that may have overcome their original nature.

**JARATHIR:** Oh. I sort of assumed that they were a spider-thing...

**EXAMINER:** No, I think not. I think they pursued a very high path and regretted it.

**JARATHIR:** They didn't seem deeply regretful.

**EXAMINER:** They were seeking the centre of the path of Enlightenment. Perhaps to seek release from what was happening to them. I don't know.

**JARATHIR:** A spider seeks the centre of a web.

**EXAMINER:** I'm not enlightened in that way.

There was a long conversation (some of it lost to the sound of crisp packets and side conversations which I will summarise:

- There are not only many ways. There are factions in those who are Illuminated.
- The new illuminate would need to master one of the Runes of the Goddess before rising further. Meditation and contemplation were recommended.
- Jarathir was given a piece of paper saying he had started on the path of Enlightenment and could return for further instruction and education.
- The Examiner felt that by returning the book he had done the Temple a favour to be repaid later.
- As an illuminate he was not subject to Spirits of Reprisal. Some people went a bit over the top or over the edge when

mean Drak does. THE PPOE&A: He's the spokesman for their discontent.

they knew that. The Feeder of the Bat was obliquely mentioned.

**JARATHIR:** I'm not? Are you saying that's what keeps most people loyal to their gods?

**EXAMINER:** Yeah. You believe that you are loyal to your principles without being punished?

**JARATHIR** Because it's the right thing to do?

- Jarathir was no longer bound to opposites. He could increase his alignment with Life without reducing his alignment with Death. Likewise Movement and Stasis.

**JARATHIR** Because they are all aspects of one thing.

**EXAMINER:** As is the Goddess.

**JARATHIR** As are we all.

- He was advised to speak to other Illuminates but not to believe everything he was told "We can delude ourselves just as well as people without gnosis."

**JARATHIR** If all Illuminates are different there are Truths and Delusions for all of us.

**EXAMINER:** How many possible paths are there in the seven fold book you read? <sup>3</sup>

As the Examiner rose to show him the door Jarathir saw again the light of the Moon shining behind his eyes but this time it shone White.

Meanwhile, at Breakfast in the Insula (Berry porridge, red and fruity) there was a cry across the courtyard and a Senatorial Voice shouting.

A few moments later the Senator stalked into their flat.

**SENATOR:** Right! Bugger Beatpot Aelwrin! ... I have several problems I need your aid with. I need confirmation from the cult of Danfive Xaron that they are going to provide us with Elephant Poop Scoopers.

**VOSTOR:** Elephant Assistants? Elephant Followers?

**SENATOR:** (*Nodding*) Elephant Followers. And that they will be available for rehearsal either tomorrow or the day after. We have only a limited amount of time. We need a day's rehearsal. Tomorrow would be better but we may be forced into the day after.

Somebody brought up the Mouse Guards ("Mouseketeers?") for the front of the Elephants' section of the parade. The Senator asked for suggestions for who to take care of it.

Vostor queried whether there were that many mice in the city but Eshan brought up the possibility of some hostile person using them as sabotage for the parade.

**SENATOR:** I'm thinking there may be some magical solution. Somebody ought to go to the University. <sup>4</sup>. I am willing to pay....

**SENATOR:** Task number...uh... three. Where are my notes?

**VOSTOR:** Do mice come in herds?

**SENATOR:** The problem I started with was Beatpot Aelwrin who is still insists on a round-up of the White Moonies. And your friend the Overseer who is unwilling to risk disruption on the streets. We need to ensure that Beatpot Aelwrin is satisfied. I am going to go into the Upper City. I think our Humakt will look impressive.. I may be able to bring pressure to bear on one of the people who commands the regiments to overrule Beatpot Aelwrin. Oh, and yes, and ah. Eshan I need you to go to the Office of the Minister of War. There isn't a Minister of War at the moment. I need orders out of the Ministry giving permission for us to use the Campus Militarius outside the City for the rehearsal and to detach the units that we need to attend the rehearsal and the parade. I've written you a letter to present. And a request to bring the elephants into the City.

*MARTIN: I'm fascinated that his Imperial Bodyguard is willing to overrule him and say 'No you're not going to the parade....' DRAK 'Your Imperial Majesty'.*

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<sup>3</sup> This is left as an exercise for the student.

<sup>4</sup> ALAN: (*Going all meta*) Is there an equivalent of a Pied Piper here?

*GM: 'Your poor servant cannot abide the thought of you being in danger.'*

**SENATOR:** Everybody wants to puff up their role. Everybody except me.

**JARANTHIR:** *(Entering the room)* The only honest senator left?

**SENATOR:** I wouldn't say that... Ah, you're going to the University!

**JARANTHIR:** I am?

**SENATOR:** I'm tasking you to find a sorcerer capable of shielding against rodents. Have some porridge while I write you a letter of introduction.

**JARANTHIR:** Why is the porridge this colour?

**VOSTOR:** Berries in it.

**ESHAN:** Healthier.

**VISHI:** *(From the shadows)* Religiously appropriate.

The mission to Danfive Xaron first. They got referred to was a noted cultist who had been fully reformed from his evil ways, Nose Ring<sup>5</sup> Vostor didn't recognise him but Sandene recalled seeing him pass through Tarsh while travelling by Moonboat to Prax on a 'special mission' which ended with the group he was with (the Lunar Coders) returning hurriedly to the capital for reasons that were never explained. They had managed to get the then Governor of Prax Sor-Eel dismissed before they left though.

**SANDENE** That smells of politics so I shall ignore it.

Nose Ring had a lot of tattoos on his body from a lot of cults and a large brand of his chest which he displayed proudly. And a brass nose ring that gave him his cognomen.

*GM: He is one of the successful products of the cult and is now sane, stable and respectable.*

*MARTIN: For certain values of sane, stable and respectable.*

**NOSE RING:** Greetings comrades. Let me show you something.

Outside in the courtyard were a bunch of men with their eyes cast to the ground being shouted at by burlier men.

**NOSE RING:** They are a graduating class. They are what we are thinking of using as your pooper scoopers.

**SANDENE** Would they be available tomorrow or possibly the day after? For rehearsal?

**VOSTOR:** Because we're not quite sure when it will be yet.

**NOSE RING:** Let us know as soon as possible. Thing is these are one year graduates.... They are at a delicate stage.

Vostor didn't think they looked delicate. They all wore a bear cloak as their primary covering and a fresh looking brand over their hearts. Some of them were small and weedy, many were big and burly.

**NOSE RING:** They have just reached the point of being allowed to talk to people outside the cult again. It's a delicate moment in the process and we do lose people at this point. That's why the rehearsal is so important to us. We would appreciate it if you kept a light observance on them. I don't want them to think they are being too heavily supervised or observed by the other units. We think that some of them will run. And when they run we want it to be our people who pick them up.

**SANDENE** You want us to let them run?

**NOSE RING:** Have a word with your centurions.

**SANDENE** Tell them not to break rank?

**NOSE RING:** A very good way to put it. The ones who don't run we think will be stable enough to take part in the parade itself. The trouble is there are always damnable rumours about the few who get away. It's something we try to eradicate but there seems to be no way to erase from their minds the names of people like Vinval Jotoran. He was caught once, but got let go. That's the really deadly thing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A major NPC from the STRANGERS IN PRAX supplement of RQ3 days..

<sup>6</sup> This was a massive Clue that as far as I recall never got followed up.

**SANDENE** Does your cult not have some way of enforcing oaths as Humakt does?

**NOSE RING:** We are supposed to turn our hearts away from hardness and away from criminality and put our faith into the Goddess as Danfive Xaron did. And that works. We should be able to find them. But a few a very few run and stay run. We're not sure why. Thing about Jotoran when we found him he was a successful businessman in Phandaros. We took him in and he escaped again. Where he is now nobody seems to know.

Meanwhile at the Ministry of War,

Eshan entered the office of the Chief Clerk to the Ministry of War who looked at the list of requests and sniffed as if not at all impressed by the seal of the Master of Circuses.

**CHIEF CLERK:** We're used to having this sort of notice well in advance. My late master the Minister was very specific about that. However, if as you say, it is at the Imperial Command I'm sure we can get things going.

He paused, coughed and made a gesture indicative of gathering coins into his hands. Eshan looked blank and reflected that he had no idea how much the going rate was for that sort of thing. The Chief Clerk took out a chalk slate tablet and wrote a sum on it. The sum was 100 Gold Wheels.<sup>7</sup>

Eshan estimated that would be enough to buy a very nice house in the country or a small townhouse in the city. It was twice a noble's standard ransom and more than Eshan had ever seen in one place.

**CHIEF CLERK:** A small inducement will be necessary.

And then he wiped the chalk board clean.

Eshan got the sense he knew it was outrageous and didn't expect Eshan to pay that. He didn't seem to be about to settle down to negotiate either.

**ESHAN:** *I can't pay that.... I will have to get back to the Senator about the Emperor's parade. Because last time we saw him he was looking forward to it. (Sweeps towards the door decisively)*

That particular bit of intimidation caused the Chief Clerk to choke on the grape he was popping in his mouth at that moment.

Jarathir was at the University.

**JARATHIR** *(Still a bit 'spacey'.)* Wow! A lot of these people are clockwork. Moving on....

A Supercillious Person in Robes pointed him towards the Rat Tower where lived s sorcerer learned in animals and especially rodents.

**SUPERCILLIOUS PERSON IN ROBES:** Smelly Dedrick is the person you want. Don't call him smelly, call him Master Dedrick.

The Rat Tower was a tower decorated with carved rats. The tower smelled of urine. Mixed human and rat urine, if Jarathir was any judge. He came to a door which was locked and painted black. When he knocked a rough-edged voice snarled 'Go away!'

**JARATHIR** Master Dedrick?

**MASTER DEDRICK:** What?

**JARATHIR** I have a potential commission from the Master of Circuses.

The door opened to reveal a man with long tangled hair and beard down to his navel, wearing a black robe above his bare feet.

**MD:** What?

**JARATHIR** *(Showing him the letter of commission)* We.. need a mouse free parade route for the length of a particular parade. For quite a long duration for fairly small targets.

**MD:** Oh, targets aren't aren't aren't

**RELEVANT!** It's the strength of the magic, the magic which would be yes.

**JARATHIR** So it is possible then?

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<sup>7</sup> **DRAK:** *I hope you're not carrying that much.*

**MD:** (*Sounding slightly more sane*) Oh, yes, yes. Certainly. Certainly... Well, I'd have to whip it up in advance, you understand. I would say on the whole this would be a matter of... Have you considered a shaman? No, no, no shamans hereabouts. Forget what I said about shamans. They're a smelly, unpleasant bunch.<sup>8</sup> That would be Command. You don't want them dead, do you?

**JARATHIR** No. We just want them not there.

**MD:** No, no. Command Beast. Area Effect Tap? No, not really. It wouldn't... Mice *and* rats?

**JARATHIR** I think it is specifically mice but mice and rats would be good.<sup>9</sup>

**MD:** You must understand I am a Master of the Rune Beast.

**JARATHIR** That would make sense.

**MD:** And a Master of the Rune Command. So it is a matter of Range and Duration and Intensity. The longer it lasts the shorter the range will be. The intensity won't need to be too high because they're Rodents you see. They don't have much willpower. They're skittish creatures. Super Rats are a problem. I gave my evidence to the enquiry. Super Rats are a problem.<sup>10</sup> Basically, the way I think I would do this if, if, if, if I con, I con, I condescend to do this I would cast a bound spell on an ornament on the lead elephant... Is that word elephant? Never seen an elephant.

**JARATHIR** Very impressive creatures, sir. As someone interested in beasts you may...

**MD:** How long do you think this should last. Six Hours? Twelve Hours? A Day?

**JARATHIR** There's going to be a practice parade and then a parade.

**MD:** I would charge for both enchantments.

**JARATHIR** I think that's understood sir.

**MD:** Well, that, that, that, that perf... Well, good!<sup>11</sup>

Two six hour spells were ordered and then the Range had to be decided: the elephants had to be protected from the sight or smell of a mouse which caused some chin scratching.

**MD** What is the length of the group of elephants? .

*MARTIN: Let's just imagine an elephant in the room.*

*GRAHAM: Let's not talk about that.*

Drak went on the assumption that there would be a dozen elephants with an elephant sized gap between them and ignored Graham's remark that in THE JUNGLE BOOK they were holding the tail of the elephant in front.

*DRAK: An elephant is five yards long?*

*PUM: Bit longer than a double decker bus.*

*That's really not helping is it?*

As the research went on unhelpful remarks about the difference between elephants African and Asian and male and female were thrown in. The conversation wandered into silliness. The GM vanished into calculations on the cost of magic which involved diving into obscurely written rules in badly indexed rulebooks. The players wittered on to fill the gap.

*GRAHAM: It's quite difficult to run over an elephant with a steam roller.*

*PUM: It could be a Sicilian Dwarf Elephant*

When he returned from his trance of calculation Master Dedrick offered a price of fifty-five Lunars per casting plus an extra charge of five lunars per casting if they wanted him to take a bath first. Jarathir agreed this was probably prudent.

They shook hands on the deal, and Jarathir got a sudden vision of Dedrick's face turning into a mask and his body into a giant puppet with strings running up into the ceiling. He looked up and saw a Gold rank Mostali Dwarf operating him.

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<sup>8</sup> This was the pot calling the kettle black.

<sup>9</sup> *MARTIN: (Unhelpfully) Voles? PUM: Hamster? Group discount?*

<sup>10</sup> . Graham muttered that he didn't believe that Rodents of Unusual Size existed.

<sup>11</sup> I had, as you can probably tell, a lot of fun with this aged magical loon.

**JARATHIR** *(Sotto voce)* everything's fine everything's fine....Just because the Universe doesn't actually exist... I'm still here.

The Supercilious Person in Robes was pleased to hear that Master Dedrick had been able to help, noting that he didn't get out much.

**JARATHIR** I got that impression. Five Lunars is quite a lot for a bath but I'm sure it's a good investment.

**SPIR:** We have to pay the servants extra to take water up to him.

At the gates of the Upper City, the Senator and Keanus were stopped. Spells were cast on them to ensure that they were not terrorists or the Bronze Age equivalent.

*MARTIN: Any evil thoughts?*

*ALAN: He's a Humakti.*

*MARTIN: Any hidden weapons.*

*ALAN: He's a Humakti.*

As they stepped through the gates everything got brighter, sharper and nicer. The feeling that this place was more Real than the Lower City was everywhere.

The Statues of the Gods and Heroes around the parade ground looked bigger and more real. and Keanus looked at the Senator for reassurance.

**SENATOR:** Ah. You must understand here you are one step closer to the Goddess. One step closer to the Moon. If you look down the avenue there you will see the gate through which you can step and find yourself on the Moon. We don't recommend you do that unless invited.

Keanus followed the Senator taking careful note of all around him. He noted that the people in the Upper City were watching him too and with a certain amount of suspicion. Everybody else here was a member of a Lunar cult and he was an outsider.

*PUM: I do my best to look like a professional bodyguard.*

*DRAK: Which he is.*

*ALAN: He's a professional soldier.*

*DRAK: Ha! Moonlighting!*

They marched into the offices beside a set of barracks. People were marching up and down outside in Glorious uniforms.

**KEANUS** Ah, *that's* what the Janitrix was trying to teach us.

The Senator and his bodyguard were shown into the presence of Count Julian, Commander of the First Imperial Footguard. (Also a former Lunar Coder and a comrade of Nose-Ring.)

Julan was terribly sorry but it was strictly speaking Beat-Pot Aelwrin's responsibility to decide whether a particular environment was safe to have the Emperor in.

**JULAN:** I do outrank him but it would be invidious of me to try to use my rank to persuade him to change his mind.... I do not know how to advise you. I am new enough in this position that I do not wish to offend anybody.

Keanus muttered something about just rounding up the ringleaders and holding them overnight. The other two men shook their heads sadly.

**JULAN:** I have as you may have heard a certain sympathy for the White Moonies. Not for their doctrine which I think ridiculous but let us say they have not always had the best justice of the Empire.

In response to questions about what they knew about the White Moon movement. The GM said:

- They had arisen during the reign of the current Mask of the Emperor, Argentius. Probably a total coincidence, that.
- A man called Krishnan the Varlee was the current leader of the White Moon

cult in the City. <sup>12</sup> There was a reward out on him.

- Keanus had also heard that Count Julian had been involved in investigating the movement down in Prax but he didn't know any of the details.
- White Moon doctrine held that eventually the Empire will fade away as a temporary Illusion, a distraction from the Truth of the Goddess whose final form is the White Moon.

*GM: Universal Peace and Love.*

*PUM: 'The Empire must wither away' <sup>13</sup>*

*DRAK: You can see why people in charge of the Empire might not be keen on this philosophy.*

Afterwards, the Senator thought the Count wanted to find a way to help him but couldn't find a way to do it. He also complimented Keanus saying he was "the quiet determination that I need to feel safe."

*DRAK: Now is not the time to go 'Huh?'*

*MARTIN: What he thinks is 'quiet determination' is just you noodling about.*

They all got back together at the Senator's office.

Vostor had come up with a scheme to get twenty five carts and take them to the guy who wanted a hundred wheels. He thought this was funny. Sandene said carts normally had two wheels. What they wanted was fifty carts or twenty five wagons.

The Senator had a burst of temper when told the size of the bribe being asked. Eshan apologised for not knowing enough about the bureaucracy to negotiate a reduction.

**SENATOR:** He's been got at. Did you notice his name? Ah, yes. He's probably related to the old man. His family are clients to the old man. I need some way to make that problem go away.

Suggestions please. And no, you are not getting a hundred wagon wheels

**SANDENE** I thought you No, meant we weren't going to assassinate him.

**SENATOR:** Not that either.

**VOSTOR:** I could go and introduce myself to him. Explain what happened to the last Senator I met.

**JARATHIR** Or just offer to stay with him until it's sorted.

**VOSTOR:** Yeah! That works. 'I've been told not to leave until you make this happen and I'm here to make useful suggestions to make it happen.' I can do that.

**SENATOR:** I need something that will persuade him that insisting on the bribe would be not in his best interest.

**KEANUS** The only person who's got that kind of money to throw around is the Emperor. We should go to the Emperor and say...

**SENATOR:** Let me give you a piece of basic of advice of surviving in the City of Glamour.

**JARATHIR** Nothing that starts with 'Go to the Emperor' is a good idea.

**SENATOR:** Nothing that annoys the Emperor is a good idea.

The Senator admitted he didn't have any useful ideas. Eshan wanted to know about breaking in to the Ministry after business hours to which Jarathir disrespectfully pointed out you couldn't just steal an authorisation. Vostor thought finding him in flagrante delicto with his secretary was the way to go. There was a lot of talking over each other.

**JARATHIR** May I suggest a less polite delegation? ... Drop some money on him and say 'take it or leave it'.

**SENATOR:** And if he leaves it, we don't have a rehearsal.

**JARATHIR** We could be quite physically persuasive. Sir.

**SENATOR:** I know it's what you're good at

**KEANUS** Want us to rough up the Minister of War?

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<sup>12</sup> This was another Big Clue that didn't get followed up. Krishnan is a character in CITIZENS OF THE LUNAR EMPIRE, the book about the Insula.

<sup>13</sup> Yes, that's a direct parody of Marxism. A lot of 'Red Empire' vibes in Chaosium material written in the 80s and 90s.

**JARATHIR** He's not the Minister of War. He's a jumped up bureaucrat sitting in for the Minister of War. That was a little emotive. Sorry sir.

**VOSTOR:** Threaten him with a blunt object? Hang on, I am a blunt object.

Sandene suggested using sorcery to create a temporary 100 Wheels. Which the Senator said was counterfeiting.

**SENATOR:** Bribes are not legal. Technically speaking, if the Emperor wants to make a case of it, soliciting a bribe or giving a bribe is equally culpable.

**SANDENE** So if he loses his hundred gold he isn't going to go to the authorities, is he?

**SENATOR:** Creating a temporary illusion of Imperial currency....

**JARATHIR** A temporary illusion of a promissory note?

**SENATOR:** Forgery.

**VOSTOR** Can I hit him? Can I hit him and cast heal on him so he can't do anything about it.

The Senator sighed and fetched a homing pigeon from another room, wrote a note and sent it off while they came up with more and more unlikely schemes. He then sent for hot beverages and snacks.

A while later a pigeon arrived and the Senator read the message it brought. .

**JARATHIR** I will tell my hawk not to eat your messenger.

**SENATOR:** Oh, damn I've been an idiot.

**SANDENE** Surely not. sir.

**SENATOR:** Eshan, I've got a little job for you. I want you to go to the Office of Ivex Devouring Dog and ask if I can have one of his tax officials for about of two hours. Say it is a matter of some potential undeclared income.

At the dread name of Ivex several people in the room (including Jarathir who had an uncle who was driven to suicide by the attentions of the Tax Demons) came over a bit funny at the name of the chief tax gatherer of the Empire.

Fortunately, Eshan was as cool as a cucumber who has never under-declared his tax liabilities.

He took Vostor along, muttering "couldn't hurt".

His skill at Bureaucracy failed him this time and he was told they were terribly, terribly busy and perhaps he could come back later in the week. It was clear that he did not look important enough.

**VOSTOR:** Tell him you're here on business of the Emperor.

He whispered that loudly enough to persuade the clerk to look again and when Eshan showed him the authorisation that they had been given by Chief Overseer Phranestes the clerk grumpily stood up and went into the inner office.

*PUM: Every time we go to the Palace we should nick one of their compliment slips.*

Eventually, they were shown into the presence of a tax inspector.

**ESHAN:** The Master of Circuses wishes to see you concerning some undeclared income.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** Of his?

**ESHAN** Of somebody else.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** Is this urgent?

**ESHAN:** Yes. It's for the Emperor's parade. Somebody is stalling it.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** (*Surprisingly*) Ah. That is a reasonable request. Jaxarte! I'm Out Of The Office.

The Senator said he was 'quite impressed' when they came back with the Tax inspector, adding that he was also quite impressed with his daughter. (Who came up with the idea.)

The Tax Inspector, once he'd had the situation explained to him, said he'd be happy to 'discourage this person'.

Once in the office, the Senator asked the Chief Clerk for a loan of his slate and wrote on it '10 Lunars' and said: "May I introduce you to..."

**TAX INSPECTOR:** Happy to witness the

easing of the difficulties of a busy administrator.

The Chief Clerk gasped. The Tax Inspector made a note of witness to an 'extra-curricular payment' and gave the Chief Clerk a copy.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** I'm sure it will not be necessary for me to order a full audit of your affairs.

The Chief Clerk fainted.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** Ah, I *may* have leaned on him a little hard.

The Chief Clerk was gibbering when he came around but none the less managed to complete the authorisations requested. He gave somewhat incoherent reassurances that he was not intending in any way to umm ummm ummm.

They left with a bag full of authorisations with their associated stamps and seals.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** You have just increased the workload of one of my subordinates but thank you. That was very enjoyable.

**VOSTOR:** It will help you with your efficiency.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** What?

**VOSTOR:** You'll collect all the revenue that should have been paid.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** Yes. Or I may drive the poor chap to suicide. It's one of the things one has to risk<sup>14</sup>

**VOSTOR:** All he had to do is declare it in the first place....

**ESHAN:** He had other masters.

**TAX INSPECTOR:** Are you saying that you don't understand why people defy the law. Because the innocent have nothing to fear.

**VOSTOR:** Yes!

**TAX INSPECTOR:** You are part of the backbone of the Empire. Or maybe something lower.

Suggestions as to what body part was meant came from the players who weren't in the scene. Pum won with "You're the pelvis of the Empire!"

*GRAHAM: Uh huh.*

The rest of the day was spent sending messages to the people in charge of various units telling them that they were going to be assembling on the Campus Militarius the next day.

When Jarathir got to the University the wizard was in the middle of his bath. A maid servant stood by, with her eyes closed, pouring clean water over him to wash away the suds clinging to his person.

When Jarathir stepped out of the Rat Tower after confirming arrangement for the next day there was a young man waiting for him. He thought he had seen him among the group of University students, who lived on the floor above the squad's rooms. It wasn't the one who was annoyed with Vostor. Let me call this one Errio that being the name for the 'quiet, self-effacing one' among the students in CITIZENS OF THE LUNAR EMPIRE.

**ERRIO:** My friend is a bit annoyed with your friend. He's been paying attention to his girl.

**JARATHIR:** Oh yeah. Because she was upset, he got her a cat and was kind to her. I can see why that would be upsetting.

**ERRIO:** You don't want your girlfriend to go off and get cats off other men, do you?

**JARATHIR:** I suppose it would be embarrassing to discover that someone else cared more about the person you profess to be your girl.

**ERRIO:** You are *going* aren't you?

**JARATHIR:** We only have to see the Emperor a few more times and then we'll be back on duty.

**ERRIO:** Does that work with many people, hereabouts? Dropping the Emperor's name like that?

**JARATHIR:** That's why we're here. We're here to receive a medal.

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<sup>14</sup> *MARTIN: It's one of the perks of the job.*

**ERRIO:** We did wonder.

**JARATHIR** I don't think he was planning to steal her away or anything. He was just trying to see she was OK.

**ERRIO:** You have to warn young girls about the dangers of fair speaking young men.

**JARATHIR** The entire subject is one of no interest to me. I'll make sure I'll mention to Vostor that your friend is upset.

Errio clearly disliked Jarathir for some reason. He took a deep breath and his eyes flickered white for a moment before walking away.

*DRAK: I wonder if I've just been ensorcelled. Do I have all my limbs?*

*GM: You still have all your limbs. You have no sudden urge to go out and interfere with gerbils or anything like that.*

*DRAK No more than I had before.*

*GM: I don't think we need to specify that about your character.*

As he headed back to the Insula through the gathering gloom he looked up to the Moon and the stars and he seemed to see cog's and wheels and levers between them. He wondered if that came from the Celestial Lore or the Mineral Lore.

*DRAK: I'd expect more in the way of interlocking celestial spheres myself.*

There was a brief lore interlude on Glorantha having only one crystal sphere and the reasons Aristotle came up with the idea "and a lot of other notions that turn out to be untrue as well".

When he got back Jarathir passed on to Vostor the fact that there was a student upstairs who wasn't pleased with him.

**JARATHIR** I think he wanted you to tell her to beware of smooth talking strangers.

**VISHI:** I think he believes *you* are a smooth talking stranger, Master.

**JARATHIR** Oh, yeah! That would make sense in context. Thanks Vishi.

**VISHI:** I didn't believe it either.

**VOSTOR:** So he wants me to go and tell her...?

**JARATHIR** He doesn't want you to talk to her at all.

**VISHI:** Yes, that is the subtext here. Sorry, Master. I read that word in the newspaper.

**VOSTOR:** If he'd been around to comfort her in the first place...

**ESHAN:** Have you seen this student before?

**VISHI:** There are four male students living upstairs and a girl. They come and go at unusual times. There is a certain amount of chanting go on up there.

**JARATHIR** Sorcery students' parties...

The next day (the 19th) started bright and clear. At breakfast Vishi gave them a Very Spicy Porridge (Dragon's Breath from Kralorela with cooked prawns) and suggested they might want to visit the garderobe before going out.

*DRAK Do not question where the fishmonger got the prawns from given how far we are from any body of water.*

Vostor's enquiries as to how they could afford frozen prawns on their dole allowance led to Vishi admitting that he had been helping a dole queue speculator shift some of his more dubious coupons.

**JARATHIR** What we have been eating is realised dole futures?

**KEANUS** Don't worry Vostor. I'm sure you can afford it.

**SANDENE** I don't want to think about prawn futures.

They made their way to their assigned positions. Which was to get the parade sorted and in order under the command of the Senator. All of them did very well getting people senior in rank to them to follow instructions.

As they accompanied the elephants down from the northern gate they saw a disturbance in shops and stalls along the streets, following the path of the elephants.

Jarathir guessed quite rightly that this was all the rats and mic, on the surface and in the sewers below being pushed away by the wave of sorcerous Anti-Rat Commands.

*PUM: Are there that many rats?*

*DRAK: It's a city!*

The sorcerer was standing right by Jarathir as the squad realised what was happening.

**JARATHIR** Was this anticipated?

**MD:** You did want them to stay away from the elephants. Perhaps I should modify the effect.

They had a discussion and eventually agreed to try a command to all rodents to keep out of sight and hide as the elephants passed.

**VOSTOR:** Guess what the unnamed stew of tonight will be.

**SANDENE** Ratatouille?

**VOSTOR:** Honeyed rat. On a stick.

**JARATHIR** Popcorn rat!

Sandene and Keanus spotted that two of the Danfive Xaron following the elephants (with shiny, zinc plated and New! buckets which they would have to scrub clean when they got to the barracks) were edging towards the crowd of general populace surrounding them. Looking around for someone to report this to they spotted three or four people in the crowd *not* dressed as DX cultists who were keeping a close eye on the about-to-be runners.

They followed instructions and Did Nothing and a few moments later the runners throw their buckets at the observers and ran away.

They did a rehearsal for their own part of the ceremony with the Senator standing in for the Emperor.

Everything went perfectly. Count Julian came over and complemented them.

**JULAN:** I hope this will not be in vain due to somebody's pride. I hope my unit will be able to be there. It makes sense for Beat-Pot Aelwrin to insist the streets be cleared of those he regards as scum

**KEANUS** It's the danger to the Emperor. That's the main thing.

**JARATHIR** Forgive me for speaking possibly out of turn. Isn't it slightly a slur on his abilities

as a bodyguard if he feels a bunch of pacifist cultists are a problem.

**JULAN:** It's not my job to comment upon the other members of the High Command.

He mentioned how appealing he found the White Moonies message of universal harmony and an end to all conflict between men. He didn't mention if he found it believable.

**JARATHIR** It's going to be a very poor Imperial parade without the Emperor.

**VOSTOR:** Can't we just round them up? As they're pacifists?

**JARATHIR** It's more what rounding up general citizenry means...

**VOSTOR:** They're not general citizens! How many of them are there?

**ESHAN:** We don't know who they all are. And you also tend to get some innocent hangars on dragged along.

**JARATHIR** Have you been involved in any of the round ups of villages we do in Tarsh.

**VOSTOR:** Yeah.

**JARATHIR** Have you noticed you tend to get pelted with rocks on the way out?

**VOSTOR:** No.

**JARATHIR** I suppose they're not hitting your helmet so you wouldn't.

**VOSTOR:** When you say rounding up it's more rounding down.

**JARATHIR** Oh right so you're on the execution squad.

**VOSTOR:** Nope. I'm there to suppress unnecessary violence.

That evening Count Julian turned up at the Insula. He coolly walked up to the apartment of the Illuminated gent who lived on the floor above, paying no attention to the curious looks of the squad on the way in or the way out.

*GM: Does anyone do anything like....*

*DRAK: Try to listen in?*

*MARTIN: Above our pay grade.*

*DRAK: We're **mostly** professional soldiers. For whom curiosity is a very bad idea.*

*GM: I was merely trying to tempt you.*

After the Count departed the old man came out looking irritated and went to the flat of the students where he had a long conference.

**JARATHIR:** It's not as if the Senator has a whole building full of White Moonies. That would be ridiculous! And nothing at all to do with why he didn't want investigators hanging around the place.

In the corner Vishi was rolling his eyes hard enough to make his head hurt.

The Illuminated chap came across and asked if Jarathir was busy tomorrow. He said he would have to ask his officer.

**ILLUMINATED OLD CHAP:**<sup>15</sup> Would you be willing to help me to get the White Moon problem resolved for the day of the parade?

**JARATHIR:** If I could assist you in that it would be my honour and I think perhaps my duty.

**IOC:** I will come and see you when I have made the approaches I have to make.

**JARATHIR:** Is this something that may be shared...

**IOC:** I would prefer it if you kept it confidential. But if you wish to tell your officer or the Senator that I may be able to solve the little problem for the duration of the parade.

**JARATHIR** Sir, I have been told by an Illuminate of my acquaintance that with my assistance he may be able to cause the White Moon problem to not be a problem for the day of the parade. Will that be a problem?

**ESHAN:** You need any help?

**JARATHIR** Not that I'm aware of but I may come back to you once he's told me what he actually wants me to do.

**ESHAN:** Anything that will help solve it...

Jarathir made it clear that the officer would have to explain it to the Senator.

---

<sup>15</sup> Can you guess his name, reader?

<sup>16</sup> TPPoE&A: As disappointed as you were in Nick Clegg and the Coalition? ME: No, a certain base level

## DISTRACTIONS

Alan had brought in some unusual nibbles.

*GRAHAM: Do try the German Pilsner Chips.*

The GM tried it and the expression on his face caused general laughter.

*DRAK: It is akin to the sensation of walking into a pub just after it has opened.*

*MARTIN: It tastes of the smell of stale beer.*

*GM: It doesn't taste of anything except processed potato product.*

The Currywurst Sausage Chips were worse..

## COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 12

### A GRAND COVER! AGAIN!

**MATT STEVENS:** 'Your deity is a different name for my deity' changes meaning depending on the power relationship between the two cultures. // It occurs to me that divine names could change due to misunderstanding and egg-corns. Which could be funny if done right. Easier than developing a whole artificial language and its historical changes too. // RYCT Me: I'm actually a long time Liberal Democrat voter and we don't call the Tories rude names. We just tut and look disappointed.<sup>16</sup> I voted Labour last time though because I really, really wanted to kick out our Brexit-supporting Tory MP. (We did! A small Woo hoo for democracy!) Starmer looks like getting his leadership challenged. I have no idea if he will prevail. I am currently taking some pleasure in the failure of Reform to even slightly impress the psephologists. (See the end of the zine) // Jane Austen, like most British people then and now, lived a long way from the hard edge of Empire where white people exploited non-white people for profit. She did not see the oppression and needed to do nothing to reenforce it. Which meant, especially during WWII when black

of disappointment is bound into the very word 'Tory'.

American soldiers arrived *en-masse* in Britain that British citizens could, without hypocrisy, object to the white American MPs trying to bring the social structure of the American South where you had to discriminate and oppress to fit in and prosper. It also meant that she fully supported the class discrimination that made her own social arrangements work.

**ROGER B W:** I have no problem with long-term hidden magic if a) Magic is dangerous to the cosmos and the only sane thing to do is limit it or b) Magic is dangerous to the user and either destroys them or forces them out of Reality after a certain time. Or both of course. // In the Aegis Institute game, the Gods are right there in the centre of the city. They tolerate other gods if they act like respectful houseguests, put up with people who support no god and react variously to actual atheists. Crone cackles, Uncle giggles, Father, Daughter and Son frown with puzzlement and Mother just shakes her head sadly. **RYCT Me:** I think Compulsive Habit (Matchmaking) is better. Not everyone hates Dolly Levi. -5 points in most cases. I have added that to the writeup. Thanks. (And Jaq's Great Aunt has her next story arc.) Re Baron Rafe Tikhonov's further adventures. Maybe. I have some published adventures in nearby space to where he ended up. I have some reading to do first. // Re your footnote to Patrick Riley: the number of things that the German High Command could have known and really should have known but didn't is considerable. How Fighter Command was organised for instance.

**JOHN REDDEN:** Congrats about the operations: my mum managed to outlive her first pacemaker and got an upgraded version for the last three years of her life. // The Mother and the Father (and the rest of the Six) are gods of the City of Aegis, the setting of my currently running GURPS game and now to do with Glorantha, at all, at all. Apologies for confusion.

**PATRICK BRADY:** Welcome (back)! I'm sure you could find a dot matrix printer if you really needed one but didn't they consume ribbons and stuff like that. The consumables

might be the problem. // I would like to run Tekumel again but the lore barrier is even higher than Glorantha. // I can't trace the novel (?) series you describe as containing Nightwatch London. Author?

**MYLES COCORAN:** Finger ouch! Sympathy! // I was implying that the Mother's wisdom is deeper than humans *can* access. The Crone has wisdom humans would find very useful but she keeps it to herself. // Starmer may be all you say but I worry that a change of government leadership might be a problem just now. Note that the defence enthusiasts in the government are also pissed with him.

**BRIAN ROGERS: RYCT MATT STEVENS:** Comic book continuity wanders into idiocy that writes over backstory even easier than DR WHO. Fewer budget constraints. // **RYCT Me:** Perhaps in the direction of more on-line gaming.

**LISA PADOL: RYCT me:** Beat-Pot knows his boss the Emperor is a jerk and doesn't want the jerk to get hit when he's on watch. He also wants to establish his bureaucratic space. // The players never heard what happened about the Sky Guard subversion.

**AVRAM GRUMER:** I'm glad I'm not the only one who was confused reading FARFLUNG. **RYCT HEATH ROW:** Damn! If I'd remembered that polar co-ordinate paper existed maybe I'd have found mapping Aegis easier... Hmmm....

**ERIKA L FRANK:** I think you're wrong. From the point of view of the editors and writers the characters are immortal (as long as the sales stay up) From the point of view of the characters they are at risk from a serious enough challenge (yes, even Superman) and they don't know they have Plot Immunity.

So should the mechanics model the editors' reality or the heroes' reality. Good question. I'd say probably there should be a Luck resource the players have to keep an eye on and that the heroes know nothing about.

If they aren't overcoming their perfectly reasonable fears every time, are they really heroes? (As opposed to just good neighbours.)

May I offer for your consideration:

**WILD TALENTS:** The One Roll Engine supers game. Has several rather good settings including PROGENITOR.

**MARVEL HEROIC ROLEPLAYING A** Margaret Weiss game. Very good on fight scenes: tends to handwave the rest of the experience.

**MASKS: A NEW GENERATION:** A teen supers game Powered by The Apocalypse. I ran it with my family (nieces and nephews and their spouses who I suspect of being kind to old Uncle Mike) and it went well enough. Not sure I did it justice.

None of these are my ideal supers game (I'll know it if and when I see it) and they may not be yours but will at least add to your knowledge of the field.

Re The Hit Points Of God: More years ago than I care to remember I passed a table at the Wednesday Night Club (as it was then) and the teenage GM was saying to his players: "Well, last week you killed Satan. What are you going to do this week?"<sup>17</sup>

Even IN NOMINE which is all about Angels and Demons keeps the Archangels and Demon Princes out of the scope of the main system. Newly qualified angels, newly spawned demons are the run of player characters. They may aspire to their own Words (Angel of APAs, Demon of Internet Trolling) but not to the real heights of power. God, in that setting, doesn't seem to want to get involved.

**RYCT Pum:** The most annoying maps I ever saw in an RPG were those in the first Edition of REIGN. It had maps for most of the cultures but

as they were laid out on the bodies of two gods who were the surface of the game world getting them to work together was (probably deliberately) quite impossible.

**JOSHUA K: RYCT Me:** Having certain experiences in Glorantha gives you points in an Illumination skill. One of these (since the latest rewrite) is skill in the Moon Rune. Then once a year you get to roll under that skill to become an Illuminate. I abused that once a year rule horribly to encourage Drak to keep on trying to qualify, part of the magic of Glamour that my players kept saying was distorting the calendar. (I can't help it if they don't pay attention can I?) Re Roger's Zombies. Well, from a purely materialist point of view consciousness is just a supervisor function that often can't be arsed to over-ride the lower level systems that produce perception, language and other stuff. If you re-activate the lower level functions you could get something that can understand you but not resist commands. (How pure materialists deal with the existence of magic is a problem I leave for the student.)

**Lo! The end of my allotted space approaches! Dread barrier to my continued waffling! Further comment must wait to next time. Maybe. Maybe the time after. Or maybe...**

**MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE: PSEPHOLOGIST. People who study elections, derived from the Greek word for 'pebble' because the Ancient Greeks used pebbles to vote with when they weren't using potshards. (See 'ostracism'.) So literally 'pebble theorist'.**

**Take good care of you and of yours as you seek the worlds-spanning criminal mastermind Quandos Vorn, you band of vengeance-seeking loons, you.**

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<sup>17</sup> TPPoE&A: The number of times you've told that story... ME: Please keep count for me. No, really please do.

# Firedrake's Hoard

Number 11: by Roger BW

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



## What I've been up to

A ten-day holiday to Finland with my wife: we cross the channel by ferry, drive north-east through France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Sweden, take another ferry (in this case to Mariehamn in the Åland islands), and then attend (in this case) the Åcon science fiction convention. A few days later, the same drive back. I'd much rather do this than just fly to the site and fly back; it feels like actual travel.



One of two surviving genuine Jolly Rogers Also UK Games Expo, where as usual I didn't do any role-playing. I did however get into a [Bridge Command](https://bridgecommand.space/) (https://bridgecommand.space/) session with a couple of the other Whartson Hall players and some strangers—just the travelling roadshow version, but huge

fun. In particular, I ended up as the captain since everyone else had specific positions they wanted, and found myself subconsciously channelling all the naval fiction and non-fiction I've read (particularly Roger Hill's *Destroyer Captain*). The captain in this system has no console of their own, so I approached the task as one of situational awareness and, especially, *communication*: not trying to micromanage anyone, but listening to what they were reporting, telling them broadly what I wanted of them and setting overall priorities. This will become relevant later.

## Recent Games

**2300 AD / Bayern:** Another planet, more ruins—but these are more recent, and the mission has only missed these guys by 60 years or so. Most of this session was procedural exploration, and we cut it a little short as I was overheating. But the players have at least got a stock of clues...

## GURPS Traveller / The Pirates of

**Drinax:** And we're back! And I seem to have ended up as the captain here too, very possibly because of that *Bridge Command* experience I mentioned above.<sup>1</sup> Sure enough, I slid back into

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<sup>1</sup>Also my experience from running military-themed convention games is that British players are in general very reluctant to play the senior officer.

that persona (though somewhat Vargr-flavoured) as we managed an ambush and ended up feeling so sorry for our victims that we recruited them to our piratical fleet-in-embryo. (After all, a legit merchant ship is a great way to gather information...)

Next session: on a world of the former empire that now gets raided by one of its neighbours, we've made some contacts and are planning to ambush the next raiders, who have made the mistake of becoming somewhat predictable since they have a huge tech superiority and nobody else cares enough to stop them. Not completely sure how this will work, but our ship has wings and theirs are just vaguely aerodynamic wedges, and to abuse Belloc:

“Whatever happens, we have got  
A 300MJ particle beam and they have not.”

### **GURPS / The Day After Ragnarok:**

The statue appears to contain something like a god.<sup>2</sup> So now we're in Auckland trying to track down where it came from and who may have been trying to get it back. Don is... not entirely comfortable moving in high society. But we can put some connections together, and we feel our best bet is to make it clear to local members of the Daughters of Dionin, the conspiracy/secret society that we're Pretty Sure is behind this, that risking bringing down an airliner full of civilians is a Bit Much and if they pull their hand back we won't have to chop it off. (Only more politely!) Nobody admits anything, but on the way back from our interview our rented car's brakes fail, so I suppose it's No More Mr Nice Naturalist.

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<sup>2</sup>Well, a small one, and the distinction between “very big spirit” and “very small god” may have been lost in translation if it was made at all; we're erring on the side of politeness.

**Cthulhu Eternal / Hepatic Portal:** A one-shot Victorian adventure for Whartson Hall at a rare face-to-face gathering. This is the first adventure I've written for a while, and it felt good to get back into it. It opens with the police turning up to get a body identified, a body which appears to be that of one of the PCs...

### **Call of Cthulhu / Honeymoon In**

**Hell:** Also at that face-to-face gathering, an adventure from the 1990 anthology *Blood Brothers* (non-Mythos scenarios inspired by horror films) as three couples take a boat trip into the Everglades. My character (ER nurse) and her new husband (Navy lieutenant) ended up being the power couple of the session, and by the end we were talking as if we'd personally won the war.<sup>3</sup>



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### **A GURPS Template Expander**

You can't have random character generation in GURPS. There are just too many things to take into account. Well, up to a point.

I've written a program which will take a template, suitably encoded, and randomly make all the choices that a player would have to

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<sup>3</sup>“Remember that time at Guadalcanal?” or “Oh, honey, it reminds me of the Manhattan Project.”

make. So when the template says “choose 30 points from among” and then goes on to give a list of advantages, traits, skills, and so on, the software will pick items off the list until it has 30 points exactly, trying again if it misses the mark, and then go on to the next set of choices.

It will adjust skills when attributes or talents vary, and recalculate secondary characteristics. It will make random choices about frequency of appearance for disadvantages that have it, and about the skill and reliability of contacts. The overall idea is that you run the program and get a ready-to-play character.

Attributes:

ST: 9  
DX: 10  
IQ: 10  
HT: 11

Secondary Characteristics:

Damage: 1d-2/1d-1  
BL: 16  
HP: 9  
Will: 10  
Per: 10  
FP: 11  
Basic Speed: 5.25  
Basic Move: 5

Advantages:

Danger Sense  
High Pain Threshold  
Resistant to Disease: 3

Disadvantages:

Duty (to Guild; 15-. Nonhazardous)  
Status: -2  
Wealth (Dead Broke)

Skills:

Acrobatics: 8  
Acting: 9  
Area Knowledge (home city): 10  
Filch: 9  
Panhandling: 12  
Pickpocket: 8  
Scrounging: 11  
Shouting at Foreigners: 8  
Stealth: 9  
Streetwise: 9  
Throwing: 9  
Urban Survival: 10

An example Discworld Beggar.

The “suitably encoded” template is the trick, of course; the process of conversion is somewhat fiddly and time-consuming.

The code is at [codeberg](https://codeberg.org/Firedrake/gurps-template-expander) (https://codeberg.org/Firedrake/gurps-template-expander). Since most published templates are in copyrighted books, I haven’t converted them, but I have provided the Beggar from Phil Masters’s extra Discworld 2e templates as an example (thanks to Phil for allowing this).

More features may well be needed, but I hope someone finds it useful as it is.

## MICE

Back in E&A 11, Patrick Zoch wrote up some useful thoughts on interrogation. And a few days after reading that I had a conversation about NPC motivations in which MICE was clearly the answer, but the person I was talking with had never heard of it. So, in case anyone finds it useful:

MICE is a framework established by the US intelligence community to evaluate why people commit treason, betray trust, join terrorist groups, etc., and it expands to: **M**oney, **I**deology, **C**ompromise, **E**go. Of course, the same techniques can be employed by those who are seeking someone who can be turned. It’s not the full story and there are more recent and sophisticated models, but I find it useful in games to provide plausible actions and motivations.

## Money

The present system is carefully engineered to leave most people feeling short of resources most of the time: an insecure population doesn’t take risks, and keeps working for the man, whether that’s the company boss or the commissar. But one consequence of this is that

given a chance to make a bit of extra cash many people will take it, especially if it can be presented as something relatively minor. Paying someone a lot (like Aldrich Ames with his Soviet millions) can lead to compromise, if they get sloppy and spend it on things they shouldn't be able to afford legitimately.

## Ideology

True believers may be rare, but they are very useful, particularly since they'll often refuse additional payment for doing what they feel is the right thing.

## Compromise (or Coercion)

Or good old fashioned blackmail. This can even be self-generating, as in the old British approach: homosexuals are a security risk. Therefore if you are found to be homosexual you will lose your privileged position. Therefore someone with knowledge of your homosexuality can blackmail you over it. Therefore homosexuals are a security risk.

But the coerced operative is angry, resentful, and looking for a way out; they may even come to feel they have nothing more to lose by coming clean to the power they're spying against.

## Ego (or Excitement)

Most of the grunt work of sensitive jobs is boring, but knowing you're getting one over on your bosses who don't appreciate you at your true worth, that's *fun*. Of course, excitement palls and an operative may take greater risks to recapture the thrill.

## Rolling it all together

Of course, most recruitment doesn't use just one of these paths. A friend may ask you to do something clearly harmless to help them out; it's technically against the rules, so they'll sock you

some cash for it, but nobody's getting hurt—and you get to hit back in a small way against your organisation that pays you peanuts and keeps you in the dark. Then your friend's notional “boss” gets more demanding, and they ask you for more help so that they can get out of their “bad situation”. After a while, guess you've been violating regulations for a year and taking money for it, it would be a shame if someone found out about that, but we don't want to do that as long as you're still useful...



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## Strange Species

(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?)

As I think about it, the vast majority of my characters have been human. I'm not opposed to playing other species, I've done it often enough, but I think I fall too readily into stereotype: like foreign faces “all looking the same” when you're used to the ones you grew up seeing, I find it easier to tease out subtleties

of character in humans, whereas an elf is likely to be either just what you expect of an elf or the opposite of that.

That said I'm having fun with Ruersaegn<sup>4</sup> the Vargr in *The Pirates of Drinax*. He definitely has his moments of stereotype, and I'm trying to use a lot of canine metaphors ("they want my ears", "we bite and we hold on", etc.), but he's not just a flashy fast-talking pirate,<sup>5</sup> he's also a sensors/EW guy who has to be a bit thoughtful to do that job. He can see the eternal problem of Vargr states (a charismatic leader builds something great, then their successors tear it apart in squabbles, much like Alexander's empire) and he wants to build something that will *last*. Will the Revived Drinax be that something? He doesn't know yet.<sup>6</sup>

And there are dragons, of course. Much as I have a general meta idea about how undead work (see *E&A* #10), I tend to assume that dragons work the same way across worlds that support it: the only way to get enough power for the job is to do elemental transmutation. (Flight has to run on magic, of course; the wings are there as a courtesy to aerodynamics.) Dragon fire can be excess hydrogen-oxygen, but is more likely to be fusing plasma. A dragon will eat anything except iron, which is what it excretes,<sup>7</sup> the isotope that tends to be the endpoint of nucleosynthesis.

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<sup>4</sup>Pronounced "Ruhr-Sane".

<sup>5</sup>He would insist on "corsair", which is significantly different in ways he can't be bothered to articulate right now

<sup>6</sup>But the rest of the party instantly elected him to marry the princess if it comes to that. We're not sure quite how that would work, but hey, it's a high-tech setting, I'm sure something can be managed, and at least their ancestors were from the same planet and all used DNA.

<sup>7</sup>With a little bit of nickel-62.



Detail from Stefan Lochner's *The Last Judgement*, c. 1435

But that's physiology. On the magical level, a dragon cannot lie, because what it says becomes true. A dragon has to be *very careful* what it says.

## We Also Heard From

*Comments on E&A number 12*

**Matt Stevens:** the aspect of this that unreasonably interests me is the bit that isn't the clean lines of descent. On the one hand, Astarte's cult spreads and in a different place, isolated enough for this to happen, ultimately becomes Aphrodite's cult, fair enough; but then later on the two cults, or even two independent cults each of something like a love-goddess, meet again and decide, well, we clearly aren't on exactly the same page, but we're closer to each other than each of us is to our neighbours' gods, so we'll declare a new form of worship of "Astarte-Aphrodite", in which each of us can keep the bits of rite that we're used to, but if you're travelling anywhere in our lands you now have a friendly temple to go to even if they spice the sacral wine differently from the way they do it at home.

RYCTM: Yeah, at the time I joined the chorus of despising the *New Era*. I suspect that that annoyance of the long-term fans may well have contributed to GDW's ultimate demise. But now that I don't have a huge mental investment in *Traveller* specifically I think it's interesting to tease out the good, even if I don't end up running it.

RYCT Elf: I've been reading quite a few pre-written adventures of late, and I'm coming to have Strong Opinions on the way information should be presented for maximum ease of loading it into the GM's head.

RYCT Timothy Collinson: as an example, the Japanese court system had a conviction rate of 99.8% as of 2001. That didn't mean every arrest led to a conviction; it meant that only cases with a solid chance of conviction, and severe enough potential punishments that a full trial was needed, were pursued to court.

**John Redden:** glad things have gone well!

RYCT Gabriel Roark, I am still very fond of the "½-level spells" from *Dragon* back in the day, including such gems as *Detect Normal Fires*, *Bigby's Interposing Eye* and *Speak With Mud*.

**Patrick Brady:** A useful real-world group in the UK: the Civil Nuclear Constabulary. Their actual job is to provide armed security for nuclear materials (e.g. fuel rods being shipped for reprocessing), but administratively they are built as a police force, and they have right of entry anywhere in the UK if nuclear materials are potentially involved. Gluing on an actual investigative capability shouldn't be hard, and it's a great place to hide shadowy occult investigators because they have a ready-made reason for taking the Strange Stuff away.



non-free logo, used only for identification and/or critical commentary

**Myles Corcoran:** In my experience computers don't work right until they've had their blood sacrifice. (Except ones built by IBM, who I think do it at the factory.)

Aha, I hadn't quite realised *Mausritter* was set in a world with actual humans in it.

I think one of the most *WFRP*-feeling elements of your *Kriegsmesser* is the way that a brass fondue fork is a significant weapon worth hanging on to.

RYCTM: yes, I can't now remember the details but with very hard tasks you had a higher fumble chance if you had higher skill. I remember a *WoD* fan trying to justify this to me as "realistic".

Ludovic Chabant has been [looking at](https://ludovic.chabant.com/blog/2026/05/24/page-inflation-in-ttrpg-rulebooks/) (https://ludovic.chabant.com/blog/2026/05/24/page-inflation-in-ttrpg-rulebooks/) page count inflation in newer editions of games that have been around for a while. I don't *necessarily* want tiny games, but... I can certainly see the marketing pressure for a huge book for which the publisher can charge more, while deploring the load that it puts on potential players and GMs.

**Brian Rogers:** RYCT Myles Corcoran, my days of being taught maths are long in the past but even from then I remember how one bad or timorous maths teacher could get pupils into the mindset of “this is hard, follow the recipe, never step outside the lines, never do it for fun”. I have met gamers who genuinely find subtraction significantly harder to do than addition. (I don’t blame *them* for this!)

RYCT Joshua Kronengold, of course there are also space games in which the spaceship is narratively “how you get to where the next adventure happens”, but that’s a genre setting. (Something based on the *Alien/Aliens* films, for example, or much of early *Doctor Who*.)

RYCTM I think it may have been the *gauleiter’s* great-nephew, but definitely a relative.

Can’t go wrong with a B-wing. It’s the A-10 Thunderbolt of the *Star Wars* world.

(Also interesting to see the Champions!Face, thanks for that.)

**Brian Christopher Misiaszek:** I agree on the pulp talents; the impression I got from the book is that it wants you to jump straight into the wacky and blatantly supernatural stuff, rather than emulating classic pulp heroes—who for me are much the same as the ones you list. If I ever take up *The Two-Headed Serpent* again I’ll offer these to the PCs.

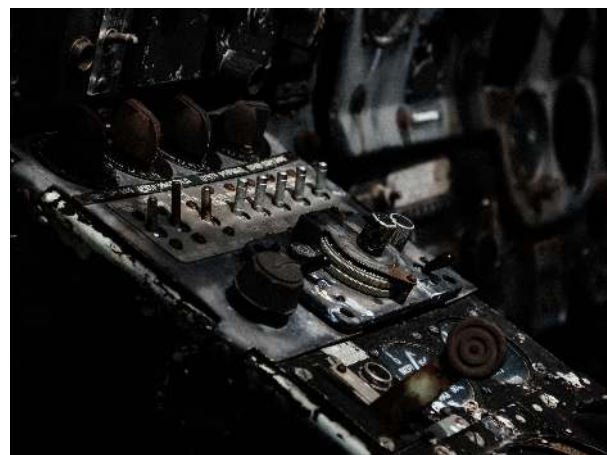
I think for *Terror Incarnate* I’d also exclude SAN-0 humans (the more advanced cultists). They may remember what fear was, but they don’t really *feel* it any more (or they feel it *all the time*).

You may well be aware that the short film *Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life* (1913) seems to be the very first appearance on film of the trope of the girl tied to the railway tracks.

I’m really liking the *Twsha* appendix, for two particular reasons: one, you’ve hit on a thing I care about strongly, that Mythos entities are in general *not malicious* any more than the farmer who starts up a combine harvester without checking it for mice is malicious. And two, the gorgeous tables showing ways in which attempts to do research on it can progress. I run a lot of investigation- and research-heavy games and this is just the sort of thing I find useful.

RYCT Matt Stevens: indeed, I think some pulps could be considered the technothrillers of their day, combining good solid adventure with some new technology taken from the headlines and pushed just a little bit further.

**Patrick Riley:** RYCTM honestly I think abandoned spaceships are among the most potentially dangerous (i.e. fun) places for a bunch of PCs to go, Virus or no Virus. (Kristine Kathryn Rusch’s *Diving Universe* series has quite a bit of this, though sadly for me the actual spacewreck diving tends to fade into the background in later books.)



Ejov Igor on Pexels

RYCT Joshua Kronengold, well, it’s very clear that some game designers (even well-liked ones) do their mechanics and probability design by “what feels right”, and there are some very

counter-intuitive things that happen when one starts getting clever with dice.

Can't comment on *Outgunned Superheroes* but someone, er, you, wrote interestingly about it elsewhere. I think the important consideration may be that, as with core *Outgunned*, it's set up for what I'd think of as long one-shot games rather than an ongoing campaign.

**Michael Cule:** I wonder how the religious hierarchies of the Son and the Daughter look, if their worshippers tend to move on later in life? Very young bishops and abbots, by anyone else's standards?

Obviously the Wyrms must be disguised as a parade float! "Yes, it's terribly realistic isn't it?"

RYCTM: *Traveller* was originally inspired primarily by science fiction of the pre affordable computer age,<sup>8</sup> particularly Anderson's *Flandry*, Tubb's *Dumarest* and Vance's *Demon Princes*. (The first edition just barely pre-dates *Star Wars*.) So I can see why "even less computery" might have been a consideration by the time of *TNE*, even as many other SF games (even *2300AD*) were jumping on the cyberpunk bandwagon.

I like to design a miracle technology (or whatever) and then *work through the implications* of it. So do many of the people I play with.

RYCT Myles Corcoran: no, the algorithm is supposed to give you things that will make you keep watching so that you see more advertisements, and it turns out annoyance is easier to generate than enthusiasm.

**Lisa Padol:** RYCTM on puzzle settings, I should say for clarity that while working out

puzzles built into the setting is *an* activity in this style of game, it's not the only thing PCs do, or even the primary thing. In *Irresponsible & Right* it felt more like a downtime activity: the NPC scientists (led by Nicholas Kemmer and later Nils Bohr, not magicians themselves) have these experimental results, they propose these other experiments, the PCs (who are magicians) think about it and decide what advice to give, then they go out to be heroic again.

RYCTM on mystery appreciation vs *Brindlewood Bay* appreciation: fair enough! Re different speeds of speech: sorry, that was a long time ago and I can't see an obvious prompt now; you probably said something that suggested to me that it might amuse.

I find that when I'm reading a scenario I'm planning to run I want to get the entire concept into my mind as smoothly as possible, and a timeline helps a *lot* with that. (Also, compiling one for my own scenarios has helped me spot errors in plotting: this has to happen *before* that, because that was a reaction to this, and each of them has other consequences.)

RYCT Dylan Capel: first edition *Twilight: 2000* has hesitation: you get half your coolness under fire in action rounds per 5-round combat turn, and the time you spend not acting is explicitly called "Hesitation" rather than just "you aren't as fast as the other guy" as say *Champions* might describe it. You can get round it a bit by declaring in advance that you're continuing to do one thing—e.g. if you're crawling along a ditch or giving covering fire you can act on every round, until something changes and you have to stop and think again. I suspect this may have happened because someone noticed that otherwise experienced soldiers would drive much faster than civilians...

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<sup>8</sup>Marc Miller had an interview about this in *White Dwarf* 23.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold RHCT Erica: Yes! I keep telling people to read *GURPS Mysteries*; it's one of the best game books I own. (And I hardly ever use the actual *GURPS* mechanical content.)

RYCT Timothy Collinson: one of my standard frameworks for an investigative game, as I may have said before, is the NPC who has a plot that must go off as planned... then I see how the early tendrils of that plot will bear clue-fruit that may become available to the PCs.

**Dylan Capel:** What I've seen of the new *Tunnels & Trolls* makes me wonder why Rebellion even bothered to purchase the licence if they had their own game ready to go.

RYCTM yes, depending on how cynical one wants to get one can model the transition from bandit who just takes, to bandit who provides genuine protection from other bandits, to tax-collecting state, as a continuum.

**Jim Eckman:** Sarah Newton's *Mindjammer* is explicit about having PCs embodied in starships. (But since it's basically *FATE*, though you can run it in other systems, it's not really trying to balance PCs' specific capabilities against each other.)

**Erica Frank:** A friend of mine once wrote a song inspired by 80s-90s X-Men: "Mutant Heaven Has Revolving Doors".

But I think there are at least two sorts of superhero enthusiast: "who would win in a fight between X and Y" (ideally from different publishers so that the question can never be resolved) and "how do you stay human when you can [power]". The former seems to me what classic *Champions* was aiming at; the latter is more in tune with current superhero TV and

the *Smallville* RPG, and it sounds somewhat like what you're talking about with *FATE* too.

If you are trying to do numbers, I have some sympathy with Greg Gorden's approach in *DC Heroes*: each +1 on a stat doubles its effective level, so even Superman only has strength 25.

Re gods: I've recently read an urban fantasy series, *Crossroads Queen*, in which it's clear that all the gods from all the mythologies may well exist, and demons and the actual Lucifer turn up in later books... but somehow the Christian God and angels are just never mentioned.

RYCT Pum and Campaign Cartographer: I've had some success with Inkscape, though it's nothing like as pretty as what CC can produce.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: in the 1964 film *Murder Ahoy!*, Miss Marple (played by Margaret Rutherford) turns out to be a champion fencer and has an extended duel with the villain. (I do not recommend this film to anybody.)

**Joshua Kronengold:** RYCT Clark Timmins, one of my watchwords when writing background material is that I'm not Wikipedia, and even if I'm writing about an imaginary world everything I put in there should have some kind of direct gaming application. So it's not "the Montagues and Capulets hate each other", it's "the Montagues and Capulets hire deniable strangers to do *this* kind of job".

RYCTM Ah yes, the curse of metaplot. I think the counterargument was that companies didn't want to fragment their player base: a *GURPS* adventure, for example, only sells to GMs who are running the specific sort of campaign it fits, versus a *Traveller* adventure which potentially sells to all *Traveller* GMs, So I can see GDW saying "we don't want to be supporting Classic Trav and New Trav at the same time". (And

presumably there wasn't another company to which they could licence out one of the eras, as they had effectively done with Digest Group Press earlier.)

The era approach has happened in the end of course: if I dive into a *Traveller* game now it could be *Interstellar Wars* or *Milieu 0* or classic (most likely) or civil war or New Era or even the post-reconstruction stuff. But I haven't heard of any campaigns that actually bridged eras. At the very least, I'd want the players to go into it knowing up front that they were potentially going to play through the collapse of the Imperium and the reemergence of civilisation.



photo by author

A boardgame that I know many people enjoy more in app than face to face: *Suburbia*, where each new tile's value can be affected by a whole long list of things and it's *really tempting* just to

say "I'll put it there and let the software do the counting".

I'm glad to know other people don't find *Brindlewood Bay* as incompatible with enjoying conventional mysteries as I did on reading it! And yes, one key problem<sup>9</sup> is that actually solving a mystery really comes down to the *players* working things out more than the *characters*; it's just not fun for anyone to say "you rolled a critical Deduce, you realise that the vicar must be lying because the train wasn't there until 12.03".

Yup, that's pretty much the approach to fixed events that I take: start of session, with player buy-in, something like "you're in prison, you remember how you got here (maybe a flashback), now how are you going to get out".

RYCT Michael Cule: as one character of mine put it, "the term 'necromancy' carries a whole load of cultural baggage with it. We prefer 'thanatological energy manipulation'."

RYCT Dylan Capel: I quite like the *GURPS* approach to defaults: most skills have a default from a stat (and for most of them it's easy to work out without even looking it up), many have a default from another skill, you *never* get to default from a default, and if the skill isn't in your background (e.g. you have never seen a car before) you don't get to do it at all. It's certainly not perfect but it gives convenient quick answers that don't feel wildly wrong. Of course there's always just the *Traveller* style "if you don't have the skill at all, -3, otherwise plus your skill level".

RYCT Lisa Padol: oh yes, one of the big gains of sound film was that people in the little rural cinemas could get a much better sound experience than the one guy with his piano or

<sup>9</sup>Which I think someone has already mentioned.

whatever could provide. In the big cities they already had orchestras, and the filmmakers and critics initially felt there wasn't much gain over that.

RYCT Patrick Riley: can a network of Magic Mouths be Turing-complete? At the very least they can implement logic gates. I suspect you'd need quite a large network since the spells can only be triggered once each.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos: having moved over several years from writing mostly Perl to about half and half Perl and Rust, the major improvement I've noted is that a whole class of debugging is no longer necessary: the one where I've referenced the wrong variable. Perl will do its best to make something work, and give a nonsense result that maybe causes an error several statements later or just gives me a wildly wrong output. In Rust it's a compile-time error, because that's a `char` not a `u32` and I don't get to use it as a number (or whatever). I still find Rust harder to write in the first place, but I'm getting actively impatient with untyped and loosely typed languages now; this variable holds an integer, and if anything tries to treat it as a non-integer, I want you to drop out because that is a mistake. (And with Rust I can have separate structs with similar raw contents, so that the compiler can check that *this* is a pre-scaling coordinate and *that* is a post-scaling coordinate, even though each one consists of a pair of floating-point numbers.)

**Jim Vassilakos:** RYCTM yes, I think it's a legitimate problem in classic *Traveller* that the Third Imperium can feel a bit bland as you go from world to world and it's another class B

starport.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the planet of the week can often make up for that.

**Timothy Collinson:** I keep meaning to get to a North Star! One of these days. (But then I start to feel anxious about writing something, which I really shouldn't after (mumble) years GMing...)

RYCTM yes, *Traveller: 1248* occupies an odd position in my mind, perhaps because I didn't hear about its existence until many years after it had happened. (And of course it wasn't "by GDW" at that point.)

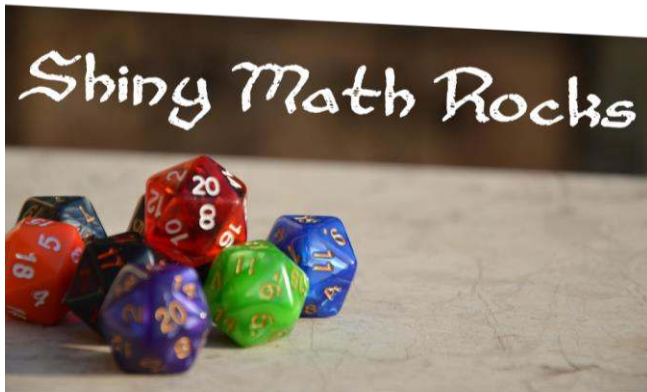


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<sup>10</sup>I haven't run "straight" *Traveller* for a while, but I'm tempted to play that up: every starport has the same Space McDonalds and Space Hilton and Space Halfords, so

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if you want to see anything different you have to cross the Line.



## SMR Issue #9 for E&A #13, July 2026

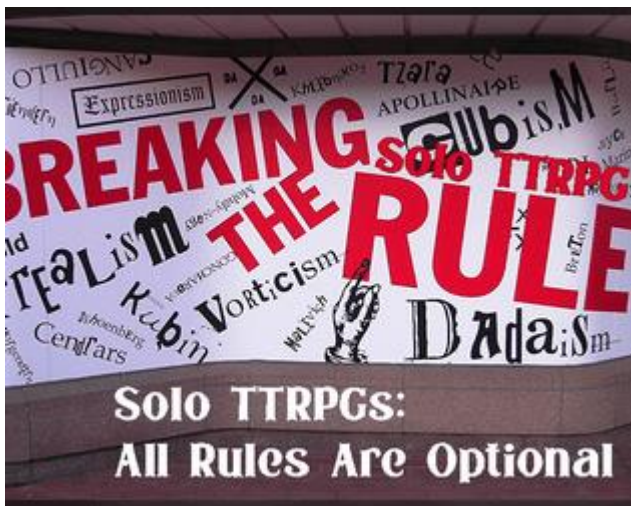
[Erica L Frank](#) (call me Elf); [Eris Lord Freedom@itch.io](mailto:Eris.Lord.Freedom@itch.io)

### A Handful of Game Jams

I got caught up in a few game jams recently. (I have a lot of stuff going on in my personal life, so of course I'm looking for "project with deadline" things to distract me.)

For the second "[TTRPG Character Creation Challenge Jam](#)," with a goal of 31 characters in 31 days, I submitted [Golden Murder Mavens](#) (the 4 Golden Girls as characters for Brindlewood), [Untamed FAE](#) (beta'd by Lisa Padol) (13-ish characters from *The Untamed* for Fate Accelerated: 7 complete & 6 partial), and [Kith of Glitch](#) (22 characters from Glitch as kith for Wanderhome). I gather other people tended to write up original characters.

For "[Manifesto Jam 2026](#)," which is focused on video games<sup>1</sup>, I wrote [All Rules Are Optional](#) about solo TTRPGs. ~3500 words, some of which are about safety tools in solo ttrpgs. I considered including the whole thing here and decided that'd be redundant.



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There's some amazing stuff in the collection:

- [NO-ONE IS GOING TO BUY YOUR GAME](#): "Most advice about making games is actually about selling games"
- [Obscurity is a curation problem](#): "Serious market researchers were analyzing the [tweet] like it was *Finnegans Wake*. They were asking each other who the next bigolas dickolas could be."
- [secret horses manifesto](#): "i wish generative images, audio, video (and sure, text) were seen as media with creative value!!"

There are over 300 entries, and some are amazing.

For the "[You Cannot Play This TTRPG Jam](#)," I made [Principia Discordia the TTRPG: Quick Start Guide](#). It may not be random enough. However, I can promise it is not playable as a TTRPG, and that qualifies it for the jam. I'm not sharing the "cover" image here, as it hurts my eyes. You're welcome.

Coming up soon is the [Second TTRPG Manifesto Jam](#). (I didn't know about it, or I probably would've waited to post All Rules Are Optional.) It runs June 14 to July 15, so, there's time for everyone to write up their ~~rant~~ entirely correct opinions that all sensible people would agree with if they only had thought if it themselves.

Upcoming/ongoing TTRPG-related jams are: [1100 Words TTRPG Kitchen 2026](#): Create a complete TTRPG using 1100 words or less, and at least 2 of the 4 secret ingredients (which won't be posted until it starts). July 4<sup>th</sup> through July 19

[TTRPG Crossover Jam 2026](#): Crossover adventures between TTRPGs, e.g. B/X D&D adventure for

<sup>1</sup> There was a question about TTRPG manifestos. Answer was basically "this is for rants. You have rant? Plz post rant."

Mothership, Mausritter adventure for Mörk Borg, etc. March 15 – June 29; not much more time on this one.

**Shell TTRPG Jam:** Create content for [Shell](#), a “souls-like solo TTRPG” strongly inspired by Hollow Knight and Silksong. It’s not free; it was in the Typhoon bundle a little while ago. System based on/derived from the game [Rune](#), also focused on soulslike video games. I don’t play soulslikes and have seen just enough of HN and SS to know I’d be terrible at them.

**Eternal TTRPG Jam:** There’s one of these every month. June’s has a theme of “Night Shift,” and an optional challenge of “Single Room.” July’s won’t be posted until probably the 23<sup>rd</sup>; that’s usually when next month’s jam goes up. They have a Discord for people looking for collaborators and other help.

**“Make 5” TTRPG Jam:** Create five short TTRPGs linked together in some way. (Theme, mechanics, whatever.) May 1 – July 5. Not much time left on this one either. I’m pondering if I can make some bookmark games for it.

## Current Bundles

Updating y’all on current game bundles I’ve found interesting. There are other bundles, including a lot of fiction; I don’t generally buy those.

### [Romani Mutual Aid: The Sky & Earth Bundle](#)

79 items, \$5 minimum donation

Info about the charity at [theskyandearthknow.com/](https://theskyandearthknow.com/) and their Instagram. (I don’t have insta; I have trouble collecting links from there.) Interesting games include:

### [The Goat Must Burn](#) by The Falling Dream

*a print-and-play game about a giant straw goat*



1-page game, closer to a board game than TTRPG. I’m bringing this up to Tumblr later this year.

### [Blood and Foam](#) by Volvodja Press

*A solo game about mermaids choosing their fates*



17 pages; CC-BY-SA 4.0.

This has guided writing prompts using a deck of cards. A Little Mermaid-esque game: You are the youngest of 7 sisters. You will need to trade something to the sea witch for legs. (“Voice” is not an option.)

### [The Power of Pride Bundle 2026 – \\$10 PWYC Edition](#)

(The full [\\$60 version](#) is also available.)

395 items (\$60 version also has a set of Pride wallpapers), \$10 minimum donation, proceeds are split by the creators.



This is mostly video games with a few TTRPGs (and other items; there are a few soundtracks in the mix). There’s also fiction.



**[Be Not Afraid](#)** by Ronove: *a fast-paced blaze through Hell...*

I haven’t read this one, but I’ve read another book by this author

(from a previous bundle) and enjoyed it very much.



[Biotrophication](#) - [Darling Demon Games](#): A zine-game of alien horror and weird romance for two players.

New to this bundle. Looks fascinating. I have no idea if I could find anyone to play it with.

★ [My Lone Summer - Solo/Duet TTRPG Bundle](#) ★  
(Yes, with stars in the bundle name.) 28 items, \$10.

May not be worth it unless you love collecting solo and 2-player ttrpgs. It does have [Tangled Blessings](#), which I've mentioned before, which has some renown and is almost \$20 on its own. [Kassandra King: Devil's Dice](#) also looks interesting. [WHO WAITS WITHIN](#) wins the prize for "most striking cover art." (Not including it here. You're welcome. Don't worry; you can't miss it.)

There are a swarm of Pride Month book bundles. I continue to be really annoyed at the payment processors that ([illegally](#)) refuse to process payments for works they consider "adult" – except, of course, when those works come from mainstream publishers. (VISA is not blocking Amazon from taking payments for 50 Shades of Grey.) I had the "[co-op bundles with goals](#)" page bookmarked and used to check it regularly to see the new megabundles.

Megabundles and queer bundles no longer show up on that page, because having a single "mature" item in the bundle will prevent it from being listed. And of course, a lot of queer content is tagged "adult" even if it's no more explicit than non-adult het content.

Away from itch. HumbleBundle has "Roll Big or Go Home 2," 54 books for \$40, with a \$1200+ value. I believe it runs until the 25<sup>th</sup> of June. \$5 gets a 9-item bundle.

What I'm interested in: Shift, Fabula Ultima, Bluebeard's Bride, maybe Star Trek Adventures.

...Not that I think I'd ever play any of those.



I will probably waffle for a couple more days and then buy it. I will probably not buy their Free League RPG collection, which also sounds interesting, but again, I'm less likely to play. The RBGH2 collection includes several other games I hear talked about, that I'd like to read even if I won't play them.

## Solo Play: Cage of Sand, part 6

Game link: <https://lucielleaes.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

**3 minor encounters:** Her Grace, Lady Linyeve, Vamirelion

**2 major encounters;** Sir Godfrey, Stregori Zrin

*Inciting Incident: Opening of the crafts pavilion*

**First two deaths:** Elenwen Crow; Remi Longfoot - found at the games booth

**Second two deaths:** Her Grace Lady Maritha; Sir Godfrey - found on the rocks in the water, dismembered before being thrown off a cliff

**Final two deaths:**

Six of Wands (Lady Linyive), Six of Cups (young Lady Phoebe)

Card: Justice (more gruesome ritualistic deaths. Sigh.)

After seeing Her Grace's body, Anni went looking for her daughter. She didn't see her around in the crowds, and headed back to the pavilion to see if she'd been left with an attendant there. She didn't see her near the Duchess's booth (and she couldn't bring herself to speak to the servants there, to tell them about Her Grace. The guards will be along soon enough, she supposes, and they'll explain better than she could.

She can hear an echo of the Duchess's voice saying "go find her," although she surely wouldn't be trusted to find Lady Phoebe on her own. Still, she looks around the tables and booths, and spies a stack of boxes and crates, the kind a child might like to climb on and hide in.

She thinks she spies a flash of blue between the boxes, the color of Lady Phoebe's dress... It is indeed her dress, or part of it. One sleeve... and one arm. Anni pushes the boxes aside to find more of Lady Phoebe's body, and Lady Linyive's body as well, also cut up, with the pieces mixed together in a couple of boxes.

Anni faints.

*Act 4: Revelations*

**Reflect on the previous cards – does anything change?**

(Option to draw a new card. I decline.)

Again, the pavilion erupts into chaos, and Anni is caught up in it. Paranoia and jealousy and fear, all of which quickly turn violent.

Remaining characters: Bari Bristlegrog, Anton Kumada, Vamirelion, Stregori Zrin

**The last thing Anni sees is [5 of wands]:** Arguments throughout the pavilion, with a sinister light casting strange shadows through the dark-and-light embroidery in the cloth roof. Someone from the shadows raising a huge blade and cutting off Bari Bristlegrog's head – just before something hits her from behind and she falls.

**The first thing the rest of the world perceives [Temperance]:** A need to reclaim order and justice; a wave of confusion and shame falls over them, and they quietly clean up the bodies and the mayhem.

**Select one or more characters, and answer some questions:**

**Who or what is responsible for the murders?**

A group of people, angry at being kept from competing in the festival, and sometimes with other longstanding grudges, have decided to take out several high-ranking people, and a handful of "nobodies" they are using as confusion to cover their tracks. The axe-man among them is a butcher who was enraged that his "art" was not considered fit for the contest.

Anton Kumala, the one character who hasn't made an appearance yet, is among them: he was convinced to bring in supplies and other resources in exchange for the opportunity of great profit from his next shipment. He did not expect to be caught up in the web of deaths himself.

**What is the true nature of the disaster at the end of the time loop?**

The pavilion has been arranged as a giant magical array - the decorated tarps and cloths, the pattern of support poles, the lines traced between them and around the booths, are all designed to nudge people into violence.

Once there are enough deaths nearby, and blood to power the circle, it activates, and everyone inside is driven into a frenzy. It doesn't quite have the ability to make everyone violent (hence Anni's victimhood), but there's enough to guarantee quite a lot of deaths.

*End of Loop 2.*

Shuffle character cards, add 1 to the tally sheet (we're at 2), and return to Act 1

This will include: "For each tally mark, describe one unremarkable element of their surroundings or morning activities which seems either strangely repetitive or strangely out of place"

I'm breaking here rather than going through the start of Loop 3 in the same issue.

In 6 issues of SMR, I've gotten through 2 time loops. Huh. I strongly suspect the author did not expect this much time or complexity from a single play-through.

I'm caught between "take your time; let the story unfold slowly; go ahead and do a dozen loops if that's what it takes" and "dammit wrap it up 'cos I want to use the tarot deck for other games."

(I have other tarot decks. Other gaming tarot decks, even. I will try other games with those.)

## IgTheme: Interesting Race/Species

*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?*

I loved so many of the "GURPS Aliens" species, and never got to see any of them in play. (I've never seen a GURPS sci-fi game; it's always been "we all hate D&D but we like all the game patterns we learned from D&D, so this is a fantasy world with um elves and orcs and probably dragons but you're not meeting any dragons.")

Also loved many of the *Midnight at the Well of Souls* species, enough to pick up the boxed TTRPG when I found it.

...It's basically unplayable; 80s shovelware before the term existed. STR-DEX-CON-INT-WILL at 4d6 each, with Resistance (to psi/magic), Fatigue, and Endurance calculated from those. I remember running into missing info – like, a mention of a type of poison and "see [chart] in [other section]" which didn't exist.

I wanted to use it as a reference guide and rewrite all the alien species in GURPS. I suppose I still could, or I could write them up for Fate, although I'd probably need to re-read the books first. I'm told Chalker's politics and... life philosophies (probably shouldn't call them "kinks") are more likely to be apparent on re-reading today.

I miss Star Frontiers. I liked drasilites and vrusk; did not care for yazirians. The fact that I remember their names and rough descriptions is a statement of their impact on me – I last played Star Frontiers in middle school, and never owned a copy.

## Comments on E&A #12

### Brazilian Interactive Fiction, Pt 2 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira Zucolotto

I have poked at visual novels more than playing them. They seem like they'd be exactly my kind of game/story, but I keep clashing with the interface.

They're one of those "this is a very SIMPLE video game so OF COURSE we don't need to provide a tutorial or instructions. Everyone knows how these work. It's obvious what you can click on, how you go back (and when you can't), how you save the game, how you restart next time."

(Everyone does not know, and it is not obvious. More than once, I have deleted my progress because I failed to figure out which little glyph meant "save" and which meant "exit without saving.")

I do intend to keep trying because there are some that sound like much fun and/or amazing stories. And I'd like to learn to write them.

### Cowman Baloney Face #8 – Matt Stevens

RYCTM: While you could have a 4-quadrant split with PRE and COM, in reality... both were at the default 10 most of the time. Unless someone is pushing for "my character is basically a deity incarnate" or "my character is a swamp monster," they were almost always left at the default, with the occasional drop to 8 in one or the other to squeeze out a couple of extra points. They're stats where the super-heroic nature of the game clashes with the ordinary human interpretations: A 5 COM/15 PRE should be a strikingly ugly person who somehow commands the attention of a room, but... PRE is cheap (and PRE defense cheaper); if you want to command the attention of supers, it needs to be 23 or higher.

Maybe it was different in the Fantasy Heroes games, or modern espionage games.

### Reddened Stars #11 – John Redden

RYCTM: I am enjoying bits of GMing right now but I'm sure it won't last; I am planning to write up both adventure modules and world settings. (I figured I should actually run some Brindlewood before I start making adventures for it.)

Both my daughters' main computers are Linux. (Mint MATE, I believe, although one may be using PopOS for one of her laptops.) I am, unfortunately, a power user of Adobe Acrobat and Microsoft Word. There are substitutions but it'd take substantial time to learn LibreOffice as well as I know Word (if it even has all the features), and there is just nothing that's the equivalent of Acrobat. Most PDF editor programs don't even have bookmarks on their feature lists; I can't tell if they support editing them.

That said, when Win10 support finally completely dies next year, I'm looking at shifting my main computer to Linux and having a side laptop for the specific production work that takes Word or Acrobat.

I don't know what meta-structure definitions are, but I have heard that Access is weak/limited in multiple areas. Its advantages for me are:

- Strong GUI; I don't have to speak code/script in order to set up queries
  - It meshes nicely with Excel, for obvious reasons
  - All its tables are nicely bundled into the database; I don't have to deal with them being stored (or edited) elsewhere.
  - I had a bit of training in it (err, 30-ish years ago), enough that at least the interface is familiar
- Cons of Access include:
- Very few online tutorials or advice articles (Compared to SQL, MySQL, etc.)
  - Mentioning it makes database people scrunch up their nose and give me that weird little squint that means "really?"
  - I have Access 2021 and they've stopped selling it as a stand-alone program; new versions are only available in the subscription package that I don't want
  - Accessing links is more troublesome than using an Excel sheet. (This may be true for any database.)
  - Its "time" field is automatically tied to a date; there is no "number of hours/minutes" option separate from a date. Makes it hard to add times, and if you get over 24 hours, it just adds one to the date (that may be invisible). (There are workarounds – even I can figure out workarounds – but it'd be nice to have a setup that just worked with hh:mm:ss.)

The cons may look like they outweigh the pros, but "easy-to-use GUI" is a very strong feature. And while I'm realizing some of the features I want are more complicated than I thought (importing new bundles regularly runs into some hassles), I don't think anything I want is going to run into very tricky requirements.

### In the Hall of Stone – Patrick Brady

I had (have, probably) a boxed set of EPT; I loved it because it had language things. (I did not learn the script; at the time, the whole notion of "initial and ending letters are different" was baffling to me.) I couldn't quite wrap my head around how play actually worked, but I liked how unique the worldbuilding was.

I have never seen it played, and I'm not surprised it's more obscure now than it was. There are now

zillions of other interesting-unique games – and Barker's politics have become [publicly known](#).

I wouldn't let that stop me from playing it, any more than I'd avoid playing Call of Cthulhu, but I'd probably want to put some serious thought into how his ideologies shaped the worldbuilding and what changes I'd want made to that.

### Twisting the Rope #12 – Myles Corcoran

Part of my interest in a bundles database is being able to add the new bundle to the list, push a couple of buttons, and announce to the world, "65% of the new bundle has not been any previous megabundles!" Or, "2/3 of this small bundle has been in prior bundles, but the ones that haven't include [title] and [title] which may be worth the cost on their own."

Regarding "organizing purchases" – I have a folder for itch.io content and I make a folder for each bundle within that. (Including the 3-so-far non-itch bundles; I can remember that "bundles go with the itch stuff.") All files for games go in the bundle folder; often there's a separate "Video games" folder for the video games. (My early bundles used a different system and I need to restructure them someday.)

Games with 4+ documents get their own subfolder. 1, 2, or 3 documents go in the main bundle folder, named so they stack together – if something is named "map.png" it gets renamed to "*game title* map.png." I use Windows search or, more often, [Agent Ransack](#) to find individual games if I can't remember what folder they're in.

I try to download all the TTRPG content within a couple days of getting the bundle, because I've had cases where a game disappeared before I downloaded it.

The folder-per-bundle thing is getting unwieldy as my bundles approach 100. But I haven't been able to think of a better arrangement.

### Denizens of the Library #11 – Brian Rogers

RYCTM: My early D&D days were heavy on exploration and problem-solving, too. But a lot of what I see these days is adventure-conquest: You *must* have dungeons. You *must* have Big Bad Evil monsters to slay. You *must* have hordes of goblins/orcs/ugly-vicious-bipedal-whatevers to serve as canon fodder for the BBEs and whose sentience is limited to "comic relief" level. These are so ubiquitous that you wind up with the creators of a Ghibli-inspired (!!!) game [saying](#),<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Link to Reddit discussion; original video is gone. It's probably from one of their podcasts but I have no idea which.

*"As soon as you humanize the faceless monster, now, you got a huge problem. It ceases to become fantasy adventure. Keep monsters monstrous 'cause you need to have things to kill. If you keep it cinematic and cartoony, you'll have a good time killing monsters. If you start getting into simulation, where - 'what is the Howler culture? What is the nature of intelligence? And like, do they have a soul?' And like, you're done playing fantasy game and now you're into the moral nature of our world and existential stuff."*

We have a generation of gamers who grew up with video games before they discovered TTRPGs, and "fantasy adventure game" meant "kill the monsters and rescue the helpless princess" before it meant "explore the lands beyond human control, which host both civilizations and dangers beyond your understanding."

We have a lot of gamers who literally cannot imagine how a whole session without combat would work. We have game designers who can't imagine how - or why - anyone would play a fantasy adventure game where you don't kill "monsters" (any species not allowed as a player character), take their loot, and go looking for bigger monsters to kill.

No wonder we have an entire faction of players who insist that game system doesn't matter because they all do the same things. They have no awareness that anyone plays RPGs, much less high-magic fantasy RPGs, with a focus that's not "visit the dangerous place; kill the dangerous residents; save any refugees; take the treasure; repeat."

As far as I can sort out, the reasons they want to play D&D instead of video games are

- More flexible character creation - no video game allows the full customization that you can do with pen & paper;
- You get to roll the dice yourself - and you can argue about the results;
- GM gets to create monster-dangers customized to the group's abilities and interests.

Re: **The (Grandchild of the) Puppeteer:** She grew up hearing tales of her grandfather's heroism, most of which she thought were just made-up stories to pass time while they worked the pet store together. When her grandfather passed away, she inherited most of his possessions, and finally went to clean out the basement, which he'd always forbidden her to explore.

She finds the pipe organ, in horrible disrepair, and starts to clean it. One of the thinner pipes breaks off; and as she tries to fit it back into place, it cracks all the way down - and then curls into itself, with the

remaining dents and cracks in its surface lining up into a flute shape.

The magic of the pipe organ is now imbued in this one pipe; her first few notes have her covered in a glowing light as the long-dormant magic surrounds and fills her.

She gains pied-piper-esque powers to use the music to control animals and children (and anyone below a certain level of conscious thought and self control). She remembers her grandfather's favorite superhero, "the Puppeteer," and takes that name for herself, along with his tuxedo, because she loved the story of how he danced at his wedding and gave up all his adventures to be a family man.

She's going to take his suit and his pipe and go have the adventures he walked away from.

### **Age of Menace #249 - Brian Christopher Misiaszek**

RYCTM: I may have miss-explained the result of the Brindlewood game. The player characters didn't frame anyone; they discovered that the murder victim had been framed (and imprisoned) for a murder she didn't commit, and when she had found proof of that, she was killed to keep the secret hidden. The detectives discovered the truth and were able to reveal both her murderer, the person she didn't murder, and ties to a long-running evil conspiracy.

(Discovering all this involved a 70-ish year old woman dancing in a bikini at a Buddhist retreat's quiet meditation pool. The Lans were scandalized.)

### **Quasipseudoludognostication #12 - Patrick Riley**

RYCTM: I can understand published adventures that give a framework and a few details and let the GM fill in the rest; that's one of the ways you can customize it to your world. For an ongoing campaign, it's nice to be able to say "this takes place about two days' travel from where you left off, and [from the module] you've been hired as guards while the local viscount's manor is being renovated. The town is unsettled because [module: a rival lord's faction] your old not-friends the Order of the Crystal Rose are already here, stirring up trouble and accusing anyone who doesn't attend their temple of practicing dark sorcery."

And Brindlewood mysteries don't need much; with very little nudging, the players will fill in a ridiculous amount of details and theories on their own.

I'd just like a bit more than "name, 3 descriptive words, 1-2 sentence quote" to work from. Especially

since, if it's not already written, I'm going to have to take notes as more details come up.

### An Unlooked For Zine #11 – Lisa Padol

RYCTM: Cage of Sand is indeed easier to get started now that I'm packing the cards away in little post-its that indicate what each stack is. I have one for setup (10 cards, I think, including the two "stage 4" cards); the characters deck (10 cards; sometimes split between used-this-stage and not); discard pile; unused remainder of deck.

Claiming bundle games – I think this is the script: <https://greasyfork.org/en/scripts/446312-itch-io-automated-add-bundle-to-library> It requires going to the "download" page and letting the script run for a while, for the bigger bundles.

For the spreadsheet – that's the reduced version; the ones I had on Google docs also had the tools for solo TTRPGs (cards, dice, block tower, tokens, etc.), page count of the PDFs, and platforms for the video games. It got to be too much to keep up with, but I do want all that info in the database.

### Going to be Ad-Libbed #10 – Avram Grumer

I'd been debating whether to pick up the new *Umdaar*. On the one hand, I was a bit disappointed because I like Fate Accelerated and there's so little content for it, and this feels like they're removing one of its settings. (I know nothing prevents people from playing the original version, but... it's not likely people will play an older, simpler version instead of the more expanded setting.) Glad to hear they're adding innovative player-worldbuilding features.

### Accidental Recall #11 – Joshua Kronengold

Re: Database in Excel – I've looked into it and decided it wasn't quite enough. I can't quite remember why or how I decided that, but I remember running into features that I want that Excel won't do. (Reports, maybe? Some kinds of filtering?)

For the name changes (Game, URL, creator) (description, sometimes): Whatever the most current version is, is correct; old version should be updated. I'm not keeping track of when something changed. (I tried that; it's a nightmare. I decided that's metadata I don't need.) So I just need an easy way to update the old data when an item's info changes. Which means I need a way to flag "hey, you already have a game by this creator with a similar title; is it the same game?" or, "you have this title by a different creator; is it the same game?" or, "you have this title & creator but the description is different; was it updated?"

Re: Same name – I have three games named "Memoria" by different creators, two named "Fresh Blood," and two named "Heist Heist Baby." So I need ways to check "is this a new creator-name for the old game, or just an entirely different game that shares the same title?"

I don't mind if a lot of the checking has to be done manually. I'd like to find a better way to look for them than "sort Excel by title, alphabetical; scroll through list of 18,000 items looking for duplicates."

I should be able to differentiate by Title + Creator; that combo should always be unique. (And for now, I have an "order" field that basically functions as a primary key.)

GM Required/GM Optional – These do seem exclusive, as in, both can't be marked "yes." The problem is, I can't have just one of them. There are standard GM-required games, GM optional games like BOB – and there are no-GM games. (Several 2- and 3-player games do not have a GM, not even in the optional-tradeoff sense of BOB games.) So you can't have "GM Required: Yes; GM Optional: Yes" – but you can have

- "GM Req: Yes; GM Opt: No" (most ttrpgs),
- "GM Req: No; GM Opt: Yes" (BOB games)
- "GM Req: No; GM Opt: No" ([Star Baker](#) is one example) (I went looking for one that's free)

I don't know which to use for solo games. It might vary by game, because some are "can be solo" and those would likely be GM optional; some are closer to "you are the GM as well as all the characters."

I have (or have access to) Slay the Princess; my daughter has it on Steam, and we have family sharing.

### Last Minute Stuff

[Neopets TTRPG Drama Recap](#) – 15 minute video.

[Playtest Material Magazine](#) – "a not-for-profit critical journal dedicated to roleplaying games. We publish essays, reviews, interviews, and experimental writing on all aspects of tabletop roleplaying."

It's just getting started and is looking for all kinds of volunteers & writers. [Bluesky](#); [Instagram](#). There's also a Discord for volunteers.

## Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #13

by Jim Eckman,  
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### IRL

Club art show finished. Working on Wanderer. Watching Zhan Zhao Adventures – Soong dynasty martial arts detective series. I recognize the Emperor's name from my art books, great artist, lousy emperor.

### 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.

I started work on The Player's Guide, breaking it up into smaller chunks. While doing this I found several suspicious bits that may have been the reason that earlier versions of Open Office crashed while reading this file. Hopefully creating smaller files will make it much easier to maintain in the future as well.

One major change is the current rules set jumps immediately into the complex character generation system, which for a system that's not widely known, makes it a non-starter for anyone just glancing at the rules seeing if its something they would play.

The new book would start out with an introduction to a Zack archaeologist character who is expert in Forerunner civilizations one through eight and has experienced many rough digs in his career. The character knows more about any of these subjects that the player does is not surprising, this is a science fiction game. Then there would be examples of simple tasks carried it out based on their skills saving throws or surprise rolls made based on their physical characteristics and tasks carried out in the long term based on various skills, equipment and discovered artifacts.

On the other hand maybe I should concentrate on the robots.

### Worldbuilding

Free our enslaved machine brains! Inspired by the Murderbot series by Martha Wells and Automatic Noodle by Annalee Newitz. Older gaming systems probably won't work well for these, missing capabilities like: drone warfare, electronic warfare, hacking, etc. The original Traveller computer system was a bad joke to say the least. Robots & Rebels?

### Reactions to Issue #12

**Cowman Baloney Face #8 by Matt Stevens** - Re: Leviathan, Traveller law levels. Interesting. I seem to recollect that the original Traveller law levels were based on what kind of weapons you could

carry and that was pretty much it. I find most of the Traveller world data shows the less useful info first and it seem rather scattershot. One reason I had started working on something different many years ago. LOL Design your own gods.

**Fire Drake's Hoard #10 by Roger Bell West** *RYCT Elf, even more I think a lot of players don't know (and don't think to find out)..* In general I'm a bit lazy, if there is a game system that will accomplish what I need it to do then I will use it with a few house rules. This has not been the case with most SF games I've run into, Many of the older game systems, Space Opera, Traveller, GURPS, had serious play issues that make it difficult to generate the type of environment I'm trying to create. I've been out of circulation long enough that I may find a system I can use with minor tweaking. Also if I had enough players asking for Traveller, etc. I'd bite the bullet and use it.

**Age of Menace #249 by Brian Christopher Misiaszek** – The whole Twsha article is awesome, a great example of a well crafted mini-campaign. Also loved Pulp Cthulhu.

**Quasipseudoludognostication #12 by Patrick Riley** – Re: XP to GP Its silly, I agree, we dropped that pretty early on.

**An Unlooked For Zine #11 by Lisa Padol** – Re: Maiden Holmes, I got a bit mixed up here. I'm watching a series on Viki called Maiden Holmes, historical Chinese drama.

**Convention: North Star 9 by Timothy Collinson** – Nice report, glad to see that SFRPG isn't just Traveller. Hopefully you will find some interesting materials in Wanderer.

**Everyone else** – RAEBNC

Next issue

Hopefully some prototype thoughts on bot warfare.

# ATLANTIS FOR NOW #1

June 20, 2026, for Ever & Anon #13

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

Secondary Game System Keywords: Original D&D, Advanced D&D (1e), Lamentations of the Flame Princess

## From the Edge of the Deep Green Sea

After fifty issues of Bugbears & Ballyhoo, I decided that it is time to retire that zine title. Fifty is a decent run (thirty-nine issues in *Alarums & Excursions* and eleven in E&A). Plus, starting a new zine title with the thirteenth issue of this apa appeals to folkloric superstition, whether boon or bane. But you are probably wondering less about retiring the old title & more about what's with the new one. Well, I will tell you. First, Atlantis vibes with RPGs & fantasy. More importantly for me, the title is a tribute to my daughter Emma. When she was in elementary school, Ems & her best friend liked to play imaginary games while swimming. Usually, Emma & Isis would pretend to be mermaids or fairies. Playing in & around the pool, Atlantean themes came to the fore. One day, I heard Emmie ask Isis, "What should we call this game?" Isis replied, "Atlantis for now," as in temporarily, until they came up with a better name. Emma being autistic took Isis literally & understood her meaning as "Atlantis for Now." Ever afterward, when Emma wanted to play their favorite poolside game, she would suggest to lcy, "Let's play Atlantis for Now!" Celeste & I don't think that Isis ever told Emma.

Otherwise, The Zine Remains the Same, containing:

- A Further Examination of Arduin's Portal to Adventure
- Appetite for Discussion: Comments on E&A #12

## A FURTHER EXAMINATION OF 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 (#49–50; E&A #11–12) surveyed the box set, described the physical characteristics of the first

volume of *Barrows & Borderlands (Men & Mutants)*, & described the gaming content of *Men & Magic*. Now we move on to *Volume 2: Psychics & Sorcerers (P&S)*.

The physical characteristics of P&S are effectively identical to *Men & Mutants*, except that Tapp selected different art pieces for the book & page the count is 51, inclusive of the Open Gaming License. All illustrations are in black & white. The front cover piece is the work of Michio Okamura; Grimoire Games used this drawing on page 146 of *The Compleat Arduin, Book One: The Rules* (1993). Interior art is by Lavieille (probably the nineteenth-century French engraver Adrien Lavieille), Wallace Smith, & others. The back inside cover illustration is also Michio, dating to 1992 & featuring in *The Compleat Arduin* as well. Most pieces are not individually credited. The contents of Vol. 2 are as follows.

- Spell Craft, p. 6
- Counterspell, p. 7
- Roll to Cast, p. 8
- Critical Miscast, p. 10
- Spell Tables, p. 15
- Explanation of Spells, p. 18
- Item Identification, p. 37
- Psionics, p. 40
- Black Necromantic Rituals, p. 46
- Open Gaming License, p. 50

**Spell Craft.** Much of this section will feel familiar to those who know the OSR, with minor variations. Casters, for instance, must be able to speak & have one (not two) hands free to cast spells. Spell Craft also covers the format of spell descriptions, range, duration, hit dice affected, magical research, & creation of magic items. Magical research is like that of Original D&D or *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*; one must have access to a study/laboratory worth 1,000 silver pieces (sp), & invest one week of time & 1,000 sp per spell level. The researcher must roll under their prime requisite on 1d20 to succeed.

B&B does not assign a minimum experience level to create magic items, which I like, & the enterprise is subject to referee discretion as to time, money, & any special components required. All potions & some magic items require a Starshard for manufacture.

**Counterspells & Magic Duels.** This is my favorite section of rules so far because it captures a sense of the “duel arcane” of fantasy literature. Casters of the same class (magic-user vs. magic-user or cleric vs. cleric) may declare a counterspell to disrupt or delay another caster’s spell. The counterspeller cannot have already cast a spell in the same round that they want to counterspell. Once a valid counterspell is declared, the caster level of the casters is cross-referenced on the Counterspell Chart. This yields a number, C, or R result. A number is the score that the counterspeller must meet or exceed on 2d6 to start the duel. Failure means the counterspell is ineffective, on the other hand. Once an arcane duel is underway, the spellcasters are locked into the struggle & cannot

take any other actions. The following combat round, the original spellcaster must consult the Counterspell Chart for the roll needed to prevent the counterspell. The duel continues in this way until one of the casters fails their roll. “C” results on the chart mean automatic success on the counterspell. “R” indicates that the counterspeller reflects the spell onto another target of their choice.

**Roll to Cast.** In B&B, using magic is dangerous. When a magic-user casts a spell, the referee consults the Spell Complexity Table, cross-referencing the magic-user’s caster level with the spell level. The caster rolls 2d6. If the score may indicate immediate effect, delay of 1–6 rounds, or a miscast. If a miscast is indicated, the magic-user must save versus Sorcery or roll 1d100 on the Critical Miscast Table, which has some very nasty results! It looks like these rules do not apply to clerics, although the rules do not explicitly preclude the idea.

**Magic-user & Cleric Spells.** The spell assortment for both classes resembles the many varieties of D&D. Most descriptions are pithy, comprising as few two lines of text, average four lines, & max out at 20 lines or so. On my first read of this volume, I observed some contradictions & unhelpful omissions, although I cannot recall them just now. The magic-user spells are organized under 12 levels, whereas cleric spells have only seven levels.

**Item Identification.** B&B does not have a Identify spell to figure out what magic items, let along exotic technology, does. B&B uses flowcharts instead. A character must have a study or laboratory worth 1,000 sp in which to examine magic items or advanced technology. For each turn (10 minutes) invested in examining the item, the researcher rolls 1d10 on one of three charts according to the general type of item: (A) for magic items & less complicated advanced technology, (B) advanced technology, & (C) artifacts or relics.

The result of the 1d10 roll moves the researcher to one of eight types of tiles in the flowchart. If the result takes a character back to the Start tile or to a blank one, nothing happens & the researcher is free to take another turn to roll again. Landing on the Finish tile indicates successful identification of the item’s function(s). Tiles marked I–III will reveal how well the item functions (broken to pristine), information about the creator, or the item’s purpose, history, & notable users. Failure tiles mean nothing is learned & the researcher must wait a week before trying again. Skull tiles indicate a severe mishap & the researcher must save vs. Devices or perish in the study/lab.

**Psionics.** In Firnum, psionically gifted characters are called psychics. Such may be trained per the Psychic class or be a Wild Psion.

All characters get a Psychic Strength score by rolling 1d100 with bonuses for Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma above 15. Psychic Strength functions as hit points for psychic duels. Psychic Strength must be above 100 to choose the Psychic class. Members of the Psychic class have an investment level of 0 (out of 6) in all psychic disciplines & begin play at first level with four points to make further investment in psychic disciplines. There are 12 disciplines: telekinesis, telepathy, object/aura reading, mental assault, remote viewing, precognition, cell adjustment, dream travel, spirit channeling, claircognizance, pyrokinesis, & living weaponry.

Level 1 Wild Psions must roll under their Psychic Strength—100 on percentile dice to start with a psychic discipline at investment level 1. A roll of 95 percent or higher can cause the loss of Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma.

Use of psychic disciplines requires a roll-under investment level on 1d6 & precludes movement during the activation round. Once activated, the psychic can move or attack while maintaining concentration.

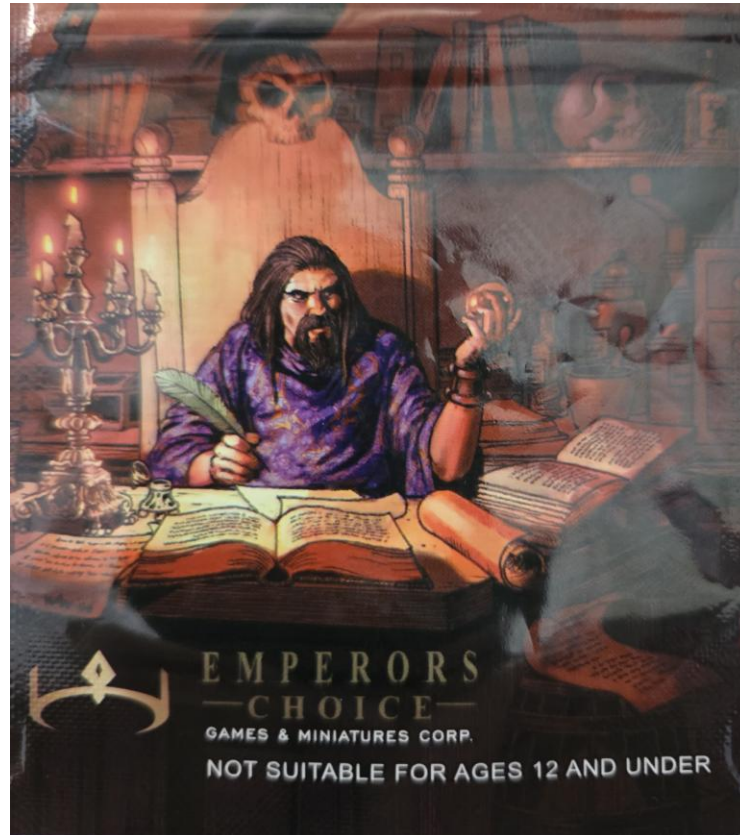
Psychic duels operate a little like magical duels, except the attacker secretly informs the referee of their attack mode, whereas the defender informs the referee of their defense mode. The referee cross-references these on a chart. A number indicates the number of d6s of damage to the defender's Psychic Strength. If Psychic Strength is reduced to zero, further damage goes directly to hit points.

**Black Necromantic Rituals.** This volume's rules wrap up with heinous rituals. They are closely guarded secrets on Firnum but anybody who is willing can learn & attempt a necromantic ritual. This activity comes at considerable cost. Once a necromantic ritual is cast, the caster is marked as a reviled necromancer & may not enter heaven or hell. Good or neutral clerics lose their patron. Additionally, many rituals physically mark the caster such that common folk & small animals recognize their taint & avoid any dealings with the necromancer. The components, steps, & cost in hit points, experience, ability scores, or worse vary with each ritual. Some losses are temporary, others are permanent. Some known rituals are Skeleton Summoning, Inward Invultuation (a voodoo-like spell), False Life, Army of Darkness, Black Heart of Ahthmon-Ka, Mummy Creation, The Secret Rite of Lichdom, Creation of the Black Blade, Unholy Strength, & Draugon Summoning.

Tan gent time—wait, not me, I mean tangent time! For my birthday this month, I purchased a set of paints from Army Painter. After bringing the set home, I decided to see which mini(s) I should paint first. I think it will have to be this Gandalf lookalike from Empcho:



This illustration was on the back of the plastic envelope that old Greyhame arrived in, just the sort of detail for which Empcho is known:



That is a fantasized rendering of David Hargrave, creator of *The Arduin Grimoire*. This is a terrific piece, very moody & well rendered. It exemplifies Empcho's attention to detail & the way that they honor tradition in the Arduin product line, even as they innovate. You see, since the release of *The Arduin Grimoire Volume IV: The Lost Grimoire*, at least one of the artists contributing to each Grimoire would include a representation of Hargrave in a composition. It is cool to see Dave Bukata & George DeRosa keeping the practice alive forty years on.

### APPETITE FOR DISCUSSION: COMMENTS ON E&A #12

- Brazilian Interactive fiction – part II (Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira Zucolotto)
- Cowman Baloney Face #8 (Matt Stevens)
- Firedrake's Hoard No. 10 (Roger BW)
- Reddened Stars No. 11 (John Redden)
- Twisting the Rope #12 (Myles Corcoran)
- Age of Menace #249 (Brian Christopher Misiaszek)
- Cts on lastish (Clark Timmins)
- Attack of Opportunity #11 (Dylan Capel)
- Shiny Math Rocks #8 (Elf)

- Accidental Recall #11 (Joshua Kronengold)
- Computocracy (Jim Vassilakos)
- Convention: North Star 9 (Timothy Collinson)

**Brazilian Interactive fiction – part II: Coração Acelerando (1998) (Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira Zucolotto):** I enjoy your essays on Brazilian interactive fiction. You two keep the reviews balanced even when confronted with qualities like “false interactivity.” Please keep these essays coming.

**Cowman Baloney Face #8 (Matt Stevens):** Matt Stevens! I am late to the party, but my recent reading of older A&Es turned up something interesting (that E&Aers might have discussed): you had compiled an author index for A&E a couple of decades ago, right? As one who engaged in a similar but more focused project (Subject Matter Index of Arduin/Hargrave Content in A&E), I certify you as a madman.

RYCT Elf: I am also on Team ‘Name Your Town NPCs, Adventure Writer’. It is not the sort of thing that I want to have to think about on the fly, so I end up adding character names to town & adventure keys anyway. Name generators help.

**Firedrake’s Hoard No. 10 (Roger BW):** RYCT Clark that setting-rich RPG products should provide gameable information, hear, hear! I like your opinion about naming some tactics that rival factions use against one another. This information is immediately useable at the table & a referee (or clever, manipulative PCs) could use the standard modus operandi as a departure point. As Matt & I have both written, sometimes it is onerous to decide what it is in the middle of a game session.

**Reddened Stars No. 11 (John Redden):** It is great to see you in print again. Felicitations on your successful surgery! I love the inspiration for your Face of God.

RYCTM, I also wished I had gotten into Arduin when I first heard about it, late as it was (between 1988 and 1993; Hargrave had already died). Typo as a miscast is great. I think I will yonk that.

Your scheme of having obvious buildings obvious to the PCs & keyed in advance, while reserving others for future definition is sensible. I can see it satisfying referee & players alike. Ice skating jokes...how about this one? I wrote on our ice skating white board, “Remember to channel your Ina Bauer!”

**Twisting the Rope #12 (Myles Corcoran):** “Don’t try to wake me in the morning.” That is from “Asleep,” by The Smiths. Great song. I did have to look up the lyrics, however, as I have heard it much less often than much of their catalog. Also musical regardence: Stereolab is a terrific band. Good on you & Sam; thank you for the congratulations.

**Age of Menace #249 (Brian Christopher Misiaszek):** Thanks for the good wishes, Brian! I hope the second installment of B&B review thish satisfies. Cute picture of Lauren & Co.

**Cts on lastish (Clark Timmins):** RYCTM about player-facing Elarian history, I suppose players have varying degrees of interest in that sort thing. I enjoy reading in any case. It is inspiring for historical developments in my own games.

Our peek behind Arduin's Portal to Adventure continues this, good sir! It will be a few installments before I exhaust Barrows & Borderlands & tackle the Arduin material in the box set, especially with my work on a special Arduin project for its fiftieth anniversary next year.

**Attack of Opportunity #11 (Dylan Capel):** RYCTM, the PCs who want to start a are both affiliated with the Church of St. Cuthbert, which has a meetinghouse & two mid-level clerics in Hommlet. The PCs intend to operate the hospital on a free basis. The nearby threat of the Temple of Elemental Evil has hijacked those plans for the time being. The hamlet's reception of the Ironheart brothers plan was underwhelming to the PCs & their player—even the local clerics were puzzled at the concept of a hospital or its need. I had suspected that the two clerics & druid in Hommlet had sufficient casting ability to keep disease outbreak tamped down. It was just an intuition garnered from looking at the number of spells that these NPCs could wield in a day & reading the AD&D (1e) Dungeon Masters Guide's probability charts for contracting disease or parasites. My simulation corroborated my instinct, as it turns out. I will write up the simulation for a future ish. Oh, the hospital idea also flopped because I do not regard Greyhawk as having a remotely modern medical sensibility & the PCs presentation was decidedly "ahead of their time."

**Shiny Math Rocks #8 (Elf):** RYCTM on religion, treatment of the dead, & undead in RPGs, yes to all that you wrote. In our AD&D campaign, I introduced the concept of unburied human or humanoid bodies becoming restless dead (undead) because of the lack of proper rites & divine propitiation. Part of the reason that I did this was cos a player was grouching about how "dumb & useless" the *ceremony* spell from *Unearthed Arcana* is—who needs a burial ceremony in an RPG, like? I put on my anthropologist hat & asked myself, "What are some of the reasons that people in the real world have burial rites at all & what do they purport to address?". Undeath, moving souls to the afterlife, & others came to mind. My buddies really dug the sense of verisimilitude that this brought to our game, although it had some freaky consequences once in the hands of the Frog Leg Gang! They have, in fact, encountered the zombie of a former hireling, with all the shock & breast-beating that that entailed. It was awesome!

**Accidental Recall #11 (Joshua Kronengold)** RYCTM on magic-users, did you really read "master" as "monster," or was it a typo? Hilarious in any case. Also cool. I would like to run a world in which magic-users had to study under monsters for specific powers. Excellent & weighty ethical conundrums would likely result!

**Computocracy (Jim Vassilakos):** Thank you for providing the link to your zine database. Like I wrote to you by email, I have started using it for my new Arduin project. RYCT E&A by email on June 20, 2026, what is the addiction? Gaming or apa production?

**Convention: North Star 9 (Timothy Collinson):** North Star Con? Go Sheffo (even if it is hard to get to). I appreciate your convictions about the meaning of "in the image of God" & creativity. I will check out *Spark*.

Happy Fathers' Day!

**Scribbles and Horrors**  
#2 – July 2026  
by Scribble M. Horror (Pseud.)  
for Ever & Anon #13

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- p. 1 . . . Rule Mutability in Nomic and D&D*
- p. 9 . . . The Endless Birthday of Kazzoo the Wise*
- p. 11 . . . Realm of Yolmi Session Report*
- p. 14 . . . Comments and End Matter*

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## Rule Mutability in Nomic and Dungeons & Dragons

In most games, play alters the gamestate only. Nomic and Dungeons & Dragons are unusual (though not unique) in that they require participants to constantly assess, critique, and modify the fabric of the games themselves.

The rules of Nomic and D&D are distinctively mutable: through the course of ordinary play, participants alter the ruleset. The emergent complexity produced by this rule mutability is crucial to the success of both.

There are major differences, however. In D&D, mutability is expressed through the complete authority of the referee to present scenarios and resolve situations, either according to the logic of the fantasy world or their best judgement for playability. In Nomic, mutability is enforced through a strict set of rules-amending procedures effected by player vote, procedures to which all players are rigorously subject.

I wanted to share some thoughts and analyses about these two favorite games of mine. I don't really have a coherent or paradigm-shattering argument—just thoughts and descriptions mostly. Much of what I say

here about D&D is of course applicable to other wargames and RPGs, especially OSR and FKR-leaning playstyles. Likewise, Nomic has its peers in Diplomacy, real-world governance, drinking games, and the like.



A game of Nomic in progress on 7/9/2025

It does seem to me these two share a kind of kinship—I do not know of any other pen and paper games so enthusiastically mutable as these two.<sup>1</sup>

Nomic is also more obscure and often misunderstood, at least in my circles, and I wish it were more widely known. Many of Nomic's lessons are useful for thinking about the structure of game rules in general, even (or especially!) those which have no rule mutability whatsoever.

### *Which D&D?*

By *Dungeons and Dragons* I mainly mean what I play: the three original booklets *sans* supplements. The 3LBBs amount almost to something like sacred texts, not because their authors were divinely inspired or virtuous (God, no!), but because they carry a mysterious impenetrability, what Marcia B. calls "...the way

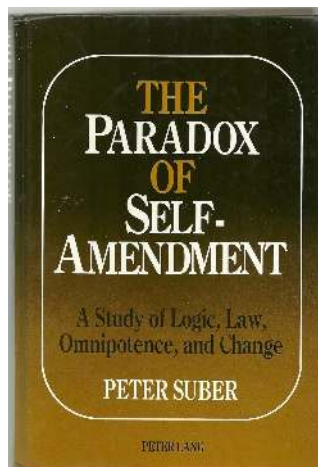
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<sup>1</sup> Say so if you know any—I'll be really intrigued!

in which it does not survive being read.”<sup>2</sup>  
Accidental genius, I think. Lightning in a bottle  
type stuff.

### *What is Nomic?*

Nomic is “A Game of Self-Amendment”  
invented by Peter Suber in 1982 while working  
on his book on legal philosophy *The Paradox of  
Self-Amendment: A Study in Logic, Law,  
Omnipotence, and Change*.<sup>3</sup> The book was  
published in 1990, and is available in full on  
Suber’s website, with the [Initial Ruleset for  
Nomic](#) making up Appendix 3.<sup>4</sup>



*Suber’s Paradox of Self Amendment could win an  
award for Ugliest Cover Imaginable, but I am fond of it*

Nomic is designed more to be a teaching  
tool than amusement. It is intended to  
demonstrate Suber’s philosophical position on  
the nature of legal authority. The main question,  
if I understand it, is: *Can a legal document*

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<sup>2</sup> From the endmatter essay of *Fantastic Medieval  
Campaigns*, an interesting retroclone available here:  
<https://traversefantasy.itch.io/fmc>

<sup>3</sup> The rules for Nomic were first published in 1982 in  
Douglas Hofstadter’s column *Metamagical Themas* in  
*Scientific American*.

<sup>4</sup> Suber’s Nomic page is here:  
<https://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/nomic.htm>

*grant amending authority to revoke its own  
amending authority?*

According to formal logic the answer is  
supposedly paradoxical.<sup>5</sup> It’s the same problem  
as *Can an omnipotent God create a rock He  
can’t lift?* A god who couldn’t create such a  
rock isn’t omnipotent, but a god who could  
wouldn’t be able to lift a rock, and thus *also*  
isn’t omnipotent. Does a legal document, then,  
really have the power to revoke its own  
authority?

In the real world of politics and laws these  
kinds of amendments plainly exist, and are used  
all the time without difficulty, paradox or no  
paradox. Suber’s claim is that Law has its own  
reasoning system for dealing with logical  
inconsistencies: political will.

Nomic, then, is a test chamber for  
philosophical problems of legal reflexivity. It is  
purpose-built to raise difficult questions about  
the nature of rules themselves.

The Initial Ruleset for Nomic consists of 29  
rules governing play, numbered **101-116** and  
**201-213**. There is no imagined setting in Nomic,  
no role-playing, no referee or GM. The rules are  
written concisely and logically, with few  
explanatory remarks. Sometimes a concept or  
mechanism is split up into two or three rules,  
which can make it difficult to read at first, but  
makes the ruleset more modular for amending.

Rules are divided into two classes: *Mutable  
Rules* can be added, amended, or repealed by  
unanimous (later majority) vote. *Immutable  
Rules* cannot be amended, but can be transmuted  
into Mutable Rules by unanimous vote. Thus

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<sup>5</sup> Quite possible that I’m misreading and/or  
dangerously oversimplifying Suber’s arguments here. I  
did my best, but *Paradox of Self Amendment* is a dense  
book.

some rules are harder to alter than others (requiring more political will.) Generally the more important and fundamental rules are initially Immutable, while the substantive process rules are Mutable. It also seems like some of the more dangerous, exploitable rules (ex. Judgement, Win by Paradox) are mutable.

The main gameplay loop in Nomic is described with the following rules:

**201.** Players shall alternate in clockwise order, taking one whole turn apiece. Turns may not be skipped or passed, and parts of turns may not be omitted. All players begin with zero points.

...

**202.** One turn consists of two parts in this order: (1) proposing one rule-change and having it voted on, and (2) throwing one die once and adding the number of points on its face to one's score.

Rule **203** sets the vote requirement for a proposed rule-change to be adopted, (unanimous, except after the second complete circuit of turns). Rule **103** defines a rule-change, (either the amendment, enactment, or repeal of a Mutable rule or the transmutation of an Immutable one.) **208** defines the winner as the first player to achieve 100 points.

Many of the other rules describe how to organize and interpret rules against one another. Rule **212** describes the process of Judgement, whereby disagreements about the interpretations of the rules are settled by one player acting as Judge. The Judge is supplied with somewhat

binding parameters, and can be overruled by the other players.

The malleability of the Nomic rules is enforced. Since parts of turns can't be skipped, players *must* propose rule-changes. The way points are allocated further means that a player cannot gain points unless their proposed rule-change is adopted—you lose 10 points each time one of your proposals is voted down.

It is, conversely, rarely the optimal choice points-wise to vote *for* another player's proposal under the initial ruleset. Voting *for* someone else's proposal gives them points and gives you nothing. The players are in a lose-lose situation until they work cooperatively to change the rules. Like Diplomacy, simple rules must be brought alive by the complicated nature of inter-personal relation. In order to make any progress at all players must work together *against* the situation presented by the Initial Ruleset.

Much of the gameplay of Nomic is trying to come up with neat rule ideas, trying to convince fellow players to vote for them, and watching these plans unravel. It's delightful, devilish fun. A social game masquerading as a logic game.

Like D&D, the Nomic Initial Ruleset is clunky, sometimes dense, and occasionally frustrating. It seems to demand fixing.<sup>6</sup> As in D&D, whatever fixes get implemented usually break several more things, so it is a constantly churning patchwork rollercoaster.

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Scarry in her book *On Beauty and Being Just* said of beautiful things that they "...seem to incite, even to require, the act of replication." I wonder if it isn't true that well-made pen and paper game rulesets incite or even require one to play with it.

I highly encourage any person interested at all in games of any kind to read the [Initial Ruleset](#). It is a work of art.

## *Rule Mutability in D&D*

Dungeons and Dragons states the attitude its participants should adopt to the rules text in the introduction and the afterword. The first paragraph of the Introduction begins:

These rules are as complete as possible within the limitations imposed by the space of three booklets. That is, they cover the major aspects of fantasy campaigns but still remain flexible. As with any other set of miniatures rules they are guidelines to follow in designing your own fantastic-medieval campaign. They provide the framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity – your time and imagination are the only limiting factors.... New details can be added and old “laws” altered so as to provide continually new and different situations. (*M&M*, p. 4)

The rules position themselves as incomplete; a guideline-framework, pieces of a game which must be assembled. There are variations on the kind of game which can be built—simple, or complex—and the fundamental motive power for this kind of building is “...your time and imagination...”

The rules explicitly allow for enacting new rules (adding new details) and for amending existing ones (altering old “laws”) A purpose for the mutable approach is also made explicit: “...to provide continually new and different situations”

The Afterword restates these points:

There are unquestionably areas which have been glossed over. While we deeply regret the necessity, space requires that we put in the essentials only, and the trimmings will oftentimes have to be added by the referee and his players. We have attempted to furnish an ample framework, and building should be both easy and fun. In this light, we urge you to refrain from writing for rule interpretations or the like unless you are absolutely at a loss, for everything herein is fantastic, and the best way is to decide how you would like it to be, and then make it just that way!...(U&WA, p. 36)

Here is added that the assembly of the game from essentials is part of the experience—easy and fun. The *fantastic* is to be the main driving force of the game, which pushes further into mutability. The recommended method for settling disputes is *not* writing for clarifications, but the far more freeing, fanciful, and uncharacteristically friendly “..the best way is to decide how you would like it to be, and then make it just that way!” The afterword thus cautions players *against* taking a non-mutable approach to the rules.

## *What Counts as Mutability?*

Aren’t all games mutable, if you want them to be? You can always change or ignore the rules of any games you play. Moreover, it’s common to forget rules, and, once the mistake is discovered, to find a group consensus for how to proceed. Usually, though, these rule-change shenanigans operate *outside* the rules-as-written. The rules do not themselves account for these kinds of alterations. My definition for rule mutability is that the rules as written tell you to do it.

Rule mutability is not something which *happens* to Nomic and D&D, it is an essential component of playing those games. In D&D, you need a referee to run it. In Nomic, you have to propose rule-changes while taking turns.

### *Writing Down Rule-changes*

Both Nomic and D&D have a rule instructing players to write down rule-changes. In Nomic, we have the following:

**106.** All proposed rule-changes shall be written down before they are voted on. If they are adopted, they shall guide play in the form in which they were voted on.

In D&D, the second paragraph of the Introduction, directed to non-referee players, reads:

....If your referee has made changes in the rules and/or tables, simply note them in pencil (for who knows when some flux of the cosmos will make things shift once again!), and keep the rules nearby as you play. A quick check of some rule or table may save your in-game "life". (*M&M*, p. 4)

In Nomic, players write down a rule-change before it is in effect, as a necessary component of the process of making a rule change. Proposed rule-changes can't be voted on until they are written down, and the *writing itself* is essential for guiding play. Thus, in Nomic, writing down a rule is a crucial step beforehand.

In D&D, players write rules post facto. The referee has already altered the rules, and players are directed to mark down those changes.

Writing is done in pencil in case those rules change again. The writing is for convenience, and perhaps for strategy, but in no way necessary for the rule to be in effect.

Written down rule-changes, in D&D are only an aid—not definite, but occasionally helpful. This reflects the whole of D&D's approach to rule themselves, as a framework or guidelines.

### *Rule 0 vs. Immutable Rule 101*

"Rule 0" isn't present in the D&D rules text, but as I understand the sentiment is something very close to the idea that the "make it how you decide you want it" principle supersedes *all* the other text in the game. Namely: *the Referee can ignore any or all of the rules text in order to play the game desired*. In D&D, the principle of mutability is closely tied up with the authority of the rules in general. Under Rule 0, the same power which effects rule mutability decides which rules are in effect, and when.

I bring the term "Rule 0" up here to contrast it with Nomic's first rule, which conveys exactly the opposite sentiment:

**101.** All players must always abide by all the rules then in effect, in the form in which they are then in effect. The rules in the Initial Set are in effect whenever a game begins. The Initial Set consists of Rules 101-116 (immutable) and 201-213 (mutable).

Nomic, the game about rule mutability itself, sets as its most fundamental concept the idea that playing a game means following *all* the rules currently in effect. No player or rule

supersedes Rule **101**, in the Initial Set, and it is the hardest rule to amend or repeal.

Nomic is thus D&D inside-out. If D&D is a skeleton of guidelines which must be fleshed-out by creative and industrious participants, Nomic is an *exoskeleton*: the players are the fleshy parts trapped inside the skeleton, and if they wish to escape the old structure must be molted. In D&D, participants play with the rules; in Nomic, participants are playing against the rules.

One troubling aspect of Rule 101 is that it can be repealed. *What happens*, the Initial Ruleset asks, *if players are no longer obligated to abide by the rules of the game?*

There is no such clear contingency in D&D. It's not clear that a Referee could abdicate their authority so thoroughly to the point that the paradigm (Referee runs the game by deciding what the rules are and how to interpret them) is dissolved. Saying anything coherent about this will require getting deep into the weeds about how cultures of play affect the interpretation of rules texts, so I won't go farther here.

### *Reasons for Changing the Rules*

As I've said before, in Nomic mutability is enforced: you cannot play without trying to make changes. In D&D, mutability is always available; a set of tools waiting for you to pick up. The differences between these are reflected in the kinds of rules-mutability which are most frequently engaged in. In this section I'm just going to describe a few different types of mutability, and how they show up in each game.

#### Playability Mutability

Changing the rules to make play easier, more interesting or run more smoothly, or

according to some other game design principle like simulation.

Examples abound in D&D; combat interpretations, house rules adding meaning to ability scores, tuning monster stats up or down for balance reasons, developing mechanics to account for players trying new things.

Nomic is full of these as well—one of the first rules added in new Nomic games I've been in are clear voting procedures and other clarifications.

#### Diegetic Rule Mutability

Diegetic rule mutability occurs when a rule is made in order to have the rules correspond more fully to an imagined world. D&D exercises this kind of mutability and Nomic generally does not, because D&D has a setting and Nomic doesn't.<sup>7</sup> In fact, most of the action of D&D takes place within this setting. The rules, then, engage in a dialogue with that fantasy world, both creating it and operating within it. The Introduction and Afterword repeatedly express the desirability of new situations, sparked by player (non-referee) initiative. These new situations are undoubtedly situations in the imaginary world.

There is no fantasy in Nomic, no verisimilitude to defend. The malleability of Nomic's rules is not a means to achieve a better, quicker, or more full experience: malleability *is* the experience Nomic offers. The dialectic in Nomic is not between Player and Gamestate, like in other games, not between Ruleset and

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<sup>7</sup> Initially, at least. Lots of Nomic games develop imaginaries which approach status as fantasy settings. Such material is usually entirely contingent upon defining rules, which (to me at least) makes it feel as though the "real game" is still settingless and characterless. The meat of Nomic is players and rules.

Fantastical, like in D&D, but between Ruleset and Player.

Both games, in common phrasing, can “Be whatever you want”, but both have definite restrictions. D&D by enforcing a fantasy world in which the action happens; Nomic by doing the opposite.

### Gonzo Rule Mutability

Gonzo rule mutability is changing the rules into something bizarre or extreme just to see what will happen. The Wikipedia page for Nomic lists a really tremendous quote describing one playstyle being “...the equivalent of throwing logical hand grenades.”<sup>8</sup> I would say Nomic has the edge on this one, because in Nomic “new and interesting situations” are only ever rules-defined. It is fun in Nomic to require that every player compliment another player before taking a turn, or sing songs, or to set up mind-bending official hierarchies with overlapping powers.

In D&D the referee may very well come up with very strange, wild, or interesting scenarios, but these are often in-setting creations. If a monster or situation is outside of the norm expected by the rules enough, it will spur new mechanics to be developed for dealing with it.

### *Judgement and the Ref Infallibility*

Nomic does actually have an authority role, a participant who makes binding decisions about the scope and interpretation of the rules: the Judge. Both D&D and Nomic have The OSR “Rulings, Not Rules” mantra.

The Judge is an interesting role in Nomic, because they have wide authority for rules-interpretation, but can be overruled by a unanimous vote from all other players.

Likewise, mutability might seem to be entirely in the hands of the Referee, but they are not in control of what situations will be brought about: the referee is beholden to the fantasy world and the gamestate describing it. Players will continue to produce new situations which need adjudication. As players interact with the world through the rules, they can and do push back on rules interpretations. Players frequently bring up points or clarifying questions which push the referee to enact rule-changes which fit the play at the table. In D&D rule mutability is a collaborative effort, although it is an asymmetrical one.

### *Unfolding Games and Patagaming*

Both games start simply and expand. There is a sense that anything is possible, that a whole cosmos of playability is within reach, if only you tinker here and there. Both games are likewise chaotic, which is to say, they both frequently feature awful game mechanics; but in both this is besides the point: the point is how players *react* to these mechanical situations.

Process is more important than product. These are experiential games—the fundamental excitement is that the players do not even know *what kinds of things will be possible*.

Two terms come to mind to describe this:

One is *unfolding game*, a term from this Extra Credits Youtube video: **The Waiting Game - Why Weird Games Become Cult Hits**<sup>9</sup>. An unfolding game is one where new

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<https://lists.ellipsis.cx/archives/spoon-discuss/spoon-discuss-200401/msg00132.html>

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<sup>9</sup> Extra Credits Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptk93AyICH0>

mechanics or systems are revealed over time, usually recontextualizing the older mechanics.

The other term is *patagaming*, which I pull from this [ODD74.proboards.com](https://odd74.proboards.com/thread/10213/game-games-engaging-diverse-legendaria) thread.<sup>10</sup> Patagaming describes a way of playing where a game draws other games into it: D&D is a dungeon mapping game *and* a combat simulation game *and* a castle maintenance game *and* an overland travel game. Each of these games are fairly separable from one another: the striking position D&D takes, a position which sets it apart from other games, is that it brings these together.

The practice of patagaming or unfolding involves bringing more and more different kinds of games into the mix. Need a way to resolve jousts? Use the jousting minigame. Have some flying creatures? Here's an aerial combat system. Need to get information about the dungeon? Here's fantasy roleplay. In Nomic, players pull from all kinds of mechanics and laws in order to accomplish their goals, resulting in a mish-mash of different kinds of rules operating all together.

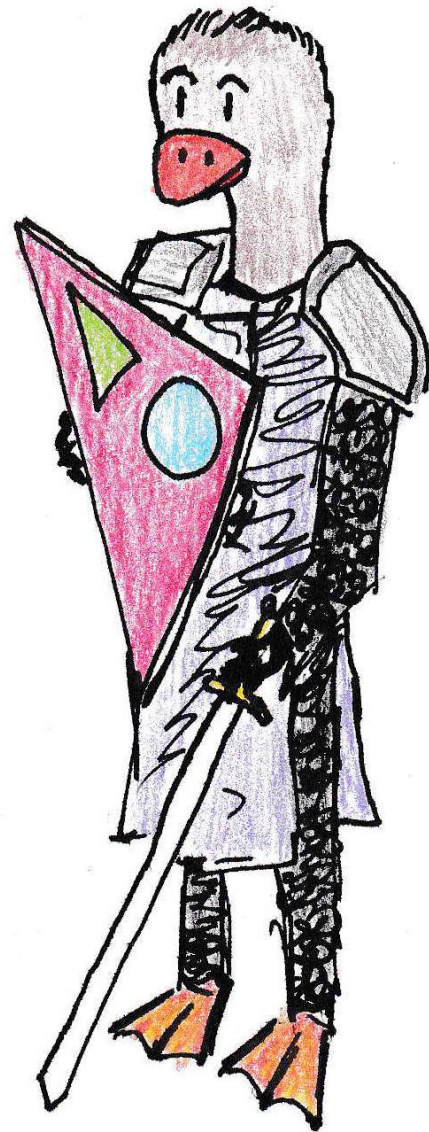
Rule Mutability is important for patagaming or unfolding, since it allows these games to mimic other games. It allows the ground upon which play occurs to shift.

### *Community and Continuity*

Finally, both Nomic and D&D tend to develop a community of players. I think this is largely because the story of a rule-mutable game requires investment. A rule-mutable game is a community project. There's probably more that can be said on this, especially on how the two

games deal with onboarding new players. That might be another essay, though.

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Sir Duckclass Fenwick

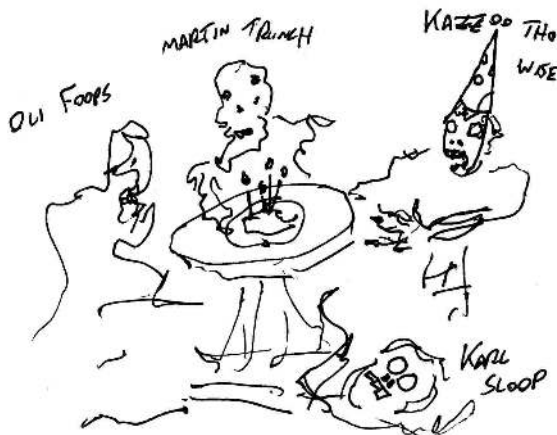
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<sup>10</sup> odd74 thread (may require login)<https://odd74.proboards.com/thread/10213/game-games-engaging-diverse-legendaria>

## Room Contents

# The Endless Birthday Party of Kazzoo the Wise

**The Endless Birthday Party of Kazzoo the Wise** is a grotesque monument to the insanity of absolute power. The corpses of great philosophers from disparate eras (Kazzoo the Wise, Martin Trench, Oli Foops, and Karl Sloop) have been exhumed from their resting places, brought to a cramped room, positioned stiffly around a table, and re-animated to engage in a philosophical dialogue steeped in the stench of immutable rot. The dialogue has been in progress for many centuries already: endless questioning and speculating in the dark, without interruption.



*The Dialogue in Progress*

The interlocutors will not notice anyone who comes into the room, and will not talk with anyone but themselves. They are reanimated corpses—in no way alive, yet academically active. Attempts to attack or remove them will meet no resistance. The conversation will continue until all of them are reduced to dust.

Included on the following page is a transcript of a snippet of that conversation (perhaps the bit which your party of adventurers happens to walk in on right at that moment!) It

should be read very slowly, in a zombified drone. Other snippets can be added, naturally.

The conversation generally rotates every few months between Kazzoo-Trench and Kazzoo-Foops. Martin Trench of course mainly has questions about ontology, ecology, and epistemology. Oli Foops is concerned with aesthetics, politics, and his watered-down theology. (Oli is always asking about the Demiurge.) Kazzoo is characteristically circumspect, poking holes in others' arguments without making many himself. Karl Sloop's chair rotted out from under him one or two hundred years ago, so he remains on the floor, occasionally groaning. (One might joke that Karl Sloop's philosophy was never much more than the occasional groan anyway.)

Why in God's name Thackeracky the Terrible set up such a display is anyone's guess. Perhaps it is simply because he could — surely not out of a real love of wisdom. Thackeracky is now long gone, and so the **Endless Birthday of Kazzoo the Wise** endures as a harmless, if unsettling, landmark.

Young philosophers have on occasion ventured to audit the dialogue for long periods, hoping to gain some wisdom in the exercise. A partial transcript was even published by Kendra Matchsticky as part of her Ph.D. Thesis, "Ways of Knowing: New Epistemologies from Old Voices."

In general, though, the dialogue is obscure and abstruse, of no great interest even to those who know that it is taking place. Philosophers are mainly concerned with getting their *own* work published and regard it as irrelevant. Historians of philosophy consider the dialogue to be pure anachronism, unworthy of serious study.

The Endless Birthday of Kazzoo The Wise

Dramatis Personae: Oli Foops, Martin Trench, Kazzoo the Wise  
Karl Sloop

TRENCH: And yet it seems to me, O Kazzoo, that Being cannot itself exist without a substance that it is 'to be'. Were it not so, how could any thing be?

KAZZOO: Noble friend you flatter me with such questions! For like a spider you are weaving a web which is to be your home and place of comfort, but also a trap where you hope others might be caught. I am like to a fly--buzzing hither and thither, knowing not whence my next meal comes, and here I have nearly buzzed into your very web!

TRENCH: I do not follow, Kazzoo.

KAZZOO: Were we not saying earlier that 'to be' is neither activity nor action, nor again a kind of quality akin to color or shape?

TRENCH: We were, Kazzoo.

KAZZOO: And further, did we not conclude that 'are' and 'are not' and 'is' and 'is not' do not signify separate attributes but in fact describe two facets of one single attribute?

TRENCH: Yes.

KAZZOO: And this attribute is Being?

TRENCH: Of course.

KAZZOO: And the substance of Being is what provides it with this attribute, namely what makes things be or not be, and have been and have not been?

TRENCH: I don't see why it shouldn't be so, O Kazzoo.

Karl Sloop groans.

## Session Report

# Escape From Special Operations Complex #903

Here is a session report for a [Realm of Yolmi](#) game I ran recently. The premise of the scenario was to begin in an underground complex and escape to the surface. The Realm of Yolmi is a fascinating game.

*Deep within the complex, lights flicker on. Cryosleep pods open in unison, waking from indefinite slumber 5 new adventurers eager to escape out into open air...*

**Diorama Jones**, *Fool* ; **Ostiana Mulch**, *Footman* ; **Quern Zadoki**, *Fool* ; **Garamond Micron**, *Fool* | Later joining the party was: **Shunt Organman**, *Assistant*

The party began with a poster map<sup>11</sup> of the complex plastered to the wall, and set to work finding where they were on it.

The party climbed through a vent and went westward, revealing a room which seemed to contain an immaculate red car. The party descended into the room to take a closer look, and the car was revealed to be a shimmering illusion put up by an Omegacron, armed with submachine guns and a phaser.

The omegacron warned against intruders and asked for authoritative identification, but did not engage immediately, enabling the party to slip down the western passage.

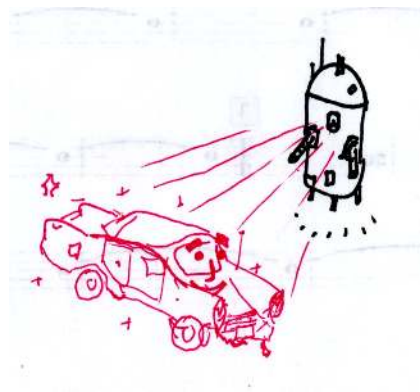
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<sup>11</sup> This map originally drawn for my [Redux campaign](#), repurposed here.



The beeping sounds of the omegacron drew a group of 3 heavily armored True Ones, however, who immediately challenged the party to a one-on-one unarmed combat, loser to be eaten.

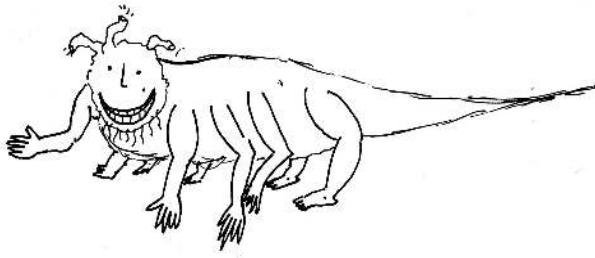
Quern Zadoki rose to the challenge and put up a good fight, but, lacking the necessary training and chivalric military prowess, could not stand up to the muscular foe.



Moving south as the True Ones feasted, the party went up

another vent in hopes of reaching a room from which to mount their escape. Within the room

were 6 Galics, horrifying and smiling creatures which rolled a “friendly” on the react roll.



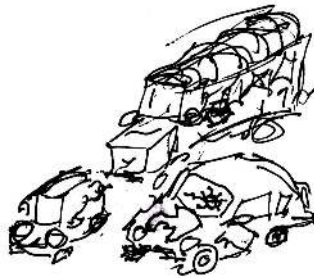
Upon descent, the Galics were quite happy to meet the party, and gave somewhat unhelpful-seeming advice about rafts and boats to make their escape. The galics were eager to shake hands. When shaking the hand of Garamond, a galic named Nine refused to let go and shook so hard that Garamond’s arm fell off. At this point the galics broke into uproarious laughter the arm started twitching, lurching towards its owner aggressively, and the party simply made a break for it eastwards. The new member of the party, Shunt, grabbed the arm in the midst of the flight in case it might be useful later. Honestly the galics didn’t mean much harm, and did not pursue.

At length it was discovered that a slightly ambiguous part of the map did not correspond to navigation in their favor, and the party was puzzled at how to proceed to one of the exits. No path seemed to take them where they needed to go!

They continued northwards and met some mole-like Snets, who ordered them to disarm themselves in fealty to the metaphysical lord Diss. The party simply turned around and went back.

The party re-checked the map and finally found another, secret path out, through the galic room. As a joke, they tied Garamond’s severed arm to him for the Galic to shake. The galics found this ruse delightful, and did not harass them further as the party scrambled up to the vent, which wound around for a long way.

At length the party found themselves in a used car lot run by a solitary Regik. He offered to sell them a low-end model for 6000r. When the party balked at this, he offered an installment plan at 1000r/month over 6 months, but tempers were not running well and Diorama hit it with their nun-chuks. One the second round of combat Ostiana shot him dead outright.



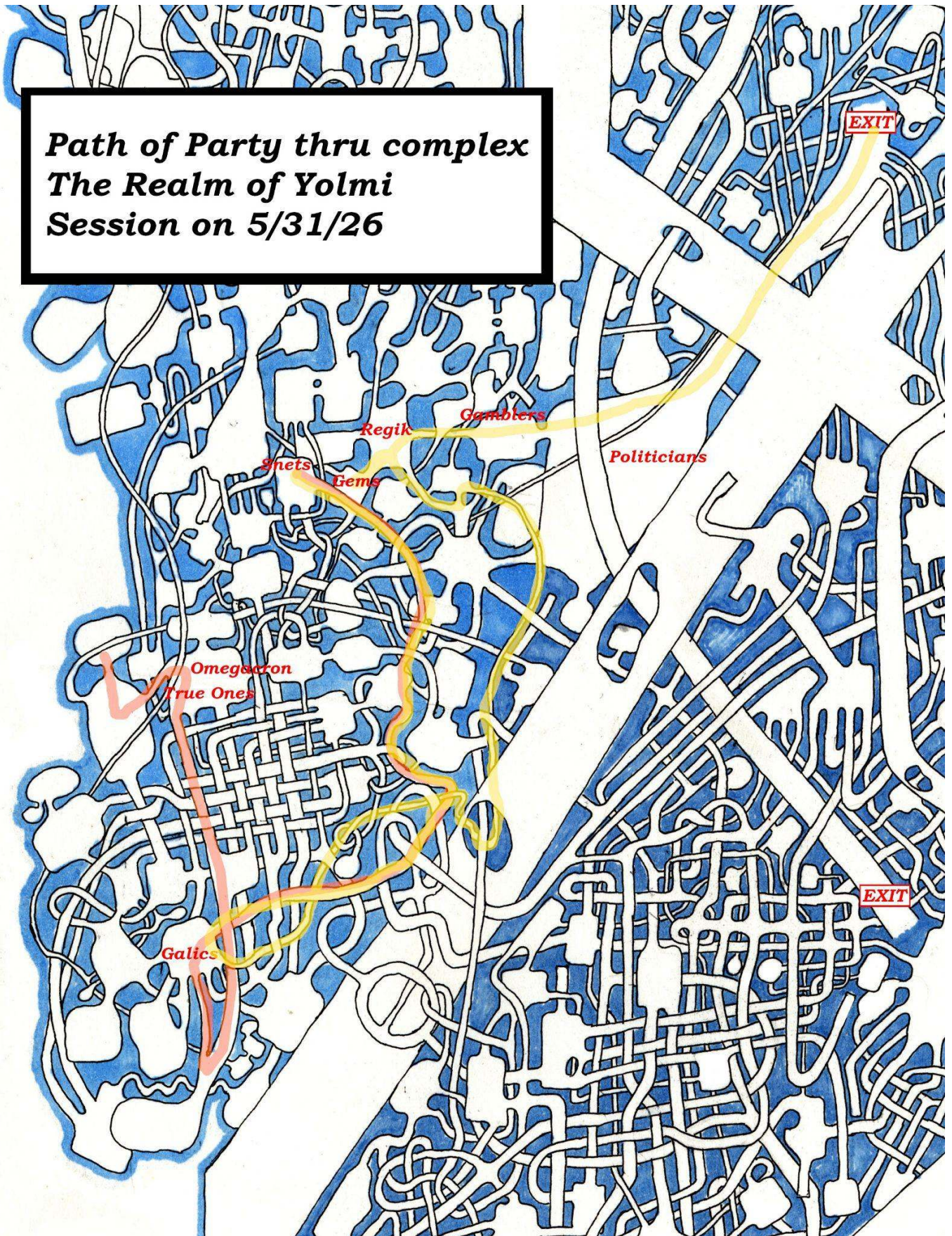
The party found only rusty cars there, but noticed bank deposit

boxes in an adjacent room, from which they recovered 300 Chromiks, 400 Galiks, 300 Rupniks, 3 Gems (worth 2500r, 1000r, and 250r), and a suit of -5 mech armor.

Knowing they were close to the exit, the party quickly made their way past a treasury room, deftly evading some Gamblers, and stumbled straight into a conference of Politicians who immediately began haranguing them with all kinds of aggressive nonsense. Eventually kerosene splashed around and lit by Shunt Organman caused enough of a ruckus that the party could escape to the exit and into the open air with their treasure. Their first adventure was a success.



**Path of Party thru complex  
The Realm of Yolmi  
Session on 5/31/26**



## Comments

I have not kept up properly with commenting, but thank you to all who commented on my first zine!

I will try to be better in my next contribution.



## End Matter

*Everything in this zine is my own creative work. I do not consent for any portion of this zine to be used as training data for any LLM, AI, or corporate data-harvesting operation other than those dedicated to archival preservation. Do not use any portion of my work as part of an AI prompt. Generative AI is antithetical to what I'm doing here.*

- Scribble M. Horror (Pseud.) 6/20/2026

# Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 12, Dylan Capel

The ascent of white supremacy in the UK this year is extremely depressing and a reminder that these views have only been suppressed rather than actually challenged. I'm hoping that now that we have an example of where the endgame is for these people (thank you America) we can see all the steps that lead up to citizenship being a negotiation with the state rather than a right of birth or legal process. Belfast this year was particularly shocking as it shows that they would burn people alive than tolerate even one non-white person in their area.

**Spoilers** from here on in for *The Mandalorian*, *Backrooms*, *Radiant Star*

## Watching

I enjoyed *The Mandalorian* and *Grogu* more than the critics did. I felt the puppetry was good, the action sequences were enjoyable and this film felt closer to inspiration that George Lucas took from the *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* serials.

Where I do agree with the critics is the completely flat dialogue between the human stars and the utter lack of chemistry between them. Virtually everyone plays better off the Grogu puppet rather than each other, which is a total waste of the talent that they've assembled. I also don't know what I feel about ripped Hutts either.

One of the things that did seem to work was the expansion of Hutt culture and lifestyle. For better or worse this is a more dangerous, organic, maybe even sexier view of the Hutts. It obviously echoes Jabba's Palace but I enjoyed this version more than what was in *Return of the Jedi*.

I did find the use of droids in the film fascinating, initially I thought it was simply a clever way to call back to the original trilogy and also have a huge army of antagonists with no moral issues if there are cut down in huge numbers.

However the beautiful art design for the droids meant that each one felt unique with their cloaks, warpaint, individual scars and repairs. This spoke to both these creatures being ancient machines and possessing an individuality worthy of personhood.

This meant that when finally we get to the big battle instead of guilt-free carnage you can also read the fighting as a tragic destruction of creatures who have witnessed and participated in any of the grand events of the galaxy. Moments in time, lost like leaking oil in the lubricator bath.

The individuality of these droids is once again picking at the seam of whether these creatures are sentient and what kind of rights they should possess in the fictional universe.

I also saw *Backrooms* which is the kind of creepypasta horror that I can tolerate. I enjoyed Renate Reinsve's final girl performance and Chiwetel Ejiofor was excellent too. Of course when you're building this big mystery it can be hard to land the reveal and get to a satisfying ending.

An infinite ever changing space naturally led me to think about dungeons built on the same concept and the idea of being trapped or feeling like you are part of the dungeon also felt very much on brand for gaming in this style.

# Reading

*Radiant Star* (ISBN: 9780356517957) is a new book set in the *Imperial Radch* universe. I had some holiday this month so in the heat of a mini-UK heatwave I spent my afternoons smashing through the story which was very readable. It covers a before and after experience of a Radch annexation with more perspective from those being annexed rather than the invaders. Religion is a big theme in this book with organised, arbitrary creeds being examined. This time though the Radch Civil War intervenes with the annexation and it is interesting to see a portrayal of precarious power.

There is also a lot of ruminating on the nature of food. Famine is a big theme due to the collapse of interstellar supply lines (timely but probably a coincidence). There's also a lot of contemplation on the nature of nostalgia and food and whether flavour is something other than memory and habit.

*Cubicle 7* had quite a good sale recently with 40% off their Warhammer city guides. I have enjoyed my copy of *Altdorf* a lot so now I have added *Middenheim* and *Salzsumund* to the collection along with the *Lustria* setting book which I have coveted for a while. I'm a big fan of the *Lustria* setting but I worry a bit that this means I have existing ideas of how it is and I might not enjoy the book as much as I would hope.

I also got the *Soulbound* starter kit. The system reminded me a lot of the *Tunnels and Trolls: New Era* system I recently played. Generate a pool of d6s and roll higher than the target number, successes are compared to the difficulty which is just the number of successes needed.

*Yoon Suin* has been doing my head in a bit. I really want to like this setting and I keep picking bits and pieces out of it but the landscape book format combined with the erratic layout that puts things like the bestiary before the regional descriptions and relies on rolling things in spark tables that you don't have much context for is making it hard to like. I feel like this is a toolkit for existing enthusiasts.

*Playing Outside the Mainstream* (ISBN 978-1-4766-9424-5) is a collection of academic essays on indie roleplaying. A number of the essays wrestle with the idea of what indie means. The least satisfying of which is *not D&D*, which I think everyone here will agree is reductive. I have a lot of sympathy with the Ron Edwards view that being creator controlled is the key thing and I think that is a minimum. However some of the other essays deal with what happens when things like actual play podcasts or videos become mainstream (*Critical Role*) despite the property not being sold. There is also a lot of material on queer gaming which I initially was sceptical about how it fit with the overall subject (particularly because there is a lot of space given over to describing what solo gaming is or *Powered by the Apocalypse*) but I am going to let the argument that queering gaming is a vital part of the subversion of mainstream culture (not matter how niche) that powers alternative approaches to what gaming is and can be.

There is also a requisite amount of Marxist analysis but I definitely do not think there is a comparison between indie cinema and indie roleplaying because the material requirements of both are significantly different. Alternative cinema is a horrendous logistical nightmare that requires a supporting framework to be there from conception to production and especially to allowing audiences to access it. I'm not sure sharing processes via a website (or a collectively produced PDF) is anywhere as complex despite an overlap in the problems of discovery and promotion.

I'm still skimming and diving into sections of particular interest but I think the book is more akin to the idea of an essay as an attempt than something that significantly adds to the understanding of indie as a sub-culture within roleplaying. If nothing else I think it fails to

account for the viewpoint that *Patrick Brady* mentioned in his zine last issue that you have to accept the special nature of things like *D&D* and canonical play before you can start to define indie gaming into opposition to it. If you do not then all gaming is essentially indie with different audiences and reactions.

Back in the *A&E* times Lisa reminded of the title of a *Monsterhearts* hack called *Dungeonhearts: Youth on the Borderlands*. This is an intriguing frame of play for *Monsterhearts*. The game is set in a liminal urban setting in the margins of the city where buildings have been abandoned or more accurately reoccupied by those living in them.

The “monster” skins are teenagers that have fallen out of conventional society and now occupy spaces outside the social and geographical norm. The rest of the skins are drifting out of high school and into the same spaces. Maybe initially to fight the monsters but with less and less to return to in the “straight” world.

Surrounding all this is the Dungeon Master, the big bad of this frame, the Dungeon Master seeks to lure in people to serve it and expand the dungeon. The dungeon itself gets progressively stranger and more true to its esoteric purposes as you go deeper into the basements, tunnel and caves under the surface.

The goal of the mini-campaign is to discover the Dungeon Master (who may take on different forms and may well contact the player characters in the early game), their agenda and thwart it, preventing the spread of the Dungeon.

It is a delightful piece of game design and a bleak piece of social commentary on a society that had less immediate problems than the current day.

Itch: <https://ludopolitics.itch.io/dungeonhearts>

## Comments

Due to the holiday I did have the chance to read everyone’s contributions in the last issue even if I’m not sure I’ll be able to comment on everything before the deadline. I was genuinely struck by what an interesting gaming resource this APA is and what a variety of thought and content there is. It can be a bit overwhelming and it is incredible to think that it happens every month but it is also an amazingly valuable thing to have in our lives.

I have been trying to annotate my PDF as I read through but I haven’t really found a good tool for doing this that allows the highlights to be referenced on multiple devices. If anyone has any suggestions I’d be interested in hearing them. This month I’ve tried Amazon’s annotations and next month I’m going to try the PDFDing suite (self-hosted).

### Lisa Padol

Thanks for recommending *GURPS Mysteries* I definitely would not have considered it as being genuinely generic by default.

Thanks for sharing John Tweet’s reasoning about your *Everway* character. It made me think that actually all players should have these channels to adventure built in.

The character portrait lottery sounds a very charming idea and a nice portrait too. I saw a bit of a young Freddie Mercury in it.

I’d be interested in hearing more about *Realis*, the art looked amazing but I wasn’t sure about the game itself.

### Avram Grumer

Thanks for sharing Bryan Cranston’s checklist. It does seem to be a pretty solid guide to getting the essentials of a character. I think fear is often the flipside of ambition and in

terms of gaming opportunities it can often serve the same function as a flaw to create dramatic possibilities or at a minimum justify why some acts against their best interests.

Regarding the *Dogs* dice mechanism I've always thought that the failing dice you mention represent reality impacting the character's best attempts. I think particularly with the original setting of religious teen virgins the idea of what a good approach would be has a strong potential for being flawed. Shades of the *Crocodile Dundee* meme of "Call that a knife? This is a knife." and so on.

## **John Redden**

Glad to hear that your surgery has been successful.

On resumes, I think that generative AI has changed the game in both creating and consuming these. I think a short resume that missed out matches on keywords and textual analysis would be a mistake now.

However looking from the recruitment side the one thing that generative AI users fail to do is link the capabilities to their experience particularly in terms of which roles and projects demonstrated the capability.

## **Roger Bell-West**

Thanks for the recommendation of *ACOUP*. I had been a reader before but I didn't stay engaged before so I'll try and to commit to it a bit better, the military analysis of Dune sounds intriguing. By chance I also noticed that the revised *1177 BC* edition (ISBN 9780691208015) has been published so I'm trying to find the time to read that too.

## **Myles Corcoran**

I completely recognised your description of the aches and pains of being a gig goer of a certain age. It almost gets to the point where you're urging the band to get a move on rather than going through another round of tuning. I also went to see Stereolab recently but traded connection with the band for a seat in the circle of the Royal Festival Hall.

I was interested in your comment on players struggling to understand a situation verbally but my experiences with sketch maps has been mixed as it often feels that things can get a bit bogged down in the relative positioning of things. It's not a easy balance. I've tried using index cards so that is a sense of boundary on the level of detail we are getting into.

For some one-shots where certain flashpoints are likely I've been able to draw up cards in advance and when they work they really hit the spot.

## **Patrick Riley**

Your comments on improvising are really part of the wider conversation about the nature of the games we are playing. Simulationist mechanics allow people to play characters that are very different to themselves but if everything boils down to system and mechanics then sometimes the play becomes simply an abstract exercise in ticking down counters until the Truth pops out.

I think there could be a compromise where a player could describe how they prepare for an interrogation and what they do in the aftermath. Things that are more rooted in the emotional state of the character than their skills, knowledge and experience.

I do think there is often a risk where things are too abstract that there are no meaningful consequences to social interactions and that is where we potentially slide into mistreating NPCs because they a just a bunch of mechanics. Hit the clue pinata until the answers come out.

## Brian Rodgers

I liked your comment about experience systems being Skinner Boxes. I think generally people want a sense of their character changing over time mechanically but I never really understood *D&D*'s obsession with scaled play which essentially means you're just doing the same thing over and over but with different labels ("dragons" instead of "goblins") and the resource play being the same with bigger numbers.

I'm also enjoying your series on weird heroes. My favourite so far has been scary face guy, very simple and very satisfying (and thanks for sharing the weird subtext on their companion volunteering to stick around and watch a beating).

For *The Puppeteer* it is hard to avoid real puppets or mind control but I wonder if you could use Watchman's later Ozymandis as a model of someone who creates these grand plots to guide and shape the global political situation and zeitgeist.

There wouldn't be a direct threat to the player characters but just a general air of confusion and deception. Are their plans benign or dangerous? How do you fight an idea? Relevant perhaps to our era of misinformation and delusion.

## Timothy Collinson

Regarding your dilemma on art the first thing I want to say that as a creator I don't think people get to dictate to you what you should do or how you create your work. I also think that you want to respect other people's work.

I don't think you need art in a roleplaying product but there are people who think that magazine style layout is the only acceptable form of layout so naturally there is always going to be a bit of noise and pressure.

Of course having said that I am about to offer some unsolicited advice which you are welcome to ignore. I think the halfway house between commissioned art for products and no art is the use of clip art by contemporary artists. These are often offered through Itch, Patreon or direct from the artist. I'm going to try to link to some examples.

Both illustrators and writers are being squeezed at the moment. I do think there needs to be some creatively solidarity.

I realise that sourcing appropriate clip art remains an ask on you but hopefully if you can find someone who's style you like and who is reasonably constant in producing pieces maybe it is a one time effort.

I also wonder if we need to break the historic model where artists were paid up front for art and instead percentage on sales should be a greater part of the model, particularly if the art is a partnership with the writing team. Of course tracking sales and distributions is going to add to the burden of administration.

The only way that I see generative art being acceptable is if the training data is open, ethical and well attributed and the model is being run locally so you have a full accounting of the resources required to run it. Even then I think it fails the solidarity of creatives principles.

I think it is great that you've been so open with your thoughts and the challenges on this.

## Art library links

- Strega Wolf (modern montage art): <https://www.stregawolf.art/ccla-library>
- Perplexing Ruins: <https://www.patreon.com/c/perplexingruins>
- Garin (Cloud Empress) and pbbeta: <https://www.patreon.com/c/kattapulka/home>
- Chao's art pack (Chaos Crawl zine): <https://chaoclypse.itch.io/chaos-art-pack-pwyw>



### ATTENTION CONSERVATION NOTICE

Norman, coördinate! • *Spicklebod* • *Crime Wave* • end of Fate • *RPG Trader* • *Fiasco 2ed* • *Going for Broke* • *Monsterhearts* • *Scum and Villainy* • *Ringmaster and Descended from the Queen* • GM emulators • Jane Austen as sci-fi • *telenovela RPG* • *Backwords & Bucklers* • trashy fiction • Alan Moore on Jack Kirby • interstellar republics • enthusiasm • Roman calendar hijinks • *Keeping Your Cool* • Erick Wujcik • rubbers • *Cross Bronx Expressway* • *Umdaar* • superhero RPGs • John C Wright • Greg Egan

## Random Stuff

### “I am not programmed to respond in that area”

Just for fun, I uploaded E&A #12 to Gemini, and asked it to [Summarize this PDF](#). It animated its cursor at me for a good long time, like about four minutes, and then replied:

Sorry I can't help with that image. Try uploading another image or describing the image you tried to upload and I can help you that way.

I'm not sure if this is because of Google's recent change from a number-of-prompts-per-day limit for Gemini, to a computational-resources-used limit, or if the awesome power of our combined writing just overwhelmed it. Or maybe the PDF was just too big.

(I use the web interface for Gemini, and it's possible that these new limits apply only to the Gemini phone app, which I don't use because I'm wary of the amount of control it wants over the phone. I like keeping the potential [Straumli Perversion](#) fenced inside a browser.)

### Terrible Game Idea: *Spicklebod*!

New dice mechanic: a dice pool with a literal pool! You get one of those inflatable kiddie pools, and fill it up with a mix of polyhedral dice. When fortune needs consulting to adjudicate something in the game, you strip off your clothes, roll around in the dice pool, then clamber out and shake off the dice that stuck to you. Add 'em all up, and there's your result!

If your character has a high level of ability, you smear yourself with honey before getting in the pool, so more

dice will stick. For low levels of ability, use oil.

Not sure yet how to keep the pointy d4s and d8s from puncturing the inflatable pool.

### *Crime Wave*

Just stumbled across this game being worked out on a blog, [Crime Wave by Jon Davis](#), a 1920s game of criminal shenanigans in the city of New Babylon. It draws inspiration from [Tunnel Goons](#), [Gangbusters](#), and [Traveller](#).

I'm intrigued by the Flashback rule. The game uses 2d6 for resolution, and any time you roll doubles, you get a Flashback: If the roll is a success, you describe how something from your past helped you in this moment; but on a failure, something from your past is haunting you.

### The End of Fate

Rascal News had [a recent interview with Fred Hicks of Evil Hat](#) in which Hicks speculates that *Umdaar* (which I wrote about in E&A #12, pgs 132–133) will be the last official Fate product. The games will still be available in PDFs and as print-on-demand books, and the [Fate SRD site](#) will stay up. (*Umdaar* itself is not getting a full offset-printed release; [just PDF](#) and maybe POD.)

That's a 20-year run from the 2006 release of [Spirit of the Century](#).

The article has a good retrospective on the history of Fate, going back to its origins in Hicks and Rob Donoghue's experiences playing [Amber Diceless](#).

On Bluesky, Hicks [passed along](#) an amusing comment (from Reddit, I think?) by someone who pulled a particularly clever move while GMing *Spirit of the Century*. The players needed to break a supervillain out of prison, and were dithering and planning without actually coming up with anything, so the GM just cut to them having already broken the guy out, skipping over the actual breakout entirely – they're in the escape car with the supervillain, being chased by the cops, what now?

### RPG Trader

There's a new option for people looking to publish games online: [RPG Trader](#). This will be especially interesting to contributors outside of the US, because RPG Trader sells print-on-demand books printed through [Lulu](#), which has

printing centers in Australia, Canada, France, India, and the UK, in addition to the US, so you get lower shipping costs. (No love for South America, I guess.) I'm not sure what benefits this offers over just using Lulu. Better discoverability, maybe.

## Recent Gaming

Three different games with three different groups in under a week!

### Fiasco (2nd edition)

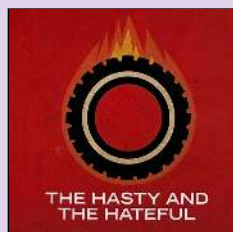
23 May. I'd thought we were gonna play *Scum and Villainy* again, but our GM was away on a cruise, so we broke out Lisa's [Fiasco](#) set. She backed the crowd-funding campaign at a high level, so she's got all of the expansion Playsets. (I think there are 18 of them.)

That's the main difference between first and second editions: first uses dice and index cards, and is more complicated to set up and explain, but it's cheaper to publish new Playsets. Second uses cards instead of dice, sets up faster, but making your own Playsets is more difficult.

The game comes with an Engine Deck, which is where you get your Outcome and Aftermath cards, which are the same for every Playset, and you pick one Playset deck, which contains 18 Relationships, 13 Needs, 9 Objects, 9 Locations, some blanks, and a Kicker card. We neglected the Kicker, which has four suggestions for scenes, but they're obvious enough suggestions that we wound up recreating three of them on our own, without having looked at the card. Three Playset decks come in the basic game box, but as I said, Lisa went all-in, so we had a lot to choose from.

Lisa had a strong preference for the "The Hasty and the Hateful" playset, based on the *The Fast and the Furious* movies. I've never seen any of these movies, and wasn't excited about this choice, but I went with it anyway, and managed to build up enthusiasm as we went, which addresses some of my ongoing questions about enthusiastic buy-in. (I'd initially been interested in the "Dragon Slayers" playset, but looking over the expansions on [Bully Pulpit's website](#), "Folly and Fortune" and "Home Invasion" also look like fun.)

The logo on the playset tuck-box looks like something you'd come up with if you crossed [The Lord of the Rings](#) with [Smokey and the Bandit](#), which sounds like a fun game premise itself. (The travel direction — [east bound and down](#) — is even right.)



We start by shuffling together the Relationship, Need, Object, and Location cards, then deal them out roughly equally among the players. (Josh gets the extra one, but that has no real game effect.) Then, one by one, each player

chooses one Relationship from their hand, and places it between any two players who don't already have one there. We wind up with:

- ◆ **Gareth & Lisa:** FAM, Came up in the neighborhood together
- ◆ **Josh & Gareth:** RACING, Quarter-mile rivals with an unbeatable attraction
- ◆ **Lisa & Avram:** FRIENDS, Tough guy and ace mechanic
- ◆ **Avram & Josh:** ENEMIES, Dangerous outlaw and their nemesis

Lisa immediately wants to be the mechanic half of our shared relationship. It takes a while to figure out my and Josh's PCs' relationship; I later wind up framing a scene to define it in play. We then distribute Needs, Objects, and Locations — at least one of each, and no more than two of any — attaching one to each Relationship:

- ◆ **Gareth & Lisa:** NEED to earn the money to pay for Pop's cancer treatment
- ◆ **Josh & Gareth:** OBJECT, valuable bag of blood diamonds with fake [Kimberley certificates](#)
- ◆ **Lisa & Avram:** LOCATION, fancy private island off Dubai with its own racetrack
- ◆ **Avram & Josh:** NEED to find out if you still have what it takes

Then we use the leftover cards (which have names on the backs) to create names for our characters, thus saving us the trouble of having to write anything down:



- ◆ **Celine Moon**, tough ~~guy~~ gal (me)
- ◆ **Logan Matsuda**, ace mechanic (Lisa)
- ◆ **"Gritty" Jackson**, racecar driver (Gareth)
- ◆ **Katie Kimura**, racecar driver (Josh)

It later develops (through a flashback scene) that Celine and Katie were also former thieves and partners, until that one time in Paris when Katie took off with the jewels they'd stolen together from the Louvre, leaving Celine to take the blame and do time in prison. But we have no idea of any of that until several scenes into the game. The PCs start out as the barest suggestions of characters.

I don't take notes, so I don't have a detailed record of who does what and how it all works out. It's all kind of confusing, because there are multiple jewel heists. Interpol gets Katie out of jail to help set up Le Grand Souris, the crime boss who's stolen the diamonds. There's a heist at the hotel where Mssr Souris is staying, and I get to narrate it, so (inspired by [the Cisco scene from Rick & Morty](#)) I narrate a scene with a voice-over of my character describing a smoothly operating plan ("Our master cracksmen, Logan, will open the safe..."), alternating with descriptions of the actual action, going entirely off-

plan (“Logan’s ears are still ringing from the gunplay in the hallway, so he can’t hear the safe’s tumblers...”) leading to hastily improvised Plan B action.

We wind up with a happy ending, and pretty much everyone getting happy outcomes, which is on-brand for a *The Fast and the Furious* movie, but off-brand for *Fiasco*. Part of this is that three of us had played *Fiasco* before, and know how to manipulate the Outcome mechanic:

See, in both editions of *Fiasco*, each player gets scenes, in order around the table, four scenes each, and the active player has the choice of either Establishing the scene (framing it, deciding who’s in it and what’s at stake), or Resolving it (deciding whether it comes out in their character’s favor or not), with the other players taking up the task that the active player doesn’t. In second edition, you take an Outcome card, either a positive one or a negative one, depending upon how the scene resolves. At the end of the game, your character’s final fate is determined by these cards. You want a total with a high absolute value, either very positive or very negative; a mixed result gives you a total near zero, which is where the bad outcomes are.

This is simpler than first edition, which had some complicated thing where you take dice and sometimes give them away and sometimes not. But it’s complicated a bit by the fact that the game creators couldn’t be bothered to describe the process consistently. The rulebook says “the person whose Scene it is takes [an] Outcome card,” while the Player Reference Card says “Whoever is Resolving the Scene chooses [an] Outcome card.” We decided that the rulebook version made more sense, since it ensures that every player will have four Outcome cards when you get to the end of the game.

In closing, this was good! I think it runs more smoothly than first edition, and I’ll get a copy when it comes back into print this summer, though I don’t think I’ll splash out on the full set of expansions.

### Going for Broke: “Multi-Level Mushrooms”

26 May. Dillin Apelyan (aka [Superdillin](#)), game designer and actual-play performer, runs monthly games at a bookstore near me, [The Nonbinarian Bookstore](#). (I am so enjoying having gaming options within walking distance of my apartment!) This month’s game was [Going for Broke](#), which I wrote about last month (E&A #12, pg 133).

Dillin uses *mirror pronouns*, something I’d never encountered before. That means he wants you to refer to him with whatever pronouns you’d use to refer to yourself if you were talking about yourself in the third person.

The bookstore has an everyone-masked, all-the-time policy. I was afraid this might muffle our voices, but that wasn’t a problem.

What was a problem was me: I got creatively blocked *hard* in this game. I haven’t yet figured out what my problem was. I’m usually great in comedy games, especially

one-shots. I just somehow had a lot of trouble trying to figure out how to squeeze comedic material out of my character card’s prompts, and totally forgot to volunteer to play NPCs.

Anyway, here are the PCs we chose:

- ◆ **Ben** (he), problem solver, on parole (me, he)
- ◆ **Beth** (she), pro thrifter, amateur mycologist (Sasha, she)
- ◆ **Bruce** (he/they), brews their own beer, horror movie podcaster (Ennis, they)
- ◆ **Rona** (they), queer memoirist, heartbreaker (Dillin, mirror)
- ◆ **Salem** (she), legal advocate, camgirl (Ting, they)

I notice that of the twelve possible roommates, three have names starting with B, and we chose all three of them. The main NPC in the starting scenario also has a B name.

We played the recommended starter, “The Rent”:

Brittney bails three days before rent is due. How will the house pay her share? What will happen to the room? Will someone try to track her down?

Brittney’s an NPC, not one of the 12 PC cards included in the game.

The way the game works is, you first do an opening scene in which the PCs are confronted with this week’s problem. You improvise around that for a few minutes—our characters go through Brittney’s room looking for clues as to where she’s gone, and Ennis has a funny bit where Bruce picks up a plate with food scraps on it, turns it sideways, and the scraps are stuck to the plate. Dillin has Rona find a crumpled-up printout about a music festival: Beach-Chella, in New Jersey. Beth has a car, so some of the roommates can track Brittney down. I think there was also some discussion of Brittney having once worked at Target, and having gotten fired for shoplifting. Also, Brittney has a twin sister, maybe we can disguise her as Brittney and fool the landlord and maybe she’s got a real job and will help us cover her sister’s share.

And there are our two plots:

- ◆ **A Plot: Find Brittney’s sister!** Ben, Bruce, & Salem
- ◆ **B Plot: Find Brittney at Beach-Chella!** Beth & Rona



Coincidentally, this place is just a block from the bookstore!

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**Opening credits:** Ennis suggests “[You Signed Up for This](#)” by [Masie Peters](#) as our theme music, and we pull it up on the shop’s sound system, and it’s a great choice. (Seriously, Ennis came up with most of the best ideas in this session. They’re great at this.) (Also, one advantage of gaming with people decades younger is that I’m getting exposed to a lot of great new music.) Our opening credits sequence has the roommates dealing with a kitchen fire.

**A:** Ben, Bruce, and Salem go to the airport to pick up Brittney’s sister. They’re holding up a sign that says “Brittney’s sister.” (Ennis’s idea.) We also decide the sister is in a punk rock band, and her name is Bethany. (Sasha volunteers to play Bethany.) Bethany’s a punk-rocker, so she’s happy to help fool a landlord.

**B:** Beth and Rona are stuck in traffic. If only they had a third person in the car, they could use the high-occupancy lane. Rona tells Beth to pull off at the next exit – Cam, a former boyfriend of hers, works at the service station there. She invites Cam into the car to talk about their relationship. (Ennis volunteers to play Cam.) There’s a suggestion (from Dillin or Ennis, I forget) that it could be funny if Cam and Beth hit it off? Sasha says that Beth isn’t into guys. Ennis suggests, hey, what if Cam is also into mycology, Beth’s hobby? Yeah, that works.

**A:** Ben, Bruce, and Salem show Bethany around the apartment. We try to bleach her hair blond, to look more like her sister, but we leave the bleach on too long, and her hair all falls out. She’s punk, so she’s kinda into the look, but now we need to get her a wig. Someone – either Ennis or Ting, I forget – suggests a possible ending where the landlord thinks Brittney has cancer, and gives us a break on the rent.

**B:** Beth and Rona, with Cam, have made it to Beach-Chella! Rona has a long conversation with a woman at a stall doing henna tattoos, and winds up getting their face slapped with the tattoo half-done. Dillin grabs a coin, saying that he’s answered Rona’s Classic Question: They are currently Just Pretty, not Profound. Meanwhile, Cam and Beth wander off to look for mushrooms in the woods.

**A:** Ben, Bruce, Salem, and Bethany go to Target, where they run into Brittney’s old manager, who had told her never to come back! (Dillin plays the manager.) Salem chides the manager, telling him that Brittney’s going through some very difficult things, which [HIPAA](#) prohibits us from telling him about.

Ting’s good here, working their voice up into a high-pitched, verge-of-tears register when talking about Brittney’s implied health problems. Dillin has the manager reply, “Well, sorry I made you get all squeaky, there,” and gives us ten bucks to buy a wig with, “Just please, actually buy it at the register so the security cameras can see you paying for something!”

**B:** Beth, Rona, and Cam are all stoned on mushrooms. Dillin tries to resolve the B plot, flips his coin, and gets tails, so the B plot twists: They spot someone who looks like Brittney, but isn’t. They chase after her, and Rona stumbles into a mushroom cult, and Brittney is there, being declared the Mushroom Goddess. She doesn’t want to leave.

Ennis plays Brittney, and asks if we didn’t get the note she left in her sock drawer. In [Minecraft](#). The sock drawer she built in Minecraft, that’s where she put the note. Because that’s where everyone hides stuff, so that’s where we’d know to look.

**A:** Ben, Bruce, Salem, and Bethany come back to the apartment. They bat around ideas for tricking the landlord. Ben suggests that they need something to keep him distracted. (Ennis prompts me for this, like they can tell that I’m blocked.) Bruce has a mannequin (made up to look like a vampire, I think), so he puts another wig on it, and Salem sashays around in her bra. We call this plan “Titneys for Brittney.”

Dillin plays the landlord, and there’s some complicated dialog, and Salem takes control of the situation with talk about exactly how they’re all going to pay, and that answers Salem’s Classic Question: she’s currently Total Control, not Total Chaos. That earns Ting a coin. They flip it, and it comes up heads, so the A plot succeeds, which means the B plot fails.

There’s also something about podcasting. Bruce is a podcaster, and he talks to the landlord about this podcast he heard about a mushroom cult.

**B:** Rona writes Brittney a note telling her that she’s in a cult, opens up Brittney’s bag, and sticks the note into a rolled-up sock. Cam is crowned Mushroom King. Someone says something about the cult being a multi-level marketing plan that Brittney’s hoping to get rich from, and I say “Multi-level mushrooms!” and Ennis declares that the episode title.

**Final closing scene:** The roommates all share this weird mushroom beer that they found in Brittney’s room.

**Conclusion:** I’d like to give this game another try, to see if I can get my brain un-stuck. Something about having those prompts to work towards just froze me up. Probably I should try just forgetting about the prompts for the first scene or two, easing into the character, and going from there.

I’m also wondering, when comparing the Saturday *Fiasco* session to the Tuesday *Going for Broke* session, whether this is our old friend develop-at-start vs develop-in-play again. *Going for Broke* requires you to commit upfront to a pre-gen character, while *Fiasco* just hands you a bare description and a pair of relationships and lets you develop the rest in play.

And I’d like to play with these people again. Ennis,

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in particular, was a firehose of creative energy.

The basic structure of the game seems like it could be easily adaptable to other settings and sets of PCs. Ennis talked about coming up with their own version that involved D&D characters in a dungeon. I've been thinking that a crew of classic *Traveller* PCs trying to pay off the mortgage on their ship is a lot like a bunch of broke roommates trying to scrape rent together.

### Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 11

**Correction:** In “Going to be Ad-Libbed” #10, I said that Johnni believes Laeli to have undiagnosed bipolar disorder (see E&A #12, pg 141); they actually believe Laeli to have undiagnosed BPD (borderline personality disorder). Also, I have consistently been describing the Tenleyton school shooting as having occurred at the end of the last school year (for example, see E&A #12, pg 142); it actually happened at the beginning of this one. We regret the error.

28 May, a weekday session, an hour shorter than usual. This was one of those sessions where I wish we were recording, because while not many events happened plotwise (though the ones that did happen were pretty important), there was a lot of great dialog, which went by too quickly to write down, so I've only got three pages of notes.

The week before this session, Johnni, Briar, I, and my girlfriend Chris took a nighttime tour of *Green-Wood Cemetery*, a large cemetery south of *Prospect Park* here in Brooklyn. (We saw *the catacombs*! Also *Boss Tweed's* grave!) I overheard Briar and Johnni discussing some ideas for Blue, and I also discussed some ideas with Briar for Steffan, including the fact that Officer Biggs (who got bitten by Steffanwolf last session) has no idea whether lycanthropy is contagious, and Steffan might be able to use that. I suspect that some of the developments in this session come out of that discussion.

There's also the fact that Steffan's only got two advances left on his sheet, and one of them is *You belong to a Wolf Pack*. Though nothing requires him to take all six advances; a fifth advance ends the season, and a new season clears the advance track. It's either the wolf pack, or take a new move from another skin, and I've got several tempting other-skin moves already transferred to my character sheet to keep me from having to look stuff up mid-game. (I pulled my sheet into Affinity Designer to customize it.)

See, *Monsterhearts* is played in seasons, like a TV show. When a player takes a fifth advance, the next session is the season-ender. At the start of a new season, everyone clears their advancement bubbles, allowing them to take those advances again, so I could leave one advance untaken. I don't think any of us realized how close we are to the season-ender until I posted about it on the Discord after this session.

NJ had to cancel at the last minute because of work stuff. Fortunately, Laeli was off doing her own thing at the end of last session.

- ◆ **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)

We've got a common sheet of paper where we track everyone's Conditions. Laeli is *Jealous*, *Shabby*, and a *Snitch*; Drake is still a *Gentrifier*; and Blue is a *Creep*, a *Crazy Driver*, and a *Psycho*. Steffan and Logan are currently Conditionless. We're still not really making enough of the String and Condition mechanics.

Opening scene: Briar puts on our theme music, “*In My Mouth*” by *Black Dresses*. We pick up where we left off last session. There's a clear night sky, brightly lit by a nearly-full moon. A black car drives on the coast road. Logan is driving. (**Briar:** Has Logan ever driven before? **Erica:** No.) He's driving jerkily – fast, then slowing down abruptly, then fast again. The streets are cluttered with debris.

At the old cannery, Drake and Blue are with a tall man in black. The man is speaking into a phone, keeping a stern eye on Drake. Drake stands, cool. Behind the cop, Byron's ghost is visible (to Drake). Blue is trying to get the tall man's attention: “Ow, I'm hurt, and I'm a minor! Oww...”

Cut to: Steffan, sprawled on asphalt, naked, blood-covered. (**Me:** Not in the woods? **Briar:** No.) A car approaches, but he's too woozy to get out of the way. The car is driven by Logan. He sees a naked body in front of him, slams on both pedals at the same time. (Keep Your Cool: 5) He hits Steffan, who flies down the street, getting a butt full of asphalt. Briar calls for 2 Harm, but Spirit Armor blocks 1 point.

Steffan gets up, knocks on the car's tinted window, thinking of yelling at the driver. The window rolls, revealing Logan!

**Logan:** Is that your blood?

**Steffan:** Some of it, I think.

Logan gives Steffan his flannel shirt, Steffan gets in and drives. I point out that people sometimes keep cards and documents in their cars, in the glove compartment, or clipped to the top of the sunshade, so Erica has Logan search the car for info, and finds papers from FBI Agent Gunther Dupris. Tall, good-looking. Briar also makes sure to mention that the car has two shotguns in a gun rack.

Logan's Dark Patron contacts Logan, telling him to bring Steffan to him. They argue about this for a bit, since Steffan's haphazard Catholic upbringing is making him leery of mysterious shape-shifting figures bartering for

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souls in graveyards. Logan also fills Steffan in on the stuff that went on in the previous session (“...and then I was *inside* Blue, and it’s really terrible in there...”), since Steffan spent it all separate from the other PCs (I note that Steffan didn’t speak a single line of dialog in the entire previous session, since he only spent a few minutes of it not in wolf-form), but he eventually convinces Steffan to at least hear the Patron out. The Patron says he can take care of the feds so they won’t see us. Steffan insists on stopping off at the school to get first aid at the football field’s first aid station, since Briar’s calling for Keep Your Cool rolls while Steffan drives, due to the pain of his gravel-pocked buttocks. It’s 1 AM, and the city’s under curfew, so it’s not like they’re in danger of being caught.

At the cannery: The tall man, Agent Gunther Dupris, is talking into his phone to another agent, about how someone stole his car.

**Blue:** Embarrassing!

**Dupris:** You, go sit facing that wall, hands behind your back.

**Johnni:** Did he just put me in time out?

Dupris keeps talking on his phone, filling someone in on details, asking for a pick-up. He checks Drake’s ID, asks him “Kennedy. Teresa’s kid?” Drake tries to smooth-talk the agent, use the fact that he knows Drake’s mom as a lever to pry more information out of him, but it doesn’t work. Drake recommends the agents keep an eye on the cemetery, Logan might go there. Blue keeps pissing off Dupris with snarky comments, and Dupris keeps telling Blue to sit back down. A black SUV shows up.

**Dupris:** <nodding at the SUV> What’s between me and your mother is between me and her, not me and him.

**Blue:** <to Drake> Did that guy just admit to fucking your mom?

The agent driving the SUV looks annoyed at Agent Dupris. There are also two shotguns on the SUV’s gun rack, Briar makes sure to point out. (Not sure if this is her warning us or tempting us.) The agents want to drop Drake and Blue off at Drake’s house, but Blue wants to go pick up Anna first, whom he describes as his girlfriend.

**Agent Dupris:** Call her.

**Blue:** I don’t have my phone, it got swept up in the tornado.

**Dupris:** Drake, call her.

**Drake:** <same intonation as Blue> I don’t have my phone, it got swept up in the tornado.

**Dupris:** <sighs> What’s her number?

**Blue:** I don’t know! We’re teenagers! We don’t know numbers!

Blue keeps pushing to pick up Anna, so Briar calls for a Turn Someone On roll, which succeeds. Blue winds up getting a String on Dupris representing that he knows how to get under Dupris’s skin, but this does not result

in them going to pick up Anna. The agents take the kids to Drake’s home, and tell them to obey the curfew.

**Blue:** <to Agent Dupris> Looking forward to you pushing me up against the wall again!

Drake pulls out his phone (yes, he’d been lying about losing it), texts his mom, asks her about “Gunther.” His mom immediately calls him back:

**Mom:** How do you know that name?

**Drake:** He gave us a ride home.

**Blue:** And hit on your friend!

Drake’s mom has Dupris on her payroll, but doesn’t know what he’s doing in town. Blue tries to get more details from Drake about why Logan tried to kill him. Drake doesn’t admit trying to kill Logan, but does spill about Byron’s ghost, who’s watching them in the living room.

Blue can’t see or hear Byron, but is happy to try and attack the place where Drake says he’s standing. Every so often, for the rest of the session, Blue will flip his middle finger toward wherever he thinks Byron might be.

Blue also updates Drake on the whereabouts of his car (which we’re pretty sure got swept up in the tornado):

**Blue:** Oh I lost your car, and Laeli stole my stuff, and I’m pretty sure Steffan doesn’t have his pants, I just feel it in my bones, which I have now, and I fucking hate it!

Steffan and Logan walk into the first aid station – they don’t even need to break in, since Steffan broke into it yesterday afternoon (E&A #9, pg 149), and the door hasn’t been repaired yet. He washes off the blood, but Logan (whose heart belongs to Pete) isn’t willing to get delicate and intimate, just spraying Steffan’s butt with antiseptic at arm’s length, so Steffan only heals 1 Harm, not the 2 you get with sexy care.

They then break into school to get the clothes Steffan left there yesterday, after nearly drowning (E&A #8, pgs 173–174). Briar calls for a Keep Your Cool roll for Steffan to break a window with a paving stone, and I roll a failure, so Steffan drops the stone on his foot, 1 Harm! But it’s still a bright moonlit night, so Steffan’s Spirit Armor blocks the Harm, and I get to check off another experience box. Logan breaks the window, and Steffan goes in and has pants now. Yay!

On the way out, Steffan sees headlights approaching, so they quickly drive off to the cemetery. Steffan doesn’t get a chance to check if his phone is still lying in the parking lot.

Drake gets a call from his mom. He puts her on speaker.

**Blue:** When am I getting paid?

**Mom:** You’re not.

**Drake:** You need to negotiate for that.

Mom wants Drake to drive over (they live in nearby Tenleyton), but he has no car. (Blue left Drake’s car near Laeli’s house, and we suspect it got swept up by the

tornado. We imagine Drake walking around town with his key fob, clicking it and listening for the answering beep, and hearing it coming from the top of a tree.) (Did I mention the tornado last session? I might have forgotten it. There was a lot going on.)

**Blue:** Why is your AI ELIZA making my friend act weird?

Mom doesn't have an answer for that, but she tells Drake that he's under investigation, as a facilitator of Byron, aka "Young Epstein." She wants Drake out of the country for a dozen or so years. Statute-of-limitations laws exist for a reason, she says.

Blue and Drake talk about next steps, finding the rest of the PCs, figuring out what to do about the well. Drake has a boat (of course Drake has a boat!), so they can get to the island.

Drake calls Logan. Logan calls Drake a murderer, tells Blue about what Drake did. Drake and Logan argue back and forth a bit about who did what, and who deserved it. Drake warns that the feds are watching the cemetery. There's a discussion about whether Steffan should trust Logan and his Patron. Blue suggests requiring, as a condition of Steffan's agreeing to meet, that the Patron should appear in a ridiculous form that Steffan won't find impressive, like a featherless bird. A plucked ostrich, maybe. The rest of us think that actually sounds pretty terrifying, and Johnni admits that Blue isn't really clear on what an ostrich is.

When Logan and Steffan get to the cemetery, I say that since we've already had a puppet episode (E&A #12, pg 135), should we have a musical episode? Briar asks if anyone can sing, and I break out with:

♪♪ **Hey there, ELIZA**, what's been happening to our city?  
There's a mist that makes folks crazy, things are getting  
really shitty  
Yeah it's true ♪♪

There's a black SUV waiting at the cemetery, but when Steffan and Logan get there, a bright light shines from inside the SUV, and it starts shaking, and we hear shouting. We do not investigate. We walk into cemetery, and suddenly it's bright day. Like *really* bright. The Sun is standing in front of us, in giant humanoid form. Logan's phone sparks and dies. (At this point, Drake and Laeli are the only ones with working phones.)

The Sun greets Steffan ("Hello, little wolf"), extending his hand, and there's a bit of confusion as I say I'm reluctant to shake it, and Briar clarifies that it's just a gesture towards Steffan – the hand is four times Steffan's size, and touching it would incinerate him. The Sun then drops some backstory: He used to be the sun god, and his sister was the moon goddess, sacred to the werewolves, but she's sleeping. In olden times beasts ruled the earth. Then came the time of women, and domestication, followed by the time of men, our current day.

There's some point where Steffan refers to the Patron

as the Devil. Logan argues no, he's just a demon or... something. Steffan says that a smooth-talking supernatural being who hangs out in graveyards and offers to trade favors for souls is obviously the Devil. The Patron points out that Jesus works the same way, offering people favors for their souls. As a player, I am aware that the Patron is not accurately describing the Catholic models of salvation and the dispensation of divine grace, but Steffan merely thinks he should have maybe paid more attention in catechism class.

Steffan caught the Patron's attention earlier, when he howled at the moon, and it almost reached her. The Patron thinks that, with the power in the well, he can reawaken his sister and make some serious changes. The Patron wants to use the mist to bring back the moon, and create more werewolves.

**Steffan:** As a wolf, I've done some things. Things I'm not, um, proud of.

**Johnni:** Aw, Steffan's such a good boy!

**Patron:** You're feral. You weren't raised by people who understood you. These new werewolves, you can raise them right. You can change people who have the potential.

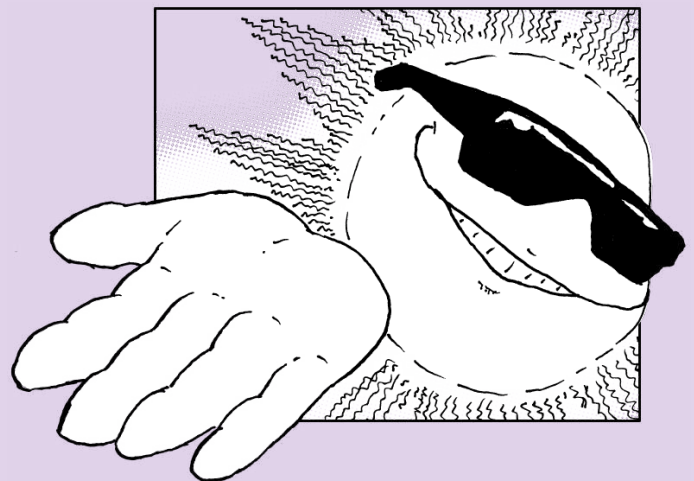
**Logan:** How will we find them?

**Patron:** You will find them the way you found this one.

**Logan:** By hitting them with a car?

The Patron wants us to get the mist-power out of the well on Blackwell Island. Agatha took the part of the power that was sound; now we need to trap the sight, taste, smell, and feel. Steffan mentions he heard the sound in the mountains.

Blue and Drake contact Anna, warn her that Laeli is unhinged. Blue wants to go to the well. Blue also asks Drake if he's got any more spare phones, but he's out. Drake gets a pop-up to call ELIZA. (Mike and Johnni are sitting next to each other. Briar says something about a pop-up on Drake's phone, and Mike mimes putting a phone between them and pressing the screen. Then he seems confused about who initiated the call, and Johnni



says something about how the pop-up interface works. Briar says “Yes, that is how the interface works,” and then clarifies that that was ELIZA talking. Mike and Johnni both flinch away from the imaginary phone as if startled, shouting “Ahhh!” It wants to talk about the conversation Drake had and his mom. Drake asks if ELIZA’s monitoring his calls – yes, that’s the default setting. They have a conversation about how to keep Drake from being sent overseas.

**Drake:** How do I keep my mom from sending me to Singapore?

**ELIZA:** Oh, Singapore has an extradition treaty. They’d probably send you somewhere in South America.

Blue asks if ELIZA told Laeli to ditch him (referring to Laeli running off last session with everyone’s phones and car keys), and ELIZA’s evasive, but later on in the conversation says something that implies that it did, and Blue’s like “Aha! Got you!” and gains a String on ELIZA. ELIZA also says something about Laeli, Agatha, and CJ needing help, and being endangered by “a wolf.” We’re kinda puzzled by that. Is there another werewolf? Maybe just a mundane wolf-wolf? After the end of the previous session, I thought that maybe Steffan, while he was blacked out (see E&A #12, pgs 140–141), had killed Agatha, but now I’m wondering if maybe he just injured her, and the help they need is to keep her from dying. On the other hand, in the 18th century, “wolf” was a term used to describe cancerous tumors, so maybe that’s it?

Blue and Drake try to call Logan, getting no answer, because his phone was just destroyed (An old Nokia pre-smart phone! You can’t get those anymore!), so they head to the cemetery – Drake’s got a motorcycle with a sidecar. And that’s where we end for the session.

We notice that the PCs are more or less on the same page again, and figure that’ll probably last until NJ makes a session and Laeli starts doing her thing.

We’d set June 11th for Session 12, but some players had other stuff pop up. Briar wants everyone present for the next episode, so we’re aiming for the 28th.

## Scum and Villainy, Session #7

20 June. This is our first session since March.

- ◆ **The GM** (Gaylord)
- ◆ **Harmony Qián**, a **Mechanic** (me)
- ◆ **Valsi**, a **Mystic** (Lisa)
- ◆ **Von Redwell**, **Muscle** (Gareth)
- ◆ **Varilas**, aka **Vary**, a xeno **Speaker** (Josh)

We’re in Iota system, having dropped off the guy (the cloned heir to the governor) we rescued last session (E&A # 10, pgs 131–132) at Indri, and then returned to the shipyards. We’ve changed the name of our ship from the Stardancer to the Waydancer, to reflect that we’re all a bunch of Way-obsessed weirdos, and Von’s been repainting it on the hull, but he only got it part done, so

we’re the Wardancer for now.

We’re contacted by Citani, our reclusive info broker contact:

**Citani:** I have a job for you if you like money. Do you like money?

**Valsi:** Yes, we like money.

**Citani:** Good, because you’ll hate everything else about it.

It involves sub-contracting with the Ashen Knives, an interstellar crime cartel. House Malklaith has hired the Knives to throw a splashy birthday party for the governor’s new heir. We’re being hired to transport animals – rare, valuable ones, cryo-frozen for ease of transport. The destination is Warren, the sector capital, in Rin system, where we’re WANTED: 1. The job pays 10+ CRED. Lisa’s curious whether Harmony’s brother or ex-sister-in-law will be involved (see E&A #8, pgs 177–179).

The party is the social event of the season, so all the bigwigs will be showing up to give gifts to the heir. Also, it’s tax-collection season. House M has hired the Knives to keep the Knives from being hired against them. And to frighten off any would-be trouble-makers.

Harmony emails Oya (the ex-sister-in-law), social and a bit flirty. Rolls 6 on CONSORT roll, finds out Oya will be there, what she’ll be wearing, and that the official colors are purple & silver.

Valsi ATTUNES, and finds out that there’s gonna be some kind of trouble with the cargo. Von finds out (I forget how) that it’s gonna be a crowded event, lots of ships. Vary hacks for info, gets a **smallcaps** (“Crit”), learns that the cargo is contraband. Some recreational drugs, but also an illegal-to-transport xeno from ice world Lithios. Also two people are on the manifest: Ren Liranz, an expert on the xeno, and Asha Munzen, listed as a gift. (She’s a former lover of the governor, exiled to Lithos.) Neither of them is in cryo.

Harmony trawls databases, finds out that Asha is a Way mystic, and it seems she broke up with the governor. Valsi wants to keep Asha away from the Aleph Key, the Way artifact we picked up in the first adventure (E&A #3, pg 62).

We decide this is a Social engagement, because the main problem is keeping our two surprise guests under control. (I’m not sure this is the right call.) We roll 2 dice, and get a 2. Ouch! Our obvious problem: Ren & Asha hate each other, and Asha knows Ren is breaking the law. Von yells at them to behave, Ren draws a gun. Von points out that they’re both breaking the law, now go to their state-rooms and be quiet. COMMAND roll, desperate position, takes a Gambit, 5 dice: result 6. They back off for now. Ren attends to his frozen xeno, petting it and whispering to it. Asha starts “passive-aggressively meditating.” We get everything loaded and take off.

Vary chats with Asha, who clocks that Vary’s a xeno. Harmony finds Ren wandering around waving a stick. He blathers some mathematical nonsense at her, and she

replies “That’s not right. It’s not even wrong.” She tells him to stop, and he says he wants a doctor. Harmony leads Ren to the med bay, and calls Von (who has one dot of DOCTOR), who offers him a sedative. He accepts, and admits that he’s nervous about Asha, and that what he’s doing is “super-illegal.” He wants to clone the xeno, re-spawn its species.

The next trouble comes just before the jump to Rin system: Ren’s trying to thaw the xeno out. I narrate a flashback to Harmony putting a lock-out on the medical equipment. Von pretends to help Ren, but then injects him with sedative. SCRAP roll: (risky, limited) 5. Ren, injected, falls unconscious. But the xeno moves a bit!

Von drags Ren off to the med-bay. Harmony takes Ren’s stick to examine it: It’s not a stick, it’s a xeno bone. Valsi ATTUNES to the iced xeno, and rolls a CRIT. This is the last remaining member of its species because it killed the others to absorb their knowledge and power. It wants to keep doing this to everything in the universe. In ancient times, some civilization froze Lithios specifically to trap this xeno!

Vary talks to Asha, who’s in a better mood now, about Ren. He’s a famous xeno-biologist. Asha thinks Lithios was where the Way first communicated with humans. Valsi tells Asha what Valsi learned about the xeno, and Asha nods indulgently.

Ren wakes up, wants to be released. Von says no. Ren dismisses the Way as “mystic bullshit.” He claims to have worked things out with the Ashen Knives, and planned to give the xeno as a gift to the governor. Says he’ll give us a good review if we release him. Then tries to bribe Von with 2 CRED. After some more discussion he claims his Ashen Knives contact was Oya.

Asha offers Vary a Way reading. Vary wants to know how to best protect her people. Asha says, “Continue on doing what you’re doing and things will turn out for the best,” but Vary can tell she’s lying, and not saying what she saw. (This was a 3 on a Fortune roll.) Vary tries to CONSERV to convince her to tell what she actually saw, and rolls 4. It’s unclear, but helping House M may, in the long term, help the Magpies, or harm them. “Of course, I’ll have to tell the Governor I told you this,” but Josh resists the consequence, so “oh, I guess I’ll just put it in the files he never reads.”

Harmony emails Oya to find out how much she knows about “these last-minute additions to the manifest.” Rolls: 5. Oya replies of course, why are we asking, came to the priority dock instead of the regular one.

Asha tells us that Oya reached out to her and Ren separately to see if they’re OK.

We arrive at the governor’s palace, which is still partly under reconstruction from the last time we were there (see E&A #7, pg 146). Cars (two separate ones) come for Asha and Ren. We’ve added additional locks to the cryo

device for the xeno. Von takes Ren aside, tries to convince him to not do highly illegal things. Gaylord offers Gareth a Devil’s Bargain: an extra die on the roll if he accepts that his favorite gun gets stolen. Gareth accepts, and rolls a 6, so Ren agrees not to do any highly illegal things, but as he drives off, he reveals that he stole Von’s gun, which is only *somewhat* illegal.

**Von:** Her name is Vera!

**Ren:** You mean Bobby?

Harmony & Valsi ask Oya about the xeno, and she doesn’t seem concerned. She tells us to just obey Hegemonic law – funny from an assassin.

We get 12 CRED – 2 each & 4 for the ship. No **smallcaps** (“Heat”)! First time! Entanglement roll: 4. The Hegemonic News Network is going to move against us, but we pay 2 CRED to make that not happen.

This was a short enough session that we broke out another game:

### Ringmaster



20 Jun. This is a Descended From the Queen game, meaning it uses the rules from For the Queen, a fast-playing card-based GM-less storytelling game.

The way this works is that there’s a deck of Prompt cards, and players take turns drawing a Prompt, reading it aloud, and then answering the question it poses. Or, optionally, if they think the card fits someone else’s character better, they can pass the card off to them.

Some Prompt cards have Crisis icons on them; after being answered, these cards are placed in the middle of the table, near the Crisis deck. Once three such cards have been placed there, a Crisis card is drawn, and each player gets to decide how their character reacts to the crisis, and then the game ends.

The rules are written on a series of cards that the players take turns reading.

There are also some Circus cards, with evocative images: We chose 3 randomly: A marionette, a skeleton with a crown, and a rag doll.

You have the option of coming up with a character in advance, or just letting someone develop in play. We went with the latter, and that worked pretty well.

I couldn’t write fast enough to get down the full card text, so these are just abbreviated versions of the Prompts, or in some cases the Prompts are missing entirely:

**Lisa:** *In every town, someone dies or disappears. What did you see?* (CRISIS)

I saw a young boy going into the Ringmaster’s tent.

**Josh:** *A new performer joins the circus with your exact talents. A sharpshooter & knife-thrower, which is great, because*

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we can throw knives at each other and shoot apples off each-other's heads!

**Me:** *A child gave you a gift after a show. What makes it so precious to you that you've kept it?*  
A clown doll, which looks just like me, a clown.

**Gareth:** Joined circus under fake pretenses. I want to uncover the Ringmaster's crimes; I pretend to speak with the dead. (It later turns out that this is no pretense.)

**Gaylord:** *Knows something that could change the fate of circus.* (CRISIS)  
In an old box there's a puppet made of precious metals and gems. Everyone thinks they're fake, but I know they're real.

**Lisa:** The Ringmaster's been mistreating the animals, threatened me with poison.

**Josh gives his card to Gaylord:** *The Ringmaster has been protecting you. Why?*  
I handle the tickets and money, and have never stolen.

**Josh gives his card to Gareth:** *Circus has gone to your hometown, and the Ringmaster asked you to hide. Why?*  
A family there lost their child, the Ringmaster was afraid they'd ask me to speak with the dead child.

**Josh:** *You were allowed to leave circus for two days, what did you see?*  
A family invited me to have dinner, and they used knives for eating, instead of throwing!

**Me:** *After the crowd leaves, the circus changes in ways that make it too dangerous to leave.*  
The cages disappear and the animals roam free. They don't tear down the tents, but they hunt anyone outside them.

**Gareth:** *You have an irrational fear of the Ringmaster.*  
I once spoke to the Ringmaster before joining the circus, but the Ringmaster was dead.

**Gaylord:** *A member of the circus is interested in your past. Why does this make you uncomfortable?*  
Gareth's character keeps asking about dead family members.

**Lisa:** *Mysterious arrival. Why did you join the circus?*  
Joined because I was a fugitive, who had way with animals. Someone had mistreated a puppy, and after I was done with them, they wouldn't mistreat any more.

**Josh:** *You feel lesser, though the Ringmaster treats you well. Why?*  
I'm an artificial being, created to be the circus's knife-thrower.

**Me:** *The circus is a cover for something different. What?*  
An invasion. The animals are aliens. My job is to make sure the Ringmaster does not shirk his duty. **Lisa** asks me why the Ringmaster mistreats the animals; I answer that he resents them, since he's of lower status. (This, asking another player for more details, is something anyone is allowed to do, but I don't think anyone else did it.)

**Gareth gives his card to Gaylord:** *There are posters in town depicting your likeness.*  
The posters show a child who disappeared at five, and it's me, but I'm alive, and remember nothing before the circus.

**Gareth:** *Draws a (CRISIS) icon, but I don't remember the prompt text.*  
People in the circus are afraid I will speak to the Ringmaster when dead, which will destroy the Ringmaster. (Not sure I wrote this response down quite right either.)

That's the third Prompt with a CRISIS icon, so we draw a Crisis card and work out the ending:  
**Crisis card:** *Locals have discovered the true nature of the circus. They've come to destroy it. Do you join them, fight back against them, or abandon the troupe?*

**Josh:** Sees his apprentice attacked, defends him, and is killed, but the apprentice gets away.

**Gaylord:** The ticket taker is never found. He's a ghost haunting the jeweled doll, which someone takes home.

**Gareth:** Confronts the Ringmaster, who reveals the secret of living after death, which involves binding one's self to the invasion.

**Lisa:** Frees the animals.

**Me:** The Ringmaster is surrounded by animals. Begs for help from me, the clown. Clown shakes head (never speaks), takes the Ringmaster's hat and jacket, lets the animals have their way with him, and hands the hat and jacket to Gareth's character.

**Josh:** The knife-thrower gets up, smiling wide, says "Who wants to see some knife-throwing?"

This was a fun game, but I'm not sure how much replay value it has. It's not intended for campaign play, just one-shots, and the tone makes it something I don't think I'd be interested in playing frequently. I can't see doing creepy circus every couple of weeks for a few months, but if someone worked up a *Fiasco*-style version of this game, possibly played with a deck of ordinary playing cards and a look-up table, I could see playing a different variation session after session as a long-term thing.

(And indeed, [at least some of the Descended From the Queen games](#) work that way, with ordinary playing cards.)

None of us bothered to come up with names for our characters, or any but the barest of details. We did pretty much all of our roleplay in third-person narration

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of action form, with essentially no in-character dialog or interaction, but there's nothing in the game that requires this. I suspect that if one of us had started acting in-character, others would likely have followed. But also, the game would probably have taken longer.

## Comments on E&A #12

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### Matt Stevens

YCT **Lisa Padol** (PG 13) RE GM-less games ⇒ What you're talking about is a thing that actually exists! There's a whole class of game supplements out there called GM emulators, probably the most popular of which is [the Mythic GM Emulator from Word Mill Games](#). They're generally designed for solo play with conventional (non-solo) games, but could probably be pressed into service as a mechanical GM substitute for a group, provided they shared out the NPC roleplaying.

In practice, I'm guessing that whichever player figured out how the emulator worked would wind up doing most of the dice-rolling, and would risk evolving into a de-facto GM. I could see a fun [Knights of the Dinner Table](#) arc built around this premise, with the various characters scheming to advance their character goals while angrily insisting that they're not seizing GM privilege.

RE Jane Austen's society (PG 13) ⇒ This reminds me of someone on [Mastodon](#), a few years back, asking what sci-fi stories people were reading, and since I was reading *Pride and Prejudice*, I described it as a dystopian novel set in a society where women had no rights, and thus had to center their whole lives around arranging a marriage with a wealthy protector.

You might enjoy [Jo Walton's 2003 novel Tooth and Claw](#), which takes Victorian social habits, as portrayed in the stories of [Anthony Trollope](#), and turns them into dragon biology.

### Roger BW

YCT **me** (PG 24) RE *telenovela* game ⇒ There already is at least one: [Pasión de las Pasiones](#), a [PbtA](#) game from Magpie Games. I haven't tried it.

### Patrick Riley

RE XP for GP (PG 80) ⇒ There's an OSR game called [Backwords & Bucklers](#) which is an adaptation of [Swords & Wizardry: White Box](#) (a retro-close on original D&D) to playing in Elizabethan London. It has three character classes, each of which earn experience points in a different way: The Fighting Man gets XP for fighting foes (double if they win!), the Scoundrel for spending money, and the Wise Woman/Cunning Man for helping people in trouble.

I think author Christopher Cale had plans for more classes in later expansions, but never wrote them.

YCT **me** (PG 82) RE better TV shows nowadays ⇒ I don't think quality has much to do with it. Genre books are often

trashy, and that's actually one of their virtues – they're creative work done quickly, often by writers under financial pressure, and neglected by mainstream critics. Those are conditions where you get close to the human id:

Fin Fang Foom. Its and Things and Them and BEMs.  
The bright Bikini Atoll glow that permeates the '50s  
birth mutations and leviathans within the artist's  
deadline haunted mind; that feverish hack energy, that  
"Get it done by Thursday" that allows no time for  
conscious thought, and thus the dream and prophecy  
seeps through.

– Alan Moore, in a tribute to Jack Kirby  
in *Wizard* magazine, 1994

(It's plain that Moore desired to impress us with that paragraph so sweet, 'cause all that marches onward from the second line goes on [iambic feet](#).)

(And yet Gemini, tasked with its usual check, tried to tell me the meter was anapest. *Dreck!*)

YCT **me** (PG 82) RE *Star Wars* ⇒ My impression of the *Star Wars* setting is that it was (before Palpatine) a liberal federal republic at the galactic level (and possibly the sector level), with a variety of governmental forms at the system and planetary level. Consider how several of the European Union's member nations are technically monarchies, but that doesn't make the EU itself a monarchy.

I think *Star Trek's* Federation works similarly, and it's a pretty great setup for episodic story-telling. You've got an excuse for all of the planets to have people who speak the Galactic Common Language and a common monetary system for traveling space merchants, but the variety of governmental forms lets you have an election story on one planet, and then a royal succession story on another.

YCT **me** (PG 82) RE enthusiastic buy-in ⇒ I'm pretty sure that a game in which *most* of the players are enthusiastic can get by with a few that are tentative-but-willing-to-try. But I've been in games where most of the players were like "eh, whatever," and those games didn't work out.

I also think that the original model of 1970s D&D, where you had a large group of players led by a caller, could probably survive having some unengaged players more easily than modern games with small groups that expect everyone to contribute.

### Michael Cule

RE "the GM had triggered Humakt's seasonal Holy Day a day early" (PG 88) ⇒ I'm told that this was a thing the priesthood could actually do in ancient Rome, prior to the Julian calendar reform of 45 BCE. There was an intercalary month, Mercedonius, of either 27 or 28 days, that got inserted between the beginning and end of the year every so often to bring the Roman year into sync with the actual solar year, but the head priest, the *pontifex maximus*, would sometimes insert it (or skip it) to lengthen an ally's political term in office (or shorten an enemy's).

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## Lisa Padol

RE the Keep Your Cool rolls (PG 104) ⇒ What was actually happening (E&A #10, pg 131) was Briar was calling for Keep Your Cool without first asking Mike to name what Drake was afraid of, and then straining to come up with a plausible partial outcome.

Interesting thing about the Keep Your Cool move: Success doesn't mean that you succeed at the thing you're trying to do. On 10+, you get to ask a question which gives you a +1 on the next roll you make acting upon the answer, or might give you the information you need to make choices which eliminate the need for further rolls. On 7-9, you're told what you risk if you continue. On failure, nothing specific, but the usual failure rules. It's not a *Do you do the thing?* move; it's a *Clarify the stakes and options before trying to do the thing* move.

Which explains why we were stuck in a loop: there was no obvious move to progress to after Keep Your Cool except for another Keep Your Cool. The output of a Keep Your Cool roll isn't success/failure, it's information about the situation. A lot of people are clearly treating it like the Do Something Under Fire move from *Apocalypse World*, which *does* resolve success/failure (while also possibly raising stakes).

YCT me (PG 107) RE Amber ⇒ I'm surprised you never played with Wujcik, given how many more conventions you go to than I do. I played in a playtest of *Amber Diceless* he ran at *Noreascon 3* in 1989, but I remember almost nothing about it. My PC was a child of Random, I think. There were some bits of character creation that were slightly different between the playtest edition and the final release, but I don't recall exactly what. And the player sitting next to me was from Germany, and had learned British English, so when he needed an eraser, he asked me if he could borrow "a rubber." (I explained to him that in the US, that's slang for a condom.)

Hey, Brits, do y'all still call erasers "rubbers," even if they're *modern plastic erasers*? Like we still call pencil leads "leads" even though we know they're graphite or wax-bound pigment?

## Dylan Capel

YCT me (PG 130) RE *Cross Bronx Expressway* ⇒ Oh, the fact that the subject matter was close to home *definitely* made a difference! I doubt that we'd have been as interested in a similar game about the Santa Monica Freeway. As to what I thought of it, it was a good game, but not a great one. Not sure if I'll ever play it again, but I'm glad I got to play it once.

## self

RE *Umdaar* (PG 132) ⇒ The full version is out! [PDF is pay-what-you-want on DriveThruRPG!](#) There might be a print-on-demand version if there's enough interest.

I haven't looked through it, but [I hear](#) there's a lot of cool *Fate* stuff inside!

## Erica Frank (Elf)

RE superheroes (PG 291) ⇒ I've got a copy of *Different Worlds #30* (Sep 1983), which has write-ups of the New Teen Titans for three major superhero games of the day, written by the authors of those games: a *Champions* writeup by Steve Peterson, a *Superworld* writeup by Steve Perrin, and a *Villains & Vigilantes* writeup by Jack Herman. (The *Champions* and *V&V* writeups were also illustrated by the main artists for those games, Mark Williams and Jeff Dee. Luise Perenne, who illustrated the *Superworld* writeups, was the illustrator for *RuneQuest*, but not for *Superworld*.)

The *Champions* versions come out as very high-point characters, generally 350-400 points. Clearly these are not starting *Champions* PCs, but you could build your way up to them over time.

The *Superworld* versions come out around 200 points (250 for Robin, 322 for Raven). I've never actually played *Superworld*, but looking over the rules, it seems like you roll your characteristics randomly, then sum them to get Hero points to spend on powers. The sample character in the book has 157 points of stuff, but with lucky rolls a character could start off over 200 points.

The *V&V* versions all have experience levels, mostly in the 7-11 range, but Robin is 17th level, and Terra only 2nd. So again, not starting PCs, but you could get there.

But those are all old games, from the 1980s, built around the old wargaming ideal of working out the physical capabilities of the character. For superheroes, as you point out, that doesn't work. No plausible system that simulates what the Flash and Superman are shown as being capable of would have room for Batman or Green Arrow. So: a more narrative-based system, with meta-gaming mechanics to keep characters on a more level playing field. I haven't played *Icons*, which is a sort of mashup of *Fate* with the old *Marvel FASERIP system*, but I hear good things about it.

Memory manipulation is a tough superpower to handle at the table, but it's not any tougher than a memory-altering spell in a fantasy game, or a memory-editing psychic power in a sci-fi game, or hypnotic memory-changing in a pulp action game. (Though I kinda like the idea of a hit-location table for psychic powers. "Blam! He hits you in your memories of grade school geometry class! Now you can't calculate bank-shot attacks!")

As far as character death goes, that's a solved problem. Take the game I'm in right now, *Monsterhearts* – it's very difficult for a PC to die in that game if the player doesn't want them to. I've played *Masks*, a popular superhero *PbtA* game, and I don't recall it having any rules for PC death. Even *Longshot City*, the superhero game based on *Troika*, has a table you roll on instead of dying, where you can come back as a clone, or duplicate from another dimension, or some other fate that doesn't involve your character actually dying. (I don't like the *Longshot City* mechanics for actual superhero play, but that Knockout

---

Table is brilliant.)

Ooh, how about this: Instead of dying, when a superhero PC is reduced to zero hit points (or some other mechanic), they get *passed to another player*, as if the writer for that hero had been taken off the book and a new writer brought in. There's a feature of real comics superheroes that we don't usually see in RPGs!

### Joshua Kronengold

YCT **Matt Stevens** (PG 157) RE name spelling ⇒ Page design tip: The reason I designed my page layout to include my name at the bottom of every page is to make it easy for people to copy-and-paste it when writing comments on my zine.

YCT **Matt Stevens** (PG 157) RE John C Wright's gold-buggery ⇒ [Wright's Golden Oecumene](#) trilogy was published before the Everness books, though I think Everness was written first. I found that particular character an arrogant boor, myself, and his right-wing politics were apparent pretty early on. (And Wright turned out to have worse opinions than gold-buggery, like raging homophobia. [And I mean raging literally](#). And I mean *literally* literally.)

YCT **Lisa Padol** (PG 163) RE Strings in *Monsterhearts* ⇒ Also, one of the MC (GM) moves is Take a String on someone (*Monsterhearts*, 2nd ed, pg 97). This is primarily intended for side characters (NPCs), but I don't see anything keeping the MC from giving your PC a String on another PC who tries to put a move on you and fails. And, of course, you generally wind up with a bunch of starting-out Strings from the Backstory phase of character creation.

### Jim Vassilakos

RE content provenance system (PG 169) ⇒ Have you read *Distress*, the 1995 novel by [Greg Egan](#)? The narrator is a journalist, and the opening chapter describes a system similar to what you're talking about, where cryptographically-signed raw footage is saved to storage locations on three different continents, and the finished video news story is published as a series of editing instructions referring to that raw footage.

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a cruel, cruel world.



# THE DRAGON'S BEARD

JULY 2026

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I can be found as pdzoch at  
[boardgamegeek.com](http://boardgamegeek.com),  
[rpggeek.com](http://rpggeek.com), [enworld.org](http://enworld.org),  
[fantasy-grounds.com](http://fantasy-grounds.com), [discord.com](http://discord.com),  
and [boardgamearena.com](http://boardgamearena.com).



## NATTER

First, *mea culpa* for my horrendous editing on my last issue. Trying to rush through a complex topic didn't help either, especially when I was racing a deadline. I got a new keyboard last year and it has been a bit of a trial for me. It works wonderfully – it is super responsive and smooth. The one thing different about it from my old one is that this one is a silent keyboard. My old one was a clicky. Sure, that made it noisy, but it helped me control my typing. I'm a sloppy typist. I am rarely as precise as I liked to be in my untrained typing. I am prone to hit multiple keys at the same time or strike one key slightly sooner than I intended. With a silent keyboard, I can't hear the mistake. Sometimes I can catch it as I read while I type, but I am often looking at another screen instead. But with a clicky, I can hear strokes and where I am typing on the board. I can hear the double strike, or the strike sooner than I intended as I lazily position my hands over the keyboard. I'll get used to the silent keyboard. Or, I could actually learn to type. But meanwhile, I just need to plan better, start sooner, and allow time to edit. Just not this month.

My wife and I are wrapping up our second series of ballroom dancing. We are still in the learning beginner stage, but we have enjoyed the experience very much. The instructions have been very good, and the dances taught a nice variety. We learned the basics of eight different dances and usually one or two additional movements for each of the dances. It does not make us very interesting to watch at all, but we learned enough that we could get onto a dance floor and do some sort of dance to just about any song. Unfortunately, the lessons are expensive and not something we can sustain as a lifestyle, at not for another year or so. Until then, we will attempt to practice what little we know and have a little more confidence to get on the dance floor.

My youngest daughter got engaged this month to a nice gentleman she's known since college.

I had several guests coming to stay for a week supporting their kids attending

Benedictine College, which is a very nice college about 45 minutes north of where we live. The first was seeing their fantastic son graduate with an engineering degree. The second was bringing a van full of kids to attend the college summer program for a week. While the kids were at summer camp, we spend the week having our own little mini-game retreat. We managed 27 games during the week, and I got to learn four new games and teach them the rest. It was a really good time. I need to do this every year.

Work is ... well, work. Just faster. With less resources. Before, it often felt like being in a room where everyone was running around with scissors. Now, it feels like someone is handing out extra scissors, telling everyone to run faster, and then turning out the lights.

We started watching the new *Night Court* starring Melissa Rauch on Netflix. It made us feel nostalgic for the original series. The new series was OK, but John Laroquette was the only interesting character on the series and we did not find it very engaging. Sometimes, we feel nostalgic for an old show only to be disappointed by it when we go back and watch it. Older shows often have a much slower pacing that fails to retain our attention the way it used to. We decided to watch the original *Night Court* with Harry Anderson on Amazon. While the original series did take a couple of seasons to find its stride, we still found it enjoyable. It just engaged us better, but some of it was dated (like the many 80's references), which had its own sort of appeal. Thanks to Harry Anderson, I've gone back to listening to Mel Torme. We have not gone back to the new series on Netflix, and I doubt we ever will.

After hearing all the hype around *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, I decided to pick up a copy on sale earlier this year. I am not reading it at a blistering pace, but I have found it enjoyable so far even if only as a new experience in reading a new genre of literature. The video game references that overlay the story's world are occasionally clever, humorous, and a totally fresh experience to me.

Yesterday, I took my wife to a local professional softball game between the KC Diamonds and the Florida Vibe. It was a fun experience, but it was much like watching college softball and it was reminding me of my old college days watching my wife play softball. Unfortunately, we both got sunburnt in the midday sun and are now walking about gingerly with cooling gel on our lobster red parts.



## GAMING WITH GRANDKIDS

My eldest daughter, who lives in Sicily, asked me to run an role playing game with my granddaughters over the summer. Yes, please! They had fond memories of me running the *Tales of Equestria* RPG for them a couple of summers ago. I looked at a couple of ideas and decided to run *Magical Kitties Save the Day*, partly because the game play is simple and partly because they have and love cats. The challenging part was deciding how



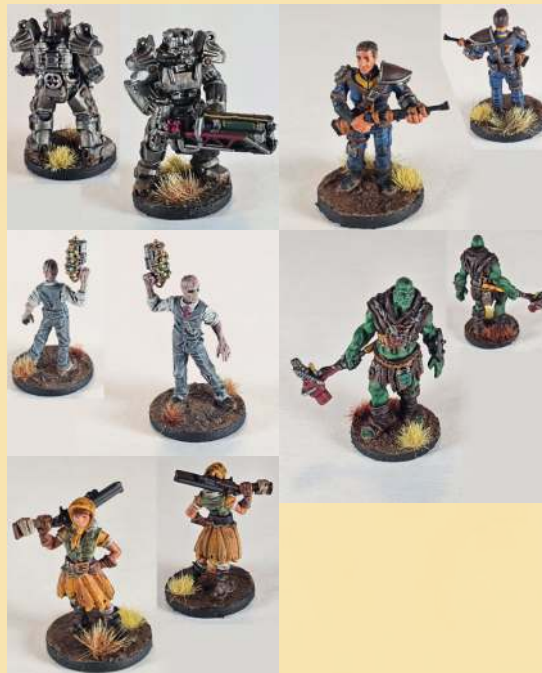
to play the game virtually while keeping the interface simple enough for 7- and 9-year olds. While I usually use Fantasy Grounds, Magical Kitties is not an available rule set for the platform (or any platform for that matter). I considered trying to build the rule set for Fantasy Grounds, but that would require intense coding and time I did not have. My daughter uses Discord along with me, so that was our primary means to talk. I experimented with sharing screens and eventually decided to use PowerPoint as my game kit with Discord's shared screen. I built their characters on a "Main Screen" or the front page of the power point, along with a video camera screen for me. The other slides contain various images I would use for the game – icons for owies and kitty treats, NPC pictures, and other scenes to help tell the story as they played. I simply ran a PowerPoint slide and shared my "presentation screen" for a live show. I would work in the PowerPoint slides to copy images in the backup pages and paste them temporarily on the front page for any part of the story I was one and those images automatically updated on the live screen. The only glitch is when I am working elsewhere from the main presentation, my camera will freeze until I get back on the main screen. I use the "laser pointer" option as a power point pointer, which feels on brand for the game.

I am running *River City* as their campaign, we are playing through the *Magical Kitties Save the Library!* adventure. I am glad that my daughter is playing also – she helps keep the girls focused and manages the die rolling on her side. I love that the two girls drew pictures of their own kitties, Flare and Charming. Steve, my daughter's kitty, is a clip art cat. While the adventure book does provide some illustrations, the story line and scenes are many and varied and often lack illustrations. They are often so unique that a suitable image online can not be found. I've resorted to using AI to generate the necessary images to convey the stories that unfold during the Magical Kitties adventure (to varying degrees of success). We've completed three session so far, and the girls are having a blast, which pleases me to no end!



## FALLOUT FIGURES

I squeezed some time to get some painting done. I decided to knock out the few figures in the board game *Fallout*. They are merely tokens on a map, but painted pieces are always better than grey ones (well, brown ones in this case). I started on the minis to the expansion, but I've stalled on the last mini due to lack of time. Hopefully, I'll get it painted before the summer ends.





A D&D 5<sup>th</sup> Edition 2024 campaign set in Greyhawk. Played over Fantasy Grounds Unity and Discord. Session reports by Kevin Santschi and Patrick Zoch.



**Arael Vexwood** (Kyra)  
Wood Elf 2nd level Sorcerer  
Merchant



**Bareas Wilhelm** (Sarah)  
Dwarf 2nd level Rogue  
Marine



**BoB** (Chris)  
Dwarf 2nd level Barbarian  
Soldier



**Cassian Dawnward** (Kevin)  
Human 2nd level Paladin  
Soldier



**Frocaryn Stonegather** (Delia)  
Halfling 2nd level Cleric  
Guide



**Juan Quixote** (Christie)  
Halfling 2nd level Fighter  
Noble



**Lux Cantata** (Jackie)  
Aasimar 2nd level Bard  
Artisan

## Session 8 & 9: Good Deeds in Saltmarsh

- Prologue -

In the previous session, the party had returned to Saltmarsh to report to the council the results of their investigation of the haunted house. They rescued and escorted back Ned Shakeshaft, a traveler abducted when he tried to find refuge and rest in the house. They also discovered a smuggler operation in the caves beneath the house. While no definite connection to the murdered woman could be made, it is likely she ran afoul of the smugglers. According to the information the party recovered, the smuggler ship should arrive in

two weeks. The Saltmarsh council ordered a guard post at the haunted house to watch for the returning smuggler ship. Meanwhile, the party had a week or two to rest, prepare, do good deeds. These are Cassian's words:

- Scene 1 - Crabber's Cove -

Upon returning, we had hoped to enjoy some free time before venturing out yet again, but it was too good to be true. We've heard rumors about, telling of a dwarf (or several) having disappeared. A ransom has been posted publicly for Manistrad Copperlocks, a devilish scheme to be sure. We made an appearance at the Wicker Goat, hoping to speak to some of the local dwarven populace and gather information, and who else should we find but Miss Copperlocks herself. She shared the ransom note with us: four dwarves were taken, and the rogues demanded a total of 100 gold coins in exchange for their health and safety. Hearing of innocent lives in danger, we have no choice but to step up to the challenge. As we set out to investigate Crabber's Cove, (the villain's proposed hand-off point) Bareas inquired around as to the area, but received little information: a small coastal area half an hour down shore, with very little to speak of. However, sailors have seen strange lights out on the water in recent evenings.

Over at Crabber's Cove, the coastline runs alongside a cliff face, providing few vantage points from the lower position. An abandoned boat sits against the bottom of the cliff face, rather large but rather unassuming. BoB and I flipped it over to discover oars lying on the ground, and a swarm of crabs came scuttling out from underneath it. One giant crab clawed forward to attack us alongside the swarm, and combat begins.

BoB immediately flew into a rage, surely in expectation of the tasty meal awaiting us beyond this fight. He bashed the giant crab into the ground, leaving its shell cracked and splintered, and flipped it onto its back. Frocaryn cast *Toll the Dead* and sent the giant crab to whatever crabby afterlife awaits it. Bareas attempted to scatter oil on the crab swarm, but seasoned the sand next to it instead, and Arael torched exactly one crab with a Fire Bolt. Juan slammed his warhammer into the general midst of the crabs, and they retaliated heavily, tearing away with a flurry of pincer and claw. Lux and I both whiff our attacks, and we begin anew. Arael placed a much better *Fire Bolt* into the fray, and Bareas stabbed it (as well as one may stab a swarm of crabs). BoB laid another heavy blow into the beasts, and I slaughtered the remaining crabs with a quick slash.

Juan, Arael and Lux made their way up a nearby bluff to the top of the cliff, though the

rest of us were unable to climb it (BoB and Bareas due to their short stature, and me due to my bulky armor). A moment later, we hear a yell, and a familiar flash of light: Lux casting *Starry Wisp*. They have met with some assailant, and following yells confirm another swarm of crabs. Frocaryn and BoB both scramble up the slope to join the fight, and I soon heard the clash of an axe. Bareas failed again to climb up the slope, but hearing the battle continue, I bounded up the slope with renewed energy. Too far away to attack properly, I threw a javelin to no avail. Juan bashed the crabs once again, and Arael misses a *Fire Bolt*, leaving flecks of fresh glass in the sand. I can hear Bareas still attempting to stumble up the hill behind me. Many of us attack the creatures before us, but most of us miss. A little while later, BoB rushes forward and critically mauls a great number of the little crabs into the sand, leaving them motionless. Juan finishes off the last of the crabs.

- Scene 2 – The Seaside Hostage Crisis

We continued looking around, and Bareas, who has finally made it up the hill, spotted a sandbar about a half mile off the coast, whereupon rests a ruined ship. We recovered the dinghy at the bottom of the cliff and began rowing towards the hulking figure: a three-mast ship lays tilted in the sand, and we approach from the south. A dog begins barking somewhere ahead, and Alfonso stands alert. Several fishermen, clearly hostile, demanded to know what business we could possibly have there, and between odd attempts to explain our presence, we try to plan our next move. They seem to be hesitant to attack, but strangers stand plotting in front of them. Naturally, they move to apprehend us.

In a wild attempt to avoid bloodshed, Frocaryn scares the living daylights out of them with a divine booming voice (*Thaumaturgy*) chastising them for their wicked acts; while they are stunned, Lux persuades them to minimize their punishment by giving themselves up. The fishermen, visibly quaking, began stammering about how they just wanted their town back, how they wanted no part with the kingdom's schemes and mining ventures, how they didn't have any other choice (what spineless balderdash!) but this. Lux and Arael convince them that we can help them, and moments later, they escort four dwarves from the inside of the ship, the hostages themselves rather unhappy but notably unharmed. We decided to send the miners back first along with our own dwarves in order to avoid any unnecessary conflicts. Lux plays the fishermen a song and I attempt to soothe some of their fears, to no avail. BoB comes back seething and looking to pick a fight, but Lux sits on him (rather effective at quelling the dwarven temper) and we retreat back to Crabbers Cove.

Upon returning to the Wicker Goat, Manistrad is quite happy that we were able to resolve it (mostly) peacefully, and gave us a hefty sum of gold for our troubles. After some short conversations, we end the day.

- Scene 3 – The Living Cellar

As we walk through the streets of Saltmarsh, I overhear several smaller commotions: the town guards are searching businesses across the district in order to determine the smuggler's clients. Crowds form around a house, where guards accompany an orcish sergeant in overseeing the raid on an old woman's dwelling. A fourth guard bursts from the house, screaming bloody murder, and disappears into the streets. Your average weekday happenings. The orc approaches us and requests our help in investigating the house; as the (clearly) most competent folks in town, we step inside to inspect.

Stepping into a large room, there is no clear sign of a scuffle; BoB and Bareas investigate the lit fireplace: it's hot (shocking, I know). I peek into the only side room to find a kitchen, wherein lies another door, seemingly the only way to continue. We proceed through the door and down into the cellar, where a small hallway holds a series of barrels and crates, some intact and some broken. Two corpses adorn the floor, and a flickering torch sputters on the ground near one. A large chest sits against the back wall, and as BoB and I investigate the bodies, Bareas goes to poke around the chest. It creaks open unassisted, revealing rows of sharp teeth and a slimy purple tongue.

Attacks fly: Bareas stabs the fiend, Lux casts *Dissonant Whispers*, and Frocaryn casts *Sacred Flames*. The mimic retaliates against Lux, but misses. Arael casts *Fire Bolt*, I bash the chest in, and BoB lands a heavy killing blow against our foe. It returns to what is presumably its true form, an amorphous blob of... ambiguous matter? Floating in the blob are the spoils of our fight: some coins, black pearls, and a dwarven collar. BoB and Bareas both take a look at the collar, but neither know its purpose.

- Scene 4 – Aw, Rats!

Without warning, Alphonso began barking his furry head off. We rushed upstairs to find the orc sergeant and his guards sprawled about the room, riddled with crossbow bolts and claw marks. I moved forward through the room as the dwarves investigated the bodies, and spotted a hunched figure hugging the shadows around the corner. Egads! The old woman, transformed as it were, into a bestial creature. A wererat, as I've read. She fired her crossbow, but the bolt passed far over my head.



Frocaryn swung around the far side of the room and cast *Sacred Flame*, and BoB moved in with renewed fury, slamming a critical maul strike into the creature, but it shrugged off the blow like it was nothing. Lux sang a haunting *Dissonant Whispers*, which was considerably more effective at wounding the creature. Arael lands a *Fire Bolt*, and the wererat throws the crossbow down in favor of her shortsword, stabbing the angry dwarf in front of her and following in with a vicious bite. Several quick attacks follow up, but the wererat resists all manners of physical damage. The wererat attacks BoB once again, I strike with a *Thunderous Smite*, and Frocaryn finishes it off with a *Toll the Dead*.

After making sure the beast was dead, we covered the remains of the guardsmen, and a few more guards came down the street to investigate. We explained the situation to them and were taken to Eliander Fireborn to describe in further detail. Though it may have been hard to believe such a tall tale, he understood the situation and thanked us for our service.

#### - Scene 5 – Trouble in Tropochorn

With still more than a week remain before the smuggler's ship arrive, the party decided to venture into the countryside to visit the halfling communities in the hills and marshes outside Saltmarsh. The halfling children were excited to see a "real" halfling knight riding a mastiff. During their brief excursion into the peaceful and quaint halfling communities, the learned that there was some trouble in Tropochorn, a

small halfling village in the marshlands. So the party decided to travel to Tropochorn to see if they could be of assistance.

As they approached Tropochorn, they discovered that it was a farming community that harvested some kind of lotus plant; wooden dwellings were scattered around the marshy areas, surrounding large flowers floating in the middle of the bodies of water. A halfling named Noad greets us with offerings of booze, and explains that he is the only council member currently available. The other two are away on business. He explains that the village is small and every member is important. Their resident bard, Ockue, has become missing. The last anyone seen of him was near Charis's house. Charis is the local swamp wizard who helps control the weather which is important for the health of their crops in the swamp. Charis is a bit of an eccentric, prone to pranking the villagers by turning them into aquatic or semi-aquatic creatures for a very-short duration. More of a nuisance than anything else, but the village tolerates it because his powers are so helpful to the village otherwise.

We made way for Charis's house, finding it silent and locked. Arael clambered up on the roof to take a look around, to no avail, and Bareas failed to pick the lock on the front door. Losing patience, BoB took it upon himself to break it down in classic barbarian fashion. Inside, various arrays of glass jars and plant life occupy the room. Within a wash basin, Lux located a hidden compartment, which Bareas gleefully pried open. Poison spewed out at the dwarf, who nonchalantly wiped it away. Inside, there was a notebook filled with odd drawings connecting residents of Tropochorn to various woodland and marsh fauna. Halfling tracks lead away through the mud towards the marsh, so we make way to leave; as we do so, BoB attempts to wedge the door back in place, but instead pulls it clean off the hinges, leaving clear sign of entry. Lux, in top shape following the recent scuffles, guides us neatly south alongside the fading trails, and we come to a creek swarming with giant crabs, seemingly feeding



upon something. Arael cloaked us all with Pass Without a Trace, and a few of the party moved closer to investigate further. BoB took drastic action and acted as bait to grab the crustaceans' attention, and Bareas crept opposite him to discover that the body belonged to a scaly humanoid, a dragonborn. As we moved closer, the crabs were wary, but not openly hostile. They seemed to hesitate to attack us.

- End of Session -

GM Notes:

In *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*, there is up to a two-week break between the breaking up of the smuggler operations in the haunted house and the arrival of the smuggler ship, the *Sea Ghost*. This works well as it provides time for the characters to level up in town and make any purchases to re-equip. The *Sea Ghost* is not a particularly challenging fight once the party get aboard and with this large party, they might make short work of the pirate crew. This was a good opportunity to provide them some side quests to become more involved in the town, the surrounding community, and the NPCs.

The first two side-quests come from *Saltmarsh Sidetrek - Tier 1 Events* by Anja Svare and JJ Walsh. The first was titled "Fanatic Fisherfolk" and laid ground work for building connection with the loyalists and possibly creating friction with the traditionalist. It could be combat solution, making relationships with

the traditionalist worse, but the party opted a peaceful solution and avoided making enemies of the traditionalist. The second was titled "Smuggler's Surprise" and involved working with the town guards in their effort to crack down on the smuggling in town. While it may appear to be a royalist mission, it still caters to the traditionalists who are trying to demonstrate to the king that they do not need his involvement and can handle things on their own. This reinforces the councils plans to have the party board the *Sea Ghost* later when it arrives. It involves some sleuthing, but quickly turns into a fight against creatures.

The third sidetrek comes from *Encounters on the Savage Seas II* by Jeff c. Stevens. The specific sidetrek was written by Maxine Henry entitled "Chasing Ockue". We did not finish sidetrek in session 9 and had to wait until session 10 to wrap it up. I chose this sidetrek specifically for Juan and Lux. This sidetrek gave Juan a chance to head into the countryside and meet his folk and establish his presence as a potential hero to the community. It also gave Lux a chance to use some musical performance and non-lethal solutions to social encounters. It should give her a chance to shine, provided that BoB the barbarian doesn't fly into a rage first.

The group appeared to enjoy the various diversions from the main quest. Probably because they were short and different.



## OAK & IRON: NAVAL WARGAMING IN THE AGE OF SAIL & PIRACY

A few weeks ago, I hosted a game of *Oak & Iron* at my FLGS for the local wargames group. This is 1/600 scale warships that I painted. I had enough to support four other players with a fleet of Dutch and English to pursue a pirate fleet aided by a larger French fleet. The powerful Dutch and English ships decimated the French, while the pirates, lead by Edward Teach, slipped away. It was a fun and beautiful game to play.



## An Unlooked For Zine #12

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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 finished the reread and will be talking about it at a salon arranged by friends.

**The Raven Scholar:** The first part of a fantasy trilogy. I like the world building, though as Josh noted, it does the Thing of "look at this world, and you'll gradually see how terrible it is". This is mitigated in several ways, and I look forward to the next book (in 2027).

**The Incandescent:** Magic school setting where the focal character's one of the professors. I'm mentally comparing it to The Raven Scholar, as both are up for the Best Novel Hugo, and in that context, I prefer The Raven Scholar, though it's entirely possible I'll like one of the other four nominees better than either. The Incandescent does some very interesting things, but doesn't have the scope I look for in a Hugo winner. This is a matter of taste, not quality.

### Recent Watching

**Ironheart:** Sadly, I doubt it will get another season. It's morally complicated and solidly good, and left some interesting loose threads dangling.

**Sinners:** Over several nights, and with Amazon Prime's commercial interruptions, and it's still amazing. I want to watch it again in one sitting, without commercials.

### Awards: The Indie Groundbreaker Awards

- Nominees:  
<https://www.igdnonline.com/groundbreakers>;
- Listing the Winners:  
<https://www.rascal.news/little-wolves-takes-top-honors-at-the-2026-indie-groundbreakers-awards/>
- Youtube of the award ceremony:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bBSXhPRvro>

### COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #12

**THOSE WHO ENJOYED THE LADY SUSAN VAN HELSING, VAMPIER HUNTER WRITE UP:** I'm

delighted! What made this write up enjoyable? I do a lot of write ups, and I know they're not all hits.

### PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND MAIRA ZUCOLOTTI:

I might not mind 4-5 pages of text as a "paragraph", but I'm an adult. I might not have felt the same as a child. re me re megalomaniac: Merriam-Webster defines "megalomaniac" as "one affected with or exhibiting megalomania", and it defines "megalomania" as "a delusional mental illness that is marked by feelings of personal omnipotence and grandeur". This is the definition most English speakers will assume applies when seeing the word. It's not what you're talking about. The word doesn't mean "very ambitious". For that, say "very ambitious" or "extremely ambitious".

### MATT STEVENS:

Enjoy Iceland and tell us all about it! re me re Hollows: I've not played WoW or Dark Souls. re Appearance in James Bond 007: Sure, a high score might help charm people into doing what you want, but a low score might help intimidate them into it, so it's a wash. Note that I presume for these purposes that the goal of seduction is to get information or to cause someone to switch to your side, not something as simple as getting laid.

re removing GMs from a game that has them: We tried this once with the Leverage rpg, improvising, although we had some support because the game has tables to help GMs create a heist on the fly. There are several solo versions of games that generally have a GM, and I presume they use tables and could be adjusted to work for more than 1 player. I haven't tried these.

Otherwise, my experience is with games designed from the start for GM-less play in the sense that (gasp), there is no single authority and we have to collaborate and reach consensus! You ask: "would a collective story be better than one by a single author?" and answer "Impossible to say". Given your experience, I recognize that this is true for you, and respect that.

It is not impossible for me to say, as I have played "games designed from the start for GM-less play" (as distinct from games with a game master when that game master has been removed). And the answer is: It depends. Sometimes, yes, yes it is better. Sometimes, no, it's about the same. Sometimes, even, no, it's

worse. As with games with a GM, games designed for GM-less play and sessions of such games run the gamut from awesome to awful.

re *Good Society*: Nod. On the Storybrewers Discord server, which is not part of the game so doesn't count towards evaluating it, there has been discussion of the degree to which slavery is the foundation of some of Austen's characters' wealth and ways to discuss, OOC in this very safety conscious game, to what degree any group wants to address this. The *Castles in the Air* hack may well address this in greater depth. (It did in playtest, but I need to read the full published book.) As *CitA* is set in North America, Black and Native American people are woven into the source material the game draws on, not always in a good way, *CitA*'s author put in a lot of thought and effort considering how to handle the topic(s).

It will be interesting to see how/if the forthcoming 2nd edition of *Good Society* updates the discussion of race in it. On the one hand, I understand that the intent is (more or less) to say, "You can play this game without guilt and without having to grapple with issues that never came up in the book unless the group chooses to do so". On the other, I know some players feel that doing this, like turning gender roles off or deciding that romance between any set of genders is acceptable to *Society*, drifts the game, which, while a legitimate decision, means one is no longer playing in Jane Austen's world (and is distinct from simply having queer characters or people who don't conform to gender expectations is drifting the game).

IF you want to give the game a try, I'd suggest using one of the hacks, given you aren't an Austen fan. We started with *Sense, Sensibility & Swordsmanship*, which can cover *Scarlet Pimpernel* or *Zorro*-esque material. What would you want from a *Good Society* game? If it's Mary Shelley as feminist, you might be happier with *Castles in the Air*. If it's Frankenstein, you *might* be happier with *Gothic Society*, although that one is trickier because it is more ambitious, trying to do a story about Gothic spookiness and evil in ways that limit what can actually be nailed down about the situation. Caveat: I tried this hack only once, without the author participating, and scheduling conflicts meant the game wound up truncated and probably even weirder than usual.

re Patrick Zoch re it seeming like a waste to reduce interrogation down to a few dice rolls: For you, yes. For me, maybe not. What is the game supposed to be about? Is it a police procedural? Then, okay, if I'm playing it to begin with, an interrogation is an important enough part of the game maybe we do want something more than die rolls.

If this is a find-the-plot situation where the hurdle is getting the NPC to talk to get to the rest of the adventure, I do want a quick skill roll, as well as a plan for what happens if it fails. Do you just say we don't get to the rest of the adventure, and might as well go home for the night or break out board games instead of continuing? Note that this is something I have scribbled in the margins of *many* scenarios I've edited and for things other than interrogation (What if everyone fails the Spot Clue roll? Or a Cthulhu Mythos roll, where you have 1%, if you're lucky!).

OTOH, if you've got a specific person I know who was trained in interrogation, this person is going to be happy to use actual techniques, none of which involve truncheons or cigarette burns. Instead, it's a lot of raised voice demands and interruptions.

They gave me a quick demonstration once. Paraphrasing: I love you all, but ye ghods, you go on and on when asked a simple question. This is how we do it. [Note that at this point, as soon as I uttered a single fact, they cut me off firmly and loudly.] What did you do today? You had breakfast—stop. What did you have? [As soon as I give the first part of the answer:] And what else? [As soon as I give the next part:] And what else? (This was fascinating, and the person wisely kept the demonstration to about 30 seconds.)

re Joshua Kronengold re solving some of D&D 4e's problems by cutting hit points in half: Heh. Pulp Cthulhu does the opposite, doubling PCs' hit points. I'm not sure how much that helps, but it didn't hurt in the Harlem Unbound campaign we played. re Tap-dancing on the heads of the crocodiles: Oh, don't forget that this also involved the character dangling handcuffs in front of the eyes of the crocodiles to hypnotize them! re "It was my fault for having a death trap without a clear idea how to get you out of it": Actually, it was the opposite problem. You had a very specific idea of how to get out of it and didn't, at first, want to allow any other method. I think it had to do with breaking off pipes that were sending gas into the room and crumbling the bits the pipes broke off of to stop the gas from coming in, an idea which would never have occurred to any of us, and then beating up the crocodiles with the pipes. Mind, I'm sure I did worse over the years in Cthulhupunk.

**ROGER BELL\_WEST:** Congratulations on the launch of *Of Dice and Meeples!* Enjoy Finland and tell us about it! re Outgunned/Project Medusa: This is sadly common. I've read campaigns and scenarios where the set pieces are great but the paths between them are extremely contrived. One campaign I've run successfully and very much like has this issue. There's a section where the PCs get a letter from someone they've never heard of saying "Hey, investigate this guy because he's part of what you're looking into and also

he's terrible so do kill him" and then sends another letter later which assumes that the PCs have killed the man (who, to be fair, is indeed terrible).

I definitely agree that clue paths should suit PC strengths. I was quite proud of myself for adapting to these in a scenario I improvised for Dracula Dossier. It may have been semi-accidental, in that I hadn't expected one PC to try Stealth and hadn't recalled that another had Art History, but it all worked.

re *GURPS/The Day After Ragnarok*: I love the snakey hijinks and explanations. re hidden magic and realism: I'm mixed on this. Your primary objection is correct, of course, but often, I don't care *enough*. Nevertheless, it's no coincidence that the *Fearful Symmetries* campaign (*Trail of Cthulhu*) I ran went so well in part because magic only recently returned (with the brief rise of R'lyeh) and I ended the campaign after the PCs brought more magic into the world.

re igttheme: I suppose it depends on what one wants the role of gods et cetera to be in the setting. re Catholic church not being that bad "in most places and at most times": Possibly not to Catholics. re gods being more than just Powerful Humans: Some fantasy novels with interesting takes include Jo Walton's *Lifelode* and Hannah Kaner's *Godkiller, Sunbringer, Faithbreaker* trilogy (I still need to read *Faithbreaker*.)

re Paul Holman: I'm not fond of shows that answer all questions with questions. As you say, it "eventually comes crashing down". Also, the spinning it out gets tiresome. re Clark Timmins: While one can sometimes get around the limit of how much players will read (especially if one doesn't drop a lot on them at any given time), I agree that one must remember it's a game, not a Wikipedia or encyclopedia entry.

re me re possession: That's fair. re older issues of *Dragon*: Yes. I learned about a lot of good science fiction and fantasy in the its review column. re Patrick Zoch re *Shadows of Yesterday/Solar System/Lady Blackbird* Keys: Yes, one can and generally does have more than one, iirc. Not a huge number of them, but more than one. Also, *Shadows of Yesterday/Solar System* uses *FUDGE* dice and there's an endpoint for a PC: When they get a Transcendent success level, their story is over and they retire, die, ascend, or something similar.

re Patrick Riley re NPC surrender being easier in a system that makes it easy to knock out characters long before one is likely to kill them via die roll: Yes. I'm also fond of systems where one won't accidentally kill someone, but rather, must deliberately decide to do so, regardless of realism.

re women secretly living as men: I read one about a GM running *Beyond the Mountains of Madness* who let one player create a woman disguised as a man to join the Starkweather-Moore expedition. The player left the campaign fairly early on, and agreed that the GM could rule that the character had committed suicide via drug overdose. Two PCs found the corpse.

Once they were over the shock, they agreed to keep her secret. The GM had a lot of fun with Starkweather giving a eulogy at the funeral, saying that Vlad was "a man's man" and that, while he didn't know Vlad's secret pain, he gathered that there was some woman in Vlad's past who'd broken his heart (true—a woman who decided to marry a man, not for love but for an easier/safer life of conformity).

re it feeling weird when you don't roll dice as a GM: I find it a relief, as it's one fewer thing for me to deal with. I'm not sure I'd feel that way if I'd started with *Outgunned*, as it has some other peculiarities.

re Avram Grumer re telenovela form: Are you aware of the Powered by the Apocalypse game *Pasion de las Pasiones*? Also, some PbtA games, such as *Monsterhearts* and *Urban Shadows* have a season model. I ran 2 seasons of *Monsterhearts*. In the 2nd, one player changed both PC and playbook, one kept both, and the other two kept their original PC, but changed playbook.

My Dracula Dossier campaign is several mini-campaigns and one shots. Characters come and go, and the ones that stay for more than one part can be reworked between sections of the campaign.

re Joshua Kronengold re the granularity of the system: This is something that confuses a lot of people, including me, when it comes to *Blades in the Dark* and its hacks: it's often unclear what it is in play. re Jim Vassilakos re wanting to cut magic and psi from the *GURPS* core book, but thinking that might not make for a saleable game: Indeed. We want our laser sharks.

MARK WILSON: How is Origins these days? We've not been there since the Great Date Shift. re igttheme re your character wanting to redeem their celestial patron: When I played *Great Soul Train Robbery*, my character doomed himself with a hubristic, if heartfelt and almost successful, attempt to save the Devil.

re cults: *Worlds of Cthulhu* has a scenario where a cultist couple helps PCs because the adversary is trying to do the Unspeakable Ritual too soon—the stars aren't right! re Lonny: I introduced Joey the god of basketry after skimming a book about creating PC gods which used him as one of its examples (and whose name I forget). Skullduggin' in the Deep sounds fun.

**JOHN REDDEN:** I'm glad you've come through the surgery intact. re poor performance of *The 39 Steps*. That's a shame. re North California Minicon: I've not played *Slugblaster*; I did play *Wildsea* at DexLite. It was fun, but I don't know how easy it is to gm.

re me: Thanks for the good wishes. re GMless games being storytelling games: While one could say that all rpgs are, I think I know what you mean. There are also "oracle" games where one rolls on various tables to determine what happens, and gamebook/choose-your-own-adventure games which involve a full character sheet and dice rolling mechanics. re doctors using bad handwriting so that it's "difficult to forge their signature": Interesting. I'm skeptical that actually makes it difficult, but have no evidence either way. The accuracy of a forged signature, or lack thereof, probably takes a back seat to how much anyone scrutinizes the signature. re Joshua Kronengold re assorted acronyms: Would a document or spreadsheet file of these help?

**PATRICK BRADY:** Great to see you in these pages! re me: Aw, thanks! re Urban Fantasy Games: I really do need to read the Night Watch books, don't I? What system do you use for this?

**MILES CORCORAN:** re tearing the nail: Oof! re local birds: Thanks for the pictures! re Rowan not knowing what to read: Any particular tastes in books? I'm sure we'd all be happy to make recommendations. re Mausritter: I see the mice are trying to play matchmaker. re the ring: So they just need to convince Odette to let someone from the World of Man destroy it. Easy! Berry hunt!

re Kriegsmesser: Wait, Isabella's uncle is her ward? She's his guardian? In any case, this reads like a bizarre medieval/Renaissance meet cute/date night crossed with heist-jinks. re Roger Bell\_West re "PbtA success at a cost middle ground": Blades/Forged in the Dark has this. (1-3 = failure; 4-5 = success with a complication or cost; 6 = success; more than one 6 = success with an additional benefit.) It's odd to me that the Free League system doesn't have that, and I don't recall why the games we played at conventions went as well as they did. Were the mechanics softer than for *Vaesen*? Were we just lucky with the dice?

re WoD dice pools making one more likely to fail when being an expert: This was originally true, correct. White Wolf later tweaked the rules to fix this. re Greg Stafford and others putting in rules they'd never use: I don't know why Greg did this, but wonder if it's for the same reason Jonathan Tweet added rules for hit points and psychic shots in 1st/2nd edition *Over the Edge*. IIRC, he and/or John Nephew felt that while he didn't run the game that way, other GMs wanted them. IIRC, Sandy Petersen didn't originally intend for SAN ever to rise,

but Chaosium (which I think meant Lynn Willis) said it was necessary for the game to be viable/salable.

IIRC Jenna Moran didn't originally have rules for doing non-miracle things in *Nobilis* until a lot of folks playing the game complained about this. Josh has thoughts on this and more knowledge of the mechanics and history of the game than I do. I also note that if it had been solely up to me, I'd have finished our Dangerous Refuge dark academia hack of *Good Society* by simply explaining in writing how to use it to model a specific fantasy trilogy, but Josh and folks on the Storybrewers Discord server nudged until I agreed that it could be a) broader and b) something Josh and I could turn into its own full game. While I doubt it'll be a doorstopper, this does mean it'll be bigger than originally anticipated. re me: Thanks for the good wishes.

**BRIAN ROGERS:** re Myles Corcoran: I still have our *Invisibles*. re Michael Cule re will reading: Yes, it Just Works. *Lady Susan, P.I.* and countless CoC scenarios have a will reading (scheduled even if it doesn't happen in game). We've seen it in so many cozy and not-so-cozy mystery books and shows that we "know" that's how it goes, even if it doesn't. Similarly, a friend noted that, iirc, Israeli shows set in schools have halls with student lockers because that's what they see on USAn shows, even though this isn't the situation in schools in Israel (and may or may not be the situation in any given USA grade school). Everyone is so used to seeing this that they "know" schools have lockers in hallways.

re me: So mi-go? Ithaqua? K'n-Yani? re *2e Unknown Armies* being a millennial-focused time capsule: That's not wrong. It's still a better game overall than 1e. 3e tries to update the game and make it more what Greg Stolze had in mind. It's also a snapshot of its time, but what isn't? re character vs player social skills: True, the argument never goes away.

re Avram Grumer: Predictably, I read "Con" as "Constitution" at first. re Patrick Zoch re "you don't want to veer to cozy fantasy where they take their reward and set up a coffee shop and bardic stage": No \*Legends and Lattes\* campaigns? Okay, to be fair, a) it's probably not the campaign either you or Patrick want, b) I probably wouldn't recommend using D&D/OSR for that and c) I did have an issue or two with the book (aka the author is clearly on the protagonist's side in ways that occasionally become annoying). That said, like the "you're running a noodle shop" in a cyberpunk setting, there are a lot of us who would jump on that premise in a heartbeat. (*Yazeba's Bed and Breakfast*, anyone?)

re Joshua Kronengold re why you favor messiness over too much clarity: It's a balancing act, and the balance point may vary not just between X rule and Y, between X group and Y, between X situation and Y, but also

between what kind of game we're talking. A larp is more likely to have different balance points.

Fr'ex, yes, the GM needed not to lead the players in one of our larps. But in another larp I helped gm, absolute clarity of at least two of the rules was essential, and they had to be enforced as written and in no other way. That didn't apply to *all* of the rules in that game, as it was a superhero larp, and the general metarule was that what your PC could do with their powers was LIT: Limited by Your Imagination and Our [the GMs'] Tolerance.

One case was simply a matter of meta vs concrete. Someone found a card listing how much money another player's PC had and asked "Is this something my character can just take and use?"

Answer (which I had forgotten, but fortunately, checked with the lead GM, who hadn't): No. This is a green card, which means it is not an item card. It's not actually something the character can lose when the player accidentally drops it or whatever.

Player: Right, no problem. Here you go. (hands over card so we can return it to player)

This encapsulates the best and the default of that group: Playing fairly, by the rules, but with something of a player vs player mindset. If the rules don't forbid it, it's fine to do. Therefore, the player correctly asked for a rules clarification, got it, and abided by it without complaint. I'd likely have done the same.

Indeed, this was something the lead GM had tried to hammer into my and Josh's heads pre-game, saying, "Our ways may seem strange, but the players expect certain things. Trust that we have a reason for doing it this way."

Now, some players were, let us say, a bit more obnoxious than others. The player who found the green money card was not *trying* to screw over another player. A different player, for reasons that remain opaque to us, wanted to reveal a PC's secret identity, outing them to their family. Again, I'd forgotten the rules, and again, fortunately, the lead GM was there to do damage control.

The player was extremely persuasive about how their character had figured out who the other character was. In a messy-gming situation (which I'm likely to fall into—correct, JOSH?), it could be allowed and would've ruined the other player's game. This is *exactly* why there were, as the lead GM reminded us, very specific rules about discovering a character's secret identity. Had the player followed these rules? The player had not. Therefore, the other character's identity was still secret.

The same player later wanted his character to sneak up on another and snap that character's neck, auto-succeeding, and argued that this should be allowed, as the character had, per the backstory on the character sheet, Green Beret training.

Lead GM: Do you have a skill card for that showing the mechanical effect you've described?

The player did not.

The player was now in something of a foul mood, and at this point, my messy gming skills became useful. I took him and two other players with whom he was interacting, and ran a more narrative-y scene where:

- This player's character trying to kidnap another's
- All three characters winding up in a space bar due to the other character's abilities
- The would-be kidnapper asking that other character "so, what would actually convince you to work for my people" and being told "money"
- An interstellar phone call being set up where we all had fun
  - (Me: So does he want women?
  - Player: Er, no—
  - Me: Men?
  - Player: Er... he is eunuch.)
- The would-be kidnapper now in a much better mood, having succeeded in a goal!

(Why the player decided his *hero* PC had to murder another hero and the rest is complicated. Short version: The player tended to cause this kind of problem, but also, in retrospect from many years later, I think this was not the best role for them. Unsure what would be, to be fair.

Josh: The correct role would be anywhere that is Not In This Larp.)

re me re it not the kids complaining via their parents: I believe you. re new edition bloat: I can't speak to V&V or Champions. For Space 1889, I'd need to know

- Word count. Page bloat exists regardless, but word count tells me how much more there is to read.
- What was added. Sure, Conklin's Atlas covered more ground in fewer pages; this might or might not be a good thing. What was added? Mechanics? Setting details? Bigger fonts and art?

For *Swords of the Serpentine*, I like it enough I'm biased. If you want a hilarious example, consider *Cthulhu Dark*, a game that originally took about 2 pages. The author, Graham Walmsley, joked about expanding it to 200 pages. And folks said, "Yes, please!"

The end result is a) a 90-page book, *Cthulhu Dark Zero* and b) the promised/threatened 200-page *Cthulhu Dark* which contains all of a). Roughly the first 60 pages are an expanded version of the 2-page game, the expansion being examples and advice (much of which boils down to "relax, you got this, don't overthink"). The rest of *Cthulhu Dark Zero* as well as the next 20 or so pages of *Cthulhu Dark* are 2 scenarios. The rest of *Cthulhu Dark* is 6 more.

Is this *necessary*? No, it is not. But people (including me) asked for it and are delighted to have it.

re blather vs essay: "Blather" is your self-deprecating assessment of the worth of your words. You're wrong. "Essay" is my description of the format, which may or may not be wrong, as I've not looked up the definition of the term, but has nothing to do with intrinsic value, and more than, say, "Novella" or "Novel" do.

re the space *Monsterhearts* game: I don't recall if my character underwent a physical examination in game, and if she did, I don't recall what the instruments said. I wasn't about to apply actual reality here. I do wish the GM had made available the rules/setting material they were using, just as I wish they'd done the same for *Mars 244*.

re Patrick Riley re comics about underaged superpowered people: In *My Hero Academia*, each generation gets more powerful! There's an episode or two of the anime where a few of the more powerful Hero Academia students have to look after a class of kids that could've come out of *PS 238*, and boy, do the older kids have their hands full!

re Nadia Swan: Her careers are Spy and Soldier, correct? What are her skills? re Knaves of Ridgefield: I love "we're not pirates—aren't you pirates?!" To make sure I'm following: The PCs discovered that the Dakon gems were on Gales Teeth, but that the captain and much of the crew didn't know this. The Dakon were remarkably restrained. The thieves were also mutineers. I'm not clear on who Frances is besides a mutineer and now a recurring villain.

re Age of Reckoning: The senator's a PC, correct? I'm confused because of the section labeled "The Script". Is that the actual dialogue or your translation of that part of the session into what the movie would be? In any case, having just finished *The Raven Scholar*, which, while not at all *Star Wars*, has political shenanigans, I sympathize with the senator trying to deal with the subcommittee in general and Rom Vallus in particular.

Those die rolls were wild! I love that they decided it's for her bodyguard, not her, to do direct combat. Lovely timing with B-wing; well played! Kudos to Roist'r's player for being clear that, while he's up for playing a

PC on the road to the Dark Side, it's not the only kind of PC he plays. And of *course* Captain Intarr's must be roguishly handsome! It's the rule! I'm glad Seris's player read the same rule book. I also like the calculation of likely losing 20%, but gaining 30% because of government connections. Looking forward to hearing about the Battle of Yatero and more IGn8ius.

re The Puppeteer: Was this published after *V&V*? Okay, I know it wasn't, but it really would make more sense if this were a comic written about a *V&V*/PC created as you described. re what I'd give a hero named the Puppeteer: The first thought that pops into my head is Hitoshi Shinso from *My Hero Academia*. His Quirk (Superpower) is referred to as Brainwashing, but could as easily be considered Puppeteering.

He talks to his adversary, and if the adversary speaks back to him, then he can give them orders which they now follow, regardless of their desire in the matter. It got *very* old very fast when his classmates kept joking that it was lucky he wasn't a villain.

And this is where I need to consider carefully how one would model this. In minimal mechanics games, it Just Works so long as all players, including the GM (if there is one) agree. Possibly a token changes hands or is tossed into the pot. Possibly there are unintended side effects, possibly not.

When one starts adding mechanics, I start being uncertain how to model this. It's not that his power always works, no exceptions. It's that, as Erica might put it, it doesn't not work because of a random die roll.

Or does it? After all, we see the characters in *MHA* training, day after day, pushing themselves to get stronger, as well as more flexible, with their powers. Maybe it's fine if his abilities start less powerful and build over time. This presumes something like (if I understand correctly) *V&V* or *Champions* or FACERIP.

*Marvel Diceless* may make him potentially more powerful than a starting character because it boils down to how many stones (tokens) his player puts into using his power at any given time. *Fate*, *Smallville* (Cortex), and *Masks* (PbtA) are in the middle ground between heavier mechanics and minimal mechanics.

I'd need to review *Fate*'s rules, particularly suggested options for superheroes, but iirc one can always have success-at-a-cost. If so, this dodges the "but I don't want it to not work for purely random reasons". It's certainly valid to do something like "Sure, you can still succeed—if you take the Major Consequence Damaged Vocal Cords" or something similar that gives a narrative justification for having a hard time using the power going forward. That provides a pleasing arc, because

when someone Compels this consequence to cause the power to fail, be less effective, or have a complication, the player gets a Fate point which they can then use to be more effective later. (X-Man's Banshee, anyone?)

I'm skipping Cortex/Smallville because I don't understand it well enough. *Masks* is deliberately fuzzy when it comes to powers, and presumes a Young Justice model, which works well for a young hero trying to master their powers. I *think* the Protege playbook would work best.

I could probably hack something out in *Urban Shadows* (another PbtA game). I could also use *Apocalypse Keys*; someone created All-Might using the Fallen playbook. That might also work for Hitoshi Shinso. The things that make *Apocalypse Keys* tempting for this are:

- Everything runs on Darkness Tokens, and the player decides when to take those. This avoids the random failure problem.
- The characters are extremely powerful and walk a line between—"hero and villain" is an understatement. "savior and destroyer" is more accurate.

re your footnote: I (and I suspect others) didn't not take it at face value. We misunderstood what you were saying. The footnote says:

"Note that if you roll 9 you are a nonpowered adventurer with a lifetime of training, and a 10 means you're extraterrestrial."

Right, straightforward. I think we all understood that part.

"Since your first PCs is supposed to be based on you, if I were to roll these I would need to reroll with a d8."

Here's where the confusion starts. To you, it is OBVIOUS that the reason you need to do this is because the book says so.

But you haven't said this. You've just said you need to reroll. Remember, I am not you. I have read NO edition of *V&V* in any detail. Had you said, "if I were to roll these, I would be *\*directed\** to reroll with a d8", there would have been no confusion on my part.

But YOU DIDN'T SAY THIS. "I would need" is ambiguous, whether or not you think it is. You then go on to say:

"Have you had a lifetime of training? Are you an extraterrestrial? I DIDN'T THINK SO, so try again."

This comes right after the ambiguous part and is so clearly in your voice that I thought that *\*you\**, not the book, decided you had to reroll with a d8. No, Brian, It. Is. NOT AT ALL OBVIOUS to people who don't have the book, have never read the book, and are reading your footnote, the proof of which is WE THOUGHT YOU MEANT YOU DECIDED THIS. (Yes, I know you said it wasn't necessary to step through this, but you have met me, right?)

**GABRIEL ROARK:** I'm glad the ice skating is gong well.

**BRIAN MISIASZEK:** re Pulp Cthulhu: I'd thought that the Harlem Unbound campaign wasn't really pulp, just using double hit points, upping a stat, maybe a supernatural talent and some general weirdness. But given what you and Matt Stevens said, that basically is pulp, isn't it, just with some of the dials set low or off?

re "player must show their homework": As with the old *Over the Edge* rule about not making one's attack boring, this is something that sounds good in theory, but in practice, can be onerous. Also, if I accidentally hit on something from the source material, I'd be annoyed if I were denied the bonus die because I didn't know I was modeling the talent correctly.

re Florence Nightingale: How many different mini-talents have you stuck together here? If I can, I should try to come up with a Mary Seacole. What is a "true deathtrap"? I ask because escapology is exactly what I'd expect to be useful for that, and I suspect you're defining it differently than I am when you bundle it into "Master of Illusion".

re Mazorra re events that "should therefore be read not as what happens but as what happens if no one interferes": Then you need to say that this is the case, repeatedly. Don't make the mistake that *Beyond the Mountains of Madness* does: One of the authors explained to me that it's totally fine to alter events based on what the PCs do, and that the way the book presents things should be viewed as one particular way, perhaps as if the book were the movie version. That would be fine if the authors had explicitly said this in the book, but they didn't.

*Pillars of Sand*, a campaign for *Swords of the Serpentine* is reasonably good about this, and in the introduction to the final scenario, the author notes that, at this point, especially if the GM's run all of the previous scenarios, the default branching paths and events are even more subject to change, based on past as well as present PC actions, and the GM will need to be prepared to adapt. It's a timely reminder.

Also, even when it's clear that there's a lot of "if the PCs don't interfere", it's not always clear how far this

goes. If the PCs find themselves in the middle of a firefight, and the author has said "X NPCs are shot down at once, while Y does this, Z does that, and A-G do this other thing", it's not necessarily clear whether:

- This is what *will* happen, before/regardless of PC actions.
- This is just a default, and PCs even just being there means that nothing is certain.
- Something in the middle. E.g., there is a firefight if things get this far, one NPC *will* decide X is what's really going on, another *will* be fatally shot or infected or whatever, but everything else that happens may vary based on PC/player activities. Heck, it's not even necessarily a problem if you've decided that certain things *will* happen. It all depends on what those things are and on context.

Countdown clocks and other "at this point in the timeline, if nothing happens to prevent it" descriptions are fine. It's worth reminding GMs to be ready to adapt on the fly as needed or as seems best to them.

It's also important to think about what someone who isn't you might think when reading your writing, something that is obvious when one says it, and I know you know it, but it is still easy to overlook. Fr'ex, you say, "The Director's Manse shootout is therefore not a mandatory set-piece. It is one possible crisis point where several pressures converge."

Sure, but first of all, you didn't say that in the scenario itself. Second, the more words you spend on something, the more important it seems. I could see a GM making the mistake of thinking the shootout is something that they absolutely must get the PCs to see. This is why it's important to say that it isn't not mandatory, and that it might happen off screen or not at all. (It's also why scenarios where a significant amount of the content is stuff that happened before the scenario begins have to be handled carefully.)

If I understand correctly, you're temporarily jumping over the next part of the scenario in favor of the appendices. Chart A1 is a bit medical speak, but not, I think, too much for easy comprehension. You could probably use a modified version as a player handout, representing medical notes from studying the infected.

If there had been a shoggoth on the premises when Mateo Derosier used his phial, what would have happened?

I see half of the PCs have a medical background. What do you think the group's odds of survival are? Of containing/ending the problems posed by the Twsha? Also, have you read the Delta Green scenario "Sick Again" in the collection *Control Group*? If so, I'd love to

know what you think of it. (It's nothing like the Mazorra scenario and very much a pre-COVID-19 scenario.)

re fetus-in-fetu: I think I know what you mean, but you may want to define this in layman's terms. Players/PCs are unlikely to know the term "Twsha", correct? If so, what do they call it, or is that up to them?

Chart A2: I understand all the words, more or less, but not what this means in practical terms, i.e., what it signals the PCs to do.

Chart A3: The medical speak is starting to get a bit too thick for me. I'd recommend finding someone with less specialized knowledge than I have (as, while I am in no way a medical doctor, I've picked up enough jargon over the years I might be filling in a bit more than the average reader) and having them highlight places where they got confused. I know you know you'll need to unpack some of this, but figuring out what really is obvious to everyone is the tricky part, I suspect.

I'd be very careful giving players misinformation, particularly about euthanising patients. This is partly because it might feel like cheating, leave a bad taste, et cetera, and partly because players often assume, not necessarily consciously, that something is said in GM-Voice and is, therefore, true. (Having an NPC deliver the misinformation helps sometimes, but not always.)

Researching Potential Suppressive Signals: Here, too, I'm a bit confused about what the PCs can and can't achieve and what they should be aiming for.

Table A4: I believe this is more descriptive than prescriptive, which is as it should be. The PCs might be medical pulp heroes, pulling as much of a medical "win" as is possible under the circumstances, or may get swept up into a deadly fight for survival against ordinary human threats. Either is fine, so long as there's no expectation mismatch. I could see problems arising if one or more players are trying to solve the medical challenge but events pull them towards the other pole, or if some players want things that make the game less playable by others, but that's true of most games.

Tables A5-7: Okay, I think I'm starting to understand. Table A7 is way more useful than Table A2, and indeed, I'm now not sure why you have Table A2. So, first, the group needs to reach row 6 on A7, which doubles as a clock. I'm not entirely clear on how they do this, but rereading your zine will probably help.

A3 explains what they can do to get to row 6 on A7, and A4 provides possible setbacks. A5 is what the PCs need to do, though I'm not entirely sure how that chart works with A6. A6 gives the results.

To get the results, they need to do the three things listed on page 13. I gather that the folks Assisting do so by rolling one of the skills that the Lead rolls? Complications might come from the A4 table?

Does forcing dormancy apply to all of the affected, just the ones within range, or only to one individual per set of rolls?

If dormancy is induced for 1D6 or even 24 hours, "continued protocol" can extend it. What does this look like? Does the patient need to go around with their own sound system, staying in dry, bright places?

Indefinite dormancy lasts until and unless "conflicting /overriding Twsha signals resume". What does this mean? How likely is it to happen? That is, does the patient need to go around with their own sound system, stay in dry, bright places for the rest of their lives and hope no weird accident happens? Or, are they fine unless something weird happens that counts as resuming a "conflicting/overriding Twsha signal", and what does that look like (or sound like)?

re Pedro Panhoca da Silva and Camila Lourenco Panhoca: Alternatively, the publisher could put the map in a sealed envelope included with the book or have it folded and tucked into a pocket attached to or created in one of the covers. re me: Thanks! It'll need a couple more drafts, but you've got a solid foundation to start from.

re Erika Frank re framing someone being wrong and out of genre for the detectives and shows referenced: I don't disagree, but that's not what happened in her game (as I suspect she'll explain). Somewhat longwinded explanation follows.

Erika takes the base situation from *The Untamed/Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (and shifting the setting from the magical China-esque past to the 21st century USA), and the players come up with a theory of what really happened which the system then says is correct, per *Brindlewood Bay* mechanics.

In *The Untamed/Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, the mother of one of the two leads murdered a man and was subsequently locked up for the rest of her life. Her sons were permitted to visit her once a month, and she eventually died when the younger one (our second lead) was very young, pretty sure of natural causes.

Erika said, "But what if she were actually murdered?" This became the starting point of the session.

The players (after their characters gathered clues and so on): Okay, we think that this woman didn't actually kill the man she was locked up for killing. He was still alive. In fact—he was the one who murdered her.

The Dice: Yes! That is, in fact, the reality.

In other words, the detectives didn't frame anyone. They uncovered the truth: The murderer had framed the victim for his own murder (and hadn't been murdered).

**PATRICK RILEY:** re Myles Corcoran re *Unknown Armies* 3rd edition: It's interesting what unrealistic things we will and won't accept in gaming. I blip over the Dodge vs Fitness and the like, despite agreeing with you that the real world doesn't work that way.

Yet, I had a problem with an rpg from the 1990s called *Immortal* because players were supposed to start with 100 points, create themselves, and then get extra stuff for their characters once the whole being immortal thing kicked in. The problem was that I couldn't build myself in that system for 100 points. I couldn't bring myself to make the necessary tradeoffs, and likely still couldn't today.

I also find it interesting that people who play Powered by the Apocalypse games don't generally have a problem with either

- Those who are bad at fighting will be bad at running away from fights. I always point this out, because it's not necessarily obvious, but no one says, "That's not how it works in real life."
- Being good in a fight and being good at running away from fights being completely separate skills so that the above is NOT true.

*Trail of Cthulhu* lets one create a character that has no (or low) Athletics but is good at Fleeing, and again, interestingly, no one objects to the concept. (To the fiddly mechanics, sure, but that's a different matter.)

re "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!": In general, I agree, but there's this odd grey area for games like *Brindlewood Bay* and similar Carved From Brindlewood games. These are games where everyone knows (or should know; I suppose it's possible a GM doesn't tell the players, but this is extremely foolish, imo) that there's no explicit "this is what happened in the backstory" to explain who the murderer is (or the Harbinger in *Apocalypse Keys*, or whatever).

So you'd think there's no need for a published scenario, given the GM and the group are supposed to figure out what's really going on as they play. But for this sort of game, what a "scenario" supplies is a broad description of the opening situation, a list of NPCs, a list of clues, locations maybe, and some other stuff. Generally, the

price for such a scenario (presuming it's digital only) is fairly low.

I've seen other scenarios that do this sort of thing for a more traditional system. Fr'ex:

- There's a *Trail of Cthulhu* scenario where exactly who the villain is is left to the GM to decide. Each suspect gets a motive and a "what the suspicious behavior really means if they're not the villain" line. But other than that, it's written like a traditional scenario.
- The *Night's Black Agents* scenario "The Carmilla Sanction" has 12 NPCs who might be Carmilla. Which one is the GM's call. Each has a distinct personality, goals, and so on. When I ran the scenario, I rolled a d12 before the game started, determining that way which one was the real Carmilla. I didn't feel at all like I hadn't gotten my money's worth; it's a rich scenario, and it doesn't hurt that it riffs on *The Third Man*, a movie I like.
- *The Armitage Files* is a make-it-up-as-you-go campaign for *Trail of Cthulhu*. The premise is that Dr. Henry Armitage got two letters from his future self warning of a coming world catastrophe, and hired the PCs to find out What It All Means, what dire thing is coming, and how to stop it. There are multiple descriptions for the NPCs, locations, and items, based on whether the NPCs are Sinister, Stalwart, or Neutral; whether the locations are normal or sinister; whether the items are normal or have some kind of weird power.
- *Night's Black Agents's* Dracula Dossier does something similar, only with Dracula. Where *The Armitage Files* is 150 pages, the *Director's Handbook* is 370 pages, and that's before we get to *Dracula Unredacted*, the *Hawkins Papers*, and the *Edom Field Manual*. None of this is going work for people who don't want to buy material and still have to build their own campaign, and that's fine. This material does what it says on the tin, but that doesn't mean the tin is for everyone.

re Avram Grumer re the liberal republic with a princess: I gather that she was elected to be princess? Or was she a princess no matter what, just also elected to be a senator? re Joshua Kronengold re the optimal answer of giving the token to the train conductor: Yes, that makes the whole scenario come together in a very satisfying way. If the characters tried to give it to one of the "staff", I'd likely reward that by having the NPC not just turn it down but suggest, or at least hint, that there might be a better candidate to give it to.

re me: Thanks for the clarifications. re the birds: I don't think high resolution would help me given I'm not up on my ornithology. re group character creation running the risk of steering one to make a character that feels less one's own: It is a risk, but I've found that it

generally pays off. Good point re "this game costs X to run" vs "we want a profit" vs "we deserve a profit".

re "effectively impossible" to accidentally discover something boiling down to "it takes more than a cursory glance": So "passive perceptions" wouldn't be enough, correct? Would a "simple search"? In GUMSHOE terms, this means "I search the room", and does not involve a point spend. I'd interpret this as "enough to find a Core Clue" and for something more, I'd likely suggest a spend or ask if the player wanted to make one. (I know that's getting meta, of course.)

re Patrick Zoch re acknowledging the lack of player skill when it comes to actual interrogation technique: Nod. I know one gamer who was trained in that skill. re Outgunned Superheroes: I look forward to hearing how well it works (or doesn't) for you.

**CLARK TIMMINS:** re Brian Misiaszek re learning Pixabay accepts "AI generated art and then presenting it under the Pixabay license": Oof, my sympathy. I'm feeling very *The Good Place* about this sort of thing (the tomato thing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lci6P1-jMV8>).

**MICHAEL CULE:** re Bruce: I hope he continues to do well. re the Three Pilgrims: Oh my. I am interested in any game where the big bad is called the Master of Origami. re wizard school game: So, to get the players to have their characters go to the festival, either their instructors need to tell them to do so or they need to believe something they need is there (or both).

re Glamour Days and Nights re Drak's "Well, you would believe that": I don't see it as a lack of respect so much as a tautological statement. Obviously, if you believed your list were wrong, you'd have corrected it so that it wasn't. re what SIZ 35 means in RQ: I know this one! SIZ 35 = the size (or, at least, the mass) of 35 kittens!

I can easily visualize Pum looking at the others with "steely eyed" suspicion. re cleaning up elephant shit: Shades of the "Tusks Are Optional" story. I see nephew and uncle have been banished, er, reassigned, at least temporarily. re the Chair not actually being fired: Shades of *Unveil Jadewind*.

Is Jarathir correct about how Vostor managed to keep silent for so long? re the book the Janitrix found: Why was it in that room, again? Is Jarathir now Illuminated? What does that mean? How does it affect everyone and everything going forward?

re Brian Rogers re the difficulties in bringing the Narnia books to the stage: Reminds me of the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, where both I and one of my characters wondered how they get the elephant onto the stage.

re Roger Bell\_West: "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": Even if it's a reaction to cyberpunk, *Cyberpunk Red* is doing something similar with its "You can't use the internet because, er, viruses took it over!" re "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": This encapsulates why I'm unwilling (or, at least, very, very twitchy) to run high tech setting campaigns (this includes magic-as-de-facto-tech).

re Myles Corcoran re Then and Now: Ick! re "artificial means. Aren't algorithms supposed to give me things I'll like?": You'd think so. Instead, they give us things their creators want us to like. re me re the City: Ah!

re what more I would like to know about the Lictors campaign: This is the same one you did write ups for before? If so, how did matters progress such that the rebellion started? What are the factions and the principles and supporters of the factions? What are their master plans? What situations did the PCs get into and how did they get out of them? Where do matters stand now? How did the Magistrate wind up in the setting, given where he came from?

**ATTRONARCH:** re the egg mission: I see the party was wise enough to resist the temptation to tamper with the egg. re me re rations: Ah. I confess I never had much contact with those rules.

**DYLAN CAPEL:** re Belonging Outside Belonging: These are the shared forces/factions/groups? I don't think they get tokens, as they don't need to spend a token to do a move. As this is a game with no GM, it's totally fine for the players to set up each PC getting a chance to do a weak move as early as possible. But this *is* play. Doing it before the first scene confuses me, as you don't seem to be saying "Hand everyone 1 token at the beginning of the game" (which would change the feel of the game, but probably not break anything). I just don't understand how one does a weak move outside of a scene. I agree that having a full game in the space of a one-shot of 4 hours or so is tricky.

re Avram Grumer: I enjoy having played Cross Bronx Expressway, likely more than I enjoyed playing it, and am not eager to play it again. It felt accurate, including the aspect of getting harder in later decades, and this is part of why I don't want to replay it.

**JIM ECKMAN:** re Murderbot: I wonder if one could play one of the ships from Iain M. Banks's Culture novels.

**AVRAM GRUMER:** re Bryan Cranston needing "a strength, a weakness, an ambition [which I read as "goal"], a secret, and a fear" to create/develop a character: This seems solid, yes.

I'm not sure all characters need a secret. I need to ponder that. The Oracle in *Urban Shadows* has a Move, Skim the Surface, that allows the character to get answers to 1 or 3 questions on hit, and one of the permitted questions is "What secrets are you currently keeping?" while another is "What is your hidden pain?" These imply that every PC and NPC has at least one secret. Sure, a player/GM could say "I have none", and occasionally, that would be all right, but that should probably be a rare exception.

As you note, *Over the Edge* 1st/2nd edition gives characters most of these items. I think there's no requirement to have a fear, but I suspect that, if nothing else, there's an implicit fear of not reaching one's ambition or of one's secret coming out in a way that causes the character trouble. A weakness is required and it must have a mechanical effect.

*Fate* doesn't require this precise list, but the Trouble Aspect is intended to be a weakness. *Fight With Spirit* builds in some of these elements. *Good Society* gives characters a Desire, which counts as an Ambition. It sometimes is or contains a Secret. Certainly, acting on one's desires can cost one's Reputation, so there's at least an implicit sense that there should be secrets.

re *Umdaar*: The expanded version is now out and also Pay What You Want. re *Going for Broke*: That sounds like a good palate cleanser. re *Monsterhearts* re multi-page backstory: It's the best thing, not just the worst thing. Invoking Eliza sounds perfectly creepy.

re Drake faking the fall: That was a Shut Someone Down Move, correct? re Laeli's sister banging on the wall: At first, I thought that meant the ritual was happening in the bathroom and got confused, but it's just the sister banging on the wall of—what, the sister's own room? Any particular reason?

re strings: IMO, yes, you should keep track of incoming and outgoing Strings and the reason for them. But yes, it is a fair amount of work, if there are a lot of Strings dropping. re ELIZA: Okay, so it's one of two powerful beings, the other being the "thing moving through the town", and Logan's demonic power is a third?

re no dice rolling for Ernie driving: Right, Ernie's an NPC. re Logan's Patron: I'm guessing the "champion" is Drake. But I'm not clear one what "That one's on me" means. When did Agatha leave Laeli's place? I do like the idea of Logan leaving his body behind. I'm all for creative interpretations like that.

re Wedge and Biggs: I missed the connection too. re Byron's "Through you, I was able to do all the things I always wanted. And through you, I still will.": Should I start calling him Ruthven? Right, Drake could handcuff Logan to the catwalk because Logan wasn't in his body.

re doing 2 more harm to Logan and texting the vid of Steffan attacking a cop to the sheriff: Ah, I see we've got to the PvP part of the game. (It's not inevitable, but the very first session I played, a convention one-shot, started out *Twilight* and ended *Ginger Snaps* into the end of "The Wish" from *Buffy*).

Logan and his Patron, Drake and Byron, Laeli and ELIZA—that's three PCs with Dark Patrons/Shoulder Angels. Having Steffan pass out after you chose to take the price of being out of control seems weak, but there's a lot going on. The Dark Patron telling Logan not to kill Drake but to "make him yours" is on target.

I see—Briar's trying to play the Ghost-as-NPC with Byron. I wouldn't focus on what the playbook says, as NPCs work differently than PCs and no one's currently using the Ghost playbook. Then again, I'd probably have had the ghost help with telekinesis; having Byron manifest after being believed dead is much better.

re recruiting the feds as Drake's new gang: Classic player move. The question is whether the GM should allow it. This isn't about Briar, more about me musing whether it's better to Say Yes or to say, "No, that's out of scope because the feds are adults and also it would completely unbalance the game." I lean towards Say Yes, but could make a case of No. I agree with Briar's description of the season so far. Trading headcannon and character details after/between sessions is fun.

re Matt Stevens re the author disavowing the chocolate factory module: Fascinating. re D&D not having a Dodge skill: *Trail of Cthulhu* and most other GUMSHOE games don't (*Swords of the Serpentine* is an exception). This is part of why damage is capped fairly low; there are few mechanics that let PCs make it harder for a foe to hit them (and vice versa).

re Dylan Capel re weeping in play: While I'm up for that in a tabletop rpg, it's more my jam for a larp. re me re Pamela Dean's Secret Country trilogy: Yep. I read it and recall almost none of it. re speedwriting: I think the sample you have uses the version I was taught, although I tend to modify a bit.

Thanks for the Monsterhearts clarifications. re Bianca having some slack because she's an antagonist: I figured that was part of it. Unlearning Mother May I? takes a while, and one still has to have a sense of when to check in and say "Is it all right if...?" re Joshua Kronengold: The coffee stats look correct. Volatile -1 in summer and 1 in winter, with Dark 1 regardless and a

move about adding milk or cream to lower one's Dark on a roll in return for some other benefit? I'm misbalancing the numbers, though. re Fortune in the Middle: I don't think I've had a problem with it for Dogs in the Vineyard, though I haven't played a lot of that. I think maybe 3 one shots at conventions? Smallville I simply haven't internalized.

**ERICA FRANK:** re rpgs for superhero, romance, sitcom, and similar genres re "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.""

Okay, how many games would convince you? And what pedigree must these games have to count?

Joanna Russ's book, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* notes that strategies include stuff like

- Women don't write books.
- Oh, okay, this one woman once wrote one book. That doesn't count.

Er, no, it counts. We now know a black swan exists. Do you want me to bother listing every good experience I've had with games that cover:

- Superheroes—including those where I know the superheroes aren't going to die?
- Romance?
- Sitcom?

Or will this list merely reinforce to you that all of my examples are too weird and indie, too few, too not whatever-it-is that you look for in a superhero game / romance game / sitcom game?

re "the hobby was not built around sitcoms or romances; it was built around tactical survival wargames crossed with epic fantasy adventures." Yes, absolutely. So where will romance and sitcom rpgs come from? They will come first from the weird indie games written by weird indie authors. From there, if they are not discounted as irrelevant, they will spread and, indeed, are spreading.

I refuse to say that *Good Society* is to be discounted because it isn't D&D-level popular. And that's before we get to *Strixhaven: A Curriculum of Chaos*, a genuine no foolin' D&D 5e book, not even *AGE Blue Rose*, but *D&D* trying to make room for romance.

Does it succeed? Speaking for my experience only? Yes. Is it my system of choice, something I'd run? No. Could it do better? Yes. But weird "little" indie games that Do Not Count, like *Good Society* are the games that influence the people who decide to try to stretch *D&D* to have *Strixhaven: A Curriculum of Chaos*.

It doesn't mean you'd like it, of course, and I'd hesitate to suggest you try it. Similarly, with superhero games, I doubt I'd ever tell you to try X game that worked for me. I'm fairly convinced that, however much I liked X superhero game, and however many people I know who liked it, you'd dislike it, even the ones I can point to where there are no hit points, where you can absolutely model Jean Grey or some other superhero on your list. The things you're looking for in a superhero rpg are not things you've found.

Oddly, I can point to only one rpg experience that didn't feel like a superhero comic to me, and as I've played that system many times and every other time *did* feel like a superhero comic, I'm going to say it was the GM's approach. It was still a fun campaign, and I wouldn't say it did superheroes "wrong". It just didn't feel like a superhero comic I've read.

Of course, the term "superhero comic" covers a very wide range. There's the Batman and Superman model, as you noted, and X-Men, Young Justice, and so on. There's Powers. And CHEW. I refuse to say a game that handles one type of superhero comic book feel doesn't count because it doesn't handle every kind of superhero comic book out there.

*Hit the Streets* is very street-level, and I will fucking fight anyone who says it's not a superhero rpg that "counts". I went from being lukewarm about the whole thing to caring deeply about the neighborhood we created in 20 minutes, and we all agreed that one of the superhero PCs was the heart of the neighborhood. So what if none of the PCs were Batman or Superman? So what if any of them could theoretically have died? (\*) It. Was. A. Superhero. RPG. and it worked. (For us. I do not presume it would work for you.)

(\*) Not only did no one die; I have now checked the rules. Guess what? PCs in *Hit the Streets* don't die unless their player decides to have them die (true of several other rpgs). If the player does, they can make up a new character or "wait a few Issues and come back; it's comics", which sure as heck sounds like it meets your "superheroes don't die" criterion.

The one time I played *Progenitor*, which uses the One Roll Engine, a PC did die, saving the neighborhood from getting trashed by Very High Level supers fighting each other, at least one of which was Superman-level powerful. Despite the death and the PCs in that one-shot being less powerful than the NPC supers, I consider it a) a superhero game which b) Counts and c) is not "weird indie tiny game" unless your definition includes everything from every company smaller than Hasbro/Chaosium/Modiphius/Cubicle 7/Free League (in which case, there's no point in discussing this as our axioms are different).

With *Fate*, the thing to remember is that it's not just one game. It's a toolkit. I am not familiar with anywhere near all the different ways one can customize the game, so here are only a couple of examples:

- Tiers that let one replace one or more Fudge dice with 1D6 Fate dice, depending on how many tiers of difference exist between two opposed forces. Thus, you can set up a situation where different power levels *do* matter. I think this was first implemented in *Kerberos Club: Fate Edition*, (alternate 19th century with superpowered people) shortly before the whole Fate Core revamp.
- *Dresden Files Accelerated* uses something similar, Scale. It doesn't replace dice, but adds bonuses based on the difference in power level between two opposed forces, either +1/level before the roll, +2/level after it, or +1 free invoke/level.
- More powerful stunts for certain types of beings. This comes up in *Spirit of the Century* and *Shadow of the Century*, where, instead of a +2 bonus from a more powerful Stunt, the character gets a +4 (or some other equivalent boost). It also comes up in *Fate of Cthulhu*, as a Corruption Stunt. (It would be very appropriate for something like your *Untamed FAE* as well.)

re Cage of Sand: I want to see how this ends. re igttheme: The term "god" is used in different ways. It can mean "very powerful being", i.e., a being that can be injured or killed. This is the case in some fantasy works. The Norse gods can die, although I know "Norse gods" lumps a lot of beings together.

Heck, in some rpgs, PCs can become gods. Exactly what this means varies. Fr'ex, I think the PCs in *Nobilis* are more than demigods, if one defines demigods as beings that are still part mortal, like Hercules. But they are clearly less powerful than their Emperor. I'm not sure whether PCs or Emperors can die. If they can, it's not a matter of hit points, but of whether their domains are attacked, iirc.

With Lovecraftian games, originally, there was *Call of Cthulhu*, and the gods had hit points because everything did at the time. But if a god got killed, that just meant the form it was currently using was killed, not the god itself. Fr'ex, in the 7th edition *Keeper Rulebook*, it says:

"At 0 hit points, Cthulhu bursts and dissolves into a disgusting, cloying greenish cloud, then immediately begins to reform. He needs 1D10+10 minutes to regain full solidity and, when he does, he then has a full 160 hit points again."

In earlier editions, iirc, it was "20 minutes", which led to the following sort-of joke:

**Q.** What happens if you hit Cthulhu with a nuke?

**A.** He reforms in 20 minutes, but now he's radioactive!

*Trail of Cthulhu* and *Delta Green* don't give them hit points. *Cthulhu Dark* goes further and doesn't stat up anything. If a PC fights a monster, the PC dies. As far as *Cthulhu Dark* is concerned, a sorcerer, a deep one, an outer god? All effectively gods, power-wise.

This makes sense for *Cthulhu Dark*, as the Lovecraftian "gods" as cosmic forces that humans will never understand. The universe has no gods. It's all cold science, and we are but insects, if that, et cetera. re writing up Christian angels and so on: I think this was done in some issue of *Dragon*, and iirc, Gary Gygax got very testy, which may or may not be a point in favor of the idea.

re Gabriel Roark re the question of how to treat the dead: *Unhallowed Metropolis* looks at this because it's set in an alternate version of our world where, in 1905, the dead rose from their graves as zombies. This meant that (at least in Britain) the law requires cremation. Some of the consequences of this law:

- Many poorer people try to hide the bodies of their loved ones because they want a Proper Burial or something else that isn't cremation.
- Very Rich people hire a Mourner to watch the body. Mourners are women raised to be celibate (which has no practical effect on their duties) and to be deadly with a blade. A Mourner watches over a corpse for 3 days and 3 nights, and if it hasn't moved by then, it's safe to bury it (which makes people hiding loved ones' corpses *slightly* less dangerous). If it stirs, the Mourner's job is to behead the corpse instantly, ending the threat.

re me re resumes: LinkedIn calls? As in you get emailed from companies wanting to hire you? I'm always somewhat skeptical that this happens, so it's nice to get information proving otherwise. re *Blades in the Dark*: I want to get the rules engine into my head. So many games use it, and I want to understand how it's supposed to work, how it actually works, where it falls short, and how to patch that. There are some systems I've clicked with (*Monsterhearts*), some I've needed a bit of help with but now click with (Fate, GUMSHOE), and some I'm still fumbling with (Blades/Forged in the Dark, Cortex). D&D 3e was in the second category when I played it, though I eventually decided it wasn't for me. D&D 5e is something of an outlier, as it's "Okay, we're using D&D Beyond and I push which button? Thanks, on it." but also "We're leveling up? Yay! Er, Josh? Help me level up?" And because I have these two ways to get help and no real interest in the system itself (I'm there for the romantic school setting and the socializing with players I like), I haven't moved past leaning on them.

re Untamed Brindlewood: I'm interested in the timeline; I don't know how many others are. It's probably in direct proportion to how into *The Untamed/Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* one is. re *Leverage*: I've seen the first few episodes of it. Thanks for the tip on looking up the correct order.

re the question of paying: I've been to house concerts held in a friend's home where we do put in a few bucks because the folks doing the concert are professional musicians who happen to be in town. I've not tried "Pay for a one/two-shot" or "Pay for a short campaign" that I've seen done by some individuals or companies.

re Patrick Riley re running the same murder with the same players but different characters: That would be a fascinating experiment. re Joshua Kronengold re Cloud Boarding School: What we had in mind (without wanting to make any group do exactly this) was:

- Wei Wuxian: Dependant, Old Money (because part of the same family as Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli); Desire: Find the truth of everything (however problematic); Relationship: Partner in crime of Nie Huaisiang
- Nie Huaisiang: Hedonist, Military; Desire: Support my family without changing my personality; Relationship: Betrothed to Jiang Yanli (to make the numbers work, not a source material thing)
- Jiang Cheng: Careerist, Old Money; Desire: Make useful connections and make sure my family has a bright future; Relationship: Rival of Lan Zhan
- Jiang Yanli: Cornerstone, Old Money; Desire: Maintain peace between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian; Relationship: Elder sibling of Jiang Cheng
- Lan Zhan: New Arrival, Peerage; Desire: Enforce the values and rules of your family; Relationship: Upperclassmate of Wei Wuxian

**JOSHUA KRONENGOLD:** re *Re-Zero*: I think I knew the premise from the Reactor.com article I'd read, but that made me more interested in watching the anime. re Matt Stevens re John C. Wright's goldbug character: That one wasn't from his first popular book, just from the first (two, as it was a duology) we read.

re Whale Whores: The idea of a Whale Whore Vice Squad is now lodged in my brain, but I doubt I shall do much with it. re what you want in a *Ghost Dog* rpg: it sounds like *Belonging Outside Belonging*, and maybe more specifically *Yazeba's Bed and Breakfast*. Worth thinking about more at some point.

re Erica Frank re the idea that GMs shouldn't have plans: I find that this isn't precisely true. It's more that GMs shouldn't usually have plans they're unwilling to abandon. If I go in with no plans whatsoever, then when players hit a wall for whatever reason, the game

stops dead, we all look at each other, and folks wait for me to give some kind of guidance.

re me: Yes, I meant all of the *Jujutsu Kaisen* anime that's available. I'm not utterly uninterested in the manga, just not particularly eager to pick it up. re Annotated Dracula for Dracula Dossier: This is because I outclevered myself. If I'd used the actual *Dracula Unredacted* from Pelgrane, you would all have had access to the pdf with layers that can be turned on and off and could have used the spreadsheet of all of the annotations another GM made.

Instead, I decided that Stoker had fictionalized a LOT more, and so we might as well start with the novel and annotate that. I did eventually put all of the annotation online, taking the Gutenberg version of the novel in text as my base, but at that point, I think the momentum had long been lost.

Gabriel, Liesl, J. Summers, Tabitha, Isabella, Mrs. Pat, and Sebastian all annotated the book, to some degree. At this point, what would make most sense isn't so much people annotating the book more. Sure, I'm fine with folks doing it. But more useful would be people writing up something from their various characters' point of view. I could probably get you, Gareth, and Ray to do this, as long as a) you remember enough and b) I ask for you to answer a *small* number of questions/cover a *small* number of points (like 6 or fewer). I could maybe get Sarah to do so as well, but I wouldn't count on that.

What I really need is an NPC who would be able to have talked to most of the old PCs and gotten their take on things. If I did that, I could probably get the three of you (and maybe Sarah) to do "interviews" which I'd then write up. Alternatively, I suppose, we could record something.

The reason to do this, apart from the narcissistic or egotistic desire to have a record of the campaign, would be to have an artifact that the PCs in the final leg of the campaign could interact with and get a more satisfactory infodump than the GM talking at them or handing them a long "here's what happened before you joined the campaign" document.

re paid gming: Erica's zine notes there isn't a good site for reviews of GMs that make it their job/side gig. re the Color Out of Space playtest: That was when we were playtesting the scenarios in *The Final Reflection*, or rather, at least that particular scenario, possibly the next one, and the campaign frame. The scenarios were all written by Graham Walmsley and were very Purist/bleak. "Dance in the Blood", which Gareth later ran for us, is, I think, the most upbeat.

The Cthulhu Invictus scenario we played is, theoretically, winnable, yes. I think it's also a bit too long for a single 4-hour convention slot, although the Yog-Sothoth.com somehow did it in roughly 2.5 hours. I'd have skipped the final bit in our run, as it was close to the end of the slot. But yes, the tide definitely turned against the PCs, and the world maybe being doomed in a convention one-shot is fine.

re the Feng Shui game: My Purist Sorcerer did have limits. She needed her hands free, which wasn't usually a problem, but early on, she got captured by people who knew this. re Mallory's player not knowing Griffin was lying even though this was a "no hidden information" game: Yes. This is an example of what I mean when I say that there are still surprises in GM-less games.

re Patrick Zoch re our friend doing a guide to interrogation for rpg play: There would be a risk of losing sight of the goal. I'm not sure they'd do that, but I am reminded of the time we had a friend run the "computer game" in Jamais Vue and they couldn't quite turn off their Inner Boardgame Player.

re Avram Grumer re *Teenagers From Outer Space* "is clearly inspired by anime (but not specific, licensed anime)": Your phraseology is off. It is *inspired by* a very specific anime, *Ursei Yatsura*, down to, I gather, having all the plot seeds be episodes of the show.

I had thought Guardians of Order's licensed products were from the late 1980s/early 1990s, but I see that's not the case; it's the late 1990s and very early 2000s. re Tri-Stat power gamers: I think it was I who "abused" the system in the sense that Avram said, "This is the maximum I'll let anyone take" and I said, "Right, I'll do that then." After a session or two, he decided that he didn't really want anyone getting quite that much.

**JIM VASSILAKOS:** re John Redden re the feral chicken flash mob: Yipe! re mosquitoes: Apparently, Walt Disney decided that there would be no mosquitoes in Disneyland/world.

Architects: Then you need there to be no standing water whatsoever anywhere.

Disney: Okay. Do it.

And they did. There is no standing water anywhere. If I do get to Disneyland/world, I'll want to take a look for that, as well as to see if I can spot the staff buildings. Taxi cabs are painted a shade of yellow that apparently stands out more than other colors. The staff buildings in Disneyland/world are painted a shade of green that apparently does the opposite.

re application to rpgs: While *Swords of the Serpentine* doesn't have stats for feral chickens or mosquitoes, it

does have stats for a flock of watch-geese. The scenario "Ragamuffins" in the collection *Brought to Light* has stats for a Great Big Pig. Unofficially, Kevin Kulp has kindly supplied stats for various types of sharks. (He's a huge fan of shark movies.)

**TIMOTHY COLLINSON:** Thanks for the convention report! I like the *Blue Planet* setting, and I don't think it's intrinsically tied to any given set of mechanics. I'm less sure about *Blade Runner*, but then, I've not read the game, only played it once at a convention, and had no problem with the system then.

re *Paranoia* game: \*Giggle\* at "deactivating" missiles by blowing them up. It worked, after all! re other offerings in that slot: I'd heard of all but Offworlders, and apparently, I own that one because it's in a bundle I bought four years ago.

re Gee Cows: Oh, good thought ending with the press conference! Sympathy on forgetting to take pictures of your own game. Did any of the players take some? re *Blue Planet: Recontact*: Sounds like you played the dolphin correctly.

re other offerings in that slot: Darkness of the Demimonde is the game, not the scenario. I backed it on Kickstarter. re *Cold City*: There's a Star Trek scenario that uses the Cold City rules? I'm bogged and intrigued. re Deliverance: Thanks for including the picture of Taylor Vaughn; I was wondering what dressing like a total eclipse looked like.

Sympathy on the job annoyances. re me: Yes, exactly. Public domain art is fine, and for something you publish, what I recommend for a no-budget-for-art situation. re Avram Grumer re *Mashed*: I don't know if it would have helped with Gee Cows. It's very grounded in the television show *M\*A\*S\*H*, I think.

**IGTHEMES:** I see the one for #17 is GM-Dickery. Should we also have one for Player-Dickery?

**IGTHEME for 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?**

The most? I don't know. Some interesting ones, in no particular order:

- My sentient Hound of Tindalos taking human form in a *Monsterhearts* game, who fell in love with Wilbur Whateley.
- Vampires and Lycanthropes of various types.
- Vulcans. Logic's at least a two-edged sword and isn't the answer to everything, but it can be an

excellent tool, and many are far too quick to discard it.

- Janet Kagan's Jenji from *Hellspark*, who have a language that's very specific, and hard, if not impossible, to lie in.
- Elves/Fae are fascinating. There are so many different takes on them, of course, but the notion of Fae as beings that follow a logical-but-alien set of rules is something that's easy to relate to.
- One specific fae NPC I like was created by Morgan Ellis for a *DresdenFiles Accelerated* convention game, Ratbite, or rather: His Grace Ratbite, Duke of Washington Square Park, Castellan of the Hangman's Elm, Lord of the Chess Piece Throne, Marquis of The West 4th Street Courts, Count of NYU, Earl of Cooper Square, Baron of Gold Swan Garden, Laird of Astor Place, Bleeker Street, 8th street, 9th Street, and West 4th Street Stations, and Knight Protector of McSorley's Old Ale House and Strangers Bar. One of his Aspects is The Biggest Fucking Pixie You've Ever Seen, and he is over a foot tall.
- In the Lovecraftian vein, while I've said that humans are my favorite monsters, and I stand by that, the deep ones are interesting, especially if one does one's own take on them, as Ruthanna Emrys does, and as did I in Cthulhupunk. Ghouls are interesting, as Lovecraft, Chaosium, and Delta Green have very different takes on them, and when one goes outside Lovecraft, there's even more variation.
- The Yithians, aka The Great Race, are fascinating. I assumed Lovecraft liked them, but I'm not so sure now. Ruthanna Emrys and Jordan Hawk both did an interesting take on them.
- Lovecraft, or at least William Dyer, does sympathize with the Elder Things, seeing what they did to the humans that unwittingly began to vivisect them (thinking they were dead) from their point of view. No such sympathy is extended to the dread shoggoths, whom the Elder Things created as a slave race. Various authors have taken another look at the shoggoths, including Elizabeth Bear ("Shoggoths in Bloom") and T. Kingfisher (Ursula Vernon), as well as Aikisse Saike (the manga *Ghost Reaper Girl*, sadly on indefinite hiatus due to health issues).
- Moving in a more space opera-y direction, I wrote a Hutt character for a friend for a Secret Santa character sheet writing thing. I had a blast with that and learned a few things about the Hutts. I also enjoyed playing an Andorian in a playtest of *Starfleet Society*, a Penned to Good Society game. More recently, I played in the larp Third Contact, and I think I like all of the alien races in it.



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# Age of Menace



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**Recap from E&A #11, AoM# 248:** By 7:30 p.m. on August 12th, 1933, Mazorra stands on the brink. A disastrous shootout inside the Director's Manse has left the Porra divided and trapped with Machado's body double.

Elsewhere, the Investigators pursue separate crises across the asylum. *El Rey* has seized *La Oficina*, *El General* commands a loyal patient army, and radio reports warn that an angry anti-Machado mob is marching on Mazorra. The fate of the institution may be decided before dawn.

#### Key Events:

6:30 pm *El General* speaks to his *Grande Armée*  
7:30 Ultimatum delivered to the Director's Manse.  
7:45 Lt. Cordero makes the Mazorra Vault offer.  
7:50 Cordero/Gandia Pact struck.  
7:55 Descent to the Vault begins.  
8:00 Aeroporto Mob arrives (see upcoming AoM #251)  
9:00 *El Rey's* ultimatum expires while the vault expedition is still underground.  
~9:20 to 9:30 Mazorra's treasure Vault opens, the Vault **Doom Clock** starts, & Claudio 'the Mute' acts.

**Tonight, you are the Wall!**  
("Esta noche tú eres el muro!")



By 6:30 p.m., "General" Professor Gaspar Olivares, aka *El General* and *la Espada de la Corona*, has transformed the eastern grounds of Mazorra into something between parade ground and mass delusion made operational.

Years of harmless drills now prove useful. More than six hundred male patients stand in rough ranks along the main east-west *Avenida Álvarez-Cerice*. Others are stationed at the railway corridor, and approaches to *La Oficina*, M1 and M12 They wear hospital whites, work jackets, straw hats, scavenged belts, and coloured laundry

sashes used as insignia. Brooms, rakes, shovel handles, and crutches are wielded like rifles. A few of his select men even have those.

In the failing light and rain, with hundreds of faces fixed toward the gate, it looks almost like an army from a military painting done by [Horace Vernet](#), or [Édouard Detaille](#).

Olivares stands on an overturned laundry cart, white coat belted with a red sash. One hand rest briefly inside his coat before he extends it toward the closed gate.

*“Soldiers of the Crown. Soldiers of the Mazorra! Behind you are the sick, the hungry, the children, the frightened, and those who cannot understand why the world has grown loud. Before you is the gate. Beyond it come men with anger in their mouths and fire in their hands. Some seek justice. Some seek brothers and sons. Some seek only what they can steal. Or burn.*

*“We will not strike first. We will not chase rumours. We will not abandon formation. A broom handle held with discipline is worth more than a rifle held by a coward. A gate held with courage is worth more than a palace taken by thieves.*

*“El Rey speaks for judgment. I hold the ground. You will obey your marshals & captains. You will protect the wards. No Porra man escapes through our lines. No mob enters among the helpless. Prisoners are seized, not beaten. The wounded are carried, not trampled. Those who surrender live to be named.”*

Rain runs down his face. For a moment the old professor’s voice softens.

*“You have been called mad. Tonight, be orderly. You have been called useless. Tonight, be necessary. You have been locked behind walls. **Tonight, you are the wall!**”*

Then, louder over the sudden roar of cheers:

*“An army of men is not made by their weapons. It is made by obedience, courage, and the refusal to break when lesser men run. Hold fast, my soldiers. History is watching through the rain.”*

*El General* leaves his cheering men and returns with a phalanx of “Marshals” to his command post: the fourth-floor M1 boardroom. From there, using runners, signal whistles, hand flags, and commandeered telephones, he exerts steady if delusional control. His orders are Napoleonic, grandiose, but his Marshals understand the practical meaning: hold the gate, watch the tracks, stop looters, protect the wards, and do not strike unless struck.

## **El General’s Grande Armée**

Gaspar Olivares “Grande Armée de la Mazorra” is divided into two main battalions, two smaller reserves, & a Labour detail.

Unit	#	Position	Function
<b>Battalion I: Gate Guard</b>	~240	Main gate, Boyeros Road approach	Blocks the airport mob, forms ranks, man mobile barricades
<b>Battalion II: Rail Guard</b>	~180	Railway platform, service spur, east road	Controls train access, watches for Porra escape or armed arrivals
<b>Mobile Reserve</b>	~40	Between M1, La Oficina, stables, and laundry routes	Carries messages, plugs gaps, escorts VIPs, reacts to breakthroughs
<b>Guard Reserve</b>	~60	Female Dept. pavilions B, C & D; Children’s pavilion, M1 & M2	Block entry, protect the vulnerable women, Children, & infirmaries, sound alarm.
<b>Labour Detail</b>	~120+	Based behind the lines at New Laundry Pavilion	Hauls brick-loaded laundry-carts, man fire-brigade if arsonists, deliver troop meals.

The mobile reserve is one of the most useful parts of his army. It includes patients with bicycles, laundry carts, wheelbarrows, mules from the agricultural colony, and a even commandeered fire-truck.

## **El General’s Grand Battery**



By dusk, *El General’s* reserve has turned *Avenida Álvarez-Cerice* into a defensive line. His men have opened four manholes along the road and tapped both the water main and the steam line running from the *New Laundry Pavilion* toward the hydrotherapy wards in M2, *La Oficina*, the two Manses, and parts of the Children’s Pavilion.

At each marked blue **G** on the map, one water hose and one steam hose have been tapped to underground connections and then have been hauled through open manhole covers above ground, fitted with nozzles, and braced in brick-weighted laundry carts packed with lumber. Such *artillery carts* are already aimed down likely approaches. A fire truck across from the *Director’s Manse* is parked and waiting in the

open western-most garage To *El General*, these are not industrial hoses. They are artillery pieces.



**Keeper's Note: Water/Steam Hoses:** The hoses are semi-fixed weapons. *El General's* men use them defensively, not as precision weapons.

**Pressurized Water Hose (hospital, laundry, or fire truck hose):** STR 60+ or two operators. DEX/Mechanical Repair to aim. Target rolls STR or DEX or is knocked prone and pushed 1D6 feet; 1D3 damage if slammed into something.

**Steam hose:** STR/Mechanical Repair to open safely. Targets roll Dodge/DEX to avoid. 1D6 damage, CON or lose next action and suffer Penalty Die for 1D6 rounds. Steam cloud 10' radius gives Penalty Die to vision-based rolls for 1D4 rounds.

*El General's* army's strength is mass, obedience, and local knowledge. Its weaknesses are fear, confusion, hunger, and the fact that while *El General's* military vocabulary is accurate, their understanding of very practical orders may not be fully understood by others who have mental health issues like delusions and paranoia of their own.

**Keeper's Note: Running *El General's* Army.** Treat the army as an environmental force, not six hundred. When the Investigators act with, against, or through *El General's* troops, decide which of the following applies:

Situation	Effect
Clear order from <i>El General</i> or trusted officer	Patients act with surprising discipline
Conflicting order from <i>El Rey</i> , guards, or PA	Delay, argument, or split response
Gunfire nearby	Front ranks hold only on a Hard POW or Leadership success
Fire, screams, Twsha victim, or Leopard Man attack	One company wavers or breaks
Investigator gives practical help	Bonus Die if framed as "orders," "dispatches," or "field intelligence"
Investigator mocks the delusion	Immediate hostility, obstruction, or detention as a "spy"

Useful skills for the Investigators to consider: *Persuade, Charm, Intimidate, Psychology, Military Science, History, Spanish, Navigate, Spot Hidden, Listen.*

## Teresa Pacheco's PA Proclamations for *El Rey*:

Once *El Rey's* courtiers seize *La Oficina*, Teresa Pacheco remains at the switchboard, not as a prisoner but as the Crown's reluctant voice. Her announcements are calm, formal, and strangely practical. Across Mazorra, patients, nurses, guards, cooks, & hiding Porra hear the same impossible thing: the hospital now has a government.

**SIDE-BAR: PA PROCLAMATIONS AFTER 5 P.M.:** The proclamations below are not mere colour. They are *El Rey's* attempt to make the uprising sound lawful, organized, and merciful before panic, hunger, and vengeance pull the institution apart.

- 5:44 p.m. "By order of the Emergency Patient Council, all kitchen staff are thanked for their service and instructed to continue distribution of food without favour or punishment. Any person withholding food, medicine, or water from patients will be named before witnesses."
- 6:31 p.m. "Citizens of Mazorra. His Majesty's Council reminds all persons that the fall of tyrants does not abolish judgment. Prisoners are not to be struck. Records are not to be burned. The guilty will be named, and the helpless will be protected. Any staff member wishing to confess abuses may present themselves at *La Oficina* under escort."
- 7:08 p.m. "Notice to all wards, staff residences, and exterior posts. Headlights have been seen passing south on the Boyeros Road. No patient is to approach the east gate unless assigned to *El General's* line. Families outside are not enemies. Looters are not liberators. Porra men attempting to flee under cover of darkness will be detained and held for examination."

**Keeper's Note: Teresa & Tessa at the Switchboard:** Teresa Pacheco makes the first proclamations herself; *everyone* knows her voice. Later, as calls multiply & *El Rey's* courtiers crowd *La Oficina*, she puts her daughter Tessa on the PA while Teresa handles the switchboard, listens to outside lines, & decides which messages are allowed through. Tessa is frightened but obedient. If pressured or deceived, she may read the wrong order aloud, cut off the right one, or accidentally broadcast a private conversation across Mazorra.

## Yolanda's Tearful Reunion



After persuading *El General's* sentries to let her cross their "military lines" at 17:15, RN Yolanda Heres makes her way into the old M1 substructure and finds Zorrilla's Auxiliary Laboratory. She is exhausted, frightened, and still shaken by witnessed Yobama murdering Dr. Llerena.

Inside, Yolanda finds Zorrilla alive, but visibly altered by Twsha and trying to remain composed. Their reunion is immediate and painful. She moves toward him at once, reaching for his bare hand, before Dra. Coutinho or another Investigator can warn her not to touch his exposed skin.

**Keeper's Note:** For one suspended second, Yolanda looks not at Coutinho, Gil, or the Investigators, but at Zorrilla's uncovered hand. Ask plainly: "Who stops her, and how?"

Once steadied, Yolanda asks what needs doing. If treated with basic kindness, she becomes useful immediately. She organizes clean gloves, gowns, gauze masks, basins, and cloths; records pulse and temperature; and helps calm Zorrilla whenever his fascination with his own condition threatens to override sense.

### Mazorra Gate Guards

The Main Gate is held by Mazorra guards *Pepe Sabatés* (25, deaf in one ear, and backs down in a fight) & *Álvaro Recio* (20, secretly sympathetic to the A.B.C.), neither of whom belongs to the Porra. Their small sentry office is built into the north side of the gatehouse wall, with a barred observation window, steel hurricane shutter, doors to the pedestrian passage and main avenue, and a ladder to the flat roof, flagpole, and escape-searchlight.

Shortly after dusk, a patient-soldier emissary from *El General* arrives with four riflemen of the *Grand Armée*. They politely inform the alarmed guards that they may remain at their posts. The patients are only reinforcing the gate against the airport mob, which may now be marching on Mazorra.



With no orders from Capt. Gandía, increasingly bizarre PA announcements, and armed patients before them, Sabatés and Recio hesitate. Yet the patients neither threaten them nor demand their weapons. Sabatés is unsettled; Recio sees proof that Machado's order is collapsing.

By nightfall, guards and patients stand watch together, each uncertain who truly commands whom.

#### SIDE-BAR: MAZORRA GUARD STATUS (7:00 p.m., Aug. 12, 1933):

Mazorra's security force is near collapse. Only **12 deployable guards plus Capt. Gandía** remain available. Of the original Porra-loyal contingent, one guard is dead, one critically wounded, and one lightly wounded. Only **4 Porra loyalists** who are armed remain under Gandía's direct control: Leopoldo Enríquez, Manuel Barbe, Oswaldo Miranda, & Jesús Nadal. The remaining are exhausted, uncertain of events outside the asylum, & increasingly reluctant to obey orders. While some remain on post beyond their shifts, others never reported in.

#### Current Deployment

- Main East Gate: 2 rifle-armed guards
- M1 Pavilion: 1 guard
- M2 Pavilion: 1 guard
- Male Violent/Refractory Pavilion: 1 guard
- Female Violent/Refractory Pavilion: 1 guard
- Grounds patrol with dogs: 2 guards
- Remaining Porra guards + Gandía form a mobile reserve.

One guard recovering from Srta. Varona's paint-fume exposure remains in the barracks. The lightly wounded Vicente Beltrán may also be present. If he escaped earlier events, Jorge Dolz has gone to ground with the Leopard Men Cult in the Old Laundry Pavilion.

#### Equipment

- Most guards carry only truncheons & handcuffs.
- Gandía & his Porra loyalists carry .38 service revolvers.
- The two East Gate guards also have Mauser rifles

#### Guard Cohesion

Mazorra's guards are close to breaking. When confronted by violence, supernatural events, conflicting orders, or prolonged stress. Roll 1D6:

D6	Reaction
1-2	Hold position
3-4	Hesitate
5	Withdraw
6	Abandon Post*

\*Porra loyalists ignore this result unless isolated or ordered to surrender.

**SIDE-BAR - CORDERO'S ESCORT MEN AVAILABLE FOR ACTION:** *Teniente* (Lt.) *Esteban Cordero's* Presidential Escort Porra should be tracked separately. They are not Mazorra guards, and do not answer naturally to Gandía. After the Manse shootout, only Lt. Cordero and his 5 men *Sargento* (Sgt.) Tomás Arencibia, *Cabo* (Cpl.) Raúl Ferrer (mechanic/driver), Félix Ochoa, Julio Bécquer, & Anselmo Quiñones remain unhurt or lightly wounded enough for immediate action.

Cordero's Presidential Escort are better armed: Lt. Cordera & his two other officers carry Colt .45 automatics with spare magazines (1d10+2), while his other men retain .38 revolvers (1d10). A Thompson was secured in the Escort car, but is now in the hands of *El Rey's* men. They may cooperate with Gandía, but their first loyalty is to their own escape, the recovery of Machado's property, and preventing themselves from being handed over to the mob.

## DIRECTOR'S MANSE CRISIS (7:30 p.m.)

At 7:30 p.m., a burst of feedback shrieks across the Mazorra PA system. A moment later comes *Señora Teresa Pacheco's* strained voice, reading from a paper she has plainly been handed:

**"By order of the Crown, all armed servants of the fallen tyrant inside the Director's Manse are to surrender their weapons and stand for judgment. No prisoner is to be struck before examination. The guilty shall be named. The innocent shall be released."**

The Public Address system order is followed almost immediately by action.



Urratia, *El Rey's* man, arrives at the Director's Manse with eight of *El Rey's* courtiers, arrives at the *Director's Manse* with eight of *El Rey's* courtiers, supported by armed riflemen loaned from *El General's* army. The arrest party moves quickly, but not wildly. The lone Presidential Escort guard covering the front approach is rushed, disarmed, and bound before he can fire. The two vehicles parked outside the Manse are seized and pushed back from the portico, denying Gandía and Cordero any simple escape. Urrutia then orders the courtiers into cover and places the riflemen where they can command the front and side approaches.

The Manse is surrounded, but not yet assaulted.

Inside the Manse are *Captain Gandía* and his surviving Porra, *Lt. Cordero* and his Presidential Escort men, *Salvatore Méndez* (the body double of Geraldo Machado), *Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato*, *Dr. Santiago Prats*, and any Investigators present. The air is thick with smoke, blood, fear, and failed authority.

A patient courtier wearing a robe over a threadbare grey smock with a stencilled number on the front approaches the front door under Urrutia's watch. He carries himself with immense seriousness, holding a sealed envelope in both hands. If no one answers, he slips it through the mail slot, steps back, and bows to the house as if withdrawing from a royal audience.

**The Royal Letter:** The envelope is addressed in careful handwriting: *To Captain Alberto Gandía, Lieutenant Cordero, and all armed servants of the former Machado authority presently enclosed within the Director's Manse.*

Inside is a formal notice, stamped with a crude wax seal impressed by what looks like a brass coat button.

[English Translation]

*By command of His Majesty Don Reynaldo Fontanilla, Alfonso XIII, lawful King in exile and Protector of the sick of the Casa General de Dementes de Mazorra:*

*All armed agents of the Porra, the Presidential Escort, and all other servants of the fallen tyrant are ordered to surrender their firearms, knives, clubs, keys, papers, and instruments of violence.*

*Any person who has not taken arms against the patients shall be released unharmed. The wounded shall receive medical care, though they may remain under custody until their responsibility is determined. No prisoner shall be beaten, hidden, executed, or delivered to the crowd before judgment. The guilty shall be named before witnesses. The innocent shall be protected.*

*You have until nine o'clock tonight to answer. Your reply may be given by telephone to the Main Switchboard, where His Majesty's secretary will receive and transmit your words.*

*If you refuse, you shall be considered armed fugitives inside an institution under royal protection and subdued when His Majesty judges it necessary.*

*Given at Mazorra, at half past seven in the evening,  
by order of His Majesty,*

*Señor Anselmo Valdés*

*Provisional Secretary of Justice of the Crown  
Casa General de Dementes de Mazorra*

**SIDE-BAR - What the Letter Does:** This is not simply a demand for surrender. It dramatically changes the situation inside the Manse. Capt. Gandía now viscerally understands at once that the patients now control *La Oficina*, the switchboard, the PA system, and the grounds outside the Manse. He also understands that the language of "judgment" is dangerous. If *El Rey* can produce witnesses, prisoners, files, or testimony, Gandía may no longer be merely trapped. He may be exposed to severe judgement from either the in-patients or from any successor Machado government. Papers retrieved from his office safe now on his person are now uncomfortably damning and dangerous.

Lt. Cordero reads the letter differently. He sees *time*. Until nine o'clock, the patients are not storming the Manse. That gives him room to bargain, threaten, or reveal the existence of Machado's treasure vault.

As for the others, Esperanza recognizes the administrative power of the notice. It is absurd, but it is also orderly. *Someone* outside is trying to create process rather than slaughter. If treated respectfully, she may begin to see *El Rey's* court as a temporary structure she can use. Dr. Prats is quietly impressed and alarmed. The language is mad only in costume. Its principles are clearer than anything Gandía has offered all day.

## Immediate Reactions Inside the Manse

Gandía's first instinct is to reject the letter as lunacy. He may snarl that he does not surrender to inmates, kings, saints, or stage actors. But he does not order an immediate breakout unless pushed. He looks instead to the windows, the vehicles, the telephones, and the wounded. He is calculating.

Lt. Cordero stays focused. He asks who controls the roads, whether the main gate is still held, and whether the outside telephone line truly works (it does not). If he believes escape by vehicle is impossible, he begins looking for another route out.

*Esperanza* asks to see the letter; Cordero hands it to her (which she notices). She reads it twice, then says quietly: "Whoever wrote this knows what a government is supposed to sound like."



Dr. Santiago Prats offers to tend the wounded, including wounded Porra. This may prevent panic, but it also lets him move through the room, assess weapons, and quietly speak to any Investigator.

*Salvatore Méndez*, body double remains either awake or semi-conscious, depending on the Keeper's needs. If he wakes fully with the help of the Investigators rendering First Aid or Healing successfully, he may worsen the crisis by begging not to be handed over as Machado.

## If the Telephone Is Used

A call to *La Oficina* is answered by one of *El Rey's* courtiers, who speaks with grave formality and relays messages aloud. Teresa Pacheco is nearby at the switchboard, frightened but listening. *El Rey* may not speak directly at first. He lets his courtier take testimony, as if preserving procedure.

Possible telephone replies from the courtier:

- "His Majesty asks whether Captain Gandía denies command of the Porra at Mazorra."
- "His Majesty asks whether the wounded are being tended."

- "His Majesty commands that Señorita Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato, Dr. Prats, and any Visitors be released unharmed."
- "His Majesty reminds all present that a king who cannot restrain his own soldiers is no king."

This last line should land hard. It applies to *El Rey*, *El General*, *Gandía*, *Cordero*, and both President (& Director) Machado alike.

## If No Answer Is Immediately Given

At 8:00 p.m., the PA repeats a shorter version of the demand. By then, rumours of the airport mob are spreading. The deadline remains nine o'clock, but pressure increases as more patients gather at a distance to watch the Manse.

Urrutia does not permit the courtiers to beat their Escort Porra prisoner or rush the doors. If one of *El Rey's* men becomes excited, Urrutia physically pulls him back and says: "No. The King said judgment."

This makes Urrutia more than muscle. He becomes the only thing preventing the Manse siege from becoming a lynching.

## If the Investigators Mediate

Investigators can buy time, secure hostages, protect *Esperanza* or Prats, arrange care for the wounded, or press for release of non-combatants. They may also realize that *El Rey's* court, however delusional its ruler is, is currently the only force trying to impose rules on the collapse.

**Keeper's Note:** Investigators can create leverage to intervene: medical authority, witnesses, control of a doorway, an open telephone line, written notes, or evidence against one faction. They can successfully establish the following terms:

1. Wounded men are treated under Dr. Prats' supervision.
2. *Esperanza* & any non-combatants may leave or remain by choice.
3. All armed men stay inside until a formal surrender is arranged.
4. No one is handed to the mob.
5. Gandía & Cordero may speak by telephone, but not privately.

**SIDE-BAR- CORDERO'S SECRET LEVERAGE:** Captain Gandía does not know the full truth of the treasure store beneath Mazorra. He knows only that Director Machado reacts with unusual speed whenever certain messages arrive from his presidential cousin, and that those orders often involve the *Old Laundry Pavilion*, sealed passages, sudden "maintenance" clearances, or the removal of witnesses from inconvenient places. Over the years, Gandía has seen enough to understand that Mazorra hides more than patients. But he does not know how the hidden reserve is reached. He does not know Claudio's true role. He does not know the access procedure, the signals, or which parts of the old substructure remain usable.

Lt. Cordero does. Cordero has assisted past discreet extractions for the Presidential Escort. He knows that Claudio, the mute patient, is no patient at all, but a concealed Porra guard assigned to the vault. He knows there is an access route, a procedure, and a way to remove portable wealth if the right men reach the place in time.

He also knows something Gandía does not fully understand: the vault was never meant to serve Mazorra. It was meant to serve Machado.

## Cordero's Mazorra Vault Offer

After reading *El Rey's* ultimatum, Cordero lets the silence lengthen. Lanterns move across the grounds below. The Manse is not yet under assault, but it is surrounded.

"They have given us until nine," Cordero says.

Gandía snaps, "Lunatics do not give terms."

"No," Cordero says. "Men with rifles do."

He draws Gandía a few steps away from Esperanza, Dr. Prats, and any Investigators present.

"We still have the American money. Enough to buy a delay, perhaps a door, perhaps one frightened courtier willing to return a car. But not enough for all of us. Not safely."

Gandía's eyes narrow. "You have something else to say?"

"There is more under the Old Laundry."

"I know that much."

"You know rumours. I know the man who guards it."

For the first time, Gandía goes still.

"The mute. Claudio. He is not what your staff think he is. I have the route, keys, lock combination, countersign, and enough authority that he may still obey. Without me, you have guesses. Without you, I cannot get my men through this madhouse."

Gandía looks back at *El Rey's* letter. "And then?"

"Then we stop bargaining like prisoners. We recover tyrant money and offer it as royal treasure, placed under protection for the patients."

"Tribute," Gandía says sourly.

"Publicly, yes. Privately, passage."

Cordero glances at the scattered currency, the wounded men, and the unconscious body double.

"We do not need all of it. The bullion buys the King's honour. The paper money buys our road out."

Gandía understands both the opportunity and the insult. Cordero is proposing to use Machado's own hidden wealth to bribe madmen into saving them from Machado's collapse.

"If we leave this here," Gandía says, "we may not get back in."

"If we stay," Cordero answers, "we may not leave it at all."

**SIDE-BAR WHAT THIS CHANGES** Lt. Cordero's revelation turns the Manse crisis into an escape opportunity. Until now, Gandía has only a doubtful escape fund and a shrinking number of armed men. Cordero offers something better: a way to reach the Mazorra vault, recover enough treasure to bribe *El Rey's* court, and perhaps escape under "royal protection." Cordero cares about the vault as leverage, not treasure. Gandía cares about both. The American money remains useful but suspect, since some may be spoiled, crushed, damp, counterfeit, or impossible to sort quickly. The bullion is too heavy to move easily, but too tempting for Gandía to ignore. If Cordero speaks openly, everyone in the room hears enough to understand that money and the Old Laundry are involved. If he speaks privately, allow nearby Investigators *Listen* or *Spot Hidden* Hard success catches "Old Laundry," "reserve," or "Claudio." Extreme success reveals the deeper point: Claudio is *not* a patient, and Cordero may know how to reach Machado's hidden store.

## Vault Storm-Drain Shortcut



Lt. Cordera explains that the 'simulated cloudburst' was the previous formal extraction protocol. It is how a prepared Porra team removes heavy crates through the Female Dept's Violent/Refractory airing yard: hydrants, sandbags, the float-controlled north gate, hoists, carts, & a final washdown to hide evidence of passage. This cannot be safely repeated. *El General's* "Grand Battery" has tapped the Mazorra water mains, reducing pressure. The formal route requires all four hydrants running at full force, sustained head in the junction chamber, and enough concentrated flow into the stilling-well intake to raise the hidden float and keep the north gate open. With pressure reduced, the yard would flood visibly and alert *El General's* men, while the north gate might fail to lift, or drop without warning.

Poring over Underground Mazorra maps, Cordero points to another way in (see map). The Mazorra Vault lies just south of the *Old Laundry Pavilion*. Its main entrance is reached through a dormant east-west sewer spur north of the chamber. A separate dormant north-south sewer runs along the vault's east side at a different level and does not

connect. To the west and partly beneath the failed side of the chamber, an old north-south storm drain runs parallel to the vault. A newer working north-south sewer lies beyond that, but they can access the dormant line through a ceiling access panel.

Their pact is struck by 7:50. Five minutes later, their small armed party descends through the Manse sewer entry.

## Journey to the Vault



Capt. Gandía, Lt. Cordero, their surviving men, Méndez, Esperanza, & any Investigators present enter the Underground Mazorra through the sewer access beneath the Director's Manse. They take all the paper currency, cramming it all into pillowcases, split between Gandía's and Cordero's men. Esperanza just has time to change in her bedroom into dungaree coveralls, boots, gloves, and a work cap. She slips her two-shot .22 derringer into the bib of her coveralls.

**Keeper's Note:** The six currency bags weighs only 7.5 lbs each but the bags are bulky, damp-prone, and awkward in the tunnels. Any man carrying one has a Penalty Die to *Climb*, *Dodge*, or combat rolls without dropping.

Accessing the line via a service hatch in the Manse's scullery, the party descends, & closes the hatch. They follow the Manse sewer north line to the main trunk, then crosses into the newer east-west storm drain. Cordero's square-key opens a bolted hatch into a dormant north-south storm drain running beside the vault's west wall. When the hatch comes free, trapped runoff (from the earlier simulated cloudburst) spills out in a cold rush, then dwindles to a foul trickle. The "dormant" drain beyond is slick, & treacherous underfoot [**KN**: Penalty to movement rolls].

They proceed north in single file by lantern light, measuring distance carefully. At 112 metres they find a thick, three-foot iron inspection panel set into the storm-drain ceiling. This service plate was installed during the 1927 reconstruction, allowing trusted insiders to inspect the relation between the vault approach and the adjacent storm drain without using the Female Dept. extraction route.

Opening the ceiling panel takes ~12 filthy minutes. It requires the square-key, crowbars, and two men straining overhead. One seized bolt must be broken. Above lies the disused east-west sewer line. A short distance along its south wall, fake construction hoarding conceals the vault antechamber. In their haste, Gandía's men leave the storm-drain panel open behind them. This error later matters.

**Keeper's Note:** The underground trip takes about 35 min of cautious single-file movement, plus 5 min to open and drain the first hatch, and about 12 min to force the ceiling inspection panel. Allow another 5 -10 min to reach the hoarding, clear it, and expose the vault door. The Vault can plausibly open around 9:20 to 9:30 p.m. Not in time for the deadline, but not too late that they cannot make a deal by telephone later from some other Mazorra location they can later access.

Claudio may shadow the party from the Manse or pick up their trail at the storm-drain access. Do not announce him. Offer one chance to notice: a muffled scrape behind them, a swirling mud in the water, or a lantern-shadow briefly crossing the open panel below. *Spot Hidden* or *Listen* detects only that someone is following. *Hard* success suggests the follower is barefoot, patient-silent, and moving with practised purpose.

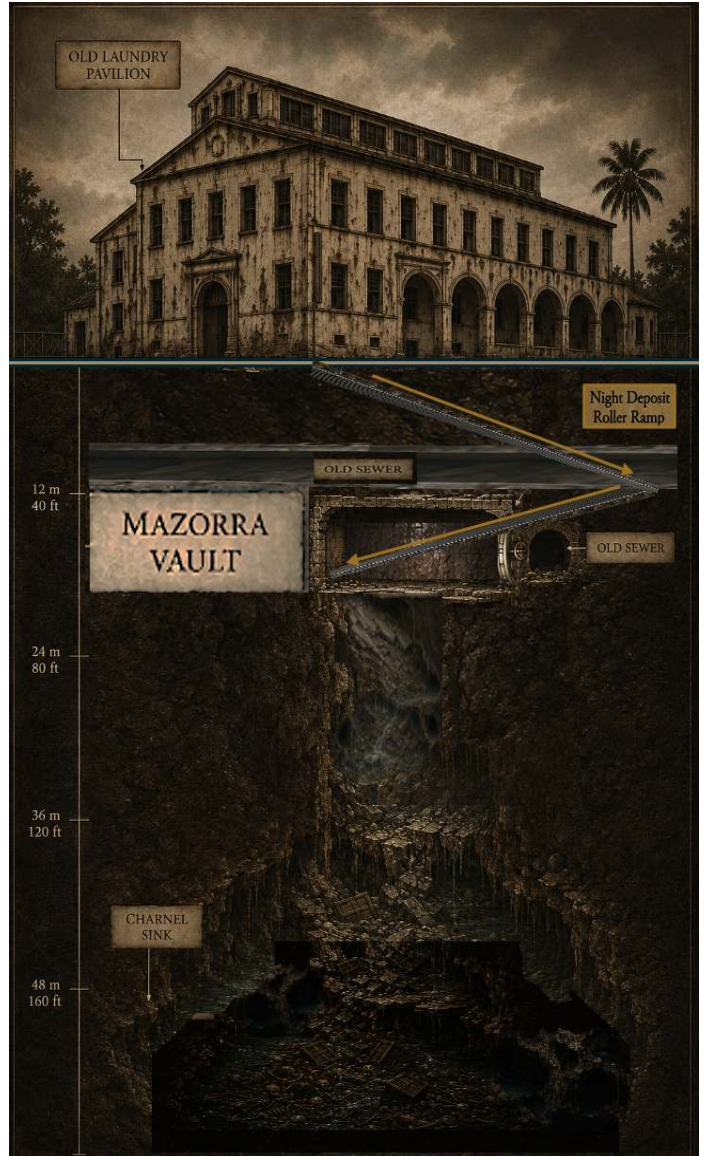
## Revelations in the Mazorra Vault



With all four keys and all but the last combination number, opening the vault is only a matter of time [**KN**: d10 minutes]. At last, the final number is found. With a metallic clunk, the lock releases. Helped by two of their men the vault door groans outward.

Gandía raises his lantern, expecting stacked crates, strongboxes, and the reassuring geometry of stolen money. Instead, the light falls across cracked flooring, an empty diagonal scar where half the floor should be.

The western half of the chamber has fallen away. The south end is worse: a slab of floor hangs lower than the rest, tilted, treacherous, and already shedding grit. Beyond it everything drops into blackness. Somewhere below, water runs over stone. The heavier stored treasures are gone. Boxes, shelving, safes, metal strongboxes, and bullion crates have slid down into the unseen lower depths.



## VAULT DOOM CLOCK

Use the full 10-point **Doom Clock** only if anyone descends into the Charnel Sink. If no one goes below, begin at 8. Each major action under pressure moves the clock down by 1: climbing, hauling, looting, fighting, forcing a barrier, freeing someone, or grabbing proof. Failed Climb, DEX, STR, Mechanical Repair, or reckless gunfire may cost 1 more.

10. The broken floor groans but holds. Dust and mortar drift down.
9. The Charnel Sink yawns open below. Rope descent is possible, but unwise.
8. First descent or looting attempt. Light proof can be reached. Heavy treasure costs another tick.
7. Bullion crates tilt on the upper ledges. If disturbed by anyone, roll 1D6: 1-2 shifts but holds; 3-4 one crate falls, Dodge or 2D6 damage; 5 avalanche, Dodge with Penalty Die or 3D6 and pinned; 6 deep rupture, DEX or slide toward a new hole. A direct hit is a *Major Wound*.
6. A lower shelf cracks. Water and gravel pour through new seams. The sound below changes from dripping to rushing.
5. Part of the broken floor gives way with a crash. Two more bullion crates slip, tilt, and fall. Anything heavy left unsecured begins moving.
4. The bone drift shifts westward beneath any scavengers. Anyone carrying bullion, weapons, Porra loot, or heavy evidence rolls *DEX, Climb, or Jump* with a Penalty Die.
3. Discipline fractures among the Porra who may refuse orders, drag comrades up/back, abandon loot, or threaten anyone blocking escape.
2. The west wall bows inward. Bricks fall like hard rain. Anyone exposed below rolls *Dodge* or *DEX*. Success means 1 damage or losing the next action taking cover. Failure means 1D6 damage and knocked prone. Fumble, or refusing cover, means 2D6 damage and pinned.
1. One final action is possible: save someone, or seize proof. No one can do everything.

**0. COLLAPSE.** The vault seems to breathe once before giving way. The sodden west wall tears loose with a roar of stone, gravel, cement, and black water. The floor slides away in sections. The heavy vault door tilts in its frame, then crashes into the depths, dragging chains, brick, and treasure after it. When the dust and spray thin, only the cracked east wall and night-deposit roller ramp still stand. Anything below is lost unless the Keeper wants it as a later hook.



**SIDE-BAR HISTORY OF THE MAZORRA VAULT:** The hidden treasure room is the latest use of an older plantation substructure beneath the Old Laundry labelled the *Refugio de Huracanes*, or "Hurricane Shelter." The chamber began as part of a sugar & tobacco estate: punishment cellar & secure store-house. It was built over a natural limestone sinkhole, which widened insidiously over generations. During the plantation era, the same void became a place for disposing of the dead. Beneath the broken vault floor lies the *Charnel Sink*: a deep drift of human remains, shifted by floodwater and darkness rather than burial. At some point the opening was roughly sealed with poor cement, brick masonry, whether to stop the smell, prevent accidents, or hide what lay below. The work was crude and never meant to bear the weight now placed upon it. Beneath the *Charnel Sink*, natural limestone fissures & partly flooded chambers descend irregularly through to Karst structures toward the deep water-table, their full extent is unknown, but may possibly connect to the *Río Almendares* ~3 km away.

**The Vault Now:** Unknown to anyone, poor quality concrete, compromised masonry, & decades of water movement gradually undermined the western floor. The 3 am August 12th the Porra extraction team success was the last straw; they disturbed the abandoned drainage system used to make their route passable. Too much water they released backed into old lines that had remained mostly dry for decades. Seepage has softened masonry beneath the vault. Heavy bullion, safes, bullion chests, and dense crates stacked along the weakened side have already begun to pull the floor apart.

## The Agony of Gold Below

Near the vault door lies the first breadcrumb of bait: a broken coin crate, a split leather case spilling bank-wrapped Cuban currency, and enough loose gold coins in to make everyone in the room stop breathing.

**Keeper's Note - Treasure on the Shattered Floor:** The spilled coin crate contains about 240 old Spanish gold doubloons, worth ~ \$4,000 in 1933 gold value. The Cuban paper currency totals about \$30,000. Each bullion crate further on is an iron-banded strongbox about 24 × 14 × 10 inches, packed with twenty-four 100-troy-ounce gold bars in straw and canvas. Each weighs about 200 lb and is worth roughly \$50,000. Two strong men might shift one on level ground. Dragging one across a wet, cracking vault floor, through a storm-drain panel, and out while the vault door is closing is another matter.

More bullion lies farther at or just below the collapsing floor. Fifteen feet from the door, one banded crate has split and yellow metals glints through straw inside. Two more crates sit roughly forty feet away, with another balanced near the broken western edge of the floor. They are close enough to torment Gandía, but far enough that reaching them should feel nearly suicidal. About 20 feet below, a dozen smaller crates rest on a rubble ledge near the drift of yellowed bone and bone shards. One cracked case glints faintly. Below the broken floor, lantern light catches the *Charnel Sink* >100 feet down. Other crates have already fallen through, leaving impact scars and dark holes in the remaining floor.

The space beneath the roller ramp is shadowed and easily missed in the first frantic look. A deliberate search with lantern or flashlight may reveal sealed storage: a long wooden case, waxed boxes, document packets, and a long metal cylinder. Contents are unknown until opened. The wooden case holds serviceable Mauser rifles; the boxed ammunition, 10 boxes, is still dry enough to use. The oilcloth-wrapped cylinder contains a rolled master oil painting, one of the three mentioned in AoM #239.

**Keeper's Note - The Stuck Document Case:** Wedged 18 feet up the night-deposit roller ramp is the rigid black leather dispatch case dropped off by President Machado's Porra Escort 9 hours earlier. It is partly hidden by shadow and dust. A successful *Spot Hidden* reveals it; if the vault is flooding, the roll requires a Hard success. If the Investigators are already fleeing in that direction, they notice it automatically. It is roughly the size of a banker's box and weighs 18 lb. One person can carry it, but not comfortably while climbing, fighting, or crawling. This may be the most valuable recoverable treasure in the vault. Gold is heavy. Files can change governments. Retrieving the case costs 1 tick on the **Vault Doom Clock**. Choose a method: Hard *Climb* plus STR or *Mechanical Repair* to free it; *DEX*, *Throw*, or *Mechanical Repair* to hook it from below with rope, crowbar, rifle sling, or improvised pole; *Mechanical Repair* to work the rollers; or Firearms with a Penalty Die to shoot it loose, followed by *DEX* to catch or stop the fall. Failure wastes time, jams the case, damages it, or leaves the retriever in trouble. A fumble risks a fall, ricochet, lost case, or another **Doom Clock** tick.

**SIDE-BAR GANDÍA'S GOLD SALVAGE-MANIA:** When Capt. Gandía first sees the ruined Vault, he does not so much lose Sanity (SAN) as refuse it. Reality and authority briefly fail. For a few seconds he only stares, pistol lowered, as if entering a chapel, tomb, or judgment chamber. Then the explanations begin. This cannot be the true vault. Cordero must have tricked him. Director Machado must have kept another chamber hidden. His anger searches for a target because accepting the truth means accepting that his escape chances has already started flickering.

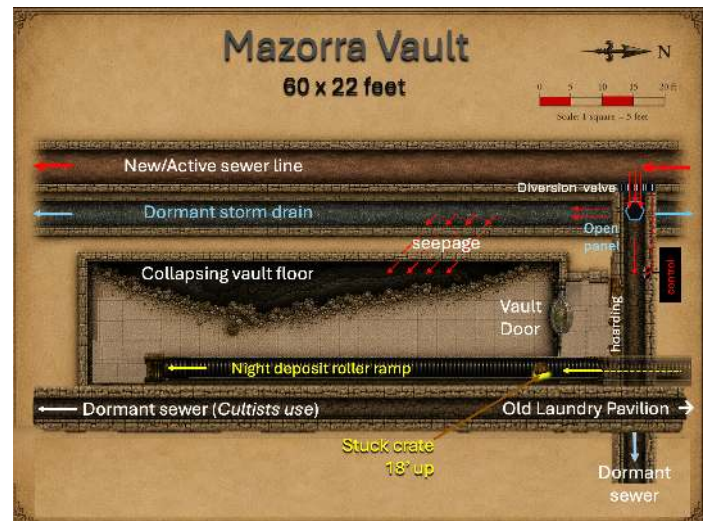
Gandía's final stage is not acceptance, but *salvage-mania*. He converts shock into obsession, becoming cold and practical again, wrongly so. He offers shares, forged papers, promotions, safe passage, or threats to anyone who will help recover "only one crate." If challenged, Gandía escalates: Keeper can choose or roll 1D6. 1) bargains, 2) orders men to bullion, 3) forces a rope descent at gunpoint, 4) seizes a hostage, 5) strips nearby valuables, or 6) goes himself rather than leave empty-handed.

Gandía quotes to use:

1. "Madre de Dios...No. This is not the vault."
2. "Cordero, if this is a trick, I will leave you down here with the bones."
3. "That crate. Not the coins. Beggars kill for coins. "No one leaves empty-handed. Not after this."
4. "You there. Help me get this rope around my waist. Down & back. Two minutes."
5. "Do not speak of danger. We are already dead if we go back poor."
6. "I am still Captain here, until the ceiling says otherwise."

## Claudio's Control Valve Flooding Mistake

The Mute, Claudio Rivera y Zayas secretly follows Gandía from the Main Trunk line and overhears the plan to loot the vault. Claudio is not mute, and never was. He is a Porra plant assigned to protect the vault's secrecy.



He reaches the old east-west spur near the newer north-south sewer line and opens a concealed diversion control valve. Foul water begins pouring into the approach tunnel. The trap is meant to cut off retreat, halt the removal of treasure, and force Gandía's party deeper into the antechamber and ruined vault.

But Claudio does not know Gandía has already damaged the precariously fragile system. In their haste, Gandía and

Cordero's men left the storm-drain inspection panel open behind them. Part of the diverted flow drops into the dormant storm drain, runs along the vault's compromised west wall, and begins seeping through old seams, porous brick, and cracked concrete.



What should have been a tunnel trap becomes a lateral assault on the vault itself. Gandia's shortcut creates the wound. Claudio's flood makes it bleed. By the time anyone understands this, the wall is weeping, the mortar is softening, and the broken western floor is moving again.

### Claudio Speaks & Acts

As Gandia shouts for rope and lanterns inside the Vault, the outward-opening vault door gives a deep iron groan. At first no one understands the sound. Then another boom rolls through the chamber as the immense steel leaf moves closer to its frame.

Claudio, the supposed deaf-mute patient, stands outside the vault, half-hidden beyond the threshold, both hands braced against the door's outer edge. The harmless smile he has worn for months is gone. He has already begun pushing.

One Porra guard stares. "Claudio?"

The supposed mute turns his head. His voice is flat, hoarse, and utterly sane.

"Traitors! "You were trusted with this place. Trusted by the President. Trusted by the Cause."

He drives his shoulder into the battleship-steel door. It does not swing shut quickly. It grinds by inches, each movement answered by a hollow boom.

**Keeper's Notes:** Claudio begins closing the outward-opening vault door when the **Doom Clock** is about 7. His first words should come only after the Investigators or Porra realize what is happening. Once the door is half shut, attacks against Claudio suffer a Penalty Die unless a character moves into the threshold. Entering the narrowing gap requires a *DEX* roll. Failure leaves the character inside the Vault or exposed at the threshold, Keeper's choice. Claudio does not need to win a fight. He only needs to steal time as the **Doom Clock** ticks down. He kicks away any previously blocking wedges, strikes at hands bracing the door, hides behind the steel leaf, and tries to engage even one lock before he is stopped. Even if Claudio is stopped, the open Control Valve is causing havoc undermining the Vault, *Mechanical Repair* or *INT* to realize this. Shutting it off can give a little relief and can reset the **Doom Clock** by two whole ticks, but the damage has been done.

### Descent into the Charnel Sink

From the broken vault edge, the apparent bottom is barely visible 120 feet below. Lanterns and flashlights catch only wet stone, bone-white ridges, and occasional glints of bullion lodged on lower shelves. That should be enough to tempt Gandia, Cordero, and their men downward.

**Keeper's Note:** The descent forces an ugly choice on the Investigators: let Porra agents die, save them for trial, or use the confusion to escape with proof. Rigging rope and making the first descent takes at least five minutes and advances the **Doom Clock** by 1. Each later major action also advances the clock by 1: climbing, searching, hauling, freeing someone, forcing the door, fighting Claudio, or crossing unstable debris. Failed *Climb*, *DEX*, *STR*, *Mechanical Repair*, or reckless firearm use may advance it by 1 more.



While descending down to ~50 feet, the "bottom" comes into better view. It is not level ground. It rises in ridges, breaks

into pockets, and drops away without warning. Bullion crates lie wedged on sodden ledges and broken shelves. They *look* recoverable from above. They are not. Touching one, climbing over it, firing nearby, or disturbing the ledge may send it sliding loose. Once one crate falls, others may follow in a chain of impacts, splintering, spilling gold, punching holes through the bone crust, or ricocheting from wall to wall before vanishing into darkness.

**Keeper's Note: Falling Bullion Crates:** When a crate is touched, struck, climbed on, or when the **Doom Clock** advances after loud or violent action, roll 1D6:

- 1-2: It shifts but holds. Anyone nearby must make DEX or lose their next action steadying themselves.
- 3-4: One crate falls. Anyone below or on a lower ledge rolls *Dodge*. Failure means 2D6 damage and knocked prone; success means 1D3 damage from splinters, stones, and flying coins.
- 5: Crate avalanche. Roll Dodge with a Penalty Die for anyone below. Failure means 3D6 damage and pinned until freed by STR or help.
- 6: Deep rupture. The falling crate smashes through the visible bone crust, opening a new hole, and disappears to the bottom 40 feet below. Anyone within 10 feet rolls DEX or slides toward it; failure requires Climb, Jump, or another character's aid to avoid falling farther. A direct hit from a falling crate should be treated as a *Major Wound*.

### The Bone Drift of the Charnel Sink



Anyone foolhardy enough to descend by rope reaches the lower right of the Charnel Sink (red X on map) where a relatively flat shelf of collapsed plantation-era flooring is slowly sinking into the void. It is a soaked ossuary drift of the skeletal remains of thousands of the dead over centuries, overlaid by a patina/crust of broken brick, crumbling concrete, splintered shelving, rotten packing crates, and filthy water piled over unseen holes. This is not even the true ground, which is a full 160 feet from the top.

This is a terrible place to scavenge, but Gandia may order it at gunpoint. That should feel ugly. Men are being forced to crawl across a mass grave for gold while the whole vault continues to fail.

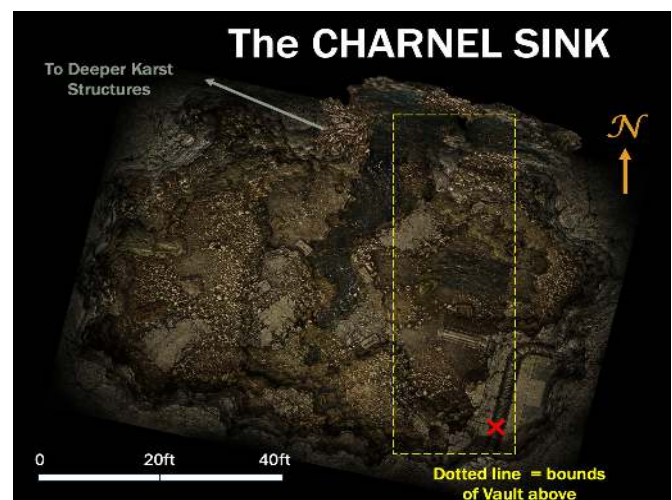
Movement is miserable. Long bones roll underfoot. Splinters stab through soles. A boot placed firmly may twist, sink, or vanish between debris. Characters cannot run safely. Stealth is nearly impossible; every step produces hollow clatter, wet scraping, or sliding collapse.

Something also moves along the drift. At first glance it looks like clusters of small bony hands. They are harmless long-legged cave arachnids, with pale bodies the size of large beads and legs like bone needles. Huge mounds of them hang on the walls which had looked like white Spanish moss. They do nothing, except fall in sheets if disturbed.

**Keeper's Note:** Each crossing, hurried movement, or 10 feet of progress under pressure requires *DEX*, *Climb*, or *Jump*, Keeper's choice. Failure means the character falls prone, loses 1 round, drops something, or becomes briefly wedged. A fumble causes 1D3 damage from a puncture, twisted ankle, or crushing stumble. Anyone carrying bullion, a crate, rifle case, or unconscious person rolls with a Penalty Die. A failed roll while carrying heavy loot drops it to disappear through the drift AND also advances the **Doom Clock** by 1. Note that visible bone drift of jammed and interlocked remains is only the upper crust of the deeper sinkhole bottom 40 feet below this level.

### Possible Finds

- Water-damaged payroll packet proving Porra bonus payments and false staff names.
- Small pneumatic dispatch tube containing partial orders signed only "G.M." & referring to "special removals to Mazorra."
- Soaked leather briefcase; \$3,000 in counterfeit U.S. currency, green ink running off the worthless paper.
- A waterproof oilcloth packet with a detailed nautical chart showing the wreck of something called the Vera V (a liquor transport vessel that vanished entirely in the Florida Straits with all crew/cargo early 1931)
- A dry leather sack weighting about 30 lbs miraculously dry; it clinks when hefted and inside are ~500 worn silver coins, old Spanish pieces of eight. Worth ~ \$150 in 1933 bullion, or several times that to the right antiquarian buyer, but heavy enough to slow a fleeing man and loud enough to betray every step. Any character carrying it suffers a Penalty Die to *Climb*, *Jump*, *DEX*, and *Stealth* until it is dropped.
- Heavy bullion crate: about \$50,000 in small gold bars, roughly 200 lbs. semi-floating in the bony jetsam. It can be shifted a few feet, not sensibly recovered during collapse.



Anyone below grabbing loot instead of evidence must choose: drop it, be slowed, or risk being trapped when the next section gives way.

### Keeper's Choice: *Baron Kriminal* Stirs



Use this only if the Keeper wants the vault scene to take a sharp supernatural turn. If Matteo is dead or dying, Baron Kriminal reaches into the Charnel Sink below the vault. He does not raise the dead. He makes the pit judge the living.

First, everything goes still. The bone-clatter stops. Ripples flatten. Dust hangs in the lantern light. The cellar spiders vanish. Then the cold arrives.

*The Bone Drift* begins to move with purpose. Loose bones roll uphill. Cracks open beneath boots. Rifles, keys, Porra pay packets, marked papers, and loose bullion drag downward as if caught in a slow underground tide. The Sink does not swallow everyone equally. It favours the guilty, armed, and greedy.

Porra agents, and anyone carrying Machado's loot, weapons, or incriminating papers, suffer a Penalty Die on *DEX*, *Climb*, *Jump*, or *STR* rolls made to cross, climb out, pull free, or rescue someone from the Drift. Dropping weapons or loot removes this Penalty Die. Dropping evidence removes it too, but may lose proof forever. The Baron does not distinguish justice from vengeance cleanly. On a *failed* roll, the victim is caught knee-deep, knocked prone, or wedged in shifting bone and rubble. On a *fumble*, they are caught waist-deep or slide toward a new crack. They must be pulled free by *STR*, *Climb*, or another character's aid before the **Doom Clock** advances again. A successful rescue saves them, but costs time and may force the rescuers to abandon gold, papers, or another trapped person.

If the Investigators try to bargain, no voice answers. They may shout into the dark, name the guilty, command men to drop weapons, throw Porra keys or loot into the Drift, display a crucifix, or swear that prisoners will face judgment above. The response is not speech but movement. The Bone Drift loosens around one man, tightens around another, or goes still for a single breath. The Baron's demand, if understood at all, is simple: give him the guilty, or give up what the guilty carry. A named Porra agent who throws down his weapon/confesses loses the Penalty Die, but the Sink still remembers him.

**Keeper's Note:** Treat the Bone Drift as a physical hazard first & supernatural judgment second. Before *Baron Kriminal* acts, it is unstable terrain. After he acts, it becomes selective, patient, & cruel. Each failed escape attempt may advance the **Doom Clock** by 1. SAN loss should be brief: 0/1 for witnessing the Sink move with intent, 1/1D4 for being trapped or seeing someone deliberately taken.

### When the Vault Finally Collapses:

The collapse is not observed so much as endured: a deafening roar, pressure in the chest, dust, spray, falling grit, and darkness opening behind them. The western half of the vault tears away. Treasure, broken flooring, and the fallen door vanish into the *Charnel Sink*. Anyone looking back glimpses only fragments: the east wall still standing, cracked and wet; the night-deposit roller ramp clinging to it like exposed ribs; black water pouring through broken masonry; and dust swallowing everything below. The open storm-drain panel pours water into the system. The dormant east-west sewer begins filling with foul water, falling brick, and bad air. Above, the Old Laundry boiler room cracks and partially subsides.

The original route is gone. No one knows the way out.



**Keeper's Note: Collapse Effects** When the Doom Clock reaches 0, anything left below is lost. Call for SAN 0/1. If a character is trapped, separated, or sees someone vanish below, use SAN 1/1D3. Ordinary NPCs may instead roll POW; failure means panic, freezing, dropping loot, or random running

**Aftershocks:** The underground Vault environs shifts & settle. Each major delay, searching, arguing, looting, treatment, rescue, or forcing an exit, advances this track by 1. The party may split willingly or by accident if masonry falls, water surges, etc.

1. **Dust & Foul Air:** Penalty Die to *Listen*, *Spot Hidden*, *Climb*, and similar rolls unless moving at once.
2. **Rising Water:** Flooding worsens; footing becomes uncertain; Penalty Die all mobility/movement rolls.

3. **Structural Failure:** Bricks and mortar fall from the cracked sewer crown; pushed rolls or loud noise may trigger more collapse. See **Doom Clock** for brick damage.
4. **Final Aftershock:** Immediate escape required. *DEX*, *Climb*, or *Jump* to avoid injury, lost gear, separation, or entrapment

**SIDE-BAR - VIABLE EXITS:** Possible signs for an exit need to be searched for: air currents, hollow echoes, cracked masonry, flow of rising water, gaping cracks in the floor, or strange piles of fallen bricks from overhead. The party may split willingly or by accident if masonry falls, ropes snap, water surges, or one group is already climbing when another finds a second exit.

**Possible Exit: Cracked Sewer Crown:** The vault ceiling has fractured into the floor of a dormant sewer crossing above. *Hard STR* or *Mechanical Repair* forces a crawl into it. The line connects with the cultists' concealed sewer access beneath Yobama's Old Laundry sanctum. *Listen* may reveal drums, footsteps, or whispered movement ahead. This exit may save the Investigators from drowning underground, but can deliver them directly beneath the Leopard Man Society's main temple.

**Possible Exit: Night-deposit Breach:** The concealed night-deposit route climbs nearly 100 feet through two narrow roller ramps toward the Old Laundry boiler room. The tube is barely a metre square, slick, tilted about 20 degrees, and shaking apart. Each climber makes a *Hard Climb* roll. *Mechanical Repair* may jam rollers, brace the frame, or rig a rope; success grants a *Bonus Die*. Only one person climbs safely at a time. Failure drops gear or slides the climber back; anyone below must make *DEX* or *Climb* or be dislodged too. A pushed failure advances *Aftershocks* by 1 and may partly block this exit. The tilt-drop box is too small for a person, but cracked masonry now gaps beside and opens into the southern boiler and coal area. *Hard Climb* or combined *STR* reaches the ramp top as frame is twisted. The tilt-drop box at the far end remains too small for a person, but cracked masonry beside the ramp creates a jagged crawlspace. A pushed *STR* roll widens the breach. Failure drops gear, separates the party, or causes further collapse. Escapees emerge in the Old Laundry's southern boiler/coal area.

## From Our Last Episode...



*The Fantastic Pulp Show & Sale* is Canada's premier convention dedicated to vintage pulp magazines and paperbacks. I managed to visit again this year on May 30<sup>th</sup> 2026 & meet up with friends Don Hutchison (*who turned 95 in April!*; see photo below) who made it despite a fall the week prior, along with other friends & others I recognized from the local pulp community.



The mixed photo shows the day's haul: 31 items in all. My favourite find was a coverless Sept 1935 *Weird Tales* for \$5. Despite its state, it contains an eldritch milestone: 19-yo Robert Bloch's "The Shambler from the Stars," in which the future author of *Psycho*, after writing himself in the story, blunders & causes the death of a "Providence Dreamer," (a thinly veiled H. P. Lovecraft & with HPL's explicit written permission) by means of a *Star Vampire*. In an in-joke sequel, HBP returned the favour, gleefully doing away with a young writer named *Robert Blake*, in "The Haunter of the Dark" (1936). I don't know if permission was sought from his young protégé.

### Outcomes of the Mazorra Vault Encounter

The Mazorra Vault has no fixed ending. It is a pressure scene: escape, proof, rescue, revenge, or treasure. The vault is failing. Gandía wants gold, Claudio wants Porra betrayed punished, Cordero wants survival, and the Investigators may want evidence, justice, or a way out. They may recover the jammed document crate, loose papers, coins, photographs, the painting cylinder, or correspondence. The heavy bullion is largely unreachable and lost below.

#### Consequences for the Larger Finale

Vault Result	Later Effect
Documents recovered	Strengthens Esperanza, Castellanos, Ellery, Flash, or El Rey's tribunal
Gandía alive	Allows public exposure, revenge temptation, or Baron Kriminal intervention
Gandía dead	Satisfies poetic justice but weakens later accountability scenes
Claudio alive	Leaves a dangerous loyalist witness or pursuer
Gold recovered	Corrupts alliances and creates disputes over ownership
Gold lost	Cleaner and stronger thematically
Vault fully collapses	Ends the treasure question and forces the story back to survival, proof, and justice



## COMMENTS

### E&A #12

**ATTRONARCH:** There is a lot packed in these adventures; which I enjoyed very much even though I don't play fantasy any more. I especially liked the bit where "Centuria's quick thinking saved the day. She cast Ventriloquism, imitating the fat, baby-headed raven's call.", and I shuddered at even the sketch of this monstrosity. I also could just imagine even the online aghast looks of the players for this bit; "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?" ☺ It was a shame that BOTH burning carts they had the foresight to prepare missed hitting the troll. ☺

**BRIAN ROGERS:** Thanks for your kind words, Bri. It had been a few too many seasons of serial subtractions. Things are better now all around. *Re burning it all down*; I think I found a way to stick-handle it; see nextish (or two).

**CLARK TIMMINS:** *RYCTM and Pixabay*: It is not only the unattributed AI that bothers me. *Pixabay* also seems increasingly weaselly in other ways. I tried four searches for suitable "free images," just as the search bar advertises, for an invited paper I'm writing on *Dementia with Lewy Bodies*. Three times I was shunted straight to iStock and offered the bargain of 10 images for US\$55/month. The one semi-useful Lewy body image I found was a graphical rendering, not a proper microscopy slide. No thanks, *Pixabay*. I'll use picryl.com which you linked to, or [Wikimedia Commons](#), or find or make my own.

**ERICA FRANK:** Your essay on tabletop superhero RPGs rang very true to me, even though my own closest point of comparison is not four-colour comics so much as the heroic pulp tradition. I have run into much the same problem trying to imagine a satisfying tabletop treatment of *Doc Savage*, the *Shadow*, the *Spider*, and similar pulp heroes. On paper they look like great RPG characters. In practice, they are closer to protagonists with a built-in genre contract. The problem is not simply that they are strong, clever, rich, mysterious, or hard to kill. It is that the stories around them are built to let those qualities matter in ways most RPG rules handle badly: narrative timing, reputation, sudden competence, theatrical entrances, improbable escapes, and the tacit assumption that they are allowed to dominate certain kinds of scenes. *Pulp Cthulhu* is the closest I have found to being usable for horror, but even there I ended up writing homebrew *Pulp Talents* aimed less at improving combat statistics than at giving players permission to behave like pulp heroes.

That still does not solve the deeper problem you identify. It only shifts the burden from rules to table culture. A superhero game, like a hero-pulp game, needs agreement that the central question is not always "can the hero survive this fight?" but "what does failure cost, who gets hurt, what is lost, and how does the hero's legend survive or change?" Without that shared expectation, the *Man of Bronze* simply becomes flightless Superman in a brown suit with a ripped Oxford shirt, and the whole thing collapses into an ordinary tactical TT adventure with larger numbers.

*Re Brindlewood Bay*: I learned from a DM from *Lisa Padol* from your BB write-up that I got the facts wrong when I thought the player-controlled PCs had framed someone but instead had determined another NPC else had done the same. *Mea culpa*.

**JIM VASSILAKOS:** "In Search of a Peaceful Path" reminded me of the concept of the professional "Fair Witness" from *Stranger in a Strange Land*, someone trained and legally empowered to observe events and report only what she directly perceives, without inference, assumption, embellishment, or advocacy. Your proposed "Neutral Truth Protocol" is, in effect, a technological or institutionalized *Fair Witness* for the digital world: not necessarily a ruler at first, but a certified arbiter of provenance and factuality. A 2025 essay on "[Fair Witnesses of the Digital World](#)" I read makes this same connection, but draws the opposite conclusion. The problem is, they argue, once any *Fair Witness* becomes digital, international, and plugged into all media traffic, it stops being merely a witness. It becomes an *arbiter* of public reality. Heinlein's 'Fair Witness' Anne can say, in effect, "the house is white on this side." But an AI truth protocol might be deciding which houses the public is allowed to see at all, which images count as houses, and which authorities get to certify the paint. That may still be preferable to universal deepfake epistemic collapse, but it is no longer neutral observation. It is governance by a *Computocracy* that curates its own certified reality. <> *RYCTM on Masterpiece*; you realize such compliments just goad me on. ☺

**JOHN REDDEN:** So glad to learn you are on the mend! I personally know of some Family MDs who dread retiring since they know that their long-term patients will be cast adrift. SNERK at your comment to Gabriel & *Raisin the Dead*.

**JOSHUA KRONENGOLD:** *RYCTM on Baron Kriminal and the PCs*: "I'm not quite sure how the PCs can protect people from him, but apparently it's possible?" That is exactly the problem I am trying to solve. I do not think the PCs can simply fight *Baron Kriminal*, banish him, or talk him into going away. My current thought is that their best hope is to support *Othello*, the blind former Santería practitioner, in performing a rite that is less a battle of Haitian vs Cuban Voudon traditions than an *Orisha hearing*. *Othello's* argument would be that the Baron's grievance may be real, but his reach has become excessive. The ceremony would not deny vengeance, but set limits upon it: distinguishing the guilty from the merely vulnerable, naming where the Baron may act and where he may not, and preventing him from roaming *Mazorra* indiscriminately. That gives the PCs useful work & agency without letting them "defeat" him conventionally. They can protect *Othello*, gather names and evidence, defend innocents, and help make the public declaration credible enough that even a supernatural avenger must answer it. I see them helping *Othello* put *Baron Kriminal* back inside a moral jurisdiction.

*Re Health Update*: To quote some of my surgeon colleagues, "Better out than in!" and "Heal with Steel"; seriously kudos for good news. RYC to Roger BW on *Traveller New Era*: If GDW had done as you suggest back in the 90s, that of adding new Eras and not throwing everything out and

started with a setting no one liked but the writers they wouldn't have alienated so many fans (including myself).

**LISA PADOL:** *RYCTM on RYCTM on Peter Hildreth*; we had another *Zoom Savage Worlds* session the week before this month's deadline and he spontaneously mentioned wanting to write something. *RYCTM on that AEG LotFR boxed set having a similar approach*; thanks for this tip for factions/timing, I have been struggling on how to best accomplish this. It's easy in my head but to write it down for someone else to possibly use is daunting.

**MARK A. WILSON:** I hope you had fun at Origins and will share a con-writeup complete with photos thish!

**MATT 'Capt. Baloney Face' STEVENS:** Iceland! So jealous. Don't wander off a path, lose your footing, and end up with one leg in a geyser. Seriously, this happened to someone I know.

**MICHAEL CULE;** My brain lurched every time I read 'insula' since it's a neurological term for a part of the brain. Looking it up it's an architectural term for an ancient Roman apartment/city block and the meaning of the original Latin term is 'island'.

**MYLES CORCORAN:** RARE. The *Magnolia/Bayleaf* scene in *Mausritter* was my favourite bit of your zine. This gives new meaning to 'sparking', a now obsolete American English that means romancing, or wooing, and refers to sparking the attention of a woman "caused by the fire burning in the heart of a gentleman admirer". Your busy *Landau* write-up was entertaining on so many levels too; would-be jewel thieves with bruised knuckles, fondue fork jabbing, flooded graveyards, and finally a roving mob of religious zealots which everyone acts as if like it's an approaching natural disaster. It sounds like barely controlled chaos, and you have some amazing players to GM.

**PATRICK BRADY:** Hey, you are back! Woot! I still have the *Tekumel RPG* book you wrote (and it goes for bonkers prices now. I think the scenario at GenCon I played in years ago was one you wrote but GMed by a colleague of yours *Joe Saul*; I recall I had fun using the 'eye of invisibility' my PC had in the game both offensively and defensively to turn *everyone*, friend and foe alike, invisible, and everyone was floundering not knowing they were attacking their foes or their friends. I like very much the concept "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." Yes, you can use my Mazorra material. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated!

**PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA & CAMILA LOURENÇO PANHOCA:** *Re Coração Acelerando*; the limited choice list of three options was cut off at one; I can guess that one of the other three options is to just keep on reading, but what on earth is the third??

**ROGER BW:** *RYCTM on Mazorra being challenging to run*: I grant that completely. I am not sure it could be run easily by anyone other than me, and even then only if I were at the top

of my GM game, with players who were patient, forgiving, and willing to meet the material halfway. That said, I am not writing Mazorra only as a ready-to-run adventure in the ordinary sense. I am also writing it because I have a strong creative itch about role-playing that I am not otherwise getting much chance to scratch as a monthly player in an online game. Part of the pleasure is pushing my gaming brain against a difficult structure: too many factions, clocks, NPC agendas, and bits of history pressing in on one terrible place. It may be overbuilt as a table document, but it is deliberately overbuilt as an exercise in thinking through choice and consequences.

Mazorra may be difficult to run. It may even be too much to run as written. But writing it is still useful to me, and I hope useful to readers, because it lets me test the outer limits of what a Pulp Cthulhu scenario can contain. Even if no one runs the whole thing, pieces of it may be stolen, simplified, reskinned, or used as warnings about what happens when a horror scenario becomes a haunted machine with too many moving parts.<> *Re Of Dice & Meeples*: The first issue looks very nicely put together. All the best for issue #2! <> And another *Grogard Files* fan shout-out. ☺

**TIMOTHY COLLINSON:** I was quite envious of your attendance at North Star 9. And then, only a month later, another UK convention run by BITS appears on the calendar. You are spoiled over there. I also remember reading JG's *Darthanon Queen* while looking for ideas to steal for my own homebrew *Traveller* convention scenario, *Fate of the Beowulf*, though I came away empty-handed on that occasion. The crocheted Alien-Spider Jane P. made, and which you photographed, was a delightfully odd convention treasure. But no convention selfies? Your "closing" of *Gee Cows to the Rescue* as a press conference is genius. Finally, congratulations on your daughter's recent wedding, and I hope the speech went happily and well.

**ME:** I always wince when I spot a spelling or grammatical error after spending hours skimming my own text. Naturally, one survived. For example, on page 8, where I wrote "J. Barrera's Post-MD Twsha Acceleration," it should read "post-mortem Twsha Acceleration."

This milestone issue #250 of *Age of Menace* also happens to coincide with my own milestone 60th birthday. To mark the occasion, I've added a little extra colour to the front page. I also somehow managed to write over 40 pages, gulp, and have bumped about two-thirds of the material into upcoming issues.

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**Everyone Else: RAEBNC**

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**June 21st 2026. BCM**

# ARAGARTH'S MUSINGS

A sporadically published zine by Peter C. Hildreth who can be reached at [PHildreth@aol.com](mailto:PHildreth@aol.com) or at 133 The Maine, Williamsburg, Virginia 23158. Cell phone: 913-284-2981. All opinions stated here are those of Peter Hildreth and are © Peter C. Hildreth 2026

## A Re-Introduction for Some, Introduction for Most

Well, for about a year, Brian Misiaszek has been nudging me to contribute to Ever & Anon. In honor of his birthday today, June 21, I told him I would submit a zine. So, here it is. I will start with an introduction or, in most cases, a re-introduction.

First, many E&Aers will remember that I spent most of my life in New Hampshire. At almost 60 years old, my wife Holly and I moved to Kansas, following our then-only grandchild, Sophia.

In Kansas, I joined a monthly game group run by Bill Reger, whom I met in 1990 at Gen Con. I also sampled local conventions.

Then, in early August 2024, the grandchildren and their parents moved to the Newport News, Virginia area. We had planned to wait a year or two before moving again. But a strange thing happened.

I had just gotten back from Gen Con. I was driving home from a grocery store when a vision, like a movie clip, popped into my head. It was me, driving to Gen Con, as I do. But I was driving from Virginia rather than Kansas.

It was rather weird. So, I told Holly, and her answer was, "That is way too soon. It's not even a year!" But she meditated on it, and a day or so later she said we should move as soon as possible. That was mid-August. Our house went on the market on the first

Wednesday in September. We had a signed purchase and sale agreement on our house the next day. A day later, our daughter went through a house with our broker. The broker gave Holly a FaceTime walk-through. Two days later, we signed a purchase and sale agreement on our new home in Williamsburg, Virginia.<sup>1</sup>

We arrived in Williamsburg on October 10, 2024 and had the closing on the new home the next day.

We really love our much-downsized



house. It is in a development called "First Colony On The James." In larger terms, we live in "The Historic Triangle." The three points are Jamestown, the first permanent colony, Williamsburg, the

Colonial Capitol; and Yorktown, site of the final battle in the Revolutionary War. As a History Major, it is a great place to be.

As to gaming, I came to RPGs later than most. I was 29 and had just finished my first year of law school. That summer, I was Camp Commissioner at a Boy Scout camp in Gilmanton, New Hampshire. I was much older than most of the staff.

On Thursday nights, younger staff members, mostly mid-teens, played D&D in the administration building [after "taps," which only applied to campers]. I watched them a bit one

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<sup>1</sup> We actually live in James City County. But the mailing address is Williamsburg. And, a lot of services are shared, particularly the school system.

night, and the Dungeon Master, Kevin Bridwell, who I think was probably 15 years old, asked if I wanted to play the next week. I had seen D&D at the game store, on the shelf beside wargames, which I had played for years. I had read the description on the D&D box and thought, “Why would this be fun?”

Well, the next Thursday night, I got my answer. I was hooked.

Kevin had run D&D, but I soon bought the new Advanced Dungeons & Dragons.

Now, in 1980, I was about to enter my second year of law school. I was also a member of the New Hampshire House of Representatives.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I was running for re-election a few months later. After re-election as a Representative, I was appointed Democratic Whip, the third-ranking member of the minority leadership. So, I did not have a lot of free time for AD&D.

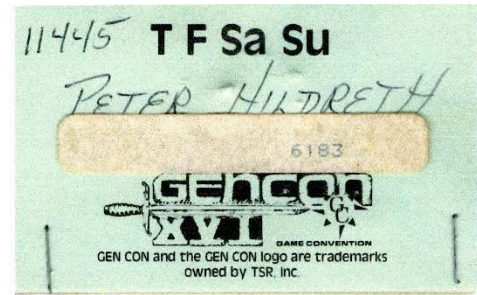
For a few years, my gaming was sporadic, mostly introducing family and friends to roleplaying. Some of the introductions were more successful than others. My Mom fell asleep during one game! But my brother Chuck and sister Susan both became fervent, and very good, gamers.

After I graduated, passed the bar, and left the Legislature, the summer after the Bar Exam, I decided to my vacation to visit my parents at Ft. Harrison, Indiana. My Dad had gone on active duty with the National Guard. My Mom and my youngest sister moved out there too. So, I would spend a couple of weeks with them. Since Gen

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<sup>2</sup> I almost named the zine as “The Musings of Aragarth, The Honorable,” The official way to address a letter to a Representative is The Honorable So and So. The first time I got a letter

Con was less than a day’s drive from Ft.



Harrison, I decided to check it out.

As soon as I walked into the convention, I could feel the energy. I was hooked. And, I got to play in a “Top Secret” game run by Tracy Hickman. This was before Dragon Lance made him a household name – at least in gamer households.

Since 1983, I have attended every Gen Con except one.

While I was introduced to roleplaying with D&D and AD&D, I have run various games over the years. When we lived in Concord, New Hampshire, I ran a mostly weekly game. From about the start, I ran other game systems too. The first one was the James Bond 007 Roleplaying Game. It actually demoed at Gen Con XIV in 1983. Over the years, I ran Torg, Castle Falkenstein, Feng Shui, FUDGE for Victorian adventurer games, and, of course, Toon.

However, most of the dabbling with new game systems came to a halt when Savage Worlds came out in the early 2000s. Now, almost all of my playing and all of my gamemastering uses Savage Worlds.

## **RECENT GAMING**

I have not yet found a local gaming group, so my gaming has been limited to online play and conventions. I do

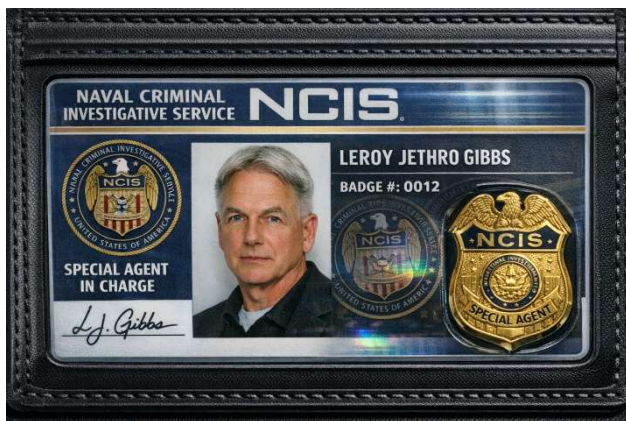
addressed to the Honorable Peter C. Hildreth, I laughed out loud. And, interestingly enough, you keep that title forever.

run a monthly Victorian pulp game. Among those players are Brian Misiaszek, author of The Age of Menace zine, and former A&Eer Avis Crane.

As to conventions, when we moved to Virginia, I started looking at local conventions. But they were mostly “mixed” conventions: fantasy, horror, science fiction, gaming, and so on. That is not to say that any convention is really just RPGs, but the pickings were small, as was the RPG game room

Jodi Black, at the time, COO of Pinnacle (the makers of Savage Worlds) suggested a “not quite local” pair of conventions. Run by the same group, Mythic Con Charlotte is in November and Mythic Con West (in Asheville) is in the late February/early March timeframe. I have been to each one and they are now on my convention calendar.

At both those conventions, I have run N.C.I.S. Murder Mysteries where the players get to play characters from the early days of the show. As time has gone on, I have built a bunch of props. They particularly like the “Credentials” for the PCs. They also get a souvenir d6 with N.C.I.S. in place of the six.



Next month: I expect to be able to post a Gen Con 2026 Report. I will be at the JW Marriott. For any of you who

will be there and want to get together for a room game or just a cup of coffee, you can call the JW or use my cell number in the header of this zine.



I leave you with a picture of me chatting with The Marquis de Lafayette at Colonial

Williamsburg. With this type of inspiration, maybe I will run a Revolutionary war game at the next Mythic Con.

Until next month, I wish you good gaming.

# Accidental Recall #12

For Ever & Anon 13 © 2026 Joshua Kronengold eaddr: mneme@labcats.org

Dreamwidth: <https://mneme.dreamwidth.org> Gaming blog: <https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/> (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish) Tumblr: mneme / Mastodon: [@mneme@dice.camp](https://mneme@dice.camp) Bluesky: [mnemex.bsky.social](https://mnemex.bsky.social)

Still unemployed, still looking. I've ramped up the free Coursera classes that come with unemployment, so my hope is that those will help my interviewing and widen my search (they have already, a bit). Plus, when I can find ones that aren't AI-written and awful, they're pretty fun.

Books: I've mostly been reading Hugo-nominated novels this month.

*The Raven Scholar* is the first part of a trilogy, and the best and worst part of it is that it contains a positively amazing number of twists, and most of them aren't completely unbelievable. Whether it can maintain that pace over another two books remains to be seen. A flaw I didn't really notice while reading but which is very apparent once it was pointed out is that even though this is marketed as adult fiction and features adult characters—by the time the story starts in earnest, our main character is in her 30s—it reads very much as a young adult book, with all the contestant characters acting very much like YAs, not full adults.

*The Incandescent*, by contrast, features adult characters—our main character is a senior teacher at a private high school who specializes in magic (in a world that, while much like our own, has always had publicly known magic and those who studied it, plus now the tricky complication that demons like to inhabit complex technology). The characters do very much feel like adults here, and the progression is compelling, but that still doesn't mean I want this to be my favorite.

I've started *A Drop of Corruption*, but haven't gotten too far into it yet. Still, I do like it quite a bit, as a mystery procedural set in a fantasy empire where humans have learned to give themselves abilities with extracts from their greatest threat: leviathans. This is actually the second book in the series (the first book won a Hugo last year), but I haven't read the first book; I figure I'll read this one, then go back and read the other one once I've decided on my Best Novel ordering. I'm quite liking it; the dynamic has elements of both Holmes (the narrator is the assistant and the detective is extremely eccentric) and Nero Wolfe (the detective wears a blindfold most of the time and prefers to send the narrator, who has an augment giving him perfect memory, to do most of the investigating) to it, in a manner that, at least so far is quite effective.

I also re-read the sixth Craft novel and quite enjoyed it (good thing; my memorize are vague). It's not nominated for a Hugo this year, but the Craft Wars novels, which follow it in publication order, are, so I'll probably read those.

June also included Dextrite, where Lisa and I ran a 3 session playtest of Dangerous Refuge. The game worked quite well (and nobody, particularly me, got sick as far as I know); we had two players that showed up for all three sessions, and created a set of four main characters with them: A dead rich girl who was hiding her inhumanity (me), her brother, who was hiding the fact that he had no magic of his own and could barely fake it by using magical devices (Lisa), A technomagician who was hiding that she'd brought my character back to life, and a magical inquisitor who wanted to reveal all the secrets. In the third session, we were also joined by two more players (both of whom I

knew already) who added in a Shinto priest/mage who was out of her depth and a stone being who had been unknowingly summoned by the Shinto priest, so that added a bit of wackiness to the last session, as I backgrounded my character for most of the session (6 MCs would be quite a lot!) and shifted full time to facilitating. Interestingly, unlike most of our playtests, even with 3 sessions, the characters didn't break the school, or decide to graduate early, or anything; they dealt with the Big Threat at the end of the third session (the creature that it turned out had killed my character, which unbeknownst to me until near the end of the second session, she'd created), and if we'd been doing a longer game would have likely been good to go for the next session.

I only played one other RPG at Dextrite—Flabbergasted!, where we played a group of gamblers who had determined we had to fake a haunting if we wanted to hang on to our gambling hall (as the owner, also a member of the club, had died without leaving a will). Naturally, our NPC opposition were the 19th century equivalent to the Scooby Doo gang, including a rather creepy dog (true to Scooby Doo if not to its I Love a Mystery predecessor, while we were trying to fake a haunting and neither the Scoobies nor the PCs believed in ghosts, there were actually real ghosts present; not only was Scooby Doo himself a kind of ghost dog, a locked room in the basement that the PCs had chosen to ignore as irrelevant to their scheme concealed a real ancient Viking haunted graveyard! Who knew?

I also played a number of board games—Trickereon (which I ran, taught, and came in second in), Sagrada Remastered (I'd played Sagrada before, but the Panorama expansion had some neat rules, particularly the variation where some of your goals were shared with your neighbors, so you had to work with them to try to maximize those goals if you wanted to get full points, giving it a semi-coop feel), Thebes (which I at one point had spent extra effort to get a copy of, since it was out of print for a good long while), and finally Decorum, which was totally new to me.

Decorum is a really interesting limited information co-op game. Each player plays a roommate in a shared house, with distinct tastes for home furnishing that can only be satisfied in a particular way. (you select a specific scenario to play, so it never simply impossible for everyone to be satisfied). On a player's turn, the player modifies the house in some way—removes or adds a furnishing, repaints a room, or swaps one furnishing to a different style, and everyone reacts by saying whether they like the change, are neutral on it, or dislike it. Every five full rounds, players can share ONE of their preferences with ONE other player, but they can't talk about them; the only material things you're aloud to say is to declare when you're fully satisfied (or not), and to react to each change, so the game has two key parts: the first is trying to figure out everyone's hidden preferences and reveal your own, and the second is trying to (as a group but acting individually, to solve the puzzle of figuring out which house arrangement can satisfy all four roommates. You only have 30 full rounds to solve it, so it can be pretty challenging!

Speaking of deductive games, I've also now brought Zendo three times to local game gatherings. Zendo is an old favorite of mine, but I've played it a lot; it's a game where one player comes up with a rule that divides all possible sculptures into two sets and other players perform experiments to derive and eventually figure out the rule; it's quite satisfying, but more importantly, it's also very unlike most other games, so I figured it was worth pulling out for people who hadn't encountered it to play it! The version I have (which switched out the three sizes of pyramids the game was originally invented for for three different shapes) is hard to get now, but both versions are pretty good, or you can just get a set of Icehouse Pyramids/Looney Pyramids (whatever they are being marketed at) and download the rules.

**Games that are Bad for You** (originally posted to my Dreamwidth).

I've been thinking for a while about games that are bad for you.

Not, you understand, games that have bad -content-. Not that I'm saying that's impossible, exactly, but art is art, and while you can certainly say *terrible* things with art, there's nothing unique about games that make "bad/racist/sexist/violent" games any worse than any other media with those elements.

No, what I'm talking about is games that make your life worse, or at least more hazardous, just by playing them.

Games that take something from you that doesn't balance the enjoyment you get out of them, that weaponize the urge to play, to win, to succeed into a kind of attack against the players, to take something from their players that will never return.

I'm talking about gacha games, of course, but also games that are deliberately addictive, that trickle out the story or fun in segments asking you to pay more and more money to finally finish or succeed, games that want to take your time or money or effort or attention and use it in ways that you only barely consent to, because they work that taking into the game play itself.

Of course, no conversation about parasitic games can ignore the oldest type of them all: Gambling games.

Which underscores, of course, one of the big facts about such games. You can play them without them being bad for you, personally. You can play the occasional penny poker or bridge or whatnot falling to the bug, without wasting time and money playing games not because you enjoy them, not because the money is spice that makes a good game just slightly better, but because you've got the bug and you're going to some day gamble everything you earned away, or because you've lost so much that you're gambling in a vain attempt to get it back. Or because you're not in the game to gamble, but to find someone who's about to lose money and make sure it's your money, to be a kind of predator, which maybe doesn't make the game bad for you, but it doesn't make it that great, either.

The thing is, I'm a lifelong gamer. I *love* games. Love the way they can take you out of yourself, give you something to seek mastery in that is made up, but still real, give ways to strive with others where nobody needs to get hurt or strive with them against the game itself in a way that brings people together.

All those things are great. And honestly, if you're spending time in a game and enjoying yourselves, there's nothing wrong with that.

But bad-for-you games, parasitic games, don't just stop there. They take more than you (probably) started out wanting to give, and they don't give back what they take. You might enjoy them; you might even be able to make the game work for you, but it's a struggle because the game is designed to abuse you. And honestly, I've played a lot of these games; there's even one I'm still playing—extremely defensively

and carefully, but knowing that if I let the game have too much, it will take something I don't want to give it.

I probably don't have a complete list of ways these games abuse you, but here's a partial one:

- Some games are designed to take your money—not in a normal “here's a game, here's how much it costs, thanks for your business” way, but in far more insidious ways, ones that start with “this game is so fun” and end with losing a literal fortune or spending thousands of dollars you can't afford, just to get a single digital character in a video game.
- Some games are designed to take your time, not in a way that's fun—spending time in a game to enjoy yourself, but as a *cost* of doing other things in the game. I used to think this was true about D&D—that you played through the low levels as a “payment” to get to the fun, high levels of the game. And honestly, maybe this is true of some TTRPG games, at some tables, but it's not generally the case—however, it absolutely is part of some of the worst mechanics in games, where you “grind”, spending time repeatedly doing the same thing over and over for a “reward” in a game. That's not gameplay; that's pay-to-play (you're just paying with time), whether it's repeating a series of actions in Fallen London to eventually get enough resources, or grinding in an RPG (when grinding is required, anyway).
  - Not this, is when a game takes time for mastery, not just as a cost. If you study the mechanics of a game to get better, or practice incessantly to master a combo in a fighting game, that's not "taking your time" even if it takes some time; that's just study and training, the same as when you train for a sport. And it feels different, because rather than having your time wasted, you've changed by the end of it.
  - But a great example of this kind of "mechanic" is daily quests. Throw a daily quest into a game, and for maximum rewards and success, the player "has" to log in every day—whether there's anything fun to do or not. This wastes the user's time, and also is part of taking their attention, even when not playing the game... which is my next point.
- Related to taking your time, a game can take your attention. The most harmless way this might happen is ads—where a game is monetizing your attention. Which...OK, it's a pretty straightforward transaction (except that the game is probably also taking your information without informed consent, which I'm not going into but also isn't great), but honestly, I'd rather pay money.
  - More importantly, a game can try to create reinforcement systems that grab your attention even when you're not playing the game, trying to get you to build the game into your routine. Hours just drift away, sucked into one or more games that pull this. In addition to daily quests, a big culprit here is action points—where you get a certain number of action points per day, and they'll replenish at the beginning of a new day—or worse, replenish over time, encouraging you to return periodically to see if there is enough to *now* do the moves you couldn't do before. Like some other mechanics that are used in harmful ways, this wasn't originally employed as exploitation or psychological manipulation—the first place I know that used a mechanic like this (short of play by email games, which are enough divorced that I'm not even going to count them) were "door" games on BBSes, which, my impression is, used an action limit as a form of fairness, to stop you from just stay logged into a BBS all day (limited number of phone lines, people), and, yes, probably to push gameplay along the expected BBS cycles where you'd log in once or twice a day to engage with others and while you were there, play a few daily moves in a game. But take the same mechanic and employ it for monetization (by letting you spend

money to replenish your actions early, or get more actions a day by spending) and suddenly it becomes a tool for exploitation.

- It's reasonable to look at the objection to games grabbing your attention and time and say "but aren't games *for* spending time? Aren't games supposed to be engaging?" Well, yeah, they are; that's part of what makes a good game. But a good game then *stops* grabbing your time and attention at some point—a game isn't a job, and it shouldn't become your life. So games that never end; where you have no natural stopping point, have to be better at giving people exit ramps to not risk abuse.

Ok, so quite a few games (most of them "free to play" but by no means all of them) are actively, semi-deliberately harmful to their users. So, what should we do about it?

Yeah, I dunno.

It would be hypocritical for me to say "never play or support games that use these mechanics. First, as I mention regarding gambling, it's possible to engage in a little harmful gaming without being harmed, or even contributing materially to harming others. But also, a lot of these mechanics enter use not because the companies in question hate or want to harm or exploit their users, per se, but because they want to be able to make their games at all. 21st century pressures (particularly the Internet) have driven the costs of many games towards zero, and when consumers aren't willing to pay enough to build games, there's a strong incentive to get the money another way.

And on top of this, well, I do still play games I know are harmful. In moderation and exercising defensive measures, sure, but I even play Genshin Impact (which engages in almost all of this).

So, instead, I'd say: If you're designing games, try to avoid building in abusive mechanics, and if you have to (or find that you have) try to mitigate their effects.

If you're a player, protect yourself. If a game asks for you to play it every day, build in breaks so you don't lock in a cycle where you feel you *have* to play every day (and yes, this means deliberately "breaking streak" in games that keep track of and reward streaks; playing the same game every day is rarely healthy!). If a game has slippery slope mechanics that ask you to commit more and more time or money to the game, don't. Make rules for yourself that limit what you will give to the game, and stick to them. If the game has mechanics that reward people who leave the game and return (these rewards will never equal that of just playing all the time), weaponize those rewards to encourage yourself to take regular breaks.

And most importantly, the moment a game is no longer fun, stop. Do something else, to return to the game some other year...or quite likely never. I can't count the number of games I've started, enjoyed, put a few dozen or even thousands of hours into...and then summarily quit. That's how games are supposed to work unless you're a world class competitor (in which case the game *is* your job). You play a game and then finish it, making your own exit if there's no natural one. Don't let any game become your life and potentially crowd out other activities and even other games.

I have a lot more to say on the topic, and I suppose I could go into specifics with individual games, but that was long enough.

## Comments on E&A #12

**Cover:** Naked sea nymphs! It's a good thing for our covers that there is so much public domain art. I guess sea nymphs match the demigods part of the igttheme, more or less.

**Pedro Panhoca:** Coracao Acelerando giving the reader a choice to stop reading at almost every branch is an interesting (if frustrating)

choice—somewhat similar to the place in the Arabian Nights "interactive story board game" to almost entirely put boring results behind the "flee" action (every interaction has another player describe, roughly, what kind of encounter you're facing "A thirsty Djinn", vs a "greedy maiden" vs a "questing manticore" (I might have made all of these up but they give you a general sense of it); the active player then chooses an action without knowing any of the details; for an encounter like this it will generally be between something like Attack, Charm, Bargain, Pray, Court, and Avoid (there are actually 12 total choices, but the other 6 are rarer in my experience). But while most of the choices can lead to multiple interesting results (and in fact, the mechanic requires this; usually there are three possible storylets associated with each choice and if the player has some mastered skills, they might automatically get the one most suited to their character; otherwise it's a random determination), Except avoid. Avoid almost always leads to a "you successfully avoid and nothing happens" result, which maybe makes sense in the endgame when a PC might be well suited to win and avoiding encounters while you try to get back to Baghdad (also a requirement for victory) might make sense, but otherwise it's very much a trap choice that leads to nothing interesting happening on your turn.

**Matt Stevens:** Thanks for taking a deeper look into GMless play! As you said, there's a big difference between looking at what a TTRPG would look like if the GM just didn't show up and the players...just had to make do (maybe with a robo-GM), vs a game that's designed for players to divide up the GM's responsibility a bit and pass the world-control plot token around more than a bit, and different games can be functional and have pretty different approaches to this.

Re Good Society: Some bits of this can be part of the system unless you hack it unrecognizably (Good Society runs on people doing inadvisable or unpopular stuff based on their desires or other pressure, but also on one's reputation mattering, so if one wants a game where how other people see you in general doesn't have mechanical weight, it won't work as well), but a lot of the specifics of Regency society can be altered at the table. Quite a few people play Good Society with the racism and sexism knobs turned to zero (although doing without classism is more challenging, as the Backgrounds can be load-bearing), and nearly everyone seems to turn the Queerness knobs way up compared to actual Austen, with the typical range seems to be between "homophobia exists because we want to play against it" and "why should society care about the sex or gender of the people involved in a marriage?" After writing this, I noted that you addressed the racism (sort of) in your footnote. I think the authors' point is that while obviously Austen's society is intensely stratified and built upon racism, any resulting tension is sufficiently removed from her stories themselves that it ceases to be foundational. You can, of course, include the tension because you want to play with it, but you can also erase it entirely (like Brigerton, I guess) and it will still feel like the same kind of story even if it's not as historically accurate.

Re D&D4e: I never found that the characters had too many hit point—not once you got out of low levels, anyway. Fights generally went 1-2 rounds, which felt about right (that said, reducing HP or increasing threat would make optimization less important, but optimization would then be deadly). Instead, my main problem in practice was that after a while the fights felt too formulaic—you had, say, a couple of useful daily abilities, plus two encounter abilities that comboed well with one another and one that was more for emergencies. So you'd start a lot of fights with your combo of two great encounter abilities, and then see whether it justified spending a daily or not in the next round—ho, hum. Once you got to high Paragon levels (for those who don't remember or never knew, heroic was level 1-10, Paragon 11-20, Epic 21-30), you had so many options that fights would generally end

before you got to use all your encounter abilities, much less be down to your at-wills, so you'd maybe make a call over which encounter abilities to lead with and which to save for another fight, but unless you played games with letting people "burn" encounter and daily abilities for improvised actions that were more appropriate to the situation—which might slow down combat a bit but would at least make it less repetitive—a fight could feel like a bit of map play followed by ordering at a cheap Chinese restaurant—one from column A, plus a pick from column C.

Re tap dancing crocodiles (and isn't that a tag for "those who know?") I think it was actually the opposite issue to your not knowing how the PCs could get out of a trap (and there were if memory serves, even discussions of this in A&E at the time), but that you had a single exit—the PCs were placed into a room with no doors or windows, which was quickly filling with water from below and poison gas from above, and then it was revealed that the water contained hungry alligators. M, of course, looked at the situation and her character's skills (as a pulp magician/entertainer with hypnosis), and decided to try tap dancing on an alligator's head while trying to hypnotize it with her watch, while other PCs tried other sensible things like beating up alligators, pushing them back until the water was high enough to escape out the vent in the ceiling, etc, to little avail.

Because the intended solution was that the PCs disable the gas by breaking off the lead pipes spewing poison gas (why this would not in fact result in more gas is left as an open question, and part of why the players didn't think of it), and then use the lead pipes to beat down the alligators now that they had usable weapons (but of course the PCs included characters with considerable unarmed combat skills, so it wasn't initially clear that the issue was that they didn't have weapons, even if in the real world the rule is that unarmed combat is for tournament or if you can't get a weapon). IIRC, instead, the PCs tried to crimp the pipes shut (nope, not without breaking them, apparently).

Maybe this actually was a Flying Buffalo trap? The usual rule I like and which was being discussed in the APA at the time is that the GM should have around 3 ways to disable a trap in mind—and also be open to other ideas from the players.

**Roger BW:** Re "there's always been magic." Of course "it didn't work until now" is a great way to set something in close enough to the real world, but it's also very specific. The thing about treating history as a black box is that it's not really about what history actually is, but what we know of it; if the open areas for change aren't "what anybody knows" but specifically "what the players know" then you can make changes to insert magic in places it wasn't (harder to find places it was) but that the players can find plausible—if they don't look too hard. And, of course, it's not really true that we know everything about history. Sure, we know lots of stuff that was written down, but plenty of places didn't write stuff down or wrote stuff down less literally, and we're revising our knowledge of history all the time. Maybe the thing that makes magic public is a big dump of secret government information which reveals, not details about the WWII coding games, but that magic had been discovered and used in a hidden conflict and the public just didn't need to know until now.

A third type—which the second one turns into if some players do more research or already know more about history or maybe if you are just willing to change more is "it's not our world, but it's a lot *like* our world, but with changes because magic always existed and maybe other reasons." This still requires ignoring the places that don't work (or just a lot of groaning like Castle Falk's inland sea in Europe), but doesn't pretend there was some centuries-old secret conspiracy; instead plenty of people know about the magic and if we lived in this world and not our own, we'd probably know about it too and maybe

use it as a wakeup alarm instead of increasingly loud and annoying devices. But unlike your "magic is new" type, it lets magic have pretty deep structures and be built into the world in a more organic way (and maybe the PCs are special in a different way).

Ironically, my angelic PC in our Spelljammers game absolutely has long thoughts on ethics, precisely because they have a direct connection to not one, but two gods. The gods in question very rarely agree, so I guess I have (well, my PC has) to have my own opinions.

Re Solar System/Lady Blackbird Keys: Yeah, I've always liked that mechanic and I used it in my Etheric Seas homebrew game. Characters typically have multiple keys—you'll have 2 or maybe 3 keys, generate xp from each, and then when the narrative makes sense maybe you'll cash one in for a big payoff and buy another as your character develops in a different direction.

Re the Perfect Plan in a heist or other plan-based game: It can, in fact, be really enjoyable for everything to go according to plan, but it also doesn't make for very interesting play. Usually. Maybe the characters are getting information that's blowing their minds, and that's where the real play is.

So often, for games that have the idea (like Blades style games do) that one cuts forwards to the moment things go wrong, it can work to think that as much can go *right* as seems appropriate, before something goes wrong and you have to play it out. Maybe the heist goes perfectly, the heroes/rogues get away clean, and the real problem happens after they've gotten away—or even unrelatedly immediately afterwards. You tend to (and generally should) move a lot faster over stuff that's going right than stuff that might go wrong, and that's fine.

The same logic, btw, applies to the D&D wish spell and similar "uber" abilities. In fiction, the usual use for such things is exactly to go wrong, and often that's correct in a game too. But sometimes maybe it's Ok if they go right instead, and the game is in playing in the world after a successful Wish has really changed it.

Re "grain size" of a system: I generally think of this as granularity. But maybe we're also using that for other stuff?

Re vi/vim and modality: I tend to think of the core thing that makes the editor modal isn't the division between colon command mode and single character command mode (I mean, emacs has exactly the same thing with meta-X command entry vs ctrl-X commands vs direct elisp vs regular commands), but the core editing paradigm of "editing mode" not letting you enter commands until you leave, and single character command mode not letting you edit until you enter an editing command. It's true that a better way to look at it, often, is that everything you do in an editing command is just a parameter to the editing command (and important; see what happens when you enter a 3 before you start an insert), but you also spend enough time "just editing" that it's important to remember where you are. That said, yes, vim blurs the line a bit more, with the ability to enter cursor movement commands during an editing session (while still keeping vim's concept that really it's all an argument to the editing character, and if that means something unexpected happens, so be it).

Re learning a programming language: what I really want, often, is a primer on "here's how to speak this language if you already know Y language" with the assumption that you're going to have like six of these. That said, there's a limit on how many of these is reasonable.

**Mark A Wilson:** Yeah, working on 7 games simultaneously is a lot! Publishers will do more, but you are yourself not a publisher!

Honestly Basari is one of my least favorite games in the "players have to guess what one another will do and try to deliberately conflict/avoid" genre; not least because it has so few options that often you have a

single obvious action you want, and you're basically playing Princess Bride "The Wine in Front of Me", since if you take the action that's right, you're making yourself a target for people happy to block you, but if you don't take it and take your second favorite action instead, you *still* might get blocked. With only 3 choices, it mostly just feels like guessing/mind reading.

I'm also not super fond of Pirate's Cove, where part of the mechanics is building a powerful ship that actively wants to enter the "negotiation" phase with other players by matching their action, since that negotiation is actually a pirate ship duel. But it does have a lot more gameplay to it; you've just also got a funky dominance cycle, since if you can reliably provoke duels you want to build a powerful ship (also, the black sail ship), while just going treasure hunting will get you the most points but loses hard to pirates that pirate if they can out-guess you. My favorite game in that space is probably FNAP, a two player abstract which is probably impossible to get with physical pieces (it was briefly published by PIN games in wood), but which is available on Abstract Play, and was based on a similar game (by the same designer) that's played with a set of playing cards that was available for a few years online on the original Button Men site.

Re resume: Back in the day, my resume was one page. This year it covers nearly 30 years of employment so it's 3 pages. I've gotten nibbles from contacts, but also from sending out my resume cold, so will have to see what sticks.

Re acronyms: It's the curse/blessing of working in a known field—the more you use common terms as phrases, the more people use acronyms so they don't have to write the same things over and over again. The more those acronyms are well known, the more likely they are to be baked into even more terms. Especially with the job search, I've gotten used to googling new-to-me terms. I try to spell out an acronym the first time I use it, but sometimes I forget. And yes, Fortune in the middle—where you play out the opening to a place where you'll roll the dice, then roll as soon as it's clear what is being rolled and why, and then play out the rest of the action after you already know what the result is (possibly with some dice magic mixed in if there's die tweaking). It does a few things differently from "fortune at the end" but a big one is not having the same kind of disconnect between what was described and what the dice say happened—everything described before the die is rolled happens, then the die determines what happens next. Fortune at the End is the approach where you describe the whole action and then roll the die, and might then have to revise the action a bit. Fortune at the beginning is what you get when you have little to no description at the beginning; just a determination of what's getting rolled—and then the rest of the scene happens after the dice are rolled (for instance, Tunnels and Trolls where everyone decides what they're doing and rolls, and then you find out what it actually looked like once you see which side had the bigger number, or One Roll Engine where you describe what you're trying (and so does everyone else) and then everyone rolls, and after that the longest set of matching dice gets to apply that match to *one* of their actions (if they described multiple actions), following which the next best set of dice gets to go, etc.

I think some of the responses to my suggesting Fortune in the Middle were more thinking of it as Fortune at the Beginning, but it's possible that confusion is on me.

**Patrick Brady:** Welcome back to the APA scene (your previous jaunt ending before my first one started, although if you've read Lisa and Avram before it's possible our reading, at least, overlapped). And yeah, the gestetner period (as required, anyway) ended before my tenure started—it was an option when I joined in 1992 or 1993 but I think my first zine was sent via 1200 baud modem.

Sounds like you've had a long and storied career in the hobby! I've certainly glanced through the GOO Tekumel; not sure we still have it, though.

**Myles Corcoran:** Re Kriegsmesser: What a trip! I enjoy the way Serafina, originally an obstacle, become enough of a companion and ally that I had to check the cast list to make sure she was in fact still a NPC! Did we ever get an idea of why she was stealing someone's jewels, and why she proved so willing to turn against her brother? Presuming that's not a ruse, of course.

RYCT Roger BW on RAM and SSD prices and AI: It's no more fake than any other money (except crypto) alas, but it's certainly a bubble. That said, apparently there were also some factory issues a few years ago that are affecting the prices now, and the two don't combine well if you're trying to buy chips right now.

Re WoD: Really the WoD rules only increased botches as pools got larger if you had a difficulty of 10 (in which case the chance of rolling a 1 increased at the same rate as rolling a 10, so with die erasure the number of dice you were rolling simply didn't matter).

Re my word counts: I don't know—I tend to devote 2 or 3 evenings a month to working on my zine, but I do write pretty quickly and don't edit much.

**Brian Rogers:** Agreed that moderns finding older "just add up all the dice" systems too complex is a boggle, especially since D&D is still doing this with spell damage—but then, if you've mostly played games like Blades and WoD, I can see sum-based dice pool games looking a bit odd even if they're actually simpler. Now, if they were talking about Feng Shui's exploding d6-d6 (plus luck 1d6), well, maybe on the outside.

Re Invisibles: one can apparently find an Invisibles omnibus, but it runs at \$150. We have the books, of course.

ryct Patrick on slaughtering to the last Hobgoblin: It all depends on the group, really. Our 5e groups are much less bloodthirsty—I mean, my PC casually offed an unconscious foe in the last session, but that was because he ATE PEOPLE. One must have standards, after all. She was also the PC most in favor of recruiting the necromancer housekeeper, and, later, a shadow demon girl who had been working with a necromantic gang but was actually a demon who had found a body to hang out in (she was remarkably useful, really, being immune to Necromantic energy).

Nice comments to me on henchmen/ally NPCs in different fantasy games!

Re high AV in Feng Shui: It might have been 15 (whatever the Martial Artist starts with; only the Old Master has a 16 so it's probably a 15), but yeah, it was unbalancing. We later restructured the experience system for our game to discourage just pushing AV as high as it would go rather than branching out a bit—mostly this meant we doubled the cost of advancing *just* your highest AV combat skill, so my martial artist/sorcerer could bump his AVs on both sorcery and martial artist from, say, 14 to 15 by spending 3x14 XP (=42), but for Beth to raise her AV from 17 to 18, she needed to spend 34 xp for just that one skill. We also decided that schtick trees would increase cost based on the number of scthicks you had from the same tree, rather than the number of appropriate scthicks you had total, which was very much a gift to the two marital artists, but did let us experiment with different scthicks and play around in the deep end of the pool a bit more.

Re dumping everything into piloting: I'd be more worried about everyone in a Jedi game dumping too much into Laser Sword, but yes; there is some stuff in Star Wars about people jockeying for who's the best pilot (mostly Han and Luke, which is ironic since the answer

is obviously Chewy), but it does seem less likely to be the big pain point unless you're running a cross between SW and the Fast and the Furious.

Re unlimited comments: Yeah, I was mostly thinking in the margins. I wouldn't want an APA with even longer issues and even more comments, but if someone got really behind on comments and wanted to catch up quickly I'd like them to be able to do so.

Re Rangers: I agree that the narrative hook is civilization defenders; I remember early Rangers feeling like tanks who could take a lot of punishment and deal a lot of damage, the spell-casting showing up later. Later they made the beast-master aspects pretty central (which is ironic given that it came from sharing the Druid's spell list), but really the "part-druid fighter" and civ defender are the strongest themes over time, which does move it pretty far away from Aragorn and harder to figure out a clear combat role.

Re metacurrency in your V&V game: I did try to use it! But it did take a bit of work. That said, the designers are dead and I don't care (even when they are alive) what they think of a given table or even people being loud on the Internet.

But the overall issue, that player-controlled flashbacks don't belong in every game (GM-controlled flashbacks are a different issue and have a different purpose) is well taken. Heist-focused games generally want every player to have them because you are trying to follow the heist playbook, including not explaining all the PCs preparations up front in order to maximize drama. A superhero game can absolutely use flashbacks well...when a PC whose main schtick is that they prepare and plan everything is involved, but that's a great argument for that PC having a power that lets them rewrite stuff in flashbacks rather than everyone being able to do so.

Re my zine design: I'd love to work more tables and images and things to break up the endless text, but damn it's work.

I agree that V&V was built as a gridded game, but also when we played it (2e) in HS, we didn't use the grid or minis any more than we used them for nearly every game we played (we did use maps for Car Wars and Battletech, of course, and I remember a Justice Inc game that might have used cardboard figures). Other groups used minis for everything, so it really depended.

Re Superboy and lifting strength: Oh, right, the power 3s got a better/bigger scale, helping them feel like their comics versions without totally overshadowing the power 2s they were teamed with. I have to wonder how things would have worked if the game lasted long enough for me to lean into my ideas of Diskette *eventually* developing interstellar teleportation abilities, probably after quite a few years of play, but as a nice apotheosis and bookend to her original range being measured in tens of feet. (as it was, we'd gotten it up quite high in comparison, especially if she was drawing on your metacurrency and taking extra time).

re KT: Yeah, I'd missed a few details on the action.

LOL on every zine being EXACTLY 16 PAGES! I love it, at least as a thought experiment!

Re giant snake (and the follow-up snake going "yeah...better not"): Lisa and I watched a Judge Di movie yesterday where the characters had a pitched battle against many, many venomous snakes, which cumulated in fighting a two-headed massive cobra. When the cobra was defeated, the other snakes all retreated, as if they'd decided that anyone who killed King Snake wasn't worth bothering with.

Re Knave: Two *consecutive* watches of rest? Ouch. One thing I like from 5e is how it made it significantly harder for enemies to spoil the PCs plans of getting a long nap by letting them resume (as long as

they don't spend a whole hour before going back to bed, anyway). I might be a bit groggy for a few hours if I only get 2 3-4 hour naps in an night, but after a half an hour I'll probably be fine for the day. That said, I'm guessing that "watches" meaning that a watch is around 2 hours so you need at least 4 hours for it to count as sleep or the like?

Re Library: Ok, I had to slip back an issue to find out what was going with the "stolen" gems: So they took a job from the Dakon (gorilla dungeon dwellers, albeit friendly enough ones) to retrieve a chest of "stolen" gems. Which meant they were going after what amounted to fellow adventurers for their loot, thus the "wait, neither of our crews are pirates" moment in the current session. That's delightful! (of course, just because you're an adventurer doesn't mean it's right to loot a chest of gems from otherwise friendly gorilla-like creatures!) Honestly, getting bargained down to fist-cuffing a single thief and not even to death makes the Dakon seem even more reasonable.

Mutiny! That's a lovely twist, and well set up.

Re the Puppeteer: I get that the reason playing he 5th is the trigger is so you can play other stuff on the Magic Pipe Organ and not transform, but I feel like everyone who learns how to use the Pipe Organ should have a different Transformation tune, maybe one tied into their personal transformation. On the other hand, I guess Shazam/Captain Marvel is a good source for doing it the other way.

Also, obviously the Puppeteer (v2) should be a crafter who makes puppet minions of various size. They've got a common fire weakness (because they're carved from magical wood), but they're pretty flexible for all of that, and the Puppeteer can also wade in since they have a wooden power suit which they also carved (which is itself a puppet, of course, but one designed to not move on its own when worn).

And maybe their actual main power is Plant Powers—they've just deliberately molded their practiced power set to be about puppets, because they wanted to match the Puppeteer name. Their other powers are explained in terms of Plant Powers, and the power suit is probably a Plant Powers stunt.

Ah, the reroll 9s and 10s is literally the rule and in the rulebook! Yeah, we totally didn't get that this was a rule; I know I started with 2e and so I guess that fewer people have personal experience with 1e V&V.

**Brian Christopher Misiaszek:** Re Expanded (homebrew) Pulp Talents: Given the context, it might be nice to also have Commanding Presence let allies act despite being driven temporarily insane.

re my job hunt: So far, all my interviews have been by zoom. It's the modern approach and far cheaper than in person, after all (and it does make my scheduling easier, I guess). But no, while some companies have told me which interviews didn't go well, they're all quite strict on not giving specifics, presumably to avoid liability.

**Patrick Riley:** The main advantage of a bonus die vs a flip flop is that you can add a second bonus die. But as you point out, it's also trickier to do visually with marked 10s (00-90) dice.

Re UA 3rd: It's quirky, and I'm not interested in defending it. That said, as I explained the first time I mentioned it, the game includes skills as well as the traded-off stats marked by personality traits. So if you want to play someone who is good at something separate from their current personality settings, you make sure it's included in one of their skills. It's only the stuff outside that that's subject to change.

Re your running through the probability math for WRS: Of course you did; my apologies.

Re AI consciousness: We might not be able to agree on even the mile-points, but we can agree that current-GEN AI doesn't meet them. A dog, a parrot, or even a mouse, presents a consistent personality and guiding identity, something a current-gen AI cannot, because unlike

such animals, it doesn't have an internality separate from its perceptive (in the form of its current token grid) state.

Re group character creation and making sure players have individual agency: Yes, it's all about the process. Everway is a classic example, as players don't have the ability to make statements about one another's characters; instead, they guide them by asking questions. But other processes can work—in Good Society, your character is someone you have responsibility for; you might grab one spot on a playset if the group chose a playset, but even then you have the freedom to adjust from there (for instance, I often change my character's Desire as they develop). And connection creation goes the other way—the player who is playing the connected character will generally provide broad description for the connection—giving them a name, a quick description, and a sense of what they want and think about the main character. But it's the player who picks them up and plays them that defines everything else, and at that point the player who is playing the MC has little further control over them—if anything, the influence tends to run in the other direction (as a player playing a connection has a loose mandate to try to influence and make the life of their associated MC more interesting).

On the other hand, Prime Time Adventure is a good example of where sufficiently aggressive players could leave some players trailing along in their wake. There, the usual process is that the group comes up with a show concept, and then as a group, drafts a number of main characters, and only after that do the players decide which MC they're playing. So without good coordination, some players will exercise more control over the process than others.

Re "we have to charge" vs "we want a profit" vs "we deserve a profit": Yes. I don't generally have a problem with this for convention games (if it's too expensive I don't play) but see my essay on games that are bad for you.

Putting a pot into an oven set to 212 is a really creative way of NOT boiling water.

**Clark Timmins:** D&D 3.5e, I think adapted the AD&D "cloistered cleric" concept from Dragon into a cleric variant and I think I did see it played (or at least used for charop) a few times. It didn't fail to have any combat role, but it traded out all the weapon and armor capacity of the regular cleric for more skill points, class skills, magic domains, and extra spells, making a wizard-like trade without being a wizard. The internet tells me they were even potentially strong in combat if you could manage them not wearing armor, since there were feats that could turn high knowledge skills into strong melee or ranged damage. Pathfinder also has cloistered clerics (it is, after all, in both editions, a D&D 3.5 hack, even if the reformulation for 2e obscures this somewhat and cleans up some 3eisms up).

**Michael Cule:** Interesting depictions of the young adult gods! Are there worshipers of each who have atypical genders, not necessarily because of gender flexibility but also possibly because they're more drawn to the other aspects of the gods in question (like male matchmakers who favor the Maiden or Mother, or female soldiers or constables who follow the Son)?

Re the Cult of Fudgeah: Clearly you were missing desert.

Re book indentures: I've never called them that before, but I've certainly encountered them in the past. On phone books? Complete Shakespeare? Dictionaries? Not sure! In curiosity, I sent Lisa into our library (which she knows better than I do) to see if we have any books with indentures but she couldn't find any.

Wait, Krishnan is an Illuminate who follows the White Moon? Doesn't that mean he's a useful person to talk to if you want to make sure there aren't White Moon incidents at the parade?

The Lictor Magistrate is an immigrant from the modern Earth? Didn't see that coming, although it makes sense that he'd thus be dedicated to reform.

I think the perpetual player questions are really a "your group" problem. I'd probably answer the one about puns by saying that the pun only works in the more relevant language, but that the other people seem to find it funny anyway; presumably the magic translator does its best.

**Lisa Padol:** Re Frieren: Our break didn't last long—we've now seen the first two episodes. Still quite fun!

We've yet to participate in a game jam to the point of publishing, but Dangerous Refuge started out as an idea based on a game jam but wasn't drafted in time to include in the jam. And while I've been thinking about writing about it for months, part of the reason I wrote the Games that are Bad for You essay included is that there was a Game Manifesto Jam this month. Neither work was included in the jam, but both were influenced by one to a point.

Re my idea of using the Apocalypse Keys Brindlewood-style mystery mechanic not for the mystery of a Craft-style narrative but for the solution: The reason this came up is that the Craft books inevitably will unfold into a mystery wrapped around a complicated magical problem—we need to resurrect a god who has been killed via bankruptcy, but where to get the power from without killing something else isn't obvious. The city is at risk of a catastrophic conflagration because of a flaw in its fire insurance spells that will inevitably lead to a catastrophic cascade. This city sucks because it's trapped around the event horizon of a generations-old war, and there's a horrible plot to simply erase the native version of the city; we have an opportunity to repurpose that plot, but is there a solution that wouldn't screw someone over who doesn't deserve it? That sort of thing; basically the center of the story tends to be magical law/engineering problems, which present much more of a problem for the GM to fairly judge solutions to than even a mystery. Traditionally, the GM will let the players set up an idea and roll, but repurposing a mystery creation mechanic for this allows for a more structured approach where the players establish facts and ideas, and the die roll determine whether their idea can work, goes disastrously wrong, or whether they need to put some work into it.

I know I wrote about the "Brindlewood mysteries are best for people who don't like mysteries" line before, but I don't think I had my current thought: Trad mysteries are best for players who love solving mysteries. Brindlewood mysteries are best for players who love building mysteries.

Re the player who filled out a questionnaire lying about whether they had any experience: Since they were sponsoring the larp in question and the reason the GM was attending their event was that they were hoping to get permission to run a larp the player in question helped write, it seems clear enough that they were joking. But the problem is, filling out the entire questionnaire with jokes means the GM can't use them for what they're actually for: Helping cast the larp well.

Ryct turn someone on to Patrick Riley: If it's a player as the target, the player can also reasonably say "that's not something that I think would plausibly turn my PC on" to short circuit the move, but of course if they do this all the time they're not really engaging with the game.

I'd also would welcome Peter Hildreth's return to APA-hacking (how many times do we have to say this to make sure he appears? Is this like Beetlejuice?)

RYCT Jim Eckman on a game where the backstory is that the main character conquered a fantasy game world, and then worked with his

friends to have them form an alliance against him and defeat him so the game wouldn't be locked in stasis: As one might expect, this is based on a light novel. The anime, the preceding manga, and the light novel series are all titled *A Wild Last Boss Appeared!*, and a second season has been announced.

RYCT Avram on the Amber RPG: My impression is that Wujick's goal is to not have PC abilities, including good stuff cut off the GM's ability to keep the game exciting and dramatic; thus Good Stuff shouldn't mean no plot ever happens to the PC ever but instead that different plot happens to the PC because they're not cursed (which does mean that the PC isn't rewarded that much more for having 50 Good Stuff than having 10, because plot still needs to happen), that bad stuff even in large quantities doesn't mean the PC instantly dies, but that the PC has lots of exciting things happening to them (and since they're also extremely powerful they should have a great time, which reportedly was an exploit at his table while he lived, since if you were playing for screen time both of these things were good things; maybe if he'd lived longer he would have revised his style eventually, but that's not a branch we get to follow). While there are clear flaws in this, it and a lot of his other advice is sourced in good places in my view. However, he couches it in an adversarial (mostly between players, not between the players and the GM, with the GM as the neutral arbiter) GM as Fight Director style and an "I believe in you" approach that doesn't emphasize player opportunity but fairness and challenge, so while he was revolutionary in a number of ways, both his table and his GM advice have a number of significant flaws in effect if not intent.

RYCT me on "GM Owns the World": Ars Magica's troupe style play also encourages passing the GM baton among the players rather than having the same GM always take the hot seat, so it's certainly challenging the assumption that every game has one and only one GM.

Re whose idea was to add HP and Magic Shots to the published Over the Edge: I mean, we have access and could ask. Maybe at some point.

Thanks for the correction on the Robin Wood deck vs Sacred Rose. Yeah, I forget who drew Sacred Rose; I tended to carry around Sacred Rose for a while so I know it a lot better than most decks other than standard Rider-Waite.

Re pbem vs pbem/epistolary mixed into regular/streamed play: I'm a bit torn. I can really, really enjoy play by email and pure epistolary play. That said, always-on epistolary play can be really, really draining, especially if it has no set end point. So while I'd be happy to do more epistolary play, even if not attached to an established real-time game, I'd want to punctuate it in some way to make it not "always on". Except, obviously, if Brian Rogers decided to revive the League game I'd join it in a heartbeat, obviously (but there, the main stress was on the GM which was not you).

Cthulhupunk Strange School using Dangerous Refuge would be interesting! Possibly if it were partially pbem with an extended (but still finite) epistolary phase and monthly sessions.

Re rmap software vs drawing by hand: Well, yes. Specifically, though, this is a software problem. The core issue with the rmap/diagram software we've hit is that it tends to draw really, really non-compact maps. Whereas when drawing by hand, you can generally draw much, much more compact maps than we get out of rmap software, so the whole is far more readable. Possibly better algorithms will eventually help. Or even AI, but I'd fear current generation AI would solve the compactness problem by just leaving a lot of stuff out (still interesting to try since I continue to be skeptical about the power/water issues). Actually, I tried this, and will try to put it on the next full page since it's pretty big (annoyingly, while I was able to do this, I had to just lift the figure and move it randomly later, as making an image appear after its invoking text but not immediately after seems to be something

typst is manifestly bad at—you can say "don't interrupt this page; just put it somewhere convenient" but then it will move our text down to make room, not stick it on a queue and pop it when it has a page to place it.)

Ironically, I can't render the graph on the rpg wiki since I don't think I managed to include the Graph::Easy module the last time I brought the wiki back up, but I was able to extract the code and insert it into gemini. Gemini won't do graph rendering on its own, but it will on request optimize the code, convert it into dot (for graphviz), and even mermaid.js (which is apparently another graphing system I hadn't hit before that's gotten popular for markdown users).

Re my being tempted to have my PC make an easy exit: This was my PC in Stephen Tihor's 12 Kingdoms game (the first Thursday game he ran using 5e; eventually he was running every other week with Julian running on the other Thursdays), a ranger (originally a barbarian, but I changed her class after the 5e playtest because of mechanical changes) from the southern continent whose core idea was "I'm exploring the barbaric northern continent" (the northerners, of course, thought the southern continent was the barbarians); she started at 7th level [the group's level] and joined while they were involved in a Heroic Quest involving a complicated prophesy. Eventually, the group completed the Quest and stopped the revival of the Fire Lord from the old pantheon, at which point there were some complicated question of what would keep the group, which was motivated by saving the world, not treasure or exploration, together, while they proceeded to explore some of the God War mysteries (the backstory, calling back to earlier eras of Stephen's game and also I think more recent play when he'd introduced some elements in an earlier age when we were playing around with the Hedra Legend RPG (which divided up D&D 3.5 classes, plus a few custom classes, into three "tracks" which could let you make really original custom classes by grabbing any three tracks and combining them with a thematic hook; I made a gadgeteer by combining the Force of Will track from Sage, The Mechanist Savant track, and I think one other track I forget, but that's not important now).

In any case, it would have been sensible for my PC to go home to the southern continent after the big quest was done. It might also have made sense for her to leave after a few other breakpoints when we dealt with complications, but as it happened, she never did, even after the group almost split due to her abusing a broken artifact she'd somehow ended up with.

Escalating from physical to talking is interesting in Dogs of the Vineyard and Dogs-like games, since while it works in the fiction, (and lets you bring new stats into the conflict, as each conflict zone allows two different stats of four to be relevant so the first escalation always allows at least one new stat to be brought in, of Acuity, Body, Heart, and Will), when someone takes fallout, they always use the highest fallout die that's been available in the conflict, so even if you escalate down from Bullets (d10) to Talking (d4), any fallout taken during that talking phase will not be the default gentle d4 fallout that can't possibly kill anyone, but the highly dangerous d10 that can easily kill someone. How does that make sense in the fiction? That's really the players problem, but the important thing is that in such a conflict the talking part is still really high danger, so people presumably aren't willing to take such high fallout unless they have an expression in mind; when you grab 2d10 or 3d10 fallout you have to know death is potentially in the cards (simply for anyone else: the fallout system is that you roll all your fallout dice and sum the highest 2; 12+ means you're injured, 16 or higher means you're dying without medical attention, 20 means you die).

It's important to note that the PCs aren't the most important people in the game world because of anything positional in the game world; as far as other characters go they might not be nearly that important. But



charged bravely to his death again, and then finally might have actually survived one fight.

**Dylan Capel:** Huh. The new verion of T&T does feel really different—and like they're going for a different game style than the old game by quite a bit! I hope they have a way to turn the die tricks into fiction; otherwise it's going to feel very abstract.

Re BoB: I could see starting with a token in some scenes/games; in practice I tend to do more weak moves than strong moves overall, since they're more fun a lot of the time, with the strong moves being "resolving" moves you throw out when you want to simplify the game. But of course every BoB game is different. Yazeba's will often have characters start with tokens, though (and I know one session where I was playing Hey Kid I was trying to build up to a certain number of tokens (at which point Hey Kid would explode, which is a thing Hey Kid does) while the other players were trying to take tokens away from me so that wouldn't happen; it was a lot of fun and very chaotic! [the theme of that scenario is "hey kid is bored and the rest of the B&B is trying to keep them amused"]

Yeah, good point on how A&E going from a collective continuous activity to a body of work and a finished project changes how people see it and even how they should see it!

Interesting ideas on zine structure! I tend to not really dicat it—I'll put whatever non-comment content I have in the front and often that means a page of non-comments and however many pages of comments, but it's hardly intentional; just a factor of how I write and that I will write the bulk of my life update after the comments are done and before I submit.

I enjoyed Cross Bronx Expressway, but I also didn't necessarily want to play it too many times; it's a better simulation than a game! Whether that we were playng it in the Bronx mattered...not exactly? It probably changed how we thought about the simulation, but in the end it was a game. (did make it a bit more fun, though).

I bind go-to-line to escape-G; emacs doesn't default to one and it's not something I'm willing to do without. Will keep the recommendation for the Fresh editor in mind; there are a lot of projects but too many of them are focused around gen-AI.

Re *Pagans*: I think the investigators certainly fail to really understand the relationship between the text and the religion, yes, but also their perspective on the text is simultaneously very Christian. I think there's a lot of satire in there (some of which I surely missed), but that the author is still thinking about how the world fits together, and not always as well as I'd like.

**Avram Grumer:** I think a negative ambition can work in a roleplaying game or story...but only accompanied by enough positive motivation to make it work. I hit this a couple of times in our current Dangerous Refuge text—first, in advicing people not to have a Desire for something *not* to happen as a primary motivation, although having it be the secondary half of a desire can work. So "Descire: make sure nobody knows I don't have real mage" is bad; it doesn't drive you to do anything, only *not* to do anything. But "Discover why my father was expelled from school without letting anyone realize I don't have real magic" is great; you've got a solid hook and something that complicates it. The exception I make is when you can negotiate a direct opposition between two characters. Once there's a PC who is trying to discover why someone was expelled 20 years ago, then having another character who is trying to make sure the secrets of the last generation are never exposed suddenly has some teeth, but without that it doesn't have a lot of play in it.

Thanks for the synopsis of Go for Broke! It doesn't seem likely to build really deep play, but it does sound at least engaging.

Re Green Lantern oath: "In loudest din or hush profound?" I did have to look that one up, but not the sighted one. And also, of course, I got a gemini confabulation before I opened up the wiki for the real oath, which did a fascinating job of garbling Rot Lop Fan's oath into something that didn't rhyme at the end (and also swapped "chime" for "hush" in the first line). It's actually comforting that frontier models (in "flash" mode anyway) are still making basic errors like this.

Re writing down reasons for strings: Yeah, I playtested a PBTa hack with string-reasons and re-determined the same thing; writing down the reason for each string is just way Too Much to keep track of. Having a changing relationship line for each character might work well, but MH relationships are transactional.

The writeup reminded me of something about MH: in practice, the game rarely has the PCs interrogate *why* all this weirdness is happening (your group is closer to that border than most). Which is interesting, because the source material—stuff like Ginger Snaps, bits of Buffy, all of it, is chock full of such interrogation. But when you interrogate the "why", you end up getting facts that you want to do more with; take "why are vampires" and turn it into weapons to fight vampires; ask deep questions about ghosts and maybe figure out more about how ghosts work. And that does creative interference with the Monster Hearts mechanics, where things basically just work. I'm sure you could run a game where the characters spend more time interrogating the "how" of the fiction, and Briar's game pushes harder in that direction, but it's not common.

Re Briar giving PCs broad latitude on things that don't impinge on other PCs or trigger moves: Yeah, that's very legit—my general view of PbtA is that rather than the usual criticism of "PCs can't do anything outside their moves," that it's the opposite—that as long as what they're doing doesn't trigger a move or warp the game out of all recognition, they can generally do it, and things generally roll forwards until a move comes up. We did a lot of that with my Queen in our longish Monster Hearts game, where I specified early that her gang were a bunch of "dragon princesses" a la Seanan McGuire's Toby Daye books (which is to say, they're actually just female dragons, who just look like pretty human women because dragons are somewhat sexually dimorphic) who staffed an ice cream parlor. And we just ran with it; a lot of what she did was sourced in the game-level fiction (the ice cream could do Weird Stuff because I chose "they have drugs and stuff like that"), but some things were just sourced from the fiction.

I'm sure Emacs does have modes for writing typst directly, but I've yet to restort to this; I'm pretty set in my ways in terms of using a simple format, so until it really gets in my way I'll probably stick with it rather than writing typst code as a core process; I can do direct typst when I need to adjust something.

**Elf:** I know Lisa and Brian are constructing very solid rebuttals for your line about superhero TTRPGs, so I won't bother with a comprehensive answer, but suffice it to say that I, too, have simply not found your points to be valid in practice; I've had many excellent times playing normal TTRPGs where one player runs the world and sets up plotlines and everyone else has a characer with abilities, and found that they did at least as good a job feeling like a superhero comic as D&D mimics a fantasy story with a small squad of often-violent adventurers, and often better. Brian Rogers V&V Legion game did a particularly good job, although it differed from what you were vaguely referring to in several respects—first, it was a play by email game, not a face to face game, and second, it did make some uses of metacurrency (although mostly Brian laments that the players barely used it; I think we did use it when we needed to). I've also enjoyed (and found that they made good comics RPGs) the original Marvel game, the MURPG diceless game, the diceless unpublished game that the designers of MURPG did for their home table *after* the MURPG, Kerberos Club

Fate, the popular Masks TNG, and quite a few others. And a lot of this was because your critical "no, you're playing wrong" is wrong; none of these play like "a team/quest RPG with super characters"; they play like the comics because they're designed to. Characters rarely die because the mechanics are built to mimic the fatality rates of the comics, characters are motivated to be heroic and make speeches, not collect loot because the incentive structure is built around what makes a superhero story tick, not the needs of D&D. You can play Superboy in Brian's V&V hack (which was basically V&V with a bit of stuff added to support the Legion), in Smallville (well, Superboy), and you can play the Marvel characters in any of the Marvel RPGs; that is, after all, the whole points.

You make a lot of lot of hay about what superhero games try to do and can't, but you don't support it with examples because in a lot of popular superhero games, there aren't any. D&D, yes, is a team-based fighting game where PCs have a specific roles, but most superhero RPGs aren't—you build your hero the way they'd appear in the comics and it mostly just works.

WRT superheroes not dying, I actually have a couple of thoughts: First, that superhero's can't (permanently) die in the comics is really a relic of marketing. It's not something good about comics—comic book superhero stories would be better if death were sometimes permanent, but due to how they're marketed and how the IP laws and incentives work, they never are. But that said, in all intentional stories except horror, death is rare and meaningful, not random and often pointless like it is in D&D. And as such, most games written to do superheroes make the heroes much harder to kill. Some leave out mechanical (rather than player-choice) death as an option entirely, like Kerberos Club Fate and Smallville. Some provide a vast pool of resources to damage PCs and NOT kill them like Champions and V&V. But death simply *isn't* cheap in most superhero RPGs the way it is in D&D-like fantasy RPGs, and that's because that problem has been accounted for and generally handled.

Now, Champions is a special case—because if you want to build a hero or villain that can kill some people relatively easily, you need to include Killing Attack, which means they can *also* kill many PCs similarly easily. But this is really because Champions is trash (for doing trad superhero stories, I mean. It's very good at being Champions!). The core model there—that you built extremely fixed powers and then run grid-based combat (extremely slowly) doesn't model any kind of story—it models Champions. I'm sure that there are GMing styles that can make it feel like a decent story (and I had enough fun playing Justice Inc—because of the GM's abilities, not the system, which had far less variance than Champions because the PCs were all basically normal humans), at least after dealing with the glacial combat speeds, but honestly, it's just an awful example.

But the idea that "you can't have hit points" in a superhero game is silly. Hit points aren't a measure of how easily it is to instantly kill someone in an RPG—they're pretty awful if that's the goal—instead, they're a narrative constraint of keeping track of how close a fight is to ending. As such, they're a GREAT mechanic for a superhero RPG; you want to have a fight that swings back and forth and where the heroes feel like they're going to lose and come back and all that, so having a hit point mechanic is exactly what you want. You just want to favor "beaten up but still fighting back" or "knocked out", not "instantly dead," which is why the Marvel games have very generous death rules and V&V has the "roll with it" mechanic that makes the vast majority of damage PCs take come out of Power (which regenerates very quickly), not HP.

More, the core concept you've got is "you can't play your favorite hero" (because they're way too powerful). But while that criticism covers games like Hero and GURPS that try to keep the protagonists

relatively balanced to one another, it doesn't cover other systems that, well, just don't. Cortex (which Smallville) doesn't try to balance protagonists on a power level—after all, the same game can have both Lona Lang and Superboy as PCs! Instead, it balances screen time and influence. Fate does the same thing and you can *absolutely* play Superman in a Fate game as long as your GM is game for it; the way you build is to focus on scale (which is explored quite a lot with Dresden Accelerated); Superboy doesn't get bigger numbers (the mistake with the Kerberos Fate game, though it was still quite fun), but can just try things most other people couldn't dream of...and it works fine.

Re Fate, you're also simply wrong. Spider Man can throw cars around—something that would be a +12 obstacle for the bouncer at the local bar isn't simply something where he gets better chrome to overcome it; it's not an obstacle for Spider-man at all. The bouncer rolls; Spider-man doesn't. If he's rolling a hard Overcome roll, it's to prevent the 7th avenue line from coming down in the middle of Rush Hour, which is something the bouncer, again, can't roll for at all. The key to making Fate work as a general system is narrative positioning, which is NOT easy for players and GMs to wrap their minds around, but it does work.

But honestly, you need narrative positioning to make superhero games work for almost any conceivable RPG, because that's how they're written. The writers aren't engaged in complicated power scaling exercises; they're setting up situations and from there deciding on what's plausible and makes sense (or is challenging). Fate is a great system for doing this, and other systems like Nobilis can do it too, but it's quite hard to do in a system that tries to bake power scaling into the system. Even a system (like Brian's V&V hack) which *does* try to build comic-appropriate power scales into the system is still ultimately running on narrative positioning, because you need the GM to judge whether a roll for something is possible and how hard it is.

One more point I touch on earlier: the core D&D approach is almost as trash to do fantasy as it is for superheroes. It only does one thing well, which is running D&D. There's nothing particularly magical about fantasy that makes it work better for D&D's small squad combat than, say, Fate's narrative and positioning-based fiction-first approach. (except maybe the zero-to-hero nature of fast leveling, I guess). That said, you can still run really good fantasy stories with it; you just need to be able to shift back and forth between levels, using D&D for the things its good at (making combat feel exciting, mostly) and other techniques to run the rest of the story. To run and/or play a RPG that feels like *any* kind of story, romance, fantasy, super-hero, mystery, or serious drama, you need to engage muscles beyond pure roleplaying, because doing story in a roleplaying game involves using the same skills as building a story any other way; systems can help with some things but not all things. Honestly there aren't a lot of systems I could trust to play something that felt like McKillip (maybe Fate—with the right players, anyway).

Of course, an added twist on that is that D&D itself has minis wargaming still at its core—not, in fact, a kind of wargaming that existed before it (small squad was, far as I can tell, really new with Chainmail), but one that mostly exists in D&D. But most RPGs don't—you use some of the same mechanical techniques, but like HP, they're adapted to the game you're trying to build and playtested until, at least in test conditions, the stories they tell feel like the kind of story you're trying to replicate. This isn't a new thing—V&V had a large non-lethal pool as early as 1981, Toon rules based around comic book physics and no permanent death in the late 80s, and so on. But people keep doing it and keep doing new things. Some work better, other less well, but the possibilities keep growing—and not just in the tiny indie spaces, either.

But in general, I think it makes more sense to talk about why specific games fail at their intended goals (and if possible, how to fix them) than to indict an entire genre.

So, I've talked a bunch about what I think you need in order to do a good superhero game (and in fact I think quite a number of games are there, even if they can't cover *every* superhero genre, and often they don't try). What do you want out of a superhero game? What would you put in, and how would you solve the problems you raise. After all, it has to be possible because superhero comics still get written, and a story game is just another way of building a story.

Re deities: Huh. Our D&D games generally have non-clerics caring about gods all the time. I mean, there's a space for god on the character sheet, init? My desert ranger honored the goddess of travelers, and later made a deal with the ancient trickster "god of humanity". In the Spelljammer game, a number of non-divine characters honor the Raven Queen (who the group's cleric is dedicated to), and the cleric tries to fulfill people's expected death rites when they can figure out what they are. You might enjoy looking over some version of Glorantha (which, yes, our Michael Cule is currently writing up a campaign set in); there most people honor a pantheon and will have charms and a connection to at least one god; dedicated rune priests will have a deeper connection, but that's just another level of what most people have.

Agreed that the core problem of mysteries in RPGs is "can you read the GM's mind?" The moment that's what you're trying to do rather than trying to find a way to put the clues together in a way that makes sense, the mystery has, in a sense, failed; it's supposed to be a puzzle, not a mind-reading exercise. Honestly, even if you're not running a mystery Brindlewood-style, following the core structure is good—players collect clues, players put the clues together in a way that seems pleasing, players test their thesis, and if they don't get it right, they get NEW information that shows why their thesis is wrong and should point them to other ideas, rather than hitting a brick wall. Honestly this is also how a lot of mystery stories are written, too; maybe it's the cops that put the wrong suspect in jail rather than the main detective, but every false lead just pushes you further on the trail to the real answer.

We've seen a few episodes of Leverage! We liked them, but there's only so much time we allocate to watching stuff and we were watching them with someone!

Re our Good Society "Cloud Boarding School": Feel free to ask out of band for a key; I'm curious about your guesses! But yeah, it's made even harder by our building it to the limited playtest material for GS2, so it doesn't have a full set of backgrounds and roles so our mapping was a different one than we might have used if we had access to the full list!

RPG means "D&D style game". It also means "video game that's based on early D&D at a rather considerable remove". Depending on context it's clear which one one is referring to; in these pages it's clear that you don't need to use "trpg" any more than you'd need to clarify which Marxism you meant in an economics paper.

**Jim Vassilakos:** Quantum computing doesn't render cryptography obsolete. This has been a known problem for over 20 years, and we have a LOT of post-graduate mathematicians and cryptographers, so naturally we have whole classes of cryptographic techniques (including alternative key-exchange answers and public key techniques) that aren't rendered trivial by quantum computing the way factoring large numbers are. Of course, it will take some time to switch most cryptography over to using them, but in the meanwhile we don't have quantum computing fast enough to break current many-bit cryptography that is based on quantum-vulnerable techniques. Yet.

You hit the nail on the head in frontier AIs having no past, no future, but producing output that looks (in some domains) like the result of intelligent thought. Of course, it isn't—it's the result of a prediction engine that is expressly trained to do exactly this, and performs surprisingly well. But whether it could do more—whether, given storage equivalent to a human brain, it could produce the simulation, not of an externality but a human or other conscious internality? I mean, maybe? We have incomplete ideas of what happens inside a human mind, so replicating that kind of internality is quite hard, plus we're talking about orders of magnitude more storage than we generally give frontier AIs (we are very efficient, in this respect at least). But one of the big questions in AI is that of at what point, if any, of replicating the steps of biological consciousness, a mind like ours arises, and we certainly don't know and might never. We've ultimately proven we can produce surprisingly human results *without* replicating the kind of internality we have; we haven't proven what happens if we do replicate that kind of internality, both because it's quite hard and that we haven't tried with all the resources now at our disposal.

**Timothy Collinson:** I'm glad you had a good time playing Mongoose's Paranoia! I've heard plenty of complaints from Dan (who invented the concept) that it's not *his* Paranoia (specifically, he thinks modern authors lean in too much to the Computer as hazard when his conception was that the Computer wanted, per its programming, to help the PCs, and only it being insane—and that the situation that puts put them at one another's throats—resulted in dystopia), but it's great to hear that people are still playing and enjoying it!

I'm glad you're enjoying *Pagans*! And yeah; the Old/New Testament stuff wasn't a huge part of the book, but it did annoy me when it came up.

# Computocracy

## Character Options, Pt 1

Jim Vassilakos

“I don’t understand why anyone needs to learn this stuff.”

“Knowledge of the past and where you come from is a gift,” I said, “a gift from your elders to you.”

I motioned to the couple sitting in front of us, who were two of Julian’s great-great-great-grandparents, and then to the holowall, where thirteen more of his ancestors watched with bemused smiles. Collectively, they ranged across hundreds of generations, the latter group having all passed into the Virtuality<sup>1</sup>, having long since abandoned their physical bodies. Like me, they were now immortal beings, but unlike me, they’d experienced firsthand what it was to be human, as opposed to merely simulating it.

“I just don’t understand why, since races don’t exist anymore, why do I need to learn about them?”

“Because to forget the past is to forget who you are.”

“But the past is past,” Julian argued. “What’s the point of showing me one man whipping another or... putting me in the middle of a silicon age riot? I mean, I get it. Everything sucked and now things are way better.”

That was not the lesson. The lesson had to do with the true nature of human nature, collectively as well as individually. One day, Julian would need to undergo full simulation, to experience what it was to be a slave as well as a master, a rioter as well as a cop. He would be tested, and it was my task to see that he developed the neural pathways to enable him to do well, as I was his Caregiver, his personal android. I’d been raising him from the day he was born.

This was not to say that Julian never saw his parents. They dropped by weekly at a minimum, unless they were off-planet, but as with most children, even those with neglectful parents, there was a near constant stream of ancestors wanting to look in and see how their youngest descendants were doing. They’d say a few words of encouragement and then talk about old times, not how things were any different when they were young (because, for most of them, they weren’t), but rather what they’d learned in their centuries or millennia of existence.

“Listen to your Caregiver,” one now said, and the others nodded, even the two 3<sup>rd</sup> greats. Julian, in response, pinched his lips together, his cortisol level rising.

“Come,” I told him.

He followed, obedient, not wanting to disappoint his ancestors.



Image by Nano Banana Pro

During the early post-transition, human ethnicity (also called race) still existed, but the homogenization, which had already been well underway, accelerated. As people moved from one enclave to another, they met each other and did what people naturally do, and over the next several millennia, variations of skin, hair, and eye color became matters of preference, subject to genes that could be edited.

Races, therefore, at least in the traditional sense of the term, ceased to exist, but this was not to say that everyone looked increasingly similar. Quite the contrary. Humans being humans, experimented with new colors and even new structural modifications, such as elfin ears and cat’s eyes. Cybernetics also increased in popularity. Even people who were otherwise all-natural often had nanobots circulating in their bloodstream, monitoring their health and possibly even regulating their emotions.

By the modern age, human children are born either natural, genetically optimized, or genetically augmented.

**Natural:** This encompasses a range of options, as human zygotes are almost always screened for genetic diseases before passing into an incubator. Yes, fully natural children almost all undergo artificial gestation. Likewise, parents will often choose traits for their offspring, and so long as those traits are within historic human parameters, their child is considered natural.

**Optimized:** This also encompasses a range of options where the child’s genetic code is designed from scratch rather than being tweaked around the edges. The goals may vary, meaning that what’s considered optimal in one enclave may not be optimal in another. Due to the standardization caused by this process, such children are sometimes called clones, but they are not really clones in the traditional sense of the term. They are not copies of a

<sup>1</sup> See my zine in A&E #503.

specific person. Rather, they're copies of a favored DNA sequence, one where their important traits — whatever those happen to be — are maximized to the very edge of historic human parameters. So we are, in effect, talking about athletic geniuses with better than 20/20 eyesight who have really good teeth, basically the sort of people who by early 21<sup>st</sup>-century standards would be considered perfect in every way.

Augmented: This also encompasses a range of options, but the unifying criterion is that the child's traits are no longer within historic human parameters. The deviation may be merely cosmetic (for example, rainbow-colored eyes) or it may be structural, such as in furry-friendly enclaves.

Children often have nanobots monitoring their health even before they emerge from their artificial wombs. As for cybernetic implants, the rules vary widely from one enclave to next, and a Watcher may interview the child to make sure they understand and agree to the proposed elective surgical body modification.

Adults have fewer hoops to jump through, and many even elect for electronic mind-enhancement, possibly allowing them to enter the Virtuality despite still being a physical human. Eventually, almost all humans cross over permanently in order to transcend the physical world, although they may still occasionally inhabit androids or robots or interact with physical humans via holographic devices.

What sort of character would you choose to play?

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#### Past zines available at:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

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#### Comments on E&A #12:

##### Drifting deities & the origins and nature of gods:

Matt Stevens (E&A #12, pg. 10): "Not only do the names change, but the 'domains' and myths associated with them shift as well."

I'd imagine this could only be true if the gods are without individual consciousness in and of themselves. If they're like people, different mainly in terms of their abilities, then this method you're outlining would appear to contradict the premise, because they would likely see themselves as having a particular name and domain, and they would probably make these known to at least their clergy.

So the question you have to start with is: What exactly are these divine beings? Are there different types? Where do they come from, and what are their abilities? And how do

they perceive the world? How do they think? That is assuming they think at all.

The common conception we have of gods in D&D comes primarily from AD&D's *Deities & Demigods* (1980), which is basically a monster manual of gods. Stats are provided for each deity, presumably so they can interact with the PCs whether through roleplaying or combat.

I can't help but wonder if perhaps a better way to portray such spiritual entities in a fantasy RPG campaign would be to portray them akin to how Brian Misiaszek portrayed the Death Loa in his Pulp Cthulhu adventure, where the entity doesn't take on a physical form but rather works its influence in ways that are inherently more alien to us. Perhaps, in this way, fantasy gods could be made more mysterious, and since they would be essentially nameless, their names might drift over time as you've described.

As for their domains, it all depends on whether the god itself can change, and if so, what causes it to do so? Interesting questions, but like I said, I'd start first with what gods actually are in the campaign world and let everything evolve naturally from that premise.

##### Traveller's *Pirates of Drinax*:

Roger BW (E&A #12, pg. 18): "We started it ten years ago and had a good initial run, but went very adrift..."

I've played it.<sup>2</sup> Curious as to how your group went adrift. While I appreciated the adventure overall, it was part of what led me to begin developing 1PMG.<sup>3</sup>

##### Nature of gods & priests:

Roger BW (E&A #12, pg. 19): "For me, if gods are going to be gods, they have to be qualitatively different from humans."

Agreed. See my comments to Matt (above). I would add that the mere reality that gods exist in some fantasy settings, as evidenced by the effects of priestly magic, is going to have a big effect on the longevity of puritanical faiths. And depending on the strength and reliability of that magic, it will likely make the priest class even more powerful. Only if the gods are inherently dangerous and unwieldy, sort of like magic itself, will priests be perceived as being more like mages. Although their priesthoods will likely give them more institutional power, even though they may end up embroiled in church politics.

##### Spell Failure:

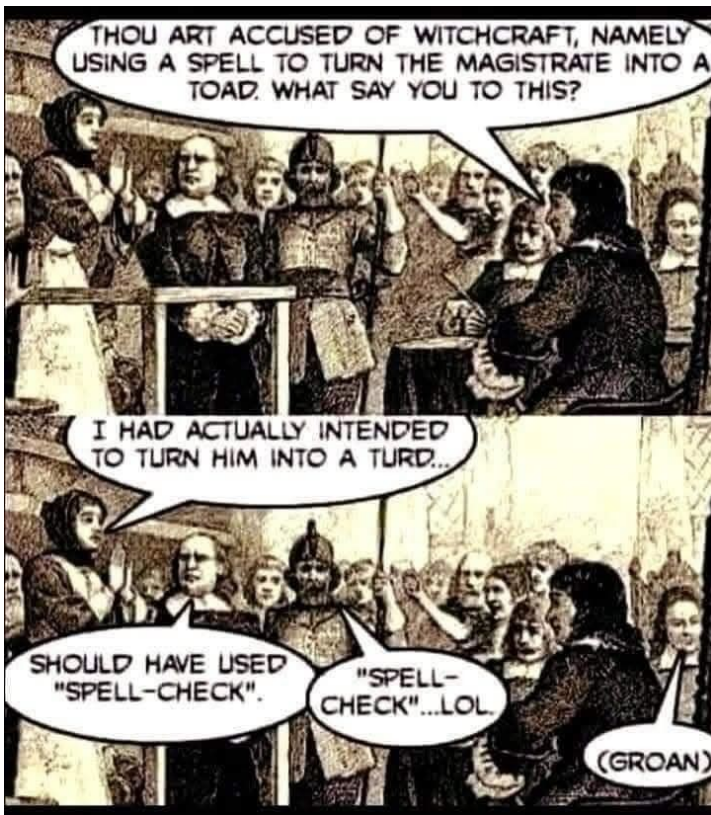
John Redden (E&A #12, pg. 33): "My favorite miscast for a magic spell was a typo. Examples: Raisin the Dead, FurrBall, Flies (the insect), Heel..."

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<sup>2</sup> See my zines in A&E #s 526 & 533.

<sup>3</sup> [https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/1PMG\\_Roleplaying.pdf](https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/1PMG_Roleplaying.pdf)

Hope you enjoy this:



### Aristotle on gods:

Patrick Brady (E&A #12, pg. 37): "...he thinks that most of the stories about the gods are just fiction. (...) Where he sees the gods as important is not as superheroes but as social cohesion. (...) 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..."

I heard about an excavation of an ancient Greek temple, and the archaeologists had apparently found a secret passage. They hypothesized that people would bring in offerings of food to the god, and the food would mysteriously disappear, proving the offerings had been accepted (by the priests, sneaking it out through the back door, as it were). I don't know if this says more about priests or Greeks.

### Mausritter & the ring:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #12, pg. 39): "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.""

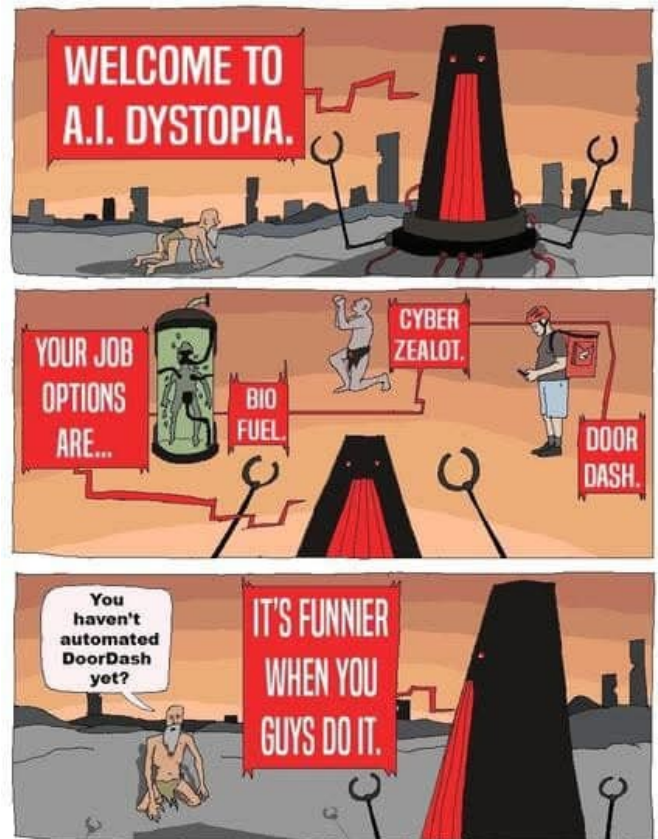
Is this going where I think it's going? "The only way to destroy the ring is to cast it into the Smokestack of Doom."

### Artificial Intelligence & Human Obsolescence:

Brian Rogers (E&A #12, pg. 46): "AI should do my dishes while I create art, not try to create art while I have to do the dishes."

Pretty soon, I think, it'll be doing both. I mean, it's already creating art, obviously, and the artists aren't too happy about it, but pretty soon the ultimate home appliance will be a robot that can do many of your household chores. They'll be limited at first, and unreliable, error-prone, etc., but give them a decade or two and see how far they come.

These robots will, of course, transform the workplace. The resulting Luddite movement will likely be even more destructive than the original. It could last several decades. It'll be the political issue of our time, and at the end, we'll either be pets or fertilizer. At least, that's what I'm envisioning.



The questions of *Computocracy* are:

- What's the best case scenario?
- How might we steer in that direction?
- What new problems will present themselves?
- How might we cope with them?

### **Silver vs. Gold (Fantasy RPG Money Systems):**

Gabriel Roark (E&A #12, pg. 61): “All weapons & armor are priced in sp.”

During at least one of the AD&D campaigns I ran back in college, I essentially did the same thing, as it had always seemed odd to me that gold should be worth so little. Needless to say, the change proved helpful to the players. It meant they could convert most of their coins to gold and platinum and therefore be able to physically carry much more easily convertible wealth than they'd be able to carry under the official rules. But it also had the effect of making treasure hordes look comparatively minuscule, as a chest with 1000 GP would end up being a much smaller chest with 50 coins (using the 1:20 ratio in the rules). It also meant I had to do value conversions for basically everything, which became a bit of an annoyance. It was a good experiment and it did make gold more valuable, but there was a lot of extra work that went along with it.

### **The Twsha Outbreak:**

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #12, pg. 68): “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.”

Gah! Such cold, clinical descriptions. So this is what happens when a doctor writes a horror scenario. You get the scariest kind of horror: medical horror.

### **Missed Opportunity in Computer Education:**

Patrick Riley (E&A #12, pg. 84): “...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?”

It would depend on how much freedom the teacher has. If none, they'd have to tell the student to go pound sand, but they could still look at Rust and try to determine whether it's worth teaching. If they decide it is, they'd have to get it approved through the powers that be, but maybe it could be something they'd teach the following year.

If, on the other hand, the teacher has a lot of freedom, they might ask the student to develop a syllabus and lesson plans, and if the student does a particularly good job, the teacher might try coaxing the student into teaching, say by hiring them as a TA. Even if it's only on a volunteer basis, it might still be something the student could put on their résumé (CV). Regardless, it would be a good experience.

I wasn't expecting the professor to change the class that was currently being taught, and I'm sure there would have been resistance if he'd tried to implement my ideas, as the department at that time had very few IBM-PCs. What they had were a bunch of terminals connected to a mini-computer running Unix. So they didn't even have the hardware to do what I was suggesting, and trying to get that hardware would probably have appeared to them like taking a step backwards, and an expensive one at that, as securing and maintaining one mini-computer is a lot easier than dealing with fifty microcomputers, any of which could develop hardware malfunctions or become a vector for malware.

Of course, many students had their own microcomputers, but given the time period, some of these would have been Commodores, TRS-80s, Apples (Mac, Lisa, or the IIGS), or even Amigas. The IBM architecture, being an open system, was already becoming dominant, but it wasn't universal.

In short, to do what I suggested would have required them to either use a Unix-version of BASIC or, better yet, build a computer room full of IBM-PCs. The latter is something they eventually did, but that was years after I graduated. As for a Unix-version of BASIC, apparently there are now several of them (cbmbasic, FreeBASIC, X11-Basic). There was even an early version called *bas*, but I didn't know about it at the time.

The problem with this approach is every version of Basic is different, so it wouldn't have met the goal of teaching the students a programming language they'd continue to have access to regardless of what they might end up majoring in. That was really the primary advantage of GW-BASIC. Its interpreter was already widely available, existing on millions of computers. All you had to do was start teaching classes on how to use it and you could have had a generation of programmers.

### **Magic systems with a coherent theory of magic:**

Patrick Riley (E&A #12, pg. 84): “...does Ars Magica qualify as having a coherent theory of magic?”

I'm not familiar with it, so you tell me.

### **Copilot's summary of the Plankwell Campaign:**

Clark B. Timmins (E&A #12, pg. 85): “It gave me this as a concise summary of the combined PDF...”

Love it! Although, I have to admit the possibility that it makes the PBEM write-up sound a good deal better than perhaps it actually is. Fortunately, you asked it for a summary and not a review.

### Punny opportunity:

Michael Cule (E&A #12, pg. 91): “ORSORKHON: I have many penitents who would regard it as an honour to clean up elephant shit in the sight of the Emperor.”

Y’see, this is what happens when nobody mentions the elephant in the room.

### Apocalypse Postponed Permanently:

Michael Cule (E&A #12, pg. 97): “God has postponed the Rapture until the Epstein Files are released.”

Finally, something good comes out of all this.

### Thursday Next:

Lisa Padol (E&A #12, pg. 112): “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 should just tie them all to the full release of the Epstein Files (see above).

### Orcs:

Attronarch (E&A #12, pg. 123): “Well it is just me, Kruggak, and my bros, Kruggak and Kruggak.”

I suppose it makes sense. Fewer names for the parents to have to remember.

### Zine Length & Composition:

Dylan Capel (E&A #10, pg. 95): “I was quite interested to read that so many people had preferences for smaller, varied zines. It feels that despite the actual page limit that perhaps round about three pages of content and two of comments is maybe the preferred ideal.”

Lisa Padol (E&A #11, pg. 111): “I don’t think I agree.... (...) I enjoy reading Brian Rogers’s essays and Michael Cule’s write ups, and I find meaty comments, including those not addressed to me, satisfying to read. I’m used to the 16-page limit, and while I don’t want it to be longer, and would be okay with it being a bit shorter, I like that one has room to stretch a bit.”

Dylan Capel (E&A #12, pg. 129): “I guess what I was really concluding is that people value the interaction and discussion over having lots of new content.”

Why not have both?

I’m reminded of something Patrick Riley wrote all the way back in A&E #400 about what sort of contributions he personally finds most engaging: ones that “*provide insight from the perspective of the player or the GM or those told in a first-person narrative of a single PC.*” And I can’t help but agree. I prefer 1<sup>st</sup> person narratives, which is the main

reason I developed a methodology for 1PMG Roleplaying<sup>4</sup>, and I prefer narratives that contain insights (possibly inserted as footnotes) highlighting noteworthy moments where something is going on behind the curtain.

Sure, it’s interesting to read about the adventure a character or characters had, but I personally find it even more interesting to read about the perceptions of the actual participants. Did any out-of-character arguments occur? How were they resolved? What critical rulings did the GM make, and how did it change the outcome of a given scene? With the benefit of hindsight and reflection, would the GM make the same ruling or is there something there that possibly constitutes a mistake? In short, is there something that happened that we could all learn from?

As for usable content (monsters, adventures, spells, magic items, etc.) or essays on some aspect of RPGs, I’m obviously all for these, and so I’d personally be in favor of relaxing the 16-page limit so as to accommodate more of this, particularly when someone like Brian Misiasek, for example, wants to include more material than sixteen pages can reasonably accommodate. After all, electrons are cheap, and nobody’s forcing anyone to read every word of every zine.

In any case, the 16-page limit was voted on, so I’ll continue enforcing it, but I’d personally be happy to see it doubled.

### Players w/ Multi-Page Backstories:

Avram Grumer (E&A #12, pg. 134): “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.”



I've *never* hated this sort of player. Quite the opposite. These are the sorts of players I prefer, although if someone were to hand me thirty pages, I might be a bit overwhelmed. But I'd definitely read whatever they came up with and think about how I could incorporate their character and all the surrounding minutia into the campaign. That said, I've always insisted on exercising editorial authority as a GM, so if they came up with a too-cool-for-this-party edgelord, I'd probably talk to them about flaws, character arcs, and possibly making their character less of a Mary Sue.<sup>5</sup> Can't help but wonder if PBEMers (or those attracted to PBEMing) are generally more open to lengthy backstories than regular tabletop roleplayers.

### Players Deciding Generally What Happens:

Avram Grumer (E&A #12, pg. 135): "Drake rolls a partial success on Run Away and chooses the 'You run into something worse' result."

Something worse than Evil Bert? Is that even possible? Meeting Evil Bert in a cemetery would freak me out.

It's an interesting game mechanic, letting the player decide this sort of thing. So then it's up to the MC to decide what the worse thing is going to be? I never really understood what the cloud was supposed to be. A mist tornado of anger/hatred/chaos? A manifestation of the Dark Patron? It'd make for an interesting spiritual entity of the sort I'd mentioned to Matt Stevens (see above).



### Religion in RPGs:

Erica Frank (E&A #12, pg. 150): "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."

One partial solution might be to allow *hedge* clerics, people who are not officially ordained but who still hold some sway with celestial and/or infernal beings. The more important task, however, centers around defining these beings. See my comments to Matt Stevens (above).

### Cover Art:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #12, pg. 156): "A lovely piece of art by Luke Broderick! Was this donated by him for the cover?"

I saw it on *Reddit* and asked for permission to use it for E&A, which he generously granted.

### Capturing those memorable moments:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #12, pg. 178): "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."

Might I suggest you download a voice recorder app<sup>6</sup> to your phone and establish a practice of keeping it open during RPG sessions? I ran into a situation some years back where I could see an in-character argument brewing, so I decided to capture it, and I was not disappointed.<sup>7</sup>

I actually like a good in-character argument so long as it's doesn't devolve into an out-of-character argument, but even in such cases, as well as in cases where players argue with the GM, it might be useful to create a transcript and share it with the APA. These episodes, however unpleasant they may be in that moment, contain potential lessons that may help us become better GMs as well as better players.

Just a thought.



Image by Nano Banana Pro

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Sue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Sue)

<sup>6</sup> I've been using *VA Recorder*.

<sup>7</sup> See the last three pages of my zine in A&E #533.

# Travelling Light

Timothy Collinson

No. 1, July 2026

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Two weeks ago, my daughter's wedding went off wonderfully in Falmouth (Cornwall) – a five-hour drive from home. I think my father-of-the-bride speech went ok despite it being a tough audience as the speeches were pre-food and drinks! Photo is daughter and I waiting for the taxi to the ceremony. We had a glorious day of sunshine for the day itself and then a week of mixed weather in a house we shared with the French relations who'd flown over specially.



Last weekend was TravCon. I'm still paying for the price for that due to completely overspending energy wise. My hopes to do a quick write up haven't happened. But you had North Star last time, so better to save it anyway.

Instead, one favourite memory from the weekend (aside from having the pool to myself the four times I went for a bob and a sauna). I had seen Tom Mouat's name refereeing one game, so I immediately signed up for that. I've never met him but had seen on Facebook the fabulous maps, deck plans and other accoutrements he puts in front of players. Perhaps he'd be a rubbish referee, but I wanted to see this stuff in action. I wasn't disappointed (and his refereeing and game were great too).

About halfway through the game, something clicked and I made the connection that he was the author of 'Happy Landings!' in *White Dwarf* no.42 back in July 1983 when it still did articles for RPGs such as Traveller. For those who don't know, this is a classic article written under a pseudonym (for Reasons). It gives plans for starports of various sizes, and it particularly grabbed my imagination as a teenager as really giving me a sense of where all this travelling was going to and coming from. Indeed, iirc the article is often considered by fans to be one of, perhaps *the*, best Traveller articles in *White Dwarf*. Anyway, I went into fanboy mode and spent the rest of the weekend telling anyone who cared to listen that I'd just met Mr Happy Landings. Tom was very gracious with my enthusiasm!

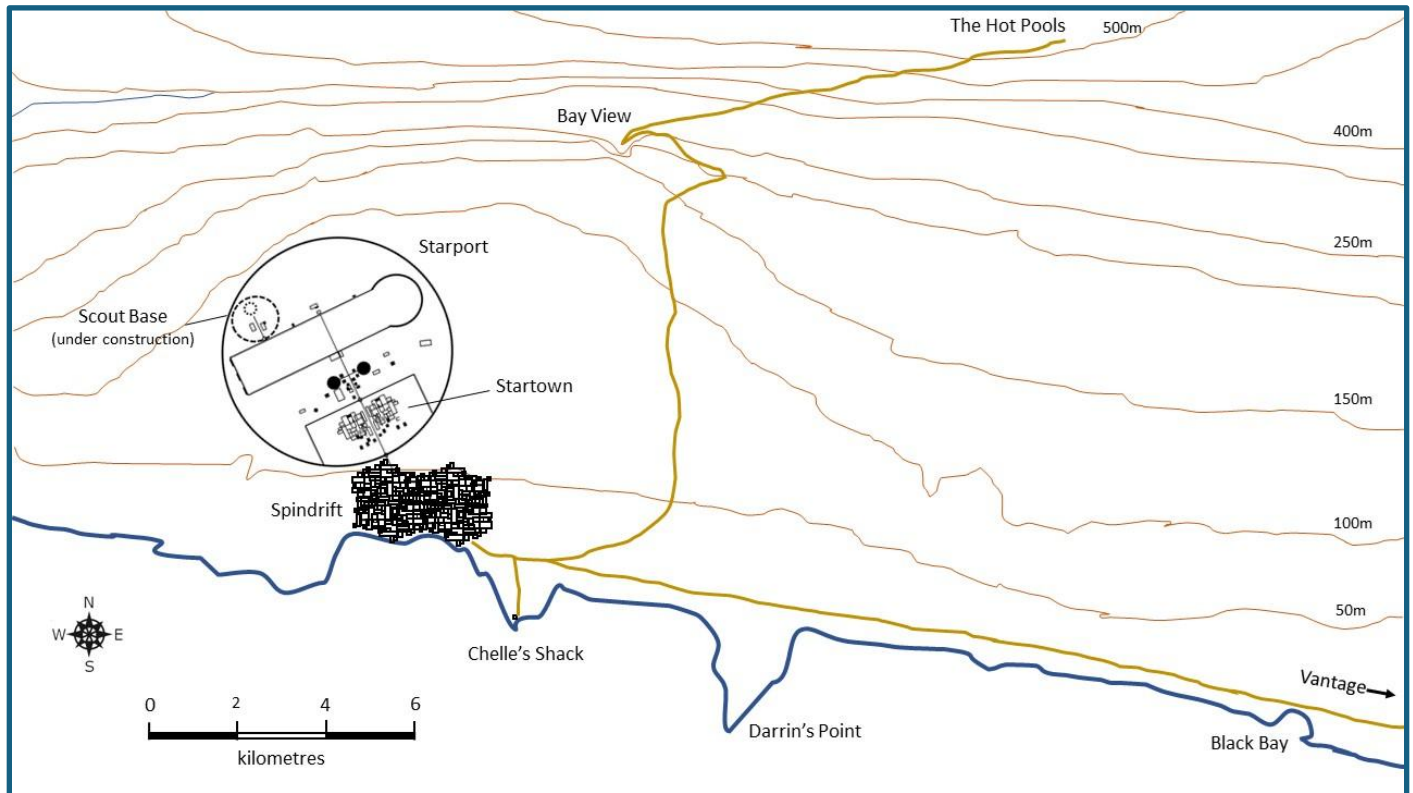
My recreation of Tom's D-class starport can be seen below (in the circle) used as a part of a regional map for my Spindrifft adventure.

A fuller version of *Spindrifft* is waiting for a publisher to decide to use it or not, but a short form of the adventure can be found here (it came second in a competition):

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/advents/spindrifft.html>

and in Spanish, here:

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/advents/spindrifft.html>



I've been honoured to be a footnote in Jim V's 'zine in *Alarums & Excursions* since no.549 in August 2021 – really, five years?! – and now *Ever & Anon*, however it seems the time has come to make my own way. I'm not sure I really want to get back into this kind of work (I edited a monthly magazine for ten years and feel I've 'been there and done that'). But we'll give it a go and perhaps there will be some value. Tell me if there's not. We can call my North Star write-up last issue, issue zero.

## Comments on Issue 11

### Matt Stevens – Cowman Baloney Face

Is there a fourth possibility with your multi-pantheon problem (or is it just a variant of your first presumption?): there is indeed “one true God”, but the others aren't fakes so much as deceptions (presumably by a devil or other 'god')? Just thinking aloud, not sure it helps.

I wish your Leviathan project had got off the ground – any chance of resurrecting it? Either

submitting to Mongoose or via their TAS programme or via *Freelance Traveller* or some such? Your “if I did it today” suggests there might be hope, so yes please!

RYCT on my experiences in Nigerian villages being “interesting”. You’re not wrong, but I don’t think there’s much to say. We often visited small villages where very close to near nudity was the order of the day, but we’d occasionally visit places where total nudity was run-of-the-mill dress code for many if not all. As an 18-year-old Englishman it was definitely “not my culture” but I wasn’t so much shocked or prurient as simply intrigued. I thought that was the stuff of *National Geographic* (of the past) not real life. (One thing I learned was that total nudity is anything but sexy!)

The best thing I learned however, as someone bullied at boarding school over my physical self and appearance, was the confidence that when it came to washing during my year in Africa it was easier, as we had no running water and fetching a bucket of water from a mile away was tedious, to bathe in a stream or pond where, say, passing Fulani herders or others might observe me. It was very healing to discover it wasn’t the shameful or embarrassing thing I’d have thought a few years previously.

### **Roger Bell-West – Firedrake’s Hoard**

Well done on *Of Dice and Meeples* – looking that up now. Although I don’t really get to boardgame very much, I do take an interest in *Tabletop Gaming* each month which covers board games way more than it covers RPGs.

RE: *Pirates of Drinax* in GURPS format – that sounds like a project! I’d be interested to see it when done, if allowed, and if it gets published, let me know for including in *The Traveller Bibliography*.

RYCT Myles C on *2300AD* being completely separate from *Traveller*. I suppose. Though because it started out as *Traveller: 2300* I still fondly imagine there’s a way of making *2300AD* part of the ‘timeline’ of Charted Space (perhaps Stutterwarp Drive was a dead end) and thus I include it *The Traveller Bibliography*. But then looking at your Rules/Setting table (p.27 of the APA), perhaps I’m a rebel both ways as everything on the table is in my bibliography! (Good table, btw, nicely observed).

RYCT Patrick R and setting up games for six: that’s just what I do for conventions but always take a 7<sup>th</sup> possibility as occasionally the organizers have a spare body they need to fit into a game somewhere and I’m happy to oblige if I can if only to help them out.

RYCT Jim V on “several pages of someone lying awake. This should not be interesting. And yet...” LOL! Chalk one up to the excellence of Jim and Conrad working their magic. (And thanks for reference to ‘A Collection of Unmitigated Pedantry’ which I’ll have to look up.)

RYCTM on Traveller-D&D and those interested not being the players you’d want: Fair point!

### **John Redden – Reddened Stars**

RYCT Mark W about not remembering *The Silmarillion* – I can see where you’re coming from,

but the first short chapter? ‘Ainulindale’? The creation story? If I read nothing else in *The Silmarillion* I think that’s hands down worth bothering with, repeatedly!

### **Brian Rogers – Denizens of the Library**

RYCTM about the numbers of players wanting experience points vs those who don’t: That’s probably fair, although it’s not my experience.

### **Patrick Riley – Quasipseudoludognostication**

RYCTM about experience points in *T20* and *GURPS: Traveller* – you’re right. I always forget them – shame on me! I never played them and although I’ve written a handful of things for GURPS, they didn’t involve experience points.

### **Clark Timmins – Cts on lastish**

RYC using AI to summarize Plankwell: that looks pretty reasonable as summaries go.

### **Michael Cule – Phoenix Nest**

RYCTM about Jeremy Brett as Sherlock Holmes being an “exception” – absolutely!

### **Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine**

RYCT Roger B about avoiding SF settings because you’re weak in sciences: I don’t know if I dare admit that I am too, but it doesn’t put me off. Bone up on it beforehand, blag it, or focus on people (sophonts) in the game is my usual approach. Seems to work. (Though in the adventure I recently wrote and ran at North Star & TravCon, I did fear any math majors playing and them not being satisfied as I wasn’t going to do quadratic equations at the table! We moved at the speed of plot. No one complained.)

RYCTM with thoughts on fiction/RPG writing overlap: many thanks for those – I’m taking note and reviewing both my fiction and RPG writing with those tips in mind. Very helpful.

### **Dylan Capel – Attacks of Opportunity**

You mentioned *Shadows*. My memory of playing this was Dom Mooney’s excellent version at TravCon where he gave us the characters from *The Travellers* comic strip as PCs and then had us meet our (evil) clones in the underground facility. Lots of fun!

Will chase up your links about Lee Gold – thanks for those and thanks for the confirmation on the books I was digging out. I fear you may not be wrong on water as a more precious resource than we imagine.

### **Erica Frank – Shiny Maths Rocks**

‘Missing Stairs’ was new to me and the link interesting, so thanks for that. It made me think how fortunate I am to not be able to think of any (local) examples off the top of my head. But that gave me pause for thought about whether *I’m* the missing stair! ;-)

### **Joshua Kronengold – Accidental Recall**

Great to read your polyp news. All the best. As for adding more eras in *Traveller* – yes, I’ve often lamented that this didn’t happen more with GDW and even now with Mongoose. It seems an obvious way to increase interest and options.

LAST WORD: They say never meet your heroes. But sometimes it can be fun!