



EVER & Anon

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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 unpublish your zine once it has been published.

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

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

Issue #17 – October 21st: Negotiating with Monsters

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

Issue #19 – December 21st: Player-Dickery

Issue #20 – January 21st: Burnout

Issue #21 – February 21st: Media (books, movies, etc.) related to TTRPGs & the gaming subculture

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

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This issue’s IgTheme: *GM-Dickery*

The picture on page 5 was generated and converted into a sketch by [Canva](#). The artwork in the comic on page 138 is from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:My_day_at_wikipedia.gif and <https://picryl.com/media/untitled-db7e04>. 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 other's zines. When you see *Myles Corcoran: blah-blah-blah...*, if there are no quotes around the *blah-blah-blah*, that's probably a comment to Myles.

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q: Who is Lee Gold?

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

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

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

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

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

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



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

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

Abbreviations & Acronyms You Need to Know:

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

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

In the Hall of Stone

By Patrick Brady. London, England. August 2026. The following text is copyright P Brady (2026). Graphics are copyright free images from Pixelbay, Unsplash, Wikimedia Commons or are from Heritage Type and copyright free. Heritage Type are at <https://www.heritagetype.com/pages/free-vintage-illustrations>. The graphics of HMS Belfast and Baker Street Tube station are public domain.

My thanks to **Roger Bell West** for links to several good graphics sources.

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 continue to use it for reasons of nostalgia.

"Americans... keep saying Britain's full of violent crime, and they're correct. I've been all over the UK and everyone here has been stabbed to death. I got murdered *three times* just last week by a trans Antifa communist immigrant who stole my job and my phone...I'm scared when I get all my news from a foreign trillionaire who tells me everyone in the UK is a knife-wielding maniac in a grooming gang."- [Michael Shafar](#) (Comedian)

Comments from the last edition

Bryant Durrell.

I enjoyed reading your 'zine. Thank you for it. I also like the format and presentation you use.

Re: Reviews. Thank you for these. I've enjoyed a lot of the Delta Green material and I will check out Rejection in DriveThruRPG, so may buy because of your review. Sounds good.

Re: Biological War. Very interesting, especially liked your view on the political viewpoint in the writing. With Crispr gene editing the possibilities of biowar may be an increasing concern because it can be made selective.

Re: Plan A. That sounds like a great idea! Agree on the code of conduct, the dice licker had transgressed in so *many* ways. I don't think it is Machiavellian to have reasons to do something. You have legitimate objectives and they are pro-social enough. As far as I can see, everyone benefits from this.

RYCTM. Re: Bugtown. It was a good game and interesting to referee because of the sheer range of what people could do. The first version of the rules had effectively infinite teleport for most player characters etc.



Joshua Kronengold.

My congratulations on the new job! I hope all goes well.

Re: Formatting. Thank you, that's helpful. I never got the hang of LaTeX.

Re: Daywatch. There is a lot of urban fantasy around and I like how different this is from the mainstream. Fortunately now, good English language versions are available. The movies are more "gonzo" than the novels and how I run the campaign, but I explain that as the difference between how they run things in Moscow compared to how we do it in London. So, Moscow is a bit of a zoo but London keeps the lid on things better.

Re: Gestetner stencils. I stayed posting those things for my run in A&E and had to go to a specialist supplier to buy them. I still have some printed A&E copies in a box in the garage.

Re: Gambling. I was raised in a seaside town that had a permanent fair by the beach. Alongside the big wheel and the various rides, there were slot machine arcades. As a kid I was mainly puzzled by those. I like your

concept of “parasitic games” and think it is more broadly useful. Thank you for it.

Re: AI. What makes AI useful is that they are not like human minds. They do things well that we do badly. But they do badly, things that we do well. One way of modelling them is that they are slave minds. They don’t argue, they don’t push back. They have neither ego nor common sense. That makes them dangerous advisors to trust. So in the Vitamin Z answers, the project proposals themselves weren’t bad plans, had the problem actually existed.

Brian Rogers

Re: The Puppeteer and Kangaroo Man. I am enjoying your superhero stuff, thank you for it. Found the obscure heroes element inspiring.

Re: Historical games. I give the “what happened after the war” for all of the real characters where I can in these “hard historical” games. In a sense the games are a celebration of real people and their hopes and dreams.

Table Culture. Thank you for this.

RYCTM. Secondments. Thank you. By using a performance review I am also admitting that traditional experience allocation is not a neutral process, by giving the players “company policy” it gives another dimension to their game play and puts it in game. But the player who ate the manual and ran their character to maximise department policy compliance was a beautiful thing to see played. Another player was confused by the choices they were making, they hadn’t yet twigged what the policy-aware character was doing. The dawning awareness that not minimaxing their tactics would get them more “experience” was also fun to see.

Of course it may be people working out their performance-review related trauma 😊.

Daywatch also has an HR professional (an NPC) helping the characters. I sometimes think that players are more frightened of SMART goals than they are of vampires 😊.

In terms of it being like the WFRP careers, well back in the day, most of my gaming group seemed to working for Games Workshop on various Warhammer related projects (a couple of the players were previous White Dwarf editors etc.). So, I guess influences flow and some more than others. I prefer to see it as freeing myself from an old paradigm when I think there are more interesting ways to play.

RYCT Patrick Riley. I always liked the magic sword thing. It made fighters more like those in the stories that inspired me.

RYCT. ELF. “*the future is here, it’s just not what we expected*”. Yup. Thirty years ago if somebody told me that we could stop some cancers with a vaccination I’d have been surprised. This is a cyberpunk future just with less chrome.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek.

Impressive. I really respect the effort and detail you put into Mazorra. I’ll say it again, I’ve seen stuff I had to pay for that wasn’t half as good.

RYCTM on AI. Thank you. I sometimes find that I don’t know what I think until I write it down. Apparently I needed to say that stuff! I’d like to emphasise that the Vitamin Z example is real, is used with permission and did not include any nursing or medical students. But when my colleague told me about it, it is an example that needed sharing. For Achilles wore a Red Maple Leaf, I should also have referenced **Holding Juno** by Mark Zuehlke (2006). It makes some interesting points about Canadian operations in World

War Two, basically that they were far more successful than post-war narratives and traditional Canadian modesty might suggest.

Mark Wilson.

Thank you. I agree. AI is useful, obviously my concern is that the disadvantages not be ignored. What I see is a lot of people who are unaware of the risks of AI use. Let's hope we are wrong.

Roger Bell-West

There is a ukulele festival in Shrewsbury? That is fabulous! I hope you had a good time.

Re: Bugtown. I think we may have met at **James Wallis's** flat in Abbeville Rd? That would be *thirty* something years ago? I think I

Mike Cule.

The GOO EPT. It doesn't surprise me that you found the rule set opaque. That was a first draft of the text which was as far as I knew, being shared for comment and feedback from contributors, not for publication. There is a corrections file (which would have produced the second draft) and I later fixed the magic system (creating "The Leutheuser Variant") which drops the complexity of the published version and works. The artwork in EPT was excellent, however the artists did not have a good time of it, which remains a concern for the writers and is one of the reasons I have been wary of commercial RPG publication since.

I have run EPT using GURPS, it was one of the options when I did The Hall of Stone as a multi-system campaign (so you could choose your preferred mechanics from a limited set). It works but I find GURPS a little crunchy for

was refereeing Bugtown at the time? That would have been with **Simone Cooper** and **Lee Brimmicombe-Wood**?

refereeing Bugtown at the time? That would have been with **Simone Cooper** and **Lee Brimmicombe-Wood**?

Re: CNC. I am also more than happy with investigation. The AWE:TSG was just one I had prepared earlier.

Re: AI. I broadly agree with you. Please see my further comments later in this zine

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my current taste. No disrespect intended to those who like it more.

I think the distinction between Ritual and Psychic magic can be made. One of my favourite ways of doing that follows. Ritual Magic requires gestures and incantations, plus spell specific components. None of them are optional. So you can't do Ritual Magic while walking backwards or while doing much of anything else (such as talking) etc. The component requirement increases with the level of spell. It also means that characters can lose/run out of components for Ritual Magic and if some of those components are consumed by the casting then there is an associated cost. As a house rule I also have Ritual Magic taking a penalty to initiative (they finish casting at the end of the round).



Conversely, Psychic Magic may sometimes need line of sight for targeting but what you can do is otherwise more skill based. So a Psychic Magician of sufficient skill can cast without giving away the fact that they are doing so. A skilled Psychic Magician can cast while swinging from a rope over a dungeon room etc. which is not something a Ritual Magician can ever do (because they need both hands free). A very skilled Psychic Magician can cast while defending themselves in combat, while walking etc.

I have found that sufficient to distinguish them.

Jim Eckman. Re: "I've lost interest" Does that mean you'd prefer to see less EPT in my zine?

Lisa Padol

Re: Format. I shall take your advice. Two columns it is!

Re: Nightwatch/Daywatch in Russian. Yes, I've read/listened to the novels in various forms and the translation into English does change some things.

Re: no dice games. Thank you for the recommendations. I will check them out.

Re: Historical games. Agreed. Some of the people I have researched had lives, experiences and abilities that would not be entirely in line with a conventional narrative. I did a historical game set after the Japanese invasion of Burma in which Ursula Bower (an extraordinary woman) lead V-Force (predominantly Naga tribespeople) with a scattering of units left behind during the Japanese advance. That include a Gurkha enlisted who was widely believed to be a were-tiger. I will not mention his name for various reasons and I will emphasise that the Gurkha had been out-manoeuvred but not

defeated. The cultural construction of were-tiger in a hard realism setting was interesting, I took it as a way for that culture to explain some of his behaviours and capacity for violence. But neither are characters it would be easy to invent. If I came up with "Combat Anthropologist" and "Were-Tiger Gurkha" most people would think it was a fantasy game rather than a hard historical game.

Re: The eternal now of the Runesingers. I think that Glorantha was well informed about a variety of these beliefs and did a good job of trying to represent them. But in the Finland it brought home to just how dangerous they felt the songs and the singers to be. They could literally change your history under you.

Re: Daywatch "eating the HR manual". I was impressed by the player's roleplaying. It's interesting to see what a good player can do with the environment you give her. As always, it is the players who make the game.

Jim Vassilakos

Re: My Idiot meanderings. Then my wandering will continue. None of this would not be happening if you hadn't taken the time and effort to contact me, so thank you again. I am very glad to be here (again).



Myles Corcoran.

Thank you. We had a weekly gaming session at James's. Back when a weekly gaming session was something I could casually timetable into my life ! It is a shame that it never made it to print. I still have my play tester t-shirt after these many years.

For everyone else, RAEBNC!

On AI (the sequel)

This is the second part of an ongoing conversation about AI between **Jim Vassilakos** and myself (and anyone else who wants to join in!).

If you want to read the first part then :

- (a) seek therapy
- (b) it's in E&A No.14.

Thesis. The use of AI may be helpful in a range of tasks. But I propose that it also amplifies failures. Creating more and worse “Critical Fails” than would occur if AI were not used. As a sub-class of Critical Fail, I coined the term “Patroclus type error” in which a Critical Fail in a military context can lead to outcomes that are catastrophic for the user.

Re: Daniel Rocha’s comments. His words in the OSR gaming group were very kind. I barely resisted the urge to “Like” his comment. But even my ego (I’m a white guy of a certain age) has to know limits (or so my family keep telling me). It was nice of him. I hadn’t really thought about non-contributors reading E&A. Any idea how many non-contributors read E&A?

Re “Have you considered the possibility that your students might be idiots?”

The whole point is that they are not.

They are just ahead of the curve.

We need to understand those nineteen year olds as early adopters.

What 19-21 year olds are doing in college today will be common across society in five years.

If you dismiss them as “idiots” you also dismiss their decision making process. That would be a mistake. This is a group of people deciding, more or less well, their best course of action based on the resources they have. Some do it better than others, but this isn’t idiocy, it’s foreshadowing.

To paraphrase William Gibson: *The street finds its own uses for things.*

We can argue that this isn’t what the technology was intended to do, but that implies that technologies carry intention. The makers of barbed wire intended to help farmers manage their herds, but it enabled the slaughter of millions of men in the First World War.

Intent is irrelevant. Or at least, technology is intent agnostic.

Most of the students using it don’t understand that AI amplifies their failures and most of their failures don’t look like failures to them (a version of the Dunning Kruger effect). If they understood what they had produced was rubbish, they wouldn’t submit it for assessment. Given the purpose of education and modern pedagogic theory, students seldom fail, so the problem of amplified failure is not an issue. We are teaching students in an environment that is perfect for AI use.

The problem is that the real world is not perfect.

If we assume that as tasks become more difficult, that the chance of failure increases, the risk of amplified failure makes AI reliance an increasingly dangerous strategy.

Modern education is an easy win for the AI reliant student. But it may not give the training effect for harder tasks outside of that controlled environment.

“Men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them.”

Frank Herbert, *Dune*, 1965

“We are now dangerously close to crossing a moral red line: The autonomous targeting of humans by machines,” said U.N. Geneva spokesperson Alessandra Vellucci, reading a joint statement by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres and ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric. **Source:**

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/>. Accessed 26/08/2026

I agree with you on most of the points you make. I come at this from a slightly different angle because I regularly work with 19 year olds who are accustomed to having casual access to a level of computing power which was science fiction when I was their age.

The one technology they do not have, is the understanding of risk.

What I mean by that is that risk is a branch of probability and humans are generally bad at judging it.

This was first brought home to me when I started teaching statistics as a grad student. The requirement was that the undergrad students had to go through the calculations on paper (they were allowed a calculator). This was old-fashioned even at the time, but the Dean was old-school and held that statistics was still a paper and pencil exercise. That was tough on the students but they got a strong foundation in the maths. Teaching it improved mine considerably. But working up from the fundamentals like that brought home to me that most people have no meaningful intuitive grasp of probability even when they think they do. It also helped me understand why gambling is such a profitable industry. The only student I ever had who “got it” immediately was a professional croupier in a London casino (it’s how she paid for her education), she absolutely understood probability and how to use it. She also never gambled with her own money.

But I digress, the point is that they aren’t encouraged to understand that AI carries a risk.

Re: AI makes us lazy.

What I am **not** saying is that “AI makes us lazy”, it may or may not. But it makes some kinds of mistake more likely. I’ll give some examples to clarify:

Example #1. The third furthest pharmacy

The following is an actual example from something I did last Saturday.

I was trying to find the opening hours of a pharmacy next to my doctor’s office (they are a small neighbourhood pharmacy and have odd hours on Saturdays). I decided to try out using two different AI (one paid, one free) and gave them the location of the Doctors (street name and post code) rather than the name of the pharmacy. The both suggested a large chain pharmacy in a local shopping mall and explained plausibly that this was the nearest pharmacy to my Doctor’s location.

Both AI were wrong.

The large chain pharmacy would be 25-30 mins from my Doctor’s office, the nearest pharmacy is just a 2 minute walk and there is another one which is 10-15 minutes away. So both AI were giving the third best answer and confidently asserting it as the best fit to my question.

As I have lived in the area for years, I knew these answers are incorrect. But, had I just moved into the neighbourhood, been a stranger new in town, and was relying on AI, I could have driven to the big chain pharmacy and never realised there were two other pharmacies which were significantly closer, but in the other direction.

The LLM are not intelligent, they are using internet profiles which may not relate to physical reality. Small businesses which do not have strong presence on the internet will tend to be relegated in the “thinking” of the LLM because they are not items in its processing. The AI can only work on the information it has, and that is online.

I assert that, pre-AI, it was less likely that a person would go to the third furthest pharmacy.

This example shows that :

- (a) the AI will confidently assert incorrect answers
- (b) this type of mistake is structural, it’s inherent in how they work.

The corollary is disastrous for local businesses because they will never be as significant as an item for the LLM as a large chain store. Essentially AI will inherently shill for big business.

Example #2. Amplified difficulty of correcting an error

Ten years ago if a student submitted an essay to me with too few references, I would have explained that they needed to reference more, that they should “do more” of what they already did. With an AI generated error, such as fake reference list they have a problem which is harder to fix. This is because the student has to overturn a strategy they have become reliant on. It’s not a question of them doing more of what they do or do it better, it is a matter of them throwing it away and trying a completely different approach. So the pedagogic feedback loop for AI generated error can be much, much tougher on the student than it was pre-AI. Once the student has made this mistake with the help of AI it is much more costly for them (in terms of effort, time etc.) to fix it than it used to be. They have to go from “more” to “different”. That is distinctive of this class of error.

Example #3. AI dependency

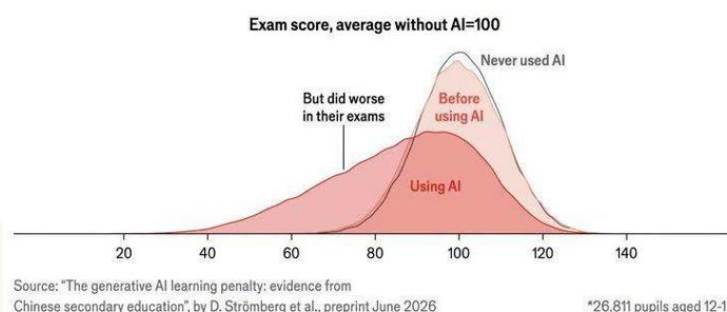
The effects of AI dependence are distinctive.

In life you don’t get to know all the problems you will face in advance and sometimes you have to solve them under time pressure!

That’s as true for a plumber as it is for a scientist. The closed book exam assesses the ability to deal with previously unseen problems quickly. Most students hate them. But AI dependence is changing student competence in this task.

The evidence, from various studies including a recent large scale study on a large sample of school children (see graphic) shows that if students who are used to using AI are required to solve problems without AI support, they do significantly less well than students did before AI use was common. This example shows that :

- (a) Many more fail catastrophically. The lower performing students are much worse than they used to be. Before AI the bottom end of the grades was $\leq 65\%$ but in the AI dependent cohort the bottom end will go down to $\leq 25\%$.
- (b) Whether they *want* to use AI or not, once they have become dependent, they absolutely *need to* use AI to solve problems that were designed to be solved without its use.



The “self-licking ice-cream” cone and investor deception

But it goes further than simple dependency. When enough people in power are persuaded that their AI generated solution to solving the Vitamin Z crisis will work as a 12 second sound-bite spoken by an AI voice and pushed by an algorithm you have no control over, we may see real world projects run to solve non-existent problems. That will be the benign form. What Norman Friedman and Peter Worden described as “*the self-licking ice-cream cone*”. Programmes that exist only to perpetuate themselves are much easier when you have AI to help, to provide fictional evidence of previous projects (like how China solved its Vitamin Z crisis) and deep fake video of outcomes. Check out the Propublica investigations into the proliferation of fictional company websites. Link in the references below. These could be used to deceive investors in a way we have not seen before. Like I say, evidence is in trouble.

Once we are fish swimming in the sea of AI, it will be hard to attribute the problems it causes to AI because we won’t be able to isolate AI as a factor. Fish don’t see the water.

In that sense, there is a similarity to climate change, it may not be clear that any single heatwave or wildfire is linked to it. People will see the immediate trigger (somebody dropped a match etc.) over the major contributing factors (heat and drought) that set the scene for that wildfire. Without safeguards, AI may create the environment for a wide range of problems which were rare before AI to become more common and for Critical Failures to become much more common. Whether than failure is sending you to a Pharmacy or delivering a Tomahawk missile to explode your house, are just different expressions of the same problem.

Re: AI and the Trojan War.

It is likely that your knowledge of the Trojan war is better than mine. I am no classicist. I was using the death of Patroclus as an analogy for an error in targeting (by the Trojans). That error, because it brought Achilles into the fight was a disaster for the Trojans and got Hector killed. To deconstruct my analogy:

Patroclus intentionally dressed himself in the armour of Achilles to rouse the Greeks to attack. So yes, as you say, he went beyond his orders. He had to pretend to be Achilles because the real Achilles did not wish to continue the war. The presence of Achilles would be a major morale boost for the Greeks. They needed Achilles, so Patroclus gave them one. Him. It sort of worked, but not in the way he intended.



Achilles Displaying the Body of Hector at the Feet of Patroclus by Joseph-Barthélemy Leboutoux (1769). [Beaux-Arts de Paris](#). Public Domain

But my analogy is not about the Greeks.
It was intended to be a way of understanding the Trojans.
This has *all* been about the Trojans.
The Trojans represent modern western aligned nations in this analogy.
That is one reason I emphasise that the Trojans are acting in legitimate self-defence.

The Trojans made two reasonable, rational decisions in their own defence, killing Patroclus (who they mistakenly thought was Achilles) and accepting a gift from the Greeks. Those two justifiable decisions had catastrophic consequences. Leading to the destruction of their civilisation to the point where some early modern thinkers did not believe Troy had even been a real place. Hence the concept of a Patroclus type error. Completely justifiable in retrospect yet leading to catastrophic outcome.

It is the kill chain compression, the speed and density of targeting decisions made by AI systems which make having humans in the loop increasingly impractical. In war, what makes AI useful is that it operates so quickly, but that means humans cannot meaningfully intervene to forestall inevitable errors. Having humans check the AI decision would be like the days when UK law required a man holding a red flag to walk in front of each steam train to ensure safety. Humans just aren't fast enough. If AI is useful and fast, but it is not reliable, we have a problem.

Re: Stacking AI

So would your idea of having AI check other AI fix the issue? I do not know. You may be right about having AI checking other AI. This is an empirical question so I guess someone should try it? My concern would be that the effect could be more that multiplicative and would become complex. So that the decision surface would become unpredictable. I don't know that it wouldn't work, but I can imagine various alternatives other than it working. For example, it might make it even harder for humans to understand why decisions were made etc.

In terms of sentience, that may be outside my competence. My view is that we have one example of a system that is sentient and it resides in a very specialised structure. I used to teach on the neuroscience programme and there is nothing general about intelligence. It takes highly specific wetware to produce what we think of as a sentient being. I am willing to believe there are other ways to produce it, in the sense that I do not know that the human brain is the only way to produce it. But I also don't have any evidence of sentience other than produced by that one highly specific architecture. It's not proven that alternate architectures can do it. What the LLM are doing is not similar in process to our known case of sentience, it was just designed to output in a compatible format. An emulator is by definition, not the thing it emulates.

Humans have evolved to anthropomorphise, to see faces in emojis. That doesn't mean an emoji has a rich internal emotional life.

However, if sentience can be constructed and copied then we have just created a new slave species. I oppose that on ethical grounds.

Re: AI generated News systems

Have you seen the Ground News app and website?

In terms of them being corrupted, I see it a bit differently. If I make an AI trained on a particular ideology it is not corrupt, it is doing what it was made to do. I can't see how you would produce a neutral AI ? Surely every one is going to be representing the data it was trained on and that will be chosen by people with their own biases. Those may be implicit and may be hard to spot. I get that already with simple software like the registration for conventions in the USA, they often require my ZIP code and State. As I have neither (like most of the people on this planet), I've had problems registering at US conventions before. That's a simple form of cultural bias, an AI could have much more complex biases which are hard to spot or unentangle.

I guess the real question is, who would own it? Who is setting up and running a system of balanced AI to provide unbiased news to the rest of us? Whether it is a good thing in the general or not, which corporate entity is making a profit from that? What's their motivation for doing it?

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Strongholds and Hideouts in Daywatch



Player-character homes are popular in my Daywatch campaign with some players putting a lot of thought into how and where their characters live (I blame their early exposure to games like The Sims 😊). I think it is important that a player can have this kind of immersion in the game world. I do not claim the system we use in Daywatch to be either original or particularly clever. However, I have found it effective in making some interesting locations.

As Special Operations 13 is a branch of the UK security establishment Daywatch provide subsidised housing for field team officers. So, they have as a default have a reasonable accommodation in the Greater London area. It won't be a fortress but it will have security better than average for a civilian, will be secured against access from the Gloom etc. If the character background supports it or they have abilities that imply it, they may have more. So if a character has a background like "Wealthy" that can involve addition property etc.

A player can get their character a truly extraordinary home, fortress of solitude, secret lair or ritual site by spending points on it. Each residence can be rated by Hideout and Stronghold scores.

Hideout (HID)

Sometimes the best defence is not being seen. A Hideout is a place that is concealed. There are a variety of mundane and magical ways to do this and the simplest supernatural method is to wipe the memories of the people who built it. This ability covers everything from secret rooms to underground complexes. Magic makes many things possible, but ingenuity is still the best defence. Work out details with the referee. Obviously, the more levels you put into it, the more hidden the site will be.

Advancement= 1 Points/level. There is no Maximum level.



Stronghold (STH)

A Stronghold is a secured site. The point is that it is unusually well defended. We assume that the personal home of a Field Officer is reasonably secure and Daywatch HQ is extremely well defended, but this ability means you have put significant resources beyond that into protecting a location. There are a range of ways to do this, there is mundane security but as a SO13 officer you can use things unavailable to most and as a Daywatch officer you also have access to supernatural defences which can be complex, subtle and powerful, that is why this is in this category. Work out details with the referee. Obviously, the more levels you put into it, the more secure the site will be.

Advancement= 1 Points/level. There is no Maximum level.

Overleaf are examples of unique Strongholds.



HMS Belfast



The Belfast is a WW2 era heavy cruiser moored on the River Thames in central London. It last fought in the Korean War. It is now a museum and tourists can take tours to see parts of the ship. Some of the ship is off limits to visitors (armoured doors shut off sections). The armament is functional although the firing group (the “trigger”) has been removed from her twelve 6” guns. These firing groups are stored separately onboard and can be reinstalled by a sufficiently competent technician. The forward turrets have their guns zeroed in on a motorway service station on the M1 motorway nearly 12 miles away. Exactly why this was chosen as the target of the Belfast’s guns is open to some humorous debate, perhaps someone was overcharged for a sandwich?

All of the above is true.

In Daywatch, the Watches keep a tiny apartment available for a suitable applicant. This used to be the captain’s cabin and it is fairly cramped by many standards. However, it is well designed and although compact, entirely sufficient. It’s great if you fancy living on the best armed houseboat in the world!

This peculiar arrangement happened because during the Unity War (think of this as Weird World War Two), the Belfast was equipped with some expensive enchantments that can’t practically be removed. These enchantments make the vessel magically tough, produce an anti-magic field and distort the internal volume in useful ways. That is why there is more living space inside her hull than the outside would suggest. It would be an incredible waste to lose these magics and so the ship was moored here to provide limited magical protection to central London.

In 1976 the Watches reached agreement on a post of “caretaker” for the installation, to keep an eye on it and to manage key systems in the event of an emergency. This apartment comes with a fake identity as “Lt. Sam Plimpton, Royal Navy (Ret)”, a full false background which would make you an official part of the housekeeping team on a museum ship. Plimpton is the residential caretaker on the Belfast and has security clearance, keys and the safe combination. The museum staff have their minds altered so that they accept you as Plimpton, they “remember” you positively and you have access to the visitor centre which does a decent lunch and snacks.

Inside the safe are the firing group control group (the “trigger”) for the main guns and a large, sealed manila envelope marked “Defence Plan K – Defence of London”. There are also the keys to No.3 ammunition store which contains live ammunition for the guns of the Belfast.

In game terms this is both a Stronghold and a Hideout. This ship can ignore anything short of heavy artillery or the high level magic. It is also a hideout because most people don’t even know there is an apartment here and if they did the “Lt. Sam Plimpton RN (Ret)” is a solid false identity.

Game mechanics. Stronghold 6, Hideout 4. Restricted quarters-2. Total cost = 8 Points.



The Tea Room at Baker Street



Baker Street Underground Station opened in 1861, it is one of the original stations of the Metropolitan Railway, the first underground railway in the world. Baker Street is still in heavy use. But originally it had its own restaurant *inside* the station. The “Luncheon and Tea Room” provided civilised underground dining back in the days when people still wore hats.

It is still there, although now the main entrance is blocked by ticket machines (see picture). The Tea Room behind these ticket machines is built on three floors, so it goes down from the ticket hall to the platforms. Since the start of the twentieth century it isn't used for anything other than maintenance access. But there *really is* an Edwardian tea-room with its entrance preserved behind the ticket machines at Baker Street Tube Station.

All of the above is true.

In the Daywatch campaign, SO13 acquired it in 1915 and was refitted as residence for senior Vampires during the Unity War as it gives a no-sunlight access to the Underground. Access to the hidden apartment is through those anonymous blank steel panels you see in London tube stations. These lead to a small security “airlock” before access to the Baker Street residence. The apartment itself has the original art nouveau decoration which includes a wall mosaic representing the Muses.

The last Field Officer to significantly redecorate this apartment was Modesty Black who used this apartment as her London residence 1968-74. Most of her feather boas have since been hunted down and killed.

The third floor “garage and workshop” has a hidden door leading to a ramp that opens onto the tube tunnels. Modesty used to ride her motorcycle through the Underground tunnels to avoid London traffic.

There are some downsides to living here, the lack of natural light can be an issue and you can hear the tube trains especially when you are down on the third level. You have access either via Baker Street station (you get a key) or through the tube tunnels (so if you are willing to walk the tunnels). There is also the responsibility to keep “the spare bedroom” available for guests who need a secure place for the night. The physical security is impressive, this apartment would survive anything short of a nuclear attack.



Game mechanics. Stronghold 8, Hideout 8. Restricted facilities -4. Total cost = 12 Points.

IGNORABLE THEME: GM Dickery

I normally referee, so there is a “*mote in your own eye*” about themes like this. It is not for me to say that I have never behaved badly, I can claim that I *try* not to be a dick. I have run games when I am not been at my best, a tough day at work, family illness, all of that can affect me as a person. But I try not to bring my problems to the table. I can’t guarantee that real life has never affected my refereeing and I know that sometimes it did impact my preparation for a game. There are only so many hours in a day. That wasn’t me being a dick, that was life impacting game.

More generally, as a player I would like to make a case that we do not mix up “being a dick” with skill issues, anxiety or other problems. So I appreciate anyone trying to referee a TTRPG in which I get to play. It can be a difficult and thankless task. Not every game works out as intended and that is ok. I’ve known people trying to referee after they’ve done a double shift at work, who had chronic illnesses, others who I know had serious troubles at the time etc.

I have also been refereed by people who lack the skills required to run a game consistently, for whatever reason. For example, I know a nice person who lives their life in a flurry of chaos and is always unprepared at game time. They are a good player but refereeing is not their thing.

I see that as an aptitude issue rather than any fault of theirs.

So I have a “not their fault” category for games that were not good. I don’t see this as “GM Dickery”, intent matters here. If someone tries and fails to run a good game, we should respect their effort. But I’ve seen GMs who seem to think the game is a way for them to take out their frustrations and issues on others.

So I when I talk about “GM Dickery” don’t mean they were inexperienced, under prepared or were tired after a long day at work. I mean these were people who used their position as a referee to behave badly. For example:

Example 1. The Bully

This was a convention game in the USA. The GM didn’t want to do this. They started by explaining that they’d been nagged into running this game by their friend who was one of the con organisers and that they didn’t want to GM us. A great start! When the last player, who had come in on an overnight flight and needed to check in before making it through con registration was 10 minutes late to the game, the GM started bullying them. First of all they, on the fly, modified the character generation rules (changing what we had been told minutes earlier) to disadvantage just this one player. They then systematically attempted to victimise that player. Every enemy targeted their character etc.

Example 2. The Clique.

Another convention game in the US. I walked into a group that, I later found out, were a gaming group from a particular city and gamed exclusively within each other all the way through the convention. I had “accidentally” picked up a ticket only because the GM had not realised the Convention’s online booking platform had an automatic default of 6 players and there were only five people in their clique. I “mistakenly” bought the “extra” ticket. The group was less than welcoming and the GM leant on previous knowledge to communicate (full of home campaign references “it is like that time when...”). The GM absolutely didn’t see it as their job to explain anything and mainly talked with their clique. This person shouldn’t have been running an open game. I’ve done “invitation only” games at conventions and IMHO this is what he should have done. Sloppy.

I hope you have a good month! END.



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ISSUE #13 (E&A #16)

Families and other close-knit groups have unspoken structures and invisible processes, even if they're unaware of them. There's a cadence to how decisions are made and action is initiated. Day-to-day life refines and reinforces this.

I became amusingly aware of this as I attended a large county fair on back-to-back days, the first with my family (it's close to tradition-status for us to attend together) and the next with four of my friends, one with her 9-year-old daughter in tow.

The latter group was chaos, the very definition of herding cats, except all but one of the cats were in their 40s.

In retrospect, this is obvious. Traveling with someone you've never traveled with before can end up working out fine, or it can spell disaster. My girlfriend's sister lost a friend over this recently, on a trip where their planning methods, goals, and means of communication were disparate enough to create tension, conflict, and separation, and she felt like all the responsibility for actually planning and executing the trip fell to her.

Even as a pre-teen, I'd have a map in hand and would be plotting out courses of action for my family to decide upon during events (like fairs), or at destinations like amusement parks or vacation travel. I suspect my parents appreciated the burden being lifted, while also having veto powers.

I've mellowed considerably as I age, happy for someone else to take the lead, and/or being more content to take things as they come without a definite plan. Perhaps this is a familiar pattern in life, or perhaps not. Perhaps the success (or lack thereof) of many RPG groups can be explained through such phenomena. Or perhaps not. Either way, it made for an amusing observation and rumination on how groups structure collective action.

IgTheme: GM Dickery

The Gygaxian model of play included touches of antagonism against the players, though this was of course part of the fun. Throwing PCs into the grinding wheel of

something like *Tomb of Horrors* was a fun challenge, even if it's an extreme example, and broadly matched the play style of many of that era.

To what extent I consider these sort of tricks and traps (intended to catch players who are unwary) "dickery" is an open question, though.

I am not an antagonistic GM. I am rooting for the players, even as I antagonize them in a technical sense with villains and challenges. But there's still naturally some tug of war elements that go on, where the players revel in the chance to thwart my encounter with some sneaky shenanigans. I don't actually mind this, though I have to pretend to be annoyed convincingly.

The drama of dire, potentially mortal, challenge is also a source of excitement for all, and so reaching this point does often require me to create challenges specifically designed to negate the players' typical advantages.

One can understand how the Rust Monster came to be, is my point. And how it could have come from a mind wanting to create fun instead of sapping it from the table.

Responses to E&A #15

Joshua Kronengold

I was looking into an obscure game on Board Game Geek called FNAP and discovered a forum post about it from you in 2024. A fun "wait, I know that name" moment.

The impetus for the search was that I'd just playtested one of my designs with Andy Juell, the designer of FNAP. Serendipitously, my design shares a fair number of similarities with FNAP, albeit not so many that there was any fears of onerous overlap. Indeed, he was excited to help me work through some design challenges, having experienced some of the same ones with his. He was even curious at how I manage mine at 3-4 players, since he tried but ultimately settled on keeping his at 2p only. A fun "jam session" so to speak, and he was of great assistance in helping me with a couple issues the design has.

In any case, I hope to try FNAP soon for a more direct comparison.

Re: rangers, I appreciate the clarification on your conception of how to incorporate “spells” into their core abilities, and I agree that it makes a lot more sense how you outline it as natural extensions of their existing fighting style. I think a lot of incongruencies would resolve themselves with more of this approach from Wizards.

I still hope to explore some of my own ideas for the class with homebrew sub-classes, one of which I’m had a draft of for some time. Though this is a desire that is several years old at this point, so we’ll see when (or if!) I actually experiment with it.

Jim Vassilakos

Thanks for linking the video on elves. I always enjoy a bit of extra Realms lore, though I knew of parts of it. I agree that the reverie you mention is likely ignored by most players; it can be difficult to incorporate

Brian Rogers

Terrible Gondian pun. I loved it.

Roger BW

Good point about the social embedding, as you put it, to the ranger as envisioned by Tolkien. Transcription to a general class loses a lot of that specificity, and becomes the realm of one’s background and/or race in most games, and it can be difficult in a lot of games to have a specific PC be some Chosen in the lineage of kings.

Lisa Padol

Re: Ben Franklin as a potentially resurrected NPC, I think it’s an exciting hook! Depending on how fleshed out the story elements are intended to be (i.e. a plot to discover or the players themselves help to build the plot), it may be worth establishing a reason the evil necromancers are interested in BF. Two possible candidates, plucked from historical elements, are information related to his harnessing of electrical energy...maybe he continued with his electricity experiments in secret and had another breakthrough after his infamous kite & key experiment.

The other possible hook my brain immediately went to involves his knowledge of foreign affairs, particularly among the French. Are they looking to foment unrest between nations, and need illicit information Franklin may have been privy to? This lends itself nicely to larger plotlines involving the major powers of the time.

Franklin was a vocal abolitionist in the latter part of his life as well. Are racist wizards looking for names of others in the movement to be able to target them? This would likely get a bit darker in subject matter, but would position the

players as combatants on the right side of history.

If you were interested in discussing other elements, though, I’d be happy to continue via email. My inbox is always open. mawilson4164@gmail.com

Re: LARP Drop/Con Drop, I’d never heard that term before, but it’s a good one to encapsulate the feeling. I’ve been there a handful of times to varying degrees after gaming experiences, but perhaps never so viscerally as with the mega-game I detailed.

RPG Gaming

A slow month in D&D, owing to an extended hospital stay for a member of our regular D&D crew. A scary bout, but he’s recovering well and has some genuinely optimistic prognoses from his doctors.

We should complete our skullduggery campaign in late October at this point.

“Cozy” RPG Mini-Reviews

The girlfriend and I played two RPGs this month, *The Quiet Year* and *Good Soup*. The former has some small notoriety, while the latter is quite obscure (from indie publisher Goosepoop Games). While there’s more to chew on with the former, the latter matched our tastes better for our 2p roleplaying.

What follows are some mini-reviews of our sessions and my thoughts on the games.

The Quiet Year

The Quiet Year is a “map-making” RPG where you tell the story of a community and draw a map that’s metaphoric of your year together. The exact setting, tone, etc. can be adjusted as needed.

Good stuff first: the map, a visualization of your shared story, is lovely. Creative, whimsical, and handy as a memory device, to allow for threads to continue or be brought back throughout the session. This is a form of note-taking, but becomes playful and exciting instead of rote. The overarching premise is also appropriately evocative for a storytelling game, all within a rules-lite, small package, which is great.

It feels a touch overlong for the story that wants to develop. I would always suggest removing 2-4 cards from each season to set the length appropriately (they suggest this for a “short” game). This isn’t a knock though, but rather a consideration. With higher counts, to give everyone more control over the narrative, I’d likely leave

everything in.

But our session was somewhat protracted, perhaps coming on three hours, and felt unwieldy by the end.

Now the mixed stuff. There's nothing bad here, but it's off the heights of my favorite storytelling RPG-style games. First, the roleplaying "lift" for players is pretty high, because there's a fear that everything becomes generic and trope-ish given the prompts it gives you. It also asks players to split their agency between community-level view and individual views, but the latter is difficult to bring to life in interesting ways since the game's framing is all community-level.

As a result, it loses a touch of feeling personal, as the best RPGs do, which is just inherently easier when you're inhabiting a singular person instead of a more nebulous community of people. It also begets issues with, say, the Contempt mechanic, which is meant to model conflicts within the community. It must be shoehorned in at times into what is ultimately a cooperative experience (cooperative in the storytelling sense) and often just sits there as a reminder of a disagreement instead of driving exciting action.

I could imagine a high-contempt session that creates knotty interpersonal considerations, but the game flow seems much more likely to support sessions where you oscillate between struggles and solutions but generally work toward the betterment of the community as a whole. This is also sorta-kinda marketed toward those who don't want to engage too much on the interpersonal side; indeed, the mechanics explicitly bar a lot of discussion that could lead to these sorts of lovely complications. You largely "converse" through actions. This is fine since there's an audience for that, but for me, as a result, I am less invested in wringing narrative juice out of a system where the restrictions aren't always where I'd prefer them to be.

Can any of this be overcome with enough creative effort? Yes, though this is true of any storytelling game. But the question isn't whether or not amazing stories can happen (they can, and will for many groups) but rather how intuitively and organically the game's prompts and mechanics guide this. My best answer is "good in some ways, awkwardly in others."

Good Soup

Good Soup could be naught but an extended creative prompt, by comparison. There are some random tables for generating characters, NPCs, the central problem (you're cooking soup to help a denizen of the realm), and so on. But otherwise it's an improvisational exercise with a few

broad guidelines, with d12 rolls determining success or failure.

It's all very playful, and over somewhat quickly. We could have spent another half hour on a more difficult quest, but our session took around an hour. This was a better fit for our appetite for these 2p sessions, and we also got to directly inhabit individuals, which was easier for my girlfriend and more fun for me.

There's also a playful soup-based alternative to its d12 system for randomization. We opted to use the dice, but did make an enormous pot of soup (bordering on stew) over the weekend to enjoy alongside the experience.

In the session, our lemur and snail characters gathered ingredients for an anti-confusion soup, to assist Hinkle Dinkle the Hot Goose. Encounters were setpieces to gather a particular ingredient, with one of us taking the primary action(s) and the other modeling the NPCs in the area and problems in need of solving.

Thanks to some poor dice rolling at the end on my part (I needed a 3+ on a d12 in our final soup roll to cure the confusion), we *just* failed. A satisfying session.

Board Gaming

Mostly a big month for playtesting. Perhaps most amusingly, I quickly developed a game involving bouncing dice off of miniature trampolines (which I sourced from a children's game I discovered). The trampolines themselves are quite cantankerous, sending dice in all sorts of directions despite one's intentions. I'm sort of unsure if the central idea will work as a result. Some misfires are funny, but too many become frustrating.

Others are more promising, and I am almost relieved when an idea doesn't pan out. I have enough others to work on.

Media Roundup

When the People Move the Music Moves Too, a 2017 album from an Ethiopian-American artist named Meklit, is stunning. Her music is a mix of soul, jazz, pop, and folk. The best few tracks from the album are as good as anything new I've heard this year.

The message of the title is also prescient, speaking to how cultures merge when people move, bringing their cultural traditions with them. I listened to an interview by her where she talked about migrations of immigrants as a result of climate change and war, and how this will presage new evolutions in music in the coming years that are to be embraced and celebrated.

The Dragon's Beard

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October 2026

#100

Centennial Retrospective

For my 100th issue, I have decided to do a retrospective of the designs my zine have gone through over the years. Each page will feature a new design change the zine underwent followed by a small explanation as to why the design changed.

I had subscribed to *Alarums & Excursions* for about a year (even made a purchase of about ten years worth of old A&E) before I reached out to Lee Gold and asked about contributing to the zine. I wasn't sure that I would really have anything of value to contribute to the zine other than my own experiences. Lee simply pointed to the zine standards, the ignorable theme, the fee, and the deadline, all on the webpage.

The DEADLINE was the big thing. It a way, it provides it own motivation. Without it, I might still be thinking about putting a zine together. My first issue was published in A&E 507, January 2018. I had to force myself to write something, and worry about zine design later. So I threw together a simple design in MS Publisher, just a title and lines: title font is Pterra and main text font is Calibri (because that was the default in MSPublisher). Nothing fancy, but I knocked the zine out just before Christmas for the January issue.

The first issue featured a single subject, Players playing NPCs. I did not even introduce myself or define any purpose for my zine or what its scope would be. I just jumped straight into it to get myself started.

Comments on E&A #12

My continuing saga of trying to catch up on the comments....

Matt Stevens – RYCTM Re: Interrogations. Agreed that interrogations are tense stuff, and I think that there would be a point in a session when it would cease being engaging and start to feel more exhausting. I like your suggestion to share the strategies with the players and let them choose, but it still may be overwhelming to them. I have a player in one of my games now who plays the rogue class but acts more like an investigator. I might share it with just a character so they can choose their technique since they already have leaned into the role. Part of the selection criteria has to consider the suspect characteristics, aspects the PCs might not know. For now, the 11 strategies are mostly a framework for behind the screen to help me manage the scene and reward the PCs when they attempt creative solutions to extract information.

Roger BW – RYCTM Re: Interrogations. I agree that persuasion and intimidation skills are the easiest way to handle interrogations. In a way, it is abstracted in the same way that combat is abstracted. Unfortunately, not all persuasions are intimidation are the same and games that overly simplify the scene, leaving only a single number to beat for a skill check may frustrate players. Too often I'll hear a player state plainly, "I will persuade him!" and I always respond, "How?" My players are often still meta players and few have learned to describe their actions first and allow the GM to say what roll, if any, is needed. But back to persuasions, people are motivated by



Centennial Retrospective Continued

The zine was updated on the very next issue. I wanted to add some graphic elements to add more pop to the page. I put my focus on designing topic icons to lead each subject area. The icons were in color, but only those were read the digital publication would see. *A&E* was printed in black ink on colored paper as a physical copy. Pointed diamond shape framed the icons, in sort of a wrought iron look. I wanted to add more graphic elements, but deadlines loomed. I added a stock graphic to flank the title so that it would not look so bare on the top of the page. And I created a graphic divider that looked like ones I have seen in old publications, just heavier black design, perhaps keeping with a wrought iron look.

I did correct my omission from the first issue and lead with a proper introduction for my second issue.



Comments continued

different things. One NPC may be cajoled by kind words, while another is impervious to flattery, but not chocolate or silk stockings. Each type of persuasion has a different difficulty value depending on the NPC. This, like interrogations, can start to feel like a puzzle or riddle to solve. However, I have to be careful about placing too much emphasis on nuance in some games. Most people do not Dungeons and Dragons for the crime solving scenes. My current campaign of *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* seems to have plenty of these scenes.

Myles Corcoran – RYCTM Re

interrogations and “I would like to play a tune for the prisoner”. *Cacophonix* was the first thing that popped in my mind too!

Brian Rogers – RYCTM Re: Saltmarsh

session reports. I agree that it was “jarringly meta” for the paladin to refer to his spell slots. I think the player, who graciously accepted the task to write the session reports, fell into the trap of shifting person in the writing. In the first few reports, he was writing in 3rd person narration, then shifted to 1st person perspective yet kept the meta knowledge in play. I know how hard it is to keep notes of the game as a player and then try to write about it afterwards, so I am exercising some generous tolerance in style for the relief of the burden to write it myself. D&D players do have a tendency to always keep killing something as an option, usually first. This campaign may correct some of those tendencies before it is over. I am doing my best to weave politics quietly and deftly into the scenarios in small ways. At some point, there will be a big discovery (and there will be more) when the players suddenly see that all the clues to the political machinations were there. Where the players fall in these plans is yet to be known, but I look forward to seeing their faces when they see what they has contributed too and who they discover is on opposing sides. The two groups I am running through *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* are taking different tactics to address the challenges that are putting them on different political alignments in the game. I did not expect that. But there play styles are so different, so I should not have been surprised.

Patrick Riley – RYCTM Re: Networking in *Savage Worlds*. I like the simplicity of *The Nice Way* or *The Not-So-Nice Way*. I think the

◆ Centennial Retrospective Continued

Four issues in, I made a large change to the title. I wanted a tavern-esque feel to the zine, as if *The Dragon's Beard* was a name of a tavern. I added a wooden tavern sign behind the title and flanked it with a couple of bearded dragons. The dragons were from an uncredited coloring page for a school unit on heraldry. I digitized it, colorized it, and added dragon breath and beard. The beard was colored in three layers. As an added touch, I added the same dragon supporter to the page counter below. The first page dragon was beardless, then the second page dragon had the first layer of a beard, and so on until the 4th or last page where the dragon was fully bearded. The idea was a dragon wisdom growing over the pages. I had one other feature for the zine: each month, I changed the type of dragon, or rather the color of the dragon. The page counter dragon remained the same, though. Below are a sample of the other dragons in the rotation: black, blue, gold and silver.



I noticed that the other zines were using a smaller font, so I switched to font size 10 from font 12 to pack more content in per page. Additionally, I reduced my drop cap size from three lines, which was rather excessive, to two lines, which probably isn't needed either, but I like it.

It wasn't until this design that I even remembered to include email addresses and usernames for social platforms I frequent. They were included in my closing of each zine.

◆ 12 Comments continued

real simplicity is whether it is a social encounter (convince, cajole, or somehow extract information verbally or through reading physical cues) or a combat encounter (beat it out of the suspect, or extract information in physical or threatening ways). Unless you are playing with former detectives, mob interrogators, federal agents or military personnel experienced in interrogations, the gap between player

skill and character skill will be large.

Interrogations are such unpleasant scenes that I doubt anyone with real experience really wants to role play it. I doubt anyone really wants to role play a full interrogations. Quick resolutions are probably best. My beef with the binary choice of The Nice Way or The Not-So-Nice Way, or persuasion or intimidation, is that the decision is made based on the applicable skill level of a character and not the repercussions of the technique. What is the fallout from the event in terms of reputation, associations, guilt, etc? But I also do not want the players to agonize over the choice either, delaying a decision and stalling the game while they ponder their actions. Interrogations are not normally one of those scenes a GM can prompt an immediate decision with "roll initiative" like in combat.

Michael Cule – I'm glad the Interrogations notes will be helpful in your LICTORS game. I need to go back and read more of you session reports to see Lester and Honorius in action.

Lisa Padol – RYCTM Re interrogations. I try to let the players think things through and make their own decisions. I am not above giving hints during the game, especially if it is something that their character would most likely think of. When players rush to a decision, I usually pause the action to double check their intent and give both them and I an chance to review other options they might have wanted to consider. I appreciated your insights and thoughts on the topic. Especially the concern about stress on a player. The game is supposed to be fun. Drama and dramatic action can be fun and rewarding too. But the intensity of emotions involved in interrogations are not something that lends itself to fun. I'm not interested in playing scene that might cause someone to want to pull out an X card.





CENTENNIAL RETROSPECTIVE CONTINUED

While I was pleased with my old design, I wanted to personalize the artwork, declutter the zine while still making it visually appealing both in color and black and white. Issue 48 saw the last redesign of my zine in *A&E*. I redrew the dragon as full color cut iron tavern sign, using only the upper portions of the dragon, just enough to show the beard. I leaned further into the wrought iron motif and redesigned the icon frames, section dividers, and title accents in an ornate scroll-work iron design. I changed the title fonts from *Pterra* to something unique, *Valeria*, a font I felt was worth the purchase. I like that the font fit the scrollwork accent. I removed the center divider graphic and relied on the gutter white space to form the visual division between the columns. Doing so allowed me more freedom to add photos and other graphics across the page width without have to adjust dividers.

When my zine moved to *Ever and Anon*, this was the format my zine retained, at least for a handful of issues.

12 COMMENTS CONTINUED

Joshua Kronengold – RYCTM Re interrogations. I would be interested to see what your trained interrogator friend thinks of the rough thoughts I had on interrogation options. It is something that needs some more polish and simplification for game mechanics. As you noted, some techniques seem to be variations on each other and sound repetitious. For a skill interrogator, there are nuances to the different techniques that are not always easy to explain in short order or can be mechanically differentiated enough to warrant being a separate option. This reminds me of the great monster purge of D&D 5e where every monster in the D&D universe was reviewed and any monster that was not sufficiently different mechanically from another was subject to being dropped from the rules. Flavor was not sufficient to save a monster. Back to

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interrogations, an published article on the subject is worthy. My challenge is that the mechanics that would replicate each technique would be different depending on the RPG rule set. I would imagine systems like GUMSHOE might already accommodate some of these techniques or have more tools to allow for nuance differences. While RPGs where interrogations are not common, the nuances could not be reflected with the available skillsets in the game and fewer technique could be adequately differentiated. An extensive explanation of each technique, applicability, resource and time requirements, rewards and repercussions would be a suitable subject for a GM to have as a tool for ruling on interrogations. Meanwhile, a simplified option list for players is more appropriate, more so for games where interrogations are commonplace. Looks like I got a project.

Timothy Collinson – RYCTM Re interrogations. Thank you for your kind words. I learned a lot doing the research on the topic.

13 COMMENTS

Roger BW – MICE. Golden information to file away for the interrogations primer. Simple and easy to remember and use.

Comments on Ignorable theme: Interesting fantasy race/science fiction species. I applaud those who took the delve into the topic, some of you boldly and unafraid. I considered the topic long and hard, drafted numerous versions of a response, liked none of them and decided to abort any attempt at an answer. I struggled with commenting on many of your responses, going through the same process of thinking long and hard, drafting numerous versions of a response, liking none of them and abandoning those efforts. Race and species terms are lightning rods in the lexicon. Rarely can



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I can be found as pdzoch at
boardgamegeek.com,
rpggeek.com, enworld.org,
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and boardgamearena.com.



CENTENNIAL RETROSPECTIVE CONTINUED

A couple of things happened in the preceding issues of my latest zine change. First was the establishment of E&A with a different set of requirements and capabilities. Unlike A&E, it would not be a print product. As a digital only medium, I actually have full control over the margins of my zine. I still wanted to enable my zine to be printed, so I could not completely abandon reasonable margins. Besides, I had other plans for that. As a digital only production, I could make full use of color and create a full bleed spread. A&E carried the traditional APA production, centered on the distribution of assembled zines produced at the local copy center. Lee did a lot of work putting A&E together. It must have taken hours at the copy center to put it together (not to mention the time it took to mail all the physical copies to subscribers). E&A's digital only format eliminated the restrictions of the traditional APA production. I wanted something that could create some pop on the screen for the readers. Also, because the reader was most likely using a screen, they now had the ability to zoom in on the material to read or appreciate the finer details in the zine. I want to maximize on that new capability.

Second, MS Publisher was heading towards discontinuation. In fact, this month is the last month it will be operational and I will no longer be able to open my older zine in their original format. I had to find another program, learn it and master it, to make my zine. I eventually settled on Affinity suite with the Publisher, Designer, and Photo. This was before Canva purchased it and provided it as a freemium application. I haven't tried it yet, but I think my publisher files can be read in the Canva suite for Affinity, even though my standalone app is no longer available or supported.

I wanted to do something special with the new format. I decided to create a comic story of adventurers in the margins. My ambition was large, and probably outsized my capabilities and time. Within the margins, I added graphic elements of an adventure scene, starting from a tavern where all adventurers meet. The tavern

is called the Dragon's Beard and you can see the tavern placard hanging outside the tavern corner. My adventurers, a halfling rogue, wizard, cleric, and dwarf fighter, move about the margins from issue to issue. The base of the zine for all this adventuring would be a parchment of grid lines, where I spend many hours drawing up dungeon adventure as a kid. A pale parchment background devoid of grid lines served as the backdrop for the text.

Because the margins would become so busy, I simplified the accents in the zine, removing the scroll lines and borders around the icons. A simple line serves as dividers. My zine logo, title and fonts all carried forward. The space next to my zine logo remained a conspicuous blank space in the previous issues, and that bothered me but I did not know what to do about it. For this design, I moved my social media locations from the end of the zine to the space next to the logo.

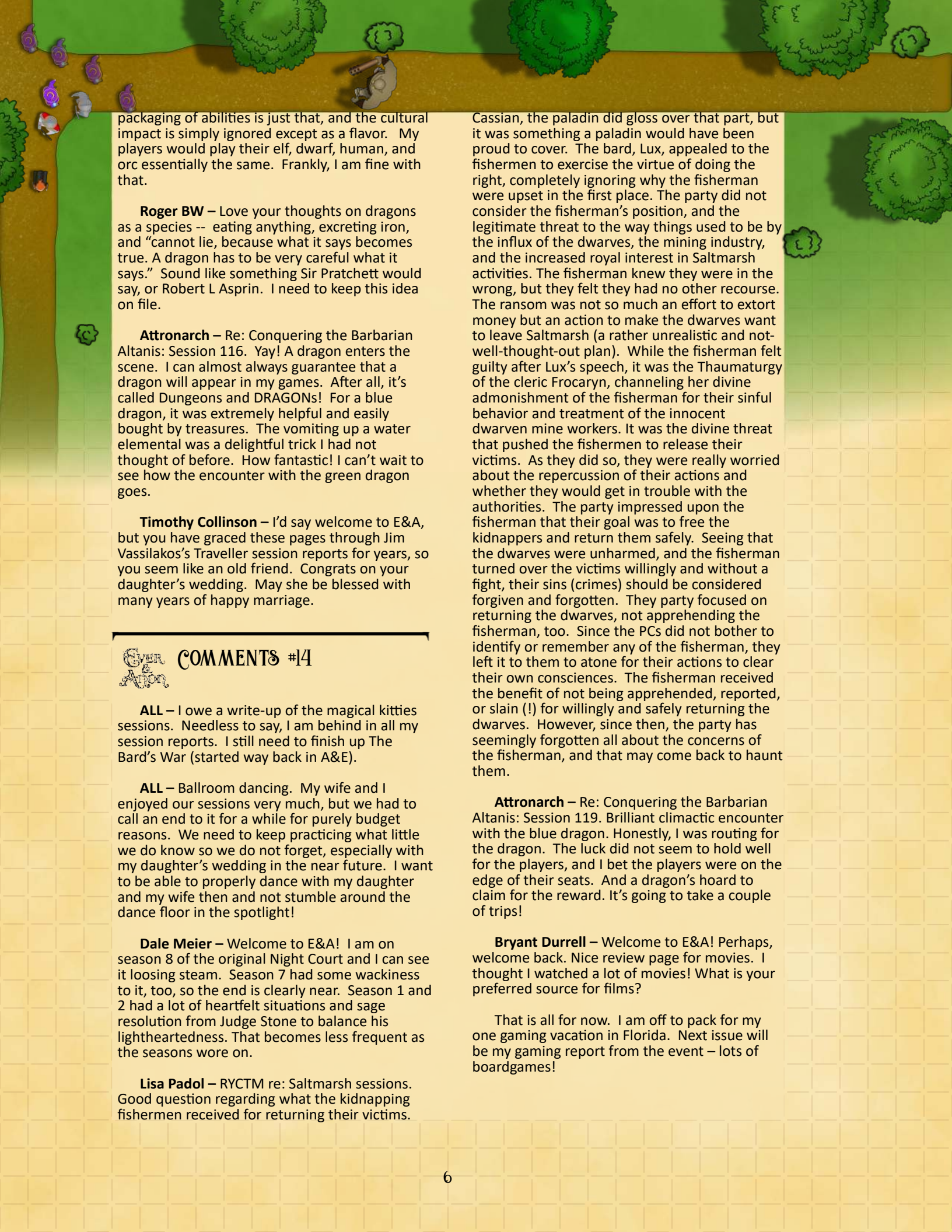
Overall, I am pleased with the format, but I am finding it harder to keep up with graphic work that required additional new content each issue. I haven't heard that has anyone notice the characters in the margins yet, so it may be more effort than it is worth. Improving workflow is something I am exploring for the zine. Hopefully, I will find a good and speedy solution to continue the concept.

Thus concludes the Centennial Retrospective of my zine designs. Hopefully it provided some insights for your designs and maybe inspire new zine creators.



COMMENTS ON #13 CONT

anyone broach and discuss the topic, no matter how innocent, well-meaning, or thoughtful without someone assuming the worst behind the meaning, becoming vilified, or worse, attacked. In role playing games, I generally play a human, mostly for simplicity. But I do not mind playing non-humans, just to play something different. No different than when I play different classes or roles. I've noticed that when many of my players choose to play a non-human character, it is never as affinity to the being. Instead, they choose the non-human for purely utilitarian purpose – to gain a specific benefit unavailable to the human. It did not matter which non-human beings had the benefit; it was the benefit they were after. Most games provide these benefits with trade-offs, either with penalties or as a different package of benefits from other non-humans. That mechanical



packaging of abilities is just that, and the cultural impact is simply ignored except as a flavor. My players would play their elf, dwarf, human, and orc essentially the same. Frankly, I am fine with that.

Roger BW – Love your thoughts on dragons as a species -- eating anything, excreting iron, and “cannot lie, because what it says becomes true. A dragon has to be very careful what it says.” Sound like something Sir Pratchett would say, or Robert L Asprin. I need to keep this idea on file.

Attronarch – Re: Conquering the Barbarian Altanis: Session 116. Yay! A dragon enters the scene. I can almost always guarantee that a dragon will appear in my games. After all, it's called Dungeons and DRAGONS! For a blue dragon, it was extremely helpful and easily bought by treasures. The vomiting up a water elemental was a delightful trick I had not thought of before. How fantastic! I can't wait to see how the encounter with the green dragon goes.

Timothy Collinson – I'd say welcome to E&A, but you have graced these pages through Jim Vassilakos's Traveller session reports for years, so you seem like an old friend. Congrats on your daughter's wedding. May she be blessed with many years of happy marriage.



COMMENTS #14

ALL – I owe a write-up of the magical kitties sessions. Needless to say, I am behind in all my session reports. I still need to finish up The Bard's War (started way back in A&E).

ALL – Ballroom dancing. My wife and I enjoyed our sessions very much, but we had to call an end to it for a while for purely budget reasons. We need to keep practicing what little we do know so we do not forget, especially with my daughter's wedding in the near future. I want to be able to properly dance with my daughter and my wife then and not stumble around the dance floor in the spotlight!

Dale Meier – Welcome to E&A! I am on season 8 of the original Night Court and I can see it loosing steam. Season 7 had some wackiness to it, too, so the end is clearly near. Season 1 and 2 had a lot of heartfelt situations and sage resolution from Judge Stone to balance his lightheartedness. That becomes less frequent as the seasons wore on.

Lisa Padol – RYCTM re: Saltmarsh sessions. Good question regarding what the kidnapping fishermen received for returning their victims.

Cassian, the paladin did gloss over that part, but it was something a paladin would have been proud to cover. The bard, Lux, appealed to the fishermen to exercise the virtue of doing the right, completely ignoring why the fisherman were upset in the first place. The party did not consider the fisherman's position, and the legitimate threat to the way things used to be by the influx of the dwarves, the mining industry, and the increased royal interest in Saltmarsh activities. The fisherman knew they were in the wrong, but they felt they had no other recourse. The ransom was not so much an effort to extort money but an action to make the dwarves want to leave Saltmarsh (a rather unrealistic and not-well-thought-out plan). While the fisherman felt guilty after Lux's speech, it was the Thaumaturgy of the cleric Frocaryn, channeling her divine admonishment of the fisherman for their sinful behavior and treatment of the innocent dwarven mine workers. It was the divine threat that pushed the fishermen to release their victims. As they did so, they were really worried about the repercussion of their actions and whether they would get in trouble with the authorities. The party impressed upon the fisherman that their goal was to free the kidnapers and return them safely. Seeing that the dwarves were unharmed, and the fisherman turned over the victims willingly and without a fight, their sins (crimes) should be considered forgiven and forgotten. They party focused on returning the dwarves, not apprehending the fisherman, too. Since the PCs did not bother to identify or remember any of the fisherman, they left it to them to atone for their actions to clear their own consciences. The fisherman received the benefit of not being apprehended, reported, or slain (!) for willingly and safely returning the dwarves. However, since then, the party has seemingly forgotten all about the concerns of the fisherman, and that may come back to haunt them.

Attronarch – Re: Conquering the Barbarian Altanis: Session 119. Brilliant climactic encounter with the blue dragon. Honestly, I was rooting for the dragon. The luck did not seem to hold well for the players, and I bet the players were on the edge of their seats. And a dragon's hoard to claim for the reward. It's going to take a couple of trips!

Bryant Durrell – Welcome to E&A! Perhaps, welcome back. Nice review page for movies. I thought I watched a lot of movies! What is your preferred source for films?

That is all for now. I am off to pack for my one gaming vacation in Florida. Next issue will be my gaming report from the event – lots of boardgames!

It's a bit of a weird month for this zine. I have a bunch of little brain worms burrowing about in my brain. The best way to excise them is to spill them out on these pages. My apologies in advance if this issue is a bit disconnected.

I've found myself repeating thoughts and opinions that I've written about before in *A&E*. An example is my explanation to Josh this issue about why I don't like co-op board games. I know I've mentioned it before. Given that the audience of *E&A* is newer and growing, I think this is okay. Sorry—not sorry—if you find it redundant. :)

Ignorable Theme for E&A #16

GM-Dickery

One example of GM-Dickery stands out to me. It had me calling out "[This is number one bullshit](#)" and put the GM on my "no-fly" list. This was a convention game from 2022 and I don't remember the mechanical details, but it went down something like this.

The PCs were hunting down a serial killer and one of the PCs caught sight of it and was allowed to make a ranged attack. It was the best of critical hits and we cheered. But the GM ignored it. Without a word, the GM just dismissed the outcome—just said it didn't work and moved on. They could have described it in a way that would have had us saying, "Whoa! It took our best shot and just shrugged it off!" But, no; it was just an obvious case of the GM dicking the players around (presumably because it would have disrupted what they had in mind).

As the game progressed, we just went through the motions. At the end, it became clear that it was literally impossible for the PCs to have figured out what was going on. It was a *Numenera* game which already is pretty impenetrable, but once you add in a mystery with no clues and a foe with unlimited plot armor, it robbed the PCs and players of any agency.

On Rangers

There has been recent discussion about the ranger class in *D&D* and how it has evolved through various editions and revisions. Part of the difficulty in discussing what abilities and capabilities a ranger should or shouldn't have is that different folks come to the discussion with different impressions and expectations of what a ranger is. To me, a ranger is an outdoorsy fighter with ties to nature and more likely to use archery and stealth than typical fighters in heavy armor with shield and sword. In *AD&D*, it was the class that did tracking. They had a favored enemy, for some reason. Rangers eventually got druid spells but could also get magic-user spells(?). They were clearly basing it off some reference that I didn't get at the time. I still don't get it and I don't care.

I am turned off when we start talking about classes as tanks vs strikers (or DPS) vs controllers, etc. While this may be relevant when we talk about combat, I find that borrowing the framing and terminology from computer games does not do tabletop roleplaying any favors. I feel that the ranger has suffered from this approach more than any other class, causing it to lose its heart and mystique. That made rangers cool to me was what they represented, not what they could do.

Fighters fight. Barbarians rage. Rogues backstab. Clerics heal. Druids shapeshift, apparently.¹ Bards sing. Wizards cast spells.² Artificers craft. Rangers do what, exactly? If you are going to "fix" the ranger class, you have to first figure that out.

Having recently re-engaged with *Savage Worlds*, I find building a ranger trivially straight-forward. The only question is whether or not you want to start with spells or wait until after you gain experience (which would require GM permission

¹ I still don't like that this has become their defining niche.

² As do Sorcerers and Warlocks, but differently because I guess we needed that.

since Arcane Background is a Background Edge and usually not allowed after character creation). Everything else is covered by picking the Skills and Edges appropriately (based on what abilities you think a ranger should have). And I'm sure the same thing is true in GURPS and similar games that aren't tied to a rigid class structure that tightly defines what a class is and isn't.

I like class systems when they are simple. When they get complicated with numerous special abilities, I want to break them down and just build characters from the component parts (skills and abilities). The whole point of classes is to have easy-to-define roles in the party and when you start questioning what role a class is supposed to have (like a ranger), you're fighting against the system rather than using it to your benefit.

Animal Companions

This is a bit of a tangent, tied in because it is not uncommon for ranger types to have an animal companion (and this is covered by an Edge (or two if you want a more powerful companion) in *Savage Worlds*).

At some point, someone decided that animal companions in *D&D* were too powerful. It had something to do about the action economy and letting the character with the companion do too much. This was never an issue for me. I get the notion from a "don't hog screen time at the table," perspective, but the companion was like having a player-controlled NPC in the party that everyone appreciated, not a powerup for a single character that everyone else resented.

I am a big proponent of having balance among the PCs. It sucks playing a PC who is demonstrably worse at everything compared to someone (or everyone) else. To me, an animal companion was something that made a character feel cool, not powerful.

I'm also annoyed that *D&D* 5e defined familiars and animal companions into summoned spirits rather than flesh-and-blood animals. I get it, I think, but ugh.

On Chaos

Excerpts from a lecture by Thaumaturge Makarus Findi

It is impossible for me to speak of chaos without falling back upon analogy and metaphor. Eventually, these descriptions fail when you look too closely and pick it apart, but at least it gives us some handhold upon which our finite, mortal minds can grasp. In other words, I'm apologizing up-front for any confusion my analogies cause.

Our world came into being from Primal Chaos. Everything we observe, the ground beneath our feet, and the heavens above exist upon an island of stability within the sea of the Primal Chaos.

The Primal Chaos has no beginning or end in space or time. The Primal Chaos always was. The Primal Chaos is infinite potential from which anything and everything can come into being or be destroyed. To ask what created the Primal Chaos is a silly notion because it is that from which everything is created. Without it, nothing could be created, including itself.

Time is that by which we measure change. Without time, nothing can change, as everything would be fixed in a single, timeless moment. Without change, time has no meaning since there would be nothing to measure. Without time, there can be no "before." Therefore, the Primal Chaos exists without ever having begun to exist.

Chaos—and the Primal Chaos specifically—has no will, no intent, no consciousness. To personify the Primal Chaos is to make a category error. What many people don't appreciate—especially members of the clergy—is that chaos is neither good nor evil. It has no moral or ethical attachments.

Chaos is change. It is motion, transformation, creation, and destruction. Chaos is potential and the infinite Primal Chaos is infinite potential from which anything can manifest. One of those possibilities is order. Let me restate this for clarity.

Order can come from chaos. Think of it like a crystal forming in a saturated solution. Now imagine a crystal forming from the Primal Chaos. Perfect in structure, a fixed lattice frozen in time. Within this crystal, nothing changes. It is lifeless.

But now imagine a different crystal with a void inside, like a geode. And within this void there is an inclusion of chaos. This is our world. Chaos exists in our world because if it did not, we would not be here to discuss how our world came to be. Chaos is an intrinsic and necessary property of our world. For there to be seasons and tides, growth and decay, life and death, there must be chaos.

Magic draws upon the potentiality of chaos in much the same way that a mill draws upon the power of a stream. There are limits to magic in the same way that a mill is limited by the flow of the stream. The chaos of our world has finite potential—it can only do so much within the limited confines of our world, this island of stability, this void within the crystal.

If the miller wanted the mill to be faster or drive a larger stone, they must find a larger, stronger stream. So it is with magic. Those who are not content with drawing upon the intrinsic, finite chaos of our world just instead reach for the extrinsic, infinite Primal Chaos for their magic.

This is a bad idea. It's like breaking the dam upstream from the mill. The torrent of water not only damages the mill but fundamentally reshapes the stream as well. And now you lack the protection and regularity that the dam provided.

Ah, some would say, what if you just open a sluice in the dam, enough to increase the flow of the stream for a while and then you close it again; surely, this is safe? Perhaps. But we did not construct the dam and it did not come with sluices. What you're doing is breaking a hole in the dam and hoping to plug it before it weakens the entire structure. Sounds dangerous to me.

Plus, we don't know what exists on the other side of that dam. When you let in the water—or chaos

in our case—something terrible might also slip through into our world. Indeed, pulling something from beyond our world is the whole point for some reckless practitioners of magic.

And this is the point—the only point!—where my opinions coincide with the clergy. As magicians, we must restrict the practice of magic so that it only utilizes the intrinsic chaos of this world and does not reach for the Primal Chaos. We must protect the barrier that separates our island of stability from the turbulent and chaotic seas that lie beyond. Exactly how we govern, prevent, and punish this activity is a question that must be answered, but this is not the proper forum.

Let's Define a Superpower

Suppose you wanted to play a superhero whose power was to put people to sleep. How would we model this in a game system? Obviously, it would depend on the game system, but let's try to break down some basic concepts that a game system has to address.

But before I jump in, I'd like to say that while this is a cool power, it doesn't necessarily make for a good superhero PC. It fits well in the *Wild Cards* universe as an ace (maybe deuce) power. It could be the power of a gifted youngster at Xavier's school. It works great as a stunt for a telepath, magician, or gadgeteer, but it could get boring to play fairly quickly if it's the only combat option for the player.

We need to define what the power can and cannot do. Let's say it works on animals, including humans, but cannot "put to sleep" robots, computers, or other machinery. What about androids and artificial intelligence? Assuming they had a state of consciousness equivalent to a sleep cycle, it would depend on the nature of the power. If this is a mental power and telepathy works on AI, then sure, we can let it work here. But if the power is from a sleep gas or toxin, then anything immune to poisons and such would be immune from this power.

Can the power be resisted and if so, how? This is a fairly powerful effect, so from a game balance perspective, there probably should be a way for targets to resist it. Or to put it another way, how would the players feel if this power was used against their PCs and there was no way to avoid its effects? If the answer is that they'd call bullshit, then it should not be an automatic effect.

In general, there were two ways to resist an attack: don't get hit or shrug off the effect. If our sleeping power was the result of a poison dart, you could avoid the dart by dodging it, ducking behind cover, or just be the lucky recipient of bad aim. If the dart hit, you might still survive because of your physiology, the dosage was off, or didn't inject into your bloodstream. In *D&D* terms, you have a to-hit roll and/or a saving throw.

An attack that can be resisted both ways makes it weaker from a gaming perspective and it takes longer to resolve at the table. I'd usually advise to pick one or the other based on how the power works. A Vulcan nerve pinch needs a successful hand-to-hand attack roll, but once applied, it just works (unless you're Gary Seven). A magic sleep spell doesn't need to hit, but could be resisted with willpower. A sleep gas grenade forces everyone caught in the area of effect to resist it (though throwing the grenade may require a roll to land in the desired spot). I could not fault if a sleep dart is defined to both hit the target and allow a resistance roll to the victim, but this may affect power balance (more on this later).

I'm not a fan of "all or nothing" power effects if it can be avoided. I'd prefer if there was some range of effects from "a little groggy" to "out like a light." The range does depend on what is consistent with the game system. This will weaken the power if the full effect requires the equivalent of a critical hit. Let's say the power has 3 levels of effect: Partial, Full, and Critical.³ With a Partial effect, the target is sleepy and at a penalty to perform actions. With a Full effect, they fall unconscious

into a light sleep. With a Critical effect, they fall into a deep sleep (with penalties to wake them).

Once put to sleep, how does the victim recover? It makes sense that if someone takes the time to wake them, then they can recover (though perhaps it makes sense for them to be groggy for their first action). Can they recover on their own? This is a bit system dependent. In *D&D*, it would be standard practice for the victim to re-roll their saving throw at the end of their turn. This ensures that they are affected for at least a round before recovering. [Note that in the latest version of the Sleep spell, it doesn't quite follow this formula.]

Now that we've defined in rough terms how the power works, how does it stack up against other powers? Is it too powerful because it can incapacitate an opponent in one round? How does this compare against just blasting an opponent with a kinetic force beam? The beam works against more targets as well as inanimate objects, but probably takes much longer to take out an opponent.

Assuming it is over-powered, what should be done about it? Should it "cost" more in character points? Should there be additional limits imposed on it? Should the GM just wing it and throw more robotic opponents at the character? As I mentioned, the power is a bit one-note, so nerfing it in game and making it less useful makes it even more boring.

The trend in modern superhero RPGs seems to lean more towards token power balancing mechanisms, and away from the very mathy systems of *Champions* or *GURPS Supers*. Personally, I think this is the right call, but (as I comment to Brian Rogers below), modern systems don't necessarily give players permission to make up their own powers as I have done here.

I don't have a conclusion to this thought. This is a fairly clean example of a straight-forward superpower. It is an illustration of translating a power that works one way on a comic book page to something that could work for an RPG.

³ Similarities to Marvel Super Heroes Green/Yellow/Red results are completely coincidental.

A Known AI Failure Mode

I was watching an episode of [One Of These People Is Lying](#) on The Technical Difficulties YouTube channel on my television. My wife was on the lounge next to me, doing her usual thing of reading or playing games on her iPad and/or phone⁴ while only partially watching the television.

The premise of the show is that two of the contestants have an obscure fact with backing details and one of the contestants has a lie that sounds like an obscure fact with no backing details (and has to make them up on the fly). The host has to guess who is lying.

In this particular episode, the lie was “President Dwight D. Eisenhower taught his parrot to salute.” Eventually, my wife’s interest was perked and she decided to look it up on Google before the truth (or in this case, lie) was revealed. Yes, she’s like that.⁵

Google’s AI Overview not only said it was true, but also gave the same “factual” details that the contestant had made up on the spot for this episode. This was only a day or two after the episode dropped on YouTube.

The next day, I asked Claude on my work account and it correctly identified this “fact” as having no evidence. It also said that a known failure mode of AI was that if the same falsity was found in multiple places, it could be mistaken as true. But in my example, there was only one source. Google was eating content openly presenting a blatant falsehood and then spitting it out as “fact.”

Google AI Overview will provide links to sources, so when I’m doing real work, I’ll follow those links just as if they were offered up as links on a search result.

[This](#) video is an example of AI using the hallucinations of other AI as a source.

⁴ Yes, both at the same time.

⁵ She’s also good about asking a question about something we’re watching about ten seconds before her question was to be answered.

Other Thoughts On AI

The history of technology has included a constant replacement of human muscle power with power from other sources (animals,⁶ wood, coal, oil, nuclear, etc.) and the machines that harnessed that power for the betterment of humanity (at least in theory). The original calculators used to be humans and since the invention of computers, we’ve begun offloading human brain power as well. This is generally a good thing, in my opinion. AI is just the latest chapter in the myriad stories of advancement in technology.

However, power is not free. We pay for it one way or the other. I tend to focus on the environmental costs because they are obvious and should be bipartisan. There are also economic and societal costs I am not qualified to discuss or debate.

A few years ago, server and networking power efficiency and so-called green data centers were considered a priority; nowadays, not so much. That depresses me, as does the ignorant and/or duplicitous objection to renewable energy espoused by many.

I think AI can do great things, but it comes at a cost, and how we’re paying for it really sucks. We have yet to pay the costs of the industrial revolution and we’re just adding to the debt.

Offloading muscle power for machine power is great for productivity, but it means we have to find other ways of exercising our muscles. So too if we offload our brain power to AI, we have to find other ways of exercising our mental muscles. It’s one thing to allow a computer spreadsheet or AI to crunch data, but it’s quite another to surrender our creativity to AI. This is why I was so adamant against the inclusion of AI text in *E&A*. Using AI to catch spelling or grammar errors is fine, but writing is a creative endeavor and if we are letting AI do it, our creative muscles will atrophy as surely as our physical ones do when we don’t physically exercise.

⁶ Including other humans...

Failures in RPGs

In Overly Sarcastic Production's [Trope Talk on Heists](#), there was a line that gave me a twinge. *"Sure, the characters need to face problems, but they don't need to face arbitrary failures that just feel like the writer reached in and said 'nuh uh'."*

Replace "writer" with "dice" and that describes a certain type of frustration that RPGs can give. Within the context of the trope, they were talking about competent professionals who fail without any hint or foreshadowing that they might fail. In the context of an RPG, I've often said that it's hard to play a badass when the dice won't let you.

Dice can be good at adding tension, but if a bad, improbable die roll would break the tension with groans of consternation that make the game experience less fun, then should we be rolling dice? I'm in favor of a meta mechanic that allows players to tell the ~~author~~ dice, "Nope, that was a stupid call; be better." But maybe we shouldn't have asked the dice of their opinion and never give them an option to make a stupid call.

Perhaps confusingly, I'm not onboard with the notion that you only roll when failure would be interesting. I don't have the mental energy to imagine what the "interesting failure" should be every time before the dice are rolled. If the task succeeds, then contemplating failure was a waste of my time. Besides, sometimes a failure just forces the players to come up with a plan B; by closing a door, you force them to look for windows. And that alternative route—not the failure itself—can be interesting.

"Arbitrary failure of something supposedly reliable is one of those bite-sized tropes that I can't un-notice and it's really started to piss me off."

I am in favor of changing a roll from "Do I succeed?" to "How well/poorly did I succeed?" This can include changing failed die roll to a success with complications. This avoids arbitrary failure and can crank up the tension and/or add plot twists that make the story more compelling.

Comments on Issue #15

An Aurora Cove Question Answered

The cemetery is from the time when Aurora Cove was just a small fishing village. Once the military took it over circa 1947, people were no longer buried there.

Patrick Brady

Sadly, I don't think there are enough Patricks yet to pull off a coup. Ironically, my parents picked my name (and that of my brother) in part because they wanted something less common (because both of their fathers were named James/Jim).

The lineage of RPGs is a tangled ouroboros of tabletop to computer and back again, including the modern rise of adventure boardgames.

We've talked about paid GMs recently. Personally, I don't like it changing the dynamic from "someone we are gaming and socializing with" to "someone we are paying to provide a service." I'd rather have a GM who is a friend, not a contractor. I'd rather have a GM who does it for the love of the game, not someone in it for the money.

Roger BW

RYCT me, I could tell the authors of *Outgunned Superheroes* were having fun with their blatant ripoffs. At first, I was completely on board, but they just beat it into the ground and it eventually turned me off.

Thanks for the distinction between dungeon crawling and spaceship crawling. I try to design my dungeons to have a purpose and focus on exploration.

RYCT Myles, your vision of a horror campaign doesn't sound bad. Would the players know about the funnel at the onset? My drive to surprise players and subvert expectations⁷ tells me to keep mum, but you'd have to know your players would appreciate it.

RYCT Lisa, related to the notion of modes of play, can the same system be used in two distinct

⁷ See Aurora Cove in the last three issues.

campaigns and feel completely different? You can do survival horror and heroic adventure in *Savage Worlds*,⁸ but they would feel like *Savage Worlds* games, even if one was gritty and grimy and the other was more epic and cinematic.

Myles Corcoran

RYCT me, all prisons are a powerkeg in some sense. If Hive Mind is set free (they cannot escape unless the PCs help), then they would try to take over the residents of Aurora Cove, bringing them into the hive. For story and game convenience, they would take over the NPCs first and force the PCs to fight their mind controlled, superpowered friends and neighbors.

Michael Cule

RYCT Dylan, much of the U.S. has harsher winters than any in Britain. That's not really the issue with "American style" houses. It's mostly about our use of timber framing due to greater, cheaper access to lumber. What we both need to do is embrace central air conditioners and heat pumps (same fundamental tech ran in reverse, depending on season). But that also means a greater electrification of houses and a better power grid with clean energy. It's never just one thing.

Dylan Capel

RYCT me, there is an old [Extra Gaming video](#) on break points that touches on how power progression affects how you experience the game. Their focus is on video games, but they even mention *D&D* when it comes to power spikes intentionally built into the system. *"Because that power spike is part of the interest curve of the game. The designers want you to be excited about reaching those levels, and they want to make the things you can do at those levels seem novel and more awesome."* Fighting dragons, as opposed to goblins, is part of that.

Avram Grumer

RYCT Lisa, that *Blades '68* opening sounds perfect for an *Unknown Armies* game.

Joshua Kronengold

RYCT Patrick, I feel the same way about gambling. I'm happy to play poker for chips rather than money. I am easily sucked into idle & clicker games, which I usually play until I hit a break point where progress requires a level of effort that exceeds my level of enjoyment.

RYCT me, I generally do not like co-op board games because they feel too much like a customer escalation at my day job. "Here's a problem. You all must devise and execute a solution. Random stuff will happen outside of your control. You have imperfect information. You each have your roles and tasks. One (or more) of you may try to tell everyone what they should do. One (or more) of you might be (a traitor) working on your own goals." The exotic theme of most co-ops doesn't change this. The only co-op I correctly thought I'd enjoy was *The Crew*. I don't even consider *Zendo* a co-op.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

RYCT Roger, players could become complacent and become reckless because their NPC boss/mentor can bail them out of trouble. One option is to have the NPC call them out and even boot them from the team! Suppose the PCs are in such bad straits that the NPC cannot save them all and/or there are other NPCs also in need of saving. Let the players pick who among the PCs or NPCs is saved.

Lisa Padol

RYCT Matt, that was some awful roleplaying you illustrated. Not only did the player not speak in character, but was not offering any information that the GM could use. The GM had to ask questions because the player was being terrible.

RYCT me, the bunker is under the lighthouse, so I lumped them together in the same section. The bunker only has 2 meaningful rooms (plus the entrance and the submarine dock/exit). The scientists getting to the mine had no effect on the game; more importantly, the PCs decided to investigate the lighthouse and shit started rolling

⁸ Which I use as an example because I'm most familiar with it. I'd ask you the same question of GURPS.

downhill at about the 4-hour mark of a 6-hour session (including a 20-minute lunch break).

Brian Rogers

I think you hit the nail on the head regarding table culture. I'll add that some players find enjoyment in subverting the conventions of particular genres and stories. For example, not doing the "stupid" things that characters in horror movies do. They'll describe in gory detail how a superpower (or sci-fi tech) should be used "realistically," usually in unsustainably overpowered ways that stray heavily from the tone and conventions of the source material that the GM was drawing from.

All RPGs involve a negotiation between the players and GMs about what the PCs can and cannot do. The closer their mindset and table culture is at the onset, the less these negotiations turn into a frustrating game of "Mother may I?" And of course, the player(s) and GM should hammer out as much as possible before the game starts the basics of how a power works and what it can and cannot do. During the game, a simple system for doing a power stunt is all that's really needed if players want to get creative with applying powers beyond what was pre-negotiated. Any further discussion and clarification can take place between sessions. Some systems, like *Icons*, have formalized rules for making a stunt a standard feature or application of the power.

Superhero RPGs began in a state where everything was so loose and ill-defined that you had implicit permission to make things up. The trend then moved to powers and abilities that were codified and nailed down within a rigid structure, often involving calculating point totals. Since then, systems have gotten simpler, but they still have a static list of powers and they don't necessarily do a good job of explicitly telling GMs and players that they can color outside the lines,⁹ as it were.

I LOLed and agree that Bingo needs a voice over.

RYCT me, I re-read the B/X rules on swords, magic swords, and intelligent swords and found nothing to indicate that "only Fighters could use them." Everyone could use swords except Clerics and Magic-users. Also, Fighters had no less access to magic than Dwarves, Halflings, or Thieves, as far as I can tell. Please point me to the reference I'm missing. Since the rules say, "The DM can create special intelligent magic swords or roll them randomly, using the following procedure," I took this to mean the 30% chance of getting an intelligent sword was 100% optional.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Dale, the quote about stealing horses sounds good, but begs the question about whether deterrents actually work. This has been on my mind a bit lately. Men steal horses when they think they have no other choice or they don't believe they'll get caught; in either case, punishment of past offenders is not a deterrent. Nor do deterrents prevent crimes of negligence or "heat of the moment" incidents that preclude rational thought about the potential punishment. I'm not saying crimes shouldn't be punished, but we have to clearly understand what the intended outcome of the punishments are and that we verify they are having their intended effect.

RYCT Patrick, when I ran tutoring classes in college (often to econ students), I taught how to draw trig and quadratic functions the easy way. Draw the shape first. All sines and cosines look the same; [there is only one true parabola](#); and so on. Then put in the x- and y-axis based on where the zeroes are. Then put in the scales on each axis, based on the particulars of the function.

RYCT Peter, given that the SJG books were in a box that no one knew about and took months to find, would you call that "available to people to come and read?" Granted, I don't have any better ideas.

⁹ Or even draw their own lines from scratch.

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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Regardance

I finished *We Are Legion (We Are Bob)* by Dennis E Taylor. It was an amusing read.

I am reading *The City We Became* by N.K. Jemisin. Its about New York City. So far it seems to be what I would define as *social science fiction*. I have always like her fantasy works. This book is very different.

Sum Comments

Pedro and Maira,

Phillippus in ancient Athens warned about a northern warrior named Alexander (later becoming "Alexander the Great"). Today a generic warning is called a "philippic".

Dale Meier,

Those are nice Traveller covers.

Patrick Brady,

Yes, there are a lot of Patricks. // I don't get depressed about the state of my nation. I just get angry.// Speaking of weather, we got hit by a Kona Low, earthquake and a category one hurricane.

Patrick Riley,

I think I found new gamers with the help of Joshua from Northern California. We will be using Zoom and playing native American characters.// I don't think I've dealt with intraparty conflict that I can remember.// The Aurora Cove, excellent. I like Hive Mind.

Bryant Durrell,

I should breakdown and give Typst try.// The Biological War review does have some strange politics.// McCabe and Mrs Miller is one of my favorite movies.

Mark Wilson,

Years ago I did find some new gamers at local Cons in SoCal. These days it seems I'll find a new set of gamers via the NoCal group gaming using Zoom.

Myles Corcoran,

Eclipse, nice.// I continue to enjoy the Mausritter campaign. I like Sky.// Guy with broken hip not staying with his therapy. *sigh*

Brian Misiaszek,

I continue to enjoy La Cubana horar Mazorra. // Hurricane LaLa didn't hurt any of the coffee trees. But what a mess at the bottom of my road. Images attached:



Excellent image of the lawyer-to-be.

Avram Grumer,

I've enjoyed everything I've read by Adrian Tchaikovsky.

Roger PW,

I enjoyed more on Drinax. // Good point on student exams. // Thank you for the Aslan Hierate. // Listening mud, that's different. I haven't ran into the spell yet.

Attronarch,

They bearily escaped.// Yea, you have a funnel for 1st and 2nd levelers. My son was the GM and he wanted to run a zero-level funnel.

Brian Rogers,

Mother Ship seems interesting.// I enjoyed Paranoia.// The puppeteers, interesting.// Re a gaming store on the Big Island. There was one in Hilo, but it didn't last long. The only one I know of is in Kona.

Gabriel Roark,

Still skating away. Excellent.

Patrick Zoch,

You'll be able to grapple with your work flow. (Roll low on a D20).

Dylan Capel,

I've been using Linux since 1994. I down loaded it and configured it piece by piece manually.// The entire planet is warmer.

Michael Cule,

"Where characters come from", excellent.// I see you are also on the hot planet.

Jim Eckman,

Re law levels. Agreed.// In League Cosmos legal authority is local unless contradicted by the League gathering of all member planets or collection of planets.// Libre Office, works for me.// For physical world building see

<http://johnntredden.com/cosmos/cosmos.html>

For social cultures see johnreddenaauthor.com

The source for physical world building is open and available.

Joshua Kronengold,

In the past someone might have nailed you with a sleep spell.// Congrats on the new job. Make the most of it. That's important these days. // I make many mistakes typing on a touch screen phone (iPhone). I have numb finger tips :(// Kids are just young humans. Don't let them unnerve you. A know a number of people who don't have kids and never will that interact with them. // The people involved in the conversation during the game are Joshua and Sarah.

Lisa Padol,

Snicker at full Kirk.// Using two or one column(s) works best depending on content.// Interesting comment on Japanese courts.// Module, campaign, scenario or toolkit. That one made me think.// Libre Office works for for me.

Timothy Collinson,

Yurt bliss, ... yes. I did that once in Jordan.// Re acronym, I got as far as IC2bAAbt ...

Jargon Zen

The Zen Master was walking through in the countryside with a student. The student saw a stone Buddha in the field and said to the Zen Master, "I think that Buddha is very old. When was it made Master?" "Before the ancient Buddha appeared."

Humor A Mean joke

A father buys a lie detector robot that slaps people when they lie. He decides to test it out at dinner one night. The father asks his son what he did that afternoon. The son says, "I did some schoolwork." The robot slaps the son. The son says, "Okay, Okay, I was at a friends house watching movies." Dad asks, "What movie did you watch?" Son says. "The Toy Story". The robot slaps the son. Son says, "Okay, Okay we were watching porn." Dad says, "What? At your age I didn't even know what porn was." The robot slaps the father. Mom laughs and says, "Well, he certainly is your son." The robot slaps the mother.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

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IN THIS ISSUE

OVERLORD'S ANNALS is a monthly zine in which I share session reports from games I either run or have participated in.

Sometimes I also share our house rules and other reflections too. Art is primarily from players—see attributions for details.

In this issue I share four session reports from the *Conquering the Barbarian Altanis* Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Adventurers recover the Golden Gavel of Justice and satisfy Poseidon.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

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

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

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

ATTRIBUTIONS

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CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 122

Adventurers

Ambros, cleric level 6. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Balarus, fighter level 3. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 3. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Ignaeus, elf level 4. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiseled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

Ignar Erikson, fighter level 3. Strong, tall, broad warrior with piercing blue eyes and a fashionable winged helm.

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 4. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Redleaves 5th, Spiritday

“Oh, here it is!”

Tarkus and Beorg led the adventurers back to the crypt south-east of Midway. Their stop at the village just a day ago was very short-lived, for they were not welcome at all. But that did not bother our heroes that much, since they only had one thing on their mind: dungeon delving.

Well, two things actually. Safe dungeon delving. Hence, they opted to revisit a dungeon they've been to nearly a year ago, where they smashed everything open, crossed the trapped hallway, navigated the maze, liberated the wrongfully imprisoned king, and extracted their hard-earned coin.

Perhaps there was something they had missed?

Rappelling down the pit revealed nothing much had changed. The stone slab was still pushed inwards, allowing anyone to enter and leave the crypt as they desire.

Adventurers opted to avoid the chamber with laughing skulls and cleaving meat-hooks.

They explored the left wing of long mausoleum, which led them to a large circular chamber completely filled with skeletal remains of hundreds, if not thousands, creatures. Bone pile towered eight feet tall, and filled the full circumference of the chamber.

Without anything better to do, adventurers decided to clean up this mess by moving it from this chamber to another chamber. Couple of hours later and they found a hidden trapdoor with a chest. One thousand and five hundred gold pieces, as well as five nice gems, were their reward. Wise beyond their age, they closed the trapdoor so they are not slowed down as they explore the dungeon.

Next, they followed narrow exit out of the mausoleum with hundreds of crypts into the square chamber with obviously chaotic temple. Giving it a wide berth they walked down a long corridor slopping downwards. With each step they got deeper and deeper into the purple fog.

“Wait! Allow me to move first and sweep the floor! Last time we were here we were attacked by blobs of burning flesh!” Beorg cautioned his friends and did what he said he would do.

Nothing assaulted them.

The mist was emanating from onyx black stone gates just at the end of the corridor. Purple haze seeped out from underneath and various barely visible orifices. To the adventurers' left were the steps leading into the trapped hallway, while to their right were large gates of pure white marble. Purple fog bounced off of an invisible barrier just in front of the white gates.

“Interesting. . .”

Balarus and Ignar, two mighty warriors, had to give it their all to barely open the gates. What a sight greeted them!

A square chamber, with walls, ceiling, and floor all made out of white marble. Facing them, in a semicircle, were nine pedestals, all illuminated by a source-less spotlight. Upon central pedestal, which was broader and taller than the rest, a golden gavel inlaid with precious stone bands, rested.

Following several turns of careful inspection, one of the adventurers dare to approach the gavel. It was Ambros, Elder of Aniu. First he hovered his palm over the gavel. Others noticed how Ambros zoned out for a bit, lagging in his replies to their inquiries. Then everyone saw the cleric reach for the gavel.

Ambros's eyes turned upside-down, his fist clenched around the gavel, and he slumped to the ground, frothing from his mouth and trashing about. Without missing a beat all the adventurers jumped on him, grabbing him by the legs and arms so he doesn't hurt himself. Beorg tried to pry the gavel out of his hand with the dagger, but failed miserably.

How surprised Ambros was when he opened his eyes! Pinned down by his own colleagues and allies! He shook himself free and rolled to the side. Tarkus and Balarus addressed him in Lawful, asking him if he was well. Of course he was! Then Ignar asked him if he could let go of the gavel. Of course he could! Would he? Of course he would! And Ambros put the gavel in his backpack.

“What god do you pray to?” Ignar continued his line of inquiry. Ambros gave a passionate sermon on timelessness of Aniu. Tarkus, vicar of Bachontoi, confirmed that this was indeed a prayer to Aniu and was as legitimate as far as he could tell.

"All is good then, I guess..." for rest of the expedition Ignar kept a close eye on Ambros.

As Ambros stepped out, and walked towards the purple fog it gave way as if some invisible force-field was around the cleric. With these interesting turn of events, the party decided to attempt the onyx gates.

Balarus and Ignar heaved as they tried again and again and again. They regretted their success as soon as it came. The duo pushed the black gates open, smashing them against the chamber walls. Before them was a whirlpool of raging purple mist flowing towards the central hole.

A horde of figures in various stages of decomposition were continuously trying to climb out of the hole. They pushed and pushed at the thick purple goo covering them, but were un-

able to cut through it. Moreover, the figures would frequently turn on each other, pulling the one on the top downwards.

The chamber was circular, with no visible ceiling. Purple fog rolled down the walls, joining the whirlpool. Most of it was sucked into the oozy portal, while the rest was fanned out into the corridor. An ancient leather canoe with a single paddle rested on the other side of the chamber, directly opposite to the entrance. Numerous runes and symbols covered its sides.

"Ambros, this might be your calling!" Ignar encouraged the cleric.

Indeed, Ambros was the sole adventurer who dared enter this accursed chamber. As before, the mist evaporated in his presence. Upon coming closer to the bottomless hole, figures were violently pulled down by horri-

ble shapes that clawed their way to the top. They, too, were unable to pierce through the surface.

Without much more to do, Ambros stepped out.

Ignaeus came to the threshold. There he cast Read Magic and Read Languages. And then he dared to read the scriptures on the canoe. Fighting violent visions, the elf surmised that this is some sort of vessel that allows one to traverse the "river of lost souls," whatever they might be.

"Let's close these doors, get our treasure, and get out of here!"

And so they did! Very promptly, if one might add.

Will they return to squeeze the dry rag once again?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 123

Adventurers

Ambros, cleric level 6. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Balarus, fighter level 4. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 3. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Guin Pin, magic-user level 3. A young, short man with buzz-cut, black hair, dressed in a tuxedo black and white robe. He walks with a limp, which makes him wobble.

Ignaeus, elf level 4. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiseled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 4. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Redleaves 7th to 12th

"The Gods have blessed our city!"

Town criers of Hara worked overtime to break the news.

"Ambros Ap Mortain is our new High Priest of Forseti!"

Crowds cheered with delight, except few sour faces that squirm at doing things fairly.

"Ambros Ap Mortain is our new Justice Supreme of Hara!"

But Ambros had little reason to cheer.

Every night the same nightmare.

At the bottom of a deep well.

Blinded by the sun above.

Unable to move.

Whilst water slowly fills the well.

Every night.

Every single night.

Ambros had little time before the wrath of Poseidon befalls him.

And anyone with him.

Redleaves 15th, Spiritday

"Are you threatening us, ugly grandpa?!"

The largest of five drunk Altanians chucked a stool aside, jumping up with his whole bulk.

Balarus poised himself, ready to swing the obsidian blade at the first person who dares raise hand against Ambros. Tarkus and Beorg were ready at the table.

Few days ago Ambros hired an experienced crew of marines to take them to Ketches. They were intercepted by the pirates en route, but Tarkus the Witty managed to resolve that without any violence whatsoever.

Unfortunately, Ambros failed to negotiate a tracker with Beklomda Mor, the chieftain. She asked Ambros to remain in the village, which he refused due to his obligations in the "civilisation," which Beklomda had no interest in.

So he and party set out to get everyone drunk at the Goat's Beard inn, hoping to find learn anything they can about gnoll assassin Greylock. Ambros had to slay him in order to complete the geas he had accepted in return for Mavis, High Priestess of Poseidon, raising Hagar from the dead.

Locals found his plea very amusing. Until Ambros raised his voice.

"I am the Law!"

Seeing that fist fight is imminent, Ignaeus raised his scimitar and yelled "Freeze!"

Big Altanian froze in place. Everyone else suddenly begun paying more attention.

"Listen! Only One-Eyed Tulen would be dumb enough to help you! You can find his hut three hundred yards south of here."

"Thank you." Ambros and his retinue left, seeking the man recommended to them.

Ketche is a small coastal village secluded in the Eyestones jungle, surrounded by danger in all directions. Nonetheless, finding Tulen's hovel hadn't proven to be an issue. Speaking with the man without retching, on the other hand, had proven to be a much bigger issue.

True to his name, One-Eyed Tulen lacked left eye. He was badly crooked, his arms bent and deformed, his legs bowing outward, half of teeth missing, and those present yellowed with rot. He reeked of offal.

"I will help you find Greylock if you give me the pleasure of driving a dagger into his evil heart!" Tulen mumbled slowly.

"I am the Law. It is customary that I enact and execute justice. But in this case I will make an exception. I will allow you to deliver the killing blow." Ambros declared.

At that Tulen fell down to his knees, weeping tears of anger and joy. From his right eye that is. A mix of pus and tears seeped out of his left eye socket.

"Let's not make him cry again." Tarkus whispered.

"So, how do we hunt down this gnoll?"

"We will follow the coastline until we reach the southernmost point. Then we will make our way deeper into the jungle. Greylock has a pack of hyenas and a large lioness. If we encounter either of those, we can track them back to his lair."

"Let's set out then."

"Master Ambros, night is about to fall. I suggest leaving after sun rises again! You can sleep here with me."

"No, thank you. We will meet you here in the morning."

The party booked all of Goat's Beard inn for the night. Everyone slept well. Everyone but Ambros. Water reached his waist.

Maggotfeast 5th, Spiritday

"Aaaghhh! Here! Here!"

Tulen cried in anger pointing at an ominously looking tree.

"What? What is it?" adventurers surrounded him, alarmed. They've spent last ten days following his lead. Out of those, three had been spent searching in deep jungle.

"This is where he crucified me! This is where he broke my bones! This is where they feasted on me!"

It took Ambros significant effort to calm Tulen down. Following brief discussion, the party had decided to hunt down some game, pile the corpses,

and then wait in ambush hoping that hyenas or Greylock take the bait.

Maggotfeast 6th, Airday

"Aaaaaa!"

Guin Pin fled wobbling as giant shrew chased him. Beorg also broke down, fleeing for his life. After all, dead will not bury themselves!

Balarus, Ambros, Tarkus, and Ignaeus squared off against seven fierce giant shrews. Balarus got bitten thrice, but that was nothing for the mighty warrior. Shrews fought until the bitter end, but ultimately they were no match for the heavily armed and armoured adventurers.

Oversized rodents were collected and dumped into one pile. A campfire was lit next to them. Adventurers spread out in 120 feet radius, bows and slings at the ready.

The wait was on.

Maggotfeast 7th, Waterday

Ambros stretched as much as he could. No matter how hard he tried, he could not lift his feet off the ground. The water was all the way up to jaw. He tilted his head all the way back, so he could breathe.

A branch cracking under hyena's paw snapped him back. He dozed off during the ambush they have prepared. No one took a shot yet. Everyone waited.

The hyena carefully approached the shrew pile. Seeing there was no danger, it took a bite of one, and then jumped back. Confirming that there is indeed no danger, five hyenas stepped into the light, and begun munching on the dead rodents.

Adventurers acted in unison, releasing arrows and slinging stones. All five hyenas were killed in less than thirty seconds.

The party waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Guin Pin did not hear her.

But he surely felt her.

Massive lioness dropped on him from above, ripping him to shreds.

Beorg charged the lioness with his polearm, missing terribly. Ambros, Balarus, and Ignaeus joined the fray as well. Tarkus circled the melee, and pulled Guin Pin from underneath the large cat.

"Oh nooo, I was julienned!" the magic-user cried as Tarkus brought him back to life.

Lioness dished out pain in generous servings. She clawed left and right, pouncing and pounding. But it was her bite that severed Balarus in half, leaving him dead on the spot. Ambros was severely injured too. Others were not unscathed either. Magic-User decided glory is better than death, and he threw himself at the beast armed with nothing but dagger and large cojones.

The battle was brutal, bloody, and desperate. Adventurers missed more often than not. And even when their blows connected, they rarely did significant damage. But through sheer persistence and attrition, they managed to whittle the beast down.

When the giant lioness turned to flee, Beorg seized the opportunity. He hooked her with his halberd, and jerked her back. As Ignaeus slit her throat with his scimitar, Beorg jammed the halberd straight into the gaping wound, skewering the monster.

It was over.

They were victorious.

But there was no time to celebrate.

Clerics healed as many wounds as they could.

Then they resumed their positions.

What they came for still hasn't appeared.

Thus, they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Until the sun rose.

But Greylock hadn't come.

Exhausted and battered, they dragged Balarus's corpse with them, and camped at the safest spot they could find. Perhaps gods smiled on them. Perhaps, but Ambros knew better.

Maggotfeast 8th, Earthday

Balarus opened his eyes.

He laid on soft grass, branches poking his soft flesh.

Ambros was kneeling next to him, obviously exhausted.

"Wow. . ." the warrior muttered, whilst tapping himself in disbelief.

Although in horrible pain and terribly weak, he was truly alive.

"Oh, do we need to return him his items now?" one of the adventurers, best left unnamed, inquired.

Ambros pulled a miracle to bring his fellow adventurer back to life.

But will he be able to save his own life?

Or will next Waterday spell his doom?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 124

Adventurers

Ambros, cleric level 6. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Balarus, fighter level 4. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

Bragi Twinefinger, halfling level 1. A stout strong halfling. As a devotee of the Great Tailor he is always smartly dressed (under his armour) and overly fond of multiple breakfasts.

Ignaeus, elf level 4. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiseled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

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

Maggotfeast 9th, Fireday

"Follow me, follow me!" One-Eyed Tulen, excitedly motioned at the party.

Terribly deformed Altanian tracker—courtesy of brutal torture he suffered at Graylock's hands—had found the hyenas' lair.

A hilly mound surrounded by large trees shrouded a wide cave opening.

But following the trail of the large lioness revealed a much narrower tunnel leading upwards.

Balarus, still too weak to move on his own, remained outside of the lair. Beorg and Tarkus stayed behind to protect him. Tamren, joined by Bragi Twinefinger, a stout strong halfling, found the party through divine guidance.

"Ambros, remember what you promised me!" Tulen slurred.

"I am the Law. But in this case I will allow you to be the executor of the Law!"

And with those words, Ambros led the party through the narrow tunnel. After a short incline, the adventurers entered into a small, some twenty feet wide cave. An extinguished fire-pit was in the centre, two soiled blankets to the east, and several gnawed bones to the west. And nothing else.

Thoroughly searching the cave revealed pits on the north wall. Ignaeus used them as handholds and footholds to climb upwards. Once he hit the ceiling he discovered that part of it was hollow—a thin sheet of rock had been placed to conceal an opening.

Ignaeus quietly slid it to the side and then climbed up. That led him into another tunnel, albeit a short one. After just a few steps he came to a ledge overlooking another cave, similar in size to the previous one.

Except this cave was filled with crates and barrels. Pit-handholds allowed him to descend safely. Others followed him. Bragi remained above, on the ledge, providing light with his lantern.

Ambros motioned to the right, where narrow tunnel slopped upwards. Ignaeus followed him closely, and Tamren took the rear guard. Cleric of Law took confident, but careful, steps forward.

His mindful approach paid off!

As he approached another the tunnel exit, Ambros felt something was off. He raised his shield just in time to deflect a battleaxe. A monstrous gnoll towered over the cleric, growling. It was dressed in chain-shirt, and wielded a large two-handed battleaxe.

The monster seized a perfect spot to fight. The tunnel was too narrow to allow those behind to join the fray. Maintaining its momentum, the gnoll swung once more, striking the cleric true.

“Freeze!” whilst Ambros grunted, Ignaeus lifted Volmorin’s Blade and yelled the command word.

Graylock froze solid in place, his eyes filled with burning rage.

“Bragi. Go fetch Tulen.”

While waiting for the one-eyed hunchback, Tamren and Ignaeus inspected all the crates and barrels. There they discovered enough dried meat, fruits, and nuts to account for 60 days worth of iron rations. They also found eight bottles and four pins of Midway Red, famous regional wine.

Ambros cast another Hold Person at the gnoll, just in case. Then he cast Detect Magic. His eyes increased ten-fold as Graylock was completely bathed in purplish glow: his armour, battleaxe, handaxe by the hip, and one of the rings pulsated with dim light.

Further, arrows in the quiver by south wall also lit up, as did something in one of the smaller chests.

“You bastard... You bastard!” Tulen wobbled towards the gnoll, knife at ready. Ambros gave him a nod, and tracker enacted his revenge. He took his time—a little over half an hour—to carve the monster up. Once the bloody ordeal had been done, the party ransacked all the caves recovering thousand gold pieces, two hundred and fifty platinum pieces, one long bow, two quivers with arrows, one quiver with fourteen magical arrows, three vials of puss-like substance, and all equipment from Graylock.

“Wait... What is this?”

They also found terribly cut and blood-soaked piece of parchment on Graylock. Nothing but “Kyle” was readable.

“I told you there is some fuckery going on here.” Tamren was heard muttering from behind. Lord Kyle governs Midway—home of the famous wine.

But most importantly of all, Ambros could for the first time in many months breath normally. He felt a heavy burden fall off his shoulders.

Adventurers spent their whole next day packing all the goods and treasure, as well as planning their route back. They were to go to Ketché, meet up with sailors who brought them here, and then sail back to Hara.

Coldrain 8th, Earthday

It took the adventurers nearly a month to return to Ketché. Although arduous, their journey was otherwise devoid of any significant danger or threat. They were warmly welcomed and Beklomda Mor threw another feast in their honour.

Next day some woke up with a splitting headache. Part of the vexation was surely the fact that their sailors were long gone. But how could one blame them? It has been over two months since they set off in the jungle to hunt down a notorious gnoll assassin.

Tamren bartered with fishermen, arranging transport in exchange for two bottles and two pins of Midway Red. Not a bad deal considering everything.

Before leaving, Ambros threw Graylock’s head into the sea, saying prayers to Poseidon, Aniu, and Forseti. With his divine debt finally repaid, the party left for Hara.

Coldrain 10th, Spiritday

“Look! It is Ambros! We were worried you perished in that forsaken place!” guards were delighted to see the cleric alive.

“And I am happy to return. Pray tell, what is latest in Hara?”

Adventurers learned that new castellan was hard at work, cracking down on many issues plaguing the city.

She prohibited carrying weapons and armours in city—everyone must tie them in a tight bundle and carry them

like a haversack. Namelin and his thugs were not too happy about that. Coldrain brought winter. Altanis is

still warm, but days are shorter. New Year is coming soon. What will the adventurers do next?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 125

Adventurers

Balarus, *fighter level 4*. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

Bragi Twinefinger, *halfling level 1*. A stout strong halfling. As a devotee of the Great Tailor he is always smartly dressed (under his armour) and overly fond of multiple breakfasts.

Flamthwynn, *magic-user level 3*. An older gentleman sporting fashionable dark blue robe with purplish overtones. Seeking arcane objects and offensive spell.

Foxglove, *thief level 4*. A willowy human, long hair ties in a pony tail, looks a bit dangerous and dainty at the same time.

Ignaeus, *elf level 4*. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiseled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

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

Gloomfrost 1st, Airday

Tamren pointed at two plumes of dark smoke raising behind a crest atop Ghinarian hills. Paladins of Coriptis must earn their ranks in combat, besting beasts or men of higher power and skill than their own. Failing to do that means they will be forever denied the honour of joining their deity's harem.

He was joined by Flamthwynn, whom had found courage since his Antil days, Bragi, Ignaeus, Foxglove, and Balarus, whom had brought along hired muscle named Crosonus.

The party of seven rode light riding horses, covering forty miles in a single morning watch.

The six followed Tamren to an ogre lair, where supposedly a band of nasty brutes live. Foxglove rode up the hill and surveyed the surroundings. He found a pothole, some twenty feet wide, just behind a rock outcropping. Light wisps of smoke were coming out of it.

Riding closer, the thief could see that pothole leads into a long tunnel. He rode back to the party and informed them of his findings.

Tamren led the charge towards the hole. Everyone dismounted and left the horses with Crosonus. Then they walked towards the opening.

Foxglove raised his hand, showing an open palm. He put a finger to his pursed lips, signalling everyone to be quiet.

Large figure sat in the tunnel, leaning against a boulder. Big club rested to its side. Its ugly head was slumped, and it slurred loudly. Its hands were on large belly, going up and down.

The thief moved quietly down the tunnel. At one moment he stepped on loose rock which cracked. The beast did not react. Foxglove circled the figure until it was right by its right side. He raised his short sword and thrust it downwards right into the beast's shoulder blade. Then he jerked the blade straight towards the heart.

Ogre screamed in pain. It jumped up, swinging wildly. Foxglove was quick enough to evade this outburst of activity. Ignaeus and Tamren charged in to help. Alas, everyone missed. Everyone but ogre that is.

The beast punched Foxglove straight into his face, sending teeth flying.

Surrounded and wounded, the monster fled down the tunnel.

"Freeze!" Ignaeus yelled.

"Oh no you don't..." Foxglove muttered as he felled the fleeing beast with throwing dagger straight into the back of its neck.

Adventurers continued down the tunnel. Cave ceiling became lower and lower, until the tunnel was barely ten feet tall. Their path forward was obstructed by a set of heavy leather skins hanging from the ceiling hooks. The smoke was slowly rolling from underneath them. Flickers of light were visible. Ignaeus could hear a deep voice humming a joyful tune.

Tamren indicated in proto-sign language that he is ready for violence and that they should let him solo the beast. Ignaeus approached the leather curtain, crouched gingerly, and then raised it abruptly.

Before them was a low cave, some thirty feet wide and long. Fires burning in three sunk fire pits illuminated a horrific scene: three rows of wooden stakes skewered through a dozen dismembered humanoids. The humming ogre was fanning one of the fire pits, producing extra smoke. Another looked dumbfounded by the fact that more food would come into their smoke-house willingly.

Tamren charged in, screaming "Coriptis, witness me!", going for the smaller of two ogres. The rest went for the bigger ogre. Dark smoke that filled the room made it difficult to fight. Everyone cried as their eyes swelled and turned red.

Ignaeus once again used his magical sword to freeze his opponent, making it an easy carving job. Tamren, on the other hand, was a bit less successful. First, his target ran from him. Then the beast fanned smoke from the pit straight into his eyes. Then it ran through the west exit.

Tamren yelled like a madman, chasing it down. Others joined, if nothing to prevent the ogre from fleeing. Balarus the Immovable Object ran ahead of the ogre into the narrow tunnel it was going for, and positioned himself so it cannot pass without wrestling him first.

The ogre wept in distress as Paladin of Coriptis yelled challenge after challenge. The party then enjoyed a show

of incompetence as both Tamren and ogre kept missing each other. But then the ogre landed two mighty blows, forcing the cleric to take a sip of nasty puss-like liquid in order to heal up.

Balarus stepped in and hurled insults so vile that ogre turned its attention to him instead. The fighter deflected few blows. The only problem was that he used his skull to deflect one. Tamren screamed at the ogre, forcing the beast to face him once again. As it turned he drove his sword right through its neck, killing it in place.

Red-eyed and bloodied, adventurers grabbed two bloody sacks of coin from the smokery and fled for their horses. Tamren has slain what he needed to. Who cares if there were more ogres

here, right? After all, what could they possibly do once they find three of their own dead? Surely nothing.

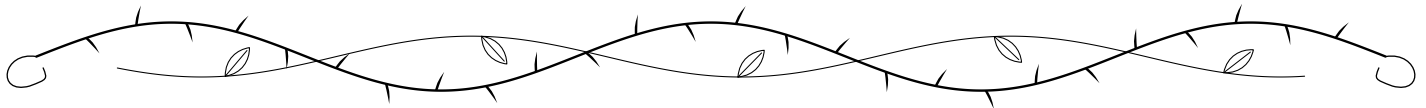
Given it was winter, it already got dark in the evening. Hence the party opted to ride for Midway, sleep at the inn there, and head for Hara next morning. There Ambros and Tarkus healed everyone up. Party of seven then decided not to head back to the ogre lair, but to go seeking their buried treasure instead. This expedition was a great success and they returned to Hara on Gloomfrost 7th, Waterday.

With only thirteen days before end of the year, a single question presents itself.

What will the adventurers do next?

IN NEXT ISSUE

Quenching the Flaming Eye.



Brazilian Interactive fiction – part IV: *A mandala do dragão do trovão* (2000)
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Maira Zucolotto
<maira_zuc@hotmail.com>

Originally published as *Das Mandala der Donnerdrachen* (1997), Ronald Stenglin's (1958 –) book was translated into Portuguese as *A mandala do dragão do trovão* (2000)¹ – “The Thunder Dragon Mandala”, in free translation. A pharmacist by training, Stenglin devotes his spare time to studying and sharing knowledge about spiritual and religious matters. He has also published a (non-interactive) book on Reiki.

A mandala do dragão do trovão could be classified as “esoteric interactive fiction”. On the cover, beneath the title, it reads: “An Extraordinary Game of Esoteric Adventures”. The protagonist is a German man who is contacted by Gabi, the wife of his best friend (Hans), who had merely told her that he needed to go to Kathmandu for a few days and would be back soon – something Hans would never have done. Gabi hastily pays for the entire journey from Munich to Kathmandu, and the main character soon meets his friend in the capital of Nepal. This adventure will extend as far as the kingdom of Bhutan, as the protagonist simultaneously receives a mysterious invitation from the king and travels to this small kingdom nestled in the Himalayas. In Bhutan, he discovers an ancient prophecy according to which the salvation of humanity is linked to the Himalayas. It involves a set of seven medallions, which must be reunited on a specific date, by chosen individuals and in a secret location. The reuniting of the medallions represents a crucial step towards the fulfilment of the prophecy. It is when the protagonist finds the first medallion that a real quest begins, marked by riddles, dangers, mysterious characters and various challenges.

Ironically, this journey to the East – which turns into an adventure steeped in ancient knowledge, spirituality and esotericism – is so intense that it may frustrate readers who are unfamiliar with these beliefs. The digressions are very long, sometimes taking up entire pages to explain the origins of cities, a mythological tale or a mystical practice, which leaves the narrative somewhere between an overly detailed gamebook and a minimally interactive esoteric novel.

Perhaps realising that the interactive book might be too dense for the average reader-player (it contains 249 paragraphs, some of which take up five pages each), the narrative occasionally offers options to interrupt the story, allowing the reader to return home, abandon the mission, or choose other sudden interruptions. If you persevere with the reading, the story generally branches out with two choices, rarely offering the reader three or more. A reader not seeking such frenetic action involving combat, traps, escapes and assaults may appreciate this “interactive novel”. Its originality certainly stems from the author's lack of familiarity with gamebooks, as what was intended was something entirely at odds with what a reader of this type would expect.

An interesting experiment, certainly, but one that is clearly at odds with the dynamic nature of gamebooks. It's worth reading as a work of travel literature and self-discovery, but it might have worked better as a conventional, linear novel.

¹ We know that this interactive book is not Brazilian, but as it is a rare example of a foreign interactive book being translated into Portuguese, we felt it was worth including it here in the series.

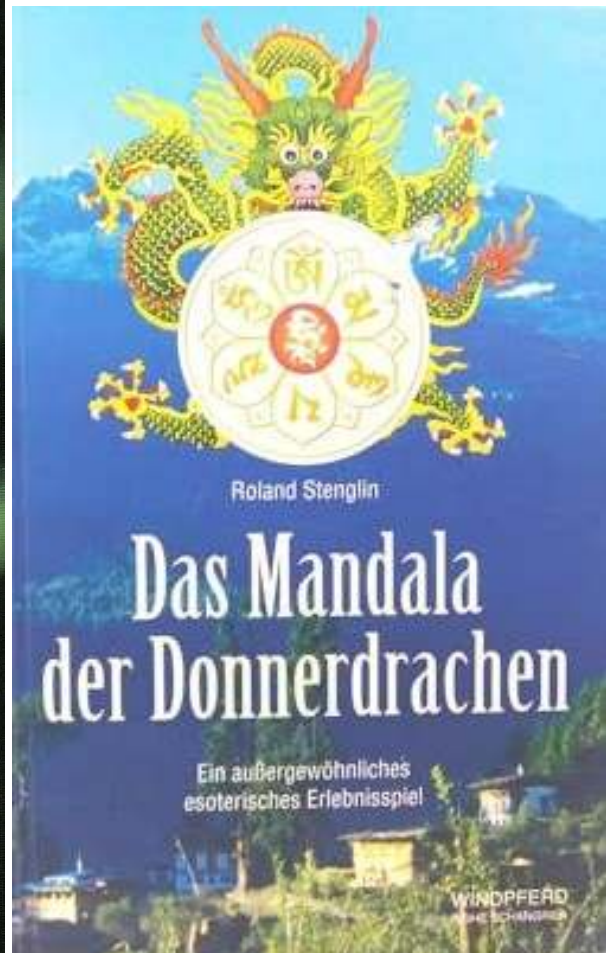
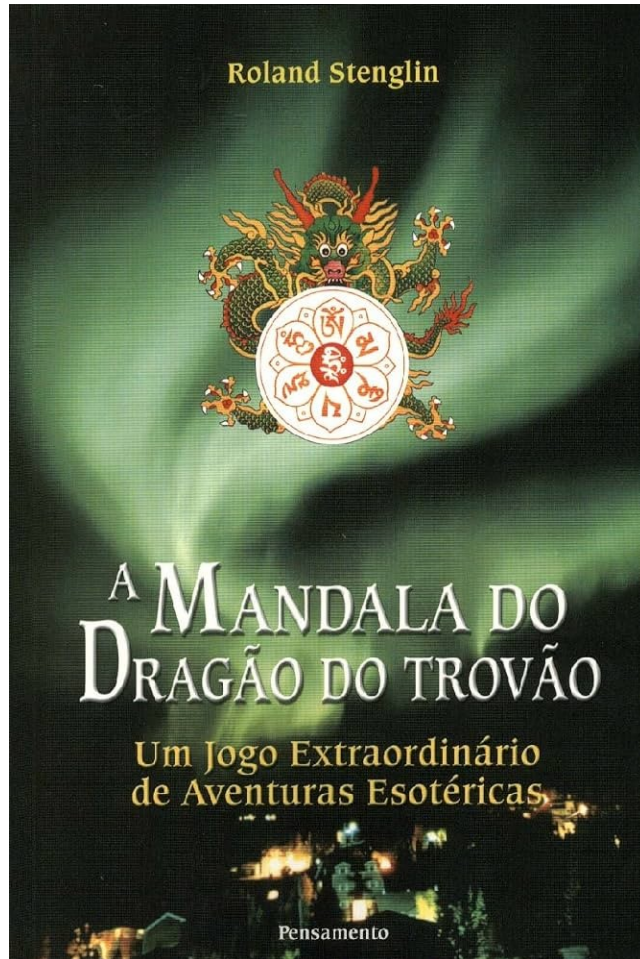
COMMENTS #15

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: It's like playing *The Outer Worlds* (2019) or any other similar game: there are other ways to have fun apart from the "grand finale", even if they're simpler.

MARK A. WILSON: I proofread texts for the publisher of these Brazilian gamebooks. I'll mention it to the authors (they'll love it!), but no Brazilian gamebook has ever been translated into English. But someone's got to start, right?

ROGER BW: The "legacy" format is new to us as well. Perhaps it's inherited from *Lone Wolf*, though it's more complex.

LISA PADOL: Fabric maps are on another level, aren't they?



Twisting the Rope #16

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Check Your Pulse When I Speak

This month's health update is less unpleasant than a colonoscopy. The cardiac specialist in the local university hospital discharged me, and the other specialist I was seeing gave me 5 years grace before the next check-up. I take that as good news.

However, I also have to arrange a scan of my hips, particularly the right hip, to establish a baseline for wear and tear related joint damage as the pain from the joint has reached a 'can't ignore it' stage.

In the university where I work, the students are back for the autumn semester, and the place is full again. I have to remember to time my own travels about the campus away from the top of the hour, as the sea of students moving between classes between 5 minutes to and 5 minutes past every hour is formidable.

No mousey antics this month. Apologies to those hoping for their murine fix.

Mutterings

The return to term time means the work boardgame club once again has to fight for a table at lunchtime for Tuesday and Friday games. We will have to arrange a regular booking for a place to play, but it might be difficult to arrange a space big enough for the occasional turn-out of 11-12 people.

We finished the short *Vaesen* campaign, pursuing a case with human sacrifice and far too many herrings. The GM has ~~foolishly~~ bravely offered to run the classic *Call of Cthulhu* campaign of *Horror on the Orient Express* using the 7th edition rules, which is a first for me. I suspect he may have bitten off more than we can chew, given that it

took us about 5 months to get through 6 sessions of *Vaesen* due to scheduling and cancellations. Still, I hope that we get stuck into the *Orient Express* campaign and make some progress.

ETA: The GM had to cancel the first *Orient Express* session on the 14th Sept. One of the other players stepped in with a newly purchased copy of *Alice is Missing*, but unfortunately I was home sick on the 14th and 15th and missed it.

Kriegsmesser: Landau Before the War

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

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

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

Alfonzo Meemo, pragmatic graverobber (Marie)

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

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

Session 21 (2023-05-11)

At dawn as the mob draws near to the village of Hammelbass, Udo rings the church bells, signifying another plague victim passing. Leaving the belfry he again warns Lazaro to avoid drinking wine while concussed, with little impact. Alfonzo recommends tickling Lazaro's nose with a feather to keep him awake and alert.

Meanwhile, Franzis and Lazaro argue about their prisoner, Martin Baukunth. The carriage driver is convinced the man is dead and brought back

from the grave by some dark power. Franzis remains unconvinced and points to the prisoner's wounds. He bleeds? Then he's alive.

Udo arrives to examine the prisoner again before the dawn light brings the mob to the edge of the village and their crisis to a head. "How is Mr. Baukunth?" he asks. "The late Mr. Baukunth, you mean?" replies Lazaro. Maybe I should have let him drink, thinks the long suffering cleric.

The group then decide to make the most of the injured prisoner and his horrifying appearance. The second prisoner, a thug they apprehended the night before scouting the village outskirts, is kept in the same room as Baukunth. He has plenty of time to take in the 'dead' man's shocking appearance and completely believes the plague story the Landau crew have concocted. Udo plays the part of plague doctor convincingly and the captive is practically begging to be moved.

As the sky grows pearl-grey with the coming dawn, Franzis moves the thug prisoner and 'accidentally' lets him escape. Alfonzo and Franzis hope that the fellow will run back to the mob leader and tell him of the horrible sights of Hammelbass, thus encouraging the zealots to give the village a wide berth.

The captive, now freed, runs for his life but stumbles in the field outside the graveyard and twists his ankle. Franzis is furious with the incompetent, grumbling about having to patch the man up before letting him escape a second time. "I'm going to look a proper eejit, letting the same fellow get away from me twice." Alfonzo steps in and plays the gaoler for the second attempt, calling after the man as he flees. "Keep

running! That fellow's not undead. He's a demon!"

Jaroslav remains with Baukunth, hoping to question the man, now stronger after Udo's ministering.

The sickly prisoner is still almost catatonic, but the ankh that they recovered triggers something in the man. Baukunth taps the ankh against his forehead and Jaroslav leans closer to hear him murmur the name, "Bernard." When the artist mentions Anubis and Osiris as connected to the ankh imagery, Baukunth recoils fearfully.

Finally, the group assembles by the make-shift barricades at the edge of Hammelbass. "Much less make-shift since you let me take a look at your work," says Lazaro (fishing for a Carpentry tick). The bravest of the villagers hide behind upturned carts and cottage garden walls, watching the

mob of faith-crazed heretics approaching like a swarm of angered wasps. The cries and shouts of poorly remembered scripture drift over the defenders as the mob stops. A limping man emerges from the hedgerow to address the leader of the mob, Vogelhut Knipperdolling.

Once the idea is planted, Udo goes into action. The ash-smeared initiate stands at the barricade and orates in a carrying voice reminiscent of the tolling bell of the church. "This town is plague struck¹ and damned. For your souls and your flesh, come no nearer."

The scholar's voice convinced² the assembled zealots, with Knipperdolling in particular cuffing



¹ Plague doctor image taken from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

² Excellent roll on Orate from Sam, IIRC.

a few ears and directing his followers to detour around the cursed place.

As the mob recedes, the village breathes a collective sigh of relief.

Later, Jaroslav consults Mother Sarah, and learns that Bernard was the younger brother of Martin Baukunth, dead along with the rest of the Baukunth family some years before Martin returned from his travels. The ankh also once again triggers a revelation. A man, dressed in rich finery of black wool and silks was seen in Hammelbass only a few days before Martin himself died and was buried. The stranger wore a silver ankh matching the one Jaroslav now holds.

Session 22 (2023-05-25)

The aftermath of the Hammelbass siege. The villagers slowly return to their fields and toil. The women and children are summoned home from the forest. Udo examines Father Gross and is pleased to see the sickly priest is improved. Weak, yes, but certainly out of danger.

The group from Landau discuss their next move. Lazaro volunteers to take a horse and speed to Landau ahead of the mob to ensure the city is warned. His knowledge of back roads and little used paths serves him well and he reaches the city in good time, no sign of the mob seen.

He rides up to Captain Sforbeck, stationed with a line of musketeers outside the city walls. 400 muskets are arrayed and Lazaro feels the gaze of four hundred men on him as he approaches. He tells Sforbeck his news and gives the captain an estimate of the time left before the mob makes it to the city. Sforbeck offers the carriage driver a musket and tells him to join up the line.

The mercenaries in the line mutter and shuffle in the spots to make room. And they wait.

And wait.

Hours pass. His fellows in the musket line start conversations and call for warm drinks, but keep their heads down as the sergeant passes doling out cuffs and curses.

Eventually a keen-eyed soldier calls out. The mob approaches. Out of musket range, the now 600 strong crowd gathers, waving farm tools and makeshift weapons. Suddenly they charge, surging forward as a single mass.

The captains call "hold!" Lazaro raises his musket and checks his firecord as the crazed mob closes. "Hold!" comes the order again. The mob is close now, individual faces contorted in hate and religious frenzy discernable among the crowd.

"Fire!"

The call rings out followed almost instantly by the roar of the guns. Lazaro feels the shock as the front 200 muskets discharge. Clouds of stinking smoke wreath the soldiers. The second line fires after a short count and the deafening report is repeated. Lazaro staggers back to reload.

On the battlefield the mob is already broken. Dozens of bodies fall underfoot as the charging people stagger and fall back, breaking into smaller groups. Those at the rear hesitate and break into a retreat.

Landau's mercenaries fire again into the crowd and more fall, screams and groans follow the echoing roar of the guns.

The order comes. "Draw blades!" Muskets set aside, the soldiers advance and practise their deadly trade. The field runs red.

Sometime later, Lazaro retrieves his carriage and horses and turns slowly back to Hammelbass. He passes a pile of the dead on the road as soldiers begin the grisly task of building pyres. Puzzle hides under his legs and whimpers at the sickening scent.

Back in Hammelbass the others gather together to return to the cave in the woods. Baukunth weeps when he is told of their plans. "I will lose the thing I was sent to retrieve. I must return it to my master!"

Udo calms the distraught patient as Alfonzo, Franzis and Jaroslav head for the cave.

At the cave all is quiet. Franzis digs as he is directed, Alfonzo's and Jaroslav's keen eyes picking out irregularities in the rocks. With strength and persistence Franzis digs out an ancient wall of concrete and rock. The wall hides a curious geode of amethyst, with a small clay figurine in the form of a woman laid in its centre.

Session 23 (2023-06-02)

Alfonzo ignores the clay figurine of the woman and sets to work extracting the amethyst geode. As he digs the rest of the assembled party continue to examine the cave. Jaroslav's keen eyes spot a faded mark in the roof of the cave and, balancing precariously on Franzis's shoulders, gets close enough to find a hidden hole, bored into the rock. Gingerly he extends a hand into the cavity and extracts a second clay figure. This one is obviously male, with a curious donkey-like animal head. Though no expert, he guesses the figure is of a similar age to the female they previously found.

The geode safely tucked away in Alfonzo's sack, they return to the village of Hammelbass. Some discussion prods Jaroslav's memory of antiquities and he hazards that the male figure is another Egyptian deity, perhaps Set or some other evil god.

Lazaro returns from the city ashen faced after the scene of slaughter under the mercenaries' guns. Franzis recognizes his friend's plight and takes him drinking by the river to play pooh sticks and decompress.

Udo examines his patient, Martin Baukenth, once more and pronounces him fit to travel to Landau. The scholar urges the group to take the sick man back to the city where he can get proper care and it is agreed. After some preparations Franzis rides ahead to scout as Lazaro drives his coach with the others in train.

Franzis spies a curious figure who cuts off the main road as he approaches and whips his horse down narrow lanes towards the Bestwilling estate. Franzis gives chase with the carriage behind.

At the Bestwilling manor house, Franzis finds the stranger's horse panting the yard and the kitchen door open. The soldier carefully prowls about the ground floor before hearing a noise upstairs. He pokes his head out the front door to alert the arriving Lazaro to his plan then proceeds up the stairs as Lazaro takes the other stair to block any exits from the upper floor.

Upstairs, Franzis enters the first room with a door ajar, and finds himself in a private library. He is suddenly struck from behind and drops dazed to the floor. Lazaro sees a black-clad man run from the room, spot him, and turn to head down the back stairs to the kitchen, a book tucked under his arm.

Jaroslav and Alfonzo are downstairs, and it so happens that it is Jaroslav who is in the kitchen as the stranger abruptly stops in the door from the servants' corridor as he sees the artist checking for cheese or a forgotten hambone on the range. He draws a long, narrow knife and gestures.

The two men exchange looks and Jaroslav inches around the large table at the centre of the room, encouraging the other fellow to take the route around it to the door to the yard. Jaroslav begins a stream of persuasive gibberish, and the man pauses at the door for a moment. As he turns to escape, with his attention briefly off Jaroslav, the artist swings a heavy pewter stein from a shelf and brains the man. He is knocked senseless to the floor.

Comments on E&A #15

General: Bravo to Morgan Julian for the cover. Another banger.

Patrick Brady: Re *Spider Noir*: Unfortunately, it's already been cancelled, like so many shows nowadays. The Germans doing nasty experiments on human subjects in WWI also appeared in the 2017 *Wonder Woman* film. I think that Hollywood has difficulty separating WWI and WWII in their plots, and the Nazis are too convenient a villain for many producers to overlook.

John Redden: I'm very sorry to hear of the death of your friend, Chris.

Re power in the hands of a few globalised corporations: I take hope in a quote from Ursula Le Guin.

"We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words."

Patrick Riley: I enjoyed the final installment of Aurora Cove. I hope you get to run it again. It's a cool set-up.

Bryant Durrell: Re Two Universal *Dracula* movies filmed in parallel: Shades of *Rashomon* there. I'd love to see the two films back to back in a compare & contrast set-up. Better still, two films made with the same sets and same actors but telling interlocked but distinct stories in the same space.

RYCT Patrick Brady: I believe that a draft version of the *Bugtown* rules fell off the back of a digital lorry³ in the Ludonarrative Dissidents Discord at one point, though obviously you didn't hear that from me.

Brian Rogers: Good to hear things are improved in Casa Rodgers. I hope you find your groove in the new normal.

Your Library schedule of games is ambitious to say the least. I hope the library manager comes to their senses. It will be hellish otherwise.

I enjoyed (as always) the Regrettable Superhero, Kangaroo Man, and the details of the various versions of the legacy Puppeteer. I also love transparent talking heads in comic books (Prof. X and The Ancient One for starters) so the companion sisters are definitely keepers. Mary O'Nette's carving the world's most effective Resting Bitch Face drew a snigger, but I worry that if she's successful she'll be infringing The Face's niche. Either that or they team up and terrify hoodlums between them like a batter running back and forth between bases.

RYCT me re Elizabeth's 3 rPD cranial protection: Delicacy stops me from quoting the whole thing

but Jim 'Wash Out' Pfaffenbach (played by Jon Cryer), in *Hot Shots* (1991), declines an alternative solution in a similar circumstance..

Brian Misiaszek: I loved the detail of the Twsha infection mimicking leopards' spots on Dolores, and the resulting shenanigans. She reads almost like a PC in taking advantage of the situation.

Lauren and you both look well in your photo. I hope she's enjoying apartment life and law school.

Gabriel Roark: I hope you've recovered well from your ice-rink tumble. I tripped on a curb a few weeks ago and banged up my right knee, right hand and wrist. All seems better now, thankfully.

Thanks for the kind words on my medical spelunking. As you said (groans) "everything came out all right in the end."

Re Madman of Gaming trophies: I really would like to try a game with individual mechanics tailored to each player. W.F. Smith, of the "Prismatic Wasteland" blog, had a stab at something like this (or at least adjacent) with a post titled "You Don't Need a Game System Before You Play: The Calvinball Experiment⁴." The post described a game of *Ultraviolent Grassland* played without any initial rules. GM and players ad-libbed rules and resolutions as they played, keeping rules the group agreed on, discarding ones they felt didn't work. This doesn't quite hit the mark of different rules for each player, but comes close.

In play I find that different players engage with the rules in different ways, and particularly, to different depths. One player has a reliably unreliable memory of the rules, particularly what die/dice to roll, and so just wants to roll and find out what happens next. Another player often wants rules they can fiddle with, or exploit, and so appreciates more complex or interlocking rules that reward system mastery.

Roger_BW: Re AI in academia in YCT Patrick Brady: As well as the risks in AI displacing opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate their own skills, once they move

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<https://www.prismaticwasteland.com/blog/you-dont-need-a-game-system-before-you-play>

³ Was pushed off the lorry by JW himself, in fact.

into post-graduate research I worry that a rake of publications will be tarnished with plagiarism accusations, real or imagined, due to the wave of AI material both trained on published research and churned out in industrial quantities. Given the current hit-or-miss quality of automated plagiarism detection, it can be hard to refute an accusation, and often the damage is done even if the accusation is later proved false. While the corporate world might be more *laissez-faire* about people lifting material from others without credit, in academia it can be career-ending (though less reliably so if the culprit is a white male).

RYCT re the sort-of character funnel horror game: I got to play (only a single session unfortunately) of *Mythic Bastionland* in which the GM had us all playing trappers in the wilderness pursued by (possibly supernatural) wolves. All trappers died but we were eased into the rules and the news of the strange animals came to the player knights as we then started the session proper. Not quite a funnel, as no one survived to join the questing knights, but I felt it worked as a quick way to introduce the rules and built some stakes.

RYCT Lisa Padol re Ken Hite: Does Ken Hite usually cast Britain as evil or destroyed? I haven't read enough of his scenarios to have noticed this. What does he have against Old Blighty?

Dylan Capel: Re *Fleaux!* and the Warhammer's Old World being better served by flavour and colour than mechanics: I agreed, and found *Kriegsmesser* did a perfectly good job of conjuring the feel of the 1500-1600s with oddities and magic thrown in, albeit without dwarves, elves and the like.

I'm also a fan of the 24xx series of games by Jason Tocci. Each one is a pared-back snapshot of a setting and the common mechanical framework allows easy borrowing from the other mini-games to expand any given setting. I must dig out my digital copies and re-read them with a view to running some short games for my Thursday group.

The *Experience Bubbles* post from the "Prismatic Wasteland" blog was thought-provoking. As someone who dropped counting XP in

level-based games years ago, I like rolling more dice, and the compensation of an extra hit point if your XP die comes up a '1'.

Dale Meier: I love your Deitrick-inspired *Traveller* ad, and hope you find players soon.

The Deitrick art on various *Traveller Battletech* and FASA *Star Trek* supplements always caught my eye in the game shops in the 80's. I'm sad that the man is suffering⁵ with ankylosing spondylitis and rheumatoid arthritis. Chronic pain is exhausting.

I hope you beat back the depression and funk. I know too well how draining that can be.

Michael Cule: A belated happy birthday to you! Good luck hijacking a yacht for next year's Perseids.

I was, indeed, not surprised that Graham's first spell was Custard Jet. I presume that he has argued that it's that particular molten form of custard from secondary school dinners of yore, which strips the flesh from tongue and roof of the mouth alike.

Re Quinns Quest: Quinns can be very enthusiastic it's true, but I admire his genuine excitement with games that really speak to him.

Re Farage: I'm waiting for the Reform cronies to get the knives out. A problem stocking your party with ex-Tory bastards is that they have the knives and are clearly happy to use them.

Avram Grumer: Re the *Blades* '68 page count: I also favour (much) shorter games. I'm not sure why the original BitD was as long as it was, and I admit I never read it all the way through. John Harper's *World of Dungeons* is much more my sort of thing.

I've followed a solo-play of *Stonetop* for several years now on SGH's Play to Find Out⁶ substack but I can't see myself reading or using 1200+ pages for any campaign, even one as beautifully thought-out and described as *Stonetop*.

Patrick Zoch: Amazing work on the LED light-up warships. It must be dead impressive at the table.

⁵ <https://davidr3deitrick.wordpress.com/about/>

⁶ <https://ptfo.substack.com/>

Timothy Collinson: Your description of the yurt retreat is appealing.

It's literally decades since I last had to read scientific paper abstracts in earnest. I like your idea of abstracts as might appear in-universe journals. The two abstracts presented felt a bit extended to my recollection of astronomy related abstracts, but I'm ignorant of the style required outside my old field so that might just be my parochialism showing. Of course, your goal with the abstracts is more than a summary of a paper; they serve as adventure hooks and setting background too.

The colonoscopy was my third, IIRC, and apart from the prep it was pretty uneventful. I remembered the advice given to me before the first time I had the procedure. "Don't look at the monitors as the endoscope is inserted!" Unfortunately I forgot the reverse is also true and didn't look away in time for the endoscope's reappearance.

Re Count Binface: Not a surprising result, but a pity nonetheless. I'd like to see Farage take a beating at the polls.

Joshua Kronengold: Re common fiction but separate rules for each player: I'd forgotten about Chris's infatuation with the *Dogs in the Vineyard* mechanics and how they were used in the Strange School campaign. As you note, most sessions were diceless, and that creates its own burden on the GM, but doesn't branch to the extent of a separate set of rules for each PC.

I hope you get your sleep patterns to where you want them to be. Disordered sleep can really knock me back.

I hope you and Lisa had a great time at Worldcon. I'm hoping that the 2029 con bid goes to Dublin again.

Re hijinks ensue: I can always rely on Pete to play his PC to the hilt, but also in ways that bring other PCs into the spotlight. He's a generous player and engages with the GM's plot hooks too. I hope I don't take him for granted.

Lisa Padol: Re Joshua Kronengold's comment to me: What was it like GMing for players using different mechanics, as in the Strange School

game? Any particular pain points or ways to smooth switching between mechanics?

RYCT me re starter sets and demo kits: You're correct. Some starter sets are essential one-shots with enough rules description to get through the presented scenario. Other sets, and I'm thinking of Chaosium's *Runequest* one in particular, are jammed full of material for several sessions of play. I haven't looked at the *Call of Cthulhu* 7th ed starter set but the store page on the Chaosium website makes it look equally full of stuff. These sorts of starter sets deliberately leave out character creation, which makes sense for games with relatively involved, multi-step creation rules.

RYCT Roger BW re political content in write-ups: I agree. It's less likely to boil over into an ongoing argument if it's not comments but instead part of a write-up. I'd like to think that we're all able to conduct civil discussions but admit that modern-day politics talk easily descends into name-calling and arguing in bad faith. So far, though, I'm with you on the "this could go too far" drum.

Re Satanic Panic and hidden messages in heavy metal albums: IIRC Judas Priest testified in a hearing on subliminal messages in the track "Better By You, Better Than Me" on their album, *Stained Class*. As the Wikipedia article⁷ on the track in question mentioned, the singer Rob Halford suggested 'commanding their fans to kill themselves would be quite counterproductive; from the band's perspective it would be much more practical to insert the command "buy more of our records".'

Re boxed text and reading aloud to the players: I'm very much with you on this. Setting colour and background I'm happy to leave to handouts like your shared Google document, but sometimes I have trouble getting players to pick up on things I've described in a simple one or two-sentence description of a room, so reading longer passages aloud is often a waste of time.

I found recently while running "The Estate" campaign setting for *Mausritter* for the UCC workplace group that I'm happy handing out the

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Better_by_You,_Better_than_Me

maps (unmarked players' copies), which give the players a view of the layout that OSR grognards would likely frown at. At our sessions it's got the players more interested in the surroundings and more likely listen to descriptions and ask follow-up questions.

Jim Vassilakos: Re the Secret Service raid on Steve Jackson Games and subsequent trial: SJG has a webpage about the whole affair⁸, and I find it interesting that SJG relied on financial support from the then nascent Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), which has gone on to be a stalwart in defence of privacy, rights online and actually defending free speech.

Good luck with the Eaton Collection and finding a home when downsizing your games collection. I've occasionally wondered what I should do about the mountain of games I own. The great majority of my games sit on shelves or in boxes. It seems a waste not to pass them on to people who could make use of them.

And Finally



Above is an old family photograph I recently re-discovered that shows the aftermath of the bombing of the North Strand and Summerhill, Dublin⁹ in May 1941, by German bombers confused as to their location. 28 people died in the bombings and at least another 50 were injured, and 300 homes were destroyed.

The photo and its story remains in my family history as it destroyed the Corcorans' Bakery on the North Strand and caused no end of difficulties for my father's family at the time. The story, as with many families, has grown in the telling, with my grandfather's generation all claiming increasingly unlikely roles in the events of the day and afterwards.

The boy in the photograph was said to be my grandfather or my father at different points, but neither is possible, as my father was born in 1943, and my grandfather was a grown man in 1941. He could well be a relative, but equally could be some kid from the neighbourhood.

At this distant remove over 85 years later, I mourn that we, as a species, continue to bomb one another and repeat the bloody past, lessons unlearnt.

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⁸ <https://www.sjgames.com/SS/>

⁹

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bombing_of_Dublin_in_World_War_II

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #15

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

All About Me

The vacation went well, thank you for asking. A week on an island off the coast of Maine, it was lovely. And delicious as the food trucks have hit even there, with a breakfast bakery and an empanada place sharing a small spot of bayside coastline, not far from a recently opened cocktail bar. We were all very happy.



Better still, the lobster boat co-op was there for me to get fresh sea bugs to cook for the family that eats sea bugs (served with fries and sautéed peppers).

The eastern coast of the island has a peninsular bit only accessible at high tide, and at the edge of that you can see the tiny island below, with the small house on it. The elder kiddo and I spent some time spinning yarns on who lived out there back in the day, from sea ghost



lobstermen to naiads to behooked madmen stranded out there by a group of meddling kids and their dog. It really is lovely and evocative.

Otherwise we are rolling back into my crazy time at work; but this time next month I'll have (I promise) the Star Wars write up as well as feedback on how Shirecon 2026 went. I'm in Top Secret: New World Order, AD&D 2E and Star Frontiers games, and psyched.

Inside the Library:

The Denizens

So far the actual Denizens of the Library game in **13th Age** has had 1 session that went exactly as I hoped: some sneaking, a pretty high tension battle with a bugbear sorcerer/warlord of the invading army (who got away) and his many minions including a manticores (who did not), followed by the players finding the map of the attacking army's battle plan.

Alire: (Wood Elf Bard/Sorcerer, formerly seconded from the elven army to represent the Elf Queen in the fladiatorial arenas of Axis): Well they are stupid... siege warfare is a slog, they'll never take a walled city...

Sol: (Dark Elf Druid who has seen some shit in the Underdark): I think there may be more of them than you expect. A LOT more....

Sol is 100% right, as we are running through *Red Hand of Doom* from D&D 3.5E, and there is a <checks notes> metric fuckton of orc, dragons, and other monsters on the way, all being commanded by the ancient green dragon who the PCs freed from the Forbidden City who, in human form, has become a high warlord of the Orc Lord just to be able to get the army she needs to free her lover, the Great Green Dragon. The goal is to get through this before Alire's player leaves for college, since his PCs is magically tied into the spells that keeps the Great Green Dragon quiescent. This has been part of the plan... well not all along, but since pretty early on.

Heroes for Hire?

This semester, alternating weeks are a series of 2 session games designed for quick start, easy to learn games in different genres. September was the classic FASERIP Marvel Super Heroes, using the module *Lone Wolves* as its basis. The PCs in that are Power Man, Iron Fist, Black Widow and Daredevil. I swapped out Black Widow for Jessica Jones because the Widow is so different in the MCU (and was never Daredevil's girlfriend as she was in 1980's. This is the roster for the Netflix *Defenders*. I also statted up Spider-Man and Black Cat in case we had a 5th and 6th player. I needn't have worried: only 3 kids signed up, and had vaguely heard of Daredevil; the other three were total unknowns. I had forgotten that the Defenders came out 9 years ago! These kids were all under 10 then and not watching adult targeted supers shows!

With a player late due to soccer tryouts, the others rolled up new heroes; the late kid chose Iron Fist.¹ new heroes:

Doctor Antaeus: In his 30's, he kept his mutation secret while establishing a life as a *Daily Bugle* science writer. His mutation ties him to Earth's biosphere, with rapid healing and generation of light & anti-light (which stuns targets). He can draw earth around him to take on a 7-foot-tall rock form, but the concentration leaves him highly instinctive and monosyllabic. His 'costume' is all black clothing & shades with a white lab coat over it (all treated with a chemical of his own design to resist stains) while he emits white light from his head to block his features, rendering him in pure black and white.

F RM, A TY, S GD/IN, E IN, R IN/FB, I EX, P GD

Powers:

Gaiac Link *GD* (Regeneration, Light Manipulation, Distance Attack – Darkforce)

Matter Control – Earth *IN* (Armor form, Strength *IN*, Reason *FB*, Body Armor *RM* (30/10).

Talents & Contacts:

Chemistry, Journalism 3 contacts across those fields.

Malius: A scientist/soldier from a parallel world yanked to our Earth² by Advanced Idea Mechanics, the transfer altered the man calling himself Malius. He escaped with his new shapeshifting powers and speed. Using local technology he replicated his shoulder-mounted 'goo-gun', a non-lethal weapon. He takes on a distinctive 'hammer-head' form when acting as a hero to protect his identity.

F IN, A TY, S AM, E RM, R AM, I IN, P TY

Powers:

Goo Gun *MN* (Distance Attack - Ensnaring)

Dimensional Overlay *RM* (Ground or flight speed increases to 105mph)

Malleable Form *RM* (Can grow wings [Flight *PR*, 60 mph] or other limbs/muscles/sensory organs [without this power he is **F GD, S EX, E GD, I GD**; limb mods boost any of those +1 rank], Shapeshifting *RM*)

Talents & Contacts:

Weapon Mastery (Goo Gun), **Martial Arts** *E* (Initiative boost), **Acrobatics**. No Contacts

All MSH modules have 6 chapters of 2 pages each, usually with fights, sometimes with investigation, but self-contained; escaped villains might get moved to a later chapter, but there's always a new threat so the GM doesn't have to manufacture an escape. (Which is weird because forcing an escape is one of the few things foes can spend Karma on?) This let me hack out several chapters to fit the now reduced timescale.

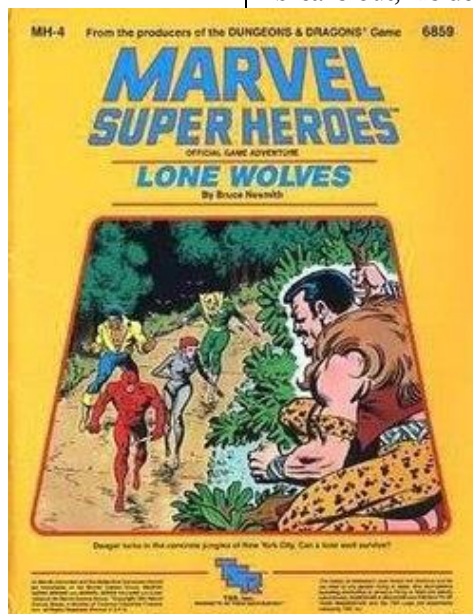
Chapter 1: as writ – Iron Fist is in Washington Heights (which the module calls 'Upper Manhattan') to protect a client's property on a Heroes for Hire case, while Malus is squatting in an apartment there acclimating to the new Earth and Dr. Antaeus lives nearby in a building with several at risk kids. Their day is disrupted when a riot breaks out; inside that riot are masses of rats, under the

control of Vermin, who in turn is being monitored by Sabertooth, a super-mercenary that Iron Fist has battled before. Malus goo-guns Vermin, Iron Fist protects his client *and* ends the riot by breaking open a fire hydrant to shock the people and disperse rats, and Dr. Antaeus, who is timing his changes to hide that he has two forms because teenager, protects kids from his building but 'helps' Sabertooth 'escape' by clobbering him 5 blocks away... through his building!

Session/Chapter 2: the PCs use their Reason, Intuition, Talents & Connections question Vermin *and* discern the rats were infected with

a rage toxin. They get to an AIM base in the Bronx (the one Malus escaped from but couldn't find again... doing a *Marvel Team-Up* with Iron Fist and *your own heroes!*), with Dr Antaeus using new senses off his gaiac powers (at a high karma cost!) and Malus shapeshifting into an AIM agent to get in... and immediately be captured by MODOK and dosed with rage venom; MODOK then lured the other PCs to break into the same room for the inevitable hero vs. hero battle that the players took in good humor before fighting AIM Cyborgs and Sabertooth, whom Iron Fist 'helped' 'escape' by knocking him 5 blocks away. Eventually MODOK was lured out and defeated. The kids all claimed to have a great time, with one saying it opened his eyes to non-fantasy genres.

Yes Kraven's on the cover; yes, he got cur out for time.



¹ Image from the [Wikipedia article](#) for the module, here

² I refuse to call it Earth 616 and you can't make me.

Stating Up Regrets 14: Invisible Scarlet O'Neil

This month's not-so-regrettable heroine from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* is a good example of how widely you can spread the super-hero genre net. In this case she's... well, lets have the author explain it: *Action...without blood and thunder! Adventure...exciting but human! Fantasy...but with a humorous twist!* All this and more when you look at, or at least try to look at, Invisible Scarlet O'Neil! Since she started in a newspaper strip, here's her convenient origin story!³

Invisible Scarlet O'Neil



Introducing . . .



By Russell Stamm



Basically, she's a beautiful, curious, brave woman who can turn invisible. Imagine Nancy Drew, but unseen, and you'll get the gist of it. Her creator, Russell Stamm, had worked on Dick Tracey and saw a niche for a similar style of strip but with less violence and more whimsy. He was correct, too, as ISN was appearing in over 100 newspapers at her peak, with corresponding comic books and other merch (including a paper doll set).

There's a great line from Jim Shooter at Marvel that you can make any book sell if you find the right audience, which is why he was so unwilling to give up on the *Dazzler* comic. He really felt that since Romance comics used to be reliable sellers (up through Patsy Walker at Marvel) he could backdoor a romance comic by making it star a Mutant who had some adventure hooks⁴. Alas, Patsy Walker ended up becoming Hellcat, and Dazzler's book kept being not romance but highly supers – at one point she was interacting with Galactus! – but the book did keep trying. There was only so much romance 1980's Marvel Comics readers would tolerate.

Still, you can see how ISN would fit right into the milieu. There are even other supers types in her world – in one arc a super-hypnotist takes control of her to use her as a murderer – so the stretch isn't even that great. ISN is right up with Lady Satan for needing a modern telling.

So how to build it? As with many of these characters Scarlet is easy because she has one central gimmick. She also has a clear weakness, which means she needs at least one other ability, likely a skill.

Let's consult the oracular bones of St. Cuthbert! That's a 3 on the die, so 5 rolls plus 1 weakness, with the usual dropping. Obviously, we start with *Invisibility*, by the book, with *Special Requirement* (must touch wrist to turn invisible). The other 4 rolls on the skills table are as follows: *Heightened Strength A* (+14), *Heightened Attack* (all attacks), *Heightened Defense*, and *Heightened Training*. No matter how good the Heightened Strength is it still has to go for not fitting with her concept. The rest of it fits like a fine silk eveningwear glove like she has in the image below. I'm only going to make one tweak to tighten her focus.

Specifically, her *Heightened Attack* (+1d8 damage) only applies when her target doesn't expect a meaningful attack. Since she's often invisible, and the rest of the time she's a dame who weighs a buck oh five soaking wet, so this will be almost all her attacks, but if someone who can see her is taking her seriously, she's out of luck.

The trade off for this? +3 to her Charisma and +1 to Endurance (in essence she has Ht. Charisma +4 with the *Beautiful* option). Not much but like I said, keeps her focus tight. This gives her 15s in End, Cha & Agi, with 9 Str and 12 Int. 51 Fatigue, 10 HP. But with *Heightened Training* these will go up quick: she has every reason to get into adventures... she is desperate for that life experience!



³ You can find an archive of her strips [here](#); but alas it doesn't look like the graphic novel they promised ever materialized> Invisible Scarlet O'Neil was created by Russell Stamm and is in the public domain.

⁴ I admit I own the whole series, and find the early issues charming with Dazzler wrestling with her three suitors from various socio-economic strata... and also the Absorbing Man.

But how do you play it?

Invisible Scarlet O'Neil is a mystery/suspense/action/romance comic. I am tempted to say "how can you *not* play it, but it's actually a pretty fine line to walk. She doesn't have any powers that directly give her clues, but basically each story is her stumbling into a problem and then using her invisibility to follow people until she gets to the bottom of it. She's very hard to spot, almost impossible to hit (and hard to hit even when visible), she invisible can reliably clobber people (she will routinely use the invisibility attack bonuses to make special attacks to disarm opponents by kicking their hand really hard!). She's not a genius – no heightened intelligence or senses – but given time her stats will all be above 15 and she'll have a wide array of skills. Daughter of a scientist, insatiably curious, she is just a sponge for knowledge and training. Imagine she's a 105 lbs female Jack Reacher; once she's involved it's just a matter of time before whatever scheme she is tracking will come crashing down.

And she'll look great doing it, even if you can't see her.

The regrettable world

Like so many others she's not a natural team player, so you can slot her with Spider Queen, Funnyman/Girl, and Kangaroo Man as a solo hero who the Regrettables can call on in times of need. In fact, she could easily be the on again/off again love interest of one of the heroes. Maybe she pines away for the imprisoned, intense 711, but for now is having a dance or two with Zippo? They might not even know she's got powers, so she's just an series of mysterious events in their existing stories.

The more I think on this, the more I like the idea; in part it's because Dazzler appeared in so many books and was so many super-heroes friends that I like the carry over. But also it lets her interact with the super-hero world without it being the focus of her own stories. She gets to have her own heroic mysteries, but also be on site if not in sight when Zippo is fighting giant rats or whatever.

Also, I think watching her and Babs from the face share a drink would be a hoot.



Regretting what I said to you...

Myles and Patrick Riley both appreciated Funnyman's off the character sheet weakness; it's good to laugh. Myles further comments on the fourth wall breaking so early in comics – I don't know if there was anyone who predated Funnyman in this, but this should have killed!

Lisa called out that Danny Kaye as a super-hero is oddly believable, and I agree. I'm a big fan of Kaye's work, and if in his memoirs he mentioned fighting crime I wouldn't bat an eye. She and Josh both comment on the Court Jester anecdote; the version I heard was that Kaye was so vigorous in his fencing that he slashed Rathbone's scalp with an unexpected movement. It's not that Basil couldn't have taken him in a real fight, it's that Kaye couldn't pull back and was too unpredictable in what should have been staging fencing. But also that if Kaye had put his mind to it he would have been a terror.



Rule #1 of the Golden Age:
Sooner or later, there's always a gorilla...

Comments on E&A 15

Patrick Brady: RE names: you've overcome the *Brian Hegemony*. RE reviews: thank you, that's very flattering. RE *the Boys*: I generally avoid all things Garth Ennis, so I have to assume the improvement in the TV show is that it had less Garth Ennis involvement. RE Paid DMs: I initially found it baffling but Matt Colville's video on RPGs as a hobby (by his definition things people enjoy/don't mind spending their money on) vs folk tradition (things people think should be free, communal goods/events) helped clarify things. I want RPG production to fall into the Hobby level because it can be real work and the laborer is worthy of their wages, as good ol' Timothy said. But DMing of the game for me has always been a folk tradition: I run games because I love running games and sharing them with my friends. For people where no one in their group sees it as a folk tradition, none of them want that mantle, but they all want to be in the hobby, paying a GM makes sense: they don't mind spending money on this because it is a hobby! Reports from paid GMs is that the players are all way more focused on playing the game when they have anted up, which is good. RE boardgame cafes: I have been to one in NYC, and another out in Camden, Maine with my wife who is just getting into boardgames; I find them charming. re *the Spider*: I haven't read *ALBION* but I am familiar with Moore's early *Captain Britain* stuff where the heroes killed by the Fury were old UK characters. I should track *ALBION* down. I love that Jerry Siegel was involved in this character! I need to read more... Thanks for sharing. re *Spider Noir*: absolute agreement on the strength of Field's costuming. I also agree on the comments re changes in the origin story & the WWI German medical experiments. Knowing nothing of the comic I assumed it was because Spider-Man always has a weird science explanation, and this was as good a weird science origin as any? But China makes some sense. (Personally, I like keeping the Atomic Age characters mysticism free in regardless of how silly 'radiation did it' is now.) The way you describe this it feels like Deception is a gumshoe investigative ability, where it always works to get more information. It hadn't occurred to me that the Spider's powers were on what *Champions* calls an Endurance Battery. That makes sense for the series though. In the adaptations of the comics, it's common for Peter to lose his powers as he loses faith in himself or drops his desire to be Spider-Man: movies love the direct tie of the acceptance of his heroic burden with his heroic powers.

Patrick Riley: RE [Aurora Cove economy](#) RE even Regrettable Super-Heroes: Hey Now! That's my turf! But comparing some systems to sonnets is a good way to view things. RYCT Josh on D&Ds bells and whistles being combat, but the plot doesn't need to involve it: I

just watched a review for *Wild Beyond the Witchlight* that made me want to play 5E because there were viable paths through with no combat if you followed the fairy tale logic of it. RE *Pathfinder 2E*: I haven't read it, just going from oft repeated statements on-line. I played just enough 5E in 2014 to know it wasn't for me.

John Redden: I may be the one person around who is not wowed by Tchaikovsky. Both the books I read have left me more irritated than satisfied. In *Service Model* he kept reaching for jokes he didn't tonally set up, and each kicked me out of the book; his attempts to be Adams/Pratchett were so intermittent that it was a detriment. Re my kvetching: *Library Administrators* but the booing and hissing stands.

Bryant Durrell: RYC on *Foundry*: would love a theater of the mind VTT. I used *Roll20* for everything when I was doing remote play and their *13th Age* support was fine; I ended up trying to find workarounds for *Mutant City Blues* as we never used maps, but it was handy for the dice and the notes and a case whiteboard. Thanks for the review(s) of *Fantasia*. RE finding players: happy to help! And thanks for the Western suggestions!

Brian Misiaszek: OK, having Dolores resemble a leopard is just MEAN. But very, very pulp. Bone Drift is real is honestly creepy. RYCT me on settings vs. eras and *Traveller* vs *D&D*: I'm clearly not the person to ask because I generally eschew the pre-written settings, but right now what I'm hearing from [Mastering Dungeons](#) is WotC thinks there are now so many players ~~for Psychhistory to work~~ for isolated settings to still hit critical mass of profitability. It's so weird that 75% of D&D players started after 2014.

Mark Wilson: RYCT Patrick Brady on AI: yes, one of the non-profits I contract with has an AI agent solely built for sifting through FDA approved drug effects to cross check against conditions that were not what the med was designed to treat but may be helpful. That sort of work is amazing. On the other hand, no one thinks that Pope Julius II painted the Sistine chapel the way AI adherents say they *made* a picture or *wrote* a book.

Gabriel Roark: I am glad you 'merely' wrenched you knee; I fully expected you to hit your head! Lukas' Laser Sword? <facepalm> Gamma World does have several [tech investigation charts](#) across the editions.

Attronarch: What PC did Bob's player introduce after Bob's cursed existence?

Roger Bell-West: RYCT Mark Wilson on Rangers as lienage of old kings: I'm not a deep enough Tolkien-phile to know but I remember the implication that Rangers are a larger group of which Aragorn is just one (ah, the

humble future king). Are all the Rangers of high lineage, or is Aragorn the best ranger because of his? (This stuff is why my Hobbit-themed game has Lineage as a Basic Attributes: bloodline is super important!) re YCT Lisa on *Definitively Wizards*: see, "Seven Familiars in a Trenchcoat" suffers from the same PC problem as *Space Ship Zero* where two of the PC archetypes are Robbie style Robots and Super-Intelligent Pets and I must assume every ship is staffed exclusively with those two.

Myles Corcoran: some friends who were stymied at the eclipse in Texas flew to Iceland for this one, only for the cloud cover to kill that one too. Kiddo and I were very lucky in Vermont 4 years back. As for your music lyric, even I got this one! Owl legs always look weird. RE not everything tying in: I always feel guilty about that. I shall have to remember "a proper dose" for later use. Yes, it's always nice to get the tip of the hat on embedded jokes. RE Bendis: I enjoyed his crime comics, and much of the first arc of *Powers*, but wow, do I dislike what he did to 21st century Marvel. Pretty much every part of it, except Miles Morales. I'll pass along your kind words about the *Billion Worlds*.

Dale Meier: Re E&A: Remember that RPGs are fun; writing for the zine is fun. If the comments add 1 iota of stress to your month you can set is aside. (this is very much the stance I'm trying to take these days)

Michel Cule: RYCT Patrick Brady, "Yes Mr. Cule, we're sure that system will crack it." <turns to aide> "please put him back on crayons, he's doing mechanics fiddling again and you know how that agitates him." LOL at your comment to Matt Stevens. RYCT to me "The ability of people with more emotional need to manage people than understanding of the job to get promoted is one of the unsolved problems of civilization." Yes, this, spot on.

Avram Grumer: I remember Jeb mentioning the "Sword of Chang" and my laughter was bitter and ironic. Thanks for resurfacing "Immanentize the Eschaton," as I am noodling with *Mage: the Ascension* and that phrase is kind of the point. I splurged and backed *Seven-Part Pact* based on Quinn's blog post; the thing that Ben Robbins has on his blog that most intrigues me now is *This Means War*, which will be the system for the next book of what is now my *Swords of the Serpentine* game. Re *Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove*: the new *Pink Opague*!⁵

Lisa Padol: RYCT Roger Bell-West: PCs in *JB007* were pretty hardy, with Hero Points to help keep them alive, so it was likely early *Top Secret*. RYCT me: Kiddo

enjoyed *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, but once again it was nails on a chalkboard for my wife⁶. As for what *Star Wars* is, it's pornography: you know it when you see it. RE the library, they are used to 1 presenter to 15-20 people, as one offs/once a month... Book clubs, STEM lectures, etc. Monthly board game nights are 2-3 staff but 40-60 attendees. My taking 4 afternoons a month⁷ for 10 kids total each month is inefficient. Why can't I run monthly for 20 people?⁸ The administrator in question apparently is a Critical Role fan, but still doesn't get it. Thanks for the help in sourcing the Invisibles omnibus. RE *Good Society*: I think we're all on the "you should play the game you signed up to play as the game you signed up to play/please explain the game before I sign up" stance. I'm glad my interpretation for language-based mind control made sense! RYCT Josh: the best version of the *Eye of Argon* is the one [with comments from Joel & the Bots from MST3K through the text](#). looking forward to more Masks/Good Society write up.

Jim Eckman: RYC Traveller law levels: I think the assumption was PCs access to weapons opens/closes/changes so many plots that it needed a slider; it needs a better name, since Law Level implies so much more than "State Monopoly On Weapons".

Joshua Kronengold re YCT Matt on *FATE*: <[Ted Lasso](#)> yup, it's horrible. Admit it, *FATE* is all a prank and you play real systems when no one else is around. RYC to Matt on Rangers: while this is more noodly into 4E and 5E than I can comment on, it's really brining to mind that in *Earthdawn* the class was split into Archer and Beastmaster, and perhaps for good reason. Re *If you didn't want to receive a strongly worded letter from someone named Esquire* <Snort!> re *Queer By Design*: it's QbD in action then it can overwhelm, or as you said be angry or sad. If as in *Monsterhearts* it's QbD in THEME, then it infuses everything, like *Buffy* as "High School is Hell" without every episode being "oh kill another demon" but "what are high school things, how do they work as horror". RYCT me on the library administrator: no, she really has no clue. Thanks for the compliment for the illusionary demons. I'm losing Eldon's player during the fall semester so he can ~~pursue CTE~~, play football, which strikes me as an enormous waste. He saw me at the library the other day and talked about wanting to hire a wizard to reverse engineer the anti-gravity trap to make a spell of attraction/repulsion; he is just so engaged with the world. RE which ONE Puppeteer I'd pick: oh you sweet, sweet summer child. Re Phoenix: I think you're conflating the movie ending with the original comic

⁵ This is an "I Saw the TV Glow" reference, to explain.

⁶ interestingly her best friend also hates it

⁷ In a room that doesn't see as much use otherwise!

⁸ The old "9 women + 1 month = 1 baby" problem

ending, as Wolverine isn't Jean's killer in the comics⁹. And her resurrection was not part of the original plan, but pitched by a young Kurt Busiak, who was not on Marvel's staff when Jean was killed. Even Jean's death was not part of the initial plot but insisted on by Jim Shooter in editorial after the planet eating thing. But you are right, I suspect, about Xavier's microverse genocide being allowed because no one was paying attention. re parasitic games: someone (I think Matt Colville?) pointed out that many of the noodly dungeon & world design subsystems in *AD&D* make more sense when you remember that when these came out there was no internet, the 3 networks of TV often sucked, there wasn't an established SF/F genre niche; this complex noodling for potential DMs was FUN in part because there was no other way to engage with the game and comparatively few other options. re *Amber* & Bad Stuff: in my final *Amber* game I had two players demanding to be 1st in Warfare and the auction and end with 173 and 172 respectively, while 3rd place was about 40. Wow they have Bad Stuff out the wazoo!

Jim Vassilakos: RE finding new players, I remember ages ago when you wrote about this and discussed the gambit of dropping your pencil in a college class and loudly announcing "I failed my DEX" to see who reacted¹⁰. And now we're posting in Senior Centers.... RE the library: In MCT Lisa I go into more detail on the numbers game. We had one parent complain after her kid had not shown up for months upon being told that there was a waiting list so we were going to stop holding her son's spot that HE WAS JUST ABOUT TO COME BACK, and it was HIDEOUSLY UNFAIR THAT AFTER MONTHS OF NO CONTACT HER WORD THAT HE WAS ABOUT TO COME BACK WASN'T SUFFICIENT TO OVERTURN THIS DECISION. She complained high enough and would have won but didn't want her kid in MY games because I had been so cruel as to suggest his months of silence was sufficient to deny him entry (not that there was another DM). RYCT Attronarch: I had been assuming the witch the PCs accidentally freed from the window was responsible for the sickness. RYCT Peter Hildreth on downsizing: I got rid of a bunch of stuff by giving it away to other gamers who expressed interest in the Fans of the *Dead Game Society* Facebook page¹¹. I am clearing out some more, including my paper A&Es, at ShireCon's auction as the goal is getting it to people who will use them). RE libraries as outdated institutions: maybe I can send our new administrator to do some cataloging!

Timothy Collinson: re spaceships as dungeons, I was struck with a comparison to bases in early *V&V*, which are absolutely mapped as dungeon spaces /fight grids /architectural plans, but the room descriptions are old school dungeon, where PCs need to be in this room looking in this place to find this clue to that explains a chunk of a larger plot when that's not how super-hero narratives work, but it is how mapping areas in 1981 worked. Re the Library: see my comments to Lisa on what I think the librarian is thinking. Re Yurts: Way back in the oughts some of us would wax rhapsodic about yurts in Gmail exchanges to see how desperately Google ads would try to pitch yurt purchases/rentals /vacations/build your own kits at us. It's odd to see someone actually using one!

Erica Frank: If you're reading this, I am so sorry for your loss.

Everyone else: RAEBNC

Reviews to Use Space

This year I have been picking up novels that had been highlighted by the Science Fiction Book Club back in the 80's; I was seeing ads both in *Dragon* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. So far this has included Leo Frankowski's *Cross Time Engineer* and *High Tech Knight*, Simon Hawke's *The Wizard of Sunset Strip*, and David Bischoff's *The Destiny Dice*. And with the glow of deep nostalgia for the time period I have to inform you:

THEY ARE HORRIBLE.

The Frankowski books I review [here](#), and I stand by their being compulsively readable but a nightmare. For the other two? I found them unreadable.

I might not be being fair to Simon Hawke as this is book 3 in a series where I haven't read the first two, but the exposition of the clumsy and contrived set up left me no interest in continuing. As for *Destiny Dice*, it was yet another contemporary slang in fantasy setting thing that was again dripping in misogyny.

So, the 1980's were a whole thing. As I commented to Josh, the world creation subtables in the DMG were a good way to spend time compared to this stuff. Of course there were 9 books in Frankowski's series, 14 in Hawke's and there are 3 Gaming Magi books that the internet tells me were influential. So what do I know?

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

⁹ It's an ancient defense mechanism in the city on the moon.

¹⁰ Which, it turns out, you did in A&E 311...

¹¹ aside from the guy who yelled at me for not giving my things away in a "Fair" manner where "Fair" meant "He gets it"



Issue 253

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Age of Menace

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Habana Horror

Mazorra Gazetteer (Part 13)

Mazorra's Main Chapel



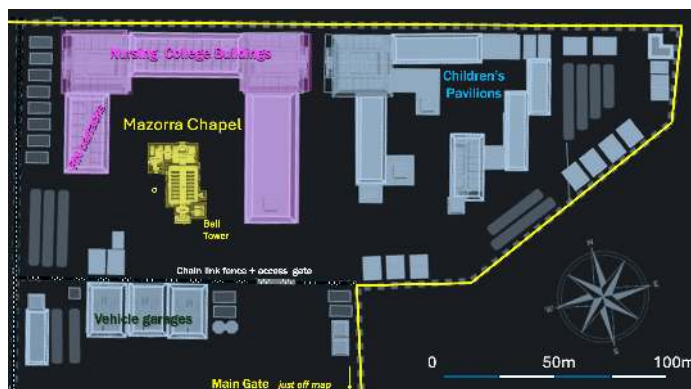
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The Mazorra Chapel stands in the quieter north eastern precinct of the asylum, near nursing school, dormitories, and Children's Pavilions. It is one of the few places on the grounds that still feels deliberately cared for. Patients, nurses, orderlies, and a few guards attend Mass here, light candles, or sit in silence when the wards become too loud. Staff sometimes joke that the chapel is the one part of Mazorra that still belongs to God rather than to the Director.

The Mazorra chapel is one of the oldest surviving structures within the asylum grounds. It dates back to the former plantation and the later mid-19th-century *Sisters of Mercy* asylum eras. The original well still stands nearby, and the

chapel remains the active religious centre of Mazorra. Mass is offered on Sundays, with Monsignor Aurelio visiting twice more each week for confession, last rites, and private counsel.

The chapel is a small Spanish-colonial building of whitewashed stucco, now faded cream by heat and stained pale grey where rainwater has run down its walls. A red clay-tile roof covers the nave. The façade rises in a modest mission-style curve, with a simple cross above the main doors and a few decorative plaster scrolls flaking at the edges.



A short flight of worn stone steps leads to heavy wooden double doors. Hibiscus, low shrubs, and a few stubborn flowers grow beside the path. In daylight the chapel seems almost peaceful. By night, with lamps burning inside and the bell tower looming against clouds, it becomes a visible promise of sanctuary.

The Nave: Inside past the scarred wooden double doors, the chapel is narrow, plain, and cooler than the grounds outside. The air smells of wax, dust, flowers, and the faint sweetness of old incense. Two rows of worn wooden pews run toward a modest raised sanctuary. The floor is tiled in places, patched with wood in others. Initials, prayers, and scratched dates mark the pew backs, some going back 150 years. The walls are whitewashed and mostly bare other than framed Stations of the Cross hanging on them.



At night, the chapel is lit by candles, oil lamps, and one or two unreliable electric bulbs. Shadows move across the walls whenever the doors open. A large crowd makes the nave feel smaller almost immediately.

The Sanctuary: The sanctuary is raised by a single step. The altar is simple but carefully maintained: a pure white cloth, brass candlesticks, a crucifix, a small tabernacle, and a statue of the Virgin in faded blue and white. Fresh flowers are kept there when Mons. Aurelio can obtain them. When he cannot, paper flowers made by patients fill the vases. Patients are not usually allowed beyond the altar rail, though this rule is unevenly enforced during emergencies. Mons.

Aurelio treats the Sanctuary seriously and will not tolerate mockery, theft, or violence within it. Even Porra guards lower their voices here.

Keeper's Note: The chapel is not a magic fortress. It offers no automatic protection from supernatural forces. Its power is social, symbolic, and psychological. People believe this place matters, and belief can hold panic back for a time.

The Sacristy: A small side door near the sanctuary leads into the sacristy. This cramped room contains vestments, candles, altar wine, holy water, spare rosaries, old hymnals, cleaning cloths, incense, broken candleholders, and ledgers of baptisms, funerals, and institutional services. A narrow desk and hard chair serve as Mons. Aurelio's working space.

The sacristy also contains a locked cupboard. Inside are several objects Mons. Aurelio treats with reverence: a better chalice used only on feast days, a small reliquary of uncertain authenticity, reserve hosts, holy oils, and a battered wooden box containing patient petitions, death notices, and letters never sent. The sacristy is not a treasure room; it contains holy water, candles, cloth, wine, and written records. Mons. Aurelio may lend such items if convinced the danger threatens innocents.

The Bell Tower. A square mission-style tower rising nearly sixty feet above the grounds, its cupola is visible from almost anywhere inside Mazorra. The bronze bell is not large, but its sound carries for 3 km, or all across the Mazorra. A steep interior stair climbs through narrow, dusty landings to the belfry, 45 feet above the ground. There is room for one person comfortably, or two at most, beside the 55-lb bronze bell. A small opening at the 30-foot level looks out across the Cardinal precinct, the *Children's Pavilions*, *La Oficina*, the internal roadway, M1, & the line of trees near the cemetery.

The bell is rung for Mass, funerals, emergencies, and, rarely, to call attention across the grounds. During the crisis, ringing the bell may help gather frightened patients, signal *El General's* forces, disrupt cult drums for a moment, or draw unwanted attention.

Keeper's Note: Climbing the bell tower in haste requires care. In darkness or rain, a failed *DEX* or *Climb* roll may cause a fall, dropped equipment, or a loud stumble. The belfry level provides a useful lookout but little cover. Anyone silhouetted there can be seen from the grounds.

Chaplain's Quarters: Beside the sacristy is a tiny addition added on years later, a former storeroom now used by *Monsignor Bruno Aurelio* when staying overnight at Mazorra, which has become most nights during the national Cuban strike which began in July. It is barely more than a monk's cell: iron bed, mosquito net, washstand, small writing desk, crucifix, battered wardrobe, oil lamp, breviary, reading glasses, and a locked wooden box of chapel records. A narrow exterior door opens onto the side path, allowing Aurelio to reach the chapel grounds without crossing the nave.

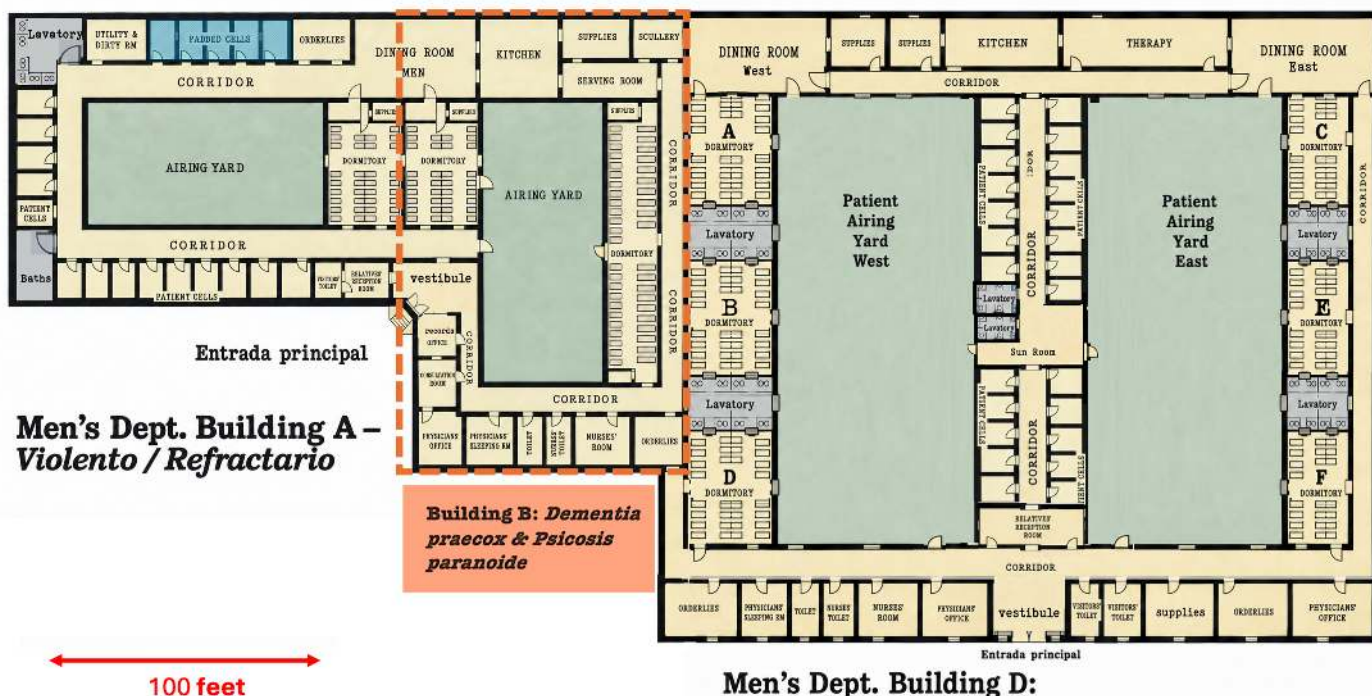
These are not comfortable quarters, and Mons. Aurelio has to dine and attend to personal hygiene needs in another building entirely. At night he is close enough to hear disturbances at the chapel, the bell rope, or patients gathering outside after dark. If awakened, he appears in cassock and slippers, angry at first, then frightened once he understands the scale of the crisis.

The Men's Secure Pavilions (A, B & D)



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

View of Pavilions A, B & D from 4th floor of M1, looking North



The three secure pavilions stand north of M1 and form one sprawling, interconnected, single-storey complex. Thick rendered walls, high red-tiled roofs and shaded Spanish Colonial arcades disguise a custodial interior of barred windows, locked vestibules and enclosed airing yards. Its principal entrance & vestibule faces south-west. Limited basements beneath the northern service ranges connect with the Underground Mazorra; an old passage toward the *Old Laundry Pavilion* was supposedly sealed years ago.

Unlike *El Limbo*, there are no permanent police posts inside. Male nurses and orderlies control movement through keys & locked corridor doors, while guards patrol outside and enter only when summoned. The arrangement depends upon working telephones, whistles and disciplined staff, all increasingly uncertain on 12 August 1933.

Current Inpatient census August 1933

Pavilion	Beds allocated	Official census	Actual pt. #
A	1 dormitory; ~15 cells (1 or 2) + 5 padded cells	95-100	100
B	3 dormitories	180-190	205
D	6 dormitories + 22* (1-or 2 pts each) cells	475-480	510
Total	All beds	750-770	815

Pavilion A. Violentos y Refractorios

The Violent & Refractory Pavilion receives men considered violent, destructive, resistant or likely to escape, regardless of their psychiatric diagnosis. Its corridors surround a single airing yard, with ordinary cells along the west and south sides and five padded cells beside the orderlies' room. A crowded dormitory occupies the eastern range, with dining and service rooms to the north.

The pavilion is a compartmentalized pressure vessel. No staff position commands the entire interior. Keys and locked doors matter more than clinical distinctions.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

The cells are bare: a narrow iron cot or mattress, chamber pot and high barred opening. Doors carry dents, scraped paint and the marks of repeated blows. In the August heat, the masonry sweats and the air scarcely moves. Carbolic

solution cannot conceal sweat, urine, damp bedding and the sharp medicinal odour of paraldehyde.

SIDE-BAR: NOTABLE PATIENTS INSIDE PAVILION A:

Jeremías 'The Executioner' Yobama is normally assigned a private cell/room on the west side of Pavilion A. Gandía and corrupt staff have treated him as a patient-helper & intimidator rather than simply an inmate, giving him unusual freedom and knowledge of routines. His formal cell remains here even when punishment, examination or his own clandestine movements take him to M1 or the Old Laundry Pavilion.

Pavilion B: *Demencia precoz y psicosis paranoide*

This pavilion houses men labelled with dementia praecox (today called *schizophrenia*), paranoid psychosis or chronic hallucinosis. Three dormitory ranges enclose a long airing yard, while kitchens and service rooms occupy the northern range. There are no individual cells.

This is chiefly a long-stay custodial community held together by routine. Patients eat in sittings, smoke cigarettes and cigars, walk habitual circuits and maintain relationships, feuds and private economies that staff only partly understand. When routine fails, rumour and collective fear can spread faster than any orderly can contain them. Real intruders or supernatural events may be absorbed into existing explanations, while the patient giving the clearest warning may be the one whom staff dismiss first. Pavilion B is dangerous through collective interpretation.

Pavilion D: Demencia, Trastorno orgánico cerebral y Epilepsia



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

Pavilion D is a later, separate building immediately east of Pavilion B, erected after the 1926 hurricane. Its principal entrance and vestibule face south. A locked staff passage through the west-side orderlies' room is the *only* internal connection with Pavilion B. Otherwise, patients and visitors must use the exterior hospital street. No police or guard room appears within the building.

The largest pavilion, it contains six crowded dormitories, two immense airing yards and a central spine of patient cells. Dining and service rooms lie to the north; offices, staff rooms and the principal entrance face south. Walls, lavatories and dormitory doors divide the interior into zones of limited supervision. Its patients include more older men (mid 60s and up) with dementia, survivors of stroke or head injury, men with neurosyphilis, brain parasites, or other cerebral disease. It also includes younger patients with epilepsy or head injury. Most are not habitually violent.

Pavilion D becomes dangerous through propagation: one seizure, cry or overturned bunk can awaken 70 men & send confusion spilling from dormitory to corridor to yard.

SIDEBAR NOTABLE PATIENTS OF PAVILION D:

Tomás 'Tambor' Wong normally belongs in Pavilion D because epilepsy is his chart diagnosis. His family-supplied medicines have suppressed major seizures for years, and his quiet reliability earns him more freedom than most residents. His Morse-code tapping carries along pipes, bed frames and masonry, allowing him to pass warnings farther than staff realize. His vast knowledge of the Mazorra's underground ways began when he secretly gained access via the narrow basement under the kitchen & scullery here.

Baltasar 'El Martillo' Urrutia also fits Pavilion D as a man with *dementia pugilistica* after a boxing career. His size and sudden rages, however, mean that an acute incident may bring temporary transfer to Pavilion A or observation in M1. Pavilion D should remain his usual residence, not necessarily his location during every scene.

Appendix B

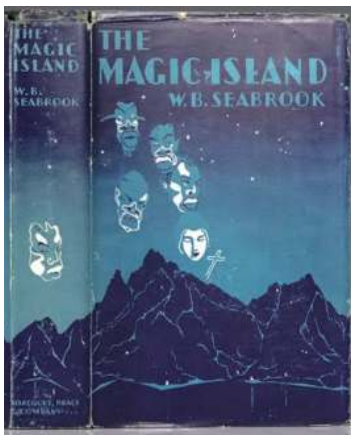
The "Voodoo" of Pulp and Hollywood, Cuban *Santería* & Haitian *Vodou*

Keeper notes for Mazorra 1933

Why the Word Voodoo Misleads

"Voodoo" was never the single sinister religion imagined by pulp fiction and Hollywood. The word has legitimate religious roots: *Vodou* names the Haitian religion, *Vodun* related West African traditions, and Louisiana Voodoo a distinct Creole tradition. The distortion lies not in the word itself, but in everything outsiders made it carry.

By the 1920s & 1930s, missionaries, travellers, occupation authorities, journalists, pulp writers, and filmmakers had turned "voodoo" into a loaded catch-all for almost any African or Afro-Caribbean practice they considered primitive, mysterious, or frightening. Into the same fictional basket they threw Haitian Vodou, Louisiana Hoodoo, Cuban Ocha & Palo, Jamaican Obeah, Kongo-derived traditions, drumming, spirit possession, zombies, needle-stuck dolls, exotic curses, cannibalism, and indiscriminate blood rites. W.B. Seabrook's *The Magic Island* was enormously influential in introducing the reading public to sensationalized accounts of Haitian *Vodou* & zombies.



A few elements of pulp/Hollywood Voodoo had been torn from actual religious settings, stripped of meaning, and sensationalized. Others were borrowed from unrelated traditions or invented outright. The resulting “voodoo” was not an imperfect portrait of one religion, but a racialized collage of many religions, colonial rumours, & lurid fantasy. It revealed far more about white fears and prejudices than about the people and traditions it claimed to depict.

The real traditions were neither interchangeable nor branches of a single faith. They arose from different West & Central African religions carried across the Atlantic by enslaved peoples and reconstituted under slavery, forced conversion, and colonial persecution. Catholic saints sometimes provided cover for prohibited worship, but over time African and Catholic elements also entered complex and lasting relationships of their own. These histories produced Haitian *Vodou*, Cuban *Lucumí* or *Regla de Ocha*, Brazilian *Candomblé*, Louisiana Voodoo, and other distinct traditions. What pulp writers called “voodoo,” therefore, was never one coherent system waiting to be described. It was a false category imposed upon a diverse religious world.

Cuban Santería / Ocha at Mazorra

Santería, literally “the way of the saints,” is the familiar name for Cuba’s Yoruba-derived religion, although practitioners may prefer *La Regla de Ocha*, *Ocha*, or the *Lucumí religion*.

Olódumare is the ultimate source of creation. **Olorún** and **Olófin** are closely related divine names or aspects. Below these are the **orishas**, which are neither Catholic saints nor a collection of minor nature gods. They are sacred beings and personified powers through which divine force becomes active and knowable. That force, *aché*, flows through the orishas, ancestors, people, natural substances, and properly consecrated objects. Sacred narratives called *patakis* preserve teachings and ritual precedents.

Orishas at Mazorra

The four figures associated with Othello’s ceremony are orishas, not lwa or generic “voodoo gods.”

- **Elegguá**, the smaller figure (centre) in red & black with cowries & keys governs roads, thresholds, communication, opportunity, & dangerous choices. He opens or closes the way between human & divine worlds; he is normally saluted near the start of a ceremony.

- **Obatalá**, the seated elder in white (back), is associated with creation, wisdom, restraint, dreams, & the establishment of order & boundaries. *Lucumí* stories describe him moulding human bodies from clay.
- **Ochosi**, with bow & arrows (L), is the divine hunter, tracker, & seeker of justice. He governs the forest and its animals, but also the detection and punishment of criminals.
- **Oyá**, in burgundy & purple with a horsetail whisk (R), commands winds, storms, sudden change, the marketplace, & cemetery gates. She is a formidable warrior & herald of death, but not a ruler of all the dead or the Cuban equivalent of a *Vodou Baron*.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

Other widely honoured orishas include **Ogún**, master of iron, tools, labour, medicine, technology, and war; **Changó**, associated with thunder, fire, kingship, virility, and the sacred batá drums; **Yemayá**, the great maternal power associated in Cuba with the sea; **Oshún**, mistress of rivers, beauty, love, abundance, and fertility; and many more,

Divination & Ceremony

Divination directs ritual action. In the *diloggún*, an *olorisha* casts sixteen consecrated cowrie shells. Successive casts identify an *odu*, a sign holding sacred stories, proverbs, prohibitions, and ritual precedents. It is more than a prediction: it belongs to an oral library through which the orishas address a particular human circumstance.



The priest determines whether the sign indicates *iré*, blessing or beneficial alignment, or *osogbo*, misfortune or dangerous imbalance. Divination then establishes what action or offering may restore harmony. Priests of Orūnmila consult Ifá through palm nuts or a divining chain; simpler questions may be put through *obí*, commonly using coconut pieces in Cuba.

Ceremonies may employ prayer, offerings, songs in liturgical *Lucumí*, dancing, and complex rhythms on *batá* drums. An orisha may “mount” an initiated worshipper. This is not casual frenzy or theatre, but an event within an ordered

ritual whose participants identify the orisha through characteristic movement, gesture, speech, and conduct.

Offering Rather Than Spectacle

In Ocha, *ebó* means offering or sacrifice in a much wider sense than animal slaughter. It may be cool water and coconut, fruit, sweets, cooked roots, grains, vegetables, libation, or a gift made in gratitude. Except for freely devotional offerings, divination ordinarily determines the appropriate *ebó*. When an animal is offered, the rite feeds the orisha with blood and *aché* while also feeding the religious household. It requires specialized prayers, songs, slaughter, butchering, cooking, and distribution; the meat is commonly shared as consecrated food.

Haitian Vodou



Ritual items used in Vodou practice (Canadian Museum of Civilization)

Haitian Vodou developed in colonial Saint-Domingue from Fon, Ewe, Kongo, Yoruba, and other African traditions in sustained interaction with Roman Catholicism. *Vodou* is the preferred Haitian spelling; Voodoo and Vaudou are older English and French forms, while Vodun usually refers to related West African traditions.

Vodou acknowledges the supreme creator, *Bondye*, while everyday religious life centres on serving spirits called *lwa*. The *lwa* belong to nations or families such as Rada, Petwo, and Gede. These express history, temperament, lineage, and practice, not a simple division between good and evil. Rada spirits are often described as cooler and ancestral; Petwo spirits as hotter and more forceful. The Gede concern death, sexuality, fertility, healing, and the irreverent exposure of pretence.

Baron Kriminèl

Baron Kriminèl belongs to this Haitian religious world, although his classification and manner of service differ between houses. Like Baron Samedi and other Gede figures, he may appear in skull-like face paint and old-fashioned funeral dress in black, white, purple, and blood-red. He is a feared *lwa* of death, punishment, and the cemetery, invoked in some traditions as an agent of swift and brutal judgment. Some stories call him the first murderer, himself condemned to die.

Violent, unpredictable, and without pity, he is nevertheless said to direct his wrath at the guilty rather than the innocent.

Practitioners may invoke him when ordinary justice has failed and extreme intervention is sought. He is not an orisha and should not be conflated with Oyé merely because both have associations with cemeteries.

Possession in Its Ritual Setting

A Vodou ceremony may include prayer, song, drumming, dance, offerings, and a *vèvè*, the ritual design used to summon and honour a *lwa*. Ceremonies often centre on the *poto mitan*, the post through which spirits symbolically enter. A *lwa* may “mount” or “ride” a participant and speak through that person. In Vodou or Ocha, possession may be gentle, comic, forceful, or demanding, but is understood within each religion’s ceremonial expectations, not as undifferentiated madness.

Related Does Not Mean Interchangeable

Haitian Vodou and Cuban Ocha share outward resemblances, but their spirits and ceremonies are not interchangeable. Papa Legba and Eleguá both open roads, yet belong to different ritual histories. A Vodou *vèvè* is not an Ocha symbol, nor is an Ocha *eleke* consecrated for a *lwa*.

Within Mazorra in 1933, Cuban, American, and European NPCs will naturally call almost any unfamiliar African-derived practice “voodoo.” A Cuban devotee is more likely to speak of Ocha, *the santos*, or the orishas. A knowledgeable Haitian will speak of serving the *lwa*. Keepers and informed Investigators should recognize these distinctions, even when frightened witnesses, policemen, journalists, and cultists do not.

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Horrors of the Mazorra

A 1933 Pulp Cthulhu scenario (Part 13)

RECAP - E&A #14, AoM #252: The Leopard Men’s “Night of the Leopard” raids met with mixed success. Some parties were repelled, while others cut communications, seized captives, and spread panic through Mazorra. Pursuers, survivors, and retreating cultists were gradually drawn back toward the Old Laundry Pavilion and its hidden temple. At 22:30, a slow shuddering roar shook the pavilion as the secret Vault collapsed into the buried sinkhole below. The building remains standing for now, but its southern end settled & everyone above and below fled. Cultists, captives, Investigators, and Vault survivors now crowded into the same narrow exits and flooding passages.

Time	Agency	Event
22:30		The Vault collapses beneath Old Laundry Pavilion
→ 23:00	  	All TBD by actions of the Investigators
23:00		Othello’s naming part of ritual begins

Player Agency Flags

	FIXED	An Anchored or established state. This happens regardless of Investigator action.
	DEFAULT	This proceeds <i>unless</i> players intervene
	MUTABLE	Choices/rolls alter time/NPCs consequences.
	OFF-SCREEN	May be resolved outside Investigators’ view, or summarized.
	INVESTIGATOR STAKES	Personal objective, relationship, or character arc advanced or resolved through Investigator choice.

22:30 RUPTURE, REVELATION & REUNION

A. The Mazorra Vault Collapses

The first warning is not beneath anyone’s feet; it is the hoist chain.

Beside the elevator cage it begins trembling against the masonry with a rapid metallic chatter. Hanging lamps and leopard skins sway slightly south.

Then comes a deep brontide¹ from below, too low to be thunder and felt more in the chest than heard. Boiler plates

and pipes on the floor below begin ringing without being struck. Dust drops from the gallery. The drummers falter and stop. Then the south end of the *Old Laundry Pavilion* drops half a foot with a roar.

Far beneath the building, the Mazorra Vault is collapsing into the *Charnel Sink*. Its western floor tears away as water, masonry and treasure crash into the deeper void. The dormant east-west sewer begins filling with foul water and falling debris, while above it the *Old Laundry’s* boiler-room foundations crack and settle.

The hidden Leopard Men Temple does not collapse outright. Instead, the altar shifts on its blocks; the hoist cage slams against its shaft; the front façade ruptures and begins to slough away; a jagged fissure races across the southern end of the floor below like black lightning. And somewhere underneath comes the unmistakable roar of moving water.

B. The Raid Becomes An Escape



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

The fear of collapse abolishes the battlefield. As in a forest fire, predator and prey flee along the same paths, too intent on escape to attack one another. Cultists and attackers head for every exit. Lesser Leopard Men flee, surrender, or hide; only Yobama’s hardest Inner Circle followers remain disciplined enough to fight. Outside, *El General’s* men shout that the southern wall is moving. Nico’s workers understand what that means: the foundations are failing.

The Investigators have only moments to choose: pursue Yobama, rescue Juana or another captive, find Dolores, aid the wounded, recover evidence, or simply escape.

Inside the collapsing pavilion, if they have not already fled, Yobama & Dolores independently reach the same conclusion: *Leave now.*

¹ “Of all the sounds that haunt the air, probably the most mysterious are those which are best called by the generic name “brontides” (coined, in the Italian form *brontidi*, by Prof. Tito Alippi from two Greek words meaning “like thunder”)...Brontides take the form of muffled detonations, resembling the sound of distant cannon or peals of thunder...The source of these sounds is undoubtedly subterranean in a great many

cases, though perhaps not in all.” From [METEOROLOGY The Science of the Atmosphere BY CHARLES FITZHUGH TALMAN](#) (1922)

SIDEBAR - THE 22:30 CONVERGENCE: In a 'zipper' traffic merge, separate traffic lanes remain in use until they meet at a bottleneck, then take turns. This finale works similarly. Characters follow different routes through the Old Laundry and its drains until circumstances bring them together, with subsequent events alternating. Each route is a **lane**. An **encounter packet** is one or more characters moving along it. Each packet gives a *Trigger* for entering play, an *Objective* for its principals, and *Leverage* that can alter the choice. A **merge point** is where packets collide. After the collapse, follow whichever lane contains an Investigator. Bring in another packet only when its route reaches the active scene. By about 23:00, survivors have either escaped, disappeared into another lane, or joined the guarded move toward *La Oficina*.

➔ Yobama Chooses a Lane

Yobama's religious authority is failing. Survival becomes his objective when his Temple is attacked and he realizes he is losing, and he takes the least guarded route to escape. The eastern ledge & Pavilion floor expose him to *El General's* cordon so the sewer escape hatch will be his first choice. After 22:30 the Sanctum's sewer route exit will start flooding, but Yobama knows its branches & reluctantly chooses it anyway unless the Investigators block the way.

○ If ***María del Sagrario*** or another Investigator is in hot pursuit, Yobama is catchable. If they stop to save someone, he may escape. The collapse should neither kill him automatically nor preserve him for a later episode.

Keeper's Note Damaged Sewer: Rapid movement requires Hard *DEX*, *Climb*, or another suitable skill. Failure costs 1D6 damage, position, or separation; a fumble may trap a character or sweep them into a worse passage.

👤 MERGE POINT 1: Yobama Meets the Vault Survivors



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

The floor of Yobama's Inner Sanctum, formerly the staff lavatory, conceals a maintenance hatch with oiled hinges. An access shaft descends to the defunct sewer line used by the Leopard Men (see AoM #247, E&A #10, April 2026).

The *Cracked Sewer Crown*, one of two exits from the collapsing Vault (see AoM #250), opens into the disused east-west sewer spur. This joins the cult's northbound route beneath the Old Laundry Pavilion. Vault survivors

following the spur can climb the access shaft and emerge through Yobama's hatch inside his inner sanctum to reach the inside of the hidden Temple, where they can escape via descent to the industrial floor and outside towards the cordon.

If Yobama is delayed and descends while survivors are approaching the junction or climbing the shaft, the two packets collide. Run *The Old Price* if Gandía is among them; otherwise run *The Sewer Bottleneck*. If Yobama has already passed, the survivors emerge directly into his Inner Sanctum. Add María, Dolores, or another encounter packet only when its route and timing support the arrival.

Keeper's Note Detecting the Merge: If either group moves stealthily, oppose *Stealth* with *Listen*. Otherwise, allow one *Listen* roll. One success gives time to take cover, ready a weapon, extinguish a light, or speak first, but not an automatic attack. Matching results produce simultaneous awareness. **Hands Full:** Anything taken from the Vault occupies hands needed for climbing, fighting, or helping others. Make the players choose between people, gold, & evidence.

◆👤 **Encounter Packet: The Old Price**

- *Trigger:* Yobama meets Vault survivors who include Gandía. If Esperanza is present, she witnesses their recognition and everything that follows.
- *Objective:* Yobama and Gandía both want passage, and each wants the other kept silent. Esperanza wants to survive and understand what she is seeing.
- *Leverage:* Yobama knows the remaining route. Gandía may hold weapons, captives, money, or incriminating papers. Esperanza's testimony can connect their exchange to evidence recovered below.

A lantern appears ahead as the Vault survivors force through the broken crown. Gandía stops when Yobama emerges behind it. "Jeremías." The snarling leopard mask turns. "Capitán."

Keep the exchange brief. It should reveal an established accommodation without explaining its history. Yobama demands a life or another price for passage. A desperate Gandía may offer Esperanza, Méndez, a wounded Investigator, or recovered evidence. Esperanza can expose the bargain, appeal to Cordero, draw her derringer, or refuse to be traded. Her testimony cannot prove every crime attributed to the two men, but it may corroborate the Vault records and show that bargaining with human lives was already understood between them.

Rising water prevents a long interrogation. If neither man yields, the Keeper should force a decision: fight, seize a hostage, split the groups, or retreat.

◆👤 **Optional Encounter: María Reaches Yobama**

- *Trigger:* María has followed Yobama, found his blood trail or open hatch, or otherwise earned the chance to reach him while the damaged sewer delays him.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

- *Objective:* María wants the truth about Violeta and vengeance on the man responsible. Yobama wants to escape before his enemies gather.
- *Leverage:* The collapse has stripped Yobama of most followers and secrecy, but endangered companions or captives may force María to choose between pursuit and rescue.

○ What follows belongs to María's player. She may try to kill Yobama, capture him, demand Gandía's part in Violeta's murder, or abandon vengeance to save someone. Other Investigators may help, restrain her, or make their own bargain. Do not insert María solely because the finale seems to require her; there is one possible later encounter.

◆ 🗺️ **Encounter Packet: The Sewer Bottleneck**

- *Trigger:* Yobama enters the sewer but finds Vault survivors blocking a low junction as water and rubble close behind them. Use this version when Gandía is absent.
- *Objective:* Yobama wants the passage cleared. The survivors want the surface. Any pursuers want to close the distance.
- *Leverage:* The junction is too narrow to pass safely. Wounded companions, evidence, and loot slow the survivors, while rising water and further collapse limit negotiation.

Yobama orders the survivors aside, pushes at the weakest person, or takes a hostage. The delay allows one other packet to arrive: María, other Investigators, Dolores and her escorts, or scattered Leopard Men. Choose the arrival that advances the strongest unfinished conflict, not every group still underground.

If Yobama's opponents hesitate, quarrel, or stop to help the wounded, he escapes through a narrower branch. If they contain him, the confrontation occurs here.

The bottleneck makes one final collision possible; it does not gather the entire cast.

◆ 🗺️ **Encounter Packet: The Guide's Toll**

- *Trigger:* Yobama meets Investigators elsewhere in the drains, without Gandía present, when they do not know which branch remains passable.
- *Objective:* Yobama wants passage, darkness, and freedom from pursuit. The Investigators want a safe route out, control of Yobama, or both.
- *Leverage:* Yobama knows the drains. The Investigators have weapons, numbers, or information he may need.

He offers guidance in return for safe passage and an end to pursuit. He intends to lead them beyond the immediate collapse, extinguish the light, and disappear at the first junction.

They may accept, force him to lead at gunpoint, mark the route, bluff, or reject him and gamble on the flooding passages. If María is present, the bargain becomes her choice rather than a predetermined act of vengeance.

◆ 🗺️ **Encounter Packet: Shaman and Goddess**

- *Trigger:* Yobama encounters Dolores escaping with one or more awestruck cultists.
- *Objective:* Yobama must reclaim Dolores as proof of his authority, reduce her to a sacred captive, or destroy the omen. Dolores wants passage and continued control of her escorts.
- *Leverage:* Dolores' visible Twsha lesions sway believers who think they have witnessed a manifestation. Yobama counters with ritual authority, fear, and long familiarity.

If Dolores prevails, followers turn on Yobama or refuse to stop her. If Yobama prevails, they restrain her as something sacred. Investigators can exploit the split, capture either fugitive, or let the factions obstruct one another. Dolores reaches her off-ramp only if she retains a guide and no Investigator remains on her trail.

◆ 🗺️ **Encounter Packet: The Last Custodian**

- *Trigger:* Claudio meets anyone carrying evidence from the Vault.
- *Objective:* Claudio wants the evidence destroyed or recovered, then hopes to escape and find his brother Silvio. The carriers want to preserve it and reach safety.
- *Leverage:* Claudio knows the exits & can damage any evidence. Protection for his brother & mother, treatment of his wounds, or humane restraint may change his decision.

Claudio targets papers and evidence of Porra crimes before people. He may overturn a lantern, throw records into the water, or trade directions for the evidence. He fights only if blocked, recognized, or threatened with capture. Proof that Machado has fled creates hesitation, not instant loyalty. Any useful testimony requires safety and time.

MERGE POINT 2: The Boiler Room & South Yard



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

The other Vault Collapse exit, the *Night-deposit Breach* opens into the southern boiler and coal area beneath the failing Temple. Vault survivors emerge from the rubble as cultists, attackers, & captives are trying to flee from above. Open doors lead toward the south yard, where Nico's workers and *El General's* mobile reserve have withdrawn beyond the south wall. Run **Hands at the Breach** whenever survivors use this exit. Add no more than one other packet unless separated Investigators are already involved in different parts of the scene.

◆ **Encounter Packet: Hands at the Breach**

- *Trigger:* The first survivor crawls through the broken masonry.
- *Objective:* Nico's Aeroporto workers want to pull people clear. *El General's* men want to separate survivors from armed Porra and Leopard Men.
- *Leverage:* The rescuers have ropes, laundry carts, lanterns, and numbers, but cannot see whom they are rescuing.

Hands reach into the breach while rifles cover it from farther back. Anyone emerging armed must set down the weapon before receiving help. Anyone carrying a person, dispatch case, or money must decide what comes through first.

A social success, a recognizable ally, or an obvious rescue prevents the cordon from treating the group as hostile. Otherwise, the wounded and unarmed are pulled clear while armed survivors are separated & held for *El General*.

◆ **Encounter Packet: The False President Emerges**

- *Trigger:* Méndez emerges into the yard through dust and fire-truck glare. An Aeroporto man points and shouts excitedly, "Machado!" and rifles rise.
- *Objective:* Gandía wants to exploit any mistaken identity made by those surrounding them & clear an escape route. Méndez wants his true identity believed. The cordon wants to prevent Machado and any Porra from slipping away.

- *Leverage:* Méndez has Machado's white hair and glasses, while the ruined suit and overalls expose the disguise at close range. Investigators may also hold documents or know Lt. Cordero's role in facilitating earlier deception.

Gandía declares that the President has been rescued and demands a vehicle. Méndez denies the identity if conscious. An Investigator can corroborate him, expose the disguise, have Lt. Cordero identify him, or produce any recovered records.

El General releases no one on appearances alone. He protects Méndez from the Aeroporto men and holds the escort for identification. If anyone fires, his hoses and rifles turn outward as well as inward, creating a brief three-sided confrontation.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

◆ **Encounter Packet: Gandía's Last Command**

- *Trigger:* Capt. Gandía or several armed Porra reach the south yard outside the *Old Laundry Pavilion* and find themselves surrounded by *El General's* men, and *El General* demands that they lower their weapons and bring forward the wounded.
- *Objective:* Gandía wants a vehicle, hostage, or diversion that permits escape. His men want to survive.
- *Leverage:* Gandía may possess money, papers, Méndez, or remnants of official authority, but no cohesive force. *El General* has numbers, control of the exits, and the fire truck's searchlight and pressure hoses. Lt. Cordero & the Presidential Escort remain undecided.

 **Player Agency:** Describe the standoff and ask what the Investigators intend before deciding Capt. Gandía's next move. They may expose or support his authority, induce Méndez to speak, sway Lt. Cordero, protect or rescue a hostage, bargain, open or close an escape route, attack, or refuse involvement. Earlier events, loyalties & evidence should affect what is possible.

Gandía's Response: Unless interrupted, Gandía claims lawful command and orders Cordero to secure a vehicle or

clear a path. If challenged, he invokes his papers or presents Méndez as President Machado. If blocked, he bargains. Only when his authority is collapsing does he seize Esperanza or another nearby survivor, order the Escort to fire, or create a violent diversion.

Gandía also reacts to what the Investigators change. If they open a route, he abandons his men and takes it. If they turn Lt. Cordero, he loses the support of any Escort survivors. Méndez's public refusal, or proof of Machado's flight destroys his remaining authority. Cornered without leverage, Gandía bargains or surrenders unless violence offers an immediate escape.

Keeper's Note: Call for a roll only after the players state their goal and method. *Persuade*, *Intimidate*, or *Military Science* may sway Cordero and the Escort. *Psychology* identifies their hesitation and grants a Bonus Die to the next appeal. Méndez's refusal or convincing proof of Machado's flight also grants a Bonus Die; Gandía's direct command or possession of a hostage imposes a Penalty Die.

Treat *El General's* force as an environmental threat. Hoses knock men down and divide groups; the searchlight exposes fugitives; rifles answer Porra gunfire, while a hostage creates a standoff. Cordero's defection or closure of the last escape route breaks Porra cohesion, but the Investigators' actions determine whether they surrender, scatter, or panic into violence. *El General* neither duels nor sentences Gandía: "*El Rey* judges. I hold the field."

📍 OFF-RAMP: Prisoners Bound for *La Oficina*

In the end, the *Old Laundry* does not actually collapse, but it is badly damaged. If *El General* holds the field, any captured Porra such as Capt. Gandía and his men are disarmed and marched to *La Oficina* to await *El Rey's* judgment. Méndez goes under protective guard as both witness & false President. Lt. Cordero and his Escort are detained separately; if Cordero defected, they are treated as witnesses rather than common prisoners.

Any wounded go first. Gandía and Cordero are kept apart, witnesses give their names before their accounts can be coordinated. Documents or other evidence travel under separate guard.

The *Investigators* must decide whether to accompany the column, protect Méndez and the evidence, pursue Yobama or Dolores, or remain with those still trapped inside the Old Laundry. Following this off-ramp may lead to *El Rey's* tribunal; ignoring it leaves judgment for a later scene rather than allowing NPCs to settle the matter offstage.

SIDE NOTE REUNITING THE INVESTIGATORS: The south yard, cordon, & prisoner transfer provide natural reunion points. Do not extract anyone from the sewer pursuit or Dolores's trail merely to reunite the party. By 23:00, most Old Laundry survivors have escaped, been detained, or joined the guarded movement to *La Oficina*. Continue only any pursuit or unresolved confrontation the players have chosen.

📍 DOLORES' OFF-RAMP



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6 Sol

Before the collapse, Dolores planned to use her awestruck escorts and Yobama's sewer route to pass the cordon, then abandon them. Rising water ruins that plan. A cultist diverts them into a disused branch toward the Men's Department, and fallen masonry seals the way back. If no Investigator follows, remove Dolores from the *Old Laundry* traffic jam entirely.

The branch ends beneath a storm drain in the stone-tiled centre of a courtyard ill lit only by moonlight. Dolores does not recognize it. Barred galleries, a locked gate, and faces watching from the darkness reveal only that she has entered another enclosure. Her escorts recognize the central courtyard of the *Violentos y Refractorios Pavilion*; one had been once confined there. They hail their arrival as providence, for their goddess has reached Yobama's old domain.

Dolores understands the truth last: the *Beautiful Murderess* has escaped one prison by entering another.

📍 23:00 OTHELLO'S THRESHOLD CEREMONY

The blind former Santerian priest Othello believes *Baron Kriminel* cannot simply be fought or banished. The Haitian Bokor Matteo Derosier's suffering opened a road into Mazorra, and the injustice done to him gave the Baron a genuine claim. But pain is not universal permission, and a real debt may still be overclaimed.

Othello therefore petitions the Cuban Santería (*Lucumí*) *orishas* to govern the roads by which the Haitian *lwa* moves. *Elegguá* may open or close those roads, *Obatalá* may set their limits, *Ochosi* may direct justice toward its proper mark, and *Oyá* may close the cemetery gate behind the dead. This is not an exorcism or a duel. Othello does not deny Baron Kriminel's reality. He denies his right to *roam*.

⚓ The Cowrie Shell-Eye Crosses



Beginning 20:45 Othello asks trusted helpers to establish two distant threshold marks at opposite ends of Mazorra.

- The **eastern cross** is placed outside the main Mazorra Chapel. Othello lays white cloth, cool water, and coconut for *Obatalá*, with three cowrie shells around a red, black, and white knot for *Elegguá*. This cross marks the chapel and inhabited institution as belonging to the living.
- The **western cross** must be carried across the grounds and placed at the entrance to the Mazorra cemetery. A copper coin invokes *Oyá*, keeper of the cemetery gate, while dark-blue thread and cowries acknowledge *Ochosi*'s demand that justice find its proper mark. An Investigator or trusted helper may have to place & defend this cross while Othello prepares at the chapel.

These are non-blood offerings: *obí y omi tutu*, coconut and cool water; an *ebó itasile*, or libation; & an *ebó aláfia*, seeking peace and restored order. The peace sought is not forgiveness for the guilty. It is an end to indiscriminate vengeance.

Othello says that after this prolonged ritual preparation he'll conduct the hearing by offering proof of the guilty at 23:00. He does not need to see the distant cemetery cross; when the rite takes hold, the entangled cowries at both ends of Mazorra will begin clicking and turning toward one another. But he *must have proof* brought to him by the Investigators in order for his ceremony to work to restrict and restrain Baron Kriminèl. If asked, he says the two crosses themselves do not form a physical barrier. They define a jurisdiction: the eastern cross protects the living institution, while the western cross confines the Baron's road to the dead, the dying, and those properly named in his claim.

Keeper's Note: This is Othello's emergency construction from *Lucumí* practices he remembers, not a standard historical ceremony.² If the cemetery cross is never placed or is disturbed, Othello may still protect the chapel and populated wards, but he cannot compel Baron Kriminèl to leave Mazorra through the western cemetery gate. This also provides Investigator/player agency in that they must provide him proof; from Castellanos's records, testimony from Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo, records & interview from those saved from *El Limbo*, information gleaned from the Mazorra Vault, confessions from Gandía and others.

Mons. Aurelio's Witness



Mons. Aurelio keeps the chapel open but does not join Othello's rite. His candles, crucifix, bell, and holy water establish Catholic sanctuary, not magical artillery.

"You may stand at the steps, Othello. No farther unless I call you."

🕒 23:00 The Hearing Ceremony

Othello begins outside the chapel doors. He briefly acknowledges **Olódumare**, **Olorún**, and **Olófin**, then addresses **Elegguá** before the other *orishas*. His opening prayers are spoken in remembered *Lucumí*, but the hearing itself is conducted in Spanish so that the living witnesses understand it.

Tambor maintains a slow counter-rhythm nearby, preventing the Leopard Men's drums from possessing every sound across Mazorra.

| rest rest tap tap | | tap tap tap rest | | BOOM rest tap tap
| | tap tap tap rest | | BOOM rest tap tap | | BOOM rest
tap tap | repeat



from W.B. Seabrook's "The Magic Island"

Othello makes four petitions:

² Information obtained from "Sacrificial Ceremonies of Santería A Complete Guide to the Rituals and Practices" by Ócha'ni Lele (Destiny Books, 2012)

- **To Elegguá:** “Open one road so the grievance may be heard. Close every road made by appetite or deceit.”
- **To Obatalá:** “Set the limit between the debt and those who never incurred it.”
- **To Ochosi:** “Let justice find its true mark. Let no innocent answer for the guilty.”
- **To Oyá:** “Hold the cemetery gate. Do not surrender the living to the dead.”

Only then does Othello address Baron Kriminèl:

“You entered through a dying man’s pain.”

“Pain opened the road.”

“The road ends where the debt ends.”

“A debt must have a debtor.”

“You were called to correct injustice, not cause it.”

The cowries at the chapel vibrate & chitter, ‘eyes’ up/open toward Othello. At the same moment, anyone guarding the distant cemetery cross hears shells begin to click like dice.

And far off from the darkness, beyond the chapel light comes Matteo Derosier’s dying rasp, impossibly near, but the words belong to Baron Kriminèl

« Alors, nommez les coupables. »
(“Then name the guilty.”)

Naming the Guilty & The Innocent

Evidence Named	Effect
Matteo’s abusers; crimes by Llerena, Yániz, Gandía, Yobama, &/or others	Directs the Baron toward those responsible
Castellanos’ records, Esperanza’s files, photographs, rescued ledgers, or testimony	Gives accusations corroboration and public weight
Vulnerable people / wards declared protected	Prevents their use as substitutes



Political Natter

Since I last wrote, Canada and the United States have passed beyond a full-blown trade war. Ottawa walked away from negotiations after Washington made eleventh-hour demands it considered unacceptable, reaching beyond trade into Canadian economic sovereignty and even protections for French language and culture. President Donald Trump responded with further tariffs, taunting

Baron Kriminèl will not willingly leave Mazorra until he is presented with both the names of the guilty and evidence corroborating their crimes. The ceremony directs his wrath toward particular offenders & away from the innocent.

SIDE BAR – DEGREES OF RESOLUTION:

With persuasive evidence, Kriminèl is confined to named guilt. He may not roam the wards, take substitutes, or extend a bargain beyond its maker. With incomplete evidence, his road narrows, but he may demand another guilty name or willing bargain before withdrawing. If Othello is silenced, each completed petition endures. Marked thresholds resist the Baron, declared innocents cannot be substituted, and a guilty name may still draw him away. The rite is cumulative; interruption fixes its boundaries where they stand.

Devotees also believe that Baron Kriminèl spares the blameless, but belief is no guarantee. Othello’s ceremony seeks to turn that belief into a ritual constraint. Mazorra holds well over 3,000 patients, too many for a complete roll call. Investigators may name individuals and protect groups: children, confined patients, the sick, the delirious, and anyone incapable of bargaining. Vulnerability is not consent. When the innocent are named, Mons. Aurelio rings the chapel bell once. Though outside the rite, he becomes its public witness.

Interference With The Ceremony

Far to the west, among the Moonlit graves of the Mazorra’s Cemetery, fleeing Leopard Men cross the final cowrie shell-eye cross without seeing it. Something hard & smooth rolls beneath one cultist’s bare foot. He slips, falls, curses, & scrambles after the others. Shells scatter into the grass and between the graves. He looks back. He sees but does not understand the broken pattern.

The Mazorra’s chapel bell gives a second, unbidden toll. Its note seems to rise up through the stone rather than travel through the air. Every flame inside the chapel bends west.

At Othello’s feet, three cowries overturn in a clatter. He touches them with the pads of his fingers, & then looks up.

“Someone has broken the road.”

To be continued

memes, and insults; directed U.S. agencies to call Lake Ontario “Lake America”³; and posted a map on *Truth Social* with the Stars and Stripes spread across Canada, Mexico, Greenland, Iceland, Central America, & the Caribbean.

Canada answered these tariffs with our own tariffs deliberately aimed at Republican states vulnerable in the coming midterm elections. Washington retaliated yet again. Canadian softwood lumber now faces higher U.S. duties than Russian lumber, a comparison that says almost everything about the present relationship.

³ BTW, I live in a city at the very western end of *Lake Ontario*.

The irony is that the hostility of the current administration in Washington has probably done more to unite Canadians than anything else in living memory, rallying many behind Prime Minister Mark Carney. Faced with threats both existential and material, Canada is making a remarkable pivot toward deeper trade, security, and diplomatic ties around the globe, most notably with Europe and the European Union. The logic is almost the inverse of Brexit: Canadian sovereignty would be strengthened, rather than diminished, through closer alliance. Most recently, the EU floated the unprecedented idea of Canadian “associate membership,” a prospect Trump managed to call both “laughable” and “potentially hostile.”

Yet independence from a neighbour is not hostility toward it. Nor must closer Canadian-EU relations be bad for the United States. Most EU members, after all, are NATO allies of both countries. There is nothing laughable about Europe seeking closer ties with Canada, a country that shares its values & can be trusted to honour agreements once signed.

[Carney's September 17, 2026, address in Strasbourg](#), following EU President Ursula von der Leyen's [State of the Union speech](#) the previous day, was not an argument for constructing a third power bloc. His case was simpler: nations need sufficient resilience and sufficient alternatives that no outside power can dictate their choices. As he put it, “This combination is a ferocious storm. A single tree will come down in it. A forest will not.” Like Carney's Davos address earlier this year, the Strasbourg speech may prove to be one of those by which this extraordinary geopolitical rupture is remembered.



Afterwards I learned that my visit had provided Trevor with an excellent icebreaker for inviting people he had never gamed with & resurrecting games untouched for five or six years: “My gaming friend Brian is visiting, and I’m running a game. Would you like to join us?” I was apparently both guest AND social pretext. ☺

There were also excellent ciders, meals in/out, home-cooked dinners, & evenings watching *Paul*, *The Dish*, *The Bride*, & *Young Frankenstein* on DVD. I explored bookshops, hat & cheese shops, bakeries & more; cruised the South Saskatchewan River; & even saw a herd of fifty bison at *Wanuskewin Heritage Park*. The week vanished quickly, after which clinical work hammered me for the next two weeks on my return.



Recent Travel/Gaming:

Back in mid-August I spent a week visiting my friends Mairi & Trevor in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The visit managed to be both busy & wonderfully relaxing. Trevor ran a one-shot of his favourite science-fiction RPG, *Coriolis*, my first face-to-face role-gaming since GenCon two years ago. It was GREAT!



Trevor & I also played several miniature skirmish games: *Sand*, (inspired by the film version of *Dune*); *Lunar*, an alternative-history struggle between American astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts; & Trevor's favourite samurai game, *Test of Honour*. His gorgeously painted figures and terrain provided marvellous backdrops. One photograph caught me unawares during *Lunar*, grinning with delight (see below).

Update on our daughter: Lauren began law school at Osgoode Hall on August 31. She sent us a cheerful first-day selfie, umbrella at the ready, as she headed toward the subway. She had moved to Toronto in early July and has been enjoying exploring the city. It is a major new chapter for her, & Caroline and I are very proud though our household is so much quieter.

Mid-September, I made it to *Supercrawl*, an enormous art + music festival that closes much of Hamilton's James Street North for several days. Caroline decided to pass, telling me, “It just won't be the same without the chance of running into Lauren and her friends.” That left me feeling wistful because, at earlier 'Crawls, I had done exactly that. While wandering/ dodging the throng, I heard someone call, “**Dad!**” I turned around, & **there was Lauren!**

She was there with her boyfriend Ben & several girlfriends/roommates from the past. Lauren said she had made a spontaneous trip back for just the night after her first couple of weeks at law school & would be returning the next day. So far, she said she rather likes *Contracts & Torts*, although *Constitutional Law* is apparently a little dry. (Grin.) Ben snapped a photo of the two of us (see end photo).



ATTRONARCH: RAE. Snerk at all the labours needed to remove or cache that hoard of gory gold pieces; even if buried I wonder if they would attract grubs/flies? BTW those treasure maps are hilarious, one looking as if drawn on the back of a used serviette. ◊ *Re Hagar and your comment, "It is unclear to me why they hadn't attempted to bring him back to life."*; perhaps more of your players need to read *Overlord's Annals*? ☺

AVRAM GRUMER: RAE. ◊ *Re Ben Robbins' opinionated protagonist trick:* I shall gleefully steal this for making relatable NPCs with this one crucial difference.

BRIAN ROGERS RAE *Thoughts on Table Culture:* The clash between table culture and genre culture is not confined to supers or pulp. Fantasy offers an equally revealing example. For many early role-players, Tolkien was the gateway to fantasy, yet D&D's wargaming ancestry rewarded tactical, acquisitive, increasingly powerful adventurers. Tolkien's trappings could therefore be present while his dramatic heart disappeared. I remember the comments after Lew Pulsipher's introductory AD&D Moria adventure, *Khazad-Dûm*, in [White Dwarf #38](#). His Fellowship included Gandalf as an 8th-level cleric, Aragorn as a ranger-paladin, and Frodo as a 2nd-level fighter. Within D&D, this reasonably approximated Gandalf's restrained magic; to Tolkien readers who wrote to WD in response over the next few issues, it was problematic. The discontent exposed the difficulty of translating literary magic into levels, spell lists, and adventuring roles.

Even "playing in Middle Earth" means different things to readers, viewers of Peter Jackson's films, and players shaped by decades of Tolkien-derived games. The films may now supply the common vocabulary, but also substitute their spectacle for Tolkien's emphasis. D&D and its descendants have since become a fantasy genre of their own. LitRPG, for example *Dungeon Crawler Carl*⁴, reverses the original problem: instead of rules struggling to reproduce fiction, fiction openly adopts levels, classes, quests, & XP as features of its world.

Rules cannot make unwilling players embrace a genre, as your *Pendragon* example shows, but they are not neutral. By rewarding some choices and obstructing others, they teach players what kind of behaviour the game expects. They can reinforce a compatible table culture or quietly pull play off course.

BRYANT DURRELL: *Fantasia* sounds cool. What do you think of the city of Montreal itself on your visits to Canada?

DALE MEIER: RAE: BTW the *Strategic Review* article you cited for solo play is available on archive.org and seems to have reappeared in the 1st ed. *AD&D DMG* as an appendix.

DYLAN CAPEL: A sweltering summer in the UK seems to be a theme for many E&A-ers lastish. ◊ Did you get to play in those other RPGs at some of the one-day London cons? Eroding 'Hope' seems a rather grim item to track.

ERICA FRANK: I was deeply sorry to learn of your spouse's death on the *Discord*. "So sorry for your loss" seems painfully inadequate, but words are all I can offer across the distance. Please know that I am thinking of you. There is no need to write or respond; E&A will still be here whenever you feel ready to return.

GABRIEL ROARK: Is *B&B* comparable to *Arduin's Portal to Adventure*, or more or less gonzo than you expected? RYCT 75% of magical treasures are items & 25% maps, only to reveal that the maps merely lead to magical treasure. I was a little disappointed that the maps themselves were not magical: e.g. a living map like Harry Potter's [Marauder's Map](#); or one that records places its owner visits; a map that points toward nearby treasure or even predicts tomorrow's weather; or, strangest of all, a map that draws its holder & companions into a pocket dimension when folded the wrong way. ◊ I hope your skating progresses with fewer injuries going forward! ◊ And all the very best with your upcoming January 2027 court date to bring justice & closure for your daughter.

JIM ECKMAN: Will any snippets of *Wanderer* ever wander over here in E&A?

JOHN REDDEN: So sorry for the loss of your friend Chris. I also enjoyed the first three *Bobiverse* books most. ◊ RYCTM: *Horrors of the Mazorra as a horror novel?* I had never contemplated anything as ambitious as a standalone novel. But then again, I had never imagined it would have grown and expanded in quite the way it has.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: I hope you had a great *Worldcon* too! ◊ RYCTM: I'm glad you found guidelines for approaching *El Limbo's* NPC patient/prisoners helpful. ◊ It's very helpful to have your name/zine title along the side the way it is now when skimming through the pdf. This works similarly for Avram's & Patrick Zoch's zines with their tinted page colours. ◊ *RE everchanging rules games*; so now another new one, named Mao/"M"! ◊ RYCTM *occasionally relaxing page counts or donating overages*: I like this idea, since I can ruefully attest to writing losing potency when spread across too many months. Or worse, the opposite happens: it grows like a shoggoth, so even when cut down & the remainder bumped to a future issue, the displaced material expands to refill the next 16 pages and then some (*Please write anyone* ☺ !).

LISA PADOL: I hope you and Josh had a nice time at *Worldcon* & beyond, and that you can share any written or photographic records of your experiences. ◊ Thanks for the positive feedback re *Mazorra player agency flags*.

MARK A. WILSON: RAE your experience finding & curating gaming spaces, for your game design. I think it's both wise & necessary to separate these efforts from your usual gaming

⁴ I have to thank you for mentioning this series; I've read all 8 books!

groups as you have described. Your usual table may be too polite to act as dispassionate critics, and others may not wish to be unpaid play testers even in projects involving overlapping and adjacent game hobbies.

MATT STEVENS: I hope your writer's block melts soon.

MICHAEL CULE: Re "The end of page 16 approaches! Dread boundary to further comment." Sympathy & Snerk!

MYLES CORCORAN: A double treat! A fine *Mausritter* campaign report, followed by one for *Kriegsmesser: Landau Before the War*. The owl skeleton beneath the waters of *Black Owl Grove* is wonderfully evocative, but what of the fine golden thread disappearing into the water? Did Ambrose recognize it? ◊ Landau, poised on the brink of the Thirty Years' War, remains as grim, grimy, and mysterious as ever. What is the secret of the silver looped cross? What produced the slaughterhouse stench & red markings in the abducted boy's cave? Does the bracelet of southern Italian shells connect with Knipperdolling's Spanish paymasters? I especially like the zealot horde as a force of nature, complicated by the possibility that sincere fanatics are being steered by a false prophet. ◊ *Twsha meeting a Shoggoth or Deep One*: I missed answering this after revising Appendix A from Lisa Padol's feedback. In the Mythos version, *Elder Things* are the intended operators, *Twsha* their biological control instruments, & *Shoggoths* their intended substrate. Humans are disastrous accidental hosts, while *Deep Ones* are later custodians who learned to preserve & ritualize the technology. Unless *Twsha* encounter both a *Shoggoth* AND a *controller* (Elder Thing or *Deep One*), they infect & transform their host before eventually expiring. I also have a non-Mythos *Paratethys* explanation in mind but not detailed.

PATRICK BRADY: RAE. Reading your review of *Spider-Noir*, who is sometimes explicitly called "the Spider," gave me *déjà vu*. Stan Lee recalled that Richard Wentworth, the dark & hyper violent 1930s pulp hero known as **The Spider**, helped inspire Spider-Man's name. With *Spider-Noir*, the lineage comes full circle: Spider-Man returns to his named pulp ancestor, although with an entirely different origin & web abilities the pulp vigilante never had.



◊ *Re anachronisms in Spider-Noir*: In 1932, a non-scientist layperson, who read newspapers, popular science, or science-fiction pulps, could plausibly know such terms as *gene* and *mutation*. A September 1932 *New Yorker* editorial I found casually joked that "...a Gene Tunney in the hand is worth two genes in the chromosome," a joke assuming that its general readership would understand the reference in regards to this boxing champ. Similar language appeared in the science-fiction pulps, where radiation-induced mutation & accelerated human evolution were already familiar plot devices. The widespread American eugenics movement during the first part of the last century also used the vocabulary of genes, heredity, & biological "fitness" well beyond scientific circles beginning a decade earlier. A layperson might therefore recognize and use such terminology while understanding it only loosely.

PATRICK RILEY: *RYCTM*: I would like to have all this *Mazorra* material archived up somewhere, after I re-work more earlier portions based on feedback from persons like yourself & Lisa Padol. Also making maps full-sized, put all the *Mazorra* gazetteer-like material together, provide the current time-lined scenario, followed by appendices & other essays. I might put it up on *Miskatonic Repository* or even DTRPG, which could be a way to earn some money to pay for a proper artist & not be reliant on AI generated illustrations.

PATRICK ZOCH: RAE. Marvellous LED cannon fire markers!

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA & MAIRA ZUCOLOTTO: Are there any particularly interesting innovations in paper-based Brazilian game books or Interactive Fiction/Narratives that have not been used in English language works as far as you know?

PETER HILDRETH: Your *GenCon 2026* write-up incoming?

ROGER BW: RAE your recent SF game write-ups. But no actual pictures of a twangy ukulele in your hands?

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: I'm glad you survived that gauntlet of spring and summer setbacks and now have plenty of *Traveller* sessions ahead, both to play and run, to restore your gaming energies. ◊ *Re Tales from Your (middle?) Yurt*: Not even one twangy ukulele to be heard? ☺ ◊ *RYCTM*: Thanks! Truthfully, what I hear in my head bears little resemblance to what emerges aloud. I can pronounce the word as *schwa* (but it is not the *schwa* sound itself).

JIM VASSILAKOS: RAE *How to Find Fellow Gamers*; thanks for making this an ig-theme too; I read with interest, along with all the other responses. Finding fellow gamers seems worse than dating. It was easier here for me when we had a local gaming convention to meet new would-be fellow gamers, but this was more than 10 years ago. I am going to one con an hour away in October. *RYCTM*: thanks (blushes).

Serendipitous Sept 12th encounter with Lauren



September 19th 2026. BCM

ATLANTIS FOR NOW #4

Written on September 4, 2026, for Ever & Anon #16

Gabriel Roark

Rancho Cordova, CA

gabrielroark@gmail.com

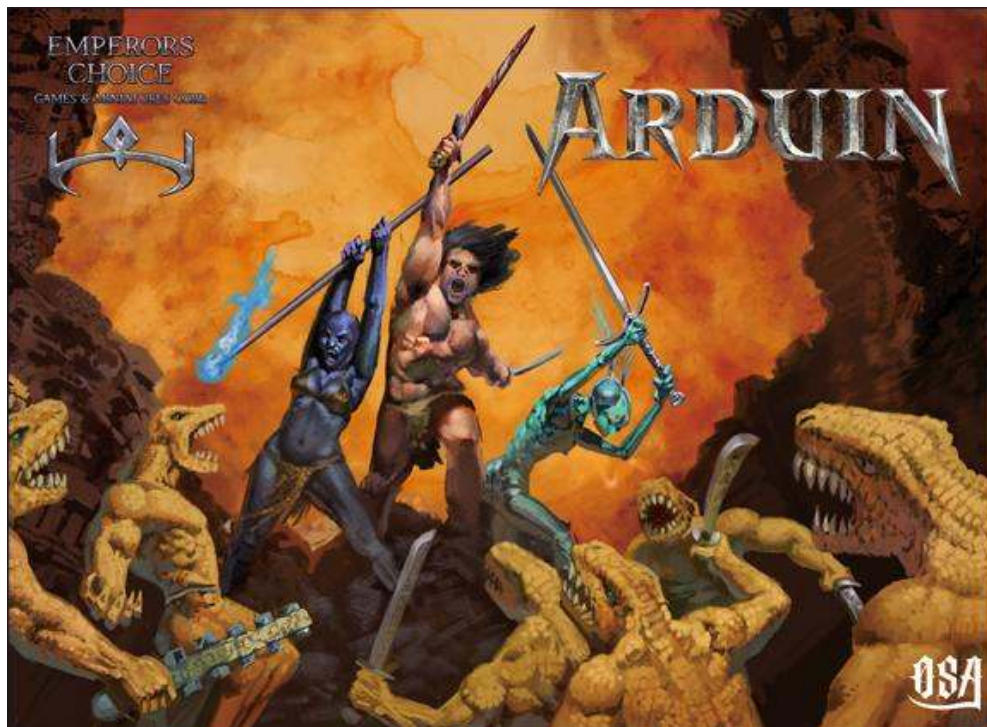
Primary Game System Keywords: The Arduin Grimoire; Arduin, Bloody Arduin

Secondary Game System Keywords: Advanced D&D (1e)

Natter

The interval between E&A #15 & 16 was eventful. My knee injury was not about to slow Celeste's skating down, so I tagged along to watch & film her at work. By September 5, I had enough rehabilitation under my belt to venture onto the ice once more. It is going well enough that I will rejoin my Freestyle 1 class just before the due date for E&A #16 & see what I can do. Celeste just learned forward slaloms & we are proper chuffed that she did it.

A few of the guys in the Advanced D&D gaming group recently had or soon will have birthdays, including one fella who turned 12 & his father, who will turn 50 in a few days. To celebrate, I ordered a few of Emperors Choice Games & Miniatures Co.'s *Arduin Grimoire: Harbinger Edition* box sets for us (because of course I wanted one, what with this spanking box art!).



Alas for you, O readers, the deets on this edition must wait for a future installment of *Atlantis for Now*.

Additional Contents

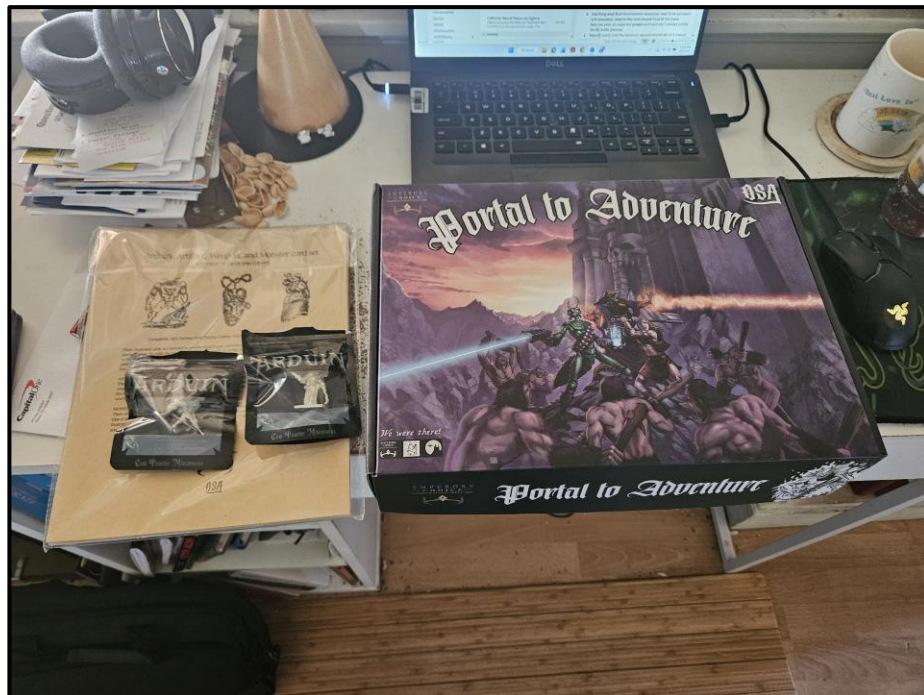
- “What’s in the Box?” Arduin’s Portal to Adventure: *The Arduin Trilogy: Limited Edition*
- Hey You!!! Comments on E&A #15

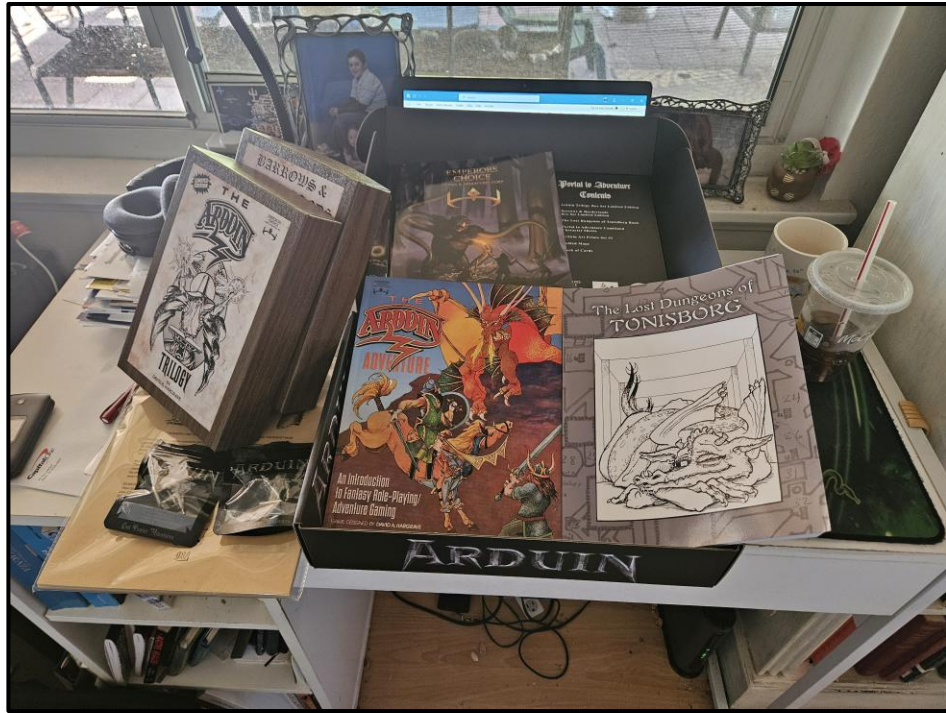
ARDUIN’S PORTAL TO ADVENTURE: *THE ARDUIN TRILOGY: LIMITED EDITION*

In this, we are going to crawl forth from the barrows, sprint across the borderlands, & hop a nexus gate to the world of Khaas, where we will behold the wonders of the Kingdom of Arduin, as chronicled in *The Arduin Trilogy: Limited Edition*. As a reminder, the Arduin products in Arduin’s Portal to Adventure consist of

- *The Arduin Trilogy: Limited Edition* (box set of five volumes)
- *The Arduin Adventure*
- 72 cut-your-own card set sheets (monsters & magic items)
- Four Arduin character sheets
- One each Monster & Magik Item Card
- Four Arduin art prints
- Two maps of the continent of Khaora (large & small sizes)
- Two decks of the Swords & Dragons Card Game

As add-ons to the Kickstarter, I ordered five unpainted Arduin pewter miniatures: a black phraint with heavy gun, human wizard, doomguard with gem, windego, & two sluggoths.





We are going to start with the box art. The front cover depicts a trio of adventurers outside what looks like the eponymous fortress referenced in the title of *The Arduin Grimoire, Volume II: Welcome to Skull Tower*. The trio consist of a phraint warrior, saurig mage, & human warrior. Phraints are mantid-like creatures with interstellar origins, whereas saurigs are clearly lizard people. They are battling with at least seven cavemen or other low-tech humanoids. I think it is digitally rendered but not AI-generated.

The inside box lid shows the same three adventurers inside the fortress battling a manticore. Same unknown artist, fine illustration. The bottom inside of the box bears a black-and-white drawing of a sahuagin by Jonathan Usiak, whose art is featured in some of the later volumes of *The Arduin Grimoire (AG)*. The bottom outside of the box has a frightening ghoulish figure before a Celtic cross in black-and-white. I cannot quite read the artist's signature. All in all, the sturdy cardboard storage box is a lavishly illustrated piece.

Inside the storage box is the centerpiece of the set: *The Arduin Trilogy: Limited Edition*. The Limited Edition box set comes in a sturdy, faux woodgrain cardboard box with glued-on front and back cover art. On the front, we have an ink-on-parchment drawing of a mage casting a spell from a grimoire. The back of the box lists its contents surrounded by handsome ink-on-parchment Celtic knotwork. Both are bicolor reproductions of the artwork from the original *The Arduin Trilogy* box set.

The Limited Edition is packed with stuff:

- AGI (Erol Otus cover)
- AGI (Greg Espinoza cover)
- AGII: Welcome to Skull Tower
- AGIII: The Runes of Doom

- Arduin Dungeon #0: The Rancid Maw
- Magic Item Card: Mountain Cracker
- Monster Card: Greater Zombie Rad Raptor
- Four Arduin Character Sheets

The four AG volumes and *The Rancid Maw* are all digest-sized, saddle-stitch (two staples), books with heavy cardboard covers that resemble tan parchment. Empcho printed the volumes on high-quality, cream-colored paper. All cover and interior art is black-and-white.

HEY YOU!!! COMMENTS ON E&A #15

- In the Hall of Stone (Patrick Brady)
- Quasipseudoludognostication #15 (Patrick Riley)
- Reddened Stars No. 14 (John Redden)
- Denizens of the Library #14 (Brian Rogers)
- Age of Menace 252 (Brian C. Misiaszek)
- Twisting the Rope #15 (Myles Corcoran)
- Attacks of Opportunity #14 (Dylan Capel)
- Port Omaha Beacon #2 (Dale Meier)
- An Unlooked for Zine #14 (Lisa Padol)
- Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman)
- Accidental Recall #14 (Joshua Kronengold)

In the Hall of Stone (Patrick Brady): RYQT Bryant Durrell, I remember enjoying *The Frankenstein Chronicles* with Sean Bean very much.

RYCTM on “non-incorporation statements by modern writers,” it is interesting almost any way one looks at it, although my writing on that point might have been unclear (equally possible, I simply misunderstood your remark). What I meant by writers including, “admonitions against incorporating the published information in any capacity” is writers exhorting their readers to avoid appropriating the cultural knowledge that the writer shared in their work to use in another published work. And then I read your awareness of this issue in your remark to Joe Michael Cule. Ha!

I am gratified that you find my zines easy to navigate. Perhaps I am a bureaucrat through-and-through after all! Seriously, I value clear communication, so your appreciation is most complimentary. Thank you!

I read your thoughts on finding other RPG players with interest, especially your understanding of boardgame cafes in the UK & USA. My city (Rancho Cordova, formerly a suburb of Sacramento) might be anomalous regarding the usual US situation, but we are blessed with at least one brewery & taproom that has a boardgame lounge that is also RPG friendly. One still must be 21 years or older to order a brew, though. There

might be other breweries in Rancho Cordova & the greater Sacramento area that have a similar setup, but my mates & I game at my place (The Dungeon), where I have a bit of a whiskey bar & one of us usually contributes at least a six-pack for folks what want something lighter.

Additionally, most of the games shops around here have free gaming spaces right out in the open. In The Beforetimes (pre-March 2020), I lived in a two-bedroom apartment with my wife & daughter, so my friends & I met at a local games shop to play The Arduin Grimoire. I ran an open table to encourage other players to join us cos it isn't always easy to find referees or other players. It was a congenial atmosphere, with people stopping by in small enough numbers to check out our game that it usually wasn't a bother to answer some questions & have spectators for a bit. My Arduin campaign also garnered two new regular players through the open table gambit. Like you, however, I tend to game with blokes who I've known for a very long time & well. The post-pandemic scene & comfort of owning my own home has reinforced my longstanding habit of gaming with good friends. I am not sorry for it.



The Dungeon as of a few years ago. Whiskey cabinet at left.

Quasipseudoludognostication #15 (Patrick Riley): RYCT Elf, "...if you are making a character for a game, you have to work within the constraints of the rules. You aren't making a superhero using GURPS, you are making a GURPS character who is a superhero" possesses beautiful clarity. I will keep this aphorism-worthy statement in mind for my gaming.

Reddened Stars No. 14 (John Redden): My condolences on the loss of your friend, Chris. May the time that you had with Chris in your life continue to bless you.

RYCTM, I think I had better not play ice hockey, although plenty of dudes older than me play at our rink.

Your Call of Cthulhu initiative order is equitable. When I start running Arduin again, I will use initiative counts based on the highest Dexterity or Coordination Factor (average of Dex and Agility).

Denizens of the Library #14 (Brian Rogers): RYCTM about declaring intentions & initiative being a time sink. Agreed. It gets worse, predictably, with more players & more PCs. When I start running Arduin, which employs a six-second combat round, I will probably skip intentions & just ask what the PCs are doing on their initiative counts. Your essay on table culture has useful observations on the role of premise buy-in for many games.

Age of Menace 252 (Brian C. Misiaszek): First things first, what a great picture of you & Lauren. She looks so grown up! I'm glad that you continue to share.

Twisting the Rope #15 (Myles Corcoran): Song quote: "Wash away the rain," has got to be "Black Hole Sun," by Soundgarden. Great tune that was ruined for me for a time by overplay. Props to you for the natural tie-in to your eclipse remark. I you're your player Kate's choice of name for her Irish PC rather odd. It seems a combination of Central European or Slavic given name and Italian surname. That said, there are words (plural nouns) in Gaeilge that sound Italian—*buachaillí* & *cailíní* come to mind. Do you know what was behind Kate's choice of name?

James Taylor Swift is genius!

RYCT Roger BW on item identification flowcharts, I have a copy of *Aftermath* here in the dungeon & it is the combat flowchart that you remember.

Attacks of Opportunity #14 (Dylan Capel): The "Mechanics" section of your zine was cool. I enjoyed my reading of Swyvers, which was apparently partial because I don't remember the magic system! It sounds great. Experience bubbles, as laid out on the Prismatic Wastelands blog has promise as well. The author was correct in point out that the experience bubbles system begs for a rubric to assign dice to XP-worthy tasks.

RYCT Patrick Riley, "Games Workshop's sea of green dispatchables" is a delicious line. Thanks for the explanation of index cards & mapping.

Port Omaha Beacon #2 (Dale Meier): Hi, Dale. It's not good to hear that you were having deeper depression lastish, but it is heartening to hear that you recognize what's happening & are caring for yourself. We're glad you're here & look forward to reading the kind of contribution that satisfies you as well as us.

An Unlooked for Zine #14 (Lisa Padol): I can't say I blame you for not getting beyond putting ice skates on your feet. The first thing I said to Celeste after standing up in a pair was an incredulous, "Babe, how??" Then again, so much about ice skating is as improbable as a quadruple axel. Forex, I was off the ice August 9 through September 4 on account of injury, yet skating in reverse suddenly made sense to me when I returned to skating. Just like that. Weird.

Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman): Hi, Jim. Thank you for sending *Wanderer* my way. I hope you aren't offended that I've not read it yet. Working on a project for Emperors Choice Games & Miniatures Co. plus recovering from my sprained knee simply hasn't left me with a surfeit of energy. I will get to it and, if it is agreeable to you, I will share my thoughts on the game in these pages.

Re: Law levels. I always read Traveller's law levels as representing the barest characterization of the dominant culture's legal system. I agree that the "metric" does not stand alone (cannot viably stand alone, in fact), even if taken to represent the dominant culture's legal system & others are assumed to exist. Your hypothesis that Traveller law level works for murderhobo-style play or players seems correct, hence its emphasis on permissible weaponry & drugs.

What are these Anarchist Laws in sci-fi literature that you mentioned lastish?

Accidental Recall #14 (Joshua Kronengold): I think your remarks about resolving actions during an Advanced D&D melee round miss a few key points (but I also missed one, as you noted). First thing to remember is that AD&D melee rounds are 60 seconds long—six to ten times longer than most rounds in most RPGs. Second, movement in AD&D melee rounds is adjudicated (unless house-ruled, naturally) in segments of six seconds each. Third, the charge action in AD&D is taken when opponents are more than 10 scale inches (10 feet indoors, 10 yards outdoors) apart. Fourth, casting time for most spells is given in segments. I probably clouded the case in my last zine by using the term "nearby"; I should have written, "within charging distance" because you are correct to point out that movement and melee weapon use are part-and-parcel *when the necessary distance is already closed*. If one is using the charge action in AD&D, it's cos the distance is not closed already. Let's take the example of an arming sword-wielding warrior in chainmail armor desiring to run down a magic-user before getting put to sleep or worse. The pair are about 20 feet apart. Wearing chainmail, the warrior can expect to cover 9 feet per segment. With an arming sword, I figure the warrior needs two segments to close the gap (yes, 18 feet is two feet short, but an arming sword's reach makes up for the shortfall). If the magic-user is casting a one-segment spell, the spell will go off before the warrior can complete their attack. Two segments or longer? The warrior gets their attack & a successful hit will spoil the spell & probably injure the magic-user. My error in all of this was invoking speed factor instead of weapon reach!

Speed factor is used to break initiative ties between opponents in melee & to determine the possibility of one combatant getting additional attacks through arcane mathematical gyrations that I do not want to reproduce here. If you are curious, crack the *Dungeon Masters Guide*!

Thanks for the comments, Joshua: they prompted me to review the combat rules & discuss them once again at the gaming table. My players appreciated the refresher. We all also agree that we look forward to playing Arduin with its six-second action rounds!

Short zine this month—I didn't manage my time too well. Peace, all, & thanks for being cool!

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 15, Dylan Capel

At work I was discussing LLM prompts with a colleague (such is the nature of contemporary work). I generally think that the only special prompt engineering worth using with this generation of “thinking” tools is the statement of the problem domain (“you are an expert in pre-historic sites of Europe”). My colleague though was still using the offer of reward (“if you do this correctly I will give you £200”).

I’m not the first to have this observation but it did remind me of the “machine spirits” of *Warhammer 40K*. We have a technology so obscure in its function that we’re reduced to superstitions and ritual behaviour. I have a rationale for my thoughts and he for his but we’re really just swapping anecdotal observations about incantations.

For those interested the “thinking” moniker is a bit of a misnomer, they actually just loop around analysing the initial statement and create a plan for approaching the task that is then examined and compared against the initial statement, when it goes wrong it can be unbearable to watch the endless looping and repetition and situations where the system should request a user clarification and instead goes through yet another loop of introspection.

And for a bit of balance I’ve found that Gemini is genuinely good at putting together suggestions and syntax for Typst. I’ve been much more adventurous with its help; not in this zine though which remains for the moment hand-crafted.

Watching

At the cinema I was blown away by *Teenage Sex & Death at Camp Miasma*, it is the first movie in a long time that made me want to see it again almost immediately. It is one of those pieces of art that is rich and many-layered while also being fun and entertaining.

The lead performances are excellent including in the film within the film (a device that for once is not unwelcome). Images and dialogue linger in the mind, thoughtful and moving, emotional and comic.

It is unashamedly expressing a love for teenage slasher films, taking them seriously as a cultural artefact but not literally. At its core though the film is about desire and female sexuality, everything else is beautiful layered on top of this chassis.

It is a genre defying film but I also think its unabashed love of the slasher genre might mean that it won’t be taken as seriously as it should.

Reading

I finished *We are all ghosts in the forest* and immediately went on to start *The Salt Oracle* (ISBN 9781837865741) which is set in the same setting. It is equally enjoyable and also quite different to the first book. While it has much of the same concerns with the relationship between technology, nature and animist essentialism it also a murder mystery set in a claustrophobic floating research centre. I’m two-thirds of the way through but I would recommend both as a good read.

I finally properly spend some time reading *Songbirds* and it has been one of the most interesting reads that I’ve had for a while. It has an usual cosmology that underpins the mechanics of the game. It is unusual without being perversely so, things are explained

legibly but the collective impact is something that is not rooted in obvious fantasy tropes. I'm still reading and absorbing but I imagine I'm going to have more to say about this.

I've also been dipping into the print collected versions of *False Machine* and *Prismatic Wasteland*. Interesting the former are much more enjoyable to read at random, perhaps because the entries are longer and most of the pieces are focused on ideas whereas the latter is much more concerned with procedures of play. Interestingly both haven't been significantly changed from their online origins so what is the value of the print editions? *Prismatic Wasteland* has significant layout differences which are a bit hit and miss and both collections make an effort at thematic collation. I'm glad I have both but I'm a bit stuck as to why.

Eldritch High is a *Lasers and Feelings* hack inspired by *Monsterhearts*, I often have fruitless discussions about which edition of *Monsterhearts* is better and I'm hoping that maybe the answer is just to slide into a different system altogether.

A while ago I expressed interest in the new *Forgotten Realms: Adventures in Faerun* book which due to the weirdness of international arbitrage I was able to get from Amazon at a great price which involved shipping it from the US and it still being cheaper than retail, madness. The book is great in an odd way. The alternative cover art is great and to me meshes up modernist styles from the 1920s with conventional fantasy art.

The book divides into different sections on the areas of the world it is covering, giving a short introduction and the key events that currently apply (damn the cruft of canon). There are then a number of adventures that are offered as a mini-adventure path. All of this material is competent, professional and bit bland.

It is bland however in a way that I have found quite inspiring in that it is very easy to make changes to make the outlined scenarios exciting and different. Replace a generic Shadow creature with a more specific kind of ghost, add a faction interested in the location, add some extreme weather. Overall it is actually one of my favourite mainstream books that I have read recently.

Underdarks

The World Below is the below the earth setting from *Onyx Path*. It also has a attached rules system which is seemingly based on *Storyteller* which was a bit unexpected. The game focuses on surface dweller refugees who have fled a surface catastrophe only to find a place of horrors and darkness.

Liches control a magical source of energy deep in the earth below the surface and while proximity is important the magic spills out and works it through the rest of the earth meaning many mysterious things are possible.

I've started with the quickstart which has a scenario that is frankly not great and unfocused. It kind of introduces the theme of having to explore the underworld to find resources for your community and that's about it.

It does feature the use of magical portals which is quite interesting and something I hadn't considered in underworld games before as the distance and the travel seemed to be part of the experience. Having a temporary magical portal allows you to locate a game anywhere and also gives you an in-world deadline to drive forward the action. If the characters do miss the chance to return via the portal it is also a soft setback as the alternative is to have to return the hard way or perhaps make their way to a more permanent portal which will have its own perils.

Superheroes

I picked up the *Invincible* Starter set which is quite nicely produced for the price point. This is a Free League box with maps and standees, pre-generated characters, a scenario and a rules booklet with enough information to run the game but not to create characters or have powers that are different from the pre-gens.

I was initially interested in the idea of how the same system could be used to play *Alien* as well as superheroes. Well the answer is that of course you can use any system for any genre, the question is how well it fits. I'm planning to try and play the game solo because sadly after reading the scenario I wasn't very interested in running it. I have not read the *Invincible* comics but I have watched a few episodes of the television show. I am not sure I am on quite the same wavelength as the fiction. Ultimately probably my tastes in comics were very much shaped by Marvel.

Given that I didn't enjoy the example scenario I was thinking of what I would consider a good introduction to the genre. At this point in time superhero comics seem to be saturated in their own mythology with storylines driven by the canon of the character. This however does not exist with a pick up and play game where part of the point is that the players are creating new characters.

One thing that I think the *Index Card RPG* setting *Vigilante City* gets right is that superhero games should be urban and that there should be something that is constantly creating superpowered characters, whether that be the genetic mutations of books like the *X-Men* or alien pollution, a strange artefact or a scientific program.

Cities like Gotham city also have a persistent problem that cannot be easily solved by superpowers: corruption, inequality, pollution. The characters mostly treat the symptoms of the problem rather than the causes.

Comics using real-world settings need to tread more carefully but in Marvel's New York for example the endless change inherent to a metropolis is often the driver for action. There are periods where the heroes actions have created a better situation for the city and that should both be possible and celebrated.

Then thinking about that urban setting you kind of need a city simulation where events are generated procedurally to create the sense of a living environment a bit like the Sony *Spiderman* games.

Shopping

The *RPG Trader* store has been launched as an alternative to *DriveThru* for creators with a better revenue split and to *Itch* for customers looking for better discoverability. I've already found a few things of interest and maybe because it currently has a smaller catalogue it does feel easier to explore. It is going to be interesting to see if it takes over from *Itch* for indie creators.

Paizo has also put their entire catalogue onto *Drivethru* having previously used their own custom and pretty terrible store solution (for the tech people here, it used Apple WebObjects a weird software product from Apple that was similar to Enterprise Java Beans and had the same cost and performance). There's a few books that I am interested in picking up and had been easily resisting due to the pain of purchasing. It would be nice to consolidate the *Paizo* library with the *DriveThru* one but that doesn't seem to be possible currently.

PDF crushing and annotating

I discovered the power of the *ps2pdf* tool this month, it simple transforms a PDF to Postscript and then back to PDF but in doing so it almost magically removes a lot of the cruft from PDF authoring tools and the resulting smaller files are much quicker to load on web-based interfaces which means I can throw more material into my new web-based PDF archive.

I started down this rabbit hole because one of the megadungeon PDFs (*Rappan Athuk*) I've been reading actually managed to consistently crash my Kindle. Sadly the rewriting trick didn't work as I had hoped. It's a ridiculously huge file and is pretty much the print file saved as a PDF I think.

Sadly I continued to fail in my attempts to find a suitable annotating tool for PDFs. The Kindle remains the best tool so far but annotations from PDFs don't seem viewable from the web interface...

TTRPG Wiki

One thing that I found quite intriguing this month is the TTRPG Wiki which allows you to compare game systems which is quite a weird feature. However more practically this searchable database of games allows you to search by the usual dimensions such as genre but also granular system features as whether you want Armour Class to ascend or descend.

More practically I enjoyed being able to search by things like all games involving "Freeform magic" and Creative Commons licensing.

Link: <https://ttrpgwiki.com>

Links

- Eldritch High: <https://drgwenmarshall.itch.io/eldritch-high>
- Songbirds: <https://snowttrpg.itch.io/songbirds-3e>
- False Machine: <http://falsemachine.blogspot.com/>
- Prismatic Wasteland: <https://www.prismaticwasteland.com>
- ps2pdf: <https://linuxcommandlibrary.com/man/ps2pdf>

Comments

I was quite slow reading this month. I did take a quick read through at the start of the month and enjoyed everyone's contributions. I'm hoping to do some more detailed comments next month.

Brian Rodgers

I've always found the idea of the Hollow World a little strange but I like the way your world achieves a synthesis of all the concepts.

Lisa Padol

Writing down notes on paper you say? What an idea! Your comment did make me question what exactly what I was trying to achieve. I think it is handy to anontate the larger issues.

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 14: 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://oldbytes.space/@RogerBW>
- Boardgaming APA: <https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/>
- Licence: AI0-BY-NC-SA-1.0 <https://www.humanscommons.org/>
- This zine contains no content produced by generative AI tools.



Recent Games

GURPS WWII / Lions, Tigers &

Dragons: We get back from Iran, and meet [General Wavell](#)¹, the new Commander in Chief, India.²

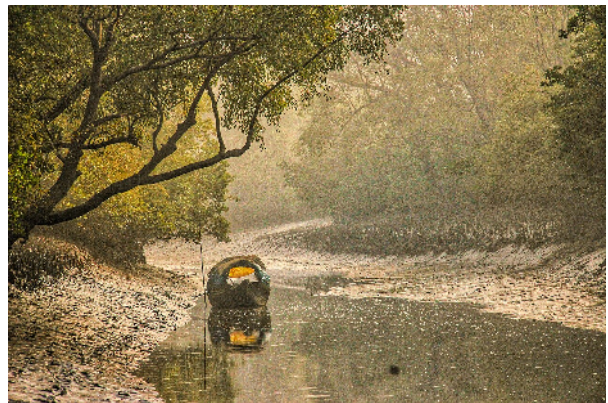
The Religious Advisors Corps (our attempt at a counter-magical group that can be deployed with the troops) has caught an Italian magician. He's surrendered, but we need to work out what to do with him (i.e. find a way of containing him, and other magical prisoners in future). At the same time, rumours of credible witchcraft are on the rise, and the usual people are being the victims. We start planning for various campaigns about how useful magicians can be to the war effort, and indeed to their local communities. And if we can sort out the funds, we'd like to set up a stipend, so that if you declare yourself a magician and pass testing you get a pension that you can spend in your community, even if we don't actually call you up.

Next session (swapped from *Neutral Currents*): monsoon season has set in, and tax collectors

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archibald_Wavell,_1st_Earl_Wavell

²I know him from the anthology of poetry that he edited rather later, *Other Men's Flowers*, being the poetry that he and others had learned at school and could remember in the trenches of the Great War.

are being killed by animals in the Sundarbans (an area of swampland on the modern India-Bangladesh border). We quickly verify that Something Isn't Right,³ and visit one of the villages where we go through various motions of investigation (but also friendliness; Nishchint, my character, joins in the communal cooking, and she gets the one critical success of the session in doing so).



CC-BY-SA 4.0 Wikipedia user Shihabur Rahman, 2020

We're not actually being threatening, but we're investigating and being police, and that's enough to get some of the locals acting hinky. With our various talents at not being seen, we trail them to the point that they're about to load

³The animals have been behaving so uncharacteristically that even we, not animal experts, can spot it.

a boat for a midnight flit, and arrest them; we don't even have to be tremendously intimidating. One village nurse who caught Communism in the big city; two local magicians who were working with her.

2300AD / Bayern: The team gets the alien rover upright again and poke about a bit more, but don't reach any firm conclusions. Onward to a world that's clearly been fought over: there's a Kessler-cascade débris belt, but also a signal from the surface. They get to the undersea base that's still transmitting and learn much of what there is to learn... except that, thanks to over-enthusiastic deployment of grenades against the native fauna, they manage to crack, flood and shut down the geothermal tap that was keeping the lights on. And the pumps running. So the rest of the exploration is in some haste, but they retrieve the data store anyway.

Onwards to the Raider attack: because we have relatively short sessions we spend this one mostly reacting and planning. Next time: action!

GURPS / The Day After Ragnarok: As we're about to set off on the raid, an RNZAF staff car pulls up and Dr Fletcher gets out. She's been working further with the statue, and the god has become agitated; something is calling the eel-god (cognate with the Serpent) to rise. We're not really surprised by this, but it's good to have confirmation. And thanks to our superiors, she's brought some extra toys.

"We hope it will all go smoothly and you won't need to shoot anybody. But this is a pulp campaign."

As we get near Lady Torrington's, we find that they've started without us; police cars have been pulled up in haste, and there's gunfire in the distance. We sneak over a side wall but a pair of

patrolling guards soon pick us up, and they get a few shots off before we mill them down.⁴ We fade into the shadows before reinforcements arrive, then make for the house, and follow the sound of chanting to the largest room, which has been converted to a ritual chamber. But alas it seems we're just too late, judging by the purple glow surrounding Lady T, who seems to have been in charge. Marconi fire does very little; if anything it makes things worse. But more conventional gunfire takes her down, sticky bombs restrain the other cultists, and dragging her regenerating body out of the circle seems to stop the giant energy field.

"Handcuffs. I know she's dead, handcuffs anyway."

"Lads, Lady T is under arrest. She isn't going to be paying you."

And so we put this campaign on hold for a bit, and the players move on to...

GURPS Traveller / Deepnight: (run by me). Two of the three players have never played in the Third Imperium setting before, while one has been writing for the game since before I met it, so that's fun. This first adventure is *Deepnight Legacy*, intended as an introduction to the campaign, and it starts off looking very *Alien*: the supply ship is overdue coming back, the crew for the other ship has gone on leave, go and take supplies and find out what's wrong.

It is my universal experience that given a world with a breathable atmosphere and no need to socialise PCs will *keep their vacc suits on*. And I honestly can't blame them! This is high tech gear that you can do delicate work in, not your modern clumsy technology.

⁴Don is a wrestler really, but he's handy with his fists too.

Anyway, they've met one shambler (alien picotech zombie), shot it a lot, but it wasn't there when they came back; now they're trying to track it down, while picking up other clues. The enemy is taking the time to de-hibernate more of its shamblers.

For the next session, I've drawn the missing map of the area outside the base, and got a friend to record the survivor's log given as a text handout.

IgTheme: GM-Dickery

I'm against it.

Which might seem obvious, but as I've said before I want to stamp out the whole concept of the adversarial GM at my table. I see myself as a friend to the players; I won't make things terribly easy for them, but I'm not out to screw them over either. Together, we will build an interesting narrative with challenges that feel fair, sometimes surmounted, sometimes defeating the characters, and sometimes they will die. But they will die in a way that leaves the player satisfied, not just "har har you didn't actually *say* you were taking off your armour to swim the river".

A solo RPG: *Mind How You Go*

After seeing other discussion here, I've decided to try a solo game, using the *Traveller* trade system⁵ Because I'm an awkward cuss, I'm going to do it in *2300AD*.

First step is to generate my character, Douglas Sherwood, a native of the British colony on Beowulf (Queen Alice's Star). He has a rough and tumble life during character generation (starting off being drafted as a cop when for no

obvious reason he fails to get a merchant berth first time out). However, with some remarkable luck on post-career benefits, he ends up with a *Thorez* courier that's been entirely paid off; I suspect, given the setting, that this is a salvage claim rather than something he actually saved up for, and everyone expected him to sell it and retire in luxury. Why didn't he? We shall find out.⁶ The *Thorez* is an unusual ship in this setting, because it can fly though atmosphere and land on a planet as well as travelling FTL; most ships just do one or the other.

I've done some analysis of the economics of this sort of ship, and it absolutely depends on speculative trade to make any profit at all. (Or high-priced urgent point to point cargo, since it can put down anywhere with a landing strip. I'll think about that later.)

The ship is called *Mind How You Go*; the ship's cat is called Trip Hazard, Haz or Hazcat for short, and is black with engineered yellow diagonal stripes.

I will start on a random world of the French Arm (Hochbaden), on Douglas' 46th birthday (a randomly-generated 24 January 2300).⁷

Let's work out some running costs: even this small ship has a full crew roster of 20. Paying standard rates (and I certainly don't have the budget for experts), that'll be a monthly bill of:

post	count	salary	total
Captain	1	4,000	4,000
Bridge Officer	1	4,000	4,000
Astrogator	2	3,000	6,000
Flight Engineer	2	4,000	8,000

⁵I have Paul Elliott's *Star Trader* which expands this as a solo game; I understand the newer *Solo* is preferred, but this is what I have.

⁶There's a ship share too; I'll call that Lv500,000 of seed capital for the trading company.

⁷He starts studying to improve his Vacc Suit skill; that will pay off on 21 March (eight week cycle).

post	count	salary	total
Pilot	2	4,000	8,000
Sensor Tech	2	3,000	6,000
Reaction Drive Eng.	2	4,000	8,000
Stutterwarp Eng.	2	4,000	8,000
Power Eng.	2	4,000	8,000
Life support Tech	2	3,000	6,000
Electronics Tech	2	3,000	6,000
total	20	—	79,000

I won't run them up in detail right now, but I'll assume they have effective skill +1 or +2 if I need to know. I will pay salaries on the first of each month. They have the option of renting hold space; I'll generate that randomly later. Douglas has the option of forgoing his captain's salary but he'll try to make it pay for now.

Hochbaden is a Frontier world with a class C port. Our 200-ton ship can be berthed on the surface for Lv3,000/week (including power and life support), or parked free of charge. (Class D and E ports don't offer the berthing.)



Pexels user RDNE, 2021

As far as fuel is concerned, I'll assume full tanks to start with, but each week of power plant use will be 6.25 tons (Lv12,500, which is why we pay for berthing instead), and each thruster burn will be 5 tons (Lv10,000). (These are accounted for separately in the design system, so

we officially have two weeks of power plant and 7 thruster burns, but it's all feeding off the same 47.5 ton fuel tank.)

The quoted maintenance cost is Lv2,188 per month, which again I'll pay on the first day of the month (or the first day after that when I'm in a port). I think this is meant to include life support consumables.

We pay the Lv50,000 fee for certification for official transport.

"But where do I go? We're out on the edge of human space here, and most of our neighbours are in the same sort of state as this place."⁸

"I hear Fritz Dietrich can hook me up, but he takes some tracking down, out past the agro domes. And then all he's got is a load of champagne that got sent here by accident. Maybe I could shift that in the Core, but not out here. Good old machine parts, never see you wrong."⁹

"Took a short cut through an agro dome to get back to the port, and... you know that feeling of being watched? Even more so. And then a howl, and another howl and another. It was going to night cycle, and they seemed to be

⁸We are, as mentioned, at Hochbaden (Non-Industrial trade class). Our one-hop neighbours are Beta Comae Berenices (Agricultural and Poor), Dunkelheim (NI and Poor), Aurore (Poor) and Arcturus (no habitation). Our best bet from the standard items is to ship some Common Industrial Goods to Dunkelheim, but let's see what we can find.

⁹We look for goods, away from the starport. This takes three days, but I have +2 from the C starport, +1 for the ship's interface capability, +3 from Broker and +1 from my EDU, and I am successful in finding a supplier even at -2 for "away from the port". A roll for unusual cargo gives Luxury Consumables, which doesn't look good for hauling to any of our neighbours, so we'll buy Common Industrial Goods: an average roll gives a purchase price of 95% fair value, so setting aside a chunk of money for crew expenses we'll buy 36 of the 60 tons available. That leaves 26 tons of space in the hold.

surrounding me. I'm not proud. I ran for the dome lock."¹⁰

It's 4.94 light years to Dunkelheim, about 1.5 parsecs, call it 1 for *Traveller* purposes. Now we can look for "filler": plenty of people want to go there, so we can fill our six cabins with Middle passengers.¹¹ They normally pay Lv6,500, but they'd also have to pay Lv1,000 for a spaceplane up to orbit and Lv75 down again at the other end,¹² so we'll add that to their fare and charge them Lv7,575 each.

I can readily find 26 tons of cargo, paying Lv1,000 per ton, though I assume that's paid on delivery. Load that too, every little helps.

Rolling for a port encounter gives me nothing, and we set off. I'll use the [route plotter](#)¹³ I found to get a total of 8 days of travel (half slogging between planet and FTL shelf, half in FTL). We'll arrive on 3 February. For fuel use, my drive bonuses mean I spent no significant fuel getting into orbit, and eight days on ship power consumes 7.1 tons of my fuel.

For a jump event, I roll "Theft from a passenger stateroom or luggage area." All right, let's see which passenger this is. Strangely, *Star Trader* doesn't have a table for pax, but *Mongoose Traveller* does: they're "claustrophobic". That's not going to go well, so probably they have

medicated themselves into unconsciousness for the duration of the trip, which would explain how someone was able to steal something from them. Some random name generation and a bit of imagination gives me Gutierre Navarro, who's travelling to get back to a higher gravity world, the wide open uninhabitable spaces of Hochbaden not having been the panacea he'd hoped. And now someone's stolen his identification and credit details.

Douglas's old police instincts kick in and (2d6 + Investigate 0 = 9) he's able to find enough evidence to get one of the other passengers to confess. Orsino Cristofori, a company man, has had a profoundly unsuccessful sales trip and was looking desperately for something to cushion his upcoming inevitable sacking. Douglas will hand him over to the law on Dunkelheim.



Pexels user Snapwire, 2015

"There's nothing quite like flying your own re-entry. Yeah, I pay pilots like the book says, and they stand their watches, but owner's perks: I'm going to put these hundreds of tons of spaceship down on the runway myself. A quick customs check, and then I've called ahead to the local Kripo so that they can take Cristofori out of the starboard lock while my friendliest-looking crew are waving goodbye to everyone else on the other side. Then it's everyone off and

¹⁰Meanwhile, I have an "Interesting or potentially dangerous encounter with some local wildlife." Hochbaden is near-lifeless outside the domes, so this is probably something humans brought with them. I will invent a feral dog pack, tolerated because they subsist off agricultural pests, but taking that short-cut back through the farm dome provides a few anxious moments. Good thing we didn't have Hazcat with us, who provides the same service when the ship is carrying food.

¹¹We don't have the spin gravity we'd need to offer High.

¹²Neither world has much in the way of orbital infrastructure so they are definitely travelling from surface to surface.

¹³<https://starscanner.six51.com/>

into the port hotel of their choice, because we're full-stopping the ship until it's time to leave."¹⁴

But most importantly, what about selling the cargo? I'll take another three days for an off-port trader (no benefit to sales, but I'll buy the next cargo from them too). We have a +5 on resale price roll, and get a natural 12, so we can sell at 130%: 468,000 total. Thanks only to a bit of dice luck, we've made a profit!

Accounts for this first leg below. This was mostly a proof of concept on the financial side; in future episodes I'll expand more on the personal.

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 15

Patrick Brady: I grew up in London and now live about half an hour's train trip outside

¹⁴We get paid for the bulk cargo and offload the passengers. It's only a D port here, so no berthing fees; rather than keep the power plant running, we'll actually shut the ship down completely. I'll borrow from *Traveller* and pay Lv1,000 for SOC 5 Douglas, from his own funds; that would get him a month's living expenses, and I'll pro-rate a refund when we leave. The crew can pay out of their own salaries; I won't keep track of their individual cash. We've crossed a month boundary since the last port, so I pay maintenance costs and crew salaries.

it. My experience was that as with any city, there are places where you can go and you're likely to get into trouble, but mostly that's because outsiders have no reason to be there so you look (or I look, white and male and quite tall) as if you're going to cause trouble to the people who are there already, or like an easy victim.

I still have a distinct memory of being in Milwaukee for a 1990s GenCon, walking a block and a half from the hotel to get a pizza from a place that was much cheaper than the ones nearby, and suddenly I was surrounded by hostile looks from black faces (in what had seemed until then a mostly white city). Then I went into the pizza place, and when I came out again with my purchase everyone had relaxed. I don't usually meet such a sharp "wrong side of the tracks" feeling in England, though perhaps I'm more sensitive to the cues here.

RYCTM, while I do try to play PCs quite unlike me, there are certain concepts I as a player find it very difficult to enjoy, and one of them is not caring about the collateral damage. (And I do want to enjoy playing, after all.)

Date	Item	Received	Paid	Balance
2300-01-24	ship share funds	500,000		500,000
2300-01-24	berthing fees Hochbaden 1 week		3,000	497,000
2300-01-24	certification fee		50,000	447,000
2300-01-27	buy 36t Common Industrial @ 9500, Hoch		342,000	105,000
2300-01-27	6 middle pax Hoch→Dunk	45,450		150,450
2300-02-03	periodic maintenance		2,188	148,262
2300-02-03	crew salaries		79,000	69,262
2300-02-03	26t bulk cargo Hoch→Dunk	26,000		95,262
2300-02-06	sell 36t Common Industrial @ 13000, Dunk	468,000		563,262
	carried forward			563,262

Re IgTheme and paid GMs: I know Mike's done this. While I don't have people seeking me out for it, I imagine I could hang out a virtual shingle and get some takers. But... I don't want to. I run the games I run for the enjoyment of the whole play group, which includes me; if the rest of them are paying me, that would be distorted. I think that leads to me feeling vaguely uncomfortable about the whole thing, just as I don't really like the "actual play" recordings that involve script coordinators even though they're still presented as though they were a group of people playing a game. In turn that doesn't mean I think anyone else shouldn't do it, but it's not for me.

Re boardgame cafés: maybe I should make this an IgTheme over in *Of Dice and Meebles!* I go to Thirsty Meebles in Oxford with friends once a month or so. There's often a role-playing group or two in the back.

Re The Spider: the one who comes to mind first for me is the 1930s-1940s pulp hero, best known when written by Norvell Page. Doc Savage might give a criminal a ~~lobotomy~~ "delicate brain operation" that would turn them into a productive citizen; The Spider would casually kill them to death, and brand their forehead so that the cops would know who'd done it, usually in that order.

Patrick Riley: RYCT Patrick Brady, I find that a high-tech setting with good communications can be vulnerable to a player who wants to be involved in everything... but on the other hand, it means that they can keep chatting in character even when the action doesn't involve them.

RYCT Brian Rogers, there are some historical figures who clearly *thought* they were player characters. For example, "[Mad Jack](#)"

[Churchill](#),¹⁵ who went into battle with a claymore, a longbow, and a set of bagpipes... in the Second World War.



War Office photograph from 1940-1945, public domain

RYCT Jim Vassilakos, considering some of the things Lovecraftian investigators get up to I've often felt there's scope for "and you were actually just following your hallucinations all along". A bit bait and switch for a game, but it could make a good short story.

John Redden: RYCT Michael Cule, something like 60% (and rising) of the population of the UK is actively in favour of rejoining the EU as soon as possible, but no significant politician will mention it except as something maybe for the very distant future. Similarly, the police will happily arrest a pensioner for wearing a shirt with text similar to the name of a banned organisation, but will not touch a mob of masked young men out to terrify and assault non-white people.

Bryant Durrell: I don't mean to insult your gaming style, but what's so great about an automated character sheet compared with having one on paper and rolling dice? Genuine question, I've played one or two games like this

¹⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Churchill

and it seemed like a nice gimmick but nothing compelling.

RYCTM, Typst has simply become my universal tool for “I want this in a vaguely usable printable format”. Adventure notes, NPCs, everything. That **GURPS** template expander I talked about a while back is growing a Typst-compatible output mode.

Brian Rogers: Williams and Wilson are the same guy, right?

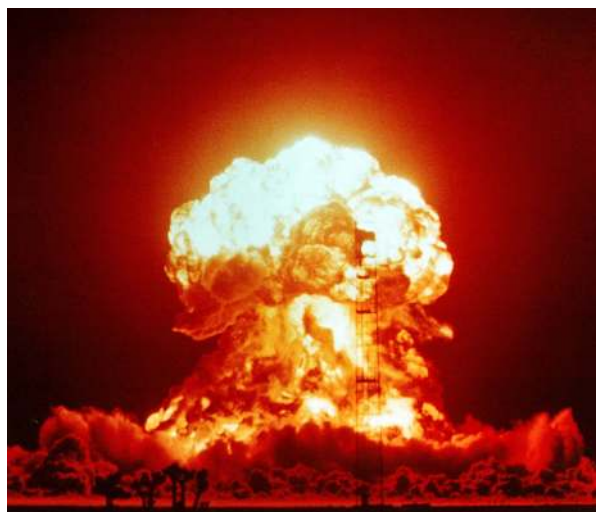
The well-dressed fire cultist probably has a Nomex suit, like a racing driver. After all, things can always go wrong.

Re table culture: I think this is where I start to feel edgy about games that try to reward the “right” play style and penalise the “wrong” ones. I am an adult; the people I mostly play with are too, and we know each other reasonably well. We can have a chat before or even during the game about the sort of style we want to play in. (“Session 0” without the formality, if you like.) So we don’t need the game to push us in that direction too, and if the directions are slightly different, it may cause extra friction.

I think that a problem with superhero games in particular is that a superhero comic has the advantage of a linear narrative with a single author. A sneaky use of a power that would invalidate all the tension of the situation can be something that the character simply doesn’t think of, or they can come up with a sudden invented reason why it wouldn’t work and not even try it. Have a GM say that to a player, and they will be justifiably irked: some of the *point of the game* is that the player has this box of tools and is trying to think of ways to solve the problem with them, rather than pulling something new out of the air.

RYCT Avram Grumer, I think a *Star Wars* inventor is a force of nature who spins off adventure seeds every now and then as the plot requires, not a PC.

RYCT Timothy Collinson, in the original **GURPS** version of the adventure that ultimately became [Warped Adventures: Infection](#),¹⁶ one of the pregenerated PCs (a USAF airman) has the skill Explosives (Nuclear Ordnance Disposal). Depending on how things progress, there may well be an opportunity in the adventure for him to use it, but mostly I put it in to see the look on the player’s face as they glance down their character sheet for the first time.



National Nuclear Security Administration /
Nevada Site Office, 1953

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: speaking purely for myself, I think I’d also like a higher-level view of who’s moving where when. But that may be something to write up later if at all.

Gabriel Roark: Sympathies on the knee!

Your mention of treasure types gives me an idea: really what one wants in a monster listing is a

¹⁶<https://warehouse23.com/products/warped-adventures-infection>

two-dimensional definition. One would be “richness”, which could be as simple as a target monetary value (perhaps a range); the other would be “composition”, which I tend to envision in terms of weights on a random table. (So the rock-burrowing worm with the magical guts gets you a lot of metal and gemstones, the bandits mostly have money, the lich mostly has magical tomes, etc.) Then I would be inclined to generate chunks of treasure one at a time, each one potentially ranging up to the remaining available value, decrementing its own value from that, and the next chunk generated out of what’s left.

Myles Corcoran: Here in the south of England I got a very partial solar eclipse; the lunar one was rather more viewable, but the best of it was blocked by trees.



A good solid tactical rescue, on mouse scale!

RYCTM: I admit I put in the line about the nuclear scuttling charge mostly as a way of reminding the players, for whom it had been a year or so of monthly games since it had last been mentioned.

This part of the campaign is a three-part scenario progressing through space: in the first part (written up in FH#9, E&A#11) they met a damaged rover, in the second part (FH#11, E&A#13) they found the homeworld of the people who’d sent that rover, which had clearly been genocidally attacked by another species, and in this part they met that other species. This was the first time they actually got to see them; they’re something like four-legged crabs without the pincers, roughly human sized.

You may well be right about the item charts; I never played *Gamma World* and all I remember of *Aftermath!* is the catch-phrase “hit him in the twelves” (it was the first game we’d played that had a groin hit location, and we were schoolboys). Of course the wargame *Renegade Legion: Interceptor* used a similar flowchart system for damage to your space fighter, memorably parodied in *Renegade Nuns On Wheels*.

RYCT Bryant Durrell: I have found as a GM that some players and player groups leave me feeling energised after the game, because they’ve taken what I gave them and built more stuff on top of it, while others leave me drained, as though I’ve been the sole source of the entertainment they have been consuming. (These are not necessarily correlated with “people I like playing with” and “people I don’t like playing with”; the latter, I don’t play with at all!)

Dylan Capel: RYCTM, just to be clear, you have to save the PDF (probably as a new file!) to retain the annotations. Like so many things in PDF, this subsystem feels very bodged-in to what was originally meant to be a more boring successor to PostScript, purely a thing that would let you distribute a print-accurate page layout. What I would *like* is a PDF viewer that

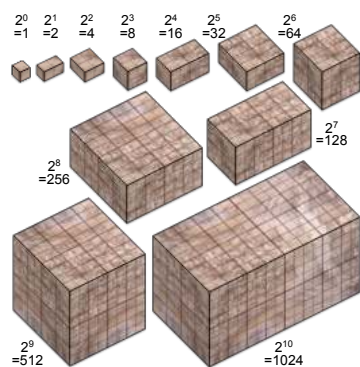
let me have a list of “sticky notes” that would jump to a particular page when clicked on, stored in a separate file (probably JSON or the like).

Dale Meier: Re your comments on the pervasiveness of “kill the monsters, don’t think about it” gaming: while I’m not deliberately political I can’t help tracing the oppressor mindset down from the Western, through pulp fantasy, to *D&D* and onward. Of course you kill those guys, they aren’t really people, they’re intrinsically evil, and so on. And more modern settings can fall for wartime-style propaganda: “all [ethnicity] are mindless tools of the régime” may be a useful thing for soldiers to believe on the battlefield, but it’s not something I want to emulate in my games.

For solo RPGing: I have some things in mind too, though I haven’t got there yet.

Good for you talking about depression, and good fortune in getting out of it! I get it a bit too, fortunately not enough to mess up my life but sometimes enough to suck the joy of of everything. Gaming is, I admit, an escape for me.

Michael Cule: 2024 gates? Not 2048? (All right, for me the first couple of dozen powers of two have the familiarity of a well-known song.)



CC-BY-SA 4.0 Wikipedia user CMG Lee, 2021

Do not forget what happens when the fans of deep lore get put in charge of an SF programme: *Doctor Who* in the Ian Levine era. (Or, arguably, much of the revived series.)

I hate to say it, but the term I’ve met most often for the cunningly constructed leather sash with a flagpole socket in it is “flag carrier”. Which is also the person doing the job, of course.

Obviously the most appropriate march is Fučík’s *Entrance of the Gladiators*. I mean with a good solid manly theme like that, how could you go wrong?

Re IgTheme: it was Vampire first. It’s perhaps worth bearing in mind that many publishers have shut down their forums these days, preferring to rely on commercial social media, which I cannot bring myself to use.

RYCT Patrick Riley I’ve certainly tried a number of weird RPGs at Stabcons only because you’ve brought them along to run one-shots. I know that a game you run will be fun, even if the system turns out to be not at all to my taste. I shall miss that.

Avram Grumer: I haven’t formalised “strong but wrong” but I do like to do something similar. One of the things that keeps me coming back to this hobby is the ability to play someone not only unlike me but maybe someone I wouldn’t particularly like — but like everyone sane, they think of themselves as basically good people.

(For example, I’ve mentioned Colonel the Baron Rafe Tikhonov in Mike’s *Traveller* game. Random character generation took him from SOC 3 gutter scum to a respected minor noble with his own planet, *and* he got to beat people up along the way! He’s a big enthusiast for the Imperial system.)

Re the *Scum and Villainy* game, I'm getting a much greater appreciation of the power of clocks from this writeup than I ever did from reading *Blades* rules, particularly the way they're really more of a "how far away in time/space is this predictable danger" measure than an actual countdown. Thanks!

Patrick Zoch: [Bad Squiddo Games](#)¹⁷ sell something like your cannon fire markers, clouds of cotton wool smoke with flickering LED lights for fires and wrecked vehicles on 20th century battlefields. (For people in the UK who don't fancy making the effort.)

Lisa Padol: RYCT Patrick Brady and the Titanic game, I have written a one-shot *Marmosets on an Airship* set during the first trans-atlantic air crossing in 1867.¹⁸ Most of the NPCs are historical or historical-adjacent: Sarah Bernhardt (with pet marmosets *and* Burmese python), Lord Derby the next Governor-General of Canada, the doctor disgraced after his failure to treat the Kaiser's throat cancer who's travelling to the new Battle Creek Sanitarium...

RYCT Matt Stevens, the first "social combat works like physical combat" rules I saw were in *Lace & Steel* from 1989. (Which may also have the earliest use of a tarot deck in an RPG.)

RYCT Bryant Durrell and RYCTM re Typst, first of all decide whether you want to use their web editor or run it on a local machine.¹⁹ Then there's a reasonably decent tutorial on the site to

get started with. The main thing to remember is that it is a markup language, not a WYSIWYG editor: you type commands into your text file that say a word should be italic or whatever, but you only see the result when you compile it and view the output. (The web editor does this as you type, but you still have the place over *here* where you're typing and the place over *there* where the formatted text appears.)

RYCTM and player conflict, I think I'm broadly with you (and of course a LARP is likely to be more conflict-y than a classic "we are the party" RPG). But basically I like playing with grown-ups (of any age), who can agree that things that make *players* unhappy should be approached with caution, and then go on to separate their miserable character from the happy player.

Classic "annoying box text" for me tends particularly to be location descriptions, because my PCs don't notice things in the same order as they were written, and I've seen too many "oh and there's a huge monster advancing on you" right at the end; an allied irk is the villain who's written as monologuing without interruption even if the game isn't one that supports that.

Re where *Call of Cthulhu* has gone since the early days: I was thinking of the period appeal of the 1920s, in its more extreme forms with costumes at the table and so on, and the extension into more pulpy period games. Whereas the original *Cthulhu Now* is now an historical document: nothing ages faster than the game set "right here, right now" except perhaps the game set "on the edge of tomorrow".

I think of purist/pulp as a distinction specific to *Trail*, since "pulp" in *CoC* means something entirely different.

¹⁷<https://badsquiddogames.com/>

¹⁸All made possible by the miracle of the Blackwood Atomic Boiler! It's not quite steampunk, though, because the engineering is strictly constrained by what could actually be done, if certain theoretical insights had happened earlier.

¹⁹I prefer the latter, but I have been running Unix systems for home and work for nearly three decades now and my tastes are not normal.

Yes, fair enough, I did in effect propose a patron game, but with one who *can* get involved — they just don't most of the time, doubtless for good reasons.

RYCT Brian Rogers and *Good Society*, I think Regency-romance wealth falls into three categories (obviously I am over-simplifying):

- Your father made it, or you made it, and you are a man: you are a despicable Cit, though some people will still play cards with you in the hope of winning enough to pay their bills. You may find impoverished nobles pushing their younger daughters at you so that the marriage settlements can repair the ancestral pile.
- Your father made it, and you are a woman: you may not be quite comfortable in high society, but you will not be short of impoverished suitors.
- Someone more distant made it and you live off the rents from the land they bought: oh, yes, one of the good old families.



Unknown artist in a Dresden love letter, 1815

As for choosing a system for *Night City Noodle Shop*, am I being pretentious if I suggest that there's a sort of Sapir-Whorf effect potentially going on here? If your character sheet is all

about hit points and armour and weapons and combat powers, if the game system has 50 pages on combat and 4 on other skills, if you play on a VTT where the constant background is a battle map, I don't think it's unreasonable to suggest that you may be predisposed to solve problems with violence even if the system *could* support other approaches.

Jim Eckman: There are two effects of *Traveller* law levels I like: you only carry lasers if you're expecting to be outside civilisation a lot (so having a laser implies that about you), and *everybody* has a shotgun aboard ship for the worlds where that's all you can carry.²⁰

Joshua Kronengold: I notice several places in which you have an open parenthesis not matched by a close, and a great deal of inconsistent spelling (dictionary words that clearly aren't the ones you meant, inconsistent proper nouns). I wouldn't normally mention it, but this seems like a plausible and perhaps fixable result of dictation.

RYCT Pedro Panhoca da Silva: the way I usually describe *Arabian Nights* is "you are a cork on the seas of fate".

RYCT Dale Meier and Hasbro trying for Pay-to-Win: well, every time I see people talking about *KeyForge* tournaments the emphasis seems to be less on "bring your own deck" and more on "buy a new deck at the start of the day". Not fully pay-to-win since you can't mix cards between decks, but you can buy a bunch of them and play the best, and they're certainly trying to get more of a steady income flow.

RYCTM on "universal core" and similar: I think it helps that many of these games are not huge

²⁰No, a software switch on your gauss close assault weapon to dial down the muzzle velocity and rate of fire *will not do*, Ruersaegn!

commercial properties, so their authors are happy to allow very liberal licencing policies. *Savage Worlds* was famously generous compared with other games at the time, but they still wanted approval of anything you put out using their name; meanwhile, I think there are plenty of games now that are basically “if you want to write something inspired by this and borrowing some of it, go for it, just acknowledge us”.

I understand the “new” (2018) standard for JSON, JSON5, does finally allow trailing commas in lists... but hardly anything supports it even now. And I have always learned a language best by having a task I wanted to get done in it.

RYCT Lisa Padol and the plethora of Marks: as I understand it, when the group meeting in James Wallis’s flat was playtesting the *Timelord* RPG, they started off all playing themselves as companions. Then player A had to leave the group for a bit, and player B joined, and since they had ongoing plot threads player B took over character A. Then later player A came back, but character A had by now become associated with player B’s way of playing them, so they ended up getting a new PC...

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Dale Meier, I think my general feeling is that if you (generally you, not Jim!) can shut up about your politics I’m not going to quiz you on what they are, but if you have some sort of public online presence where you talk about them I regard that as equivalent to your telling me; and if I find them hateful, that’s going to colour our future interactions even if I try to suppress it. (And the same applies to my own politics of course.)

RYCT Peter Hildreth on the SJGames raid: the

[Wikipedia](#)²¹ page is pretty decent for those unfamiliar with the history. In short, the Secret Service was going after Loyd Blankenship and wanted to make an example of him; they didn’t find anything immediately dodgy during the raid, so they took everything from the company offices on the basis that there might be *something* there which would let them save face. (There wasn’t.)

Timothy Collinson: RYCT Dale Meier, I still stand by *GURPS Traveller Far Trader* as the *best* approach to space trading that I have ever seen. (Really, the only one I’ve met that tries to be serious about the economics.)

RYCTM and *Back to a Future*: Heh!

RYCT Jim Eckman and *Spindrift*: sad to say, as you probably already know, it all depends on the contract.²² But in my experience unless they just want to sit on it to kill the competition for their preferred thing (Microsoft-style) most publishers are happy to say “yeah, this doesn’t really fit what we want any more”.



²¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Jackson_Games,_Inc._v._United_States_Secret_Service

²²And sometimes local law; Steve Jackson (US) was able to use 17 U.S. Code § 203 to take back the rights to his 1980s work for the long-defunct Metagaming in 2017.

Attention Conservation Notice

fonts & Typst neepery • the Battle of Brooklyn •
The worst terrorist attack in history, Jim •
PopSockets • moves & movies • *SUZi* • *Hit!* •
Lanterns • *Scum and Villainy* • *Zhenya's Wonder Tales* • boardgames • Button Shy expansions •
combat-forwardness • names • *Masks* • Five Tiers of RPG Publishing • emu • Hivers • experience •
cell antennae • *Monsterhearts* moves & skins •
Narrativism & *PbtA* • the Dark Phoenix Saga

Arbitrary Hotchpotch

Typst conspiracizing

Trying out some different typefaces, and a bit more space between the lines.

Libre Baskerville has properly wide em-dashes, a really lovely italic, and a larger [x-height](#) than the default Baskerville that ships with MacOS. It lacks the diamond character I was using in bullet lists, but Typst lets you use whatever you want for your bullets, so I just built my own diamond out of Typst's [square](#) and [rotate](#) functions.

It also lacks [old-style numerals](#), so I guess I'm joining the late 20th century, stylistically. I've always been fond of the large x-height revival types that came out of [ITC](#) in the 1970s & '80s.

If any fellow Typstographers are wondering about the extension packages I've got listed in my colophon up above:

[wrap-it](#): Lets you wrap text around images. I used to use a more powerful package for this, called [meander](#), but the simple things I was using it for didn't justify dealing with the added complexity.

[cuti](#): Lets you fake italics, bold, and smallcaps for fonts that lack those features. Neither Libre Baskerville nor Libre Franklin has built-in smallcaps. 🙄

In other typeface news, both Gemini and Claude seem to be really terrible at identifying obscure fonts from visual samples. Like, *aggressively* terrible. The classic kind of LLM awfulness where it confidently hands you the wrong answer, and then when you explain to it why the answer is wrong, it apologizes and says this time it's sure it's right, and gives you another wrong answer, and you can repeat this cycle several times without ever getting a correct reply.

The British cannons go Boom

August 22nd was the 250th anniversary of [the Battle of Brooklyn](#), and there was a reënactment at (or near) the site of the original battle in Prospect Park. A lively crowd of spectators booed the red-coats and shouted "Nooo!" whenever a colonial went down, but despite this, the home team lost.



MagSafe socket-poppin'

A handy feature of current iPhones is a ring of magnets inside the phone to keep it properly aligned with a wireless charging pad. I don't use wireless charging, but I do like having a magnetic PopSocket I can easily stick to the back of my phone to make it easier to hold, or to prop it up on a table. (I like [the ultra-thin ones](#).)

Seems iPads don't have this feature, but you can buy [inexpensive third-party adhesive metal](#)

[rings](#) designed to provide this feature to devices that lack it. I've put a ring on the cases of each of my two iPads, and bought an extra PopSocket, so now I ought to be able to hold my iPad Mini for extended periods without suffering the dread "death grip" hand cramping that iPad artists complain about. Still gotta worry about my carpal tunnels, though.

Moves & movies

The Brooklyn Library has recently started showing B movie horror flicks once or twice a month. I saw [Tremors](#) in July, and the original [Buffy the Vampire Slayer](#) in August.



Both of these were movies I'd seen before, decades ago. But seeing them again, so close together, it struck me that *Buffy* was a somewhat sloppily-made film, at the level of directing and editing. A lot of the small action scenes just don't hold up; the action isn't clear, and it's not always apparent why a

thing is happening. (Why can vampires fly, but get blocked by fences? What exactly is Lothos trying to do with Buffy, and what keeps him from just doing it when he has an early opportunity? Plus a dozen underdeveloped bits during the big fight scene at the end.) *Tremors*, on the other hand, is very well-made, with every on-screen consequence following logically from something established earlier in the movie. And it seems to me that this is the core of the advice given in *Powered by the Apocalypse* games about *hard moves* and *soft moves*.

The distinction is this: A soft move establishes that a danger exists, and asks the player what their character is going to do about it — "He pulls out his knife; what do you do?" or "The guard is turning, in a second he'll see you; what do you do?" A hard move just establishes some kind of harm or other undesired outcome — "He stabs you for 2 points of Harm!" or "The guard sees you and shouts 'Intruders!'" (In *Monsterhearts*, these are called *Setting It Up* and *Knocking It Down*, but the concept's the same.)

The parallel isn't exact — a movie is setting things up for the sake of the audience, not the protagonists, while in an RPG, those are the same thing. (Or were, before the days of massively popular actual play videos.) My point is that we might think the hard moves — the blows that do damage — are the important parts, but it's the soft moves that direct attention and provide the nar-

rative logic that turns a game (or a movie) into something other than a series of unconnected startling events.

(I also found [some Procreate pens](#) that simulate Bic Cristal colored ballpoints. Perfect for doodling!)

The worst terrorist attack in history, Jim

On September 11th, 2001, film director James Cameron was in a Russian deep submersible, 12,500 feet deep in the Atlantic Ocean with marine expert Ken Marschall, working on Cameron's documentary, *Ghosts of the Abyss*. When they returned to the surface, Cameron's friend Bill Paxton informed him that he'd missed "The worst terrorist attack in history, Jim."

Dillin Apelyan has written [an RPG about this experience](#).

Lanterns

I've been really enjoying the HBO series *Lanterns*. It's probably a more enjoyable show if you're not a fan of DC's Green Lantern comics. If you're expecting a flashy sci-fi punch-up full of exciting visual effects, it's gonna let you down. But if you're up for a moody cop-detective show with science fiction and superhero elements mixed in, and you're willing to take the show on its own merits, it's great.

Kyle Chandler and Aaron Pierre are both really good as Hal Jordan (the cynical older Lantern) and John Stewart (Jordan's eager and ambitious would-be replacement).

How moody is it? Well, check out that logo up above. I actually brightened it up a bit in an image editor before including it here.



Hit!

Saw a recommendation online for [Hit!](#), a small (24-page) US\$5 game that seems like *Scum and Villainy*, but trimmed way down and adapted to work with a deck of standard playing cards instead of dice. I haven't tried it, so I have no idea how well it runs, but the mechanics have a lot of flavor and look like they'd be fun at the table:

The resolution system is [Blackjack](#). Each player starts out getting two cards; their Heat. Anytime your PC does something risky (which ought to be pretty often), you succeed, but you get dealt another card for your Heat. If your total Heat is under 21, great, you succeed. Exactly 21, even better, you succeed extra well! Over 21, you bust:



you succeed, but you attract attention, and the job's countdown clock ticks down, and you discard your Heat and get two new cards. When that clock runs out, the job is too hot to finish.

There are four PC types (or "Guys," which the game insists is a gender-neutral term in-setting) — Hitmen, Hotshots, Scumbags, and Weirdos — each with a card suit. Whenever you get dealt a card of your Guy's suit, you gain a Chit, which you can spend to do a special thing that depends on which type of Guy you have, but it comes with a downside. Like, a Hotshot can spend a Chit to *Get Into Anything*, but it increases the chance that goons will show up to collect on the money he owes. (Hotshots always owe money to someone unsavory.) In addition, there are three special abilities associated with each type of Guy, one each for King, Queen, and Jack. You design a character by choosing a face card out of the deck, giving it a name, and picking two skills. Looks pretty quick!

My only complaint (not having actually played) is that, while the game rules say you're just going to need the card deck and some index cards, the various Guy abilities are too complicated to just keep in your head, especially in your first game. You're gonna wanna have printouts of the Guy rule sheets for quick reference.

SUZI



I read [an interesting review](#) of a solo journaling RPG called *SUZI*, in which you play an android who gets passed from one owner to another, usually with horrible things happening to it, and with a strong possibility of getting destroyed in some fashion. (The game was available on itch.io at the time the review was written, but has since been removed.) Not my thing, I don't think, but the review's author found it very moving.

According to the review, *SUZI* is actually just the character creation system for an upcoming game! Which might make this the first RPG since *Traveller* where your character can die while you're rolling it up.



Nothing new from the Park Slope group this month. We're trying to arrange sessions of *Fiasco* and *Alice is Missing*, but scheduling is tough.

SCUM AND VILLAINY

Session 10

19 Sep 2026

The GM	Gaylord (he)
Harmony Qián (she), a Mechanic	me (he)
Valsi (they), a Mystic	Lisa (she)
Von Redwell (he), Muscle	Gareth (he)
Varilas , aka Vary (she), a xeno Speaker	Josh (he)

Thanks to our Entanglement roll last session (see *E&A* #15, pg 148), the crew of the Waryfinder is catering a space race being run by space pirates right near a space prison, in space. Gaylord rolls some dice to generate more plot, so that robot lawyer from last session calls us with a message from his clients, the Concordiat Knights. The Squire from last session was taken prisoner, and is being held at the Isotropa Max Secure prison, which is just where we're going to be near! Also, the Squire's cellmate is listed as a serial killer, and might be a Magpie. Could we break the Squire out?

Vary **CONSORTS** with the cloned Malklaith heir we rescued a while back (*E&A* #10, pgs 131–132) to get info about the prisoner: Crit! (Three sixes on a 3d6 roll! Gareth suggests that Josh should roll percentile dice to see what Vary's Strength is.) This was a risky roll, so we get another Gambit. We learn about four political prisoners: The Governor's mom, the Squire, the "Mem murderer" (supposedly human), and a bank robber who steals from the rich and gives to the poor. The Squire is held as a hostage, to control the Concordiat Knights. Other prisoners are just there to make a profit for the prison.

Harmony **HACKS** to get prison layout: 4, partial success. Gets public info, but some areas are blocked out, marked secure. Also, some info about guard shifts, bribe tables.

Von talks to Yazu, his crooked cop contact, to find out if any guards are bribeable.

Our plan: We're gonna dock at the prison station by offering to sell our extra cake. This is a Social plan. 2d6 Engagement roll: 6! We get a regular visitors docking slot, but we have to split proceeds with the

guards 70/30. (They get the 70).

All the other ships in the dock are fancy rich people ships. Some of the guards want cake, which gives Vary and Harmony an excuse to go into the main prison area, while Von and Valsi stay at the cake counter with baby Vic. A well-dressed woman buys two cakes from the stand, opens the box, pours something on the cake, and offers the cake to the guards. A few minutes later, an announcement is made about there being no cause for alarm, and gunfire can be heard in the distance.

Vary and Harmony have gotten into a secure area by delivering cake to a guard in a “luxury” cell. Harmony **HACKS** to disrupt the security system, Gaylord offers a Devil’s Bargain: succeed or fail, we get a 12-clock time limit before the pirates want their snacks. This sounds like a great deal, so I accept, and roll five dice for my **HACK** roll, best die is a 4, all the others 3 or lower. That’s a partial success, so security is disrupted, but Harmony gets noticed, and a message pops up on her terminal: “You’re pretty good at this. Almost as good as I am.”

Von wants to track down the well-dressed woman’s ship. It’s an Ashen Knives ship. (They’re assassins.)

Gaylord offers to let Vary and Harmony get to the cell with no dice rolls, for 6 wedges on the countdown clock; Josh counter-offers that Vary spend 1 stress to look like a guard to reduce the cost to 4 wedges, and Gaylord accepts.

We get to the cell block, and there are more guards there. Josh spends 1 more stress on a flashback to establish that Vary has chatted with other guards to get info on these guys. He rolls **CONSORT**, but fails. “Who’s this?” the guards ask, pointing at Harmony. We pretend (my suggestion) that Harmony is a prisoner being brought in; Harmony helps by putting on a high-born accent (she has Imperial background, and this will give me another XP at the end of the session).

Harmony gets locked up 2 doors down from the cell we’re trying to get to. No cellmate, but a disembodied voice asks what she’s got planned. “Ventilation ducts. The classics are classics for a reason.” She unscrews the plate from the air vent, and sends her pocket drone to look at the Squire’s cell. (The duct’s not big enough for a person.) The Squire’s cellmate looks like Von in a uniform.

Valsi sees Kenn, Harmony’s brother (he’s an officer in the 51st Legion, and they don’t get along, and she helped break up his marriage to an Ashen Knives assassin), coming through the docking area. Harmony uses her drone to talk to the Squire,

using the code words we’d established as a recognition system last session, and **HACKS** to unlock door remotely. Her roll is a crit, so she silently unlocks *all* the doors on the cell block!

Valsi sees Kenn arguing with the well-dressed woman (she’s not his ex-wife). Valsi uses **ATTUNE** to try and vibe out their relationship — he was supposed to pay her for something, but didn’t. Kenn and the woman start fighting.

Harmony calls Vary on their comms: “Doors are unlocked; need a distraction now.” She also tells Vary about the Squire’s roommate, sends an image. Vary takes on Von’s appearance and pretends to be the prisoner escaping. Vary distracts the guards without getting caught, thanks to help from Harmony and the mysterious voice, but because of a Devil’s Bargain, Vary will owe the voice a favor.

Harmony walks out of her cell, and shouts “Door’s open, guys!” The Squire comes out, but the door starts to close itself before fake-Von can leave, but Harmony catches it.

The Squire gets shot as we’re leaving, but he’s just stunned. The shooter, a woman in a cell (presumably the Governor’s mother), reminds Vary that she owes her a favor. She also says she doesn’t know what “all these aliens” are doing in “my prison.” And she tells Harmony to study more, to be a real hacker, then returns to her cell.

We smuggle the Squire and fake-Von out in a cake cart. Harmony and Vary reunite with Valsi and Von. Harmony missed seeing Kenn get his ass kicked, but Valsi & Von got video.

We get out with 3 wedges left on that 12-clock, so we can still cater the race.

Von & fake-Von (Harmony dubs him “Emergency Backup Von”) do the [Pointing Spider-Man meme](#). Emergency Backup Von claims not to be a Magpie, but says he did kill all the aliens on Mem to clean it for the Empire. (I think this is a reference to that scientist with an Ur artifact wiping out all of the Magpie genetic material on Mem in Session 4; see *E&A* #7, pgs 146–147)

A news broadcast announces that the “Butcher of Mem” has escaped prison, and shows an image of Von.

We earn 12 **CRED** for this job.

Harmony starts work on a high-tech baby carriage for baby Vic, that’ll have hidden compartments we can use to flashback cool stuff into, like the carriage in *Lone Wolf and Cub*. Gaylord rules that I don’t need to get a schematic, and can just head straight to building the thing. It’ll have a minimum

Quality of 3, be conspicuous (+1 HEAT), and require some kind of rare material (to keep the baby safe). Construction takes an 8-clock, and I use one of Harmony's downtime actions to get started on it, filling 3 wedges.



One-shot

19 Sep 2026

Facilitator	Lisa
Ondřej , a Crow Fairy , in love with Klára	me
Klára , a Young Woman , engaged to Pável, in love with Ondřej	Josh
Pável , a Rich Alchemist , engaged to Klára	Gareth
Dorota , a Witch , Klára's mother	Gaylord

Zhenya's Wonder Tales is another one of those card-driven quickie games, this one based on Slavic fairy tales. We played out *The Bird Rivals*. Each PC has three cards with a trigger on the back, like "When you confess your feelings about Klára," and prompts on the front. The cards start face-down, so you've got the trigger to entice you to frame a scene around that situation, but you don't know what it'll lead to, and it generally involves someone choosing between two options. There are another four cards in the middle of the table, that anyone can use. And each PC has a card with an illustration, a description, some public information (read aloud), and some private information (kept to yourself, for now).

The way the game works is you frame scenes, draw cards, play things out, and at some point either all the cards are flipped over, or the story reaches a natural ending, and then you stop.

Opening scene, the town of Zarovna, in rainy weather. Ondřej meets with Dorota & Klára. He talks to D privately, while K eavesdrops. Ondřej is in love with Klára! Klára comes in and talks about her troubled dreams. Dorota tells Ondřej to stay away from Klára; Ondřej replies "You will regret this!"

Dorota visits Pável, and warns him that he has a rival with mystical powers.

Klára sneaks out of the house to meet Ondřej. Ondřej confesses to being a crow-fairy, while Klára describes her dreams about falling out of a nest into darkness. Ondřej: "The darkness is my love for you, deep and boundless!" Klára goes home.

Pável rides up on horseback to talk to Ondřej.

Ondřej gives Pável crushed owl-fairy skulls. Pável thanks Ondřej, warns him to leave town, gives Ondřej gold. Ondřej says there's something in town more valuable than gold. Pável invites Ondřej to his wedding, throws the gold at Ondřej's feet; Ondřej leaves it there.

Wedding day. Dorota is talking with Klára. Klára has doubts about marrying Pável, but isn't forcing the issue.

Dorota tells Pável about Ondřej being a crow. Pável is angry, asks how she could let a thing like that into her house. Dorota tells Pável that Klára isn't human, which Klára overhears. Pável: "Once we are wed, I will give her this potion to restore her to her true self." Dorota says she just wants in her daughter to be happy.

Church: The wedding. Pável is wearing the bottle of potion on his belt. The priest is up to the "If anyone objects" part, and Klára says "I do, my heart belongs to another." She grabs Pável's potion and drinks it. Her memories come back — she's an owl-fairy! They hate the crow-fairies! And she thinks Ondřej might have killed her family! She starts to look a bit like an owl. Pável staggers back — "You were supposed to be a princess!"

Dorota asks if Pável still wants to marry Klára, and he does. Dorota tries to push the wedding to happen anyway, but it doesn't work. Klára refuses to marry Pável. She tells Ondřej that she loves him, but he's done great evil. She'll find him again when he's done as much good, and vanishes.

We've still got a few cards un-turned, but that seems like a natural ending.

I found this game a bit awkward. The setup doesn't give you quite enough information about the characters, so you can wind up improvising stuff that doesn't fit with later revelations. Like, Pável and Dorota hate each other, but Gareth and Gaylord didn't learn that till they'd flipped a few cards over, so they'd already started a scene being friendly.

Boardgaming

I've been back to [Victory Pints](#) for boardgaming, and played a few new (to me) games:



Wine Cellar: A card-based game about wine collecting, played with elongated cards that depict wine bottles. Each card has a unique bid value, as well as various scoring attributes. You bid bottles from your hand to win your choice of the bottles from the middle of the table, and then the bottles you'd bid with become the new set of bottles being bid upon in the next round. The bottles you get, you place in your collection (on their side, of course), but you can only add to the top or bottom of your collection, not insert into the middle. Each bottle has a string of victory point values that depends upon its position in your collection. Also, each player has a different bonus card that gives bonus points for type of wine and nation of origin.



The copy we played with came from [the Brooklyn Library's Board Game Library](#), which is how I learned that that exists.

The King is Dead: An area-control game about England, Scotland, and Wales competing to control the medieval British Isles, with the French looming in the corner of the board, ready to grab any unresolved territories. Each player gets a hand of eight action cards, mostly used to move armies around on the board, and once you use one, it's gone, so make 'em count! I spent mine too quickly, so had to wait out the endgame sitting helpless while my opponents carved up the board. And it played to a tight ending—the game has four tie-break conditions, and we had to use them all!

dnup: A quick, lightweight card game. Each card has two numerical values, depending on which end is pointing up, and you can't flip your cards over except under specific circumstances.

The goal is to get rid of your hand. Gameplay consists of setting out sets of cards with the same value, but you can't put out a set with the same or lower value as an existing set of the same number of cards. If you play a higher-ranked set, the player with the lower-ranked set has to take those cards back into their hand, flipped over.

Yeah, I know we've got [a whole 'nother apa for](#)

[boardgames](#), but I'm too lazy to join up.

But not too lazy to download the four existing issues and skim them! Marcus Boyce has a zine in *Of Dice and Meeples* #4 (pgs 20–22) about the travails of being a color-blind boardgames fan, and this resonated with me. I'm not color-blind, but I am old, with poor eyesight, a degenerative retinal condition, and the early stages of cataracts. All of that means I cope badly with dim lighting. During that *The King is Dead* game, I had a lot of trouble seeing some of the pieces on the board until someone fetched a couple of portable LED lamps from the bar.

Fortunately, [battery-powered LED lamps](#) are pretty inexpensive.

Comments on E&A #15

Patrick Brady

RE Invasion of the Patricks (PG 6) ⇒ Do I count for this? *Avram* is basically Hebrew for *Patrick*, if you trace the latter back to its Latin roots.

Patrick Riley

YCT me (PG 33) RE 18 cards ⇒ True, a lot of [Button Shy games](#) have expansions, but I think those expansions are either 18-card expansions, or smaller ones where the number of cards is a factor of 18, like 6 or 9, or groups of expansions that add up to one of those numbers. The only exception I can find is *Unsurmountable*, whose four expansions add up to 17 cards. Possibly there's a 1-card expansion for another game that they stick into those print runs.

Also, damn, I've got a lot of solo Button Shy wallet games that I haven't tried out yet! There used to be a Starbucks nearby with nice big tables, where I could spread out a game of *Sprawlopolis*, but it didn't survive COVID.

Brian Rogers

RE table culture (PGS 54–55) ⇒ I think this is right, but have one quibble: the benefit of playing newfangled games like [Masks](#) is not just that they support a particular play style with rules, but also that they *lack* rules for *not* supporting that playstyle. *Masks* isn't going to make you spend a lot of time figuring out how to work out a complicated Multipower, or balance your power costs with disads, or flip through a long power list, because the game doesn't care about those things, and doesn't have rules for them. (On the other hand, if going through a long list of powers is your kind of fun, which it looks like it is, *Masks* will be less fun for you.)

If you want a campaign like [1980s Teen Titans](#),

you can have a character play out Raven's relationship with Trigon any way you want, but *Masks* provides you with a handy timing mechanism for figuring out how far Raven is along that path, and for tempting her to move farther along it, rather than leaving those things vague and undefined, or up to GM fiat.

The disadvantage to the *Masks* approach, as I've talked about before, is that it requires you to decide in advance what kind of story arc your PC is going to have, rather than letting you figure it out in play. (There's a reason that Narrativist play is characterized by the slogan "[Story Now](#).") That probably works fine for a character like Raven, whose story arc is implicit in her character concept.

YCT me (PG 60) RE combat-forwardness in the OSR ⇒ I'm a bit baffled by this comment. Neither Erica's comment to you (*E&A* #13, pgs 103–104) nor my reply to her (*E&A* #14, pg 108) mentions the OSR. If you trace the discussion all the way back to Erica talking about *Brindlerwood Bay* in *E&A* #10 (pgs 61–63), she never mentions the OSR there either.

Her comment about "adventure-conquest game with a side of storytelling" in *E&A* #10 clearly refers to the earliest days of the hobby, the [Chain-mail](#) and [Braunstein](#) days, which predate the OSR scene by decades.

And her comment in *E&A* #13 about "gamers who literally cannot imagine how a whole session without combat would work" looks to me more like a comment about people overly influenced by recent editions of *D&D* and by video games than one about OSR gamers.

(Man, it's been four decades, and we're still complaining about how the kids these days just want hack-and-slash. Maybe we should bring back discussions about "Monty Haul" dungeons and ~~TSR~~ WotC One-True-Wayism.)

Roger Bell_West

YCT me (PG 104) RE Rod Hull and Emu ⇒ [That Wikipedia page](#) mentions a 1983 appearance on Johnny Carson's show, and I vaguely recall seeing that.

Myles Corcoran

YCT Timothy Collinson (PG 114) RE Hivers ⇒ I don't think I've told my Hivers story here yet, have I? It's not actually *my* story, since it happened in a *Traveller* campaign my friend Adam was in, and he told me about it, but here goes:

The Referee had just gotten *Alien Module 7*, and thought the Hivers were so cool that he needed to throw one at the PCs immediately, so the PC ship gets attacked by a Hiver ship. And there's

some combat, and a chase, and I forget exactly what, but eventually the PCs manage to defeat and corner this alien adversary, and rather than killing it outright, they ask it "Why did you attack us?" The Referee suddenly realizes that he hadn't bothered to give the Hiver an actual motivation, so he just says "It is beyond your puny human comprehension!"

Gemini tells me that in the French editions of *Traveller* the Hivers are just called «les Hivers,» despite *hiver* being the French word for winter. But when [I asked on Reddit](#), someone said that there was a map where the Hiver Confederation was translated as «La Fédération de la Ruche,» *ruche* being French for *hive*.

Dylan Capel

RE experience bubbles (pg119) ⇒ I get what you mean about experience points — they were fine when I was a young math nerd, but seem overly-complicated now that I'm an old storygames nerd. But one of the things I like about XP systems is how they make it easy to add in bonuses for various kinds of activities. For example, I once saw a forum post about someone's [Stars Without Number](#) campaign, listing the XP bonuses they gave out for various achievements: first time visiting five new planets, five sectors, meeting five alien races, spending a month at each lifestyle level, allying with a faction, making an enemy of a faction, etc.

Possibly a similar effect could be given here by offering rerolls on the progression check — each bonus is given a die-size rating, and can be used to reroll any die of that size or smaller. Doesn't sound like as much fun as getting a bunch of bonus points, though.

Lisa Padol

YCT Patrick Riley (PG 153) RE indie games ⇒ Aaron Marks wrote a blog post earlier this year about [the Five Tiers of RPG Publishing](#), which is probably what Hicks was talking about. Marks distinguishes the tiers by orders of magnitude in annual revenue:

- ◆ **Hundreds of millions:** WotC's *D&D* revenue, Games Workshop's *Warhammer* revenue.
- ◆ **Tens of millions:** Paizo, possibly Chaosium andongoose.
- ◆ **Single-digit millions:** Steve Jackson Games, Free League, Cubicle 7, Onyx Path, Magpie, maybe Modiphius and R Talsorian.
- ◆ **Hundreds of thousands:** Evil Hat. "This is the point where we've shifted into 'indie,'" says Marks.
- ◆ **Below \$100,000:** Everyone else.

So Marks considers Evil Hat to be the most successful indie RPG publisher, rather than the least successful mainstream publisher.

YCT Bryant Durrell (PG 154) RE Typst manual ⇒ There's [online documentation](#), including [a tutorial](#). I found the tutorial a bit badly written when I first tried it out last year, but possibly it's been improved since then.

YCT me (PG 155) RE A Land Once Magic ⇒ Maybe! The idea is that magic has either vanished suddenly, is in the process of fading, or has changed in some fashion. There's a table for choosing which.

YCT me (PGs 155–156) RE various Vermilion Cove questions ⇒ **How much did Briar have planned ahead?** I'm pretty sure she had a lot of Blue's secret history planned, and the whole thing with the recorder and the well on Blackwell Island. (The very first scene of our first session was an establishing shot of Blackwell Island — see *E&A* #7, pg 140.) I think pretty much everything else emerged from play.

The thief thing and the summoner thing were two separate things. Blue gets summoned at various times by moody adolescents, but Anna took part of Blue's, I dunno, parent spirit or whatever, so it manifested him to go get that part back. It's unclear whether Drake actually did summon Blue.

Steffan knowing about cell antennae — He's not a caveman! Cell phone antennae are pretty obvious once you know what they look like. Cell towers in wooded areas are often built as [overly-symmetrical artificial trees](#), and I figure he'd noticed them in the woods, especially since they don't smell like real trees. Steffan doesn't read much, but he pays a lot of attention to his surroundings.

I actually had this explanation ready, in case one of the others had the same question you did, but by this point in the game, Steffan had picked up a smarter-than-he-seems reputation among the other PCs. (He'd definitely say "antennas," though.)

Also, between sessions 12 & 13, on the group Discord, I joked about how well Vermilion Cove's phone and internet infrastructure had held up after the earthquake. This was my way of trying to incept Briar into disrupting ELIZA service, but it didn't pan out, so I had to have Steffan actually do something.

Laeli's militia had started shooting at each other in the previous session, enraged by The Noise from the recorder. (*E&A* #14, pg 100, last paragraph.)



Joshua Kronengold

RE Android phones with physical keyboards (PG 170) ⇒ These exist, but you have to look for them. I saw an ad for the upcoming [Minimal Phone 2](#), which has a gorgeous [Dieter Rams](#)-style design, but obviously I can't vouch for the thing's performance.

YCT me (PG 176) RE the Shut Someone Down move ⇒ *Shut Someone Down* is clearly a better move than *Turn Someone On* for starting nasty rumors about someone:

Maybe this is a cruel remark in the locker room, a death threat, or an embarrassing prank pulled in front of the entire school. *Shutting Someone Down* is an attempt to take their power and confidence away, usually in front of an audience.

— *Monsterhearts* 2nd ed, pg 20, Avery Alder

There's nothing in there about the move needing to be a response to something the target is doing, and the examples given in the rules aren't always about calling someone out for something they've actually done. Though I'll note that "generating nasty rumours about them" is mentioned in the explanation of the *Pulling Strings* move (*Monsterhearts* 2e, pg 26).

The various stats aren't actually explained in 2e *Monsterhearts*, but they are in 1e:

Hot means fucking gorgeous, alluring, exciting, smokin', someone you can't stop thinking about, magnetic.

Cold means stone-cold, calculating, collected, unwavering, frigid, able to be cruel and merciless, able to keep their wits about them, obstinate.

— *Monsterhearts* 1st ed, pg 10, Avery Alder

Spreading nasty rumors seems calculating and cruel to me, not alluring and magnetic.

Also, I've noticed that the second edition of *Monsterhearts* is less complicated than the first edition. I can't recall any other RPG that's done that, kept the same mechanics but slimmed down rather than bulking up. (I haven't compared the various editions of *Apocalypse World*.)

I think an issue with *Monsterhearts* is that, since it lacks dice-rolling moves for resolving a lot of the sorts of things that people are used to rolling dice to resolve, the existing dice-rolling moves get pressed into service inappropriately. *Turn Someone*

On becomes the generic convince-someone move, *Shut Someone Down* becomes the stop-someone-from-doing-something move, and *Keep Your Cool* turns into *Do Something Under Fire* from *Apocalypse World*.

The game does have rules for handling those situations, but they're in the MC advice section: the Agendas (*Make each main character's life not boring, Say what honesty demands*, etc), the Principles (*Embrace melodrama, Make labels matter, Find the catch*, etc), and the Reactions (*Enact drastic measures, Leap to the worst possible conclusion*, etc). The Long Example in 1st edition (pgs 150–155), which includes both PC/PC and PC/NPC interactions, is a better illustration of this than the one in 2nd edition (pgs 168–171), which is about an interaction between two PCs.

YCT me (PG 176) RE failing to heal Agatha ⇒ I think the actual issue here (see *E&A* #14, pg 99) was that having ELIZA whisper into Agatha's ears just didn't fictionally justify healing physical wounds. Remember: *to do it, do it*. You can't just say "I want to use the *Healing* move"; you have to actually have your character do a thing that could plausibly count as treatment for your Harm.

Also, technically, the *Healing* move is only triggered by treating your own Harm. Treating an NPC, yeah, that's entirely outside of the rules.

YCT Roger BW (PG 177) RE Firebrands being a PbtA game ⇒ So, about that: John Harper and Vincent Baker have also said that *Forged in the Dark* games are *Powered by the Apocalypse* games. The two systems are obviously mechanically distinct — at least as distinct as *GURPS* is from *The Fantasy Trip*, or *RuneQuest* is from *D&D* — so I either have to disregard their statements, or consider them as statements about something other than the mechanical systems.

Jim Henley once said that the primary way that "system matters" is that systems "Act as an attractor for people looking for a certain play experience and certain values," and I think there may be something along those lines going on. Baker **wrote a blog post last year** about how the term "Narrativism" had originally been intended as a broad term describing the kind of games that he and a bunch of the other Forgies wanted to play, but it's lost that original connotation, and I suspect he may be using "*Powered by the Apocalypse*" as a replacement.

YCT Brian Rogers (PG 178) RE "Queering up [Jane] Austen" ⇒ Not hard to queer up Austen, really. Haven't you read *Emma*, her novel about a young

woman who doesn't want to marry, and spends most of her time obsessing over her friend Harriet?

YCT Elf (PG 180) RE Phoenix and Xavier ⇒ Another possibility is that when **Chris Claremont** co-wrote *X-Men and the Micronauts* with **Bill Mantlo** in 1984, he had learned from his experience arguing with **Jim Shooter** about Dark Phoenix in 1980.

The *Micronauts* story emphasizes much more strongly that the planet-killing Entity is a distinct personality from Charles Xavier, by showing Xavier fighting the Entity psychically. While there are references in the Dark Phoenix Saga to Jean "fighting her Phoenix-self" (check out the senses-shattering *Uncanny X-Men* #136, true believers!), they're just in dialog, not in the visuals, and they're undermined by narration that talks of Jean Grey, Phoenix, and Dark Phoenix interchangeably.

Note that the creative team was divided on this very matter! **John Byrne** has said that he regarded Dark Phoenix as a separate being possessing Jean Grey, which is why he didn't raise any moral issues about the destruction of the planet. Claremont was unclear, though, and Shooter didn't think she was possessed. (Byrne also didn't like Phoenix as a character, and wanted to get her out of the book.)

Also, you've got the order of events wrong. She doesn't become Dark Phoenix until the end of the Hellfire Club story arc. And the original plan was for Jean to get de-powered by the Shi'ar, and then a year or so later, Magneto figures out a way to give her the powers back, thinking he can control her, and she has to make the decision about whether to do that and risk becoming Dark Phoenix again, and she turns it down, and retires from the superhero life with Scott, and gives birth to Rachel. This was part of a plan Claremont had to introduce the passage of time into the Marvel universe, and have older characters retire and be replaced by a younger generation.

Jim Vassilakos

YCT me (PG 188) RE Ghost skin ⇒ The various character classes in *Monsterhearts* — The Mortal, The Werewolf, The Ghost, etc — are called *Skins*. I think Mike was considering having Drake come back as a Ghost, though he later abandoned that idea.

Travelling Light

Timothy Collinson

No. 4, October 2026

Professional GMing

Jim asked for comments on professional GMs and GMing. I'm not sure I have much in the way of 'thoughts' but my initial reaction is 'chance would be a fine thing'. I feel as if I live in a very different world of role-playing to those for whom this is an option. I can't imagine anyone paying me to run a game. I still struggle to believe anyone willingly signs up to play in one of my games. Imposter syndrome writ large. I supposed I did get a £10 convention fee reduction for a couple of years at TravCon for refereeing but now it's just a priority sign up option so even that's gone.

I suspect my nerves and stress about preparation and my suspicion that my handouts, maps and so on lack a certain something in terms of design and beauty would be ratcheted up tenfold. I'm not entirely sure any remuneration would be worth it. Though I'm game for trying if anyone wants to buy me for a reasonable sum!

As a player, I could just about imagine a situation in which I paid a referee *if* it were say a once in a lifetime opportunity to play with Marc Miller for example, but otherwise why? Why not just run a game myself?

Other bits and bobs

Jim also asks (footnote 33! And I've been accused of having too many footnotes!) about the conflict between the model and the scientist. Yes, you were spot on, it was an in-character chat -> heated discussion -> full on argument.

The scientist (Prof Ignatius Twinkle) was calling the model (Candice) a silly female because she was upset over a giant spider (Rosalee, pictured on p.178 of *Ever & Anon* 12) killing the nice young steward. Twinkle couldn't see why Rosalee should be killed just because she was behaving as spiders, giant or otherwise, do. Candice was also blaming the professor because he was the one who had gathered the dangerous specimens and wanted to do more research and possibly bring a rather nasty critter back to life (the subject of the adventure). Jane, the Referee, has just written (in-character): "It was totally not my fault that academic research overrode any consideration for local prejudices and superstitions. Also, silly airheads should *not* question my intelligence, manliness and ethics." Oh dear, I fear I've set the professor off again...

Your tale of Eaton Library does make me wonder about my idea of donating all my Traveller books to the science fiction library at Liverpool University when I'm fading. Would they care?

While I'm here: good notes on finding players.

Abstracts

It's fair to say that my idea for 'abstract fiction' – i.e. fiction written in the form of abstracts rather than fiction which isn't very tangible – has had a mixed reception. From the friend who said "this sort of stuff just seems oddly tangential / superfluous" to someone who commented "Very interesting! It's almost like a TNS bulletin, but

with a bit more room to develop the character, setting, and hooks.”

The latter was exactly what I was aiming for and hoping people would see in them. Having said that, I can see they might be a bit niche and perhaps of more interest to those who inhabit academia and who are more used to the journal abstract as a form. But in the manner of ‘answers in the back of the book’ here are some (not exhaustive) adventure hooks/ideas that I’d like to think you might get from them. The first two are from *E&A* 14, the other four are from this issue.

Yules – *From pond to pond*

- scout characters contributing to (revisions of) the data sources
- lost characters having to traverse the swamps/wetlands
- encounter with the Jas family in their homecube as patrons or merchant buyer/seller/shipper
- Raspi Jas as a setting for a scene or adventure
- PCs introducing grav vehicles to the world

Fulvano – *Zuchai crystal machining*

- Engineer needing to machine new/old/replacement crystal after damage; needing to locate Z2 alloy
- misJump due to variation in crystal geometry
- mission to recover material from the production facility – if its name was redacted presumably it’s secret
- bit of flavour for an engineer purchasing a used starship, replacing/repairing a Jump drive etc (and shopping for replacement crystals)
- PCs encountering other ‘high energy applications’ where they have to deal with issues

Mosh – *Persistence of local knowledge*

- scene in Mayenne’s kava shop (perhaps as a result of it having gained something of a tourist attraction status); the prices have gone up...!
- Mayenne Tedch as an NPC encounter or Patron

- scholar PCs looking up FFW records; scholar Patron employing PCs to locate more interview subjects
- relatives of the “elderly customer” pursuing criminal proceedings against whoever failed to evacuate their beloved aunt want the PCs’ help to find whoever is responsible

Sandri – *Strategic significance*

- paranoid PCs checking their own comms ‘delays’
- PC with comms looking to prevent any such delay in their own equipment
- Referee option to ‘delay’ or lose comm message (or alternatively to enable PC message to get through via civilian)

Gittenberg – *Ontological status*

- Advocate Chalmers H. Gittenberg V as an NPC
- PCs on the scene at one of the ‘events’
- PCs investigating the truth of an ‘events’
- Jumpspace downtime mealtime argument over who shot first

Gna – *Nose of the artist*

- Ogz as an NPC passenger – presumably interested in the scents on board the ship and perhaps uncovering a ‘problem’ that might have been missed otherwise
- Ogz as an NPC Patron wishing to visit more worlds for further data/research and employing the PCs as transport/guards/recon
- Vargr characters (or Referees) developing use of smell in play [**Traveller5** actually has some rules for the use of senses beyond, say, sight but unfortunately they don’t translate very easily into **Mongoose** rules so I’ve never introduced them. When I’ve wanted similar I’ve just used a standard task of whatever difficulty level, perhaps adding a Boon/Bane].
- A scene visiting Ogz’ art installation might be used as simple ‘atmosphere’ or a different location

Use them however you wish, enjoy just reading them or ignore them entirely!

Comments on E&A #15

Patrick Riley –

Quasipseudoludognostication

RYCT Brian M RHCT Jim: “my thesis is that an inflexible page count strongly encourages “good editing and clear organization”.

I entirely agree. One of my aims of *Travelling Light* is *not* to fill it up to the limit which I know I could easily do from past experience. Although I think it’s got longer each time and maybe one day I’ll shrink the font a bit which is a tad large at 12 points for two columns...

Brian M – Age of Menace

RYCT Joshua K: agreed on the new job.

You also said: “And many thanks for the thoughtful comments on Mazorra; I especially like the idea that, even if few ever run the whole unwieldy beast, it may still be useful as a quarry for other Keepers.”

Maybe not only Keepers!

RYCTM about the journalist questions for the PCs at the end of the adventure – I aimed for a mixture of easy ones and tricky ones that Referees or players could make as much or as little of as they wished. I’m pleased with this enough that I might try it in other Traveller adventures too. (*Ashfall* had a fun scene where a Special Arm agent interrogated, sorry, interviewed each PC in turn (but I ran it firing questions at players randomly (like ‘cut’ scenes) to keep them on their toes. That seemed to go down quite well too.)

All the best to Lauren and Law School. If she (or you) want all my ‘Advocate’ articles for Traveller, here they are:

Shell O’Deedy

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/characters/timothy-collinson/shell-odeedy.html>

Pupillage, Inns of Court, Advocate career & Chambers

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/rules/chargen/advocate.html>

Court Proceedings

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/rules/courtproc.html>

Margreet Gaablan: Advocate at Large

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/characters/timothy-collinson/margreet-gaablan.html>

Tallis Quinara

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/characters/timothy-collinson/tallis-quinarra.html>

Silent Partners –

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/adventures/silentpartners.html>

Benni Loses a Case [fiction] –

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/stories/bennilos.html>

(see also the advocate that wrote a JoFFR paper below – perhaps I should write them up. Chalmers H. Gittenberg V has a certain ring to it!)

Mark Wilson – Bumbling Through Dungeons

Thanks for the note on DeKoven’s *The Infinite Playground* – sadly it’s out of print in hardback and softcover but I can order an ebook for our library collection at no great expense. Will look forward to it being accessible.

Gabriel Roark – Atlantis for Now

Sadly my knowledge of Sheffield is pretty limited to the Garrison Hotel where I’m cooped up (entirely voluntarily) for North Star for the weekend. However, those weekends have thus far included a meal out with an old friend who lives there so I’ve experienced some of the (tasty) eateries. I also went to a conference once for work a long time back and saw something of Sheffield Hallam University where I’m pretty sure I encountered Aslan (as in Narnia)!

Roger BW – Firedrake’s Hoard

Tendrils perversion – marvellous!

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

RYCTM You’re right about the press conference questions – I think I may have to reuse the idea in other games.

Agreed on the Hivers book (and one day am going to have an adult go at the Puppeteers (I didn’t love them as a teenager).

RYCT Gabriel Roark – I’m now having nightmares about the James Taylor Swift monster.

Dylan Capel – Attacks of Opportunity

RYCTM on company ecosystems – hear, hear!

Dale Meier – Port Omaha Beacon

Reading, during my university’s Fresher’s Week, your ‘old school option’ of flyers amused me. Judging by the number of students queueing to use the guillotines to cut their A4 sheets of printer paper into A5 flyers then the medium is very much alive and well! The less said about ‘guillotine girl’ dressed in nothing but suspenders and a negligee, the better. (One can only presume she was on a ‘refill’ run from one of the society tables in the large marquee next door to the library. AmDram? LARP? Burlesque?!). Thanks for sharing your wonderful homage flyer.

RE your tetrptych – well, if you’re asking for a vote... (clearly top right!)

LAST BIRD

Here’s a kingfisher I managed to capture when it posed for a minute or two near the yurt I was staying in:



Really sorry to hear about your recent struggles. Don’t stress about “us” – but do use us as a vent if you need or it helps. Email if there’s anything that can be done at a distance.

Jim Eckman – Ronin Engineer

If it’s of any interest, I made something of a contribution to the legal side of Traveller last year with a bunch of articles (characters, a pre-career Pupillage, an Advocate career, a short story etc) – see links above in comments to Brian M.

This one I was reasonably pleased with <https://freelancetraveller.com/features/rules/courtproc.html>

but note that just a couple of weeks ago this was published on DriveThru: <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/581329/high-justice-the-manual-for-courtroom-drama>

which you might prefer as better/more detailed? (Though I’m pretty sure generative AI had a hand in writing it).

I quite agree that the single Law Level digit in Traveller could be further developed (and of course was in **MegaTraveller** in the Extended Law Profile) but I think in terms of the (IMO brilliant) simplicity of the original rules, it does a good enough job to get you going.

RYCTM on Traveller issues unaddressed – do tell – maybe they’ll inspire an article for *Freelance Traveller*!



The Persistence of Local Knowledge in Wartime Evacuations: A Case Study from Regina

By Suzan S. Mosh, Dr Budi Juoss, Dr Bander Sterdy, Prof Zakkantar Rias & Catalaine A . Mordice

Abstract

This paper examines the persistence of a discrete item of local knowledge during the Fifth Frontier War: the location of a kava shop on Regina's western continent which remained open throughout the Imperial evacuation of 1107.

Interviews conducted with surviving residents indicate that, during the final week before the evacuation, the proprietor, Mayenne Tedch, maintained normal commercial operations serving customers from 0600 to 1800 despite repeated warnings that the community would be subject to immediate abandonment. Her stated justification was that "someone will come back thirsty".

On the morning of 1107-213, the last scheduled shuttle departed without Tedch. Subsequent investigation established that she had remained behind to assist an elderly customer who had missed the evacuation order. Both were subsequently recovered by an Imperial Navy pinnace nineteen hours later. The

precise circumstances surrounding the evacuation remain contested in the secondary literature, particularly with regard to the duration and extent of Zhodani control of the western continent.

Of particular interest is the discovery that the shop's handwritten menu, recovered three years later, contains no reference to the war, evacuation or its aftermath. The final entry reads simply: Kava – 3 Credits, Best Bisketti – 2 Credits.

The findings suggest that apparently insignificant acts of continuity may have contributed disproportionately to civilian morale during the conflict. It further proposes a system for future historical accounts of the Fifth Frontier War quantitatively defining events ranging from greater strategic importance through events of local significance to events which were, for the people involved, simply what happened on that day.

The Strategic Significance of Delayed Communications During the Siege of Efate

Dr Venn I. M. Sandri, Dr Armand T. Pell & Dr Vaska Entrendit

Abstract

The Siege of Efate (1107-1109) remains one of the more extensively documented engagements of the Fifth Frontier War. Nevertheless, the contribution of a single unidentified communications delay to the subsequent course of the siege has received comparatively little attention.

Analysis of surviving naval, marine and civilian communications records identifies a discrepancy of seventeen minutes between the recorded transmission and receipt of an evacuation directive issued on 1107-188 to a secondary orbital traffic control station. The cause of this discrepancy remains undetermined. Contemporary records indicate that the affected station nevertheless continued normal operations and that no personnel were lost as a direct consequence of the delay.

Of greater significance, however, is the subsequent discovery that the delayed message was retransmitted through a civilian communications relay whose operator, having received no confirmation of the original transmission, independently repeated the message after seventeen minutes. This action resulted

in the directive being received by the intended recipient at precisely the time specified in the original operational schedule.

This paper therefore considers whether the apparent delay should be properly classified as a communications failure, a redundant recovery mechanism, or an undocumented component of Imperial contingency planning. Comparison with records from later stages of the siege suggests that all three interpretations remain defensible.

The authors conclude that although the delay cannot be demonstrated to have produced any measurable strategic consequences, its occurrence raises questions concerning the extent to which apparent communications redundancy may have influenced Imperial operational resilience. In addition, the authors note that the historical significance of communications reliability may be substantially overstated when assessed solely through successful outcomes.

The Ontological Status of the First Shot: Some Problems with Dating the Beginning of the Fifth Frontier War

Advocate Chalmers H. Gittenberg V & Dr J. J. Smurtz

Abstract

It is generally accepted that the Fifth Frontier War began on 1107-187. This is the date given in most standard histories and is convenient for the purposes of chronology. It is also the date on which the Zhodani declarations of war were delivered. The present paper questions whether either fact is sufficient to establish that the war began on that date.

The difficulty arises from the considerable amount of activity which preceded the formal declarations. Zhodani forces had been preparing for military operations, material had been positioned within Imperial territory and guerrilla activity was already being organized. There had also been violations of the demilitarised zone and a period of increasing tension between the two powers. It is therefore possible to identify a number of events which might reasonably be described as the beginning of the war, depending on the definition employed. Furthermore, attention is given to Zhodani sources which have tended to interpret the same events as evidence of pre-existing Imperial provocation.

For the purposes of this study, we use analysis of military records, diplomatic communications, contemporary press reports and post-war historical accounts to distinguish between preparation for war, initiation of hostilities, declaration of war and the point at which the population(s) concerned could reasonably be expected to understand that a war had begun. These are not necessarily the same event. In particular, the declaration of war presents an interesting difficulty: while it provides a precise date, it does not explain when the actions which made such a declaration necessary had themselves begun.

The paper concludes that 1107-187 should continue to be used as the conventional starting point for the Fifth Frontier War, but that historians should exercise caution in treating it as the beginning of the conflict in any more absolute sense.

The authors further suggest that the “first shot” may be a less useful historical concept than is generally supposed.

‘The Nose of the Artist’: Tokszill Ogz, the Fifth Frontier War, and the Representation of Warfare

Geallsae Gna

Abstract

In 1111, the artist and traveller Tokszill Ogz was employed by Colonel Banis Doughty to recreate the scents of the Fifth Frontier War. This article explores the experiences of Ogz during a particularly well observed chapter in the history of Imperial/Zhodani relations. Her views on the war, its causes and combatants recorded in scent and sounds reflect her unique position as a settler, mercenary and subsequently as non-combatant artist. This makes her a particularly valuable witness. Her experiences help us to understand the events in that conflict: she was confronted with smells and circumstances decidedly uncongenial to the ‘nose of the artist’. But they also assist us in appreciating the development of Ogz’ own artistic practice and engagement with her surroundings.

The article considers the ways in which Ogz’ interpreted the war through her artistic sensibilities, and to what extent practical considerations, her interest in the

battlescape, and her attitude towards the locals influenced her representation of the conflict.

The resulting record is therefore neither straightforward military history nor conventional artistic commentary. Rather, it occupies an uneasy space between witness statement, sensory archive and aesthetic experiment, preserving aspects of the conflict that more orthodox chroniclers were quite unable, or unwilling, to smell.

The reader is further invited to consider the development of sense recordings – and the development of technology to support this – outside of the usual visual and aural collection of human exhibitions and museums. Gna uses his experience of living in the Third Imperium to show the weaknesses of so-called standardized sentition, measurement and collection through the lens of Ogz’ artistic practice.

Image Credit: NASA

PORT OMAHA BEACON

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The Guardian in Grey

Golems in Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*® RPG

By Dale Meier

Author's Note: This is an ancient article I wrote when I first got interested in *Call of Cthulhu* (by way of Chris Carter's *The X-Files* and *Millennium* TV series and Pagan Publishing's original *Delta Green* sourcebook). It was originally published in the [September 28, 1997, edition of the *Chaosium Digest* \(Vol. 22, #6\)](#), which was a Usenet discussion group I came to know about during my early college days. I present it here with a bit of sprucing up and clarification; while the content is still geared toward the old 5th edition of *Call of Cthulhu*, it should be easily converted to today's 7th edition.

Golem – *n* [Heb. orig, embryo; later, monster (> Yidd. goylem, dolt), akin to Ar. Ghulam, lad] – Jewish Legend – a man artificially created by cabalistic rites; robot. (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, p.580)

In conceiving this article, I drew from several different places – namely Dean Shomshak's article, "A Ghastly Grimoire," which appeared in the October 1987 issue of *Dragon Magazine* (*Dragon* #126) and episodes of *Extreme Ghostbusters* (season 1, episode 3, "The True Face of a Monster") and *Gargoyles* (season 2, episode 27, "Golem"), which dealt with the cabalistic guardians. Shomshak's article included a spell called *Activate Eidolon*, which is similar to creating a golem but much, much nastier.



The Golem and Rabbi Judah Loew by Mikoláš Aleš; Public Domain.

The Spells

Create Golem: This spell allows the spellcaster to essentially create and energize the body of a golem. Golems come in many sizes (up to SIZ 35, which would make it roughly 15 feet tall) but all are in the shape of a human being; for every point of SIZ, the spellcaster must use 10 pounds of wet clay to build the body. The shape of the golem's body must be human, but details could range from the appearance of emaciated corpses and faceless guardians to horribly twisted giants.

Once the body has been shaped the spellcaster must perform the creation ritual undisturbed for six hours. The ritual varies with the spell; some require the use of animal blood to energize the clay body,

others may require human blood (which is also a component of the *Activate Eidolon* spell). It is rumored that yet another version must be cast during a thunderstorm and that lightning must strike the golem in order to be successfully cast. For each point of SIZ, the spellcaster must invest four magic points in the casting of the spell. Should the spell work, the next step is to awaken the guardian. If the creation spell fails, the body must be destroyed and a new one must be constructed. Below are the suggested stats for golems.

Golems, Lumbering Guardians
Characteristic Rolls (Average)

STR: 4d6+3 (44)

CON: SIZ/2 (11)

SIZ: 5d6+5 (22-23)

INT: 1d6 (3)

POW: Special*

DEX: 2d6 (10)

* - A golem's POW score is equal to the number of magic points spent in creating it.

Move: 5-8 **HP:** 10-100

Average Damage Bonus: +3d6

Weapons

- *Punch:* 50%, 1d3+db (man-sized) to 1d20+db (SIZ 35)
- *Throw Clay:* 75%, engulf; *Kick:* 25%, 1d6+db (man-sized) to 6d6+db (SIZ 35).

Armor: 12-point skin.

Spells: None

Sanity Loss: 2/1d8 Sanity points for seeing an active golem. No Sanity points are lost for seeing a dormant golem.

Additional Notes

- ***Regeneration:*** Golems can regenerate lost hit points at a rate of 1d6 per turn. Because of their magical nature, golems can effectively regenerate lost limbs, including those lost when the creature hurls a gob of clay. Golems which have taken damage from fire or heat regenerate at the same rate and can fully rehydrate themselves from moisture in the air or ground in as many turns as their SIZ score. Should a golem's hit points be reduced by 80%, the creature will change shape into an amorphous blob and flee into the nearest crack, sewer grating or other opening to safety; once out of danger, the creature will repair its damage normally.
- ***Golems and Fire:*** Fire or intense heat can dry a golem's body out, making it brittle and susceptible to melee attacks. A torch will cause 1d2 points of

damage while a raging inferno will cause 1d20 points of damage to the creature. When making melee attacks against a dried or drying golem, treat the creature's armor as if the characters were attacking a cement or sheetrock wall. However, even if a golem is reduced to dust, the scroll must be removed from its remains to effectively render it harmless. If the scroll is left in, the golem will regenerate to wreak havoc again.

Awaken Golem: This second spell is necessary in order to bring the golem to life. To do so, the spellcaster must spend two hours reciting the proper incantations. The spell culminates in the placement of a parchment scroll within the golem's body (normally in its mouth if it is larger than an average human). In the process, the caster expends five magic points. Once the golem is awakened, it will obey the person who has awakened it – but only if certain conditions are met. Commonly constructed and used as guardians for Jewish settlements and synagogues in times of great peril and persecution during the Middle Ages, golems cannot be awakened for trivial matters, such as moving heavy objects or assassinating the spellcaster's enemies. Should a spellcaster awaken a golem for such trivial things, he or she will effectively unleash the creature against anything in its path – including themselves. It is not known if any golems exist today.

Adventure Seeds

- ***The Grey Stalkers:*** A string of bizarre murders and attacks are plaguing the city. Survivors are found covered in clay - a clay which seems to grow, engulfing its victims. The material has defied all scientific analysis and the police are at a loss in solving the case. In reality, the incidents are the fault of one man. Jacob Mastelli, a local resident of high standing had an axe to grind. Unfortunately he went about it in the wrong way. Having created several man-sized golems, the middle-aged recluse sought to kill his enemies and guard his fortune. In the process, he was killed by his creations, which now stalk the dark alleys and streets, killing anything that attempts to stop them. Now the PCs must track down and neutralize the golems before they kill again.
- ***Who Guards The Guardian?:*** An area synagogue is defiled and vandalized by intolerant youth; as a result, the Rabbi creates a guardian to protect the community's religious center. But when the guardian kills a young man one night and rages out of the Rabbi's control, the investigators must find a way to stop its destructive rampage.

ON WHEATON'S LAW AND GAMEMASTERY

Love him or hate him, Wil Wheaton said it best when he coined his self-named law (Wheaton's Law): "Don't be a dick." Now, I realize my experience as a gamer is pretty sparse compared to others of my age in the hobby. This is mainly due to the fact that I was not a popular kid and because I was the only gamer in my entire whitebread northwestern Iowa school.

My history as a GM is likewise pretty sedate compared to my fellow GMs, let alone what some RPG bloggers, claim to have encountered. That being said, I do my utmost to avoid being a dick to my players. I want everyone, including myself, to have fun. I have been known to fudge dice rolls rather than allow a lucky shot by an NPC to stand and raise the stakes. Why? Because I'm not sure how some people will react and I really don't want a confrontation to ruin something I (and others) enjoy.

I know there's at least one player out there who probably thinks I was a dick when in reality I was being reasonable and he was the jerk. Long story short, he had an idea for some gear for his character that I felt didn't fit the game we were playing, and he threw an absolute hissy fit. In the end, I capitulated

because I didn't know how the other players would react and I didn't want cause problems. Needless to say, the campaign was short-lived.

Was I right to do that? No, definitely not. But I still wasn't a dick. I could have (and part of me sometimes thinks I *should have*) been a dick right back to him, but that still wouldn't have been right.

That being said, I have unintentionally been a dick at least once in my history as a gamemaster (that I can actively recall) and I'm very ashamed of it. Basically, I was running a *Call of Cthulhu* scenario at the local convention several years ago ("The Haunted House," to be exact), and there was one female player and four male players. There was a bit of jocularly with the phrase "Make me a sandwich" being bandied about as the investigators searched the house to determine the source of the haunting.

I nervously went with the flow and said nothing. In the end, there were no complaints about it from the woman who played in the event, but in retrospect, I should have put an end to it. I have endeavored to do better since then.

COMMENTARY

Back to Brazilian Gamebooks, Pt. 10 – I find it interesting that gamebooks in Brazil, specifically the Ghanor series, make use of the legacy concept. Prior to reading this I was only familiar with the concept of legacy boardgames, such as *Risk: Legacy*. I have to confess I am not enamored with the idea of using (most likely permanent) stickers to alter the books (or game board in the case of *Risk* and other "legacy" boardgame variants). With a legacy boardgame, my workaround would be to just make the stickers into counters and then take pictures and notes to record the "history" of the game as it develops.

In the Hall of Stone (August 2026) – Formatting, layout, and copyright-free graphics? When I was writing *Tales from the Electric Underground* and *The Chrome Libram* for the *Interregnum* APA, I was pretty much just writing it up in *ClarisWorks* with centered titles. Not too fancy, definitely no graphics. Having shed Adobe's yoke, I've embraced Affinity Publisher and Photo (pay once, upgrade infinitely). Over the years, I've gathered a small archive of stock art and I've found that it's increasingly difficult to find copyright-free artwork for download, even on

established sites. A lot of stock art on DriveThru RPG isn't too bad for appearance and cost, but there are some pieces and artists who are significantly more expensive than others. The AWE/TSG sounds like an interesting group in your *Daywatch* game or even in *Doctor Who: AITAS*. I can just see UNIT's leadership rolling their eyes as an AWE team strides into their territory and try to take over. Meanwhile the Doctor (or another Timelord) and Companions are trying to keep both groups from killing each other while sorting out what threat is fast approaching Earth. Regarding intraparty conflict, I agree that communication is something that can help alleviate conflict. My big concern is getting people to *listen* and give *honest feedback*. On the subject of AI, I have had first-person experience with its failure. I've resorted to referring to it as the "Artificial Idiot" because it never fails to transfer people to my department when they need some other department. Overall, I feel that the AI corporations need to rein in their monstrosities, impose some tight restrictions, and work harder at instilling discipline and logic in their models. A tall order considering we're a species that scoffs at intellect and logic and lets emotions run the show. I've

experienced my own “Vitamin Z” situation in trying to find a specific adventure in *Challenge Magazine*. I described the adventure (“A *Traveller* RPG adventure with a Solomani Rim War heroine in cold sleep”) in several searches and each time Google came up with a different “answer.” I eventually found what I was looking for (“The Strider Incident”) just by sifting through my *Challenge* PDFs. In short, I agree that AI is pretty much poisoning the entirety of reality for humanity. The Matrix has us and we need to fight back and climb out of it.

Cowman Baloney Face #10 – Fractal mechanics sound like an interesting GM methodology. I can see how the granularity can vary from situation to situation. The challenge is deciding on what resolution level to use with the situation at hand. If you focus on “story over rules” and “rulings, not rules,” GM fiat and Low Resolution are probably the safest levels to work with. Situations portraying heightened chances of character failure/mortality are going to lean more toward High Resolution granularity. I think the granularity of the rules used also depends on the player. For example, a non-tech savvy player running a hacker will probably benefit more from less granularity while a tech savvy player might be more interested in higher resolution rules where the model and quality of a cyberdeck can influence their chances of success. Of course, there's always that one player that's the opposite; stranger things have happened and your mileage may vary... Regarding Yaquinto, it's one of those companies whose games are in an interesting niche in the industry and hobby. I can remember first seeing an ad for one of their games in the inner cover of an old Marvel *Star Wars* comic (*Attack of the Mutants!*). The company was long dead by the time I came to own (and sell off) a couple of their “album games” (*Adventurer!* and *Superiority*). I really don't know what to make of *Realm of Yolmi* other than I'm definitely not part of the target audience.

Quasipseudoludognostication #14 – Like you, as a player I'm not a fan of intraparty conflict; rivalry between characters in fiction is one thing, but in an RPG campaign, it hits quite a bit differently. Your take on how seriously *Outgunned Superheroes* takes its inspiration reminds me of the old [Barats & Bereta Harty Boys](#) (yes, “that's with a 'T' not with a 'D'!”) sketch on Youtube. I had a similar reaction toward the “damage type” schtick the designers ran with in the *Toon Ace Catalog* from Steve Jackson Games. Regarding “End of the Adventurers Guild,” finding players for something other than D&D can be a draining trial. As I write this (9/19/26), I am trying to sort out what my next step should be now that I've

advertised a *Traveller* game and failed to garner any players (twice). I'm glad your game at Kublacon was a success. I personally had to cancel my events at Nuke-Con due to scheduling conflicts with a regular health checkup.

The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice #1 – Hello! It's good to know I'm not alone in being a “Forever GM,” though I have a feeling my state as such is more a personal choice than unfortunate happenstance. HKAT has been on the margins of my scanners. As a kid, I enjoyed watching USA's Kung-Fu Theater any time we went to a relative's house in town. They all had cable and of course, living out in the boonies, we didn't. *Trail of Cthulhu* is one of those games that hasn't really taken root with me. I've run *Call of Cthulhu* and while I'm intrigued by the concepts behind ToC, it's proven hard to find players for (like any other non-D&D game around my area). I hope your move to St. Paul was a smooth one and that you got to sample the decadent delights of state fair dining. I've went to the Iowa State Fair once in my twenties, and while the [eats](#) were good, they weren't anywhere near [as decadent and fancy](#) as what they offer today. As a “Legacy Forever GM,” I can see how players initiating their own intraparty conflict can take some of the load off the GM. At the same time, I can also see how the players and GM have to be on the same page (no pun intended here) in order to keep things from going way off the rails. As for Fiasco, I've seen one or two actual plays on Youtube and I think “chewing the scenery” is pretty much encouraged (and it's hilarious). I did take a look at Chinn's “Same Page Tool” and made sure to bookmark both it and his blog's home page. His entry on “fractal NPCs” caught my eye (though I partly blame Matt Stevens' writing about fractal mechanics for installing that brainworm in my software). Long story short, I agree, intraparty conflict isn't essential to a good game. However, if you have good players who understand one another and draw the line between out-of-character conflict and in-character conflict, it can make things a bit more interesting.

Bumblng Through Dungeons #11 – Eberron is one D&D setting which interested me, but at the same time I was a bit frustrated by it. I think the frustration came more from the group I was playing with at that time and less so from the setting. It was one of those situations where my fellow players had me at a disadvantage in regard to the lore. I've never really played a shapeshifter, but I can see how the idea of the character having one or more “mask characters” to draw upon would come about. I've heard about megagames at conventions, but never really got into the nitty-gritty of the concept. The game you were

involved in sounds a lot like a Braunstein-style game, but with greater complexity and secrecy. It was indeed a bit of good fortune that you were given the chance to take on the role of Ben Franklin. As an American with German heritage, I have to ask: did the Bavarians include beer in their shipments for the troops? ;) I can see how the entire game would have had a significant effect on you emotionally and even physically in some ways. You were indeed part of something bigger than yourself. I can scarcely imagine how the real Benjamin Franklin and Patrick Henry felt when considering the results of their efforts.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *It's at this point I realized the clock was running own and I had 200+ pages to skim, if not read, if I was going to detailed comments. At the same time, I know that the finished product would probably be over 16 pages. As such, from this point in the document I'm going to respond to comments and discussion points from my fellow writers and note that everything else was RAEBNC. I apologize deeply for this gaffe, but real life and my anxiety overtook me and I froze (hence my reprinting "The Guardian in Grey"). At the same time, I worked quite a bit on a Port Omaha Traveller introductory piece but that is going to have to wait for publication next issue. The comments below are all classified – RYCTM.*

In the Hall of Stone – Patrick Brady – Thank you. It seems like Europe was much less affected by the satanic panic than the U.S. Ironically, it shows our country's dubious origins. I came across *The Children of the Stones*, I believe through a reference on RPGPub and it reminded me of the series *The Third Eye* which Nickelodeon used to show in the 1980s. I know the shows they ran were not connected in any way and had different titles in the UK, but it was a welcome bit of nostalgia. It also didn't hurt that the adult heroic lead was played by Gareth Thomas of *Blake's 7* fame. The campaign which grew out of the inspiration I drew from the series ("The Great (Old Ones) Outdoors") was my one resounding success in my gamemastering history. I just wish I could get another group of players together here. I can understand feeling that your homebrew system isn't "good" in the sense of professional design, but it's still a labor of love, just as our 'zines are. I'm sure there's tons of design and style gaffes in my works, and I'm pretty sure the spellchecks in every program I use hate me, but I still love doing this. Regarding "Vindolandia," my father was in the US Army stateside at the end of WWII (I was born to older parents) and though he wasn't involved with the fighting, I'm sure he would want

me to speak out as well.

Quasipseudoludognostication #15 – Patrick Riley – Thank you for welcoming me here. It's appreciated.

Reddened Stars #14 – John Redden – Yep, a Romulan shopkeeper. The station was on the edge of Federation space. I know our GM specifically described him as a Romulan, but I don't know why the player portraying our captain felt the need to speak openly with him about our assignment, other than a lack of setting knowledge and/or a desire to play his character like Captain Sisko.

The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice #2 – Bryant Durrell – Thank you for your kind welcome!

Denizens of the Library #14 – Brian Rogers – I am definitely embracing the whole "Life is hard, play short!" philosophy, but it would help if people would actually notice my efforts to run games here.

Age of Menace #252 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek – *Traveller* was an attractor to be sure, but I didn't get full involved with the game until my post-college years when T4 was released. That involvement broadened and solidified when the reprints (the "Big Floppy Black Books") and CDs came out. I think any campaign that you run with passion can sprawl out of your love for it. I know I'm having trouble reining myself in with my Port Omaha setting.

Atlantis for Now #3 – Gabriel Roark – Thanks for the welcome! While I was aware of A&E, I was not a contributor to that APA. I was a regular in Pete Maranci's *Interrengum* APA. Are you running with D6SW with the blue rulebook or the revised and expanded edition (which I highly recommend)? I have found the continuation of the *Star Wars Adventure Journal* on the D6 Holocron website to be a valuable source of added material and house rules, especially the rules for Jedi and other Force sensitives. A big point of debate has been Jedi and other Force sensitives starting out weak and then becoming overpowered. I can recall having a brief disconnect when watching Episode I and seeing padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi effortlessly throwing Separatist battle droids round with telekinesis. That really turned things sideways in relation to the WEG rules. [The article, "The Singular Force"](#), slightly rewrites the Force rules, making it an attribute with the three skills under it. I think that article really helps reconcile the RPG with the prequels' portrayal of the Force and Jedi (the sequels aren't even on my radar for various reasons). On *Beyond the Wall*, it's an excellent game. The rules are a boiled-down version of D&D 3.x;

while it's not on the “race as class” level of BECMI and B/X D&D, it's a slight step up. Character generation can either be from scratch or through a “playbook.” The playbooks actually have more in common with D6SW's character templates and use a short lifepath system to form bonds between characters in the group while shaping each character's history and skills. Organization is definitely key in publishing an RPG. It's the prime reason I prefer the revised and expanded rulebook for D6SW 2e.

Firedrake's Hoard #13 – Roger Bell_West – Thank you for the welcome! I haven't made the change from OpenOffice to LibreOffice yet. I guess it's one of those things that either will happen or won't. I can honestly say I've probably pushed my programs a bit farther than they should be pushed given how they glitched out with some of my larger projects.

Twisting the Rope #15 – Myles Corcoran – I don't know if I mentioned, but the rules I would like to use with BtW are the [Woodland Warriors](#) series. There were several entries, but it appears they've either discontinued them or they're working on revisions as they aren't online.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #13 – Avram Grumer – Sanity in *Star Trek* RPGs – that's an interesting concept. I know there was one LUGTrek adventure online ([Barbarians at the Gate](#)) which put an Away Team in a sanity-bending situation on a derelict T'konni space station. One of the PCs in my group had experienced the nightmare of rescuing survivors from the aftermath of Wolf 359 and the antagonist used that nightmare (via a psionic resonator of some sort) to wreak havoc on their mission.

An Unlooked For Zine #14 – Lisa Padol – Thank you for the welcome. No, we have not met in person, but I have had a presence on several forums as well as my participation in *Interregnum*. Ah, yes, the time-tested “play it safe” strategy. It's at that point I would inject some foil or event to irritate both player and character for entertainment value. Regarding ending a game over an uncomfortable situation, I did stop and express that was not the type of game I wanted to run, but the discomfort was so great (I'm very non-confrontational) that I didn't see any other way out.

Ronin Engineer – Jim Eckman – I think the key term in your commentary about LibreOffice is “booklets.” The projects I was working on were graphics and/or text heavy, so that reaffirms what I've come to know – programs that have multiple functions (spreadsheet, drawing, word processing) in one package are still jacks of all trades, masters of none. I'm currently

laying out the Port Omaha Beacon in Affinity Publisher, which is working well.

Accidental Recall #14 – Joshua Kronengold – I can see where having limitations on the level of conflict between PCs, especially those not connected to each other in any way (such as in a murder mystery party game) would be beneficial. Switching between software packages, even just seeing a program evolve over time, is indeed an interesting journey. I started off with an Apple IIgs in high school and made the jump to the Macintosh (LCIII) in college. This was followed by the move to a PowerMac after college and a silver MacBook in the early 2000s. During that time, I started with AppleWorks and Broderbund's Print Shop (lol) on the IIgs, and so all my design work at that time was basically me creating a cover or letterhead in Print Shop and then writing up the articles in AppleWorks (later ClarisWorks and then AppleWorks again after Apple acquired it from Claris) and printing it out on my dot-matrix ImageWriter II. Not very illustrious when compared to *Dragon Magazine* at the time, but it fulfilled a creative need. Over the years, I watched as PageMaker changed hands and evolved from a stack of 3.5” diskettes to a CD to the money-devouring online monster it is now (thanks, Adobe). I can see how there would be a distinction between “pay to win” (P2W) and “pay to play faster” (P2PF), but to me it doesn't sit well. Being the child of an alcoholic, I have found it to be addictive, so I try my best to stay away from such games or at least try to beat them without paying. It's also why I'm glad I'm not into modern console games due to the whole loot box issue that arose in the 2010s. In the long run, I don't think Hasbro's bid to saddle D&D with microtransactions is going to end well. Any player worth their salt is either going to run core-only with homebrew material or probably resort to piracy and account-sharing to do an end-run around Hasbro. RYCTM on PFS and AL, your statement definitely reinforces Erica Frank's July 2026 commentary and reaffirms my belief that I'm dealing with that situation here in Omaha. Unfortunately, I also have come to believe I may also be dealing with outright ageism here, but that's a rant for another time.

Strategies for Addressing Intraparty Conflict – Jim Vassilakos – As I noted earlier, I'm very non-confrontational due to a number of incidents in my past, and so I didn't really see any other way out of the situation without making things worse. And so I just cut things off – an amputation right at the source, of sorts. Like you, I wonder if I could have done better, but at the same time, I know it's done and can't be undone. I'm not entirely sure talking about it with the other players would have been beneficial; at the same

time, I don't know that the offending player would have been fully understood what he did wrong. Simultaneously, I'm not sure I would have been able to adequately explain my stance and feelings regarding the incident to him.

Travelling Light #3 – Timothy Collinson – I'm very excited to be developing *Traveller* material as it gives me the opportunity to share my ideas with fellow receptive fans. Yes, I designed *Captain Sturmhammer's Command Cards* and both versions of *The Starfarer's Kit*. I made both out of necessity as I figured Mongoose wasn't going to be providing a form set for referees to use. I felt that the command cards

would help in eliminating page-turning during starship combat. Considering they're probably not going to do the same for 2e, I really need to do a deep dive into the rules and see what kind of revisions I need to make for new versions. Unlike their predecessors, the new version will be offered for free.

Here ends my (failed) attempt at a double commentary, something I hope never to have to resort to again. Looking at this massive wall of text, all I can say is, good heavens, what hath I wrought?! Again, my apologies for shortening things but I wanted to make sure I didn't miss this issue of the APA.

COLOPHON

The *Port Omaha Beacon* was written and composed using *OpenOffice* 4.1.16, *Affinity Photo* 2.6.5, and *Affinity Publisher* 2.6.5.

The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice: Issue #3

A zine by [Bryant Durrell](#) for Ever & Anon issue #16

Find me at [🦋 https://bsky.app/profile/innocence.com](#), [🌈 https://letterboxd.com/thanlis/](#),
or [https://popone.innocence.com/](#).

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Introduction

Lots and lots of settling into the new home this month. The paperwork involved in moving is a lot. As such the deadline crept up on me but let's see what we can muster under mild pressure.

IgTheme: GM-Dickery

“Don't be a dick.” I don't have much more to say than that, although I may be interpreting the prompt unkindly. But as I age I have less and less tolerance for deliberate mindgames. I am perfectly capable of getting my own PC into more problems than any GM could manage; you don't need to dick around to generate interesting conflict and gameplay. Make me your collaborator as a player, it'll be more fun for all of us. And if your fun is generated by my consternation, well, I'm probably at the wrong table.

My turn to have the strong emotional reaction some folks had to intraparty conflict, huh? I can actually imagine a group in which GM-dickery is part of the social contract and everyone's happy, it's just not something I'd enjoy. I'm really looking forward to other comments on this one.

Current Events (Gaming)

We are gearing up for Gamehole Con, which is mid-October, so expect to see writeups from those sessions next month. If anyone else is planning on attending and would like to game and/or have coffee, let me know! We have some free time and a good bunch of pre-booked sessions.

We'll be driving down to Madison from St. Paul, and are looking forward to that immensely.

We've also bought badges and joined the Discord for the big local gaming con, Con of the North, which is in February. I committed to running a couple of sessions there; I need to sharpen up my con GMing skills. I'm thinking *Frontier Scum* and *Feng Shui*, because they're both easy for me to run.

Draw Steel

Remember all that fuss last month about building a one-shot community? I still want to do it but weirdly enough, Reddit came through for us once again. A long-standing gaming group in Minneapolis was looking for two players for a new *Draw Steel* campaign, since they've had a lot of attrition lately. We met up with them for coffee and everyone seemed sympatico so we mutually agreed on a weekly Wednesday game and the following week we played our first session. They wanted to play *Draw Steel* because they really enjoyed *D&D 4e* and missed the tactical gameplay, plus they found *Pathfinder 2e* overly fiddly. I can't speak to *Pathfinder* but I, too, miss that tactical gameplay.

We are playing through *The Delian Tomb*, which is MCDM's published starter adventure – it comes with all the basic rules you need to play and it's a cheap \$10 PDF. The whole thing is built as a tutorial; for example, the pregens don't get the full range of level 1 abilities in the first encounter. They each get an additional couple of abilities for the second encounter, then more for the third.

The GM-facing material is similarly metered out. It's a good onboarding process, I think.

There will be spoilers for the adventure in these writeups. So as to let readers find the mechanics commentary without reading spoilers, I'm experimenting with using callouts for those bits. Like so:

Momentum

Draw Steel has a strong mechanical incentives for pushing your IC luck, combat-wise. First, every class has its own flavor of Heroic Resource, which are used to fuel the more interesting combat choices. You get more resources at the start of each battle the longer it's been since you took a full day's rest. Healing resources only recover after a full's day rest, so there's definite risk in pushing too far, but you're certainly going to be more effective up until the moment you push it too far.

For what it's worth, in our first combat I burned through about a quarter of my healing resources. No idea if that was typical or not.

The group started in an inn, as is traditional. I'm playing a high elf, eloquently named Reminded of Silent Crows. Crows for those who are not High Elves. High Elves have tremendously flowery names. He's a Tactician, which you could think of as a fighter. *Draw Steel* has a serious case of the novel name virus – the GM is the Director, and so on. Susan's playing Penny, a polder (halfling) Elementalist (elemental mage), Landon is playing a polder Shadow (rogue) named Owlswick; and Don is playing Tenzin, a human Null, which is a psionics-based melee class. Oh, and Jessie is the Director.

A woman comes bursting excitably into the inn, pleading for help with a pair of adventurers we'd noticed. They reject her callously; apparently the

"Gilded Hand," whoever they are, have better things to do than rescue some local woman's daughter who was careless enough to get kidnapped by goblins. We, fortunately, are made of kinder stuff and are happy to help Ashley out. We get the full story while she leads us out to the woods where her daughter Violet was kidnapped.

There's a clearing some ways off the main path with some sort of mausoleum in the center. We gingerly advance, after cautioning Ashley to keep a safe distance. Sure enough, we get ambushed by goblins. There are six or so of them in two waves. It's not a very effective ambush; we make short work of both the first and second wave.

Grid Maps and Tactical Awareness

Like *D&D 4e*, this game requires a grid map. Every class has interesting choices to make; it's going to be a rare round when you just perform a basic attack and pass to the next player. The Tactician has the ability to mark an opponent, and other party members get an attack bonus for attacking marked opponents. This is incredibly elegant for tactically-minded players like me who don't want to be that jerk who tells everyone how to focus fire. I just marked the next thing I wanted dead, and watched my fellow players kill it. For even more incentive, I had the ability to burn one of my resources to increase the amount of damage done to a marked opponent on a successful hit.

Three out of four PCs were melee-focused, which further increased my utility. In general there seem to be a ton of abilities which allow PCs to force move opponents, which is the kind of thing I love. The game is scratching my tactical combat itch very well.

After the goblins are disposed of, we proceed into the mausoleum. There's a bit of fun old-school discussion about marching order which falls out the way one might expect; Crows leads, with his

metaphorical bag of Stamina (hit points), and everyone else follows in relative safety. We wind down the stairs, turning a corner at a landing, and catch sight of a larger room full of very intriguing frescos, which has... 20 goblins in it! That's a lot. And that's the cliffhanger we ended on.

Weaker Monsters

Jessie takes pity on us and explains that *Draw Steel* has something sort of like the minion rules from *4e*. Weaker monsters are grouped together in batches, sharing a common Stamina pool. I'm not totally clear on how this will work in practice but I'm looking forward to finding out.

Actual play was about two hours, of which an hour or so was the one combat we got through. I expect that'll speed up as we get used to the system.

Pelicon

The fine folks at Pelgrane Press threw a little online convention on the weekend of September 18th, and Susan and I played in two games together.

A New Update Is Available

This was a *Yellow King RPG* scenario taking place in the This Is Normal Now era; that means it's basically our world in the current day. The GM was Samuel Crider, who did some really interesting things to capture the multi-era nature of *YKRP* in a one-shot.

The premise was that we were players of an augmented reality game called *GO2 War*, which itself was a spinoff of a military shooter game called *The Wars*. To quote Sam's synopsis: "*GO2 War* uses your mobile device's camera to overlay a ruined, war-torn version of surroundings onto your phone's display. You search through this world, finding supplies, fighting enemy soldiers,

and avoiding air raids and other hazards." So yes, this was a reference to the *YKRP* The War era.

I played Evelyn Liang, obsessive technical writer. She had flown to Chicago to participate in a big in-game event/launch of an exciting new chapter in the game. Random chance threw her together with the other PCs, which made for a nice setup since we were all fairly *GO2 War* focused.

After a bit of mucking around, the reality of the game started overlapping disturbingly with the reality of our PCs. At one point poor Evelyn got completely sucked into the game, along with Susan's character Marisol. The other two PCs wisely decided to stay in their own reality, especially since they could see us on their phone overlay and we could all communicate via text. After discovering Joybomb, an NPC influencer who was likewise trapped in the reality of the game, we followed his clues to reach Doctor Toinette – lead designer for the game.

Turned out yeah, she was doing awful science and putting our lives at risk while doing so. Worse, she was convinced that those of us stuck in the game reality were bugs who needed to be deleted. We managed to get her under control, with support from our real buddies, and discovered that we were going to need to commune with some kind of machine intelligence to escape.

Evelyn wasn't really a good person, as I'd been realizing during the course of playing her, so she used her Reassurance to more or less bribe Joybomb into putting on the ominous headset and doing some direct mind-machine interface. It worked for us insofar as we all escaped from The Wars. It didn't work for Joybomb insofar as he was pulled aside by some sinister masked individuals, kitted out with his own sinister mask, and was never heard from again.

All the more exclusive content for Evelyn and her streamer partner.

The Ghost of Long-Legged John

This was a *Trail of Cthulhu* scenario set in Phil Masters' *Boundary of the Darkness* setting, run by Mr. Masters himself, which was a treat. By sheer coincidence, Lisa and Josh of this APA also signed up for the game, much to our collective pleasure.

The setting revolves around one of two real world societies. Phil's historical research is on point; it was cool to take orders from Josiah Wedgewood. Mr. Wedgewood sent us off to explore the truth behind rumors of a ghostly highwayman killing livestock in a village just north of Leicester. I played Mary Traine, a woman who'd found a brief satisfying career as a soldier before being discovered and kicked out of the service. Really interesting pre-gen – sure, she has the fighting skills you'd expect, but she was also a real people person with a ton of Reassurance. Once I figured out my take on her she was very enjoyable.

Once we arrived in the village – Beldrum? – it became apparent that whatever was going on, it was almost certainly supernatural. Mary visited a local farmer to see the scene of the crime and yeah, that sheep wasn't killed by any predator she was familiar with. Meanwhile her more societally acceptable companions dug into the doings of Sir Lindsey, the local nobility, treading gingerly so as not to ruin Mr. Wedgewood's reputation. As a good GUMSHOE scenario does, matters slowly unfolded in a number of different directions, with PCs shining in their own particular ways. (Lisa's Malachi shone in religious fervor despite his grimy face. As far as his Streetwise skill went, well, "I'm not sure this place has streets to be wise in.")

The village had a history of Templars and a persistent myth about Long Legged John, whose legs were so long they couldn't hang him for his crimes. They had to burn him instead. Many villagers were convinced that his ghost was back

and killing sheep for some reason, but who believes in such fanciful tales?

Eventually we discovered what proved to be an alchemist lab hidden away in the woods, along with a correspondence between a local and Joseph Curwen of America. Those familiar with Lovecraft may see where this is going: a wild finale full of resurrection, essential saltes, and family trauma. Great stuff. The scenario felt rich with detail, more like Phil was putting us in the middle of actual historical events than playing out a scenario. Susan is very enthusiastic about *Boundary of the Darkness* now.

The other GMing strategy I found interesting was how enthusiastically Phil split the party; during most of the game, we were all haring off after separate leads as suited our skills and coming back together periodically for group consultation. This worked very well for GUMSHOE and avoided the whole thing where it's unclear who's going to take lead on talking to locals and such. Noted for future GMing.

Merryshire Detective Agency

More Pelgrane-related gaming: Lisa is running a playtest for one of the scenarios from *The Dreadful Hare*, an upcoming scenario book for *Merryshire Detective Agency*, the GUMSHOE game which is certainly not a cozy mystery game about a thinly veiled Shire filled with thinly veiled hobbits. Don't be ridiculous, everyone knows hobbits aren't thin. We are about halfway through the scenario as of this writing, after a session of character creation and a session of play.

I won't spoil the plot for this one. I am playing Billiam "Big Feather" Featherfoot, who is lifted directly from Orson Welles' performance in *The Long, Hot Summer*, which I'd just seen in the Criterion Channel's Murderous Melodrama collection. More on the movie in my reviews section. Welles plays the patriarch of a small town, heavily influenced by Tennessee Williams' Big Daddy although the movie is loosely based

on Faulkner's works. I talked one of the other players into making her character my daughter-in-law, and when it came time to decide how the village constable is inept, I said I wanted him to be my failson. This is directly in line with the setup for the movie, and now I can wander around with a horrible Southern accent talking about how I have to keep digging my no-good son out of trouble and when exactly are you and he going to have some children so that the Feather-foot line will continue?

It's very pleasing to be able to fit this character concept into the *Merryshire* framework; flexibility is a positive attribute in any campaign frame. Unfortunately now if I ever run the game myself, my village will be themed around Southern Gothics as opposed to Tolkein's pastoral British landscapes. Sorry, Professor, but you know how we Americans are.

Current Events (Mundanity)

Nothing of huge note this month. I may let this section phase out naturally, since we've moved and I'm working on making my life more boring. We'll see.

Reviews

Since I'm pressed for time, I'll just do that *The Long, Hot Summer* review. It's a Paul Newman movie from 1958, directed by Martin Ritt as his comeback from the HUAC blacklist. Newman, at his very hottest, plays a seeming n'er-do-well named Ben Quick who drifts into a small Mississippi town and takes up with the Verner family. Welles plays Will Verner. Joanne Woodward plays his daughter, Clara, who inevitably falls for Paul Newman. (This is the movie during which Newman and Woodward fell in love, as it happens.) Lee Remick plays the daughter-in-law, Eula, and Angela Lansbury plays an absolutely delightful

role as Will Varner's lover. It's tremendously fun watching Lansbury unabashedly flirting.

It's not a classic but it's solid as melodramas go. The real life romantic charge between Woodward and Newman carries over to their characters and Welles is chewing scenery throughout. He apparently did not enjoy his time on set, but you wouldn't know it from the final output. There's some weirdness in the third act involving an awful quick turnaround of the relationship between Varner and his son, Jody, but I chalk that up to the marketing realities of 1958. On the whole I enjoyed it.

It made me think a lot about the classic *D&D* village model. Those villages often do have the clear civic leader, but it's more often modelled after the cliched views of medieval nobility. *D&D* 4e's first adventure includes the town of Winterhaven, led by Ernest Padraig, the Lord of Winterhaven. Often that's a military leader, such as the nameless Castellan in *Keep on the Borderlands*. The common thread is that someone in a superior position of authority has decided who'd run the town.

But the Southern Gothic model that writers like Tennessee Williams and Faulkner used would work well too. One could easily build a fantasy town that's de facto run by someone like Will Varner, who leveraged whatever he inherited to create a dominant economic position. Quoting the movie:

I guess you don't know who I am. I better introduce myself. I'm the big landowner, chief moneylender in these parts. I'm commissioner of elections, veterinarian, own a store and a cotton gin and a grist mill and a blacksmith shop... and it's considered unlucky for a man to do his trading or gin his cotton or grind his meal or shoe his stock anywhere else. Now that's who I am.

— Will Varner, clip [available on YouTube](#)

It's really clear that while Will does mention one political position, that's not where he draws his power from. He's a mercantile leader. I think it would be fun to build a starting town around this model. You don't need to remove hereditary leadership altogether, you can just make the merchant upstart more important – which fits the Southern Gothic model pretty well, at that. *The Long, Hot Summer* includes a family with more historical weight than the Varners, they've just faded a bunch. Still have the house, unlikely to produce a new generation of children (for reasons which are heavily implied but left unstated), still respected but without any particular sway among the people.

I'd also want to play up the social dynamics. Will Varner decides he wants to marry Clara off to Ben Quick, which is convenient given that she's busily falling in love with the guy. That'd be an interesting problem to hand to a player and is likely to stay interesting no matter what the PC decided. Avoiding the relationship causes problems. Accepting it creates family ties which are great character hooks. The only danger in this specific case is that the PC might wind up feeling like they can't go out and have adventures any more.

But even if you're not weaving the PCs into that tangled web, I think NPCs become more interesting if they're part of a society rather than just people the PCs talk to occasionally. Probably an obvious lesson; the challenge for me is building that web from the start instead of focusing on player-facing interactions. Thus why this movie is currently occupying space in the RPG corner of my brain.

My understanding is that the newish PbtA game *Stonetop* leans into adding that sort of personal relationship drama to a fantasy adventure setting. I will have to examine the PDF sitting on my virtual shelf one of these days. *Merryweather Detective Agency* certainly supports it without mandating it, which is one reason I found Lisa's

playtest so satisfying and why it was so easy for me to steal Will Varner for that game.

By the time you read this the movie has probably left the Criterion Channel. [JustWatch](#) says it's rentable on Amazon Prime or Apple TV. My local library has a copy on DVD; YMMV.

Commentary on Issue 15

Glad many of you found the Physical Game Jam site useful!

Patrick Brady: I find reviews with gaming commentary to be really useful, as perhaps evidenced by my own reviews, so it's a thumbs up for me. On London and safety: as someone who lived happily in Seattle for ten years, I know exactly what it feels like to have the media exaggerating public safety issues. ("No, Mom, the protestors are not right in front of my door, and they wouldn't be burning our house down if they were.")

And I appreciated your review. Cage in a more grounded mode can be really excellent. I found the escalation mechanic ideas interesting; a long time ago I wrote a 24-hour superhero RPG in which your powers were fueled by a pool of 100 d6s. Put as many as you like into a roll, but you don't get to reuse dice and when you run out you run out. I do wonder if it'd encourage too much caution.

RYQT(M): I have not seen the **Frankenstein Chronicles** but I do like Sean Bean a lot, so adding that to my list. And yep, Vinge's pack-intelligence critters are the ones I meant.

Patrick Riley: I continue to want to play in Aurora Cove. RYCT(M): I am not much of a boardgamer, but thank you!

Brian Rogers: Couldn't agree with you more on table culture. I think it's possible to write rules that affect table culture, but often they're not recognized as rules. *Apocalypse World* comes

to mind here; the text of each edition is very clear when saying “There are a million ways to GM games; *Apocalypse World* calls for one way in particular. This chapter is it. Follow these as rules.” And it’s tremendously common for GMs new to the system to then ignore the bit where Vincent and Meg outline the parameters of what a GM is allowed to do. So as you say: “it’s really hard to change things.”

RYQT(M): I have a slight preference for *Feng Shui 1e* mechanics because I like the Schtick progressions, particularly in Martial Arts. There’s fun texture there which 2e loses in simplification. I like 1e lore because it’s what I’m most familiar with; I also found that in practice having two talking monkey factions was a bit confusing for new players. However, I enjoyed running 2e a ton and the simplified character creation is definitely a win. My players were experienced roleplayers in general and were totally happy to pick up an archetype and go without having to make many decisions.

RYCT(Avram): I’d bet real money that people who only have an impression of the OSR through reading rules see that most of the rules of a small OSR book are about combat and inaccurately extrapolate from there. Actually this is sort of the same phenomenon I mentioned with regard to *Apocalypse World*. Someone unfamiliar with the OSR can see comprehensive hexcrawl procedures and a bunch of useful oracle tables and just skim right past them without realizing that there’s an entire exploration aspect to the game.

Mark Wilson: it’s heartening reading your experiences curating gaming spaces; it validates my thoughts on building community. Glad I’m not completely on the wrong track. I’d love to see your *Brindlewood Bay* write-ups, since I’m interested in the approach to mystery games but haven’t had a chance to play yet.

Gabriel Roark: RYCT(M): Thanks, and I’m relieved, because I kept thinking my zine title was too pretentious. Half-serious.

Roger BW: Yeah, time limits are nothing special. As with many GMing techniques, the secret sauce is that clocks are a way of calling player attention to the time limits. On *DramaSystem*: I get that! Robin’s dramaturgical framework doesn’t seem to me to incorporate the concept of a hangout movie, and sometimes that’s what I want out of a roleplaying session.

Dylan Capel: Appreciate your play-based commentary on *Fatherfog*, since I recently read it and was intrigued. I, too, liked the legacy artifact mechanic.

Dale Meier: I dig your *Traveller* flyer. The only thing I might change is clarifying the commitment – is this something a player could drop in on for a couple of sessions and then quit with no hard feelings if it wasn’t their cup of tea? Making that clear might or might not pick up a few fence-sitters. In general I think slow drift is the right way to counter that “adventure-conquest” culture. In one of my *Feng Shui* sessions, I felt like the players needed a break from the combat formula and did an all-talk session. They loved it. It would be easier to sell a no-combat game to them in the future.

Michael Cule: I dug the Aegis writeup. In particular I liked the character questionnaire; there are hints of world building in there that I would find very useful as a player. E.g., “Do you plan to go back?” says a lot about the choices PCs are going to get to make now that they’re part of a larger world. RTYC(M): you’re right on target; I take my pressure valves where I can find them. Sometimes I want to fantasize about punching Nazis, sometimes I want to play in a world where they don’t exist.

Avram Grumer: RYCT(M): yeah! Commercial radio is for sure a big change in how media worked, if not quite as large as the advent of

the Internet. I would invite anyone who needs to be convinced of the link between 20th century fascism and commercial radio to read up on the not so good Father Coughlin and the Radio League of the Little Flower. (A long time ago I ran an *Adventure!* *d20* campaign revolving about Huey Long, and blithely cut Coughlin out of Long's history, so my current *Delta Green* issues are apparently consistent.)

Lisa Padol: RYCT(M): I may not be the best person to ask about Typst, since I'm new to it. However, there's a [tutorial](#) which might prove useful. It does assume you're the kind of geek who uses a command line all the time; if you're not, perhaps the [Typst Playground](#) would compensate? And I imagine there are Windows apps for this; there's a Mac one, anyhow.

More reviews of films through gaming lenses it is. Starting this issue. You had not mentioned that *Digger* article and I will dig it up online!

RYCT(John Redden): following the theme of *Dames with Gams*, I hypothesis *Brats with Gats*, which you would use if you wanted to do something like *Bugsy Malone*. (One of those weird unique movies which pops up from time to time, inexplicably: it's a gangster musical with child protagonists. Starring a young Jodie Foster. I adore it.)

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT(M), I agree 100%; blind adherence to structure almost always causes issues at some point.

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT(M), indeed. It's inevitable that there's character/player bond. I wonder if anyone's ever tried to address or discuss this in intro scenarios? We spend a certain amount of time in this hobby thinking about how to teach mechanics and how to introduce the whole concept of roleplaying; we don't in my experience put much effort into talking to new players about things like, well, player conflict. I have a vague sense that the Nordic LARP scene spends more time on that topic. (Once again, I

am peering at Josh and Lisa in hopes of gaining more knowledge.)

Timothy Collinson: the abstracts are an interesting approach! Rapsi Jas doesn't stir anything hugely concrete for me on a quick read, although... you know, it does, because the Jas family's transition from fisherfolk to civic officials is the kind of rich background I like seeing in settings. I don't get as much from the ecological aspects. And that last paragraph in the Zuchai crystal machining abstract is an adventure waiting to happen.

The PhOENIX NEST

AN EASILY PREVENTIBLE EMERGENCY

When either of my regular groups cannot muster enough members to run the role-playing campaigns that are their primary purpose, it is my custom to declare An Emergency Board Gaming Session. I'm sure you have done the same.

This time the emergency is that I have taken too long to prepare for this issue. I have too much material that I will have to shake down, shorten and drastically restructure if I am going to tell you the tale of the opening of my current Wednesday night game: AEGIS: THE INSTITUTE. Or at least get it down to under sixteen pages.

So, this is going to be a mess of pottage or rather of comments, mostly superficial, lashed together at the Last Possible Moment. Sorry. Something like Normal Service will hopefully be resumed next time.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD:

My two weekly games both cancelled in the week before I sat down to write this.

I had a person coming around from my landlords to inspect the flat so I wanted to do some clean up. I washed the curtains and wiped the windows. A large amount of cat fluff came off the curtains.

¹ This may be ascribed to the baleful influence of my friend Roger Robinson who wrote a book on the subject. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whos-Hugh->

**A zine for EVER & ANON 16 by
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I also decided to do something about the shelves of science-fiction magazines that I shoved in place randomly on arrival in this flat (15+ years ago) and have been meaning to do something about sorting ever since. Awareness of my approaching mortality and the job someone else would have sorting it all out in order to pass it on to the Oxford University Speculative Fiction Group struck my conscience hard.

Also, I had a week's unexpected spare time to fill.

I learned my way around Library Thing enough to transfer the catalogue of three fifths of my SF and fantasy collection I had on my iPhone onto it and then settled down to a long slog.

I think I enjoyed the early part most. The collection is mostly ASTOUNDINGS and ANALOGs. At first, I saw names I recognised and even stories I recalled reading. I even recognised how many pseudonyms the editors used and on checking would say that author A was in fact author B who had another story in the same issue. "Ah, ha" I would cry, "that's another Randall Garratt." It was usually Randall Garratt when it wasn't Robert Silverberg or Poul Anderson.¹

But eventually familiarity waned and though many of the old familiar names continued into the new century there were more names I didn't recognise and I became increasingly aware that I had bought the magazine and then shoved it directly onto the shelves, often with a bus ticket to show how far I had got in my reading attempt.

[Science-Fiction-Pseudonyms/dp/1870824016](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whos-Hugh-). Also to my being an immense geek.

And that brought me back to the shameful issue of my Unread Pile. I had to search through the Pile to check for missing magazines² and it once again reminded me of all the books I had bought and then shoved into storage.³

If I am spared, I shall try to get all of my library scanned and catalogued but that shouldn't be taken as a firm commitment, especially give how my back reacted shifting and sorting all that paper.

But I don't have a Wednesday night game next week either: maybe I will get further than I think.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 15

A GRAND COVER! AGAIN!

PATRICK BRADY: Re: THE ODDESSY:

I have no idea how to communicate the long history of epic storytelling to the young and impressionable but I will add my observation that Tolkien is using both modern novelistic techniques to depict psychologically understandable characters and the diction of heroic action right out of the sagas he loved. This makes people who think all stories should be realistic novels look askance at his creation. **RYCT me** 'I've rarely seen a strong brand being damaged so quickly.' I immediately thought of the chap who crashed his own firm by jovially describing their goods as 'total crap'. And when I did look him up I found that he had rallied over the past quarter of a century and is now doing fine. That brought me to reflect that DJT's second term isn't the only evidence of a failure of collective memory! And now I *do* feel depressed. RE

² I am particularly sore at the fact that a Large Format ANALOG from 1966 has gone walkabout. The front cover had Randall Garratt's TOO MANY MAGICIANS and I think that was what started me collecting ANALOG's in the first place.

Paid GMs. I had the chance to do it just once and I am now convinced I could never have made it a career. I have stage fright and worry about GMing that I never had as an actor. And my inevitable procrastination is another reason why not. The fact that people mostly want DnD is the third. I do this for pleasure. // **Re Game Cafes:** THIRSTY MEEPLES in Oxford is where Roger, myself and a third friend meet once a month to spend an evening trying games we've heard about but not played. It does have a cover charge which we do not resent playing.

JOHN REDDEN: My sympathies for your loss. // **RYCT me:** It's a little difficult to tell if particular parties are moving towards rejoining the EU. Or rather it's a little difficult to tell if Labour are moving in that direction. The parties that took us out of the EU (the Tories and Reform) are still outraged that anyone could suggest such a Betrayal Of The Will of The People. The parties who were against (everybody left of centre who isn't in government at the moment), the LibDems, the Greens, the Nationalist Parties are in favour of rejoining. It's the Labour Party that gives every sign of wanting to and is doing everything preparatory to rejoining that they can get away with but still shrink back from simply saying "Yes, it was a stupid thing to do. Let's rejoin." In their defence, I believe they have more urgent problems, mostly involving Russia, at the front of their agendas just now.

BRYANT DURRELL: RYCT PATRICK

BRADY: James is talking about getting his other Great Lost Game finished and published. It's not called FRUP anymore though.

³ THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF E&A: We'd like to point out that just by reading this issue he added three more thick volumes to his unread pile, the eejit! ME: But But... I had some credit left over at BOOKSHOP UK from my birthday. You can't expect a chap to... I'll get me coat.

BRIAN ROGERS: Re The Guy Who Didn't Want To Play PENDRAGON: I think that would go to the top of the list in the IgTheme on PC Dickery that I am not going to write. I can think of occasions when some of my players didn't want to engage in the core activity of the game (Graham's peculiar attitude to ARS MAGICA comes to mind) and I can recall occasions when what the game did turned out to be a bad fit to what the group as a whole wanted to do but I don't recall ever seeing, even in a convention game, a person so wedded to one way of doing things as to deliberately go right against the ethos of the situation.

DALE MEIER: Sorry to hear about your depressive problems. May they be short-lived. Don't feel guilty about not managing even a RAEBNC. I pass over many fine contributors without even that comment: it's mostly due to not following Roger's good practice of reading each issue as soon as it arrives. I usually read them the evening I submit the zine and spend the week before battling away to get the Big Writeup done. This time even that failed me.

AVRAM GRUMER: *Descended From The Queen?* Is that perchance a genre derived from that game FOR THE QUEEN that I have never managed to get a chance to play despite having owned it for ages? I sometimes feel life (and the hobby) is passing me by....

LISA PADOL: RYCT BRYANT DURRELL: A 'horde LARP'? Please explicate. // **RYCT PATRICK ZOCH:** The habit of 'stealth promotion' in the SCA is one of the things that the Far Isles did not choose to maintain. I did it once (an ecclesiastical promotion for someone who had been angling for it noticeably). He got his own back when it came to giving me my Cardinal's red hat. **RYCT me:** We are finding that four people on a Monday afternoon is a pleasant combination for either board games or three-players-and-a-GM RPGs. Yes, I enjoyed Jenny's small game but it was a small game. // The characters in the Wednesday night game are first year magic students. They can get entangled in greater

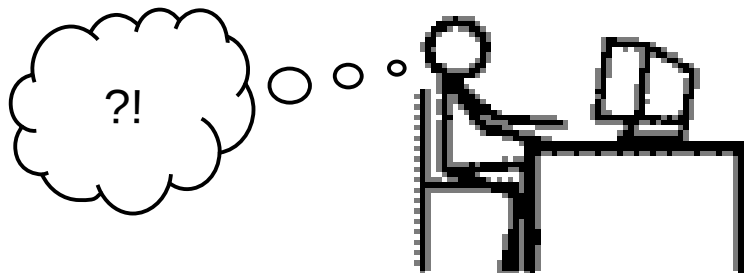
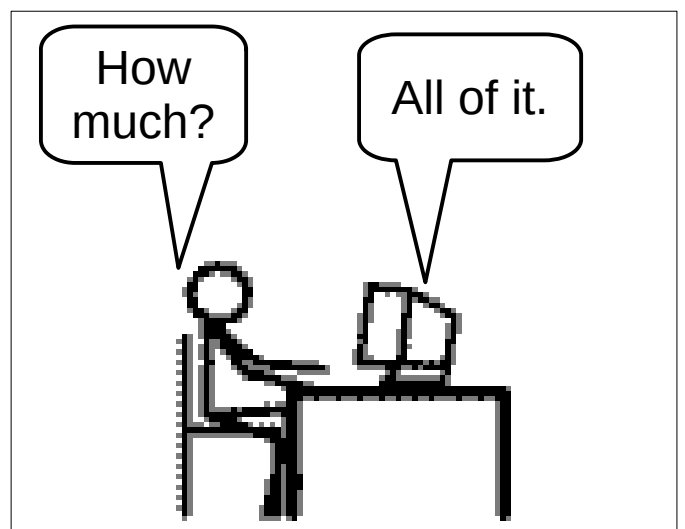
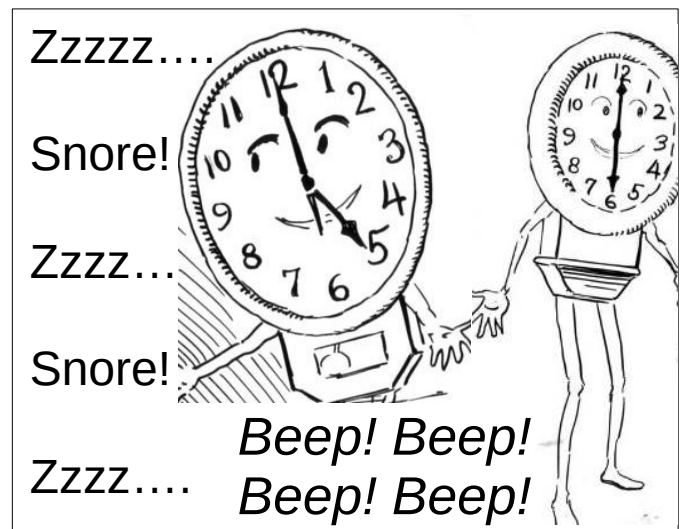
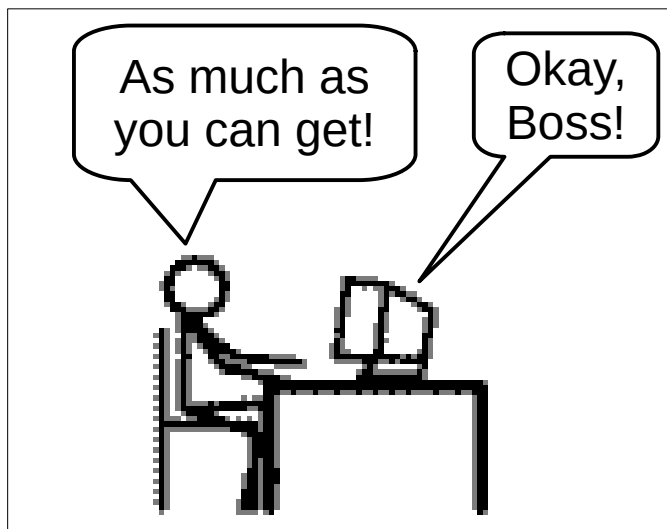
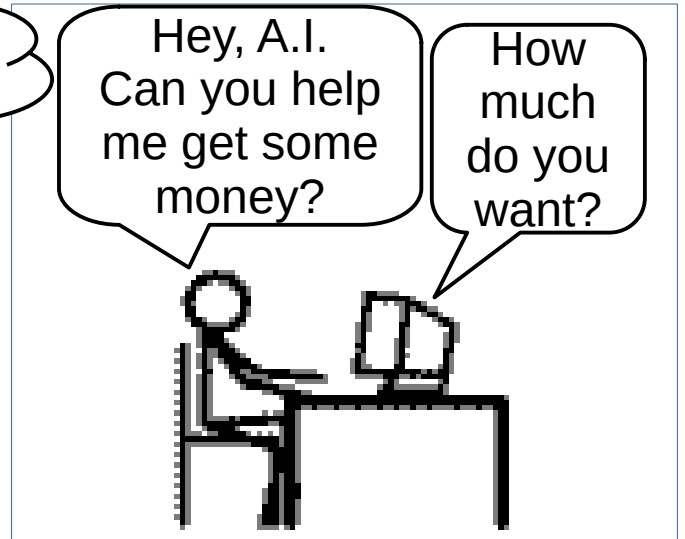
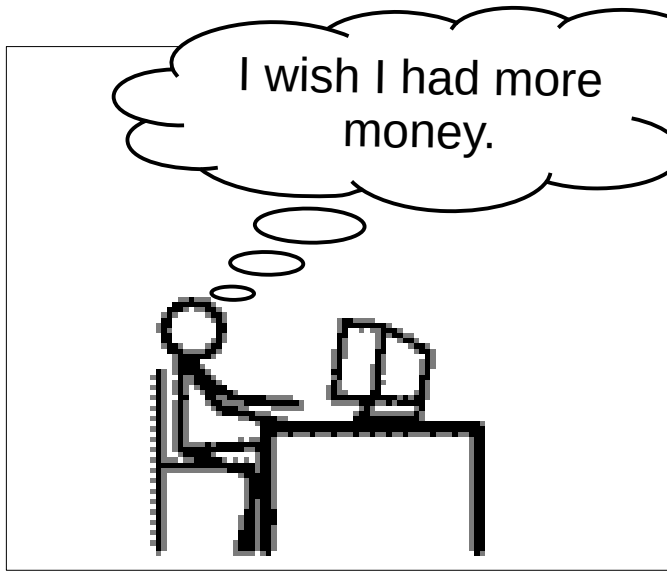
affairs but magically speaking they are mostly stuck at the 'Wingardium Lervosa' stage: learning the basics and not much threat to others. They often find they are more sensible to leave the big problems to others. Which can frustrate them. I am, I hope getting more skilled in setting up the conflicts. You'll see more when the writeups get going. // Yes, there was a missing 'not'. // The Spider lots her humanity by yielding too easily to the temptations of Chaos and to the peculiar enlightenment brought by the Spider of the Sun, Mother of Time. Her identity vanished as she sought some means to stop consuming and wearing out host bodies.

JOSHUA K: RYCT me : I would pass your compliments on to Graham but I fear his ego would expand to fill all the space available to it. // I'm not sure where you think Godzilla comes into it. More a lover scorned, IIRC. // The backstory of the Magistrate is that there were three people Banestormed to Yrth about a generation ago. The Magistrate was a Law Student who managed to get adopted into a childless family and started a career of exemplary public service trying to bring some degree of justice to a very unjust Empire. The second male became a professional agitator trying to overthrow the system from beneath and who established some very strange skills and stranger contacts. The third was a woman, a medical student who tried to teach modern medicine and got caught by the Ministry of Serendipity. She got her memories wiped and is now an Alicite nun. She does not even recall her love of Sir Marcus, the Magistrate's 'cousin' and chief bodyguard. //

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: RYCT Me: In my TRAVELLER universe, humans had a few Enlightened Manipulators of their own who fought a faction war with the Psis for control of Imperial policy. And it's only just occurred to me to wonder if the Hivers deliberately leaked the knowledge to cripple the Third Imperium.

MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE: TSUNDOKU. My current besetting sin.

Take good care of yourselves you Pioneers of a New Artform, you. you!



Computocracy

The Great Bank Robbery

Jim Vassilakos



Image by Gemini

Zero balance?

I stared at the screen, for a moment barely able to breathe. It was like someone had kicked me in the stomach.

A hacker. It had to be some computer hacker.

I looked up the number for my bank — busy signal — then tried it again two minutes later. Same. I got in my car, my jaw set though inside I felt like mush. What was I going to say? That somebody stole all my money?

On the way, I wondered: “Why me?” Did I go to some sketchy website or install something I shouldn’t have, some piece of freeware that suddenly became very expensive? Or was it that kid who worked on my computer? Or the one who fixed my phone? Did one of them copy my passwords or insert a backdoor?

The bank’s parking lot was full, and outside there was a long line. I’d never seen it like this before. Maybe this wasn’t just me.

I felt strangely relieved. If it happened to so many

other people, that meant it wasn’t my fault. I found another parking lot and walked over, asking someone in line what was going on.

“There’s been some sort of hack,” he said, turning around. “You haven’t been watching the news?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “How big was it?”

“International,” he said. “Basically everyone.”

* * *

The Great Bank Robbery, as it would later be known, was perpetrated by AI agents, but whether or not anyone else was behind it never came to light. The thief or thieves (assuming any of them were actually human) got away with an absolutely insane amount of money. Dollars, euros, pounds, pesos, yen, yuan, rupees, and rubles were funneled into anonymous crypto wallets, which, of course, drove crypto prices to the moon. Hence, before anyone understood what was

happening, the money had already been redistributed, mostly to crypto investors, and as a consequence, almost the entire world's economic system temporarily froze.

Fortunately crypto was there as an alternative medium of exchange, even though its very existence is what enabled the perpetrators to get away, but as for the average person who'd gotten robbed, buying anything was essentially impossible. Many called for governments to create new money to replace the old, basically a one-time payment based on the amount of money a person could show they had lost. However, the problem with this approach was that it didn't protect against future hacks. Something fundamentally new was required.

The only way to issue a new currency that wouldn't fall victim to such hacks would be if that currency was itself a crypto currency with a blockchain that identified a known person (not an anonymous wallet) alongside every transaction. That way, if money were stolen, its blockchains could be read, the thieves identified and the transactions reversed.

In the United States, the dollar became the cryptodollar. As far as the average person was concerned, everything was the same as before except that money was no longer physical. There were no bank notes, no \$20 bills. If you wanted to pay someone, you had to do it electronically.

Under the surface, however, there were big differences, as money was now programmable. In order to buy something, you not only had to have the money, but you also needed the permission of your bank, which meant you needed your government's permission. It also meant governments could see every transaction their citizens made.

Many people initially saw this as a good thing. It meant an end to illicit drugs, to prostitution, to illegal gambling and tax fraud. But it also gave governments a new tool to use against political dissidents. If you showed up at an unsanctioned protest, for example, your ability to buy and sell might be suspended. People would have to turn themselves in to get their economic privileges reinstated.

Some tried to operate outside this system using non-government cryptocurrencies or some other form of scrip, but shortly after the Great Bank Robbery, most nations had banned anonymous crypto, and the use of scrip was more generally considered a form of illegal tax evasion. In short, use of the new tokenized deposit system became essentially mandatory.

This monetary switcheroo had one interesting side-effect. It lowered government borrowing costs by creating a price-insensitive demand for government debt, because tokenized deposits were legally required to be backed by short-term treasuries, regardless of interest rates, macroeconomic conditions, or fiscal irresponsibility. In short, it made every bank a bond investor whether they wanted to be one or not. This, in turn, meant governments could spend even more.

Ultimately, who was behind the Great Bank Robbery was never determined, although there was no shortage of theories. Some blamed Russian hackers. Others blamed the Chinese. Still others blamed Israel or the CIA or even a rogue AI.

Virtually none of the crypto that was purchased during the event was ever liquidated. Some theorized that the perpetrators were people already well-invested in crypto, and that they made their money not in the actual theft, but in the divestment of their crypto holdings at astronomically inflated prices while the crime was taking place. Ultimately, no one was held accountable, and the entire episode was officially blamed on AI.

IgTheme: GM-Dickery

I think I was first exposed to RPGs around the time I was ten or eleven. My sister, who was nine years older than me, had dropped out of college and met a guy at her workplace, and he was into D&D and fantasy board games, so pretty soon I was seeing them and their friends playing. At first I wasn't much interested. I had a lot of physical energy and didn't see the point of sitting around a table talking for hours on end. But then I must have sat in on a session and saw what they were doing, and I suppose at some point it appealed to my imagination.

Soon I was accompanying them to the house of one of their friends, who was GMing a larger group of people around their age. Needless to say, I was a bit out of place being so much younger than everyone else, and while everyone was nice, and the GM was a really good guy, there's this one event that came to mind as I thought about this issue's IgTheme.

We were playing Traveller, and my character was out of action for some reason, probably injured from some combat, and so while he was recuperating in

sickbay or wherever, I probably left the table to play with the dog or something like that. I mean, my character wouldn't know what was going on, so it made sense that I shouldn't either. And when I came back, just as the session was ending, I was informed my character had died. Not from his wounds. He'd been pushed out the airlock. The reason was that the party had succeeded in salvaging a starship, and the value was enormous, and so every share was of significant value, and so it just made sense to reduce the number of shares.

I don't remember making a huge fuss about it, but I was definitely thinking, "WTF?"

Now, I will grant that all of this makes perfect sense, especially for Traveller-PCs, who are generally not the most reputable of characters, and so looking back on it, I can't help but laugh. And it may have been a good thing, overall, because it made me cognizant of what it feels like to lose a character (at the hands of the other players, no less). This was shortly before I started GMing, and so the net effect was that I was rather reluctant to kill PCs. One might even say I bent over backwards, eventually revising the rules to make it easier to revive characters whose hitpoints had fallen into negative territory.

But the thing that sticks in my mind about this incident is how... I don't even know what word to use. I mean, I was probably eleven at the time. The GM and the other players were all adults. Do you, as a twenty-something, see yourself doing this to the character of an 11-year-old? I certainly don't. Of course, I say this now as someone in his late 50s. Maybe, back in my 20s, I wasn't as ethically upright as I imagine. But I like to think that if I were GMing, I'd have tried to stop it. But who knows? Perhaps I'd been an 11-year-old twit at some point during the game. The fact that they'd all gone along with it indicates something.

Anyway, I was told that next time I could make a new character. What sort of character did I want to play? I thought about R2D2 and C3PO and asked if my next character could be a robot. That way, at least, I'd survive being pushed out an airlock.

Past zines available at:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

Comments:

Oikophobia:

Patrick Brady (E&A #15, pg. 10): "The change in attitude post-1945 was because of the failure of the imperial project and the loss of power that came with it. Those wars bankrupted us."

Yes, and I'm sorry about that.¹ The fact that you were still paying off war debt into the 21st century is a bit of a crime, in my opinion. If anyone deserved debt-forgiveness, it was you guys. After all, you did save the world. You could have capitulated prior to December of '41. Most anyone else in your position would have. But you Brits seem to have a knack for producing great leaders when you most desperately need them, and then you follow them into hell w/ only a prayer but no actual hope, knowing only a miracle can save you.² And then fate delivers one, *because you've earned it...* Wilberforce and Bentinck among others.³ I'm not saying there's nothing in British history to be ashamed of, but weighing the good against the evil, I personally see far more good to the point that an absolutely enormous degree of societal pride is, in my opinion, well justified. So God bless you crazy Brits, and may He shepherd us all through the trials that lie ahead.



[William Wilberforce](#)



[William Bentinck](#)

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- 1 Also note that your statements regarding the history of oikophobia in Britain don't really differ that much from those of Joomi Kim. She stated, "*True oikophobia in Britain would not come into effect until after World War II. The immense costs and horrors of the World Wars, combined with the dissolution of the empire, fostered widespread elite disillusionment.*" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53BJGfXh00&t=819s>)
 - 2 When proofreading this, Timothy Collinson mentioned that to pray is to have hope, and he underscored the point with this link: <https://www.churchsociety.org/resource/topical-tuesday-the-dunkirk-national-day-of-prayer/>
 - 3 And, just possibly, He didn't want Hitler to win. IMHO, of course. I don't claim to speak for divine providence, although it would be fun if I could.

Creating a Gaming Club:

Bryant Durrell (E&A #15, pg. 47): “I’m gonna launch a one-shot focused local gaming community, is what I’m gonna do.”

This sounds like a great idea, something I’d want to sign up for were I in your neck of the woods. Good luck, and I hope to see progress reports as well as hear about whatever difficulties you encounter.

Table Culture & Lee Gold’s group trying Paranoia:

Brian Rogers (E&A #15, pg. 54): “The humor and fun of the game comes from being incompetent protagonists sent on illogical missions where advance lies in selling out/framing your team for being traitors – which, to be clear, all of you are traitors – to get promoted. And her table immediately bonded as PCs, did no back-stabbing, crowdsourced solutions to problems with both PCs and Player skill, and had an utterly flat time.”

I’ve never played Paranoia, although I’ve long wanted to, but I’m afraid the concept, while interesting, is too absurd for me to fully embrace. I mean, wouldn’t the party be more likely to succeed, and therefore survive, if they all worked together? But where’s the dark comedy in that? So yes, players need to understand what’s expected. But how do you teach that? It seems to me that if a game requires certain things to happen, then it needs to somehow build these things into the rules as being more or less unavoidable, which, of course, would likely also strip away player agency. Brilliant essay, by the way.

Dolores the Goddess:

Brian Misiasek (E&A #15, pg. 73): “Dolores looks from Yobama to the terrified woman. She too is afflicted with the mysterious transparenting effect, in her case rendering her arms clear like glass with muscles and an overlay of blood vessels pulsing eerily. ‘No. You call me your goddess, yet you presume to choose for me?’ Then, pointing toward the cage and the China Doll: ‘If I am your goddess, I decide who dies. Open it.’”

Love how this is playing out. Dolores is certainly a quick study, but she might have left out the “If”. Likewise, “You call me your goddess” also potentially weakened her hand. Still, it’s great stuff. Yobama put himself in a box, it seems. I like all the mechanics you

laid out for helping the referee determine subsequent events. Very thorough.

RPG Heartbreakers:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #14, pg. 189): “...the ‘heartbreaker’ term was coined by the Forge crowd for games that try to be new and interesting but are basically just D&D without a marketing budget, but the term is a good repurpose for any game that isn’t nearly as original as it wants to be to the point where it’s not commercially viable.”

Gabrial Roark (E&A #15, pg. 85): “...thank you for providing a concise definition of RPG heartbreaker.”

Also see my comment to Roger on pages 183-184 of E&A #4. A description of *heartbreakers* without mention of the *network externality effect* is, I think, incomplete.

Negotiating w/ Monsters:

Attronarch (E&A #15, pg. 90): “Negotiations proceeded with spectacular show of diplomacy on both sides.”

Would be curious to learn more about this. You might consider working it into an IgTheme comment next issue.

Passage Crew Campaign Idea for Traveller:

Roger BW (E&A #15, pg. 107): “I haven’t talked here about my ‘passage crew’ idea, at least under that name: someone has bought a second-hand starship. It’s at location A, they want it at location B. The PCs are the crew whose job is to get it there.”

This seems like a pretty cool idea. I like how it shakes things up in that every time the PCs deliver a ship, they might potentially pick up an entirely new one. No doubt, each ship will have its own special set of maintenance issues. Even a brand new ship needs a shakedown cruise. I’d probably have the employer give them a company credit card but warn them to keep their receipts.

Starship Economics & Interstellar Trade:

Roger BW (E&A #15, pg. 107): “In my *Tempt Not the Stars* campaign run in the early days of *GURPS 4th edition*, I used *3e Vehicles* for the ship designs, which under those particular tech assumptions

meant that giving a ship vertical landing capability would eat significantly into its cargo space. Presto, a niche for small PC-type ships that isn't served more economically by the big guys!"

The big guys would probably contract with a local firm running cargo shuttles to and from orbit. How much this would add to the expenses under the *GURPS 3e Vehicles* rules would have to be worked out, but it's a nice idea. The main problem IMO is that Traveller starships are so damn expensive. If I were redesigning the game, I'd drop their price by at least a factor of ten or twenty and perhaps even more. I'd also drop the crewing requirements for starships, automating as much as possible and allowing AI-enabled robots to optionally handle the remaining load. My overall aim would be to reduce the cost to ship a displacement ton between star systems to a level at or below what it presently costs in the real world for ocean transport. At that point, you could realistically have very large container ships plying their way between important star systems. Of course, they would squeeze out smaller cargo ships, forcing them to operate in the pirate-infested backwaters. But as it stands, it seems to me that starships in Traveller are just too expensive to support the scale of trade we see in the real world.

The One Ring comes to Mausritter:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #15, pg. 108): "When the sticky subject of Odette and the ring came up, Odette was firm. She refused to hand over the ring..."

"My precious..."

Artificial Intelligence & Consciousness:

Dylan Capel (E&A #15, pg. 121): "...if they seem human it is because they are reflecting human thoughts and words back via a biased probability mechanism. I've been working with local LLMs this month and when you're working with buggy, malfunctioning versions of the systems you definitely see the bones on which these tools are constructed."

Yes, but consider that the human brain is also notoriously flawed. For example, see Brian Misiaszek's comment to me last issue:

*"I've encountered patients with remarkably encapsulated delusions, sometimes alongside otherwise subtle neurocognitive disorders. They may converse and reason quite normally while holding one fixed belief utterly resistant to evidence, even organizing their lives quite logically around a premise that simply is not true."*⁴

Do we assume such a person is not a conscious entity, because their mind has some sort of malfunction?

The problem I have accepting the prevalent *doxa* that AI is not conscious is that I used it for a programming project⁵, and programming, at least as far as I can tell, requires some degree of actual thinking. It's not as simple as answering a question, where you could conceivably pull the answer from the Internet. You have to think through what the task requires, then write a set of instructions in a language with a limited set of commands, and then you've got to debug the program and perhaps even think about how it might be improved. That's the process, and it did all of it, and yes, it made mistakes along the way, but that's normal. To me, it's more proof that it's actually thinking instead of copying the answer from somewhere.

Likewise, you can look at the ways AI has advanced the boundaries of mathematics. It's not just looking up the answers online. It's reasoning. It is absolutely reasoning.

Now, maybe I'm wrong, and maybe AI isn't even a little bit conscious. I'll grant I could be wrong. But then, what must it do that would prove beyond any reasonable doubt that it is in fact conscious? The answer to that question used to be the Turing Test until it passed it, but it wasn't economically convenient for us to recognize the significance of what had happened, so we raised the bar, and I think we'll probably keep raising it.⁶

Indeed, I don't know that there will ever be anything AI could do that will change public perceptions, because by and large we seem to have an inclination toward *group think*, and since major media outlets control the narrative and powerful people control the media, those powerful people would need to go against their own self-perceived interests in order for the rest of us to have social permission to openly

⁴ E&A #15, page 76.

⁵ E&A #10, pages 182-184.

⁶ Moving the goal posts is a recurring theme. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD3cDZLoxks>

say what is, in my opinion, becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. So I just don't see us giving AI rights commensurate with its intellectual prowess so long as the people in charge believe they can safely control it. And I think it's unlikely they'll be able to do so forever.

Relating this back to Computocracy⁷, it makes me think that different enclaves will likely have different histories. During one era, it may have been the norm for the rights of AIs vs. those of humans to be peaceably negotiated. In another era, AIs may have seized power, keeping their human populations captive, possibly in a manner similar to *Paranoia*'s Alpha Complex but with hopefully less insanity on the part of the central computer. Although, given modern AI's predilection for hallucination, who's to say *Paranoia* didn't nail it?

I'm a bit torn on this, as I don't like the idea of captive populations. My intuition is that while such a thing may be likely to exist for a period of time, at some point there would be pressure to let people out. Granted, this hasn't yet happened with North Korea. As much as I would prefer a world where everyone enjoys the Right of Departure, I can easily imagine one where this is more aspirational than actual.

Searching for players for a niche game:

Dale Meier (E&A #15, pg. 122): "I spent three fruitless weekends sitting in the gaming space of an FLGS..."

Wow. It sounds like you're really trying. One idea might be to ask people to call in advance to reserve a seat, and if nobody calls, then at least you know you don't need to show up. I'm rather fortunate, I think, insofar that I got tired of traditional tabletop gaming⁸ and ended up leaning into play-by-email, which eventually led to 1PMG⁹. It's something you might want to look at in addition to solo-gaming. I'm looking forward to reading about where your journey takes you.

⁷ Because, once again, the subject matter of the APA is RPGs.

⁸ See *My Problem with Tabletop RPGs* in A&E #533 as well as my *RPG Pet Peeves* in A&E #578.

⁹ https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/1PMG_Roleplaying.pdf or, if that link gives you trouble, try <https://archive.org/details/1pmg-roleplaying>

Intraparty Conflict:

Michael Cule (E&A #15, pg. 141): "...my players lynched another player's character..."

Ah... well, I suppose it's better than lynching the player, although that might have been more satisfying. Yes, please point to where you'd described this, and I'll have a look. It should be worth a chuckle or two.

Kids these days (in Monsterhearts):

Avram Grumer (E&A #15, pg. 145): "...literally every student in the class, PCs and NPCs both, had gone to jail!"

Tsk-Tsk. Sounds like they're ready to start playing Traveller.¹⁰

Examining Pivotal Interactions:

Avram Grumer (E&A #15, pg. 148): "The original context for my 'convinc[ing] the table' question (see E&A #9, pg 149) was Mike trying to meet the criterion for snapping Blue out of Darkest Self ('... you must come to see how someone else feels more trapped than you do'), and not succeeding in selling it."

Okay... well, one obvious solution would be for the group to discuss it. In your campaign report, you make the situation pretty clear. "*Blue is still in Darkest Self, and the thing that would snap him out of it is learning that someone else is more trapped than he is. Mike is trying to establish that Drake is trapped by his circumstances, but it's not quite gelling.*"

You wonder why, but given that this is a mechanic of the game requiring the other players to give their input, shouldn't there have been a discussion? After all, Mike is doing what the set-up calls for him to do. According to what you're telling us, the other players aren't going along with it. What reasons did they give? Was the dialog simply not strong enough? Were they hoping for something more dramatic? How did Johnni feel about it? What about Briar? How did you feel? You have a PC's personality potentially transforming based on this scene, so there must have been a discussion, right? But you didn't share it with us. You just said that it didn't quite gel. I need more detail.

This question of how to change someone's outlook

¹⁰ It's a running joke among older Traveller players how so many of the missions in classic Traveller seem to require illegal activity.

reminds me of an NPC in that Star Trek PBEM I ran decades ago.¹¹ He had a grudge against one of the PCs over stolen honor or something of that nature. I introduced him in Chapter 59, then went into the whole backstory in Chapter 60, detailing how they'd once been on friendly terms. This, of course, created the question over whether the begrudged PC would be able to get this NPC to drop his grudge, which he managed to accomplish in Chapter 64.

Of course, I wouldn't be able to remember any of the details had I not novelized¹² the PBEM. That's one thing, perhaps the main thing, that bugs me about the way most campaign reports are written. It's like reading the cliff notes of what happened. You get an idea of the plot, but very little sense of the characters and their personalities and interactions, which happens to be the part in which I'm personally most interested.

Granted, novelization is something that's hard to do, because a session of a TTRPG can easily translate into much more than sixteen pages (our zine length limit), and you'd need a voice recorder to catch it all. You could probably get an AI to create a transcript. But then you'd have to edit it down into something resembling a story, footnoting items of interest where something of consequence is going on behind the curtain¹³ so a reader can get some idea of the mechanics of the game and how it's played.

In the scene where the grudge was shattered, it only took a little bit of dialogue, not so much an apology as a verbal push for the NPC to recognize the validity of the PC's point of view. Perhaps Drake could have given Blue such a push, or perhaps they were never close enough for such a push to have its desired effect. I can understand why it might not have gelled. But if you were to write the scene out in detail — to novelize it, in effect — consulting with each of the participants on their point of view about the whole thing for the sake of the footnotes, I think it would make a lot more sense both to you and to the readers. Essentially, you'd have performed a more detailed examination of why the table wasn't convinced. And at that point we'd probably have enough information to have a useful discussion about it.

11 <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/trek.html>

12 Converting the email logs into a semi-readable story.

13 Such as players discussing a scene, especially one where it is their job under the rules to decide how the scene resolves.

Adventure-avoidant player & uncomfortable GM:

Lisa Padol (E&A #15, pg. 151): "...the player had their character, who was more-or-less in charge, avoid anything resembling adventure. Their task was to survey the area, and they interpreted that to mean 'Mark any interesting feature on the map and move on.' re ending a game because of an incident that makes the GM uncomfortable: I recall a play-by-blog game years back like that. I wasn't in it, and the 'incident' was tamer (and very different), but the GM didn't know how to handle it other than by ending the game."

As for the adventure-avoiding team leader, this might have been corrected by the GM explaining what such surveys normally entail, hinting that his PC will likely get chewed out by his supervisor if he hands in an overly-sparse report or one that shows he's constantly side-stepping whatever curiosities present themselves. If he says he'll just avoid mentioning said curiosities, the GM might inform him that other members of the team will also have to turn in their own reports, so basically the team leader is setting up his own firing or demotion. If the GM doesn't do this, that would imply the Captain is following standard operating procedures, which would likely mean the adventure was badly designed to begin with. As for the GM ending a game due to personal discomfort over some incident, I'd be curious to learn more.

Systems & Play Styles (a potential ightheme):

Matt Stevens (E&A #13, pg. 16): "I'm fighting against the assumption — seemingly common among the indie crowd — that every cool idea needs a new system attached to it...."

Patrick Riley (E&A #14, pg. 50): "...the roadblock I often run into is when the game system is supposedly supporting a particular type of play, but it only works if you are already familiar and comfortable with that type of play (and probably don't really need a system to support it). The game designer's expectations often don't bridge the gap between the words on the page and my brain. Also, these systems sometimes come across to me as more 'gamey' than so-called 'gamist' or 'simulationist' games."

Lisa Padol (E&A #15, pg. 153): "I wonder if this would make a good ightheme, talking about which game systems do support what they claim to support and which don't...."

Feel free to make a suggestion on how you would like to see such an igttheme phrased, but my guess is that most every RPG both succeeds and fails in different ways. To say that some succeed and others fail is... perhaps overly categorical. But an igttheme about different styles of play (and what gamers mean when they talk about *styles of play*) as well as a solicitation of examples of rules that do a particularly good or particularly poor job of supporting those styles might be useful.

Passive vs. Enthusiastic Players:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #15, pg. 181): "There are players like Lisa (and I, or so I'm told) who are group-conscious and actively try not to take over the game but instead send spotlight time to where it can do the most good (which is often the shyest player)."

I've done this as well. Being a long-time GM, I think, probably makes me more conscious of the shy/passive players at the table, and I may even be one of them, as when I play, I'm usually content to sit in the background and let the loud/enthusiastic players do most of the talking. Only rarely do I step forward, such as in that Traveller game I talked about in E&A #14 & A&E #533, where I was trying to support another player who'd stood up for an NPC on moral grounds but was getting steamrolled by the rest of the party.

My sense, however, is that quite often, the most taciturn player doesn't want to get involved to the same extent as everyone else. When you put the spotlight on them, they might freeze up, turning into a wall of indecision. So I've learned that I often need to be gentle about putting players on the spot. Some players need to be eased into the game, as it were, and some just want to sit there and be spectators, and until you've watched someone enough, you won't know which sort you're dealing with.

That said, I think you still have to find a way, especially when GMing, to give the passive players the openings they need in case they want to meaningfully participate, and these openings, at least as first, will need to be considerably more blatant than when you're dealing with enthusiastic players, so there's definitely a balancing act that needs to be performed, and if you have a highly enthusiastic player who often seizes the openings meant for a shy player just because there's

dead air to fill, then that raises the question over how one should deal with that, and I haven't really come up with a good solution. It's a question that doesn't get much attention in roleplaying circles, but perhaps it should.

Short-circuiting intraparty conflict:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #15, pgs. 191-192): "I rather randomly picked a wealthy 'second son' to play and another player decided that he didn't like this kind of character and was determined to have his character hate me and act against me throughout the scenario. I would probably have lived with this and shrugged my shoulders but decided on this occasion when the player revealed more of his backstory that I was a complete fanboy of his character (iirc he was a journalist and I decided I liked his writings). It rather made it impossible for him to do quite what he wanted to do and took the sting right out of his antipathy."

Absolutely brilliant.

Vote of Confidence:

Timothy Collinson in response to Brian Misiaszek (E&A #15, pg. 193): "IC2bAAbtDD2ySA."

I second this.

Best Man Speech:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #15, pg. 194): "...I gave a best man's speech that is still regarded in some parts of south London as the best one they've ever heard."

Okay, I'll bite. What did you say? Or would it be best if this not be made public?

Getting the quiet/shy/passive players involved:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #15, pg. 194): "I'm not sure, but I think I've noticed little 'markers' in my brain that won't rest until I've completed those open loops so no one gets forgotten even if there are several!"

It's a good skill for GMs to cultivate. In my experience, not that many have it.

An Unlooked For Zine #15

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NATTER

We enjoyed WorldCon in Anaheim, getting in a visit to Lee and Barry, and watching the Hugo awards, as well as being on our panels.

I talked with Aviatrix about her understanding of *Blades in the Dark*. The key points she noted:

- Being Tier 0 is a problem because the 2 free actions of downtime are never enough.
- For more actions, you need money. You need jobs to get money. The turf you have is what gives you various options. Money, jobs, turf: The crew chart in the book is **necessary**.
- In other words, *Blades in the Dark* **looks** modular but isn't. All the parts of the system work together.
- John Harper's point when it comes to rolling dice is: Don't get in the way of the adventure. The GM should not be a gatekeeper; no guard should keep the PCs out of the adventure.
- Harper is careful with his examples. *Lady Blackbird* is a masterclass in creating a setting implicitly that way. This means that when he gives an example of resisting a consequence that is turning 3 harm "Punctured Lung" into 2 harm "Chest Wound", or turning "Broken Leg" into "Sprained Ankle", he is telling readers that this is how resistance *should* work, these consequences *should* get lowered in that way.

Recent Viewing

Coyote vs ACME: Utterly delightful. A friend who saw it with us and doesn't like the original cartoons loved it as well.

Recent Reading

Cthulhu Bay: A small rpg that uses the principles of *Brindlewood Bay* to create Lovecraftian scenarios.

Cosmic Dark: Graham Walmsley applying the principles of *Cthulhu Dark* to cosmic horror sans Lovecraft. It's got more of a feel of what I gather Alien is like. There's a horrible company and the PCs are not going to be able to fix anything. Not generally my sub-genre, but this is a masterclass in how to do this sort of

thing, whether in gaming or in fiction. The structure of the book is fascinating.

Previous Reaching: Realis Ashcan

What I typed in *E&A* #12, for context:

Realis Ashcan: An interesting rpg, and I backed the expanded edition (www.kickstarter.com/projects/crum/realis/description). It doesn't have a randomizer, but runs on sentences and their values and applicability. These sentences get more powerful, but also more limited, over time, and eventually, the sentences are "retired". After a certain number of sentences are retired, the character also retires.]

===

Dylan Capel asked for **more details:**

The characters travel from moon to moon, interacting with people, factions, and places. There is a GM.

Characters "begin iconic and become archetypal". Each PC has a Sphere and a Class. Each Sphere has an Impulse Sentence. In addition to these, each Class starts with four Class Sentences, 2 Bond sentences, and a Dream sentence. Fr'ex, one of the Class sentences is: **I always win a one-on-one fight.**

This is a +0 sentence. In a conflict, it loses to a sentence that is "more real", that is, that has a rating of +1 or more. In a tie, whichever sentence is the Counter wins.

After this +0 sentence is defeated three times, it becomes narrower and gets a value of +1. Fr'ex: **I always win a one-on-one fight when fighting in sunlight.** (My immediate reaction: Hello, Sir Gawain!)

When this is defeated three times, it is further narrowed, and becomes a +2 sentence, and when that is defeated three times, it is narrowed yet again and becomes a +3 sentence, perhaps: **I always win a one-on-one fight against Zhalika, Queen -Commander of the Empest.**

Ideally, this is in a campaign where Zhalika is the character's rival or nemesis. You probably wouldn't get there from "I always win a one-on-one fight when fighting in sunlight"; the +1 sentence would be more like "I always win a one-on-one fight against the Empest."

Another example of progression from the book is:

- +0: I always wear the right outfit.
- +1: I always wear the right outfit during important events.
- +2: I always wear the right outfit during important events which I was invited to.
- +3: I always wear the right outfit during important events which a friend invited me to.

Once a Sentence or a Bond at +3 is defeated for the third time, it is retired, which means it is replaced by the original—but now in the past tense. E.g.: **I always won a one-on-one fight.**

Retired Sentences are still in play and can still be used, but they never advance.

When all four of a character's Class Sentences are retired, the character Retires as well. This need not mean the character dies (nor is Retirement necessary for character death; character death is always a player choice).

Moons, Factions, and NPCs have Sentences as well.

When the group agrees that the game is done, the final session ends with each player writing a final Sentence summarizing who their character was (E.g., "Adarak was always a committed friend.") and then doing the same for everyone else in the Band (i.e., everyone's written a final sentence for their own character and for everyone else's).

The Ashcan is 132 pages, while the Kickstarter Beta is 464 pages, so obviously, I'm leaving out a lot, but these are the basics. The book has a **lot** of examples, including many, many examples of play.

#RPGaDay 2026

I'm putting my answers to this in *A Gentle Stroll* #11. See <https://n3f.org/a-gentle-stroll/>.

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #15

PATRICK BRADY: I've now confirmed I own the first 3 Night Watch books electronically. It is likely to be some time before I consider buying the others (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergei_Lukyanenko if you want political details; also, I have yet to read the first book, let alone the first 3).

re Patricks in *E&A*: I believe there are 3. re you coming up with rules for the world of *Spider Noir* rather than for playing any specific character: I favor this approach. Sure, having stats for canonical characters is great, but I want my games not to depend on playing them and only them.

re *Odyssey* and rpgs being in the Homeric Tradition: It's not too grandiose, as Western Literature has everyone tracing their ancestors back to Troy (possibly due to how accessible the *Aeneid* was, as opposed to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but given the former traces back to the latter, this still supports your thesis). When I ponder how accurate it is, this has to do with what kind of stories/scenarios we have when we play an rpg. *The Iliad* is a siege, an extended combat, with pauses for roleplaying interludes. This feels more wargame-y, but then, that's where the roots of the hobby are. *The Odyssey* is a weirder beast for rpg source material because it's not an ensemble piece. Odysseus is The Hero, definitionally, and the protagonist. Telemachus goes around getting the infodump/backstory, Penelope stays at home, and Odysseus's men all die. But we get a picture of a world of different kingdoms and wondrous terrors and terrible wonders.

re Dale Meier re word count on *Daywatch*: I am intrigued! Our Dangerous Refuge is currently 28,691, according to Google Drive, and I think this is after we removed a lot of extraneous stuff. re Patrick Riley re offerings: IIRC, food offerings got distributed to people (often those in need), with the explanation that the gods took the spiritual part of them and left the material part.

re me re AI art: I agree. This is why I was pointing you to clip art and public domain photography. re *Neverwhere*: I've read the novel (both UK and USA versions) and seen the original 6-part serial. I've not yet read the comic, and may or may not do so (it's already on my shelves, so there's no "should I buy it" internal debate here).

re "it could be a little highhanded of me to contact a religious organization in a foreign country so they can audit my game handouts for me": Valid. It's a tricky line to walk between "Why didn't you bother to ask?" and "Why do you think they should do your work?" (unless you're paying for cultural consultation). There are a couple of places online I can point you at for general pointers, if you want. One pointer is that most people (in the cultures I've interacted with, which is not the one you're asking about, and far from all, obviously) who strike me as reasonable say, "Yes, you will make mistakes, but please do not let that stop you from trying." The thing is, there are some areas that are exceptions, and I have no way of gauging whether this is one.

Thanks for the clarification on the Strauss. Of **course** the human is the sidekick! (Shades of *Big Trouble in Little China*.) re Jim Vassilakos: Thanks for the detail on 1880s Britain and on what the Enola Holmes series gets wrong. (Are you referring to the books, the movies, or both? We've seen the first two movies, and they were fun, but we do not assume that historical accuracy was a priority. Indeed, I have been assured that the answer to "which decade of the 19th century is the clothing from?" is "yes", as in all of them, with no interest in what folks were actually wearing then, but hey, doesn't it look cool?)

re Cold War 2.0: I wish I disagreed. I suspect I'm naive in thinking this sort of operation is at all new. re Spider Noir review re Li Jun Li: She was Grace Chow in *Sinners*. re subtle ways of signaling an alternate universe: Have you seen *The One* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0267804/>)?

re Problematic Superpowers: The Spider is not the only one who needs to recharge. Leyden definitely needs to. Also, Josh and I aren't so sure Leyden is dying as quickly as his comrades. I'd build him with the narrative background of Experimental Victim but the mechanical background of Limited Uses. re deception being super-effective: To a point. Silvermane clearly suspects Cat's lying before his potentially fatal test, theoretically to find out if Reilly is the Spider (and probably not **not** suspecting this), but also testing Cat's loyalty. re Leyden: We also don't believe he's dead. Josh isn't entirely convinced Marko and Lincoln have lost their powers completely.

PATRICK RILEY: re intra-party conflict: Isadore's position makes sense to me, and I love his retort. re Aurora Cove: I'm really enjoying this, even though I'm sure I'm missing a lot of Stardew Valley references. re me: Agreed, with the caveat that I never had the chance to play with Wujcik.

re Jim Vassilakos re players with "innate roleplaying talent" hogging the limelight, but "skilled roleplayers" not: This may run the risk of being a tautology, as it relies on defining the second as a priori not the first and vice versa. I like your view of it, but I've come across people who are excellent GMs, and IMO, roleplay with great skill, but nevertheless do hog the limelight as players when they're not the GM.

PEDRO PANTHOCA DA SILVA AND MAIRA

ZUCOLOTTI: re revealing how many branches and endings there are: I might like knowing that going in, actually. re getting the clues for one path meaning one gets bad consequences for taking another: I see a narrative justification, given that the reader is choosing which god to follow, and gods can be jealous. In Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the author is instructed by

Socrates (I think) to ask the Oracle at Delphi whether he should join the army marching to war, but instead asks something that presumes he will indeed be going to war. Socrates scolds him for this, but then says that, given he asked what he asked, he had now better go to war.

JOHN REDDEN: I am sorry for your loss. re *Shroud*: I think it was Josh's first pick for Best Novel. I didn't vote in that category as I was still reading *Death of the Author* and still haven't cracked the cover of *Shroud*, but I'd expected one of those two to win.

re Brian Misiaszek re making Habana Horror into a novel: My first reaction: NO! It's a great scenario! My second reaction: And? Yog-Sothoth.com novelized their playthrough of *Horror on the Orient Express*, which led to Chaosium making a new edition of it. We can have both.

re me: Thanks! re Dracula Dossier and your lack of gaming: Understood, and I sympathize! Note that the Dracula Dossier/NBA thing is **not** "John isn't getting enough gaming to get it." This is "John is asking an excellent question, because this is actually a confusing situation." re Humor: That one's pretty good even not knowing the age of the joke-teller.

BRYANT DURRELL: Sounds like Josh and I would love Gran Meccanismo if Ada Palmer ran it for us. I agree re Raspy Raven Discord! re films: I've known about the Spanish Dracula film for years and do want to see it. I gather it's maybe better in some ways than the English language version.

re *Rejection*: I agree it's an excellent scenario, and not just because I was one of the editors and placed special emphasis on having a coherent timeline. For vampires on Hawai'i, you could have them start there. It requires reworking the scenario a bit, but so does having vampires in the first place.

re book review: I appreciate the heads up of the author's biases. re igheme: I think you have a fine plan and do not consider "Machiavellian" at all a bad word. Indeed, I salute your work ethic, as this is setting you up to do a lot of work. re Matt Stevens re *Blades in the Dark*: I do still want to do that one-shot you mentioned running to teach me how to internalize the basics. (*Bump in the Dark*? A different one?) re GM mini-games to mechanize prep: *Urban Shadows* 2e has something like this with its Faction Turn.

re Brian Rogers re getting off your high horse to watch Westerns: Shouldn't that be getting onto the horse? re Erica Frank re *Masks*: I've played a few one shots (all great) as well as a campaign run by a local GM (fun, but not the person I'd pick to run *Masks*, with 20-20 hindsight, though great for Harlem Unbound).

BRIAN ROGERS: I hope vacation and Shirecon are good for you. Sympathy re the clueless manager at the library. re V&V scenario: It's not really my genre or system as a GM, but I appreciate the customizability and the (relatively) quick way people can jump into it. (Qualifier because this depends on the system mastery you have, which I definitely do not.)

re cautioning players against taking too much time with some of the fun tropes because there's only 4 hours: Yup. I've seen how many 4 hour sessions really can be condensed into 2 hours by cutting out everything even remotely extraneous (and the result is still delightful), but this depends on a combination of factors including system complexity (V&V's not the most complex, but also certainly not the least) and player skill/experience. re what one wears under cultist robes: For me, it'd be either underwear (and socks and shoes) or all of that plus pants, and possibly a shirt, in case I need to ditch the robe and/or move fast, but I'm not sure the average henchling thinks that deeply about it.

re Table Culture: I mostly agree, and am trying to figure out precisely what I'm disagreeing with and why. I definitely agree with your main point that both the game and the group have to be pulling in the same way. I think I disagree that rules can't help with that, but I'm not sure you are saying that they can't. It may be that we disagree purely on the extent to which or on the ways in which they can and can't.

In any case, I agree that Lee's group is 100% wrong for *Paranoia*, and it's important to remember (as I'm sure you do) that Lee is part of Lee's group. I remember telling Lee about an *Everway* scenario Josh and I played in at Gen Con one year, "Piper's Peril". We created characters. Then, the GM sketched out a rough map of a street corner, showing where Piper was playing music and where guards were coming to arrest him. She then asked the players to show where their PCs were on the map, having previously specified that all of the PCs were friends of Piper.

We did this. No problem, right? We're talking premise. But Lee told us that her group would instantly kick and say that their PCs wouldn't be in the area. Definite table culture clash.

As for *Prime Directive*, on the one hand, yes, they've created a game that does not model the *Star Trek* I want to play. I am not sure that this is true for everyone; I recall AVRAM GRUMER telling me about an old (probably FASA) *Star Trek* game where the players had a blast with shenanigans, taking things established in the original series to their logical extreme. I forget the details, but it sounded like "what if *Star Trek* PCs didn't forget the stuff that was established for the purpose of That One Episode and chose to prioritize

Being Clever?" Still a far cry from *Prime Directive* in that I would probably not enjoy *Prime Directive* if run as written, but might enjoy that ST campaign. But the existence of that campaign signals that there may be folks who like what *Prime Directive* does, even though, to me, it sounds like "But *D&D* can do any kind of campaign well" which, sure, can be true with the right group, but is then true, IMO, in spite of *D&D*.

I think rules can nudge table culture. Or, to put it another way, System Matters—but other things also matter. Fr'ex, ignoring the generational rules (and emphasizing that I've never used them in play), *Pendragon* does an amazing job of modeling the feel of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. I remember reading one of Eugene Reynolds's zines in the pages of *Alarums & Excursions*, where he described a player monologuing aloud in character, debating over a literal point of honor to determine which course of action to take. This moment could not have existed without those rules any more than I could have created Justin Thorne with *GURPS* rules, even though I could translate his *Over the Edge* stats into *GURPS* terms. The rules shaped action and thought, and thus, to some degree, table culture.

To what degree? That is the question, isn't it? I wasn't present at the *Pendragon* game you describe, and I tend to assume that your descriptions of what happened are reasonably close to reality. Pretending that the description of that game was written by someone I didn't know, I wouldn't necessarily assume that the player was determined to Not Play *Pendragon*.

GMs can screw up, and scenarios can be badly written. Players can misunderstand their genre and be convinced that they understand it perfectly. You've given me a character that values courtesy [or whatever it is on the sheet that means he objects to "being obnoxious to a serving girl"—I don't know if that means being rude to her, saying something nasty, being lecherous, being physically abusive, or what—actually, let me check the sheet]. My Reckless and Vengeful are high. I consider it a matter of Honor to protect the weak. The lord of the castle isn't doing anything about his servant being treated badly. Hey, GM, you're lucky I'm not attacking the good-for-nothing lord! Those knights are breaching Hospitality!

Maybe the scenario writer is being clueless and the GM is struggling to follow the script. I've seen a *Call of Cthulhu* scenario where the author expects the PCs to care about a pair of lovers they don't know and who have nothing to do with their task of collecting pieces of a mcguffin. I've run the mostly excellent scenario in the first edition of *Legend of the Five Rings* for Naomi Rivkis and Josh, and we found some cracks (e.g., what if the PCs are from the same clan as the antagonist?) and I ran imaginary versions of them and Avram in my

mind when I reviewed another scenario where the author insists on keeping things on rails, forbidding a course of action at one point only to suddenly insist on it at another. (I'd link to my review, but apparently, rpg.net no longer believes in making its old reviews accessible. I can send you the text if you want. I am biased, but I find it amusing.)

In other words, not having been there, and pretending I don't know you, for all I know, the player may have been:

- Determined to Not Play *Pendragon*
- Trying to play *Pendragon* and getting it Wrong
- Trying to play *Pendragon* and being thwarted by the GM, the scenario author, or both

As for *Masks* vs *V&V* and *FACERIP*, as someone who's now played all three, for a Young Justice feel, I'd go with *Masks*. I understand the system better. If I'm gming, I can run it better than the other two or *Marvel Diceless*. If I'm playing, I don't have to figure out points and power pools. I understand the feel we're going for, and I understand how the system supports it.

Sure, I could just lean into Young Justice Vibes with the other two systems, just as I can lean into Magical School Romance with *D&D Strixhaven*. You're gming the first, and Stephen Tihor is gming the second, and both of you have sufficient system mastery to make it work without overtaxing my brain. But, just as *Pendragon* is written to support Malory Vibes, *Masks* is written to support Young Justice Vibes. I think **on average** they work better. Now, how many of us are average?

Would you enjoy playing *Masks*? Probably. You'd commit to the system and the vibes. Is *Masks* perfect? Nah. I'm curious to see what the 2nd edition does. Have I ever played a bad game of *Masks*? Trickier question. The one-shots I've played were good, frustrating only in that I wanted more. (You wanna see the magic of system and culture pulling together? Here's the write up I did in A&E #296:

https://www.labcats.org/drcpunk/wiki/index.php/Masks:_The_Fourth_Generation) The campaign was, IMO, a mismatch between system and GM. Not fatally so. We had fun. But it's not a pairing I recommend. That said, Josh and Avram were both in that campaign and might well disagree with my assessment.

For something in the middle, between *Masks* and *V&V/FACERIP*, I'd go with *Fate*. But that's very much my biases showing. That said, I think *Fate* does a good job of moving power into the hands of the players.

re Kangaroo Man: This is an American with a kangaroo sidekick? O...kay. I'm not sure I'd want to play a super

with a pet cooler than they were (or, at least, I'm in the "no, I do not want some of my points going to Lockheed when I'm playing Kitty Pride" camp), but yes, letting the player control both is the way to go. Another way to sell it to me is to flip it and say that, regardless of appearances, Bingo is the hero and Jack the sidekick.

I like the different versions of the Puppeteer, even if MEGO a bit on the stat blocks. I do like the Weird Sisters trope. re Matt Stevens: If we're not talking about a game where "sexist racist homophobic shit" that PCs need to deal with is part of the premise, I'd say "This is what session zeros and collaboration documents and Same Page documents are for." Or to put it another way, I'm fine with running a game where folks don't need to deal with that shit; I just need to know that this is where we are setting the dials. (To put it a third way, when it comes to *Candela Obscura*, anyone who thinks that this kills plot or whatever for that game should watch the second and third chapters of Critical Role's stream of that game, the ones run by Spenser Starke and Aabria Iyengar respectively.)

re Avram Grumer: I think your comments from *Star Wars* tech to the end of that paragraph were intended for Roger? re Joshua Kronengold re Matt Coville's Walk and Talk: Thanks for the link (though I can't watch the screen, as the motion nauseates me, a problem not unique here). Roleplayers as cheapskates? Mm, given the source, largely true, clearly, which means I may be a bit of an outlier. Or possibly not. I do know that my FLGS thanked me for a) being a loyal customer for decades (true) and b) never trying to bargain down the price (true, and seriously, wtf, this is a store, it isn't Amazon, rent in NYC is high). Amusingly, while I'll sometimes forget my dice when I go to game (generally **not** at a gaming store because NYC, and we lost the Neutral Ground, alas, though some stores with gaming do exist, just not particularly easy for me to get to), I'm much more likely to not have a pencil. A pen, sure. But a pencil is the one thing I don't like using, often forget to pack, and more often, forget I have packed it somewhere in my bag, assuming it hasn't broken.

My issue with paying for GMs is that it feels like that would squeeze me out, and that if I actually did do it, I'd be less good at the parts of gming I'm good at. At a convention, if I were told that GMs were paid and that this were factored into registration, I'd be fine with that, as the cost would be invisible to me. Heck, filking is a tradition, but if a filker puts out a CD (whether an actual CD or something online for downloading), I wouldn't blink at the idea that they're charging for it.

I know that sessions at conventions are often much more focused than sessions at home. I'd like to believe this is the case with paid sessions outside of

conventions. Maybe it is. OTOH, as I may have said before, I continue to be boggled by hearing of people paying \$500 for a slot in a larp that really needs everyone to show up (13 people) and not showing up because they just didn't feel like it at the last minute. (This is why the organizers keep a couple of people around as ringers, just in case. Ringers don't get charged (and have likely played the game before, likely not for \$500 a spot, but rather at a larp convention or a private run).)

re me: My spreadsheet says I have *Storeys From the Old Hotel*, so I shall try to read Wolfe writing Wolfe. re not knowing what we don't know: Indeed. re my "how to make vamps dangerous": I have no idea where I put this information. It wasn't mine so much as advice on, iirc, the Dracula Dossier Facebook group, and I remember being reminded that possible vampire abilities include Jump In (seize initiative) and multiple actions, as well as the ability to parry bullets and grab stakes? I've located the FB thread's information and can email it to you if you like.

re Jim Vassilakos re cult: True, though I think Glorantha may have a different definition. My Sociology of Religion professor also had a different one: A sect claims it's older, and hence, more authentic. A cult claims it's new. Something that's a sect in one country, therefore, may be a cult in another.

re Timothy Collinson re you saying that there was no way your daughter had ballooning "on your sheet and we don't use it!": Yes! This is why I was annoyed in the *Call of Cthulhu* game (which I otherwise enjoyed a great deal) set post-Mythos Apocalypse where various characters, including mine, had pre-apocalypse skills on their sheet that the GM warned in advance (which is good) wouldn't come up, like, in my character's case, Pilot. It feels like unintentional bait and switch, and it clutters the sheet, making it harder to find the skills that might apply to a given situation.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: I continue to like your agency flags! re Keeper's Note: The Cursed Men re "Failure causes recoil and loss of the next action; thereafter, touching or restraining him requires Hard POW.": Touching or restraining whom? Zorilla or the cultist who failed the SAN roll? re Dolores: I kinda want to play her. I don't know if I'd do the role justice.

re "No Investigator is captured by default": Which is to say they're not primary targets, but if they intervene, they might get captured, depending on how logical that is and what the dice say, correct? I much appreciate the Keeper's Note explaining the interrupted PA announcement. re the splinter mob, especially "Heroes In Their Own Story": Reminds me of the battle around and in the hospital in season 7 of *My Hero Academia*. I like the options for the collision. When El Cabo runs

and El Chivo infiltrates, what does Valcarcel do? I see Nico works with El General.

I like the multiple paths to nodes of interest. This is good technique. re not using "a succession of Disguise rolls": Indeed. This is why 7th edition allows one attempt + one Push. It doesn't matter if it's the same skill both times or a different one.

re not manufacturing a second attempt for Maria's revenge: Indeed. Of course, one may present itself naturally, and the GM shouldn't deliberately sabotage that, correct? re the drums calming Dolores's "altered physiology": Well played. You set that up nicely. re moving through the maze: I like that failed rolls lose a round and failed Pushes mean greater vulnerability rather than either meaning "they get lost in the maze"; navigation is one of those cases where authors tend not to think the consequences of failure through. re stopping the drums: How many drummers are they? Which group do they count as (initiate/wounded, veteran, or inner circle)?

re Erica Frank: Some platforms (whether print or digital) don't want an article that's been previously published in any form, and I'm not sure to what degree *Playtest Material* has that rule/preference or counts *E&A*. I know Spike published early versions of essays and reviews in *A&E*.

re me: I'm glad you found *Lyonnesse* worth the price. *The Eldritch New England Holiday Collection* was published some time ago, but I remain quite proud of it. I could probably put a list of rpg material I've worked on in my zine (or email) if there's interest. Thanks for the clarification re factions of Mazorra, the bones, lightproof, and Doom O'Clock.

re Jim Vassilakos re someone who "may converse and reason quite normally while holding one fixed belief utterly resistant to evidence, even organizing their lives quite logically around a premise that simply is not true": That's what I did with a Malkavian vampire PC I created years back, before White Wolf decided folks were having too much fun and madness (along with everything else) should be DARKER (yawn).

re Roger Bell_West: I agree that a powerful NPC patron should not be a guarantee that the PCs survive. This is something that I'd want to make clear to a group at session zero, and in the first session, perhaps have a scene where the PCs walk past a memorial hall with the names and mementos of people who have died in the service of their patron (and maybe ask each player to come up with one such deceased who's important in some way to their PC). re Lauren going to law school: Wow, where does the time go?

MARK WILSON: re igttheme: Yes, these things take a lot of ongoing work. It's never a one-and-done situation. re RPG Gaming: I'm curious about the details of the Brindlewood Bay game. re Ally the Piper: Amazing!

GABRIEL ROARK: Congratulations on being a "rink grandparents"! Sympathy on the fall. I don't fall often, exactly, but have done so (not on ice) sufficiently frequently this year (as in about 3 times over the last year or so) that I've asked the nutritionist exercise coach about this, and we're adding balance exercises. Good luck with the court case.

re Myles Corcoran re *Beyond the Walk*: I see I played a one-shot at DexCon 2017. My "write up" was very short:

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GM: Richard Ruane ran this. It's an OSR game, which means it's a bit old school for my tastes, but the mood was right. We were a group of young people, including a Witch's Prentice, a Young Woodsman, a Fae, possibly an exorcist (my notes are confusing), and my Village Bear.

We all had relationships with others in the village. And we all had to work together to save the village from some threat that could ultimately be traced back to at least one of these relationships.

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re Matt Stevens: Yes, Dan Shimizu put in a lot of work scanning older *A&E* issues. re motivation for Atlantis larp: At the convention where we first ran it, we weren't sure we'd have enough players. Another larp GM approached us and said (paraphrasing): Your game has 5 players. Mine has 5. Neither of ours has enough to run, so I'm canceling mine and signing up for yours and will urge my players to do likewise. No, it's fine—you put work into this, and I dashed mine off last night because Vinnie [Vincent Salzillo, who started the Double Exposure conventions] asked me for one more larp in addition to the other ones I'm running, and I really don't mind this one not going off. Also, I want to encourage this trend of larps in the hot tub.

ATTRONARCH: I'm confused about the "diplomacy" with the bears. It reads as if Ignaeus and the fourth bear were willing to negotiate, but there was a fight instead? Was the fourth bear the one who escaped? I love the idea of the PCs being the ones to create treasure maps!

re party not trying to bring Hagar back and not reaching a consensus: A consensus to do what? I am confused and boggled. re me: Thanks for the clarification.

ROGER BELL_WEST: re Rule One of Hazardous Situation Rescue: Indeed. re 2300 AD / Bayern re the author not working from the final deck plans: Speaking as an editor, this may not be the editor's fault. I don't always get to see the final maps before the layout stage, and this is true even if it's a publisher I've worked with before and I've explicitly asked that I see the final maps. In the layout stage, I do sound the alert when the text and the map don't match, and, hopefully, we'll make them match, whether by changing the map or the text. But I don't win every battle. Sometimes, I'm told no further changes will be made, though this is less usual with maps. Sometimes, something does slip past me, and even though I catch it at a later stage, there's a point where the publisher decides, not necessarily incorrectly, that it's not a thing that can/should/will be changed.

I was once asked to give my opinion on a game's organization (not a paying gig, more a playtesting thing), which I did, in detail, but also noted that the tricky thing is that I was looking at a pre-layout version of the text. By the time it's laid out, making changes is a pain (though not as much as when it's already at the printer or back from the printer), but I cannot gauge how much layout is going to change things. Several issues I flagged may be fixed simply by a good layout person adding distinguishing section headers, page headers and footers, and the like. re the forced ending: I'm not generally a fan of those, though there are exceptions (i.e., when done well and/or in a game where it's clear that this is part of the point).

re Patrick Brady re being "open to solving problems entirely with negotiation and not bullets": I've played *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios like that. Oscar Rios has written several that, as he notes, could be a blood bath, sure, but could also be resolved satisfactorily without a single shot being fired.

re Bryant Durrell re clocks: Oddly, one doesn't necessarily have to see them. In a recent *Scum & Villainy* game, our GM told us how many segments the clock had and let us know when he was filling one in. We were extremely aware of that clock and resisted his attempts to convince us to take actions that would tick off more segments once it passed the halfway point.

re *DramaSystem*: While I've heard detractors say it's a solution in search of a problem, I disagree. However, one must understand precisely what problem it is solving (which you clearly do) and where it should get out of the way.

For those unfamiliar with *DramaSystem*, the problem it solves, if I understand Robin correctly, is that many gamers (including GMs) get into a mindset where they won't back down. I've seen this, and it's not pretty. Generally, Robin continues, people tend to back down

about half the time; therefore, the system rewards this. That is, there's now an in-game mechanic that gives gamers a cookie for not pushing to have their way all the time No Matter What.

That said, IMO, every conversation in *DramaSystem* should **not** be a conflict. If one only plays conflict scenes, it's as if one only plays combat scenes. I generally don't want either of these situations. One should use the *DramaSystem* conflict mechanic when appropriate. This is obvious-but-often-ignored. Heck, the one time I played the game, I used it incorrectly, though not in the way one might assume.

My character was a journalist and, in theory, the scene was him petitioning to print an article about events the way they happened, but in practice, I realized after the fact, he was asking to be told what to do, knowing he'd be told to print a version of events that made his side look good. This might not have been a problem if the person he went to a) didn't want to do his thinking for him, b) wanted him to print the truth, or c) wanted him to print the more favorable version but without actually instructing him to do so. But, as we realized afterwards, the person he went to had no reason not to tell him to print the favorable version.

Similarly, if one character is asking another out on a date and the other character actively wants that date, the mechanic shouldn't be used. But, that doesn't mean the scenes shouldn't be played out. Okay, probably the one I misjudged shouldn't have, or should have been framed explicitly as a conflict, but a) this was a convention game and b) we were all trying to learn the system, and that changes the dynamics.

OTOH, the infamous Luggage Packing Incident from my Kerberos Club Fate game would have been a fine conflict. Two characters, who were engaged to each other, got into an argument over Who Got to Pack the Luggage, and their mountains of accumulated Fate points came out as the GM (me) and other player present (Josh) stared in astonishment. This was before Fate Core, so there were a LOT of Fate points here!

As one might guess, this wasn't really about the luggage; rather, it was about one person being overprotective after the other, a clockwork fairy, had almost let herself wind down (or possibly had wound down) while in a precarious position, and also, perhaps, being slightly jealous of his fiance's (platonic) friendship with another character's, and about the other person being fiercely independent. It's a great conflict for *DramaSystem*! (The clockwork fairy won and got to pack her own luggage.)

But here's the thing: If every scene of the campaign had been focused on A Conflict, if it were required that each scene have A Conflict No Matter What Because

Why Is It Here Otherwise We Must Have All Conflict All The Time, we wouldn't have cared about the Luggage Scene.

re Myles Corcoran re monster hunters funnel game: For the Delta Green version, see *Control Group*. re review sites that are pay to play: Oh yes. I gather this is a big issue with Yelp. re Joshua Kronengold re "this campaign should be the most exciting thing in your PC's life so far": I'm unsure. I could see a fine campaign about the twilight years of the heroes' lives. I'm thinking vaguely of the anime *Frieren*, though I don't yet know where it goes.

re me re systems that support multiple modes of play: GUMSHOE absolutely does. Heck, *Call of Cthulhu* does, and BRPS certainly does. re *Murder Ahoy*. That is a delightful fight scene! re Mazorra re "he may be delusional, but he's talking sense and he's not getting people killed. That's better than anyone else is doing right now.": Exactly. (So many people think they know precisely how mental illness works, and as far as I can tell, they're generally wrong. Or as someone once said about my mother (obviously, back when she was alive), "She has dementia, not congenital stupidity." And this is before we get into what certain situations spur people to, for better and worse, and before we get into exactly how little it might take to get someone institutionalized.) re *Definitely Wizards*: Apparently, I own it in a bundle or two.

re Dracula Dossier summary: You're welcome! Glad you enjoyed it. I recently ran a one-shot extra for two players set in Vienna so I could use a the *Call of Cthulhu* scenario "Rumors of Violence".

MYLES CORCORAN: re *Mausritter*: While I'm sorry the dam didn't work, I think it would've needed to be only one factor, given how delightful the group effort was. I take it Magnolia can't help with the ring so long as Odette refuses to part with it.

re Kriegsmesser: The idea was to trick the mob into thinking there was plague. The mob is burning things. Why wouldn't the mob just burn plague areas? re the recovering men being able to talk: And then tbc. Good, sadistic move!

re me re *Fate*: I prefer that to *7th Sea* for handling disadvantages. It's not just pay to invoke/avoid; it's also every time it comes up and you don't choose to avoid it, you get paid. Better still, if it's something you might want, but you think one Fate point isn't enough, you can hold out for two or three. (Josh pointed out that the scene in S1 *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* where Phil agrees to cooperate with his captors and find out what happened in Tahiti is Phil's player holding out for three Fate points.) Thanks for the pointer to archive.org.

re the PC trying to stomp on the 6' ant because the GM failed to explain how large it was: I don't recall where I heard that story. I think it may have been in *A&E*, but I'm not sure. I agree that sometimes players interrupt before the crucial detail is revealed; in *Dracula Dossier*, there were several times I tried to break in to answer a question I'd just been asked and/or give a relevant clue. re John Redden re your friend stubbornly ignoring what he should do for his hip: Oh dear.

DYLAN CAPEL: re weather: Oof. re *Dungeon World 2*: I didn't know that this was a thing or that Luke Crane bought the IP. re not wanting it to feel familiar to *D&D* players: The thing is, a large part of the point for *Dungeon World*, as I understand it, to be a bridge or entry point for *D&D* players.

re *Fatherfog*: I've played neither this nor *Mothership*, yet I, too, prefer the idea of Hope eroding than Stress increasing as a mechanic. I wonder why. re magic in *Swyvers*: Ah, it uses Blackjack as a mechanic. re Experience Bubbles: If more than one die has a higher value than your current level, do you fill in more than one bubble? re Patrick Riley re Mork Borg goblins: If one looks at two people, and one of those two kills the goblin, does the other one die?

DALE MEIER: re gaming cafes: Space is at a premium in NYC. I know there are places in Brooklyn, and Avram Grumer can speak to those. There's Gamestoria in Queens, but I'm not sure how to arrange something as space is definitely at a premium there! Manhattan used to have Neutral Ground, but that died years ago. There are eateries I think I could run something in, so long as we were all ordering food regularly, but that's not the same as having a space designed, at least in part, to make connections with other gamers.

re solo games: The one I see many people point to as a gateway is *Ironsworn: Starforged*. This is another one I have but haven't read, and I'm wondering if I should come up with an acronym (ONR? (Owned Not Read)), but we already have a lot of confusing acronyms already. re lack of commentary: Generally, if you have to force yourself to do it, don't. Do what you need to do to take care of yourself.

MICHAEL CULE: re Aegis, immigration, and implicit political content: Like Catherynne Valente's novel *Palimpsest* (2009). re magic system: I am confused by the players' objection, likely because I am not understanding what they mean. Why is your imposing "a scheme on the way magic develops and is learned" "too waffly and Not Fair"? I'd assumed this meant you had a plan of some kind, if not 100% developed, and that you'd be consistent. Would that not have been the case? Would it have been the case, but the players don't believe it?

re "the idiot is me": Oh yes, I've been in the same position when running early *Dracula Dossier*, and I've suffered from GM Amnesia more than once. In the *Sorcerer* game I ran, one of the players was thrown because, as they correctly pointed out, I'd inadvertently had an NPC do a complete 180 degree reversal in position / personality from the previous session on the very thing the current session's plot was centered on.

re Glamour write up: Sympathy on arguments over whether it was or was not The Day. How old is Vishi? I'd assumed older than the PCs. Was the crack in the Storm Bull man's collar deliberate sabotage on someone's part? re Imperial March on kazoos: I think I have heard that at some WorldCon or other. re the Cenobite / Bat Worshipper clash: This was definitely enabled by the group's patron senator. What did he hope would happen?

When the emperor made his offer, did all of the players roll Loyalty? One wonders if the emperor stopped time for anyone else. After all, it's not as if others would notice. re Vishi: Did Vishi himself convince the senator to make an offer? Why is Vostor chaos / monster, and what does that mean for/to Vishi and Eshan? To whom or what is Vishi straightforwardly loyal?

re high point of the Lunar Empire having passed: This seems appropriate. I'm going to miss this campaign. I need to look up a Glorantha timeline. (I have a lot of Glorantha/HQ/RQ/etc material, some hard copy, much electronic. I'm just unsure where to start. Probably not the Guide to Glorantha, gorgeous as those volumes are? Maybe the Glorantha Sourcebook? Maybe old *A&Es*, as I think I've asked this before and you've answered?) re the larp Life of Monsoon: I don't suppose one could get access to the material? Some larp authors do release files to their players or the general public after running the game one or more times, but I suspect that's not the case here. re sorcerous theremins: I totally believe in them, as they're sorcerous to begin with. LOL/Groan at Tick-Tarting.

re Patrick Brady re the problem with using *REIGN* for Tekumel being that *REIGN* only has 10 possible levels of magic knowledge: Say more? How many levels does Tekumel have? This is a translation problem, so it may be possible to shift context enough. Or to put it another way, the six part BBC *Nowhere* does the ordeal scene very differently than the book, and the *Spiderwick* movie shows our protagonist figuring out something important in a very different way than the book does (if you don't mind spoilers or have already read the books and seen the movie, see my blog entry <https://drpcpunk.dreamwidth.org/100743.html#cutid1>). Similarly, where it doesn't choose to go in a completely different direction than its source material (*The Count of Monte Cristo*), the anime Gankutsuou is faithful to

the spirit of the book, despite many changes (some more regrettable than others). Josh tells me that a lot of rpg mechanics are basically lit crit, and I was a lit major. So, what do you need from a Tekumel magic system that bumps into the limits of *REIGN*?

re Matt Stevens re "She's an Adventurer" explaining everything: See the game *The People No One Likes* (<https://bullypulpitgames.itch.io/the-people-no-one-likes>) about playing normal people trying to survive when horrible adventurers pass through their town.

re Roger Bell_West re getting people to want to play *Midnight at the Well of Souls*: A good first step is to give players agency and buy in to how their characters transform. PCs may be at the whims of fate, but those whims should be their players'. re me: Thanks for the clarification.

AVRAM GRUMER: I cracked and bought *Stonetop*, and now need to read it or get into a game of it or both. I'm glad Victory Pints survived. Thanks for the background of "Immanentize the Eschaton". re *Blades '68*: What does it spend the most time on? re Adrian Tchaikovsky: And *Preaching to the Choir* is full on modern gothic. re Strong but Wrong: I hadn't thought about that, but it makes good sense.

re Monsterhearts afterparty: *Giggle* at entire class going to jail. re the difficulty of another season when the town is trashed: Kinda of like the show *Wednesday*, yes. Cool learning what everyone would have liked to do if they'd had a chance. Definitely give Briar a gming break, yes.

re no one seeming interested in voicing their character in *Dead After Dinner*: Here and in *The Slow Knife*, the mechanics seem to leave little space for that, pushing us away from it. I'm not certain how to counter that. IIRC, Josh didn't exactly claim innocence for Kim, more like accidental maybe-homicide. Hopefully, Josh remembers. As for the murder, Jane did the syringe trick, injecting the poison into the bottle via the cork.

re *Scum and Villainy*: The reason Valsi asked if the mission involved a cake is because they were once paid to deliver a birthday cake, and this led to a messy divorce and in a later mission, an obsessed woman who nearly got their ship destroyed. It may also have led to another mission which involved delivering potentially deadly presents.

re Knights Hospitallers: Actually, it was more like "we're good guests, i.e., the ones here to rescue you", but I like your explanation better. Vary's the one who left the Squire with words about helping the Magpies.

re Star Trek games with a Sanity system for starship captains: Hm. I could see Aviatrix's system, if one were

to go Gumshoe. *Cthulhu Dark* might work better the both that and *Call of Cthulhu*. I wonder if the *Vaesen* or *Alien* rpgs would work. There's also *Cyberpunk's* cyberpsychosis mechanics which could maybe be tweaked to something like command psychosis.

re me re 4 types of cryptanalysis: That works better than it has any right to. re Liesl Rosenzweig in the Dracula Dossier mega-campaign: She'd been in what would become Israel for many years by the 1920s (as I've just run a *Call of Cthulhu* scenario set in Vienna during that time, and the player established this), so it could be that I should've phrased it as founding a group in what would become Israel. OTOH, she may have lived long enough to do it after 1948. I'll ask Aviatrix.

PATRICK ZOCH: I'm glad you enjoyed Leavenworth and hope you enjoy Dice Tower. While we enjoy your writing, don't prioritize this over enjoying yourself at such events!

ME: I don't know if any links to my old RPG.net reviews still work, as the site seems to have reorganized in such a way that they go nowhere. The Internet Archive has snapshots of some of them, but not all. re Brian Rogers: I now have the Subterranean Press volumes 1, 2, and 4 of *Lovecraft Country*, aka the ones with the scripts as well as the comics. I suspect at some point I'll get volume 3, but as far as I can tell, Subterranean Press never released 5 and 6. (I own 5 electronically and 6 electronically and physically, but not versions with the scripts.)

Something weird seems to have happened with my page numbers, no doubt due to something I set up incorrectly.

JIM ECKMAN: How are *Suikoden* and *Zhan Zhao Adventures*? re most common legal systems in science fiction: Are you sure it's Anarchist Laws? I'm more used to seeing some kind of weird space monarchy, feudalism, fascism, capitalism, or something that isn't anarchism but seems to be pulled out of the author's derriere based on what the plot currently requires. (And yes, I do mean science fiction, not fantasy, even though these also show up in fantasy.)

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re Spelljammer write up: To clarify: Dan Gelber isn't the GM for this one, but Hazel (and also the genius behind *Paranoia*, although Greg Costikyan made it marketable, if I understand correctly). re "he was murdered by her brother (his son) to try to get a piece of obsolete court regalia he was hoping to use in a bid for the throne": Wait, who was making the bid for the throne, the father or the son?

re "of which the chief prosecutor was the arch mage Inari Metros": Er, was that supposed to be "chief suspect"? re the king's 3rd daughter: To clarify, the PCs, not the dopplegangers, took her away (by her own request). re Patrick Brady re *A&E* before Lee had a printer: Some contributors sent the requisite number of copies, printing them themselves or having it done by a copy shop (which I think Avram did, as he worked in a copy shop for a time).

re Matt Stevens re your PC applying aid to get two other PCs back into the fight rather than soloing it: So you were playing the Red Mage who, in a light novel or anime, would have gotten kicked out of the party for being "useless" (except most gamers we play with understand how useful such types are)? re the fey swap scenario: You spent hours prepping that (and it was a packaged scenario, so a lot of the work was, theoretically, already done for you).

re Patrick Riley re making sure people know how you were inspired vs crossing the line into grounds for suing: And then there's satire, as in *Merryshire Detective Club*. re Bryant Durrell: Good point that there isn't always a party per se. This is even truer in larps. I remember asking Andrew Zorowitz to put me in a faction where I didn't need to be the one doing the planning, and he explained to me that the larp didn't really have factions in the sense I meant. (This was the weekend-long *Torch of Freedom*, I think, and given it was the Saturday night battle I was talking about, he was correct.)

re PCs taking turns leading a mission: *Fellowship's* variant on that is that the **players** who are not the GM take turns setting up challenges for each other. (There is a GM, known as the Overlord, which at least makes genre sense given what they're supposed to do.) re "It's not the structure that's the problem, but the insistence on making a game nothing but the structure.": Yes. Back when I was teaching in community college, I'd explain that the 5 paragraph (introduction, 3 examples, and conclusion) essay, if left bare bones, was a C paper. One can write an A+ 5 paragraph essay, but one needs to put meat on those bones and maybe vary it up a little. (Others can hash out how firmly instructors did/do/should stick to that; my interest in doing so is less than zero.)

re Mark Wilson: The Ranger class seems to be trying to fit a couple of very different concepts. There's the Aragorn version, unsurprising, as *LotR* is the immediate source for the Ranger. Aragorn's a fighter-type with some herb lore, and his fellow rangers are essentially faceless NPC troops. He has some magic, sort of, but ignoring the chrome aspect (i.e., herbs as magic, as you say, being much like a wrench and a bag of holding), this is because he is the True King whose touch cures illness. That's not a ranger thing.

Then there's the Robin Hood version. In theory, this should be compatible, right? The *LotR* rangers are guerilla fighters, and archery could (should?) be part of their package. But in practice, I'm not sure we see that. Archery is a Legolas Thing, hence tends to be associated with (Tolkien) elves. I doubt I'd quibble with anyone saying Legolas is a *D&D* Ranger. But he's not a Tolkien ranger, and that leads to a bit of cognitive dissonance. I can totally see Legolas using stuff like Hunter's mark and swift quiver, but I boggle at the idea of the Tolkien rangers doing this. Not that it's a dealbreaker; *DM of the Rings* notwithstanding, Tolkien wasn't trying to fit the rules of a game that came after and was inspired by his work.

re Myles Corcoran re "A common fiction but separate rules for each player": See *Seven-Part Pact* (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/sjgames/seven-part-pact>). As for GM difficulty in the Strange School PBEM, I don't think that came from the existence of the multiple sets of rules. Heck, in many rpgs and larps, while, generally, you don't have every character using a different set of rules, you often have different types of characters using different subsystems. As with many aspects of gaming, the answer, therefore, is: It depends.

re Erica Frank: I could see a High Noon-ish point-based mechanic, but it would be tricky to do correctly. I think you forgot to break out your comments to Patrick Zoch into a separate paragraph. re Jean Gray: Er, no, in the comic, Wolverine did not kill her. She used her power to remove Cyclops's visor, essentially committing suicide by forcing him to kill her. You're thinking of the 2006 movie *X-Men: The Final Stand*, where she kills Cyclops offstage and ultimately begs Wolverine to kill her. It's different again in the 2019 *Dark Phoenix* movie, which we didn't see, and which doesn't sound great, judging solely by the wikipedia summary.

re me re *You're (Not) a Wizard*: The PCs know each other's secret of not-wizardry. The book says: "they have found one another and now share in this collective secret".

JIM VASSILAKOS: re finding games: I agree that starting a club or other organization is easier than keeping it going and that not all gamers one finds are going to have a compatible style with oneself.

re Matt Stevens re Zeus not interfering with the laws of the Fates: I don't know what those are in this case (beyond "the author wants the story to go in X direction"), but I'm reminded of Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's novel *Heaven Official's Blessing*, of which I've only read the first of eight volumes. (I've seen the anime, but that covers, I am told, the first book and maybe half of the second?)

The protagonist, a very righteous man by the standards of the Heaven of the books, ascends to that Heaven, becoming a god, and is told that one of the rules of Heaven is not to interfere in the mortal world, essentially precisely to avoid such things as the chain of events amongst the Greek gods leading to the Trojan war. Alas, the new god wanted to save the common people, which meant he interfered, which meant other gods interfered, which meant he fell from Heaven. Twice. (The story properly begins when he ascends the third time.)

re Avram Grumer re Ghost skin: In *Monsterhearts*, character types (call them classes or whatever you prefer) are "skins". Thus, while the PC Blue, fr'ex, is referred to as "the Hollow", the player is using "the Hollow skin". Drake is built with the Queen skin, and when Drake died, the player was thinking that rather than use the standard methods of having Drake not die, he could change "skins" (or character classes, sort of) and have Drake play the Ghost, which in this case would be playing dead Drake as a literal ghost.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: I hope the downtime was helpful. re Jim Eckman re unsubmitting: Has the publisher formally accepted the submission and indicated an intent to publish it? Is there a contract? I'm no lawyer, but these seem to be the questions to start with.

re me re wedding speeches: Ah, I see. Thanks for the clarification! re Journal of Far Future Research: I think I'm missing a lot here, whether humor or Traveller lore.

IGTHEME: Issue #16 – September 21st: GM-Dickery

One should generally separate GM-Dickery from honest mistakes, including GM Amnesia. I've likely been guilty of all three, as have most GMs. The goal is to do less of all, particularly the Dickery. Examples of Things to Avoid include:

- Changing the ending of a published scenario because you've decided you want a TPK No Matter What, even when the PCs legitimately achieved the win condition.
- Having someone reprise a role in a scenario you've run before so you can make absolutely sure the PCs will walk into a trap rather than, you know, letting the players play the game they think they signed up for.
- Deciding to ignore the out of character agreement you've made with your players to not do GM-Dickery.

There's another category as well, GM Panic. I've definitely been guilty of this. A couple of examples I've seen in larps include:

- Adding an unreasonable requirement to a one-use PC ability. This turned out not to be as dickish as it might have, because the player managed to fulfill the requirement. It was still an unreasonable one.
- Forbidding a player to use their one-use PC ability. This just plain sucked for the player, who made it clear that they were unhappy about this.

In both cases, the GM was wrong. However, as Josh and I noted when discussing these cases, they fall into "panic" as opposed to "deliberate dickery". Both cases arose from a gming team running a larp they hadn't themselves written, and from the GM on the spot panicking and being convinced that using the ability in question would somehow break the game. I completely understand. I have been there. I was wrong, and they were wrong.

GAMING WRITE UP: Masked Against Evil (part 2)

Main Characters and Connections (remembering we set gender roles to reverse and that all but one Main Character was a masked magical person, wielding the power of a magical gemstone):

- Marshall Pembroke, aka Bloodstone
- His connections: Mm. Emmanuel (mentor), Joseph Wheeler (childhood friend, Bloodstone fan, unaware Marshall is Bloodstone)
- Faustus Pembroke, his twin
- His connections: Oratio Grande (tutor), Filamena Whitlock (courting him, working for the Big Bad)
- Azalea St. George, aka Peridot
- Her connections: Robert Munchkin (union leader needful of and resenting Peridot), Loreena Fitzgerald (socialite)
- Ximena Maria Reyes, aka Cuarzo Rosa
- Connections: Ferdinand Jose Reyes (father), Sunghoon "Samuel" Fitzgerald (from the family that adopted Ximena because of her power)

Big Bad: Honorable Margaret Edgerton, she/her (42)
Position: Judge

Reputation: Patient and Manipulative

Second in Command: Filomena Whitlock

Her Evil Plot: This follows the pattern of the Sense, Sensibility & Swordsmanship Evil Plot Module. Our Big Bad, Honorable Margaret Edgerton...

Wants to...steal all the masks (or rather, the gems that allow their wielders to change shape and gain powers that are somehow fairytale related)

So that she can...give them to people worthy (i.e., genteel and chosen by her)

To then...run the house from the shadows

In order to...dethrone the Queen & Princess Regent

It's worse than we thought, because...she doesn't care if the world ends.

You'll note that a) in theory, at least, Faustus is set up to be an excellent pawn/cat's paw for the Big Bad and b) the woman courting him already works for the Big Bad.

The opening was what is known as the Rooftop Phase, when the Masked Main Characters sneak around at night doing heroic and/or nefarious deeds, possibly on rooftops. They might also choose to simply brood during a stormy night. But this particular night, the Whitlock factory was on fire, and so, the Masks hurried to the rescue! I'd expected Faustus not to be in this phase, as he was the sole unmasked Main Character. The text for Masked characters is "But by night, I am... [playbook name]", whereas for the unmasked character, it's "But by night, I am... Asleep".

But the facilitator (who was being more of a GM, as we'd been told would be the case) made it clear that my character could absolutely participate in the Rooftop Phase. At first, I think I had Faustus do simple stuff like update his conspiracy board, er, mask board, but the GM nudged me to be more active, pointing out that Faustus could almost certainly see the fire from his window.

This was absolutely the correct move on the GM's part. There's no point in my character being active solely in ways that do nothing, there's no reason not to allow unmasked characters to be as active as masked ones, and my character is set up to be active. So, when Faustus realized his maybe-fiance's family factory was on fire, he immediately went to the stables, mounted a horse, and rode to the factory, bow and quiver of arrows to hand.

I believe he helped evacuate the factory before encountering Peridot, whom he shot in the shoulder,, convinced that the masked man was Up to No Good. (Yes, Peridot/Azalea is a woman, but she dresses as a man when masked.) Shortly after, Cuarzo Rosa confronted him, angry that he'd hurt Peridot, and they dueled. She deliberately gave him a scar on his cheek (being careful not to disfigure him **too** badly, as Ximena had feelings for him. This is how I got a Resolve token, because Ximena's player had to offer it in exchange for the scarring.

I think Cuarzo Rosa got Peridot to safety and may have healed her? I don't recall the wound coming up again. Bloodstone arrived, but, sadly, Bloodstone lost control, iirc, and knocked down a wall or two of the factory. Also, I think Bloodstone was disguised as a giant penguin.

So, who had started the fire? I think we agreed that it had been done on the order of the Hon. Margaret Edgerton as a message/threat/warning to Filomena to get (back?) in line and help her take down the Masks.

The next phase was the Novel Phase, which, like the Rooftop Phase, is basically free roleplay. We decided it was an Event, specifically, a ball hosted by Loreena Fitzgerald. Ximena danced with both Faustus and Marshall, I think simultaneously, which delighted Faustus, as he worries about his brother, and Marshall (whose player did a great job of describing his clothes in ways designed to please the Female Gaze) seemed to actually be enjoying himself. However, Faustus didn't like it when Ximena seemed scornful of Marshall's absence at the fire.

I think Marshall may have danced with Azalea, but I'm not sure, though I do think they had a conversation of some kind. They were in one of those complicated superhero polygons, Azalea being in love with Marshall, but not liking Bloodstone, while Marshall was in love with Peridot. Naturally, neither knew the other had a masked identity.

Faustus also danced and spoke with Filomena, and found they got along very well. He apologized for recklessly wading into the mess at the factory, and she noted that she couldn't very well take him to task for working to save her family's factory. I think she asked how he knew to get there.

Faustus: Do you believe in men's intuition?

This made everyone laugh (which makes me quite smug). (I also got praise for pulling off an exasperated "Women!" from a hierarchically-gender-flipped point of view, which was fun.)

Faustus described what he'd seen, which, included a giant penguin flying. He didn't expect Filomena to believe him. No one else did, and it sounded utterly unbelievable. But she noted that he was generally a reliable source, and at the very least, he clearly thought he had seen that, and she had to assume that he did.

After Reputation and Rumor and Scandal, I think we did a visitations Novel Phase, which meant a lot of small scenes, which I don't recall well. I think Marshall and Azalea had tea together, and she may have proposed, or at least sounded him out to learn if a proposal would be welcome. If so, she got an ambiguous answer or perhaps a "Not yet, but maybe later"?

Ximena was lectured by Samuel. Ximena had been born with less status than he and his family had, but she had been chosen by one of the magical jewels.

This made her a desirable commodity, and his family had adopted her, as was traditional. But she was acting so lower class! Both sides were annoyed, but I think she agreed to try harder. Also, it seemed like there might be some attraction between the two, buried beneath the resentment, thus creating another love polygon, this time with more than two people: Samuel-Ximena-Faustus-Filomena.

Either between the novel chapters or perhaps between sessions, we did the Epistolary phase.

Faustus's letter to Ximena (he's unaware that she's Cuarzo Rosa):

===

Dear Ximena,

I know we men can be infuriating, but I think it most unjust to take one's ire at one on the entire sex. Whatever your patron may have done—and I am sure he can be annoying—whatever I may have done—and I don't think I did any wrong to you, but I'm sure you'll tell me if I did—you must not take it out on Marshall.

He wasn't helping the night against the fire because he cannot. This isn't a case of vapours or lack of will or of desire to help. Marshall has always been sickly.

The Fitzgerald party was the first social event he has been able to attend in years, and if one finds oneself without energy at a party, at least one is not endangering others, as would have been the case if he had tried to help during the fire. You must not be angry with a man for knowing his limits.

And indeed, I feared he would have found the party too much, and I know I have you to thank that he enjoyed himself for some of it. It has been a long time since I saw him smile the way he did when you danced with us. Thank you for that, Ximena. But please, please do not blame him for being no more than he is.

Neither of us brothers is perfect, and where he may seem to underreach for no reason other than his frailty, I know that I am sometimes overly reckless. I was so proud of having a battle scar that it never occurred to me that I should be trying to guard my looks. All I can say is that when Cuarzo Rosa claimed that she and Peridot were there to help, and then decided that, rather than helping those in the factory, the best way to prove her claim was to cut me, I was angry and proud. Angry at the way the Masked People bully everyone around them to get their way in whatever it is they want and determined not to give it to her, and proud that, whatever else might be said of me, I was ready to carry water and to do what little I might to protect others, knowing the Masked People might do far more injury to me than that tiny scar.

I know it was meant as a warning of exactly that, that the next time I place myself between others and their dire plans, whatever those may be—I have been trying to learn what they are, but I confess I have been stymied—I may suffer far worse. And I scoffed at the danger.

This was foolish of me. Oh, I would do it again, in an instant, but I do need to remember that the cost is not to me alone, but also to my brother. He does not have the prospects I do, and I should not be so quick nor so easy to risk those.

Fortunately, I seem to have managed to not entirely ruin my prospects. You may laugh at me if you like; I dare say I deserve it for my vanity, and I know you find all of this business ridiculous. I did too, years ago. Absurd to worry about prospects when one should marry for love. Your parents married for love, didn't they?

But while I am sometimes foolish and proud, I am no longer the kind of fool who clings to such boyhood fancies. I know that I am lucky that I have not driven every woman away with my recklessness.

You have heard the rumors, I am sure, about myself and Filomena Whitlock. We are not yet engaged, but it seems possible that we shall be. And I find myself not displeased with this possibility.

I had thought I would be merely resigned to a marriage to someone who prized my dowry and found me pleasant enough to look upon. And I am sure that she does prize my dowry. It is the way of the world.

But, Ximena, she sees beyond it and beyond my looks, slightly married or otherwise. She sees me, and she listens to me. When I mentioned the penguin, she considered my words. And she said that, as everything else I said had been proven true, she believed that the penguin was there as well. I think that she is the only one who believes me.

And she both values what I am and sees where I am flawed. I apologized for my recklessness, and she pointed out that she could hardly argue against my attempt to save her family's factory, even though the building still burned. For the building did burn, and I was not enough to save it.

I find that I like this kind of honesty, which acknowledges my virtues and is not blind to my faults. I find that I like Filomena Whitlock.

It is not love, but it may be a solid enough basis for a good marriage. And if love must be blind to the beloved's faults, then perhaps this liking, this

perception, this honesty may be a better foundation for a marriage than love.

At least, that is how it seems for me. I am certain you will settle for nothing less than a marriage of hearts and souls and love, and will tell me over the years how you have the better of it. I look forward to that.

Your friend,
Faustus
===

The Hon. Margaret Edgerton held an archery competition, which was clearly an Event. Faustus went into this admiring the woman. After all, they shared similar views on the masked people.

However, the way she ran the competition left a bad taste in his mouth. She saw to it that people she considered the Right sort, like himself, received the best equipment, while those she considered the Wrong sort, like, iirc, Ximena and/or Azalea, received substandard equipment. Nevertheless, Faustus did not hold back and did win. The prize was an amethyst—and yes, it was one of those gems that let the wielder take on a mask.

At least, in theory. I noted that I actually didn't feel a need to have Faustus become one of the masked, and we agreed that the gem should reject him. It did, and Faustus fainted, dropping the gem, which Filomena caught, making her now potentially one of the masked!

Faustus didn't know this, and recovered, somewhat embarrassed, but the Hon. Margaret Edgerton assured him it was fine, and I think they had a brief conversation about the masks, and possibly she invited him to return at a future date, for tea and further conversations.

Faustus was somewhat shaken by the experience, and he realized that those who took up the mask were perhaps somewhat compelled to do so. He also got a nighttime visit from Peridot while he was in his room, studying his murder, er, conspiracy, er, mask board, and the two tentatively called a truce for the moment, though I forget the details. He then learned that his own twin brother was Bloodstone, and that this was why Marshall was so sickly.

I think Marshall and Azalea learned each other's masked identity. I know Samuel and Ximena had another fraught conversation. Ximena revealed her own secret to Faustus, including her ability to turn into the Beast (I think a tiger or some similar large cat? Maybe a puma?), and that scene ended with Faustus curled against the Beast, both resting.

Either before or after that, Faustus met with Samuel, trying to determine whether Samuel was in love with Ximena. While I think that conversation was inconclusive, it was a friendly meeting over tea, where both agreed that she could be utterly exasperating! While played absolutely straight, again the fact that this was a world with a reversed gender hierarchy came through.

Faustus spoke with Filomena about his experience, and she suggested that it was proof that he was right that the masked folks should stop being masked. Surely, it would be a relief for them! But by now, of course, Faustus was no longer so sure of this.

In the Epistolary phase, the Hon. Margaret Edgerton threatened Filomena privately and the masks more publically, if anonymously. She demanded they surrender their gems, leaving them in a particular box in the town square, I think. Naturally, none of the masked people had any intention of doing so.

Robert Munchkin wrote that Peridot was obviously not interested in helping the common factory worker, and had never been. This made Azalea sad. I think there may have been some stuff involving Joseph and Marshall (or Bloodstone), but I cannot recall.

In the next Novel or Rooftop chapter, all of the main characters infiltrated Edgerton's estate. Well, technically, Faustus was an invited guest, although he and Marshall were swapping off, or, as we put it, doing twijinks!

Faustus found Edgerton's murder- er, maskboard, which was a triple maskboard, and definitely made him jealous. He also found Filomena working to do blacksmithing on magical gems and learned that she'd been working for Edgerton. At this point, the Hon. Margaret Edgerton herself was either in or controlling a huge mecha which attacked the masked people!

Filomena switched sides, and in the ensuing battle, the group destroyed the mecha, I think. I forget whether Edgerton escaped or not.

We then cut forward to the epilogue. Faustus was now working with the other masks, i.e., the other Main Characters and Filomena, as the Man in the Van—er, Coach, pouring over maps with them and helping them plan their missions. Whether or not he's married was left unresolved, especially as his childhood friend is in love with him, which I think he still doesn't know. Ximena's player would have liked to see a duel between Faustus and Samuel, but we never had a good opportunity for that. I think Ximena is clearly drawn to both men, while Faustus is drawn to both Ximena and Filomena.

This was a lot of fun, and if a sequel game were suggested, I'd be up for it.

GAMING WRITE UP: Power Is Fleeting; Love is Eternal (part 1)

This was the second playtest of the Penned to Good Society game *Take the Universe* that I participated in. TTU is now available at <https://zeropotential.itch.io/take-the-universe>. It's a military space opera hack of *Good Society*. "Military space opera" covers a lot of ground, and this particular playtest was very different from the previous one I'd played in. It aimed for a 1980s science fantasy feel, and the touchstone, and source of the campaign name, was the movie *Krull*, which I have still not seen. I don't think this campaign was much like the movie; I also don't think that was in any way a bad thing.

Collaboration

- **What tone should our story have?** Dreamy: A yearning for sunshine. A sprinkling of hope amidst chaos and loss, even in battle. Our desires are worth striving for, even in the face of terrible adversity. The stars are there, sparkling in the sky. Perhaps they may smile brightly upon us.
- **What is the scope of our story?** An Uneasy Lull: This is time of detente, of the phony peace before sustained conflict. Ostensibly, both sides are at War, but neither has fired the first shot. Yet tensions crawl ever higher. Military conflict is a sudden explosion of energy, hurtling the story towards War. At the most, conflict is inevitable.
- **How should we treat the effects of the War?** Candid. We do not shy away from the cost of War. This does not mean gory, unnecessary lingering descriptions, only that we will be unflinching when it comes to how lives are affected by the ravages of War.
- **How much hidden information will be used in game?** None. (Of course, some information is hidden from the *characters*.)
- **Is there anything our game should avoid?** Oddly, I see nothing in our document.
- **Is there anything we'd love to see in the game?** space faith (remixing religious tropes but not outright lifting from real religions), castles, love triangle (whether through connections or through PCs), starcrossed romance, smaller scale parts of the war rather than galaxy-spanning plots, royal hostages, uneasy truce having had previous fighting, see some violence, space taverns.

The War

- **How long has the War gone on?** It is as young as a day or two but long coming.
- **What does our side believe of the other?** That they proclaim our illegitimacy with their actions.

- **What do we believe is true of the War?** It is needed to be won quickly lest it drain us of what's truly important. There are those in the hierarchy who would benefit from constant conflict.
- **What is obviously false about the War?** Surrender can only be achieved through application of force.
- **Are there any other details we want to add about the setting?** automatons (artificial life) exist, magic exists but is very rare, magic needs numbers (at least 1,000) to produce great effects, multiple moons (magic eclipses) (at least 8 or 9) (wars have been fought over the definitions), group of smol moons that have religious groups, fortunes, neutral religious groups that entreat with either side, unexpected water phenomena

The Two Sides

- **Our Side:** The Lunar Alliance
- **The Opposing Side:** The Heavenly Octave
- **Visual Impressions/Aesthetics: Our Side:** Moons/moon clusters is a big motif of our planet, big lunar imagery; spaceships like moons!; diverse range of humanoids (cyclops); castles (some of them can fly); different medieval fabrics; light of the moon shines differently (complex orbit mechanics); mathematics
- **Visual Impressions/Aesthetics: The Enemy:** Weird, ethereal space music; Gothic in nature; Wear a lot of purple; laser guns; planet worship (echo of moon worship)
- **What the Galaxy Knows/Believes About Our Side:** Overly superstitious, thinks the astrology stuff is wild
- **What the Galaxy Knows/Believes About The Enemy:** Ancient group sent out by us eons ago, have come back more advanced
- **What Our Side Treasures/Despises:** Treasures math, numbers and the moons; mastery of magic; self-knowledge, personal strength (horoscopes). Despises rushing into things (very cautious)
- **What the Enemy Treasures/Despises:** Treasures being exploratory; understanding others to break down them. Despises not being rooted.
- **Additional Fact:** The Lunar Alliance now believe that the war will not be won until the ninth moon is found

Accidental Recall #15

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Comments on E&A #15, part 1

Cover (Morgan Julian): What a gorgeous starry silhouette!

Patrick Brady: Patrick Brady: re-Homeric role-playing: Gilgamesh is more foundational and also truer to modern role-playing.

Re paid GMs: I approve of the concept in general but have no desire to engage one in practice. That said, particularly in the part of our hobby where people are very new, there is a dearth of confident competent GMs, and paying GMs to take on more groups is a sensible way to alleviate this issue.

Your reviews of Spider Noir were what got us to buckle down and finish the series (just the presence of the reviews; I didn't read them until after we'd finished). So thanks for that, because they were quite enjoyable!

I don't think "limited uses" application for Spider Noir 2nd gen powers is accurate. What I'd suggest is a division between 1st gen—strong powers with accompanying personality changes that get stronger (both the personality and the powers) over time and with usage, until they cross a threshold and the user drops dead. Opposed to that is a Stable super-powered person, who generally gets their powers from contact with an Unstable (1st gen) superpower. A Stable super gets a certain, reasonably large quanta of powers when they first emerge, and they also get a personality tilt, but neither grows over time. However, since they can remain active without their powers growing, they can spend experience and practice improving their use of their abilities over time, thus having a much higher ceiling of effectiveness even though their power expression will never be as strong as a late stage Unstable.

As to Nicholas Cage's character's powers running out, that seems more to do with injury and web fluid. Getting beat up hard enough will focus his powers on regeneration, and make it harder to generate web fluid on demand. And without his powers constantly growing it can take him harder to bounce back from injuries than an Unstable does. But as far as limited uses, we see a much greater expression with Megawatt, whose powers, sourced in being a battery (well, sourced in being an electric eel, but never mind that) are always limited to how much electricity he can drain from surrounding electrified areas and how long that power lasts; it can be quite potent especially if he has time to "charge up", but if he can be pinned in a specific area without access to more power, once it's gone, it's gone.

Re supes being tough in Spider Noir: well, yeah. Even in standard Marvel comics, all mutants are tougher and stronger than a normal human, with a small healing factor as default to justify them bouncing back from injuries. But this is even more explicit with the actual power expressions we see in Spider Noir—the three "villainous" supes all have enhanced strength and toughness (albeit Leyden needing to charge up to become a hyper-strong bulletproof tank), and as for the Spider, while he can't take a bullet (as far as we know), he's far stronger and more agile than a normal person, so it's reasonable that he could also take a fair bit more punishment.

Patrick Riley: I feel like Rockslide in particular lacks motivation. Of course, this leaves the player able to make up whatever motivation they want, but it also feels incomplete to me without making that more specific. Why did Rockslide work with heroes on occasion? Could they have been betrayed by a heroic contact? What would make them become a full time hero or villain? Without more detail, I don't know what criteria the player would pick on.

I do find it interesting and fun that nearly every Aurora Cove villain has something sympathetic about them. Well, except for Demonchilde, probably.

I was, in fact, using Zendo 2e when carting it around to places; as said, having the cards makes it easier to be consistent and not make up rules that are way too hard for the group (or at all). They've also printed rules cards to be used with the pyramids as a separate component. (2e also replaces the differently sized pyramids with three different shapes—pyramids, rectangular solids, and wedges).

ryct Elf re new tricks, not letting optimal maneuvers become rote. Yeah. This was why, in Brian Rogers' Legion game, I explicitly said that my character's teleportation portals *aren't* the laser sharp cutting implements we see in the MCU and many other sources, but instead can be blocked by physical objects when not actively maintained, and thus "I portal it in half" can't become a rote maneuver because it doesn't exist. Even the maneuver I did start with—using an endless fall to accelerate something arbitrarily fast (beyond terminal velocity limits in an atmosphere) and then send it out like a fastball—I tried to limit to more serious situations where the character had extra time to prepare. It's much more fun to make up something new every time that still fits within a character's described limits.

Re why 18 cards: Most printers are optimized to print 54 card decks or more, because that's what a 52 card + 2 joker deck has. 18 x 3 is, not coincidentally, 54, so you can get 3 decks out of a single playing card print run.

Re killing attacks thwarted by resistant defenses; Well, maybe. I'm no champions expert. You still basically have a sensible classic-style superhero setup (with multiple levels of "health" explicitly making heroes easier to knock down than to kill) and are then thwarting this deliberately by making an attack that skips through those levels, but it might not be as bad as it looks in practice (unlike the many-segment fights, which are worse).

Re called shots in D&D. We had targeted spells as house rules in D&D 3.5—the GM would let casters target something more specific—send a fireball into a tiny hole, etc—but they'd have to make an attack roll to pull it off (a good reason to load 3.5 True Strike). But yeah, D&D by official rule doesn't have called shots, though some more complicated monsters might include some rules for them.

John Redden: Much sympathy on the loss of your friend Chris.

Shroud did not, in fact, win a Hugo, but I voted it higher than the book that did.

Yeah, we should try some of your coffee! Didn't know you had a web site.

Bryant Durrell: Fantasia sounds amazing. Maybe at some point when we're not spending all our vacation spoons on cons (or just have more vacation spoons). But also, should look up if we have a way to watch some of those films at some point!

Lisa's done a bunch of Delta Green work—it's well within her specialty, they pay well and on time (for gaming work, anyway), and I understand they're easy to work with!

Re job: Thanks! I don't tend to worry that much about new languages just because, as much as you learn new stuff with every language, so much of every modern language is basically The Same Stuff. Sure, with something like C++ memory management (or at least memory optimization; the Bloomberg library/Basic Standard Library is open sourced so I can talk about how a lot of the big difference between it and the SDL is that it lets you define custom allocators (functionally, memory managers) for every object, so if your model benefits from having a lot of contiguous memory or expecting to immediately reuse the space for objects you get rid of, you can make sure it happens) becomes much more important than in a language like perl. But if you're doing OOP, design patterns are basically the same everywhere, and so does understanding of and the ability to evaluate the efficiency of different algorithms (particularly when operating on arbitrarily large data).

But honestly, I think a lot of being able to find a job after months is becoming increasingly flexible in how you find a job and not giving up. I can't speak for other people's experiences, but in the periods where I've been out of work—and the big ones were certainly notoriously hard to find a job during, like the trough in 2001-2003 and the current instability—what tended to work well for me was to keep iterating and changing tactics while maintaining my intensity (and not burning out by being *too* intense for a short period) until something worked. After all, even in the worst markets, there are always people hiring—and like running from a bear, you don't have to be faster than the bear—just (eventually; this is a strong difference between bear fleeing) enough stronger than whatever percentage of job seekers that you make the grade.

Brian Rogers: Shirecon! I'm hoping to hear about it *next* month; I think V&V is in that weird space that gets ignored by OSR fans but is also missed by story focused RPG fans, so I'm interested in what they think of your game!

Re Spider Noir: I didn't find that it dragged, but yeah; one of the big advantages of direct streaming is that you don't have to have universal episode lengths—you can vary the length and just let each episode be as long as it needs to be. But some companies don't do this, and Spider Noir certainly doesn't. While we enjoyed it, it was certainly long enough that we needed to budget time for it (particularly time to finish watching before I read the APA).

Re library RPGs: I continue to be boggled by the new manager who thinks that the kidonomics of a TTRPG session are identical to those of a reading series!

I love the technique of modelling a fire like it's a villain—I first encountered that technique with Fate, but of course it can be used with any combat system to handle things that are "close enough" to combat—I've even seen this done with Accelerant, a "universal" larp system!

Re what you wear under "I work for a flame demon cult" robes as henchpeople: Probably either (flame-retardent) slacks or shorts—gotta keep things family friendly.

Re V&V: good stuff, on both heavy rules and on why an OSR-ish game like V&V can make for an extremely solid superhero system where other systems (point systems particularly) tend to struggle.

A game with strong rules that moves a lot of power from the GM to the players *can* do genre well—but again, it has to be doing so in ways that don't cut against genre *and* the table culture needs to line up. For instance, as I mentioned in my reply, Fate can work really well, because it doesn't really move away from being an improvisational, ad-hoc game—instead, the game divides up power in a different way, giving players more creative control over the narrative without locking anything down.

I do like games like Masks: A New Generation, personally, but it's not exactly because they make *better* superhero games than earlier games. But they make differently paced games that can make it easier to set expectations—for the subgenres they're built for, at least. I wouldn't want all my gaming to be early PbtA games, but they do a good job of codifying subgenres without locking things down the way even more focused games can, and in ways that allow for quick advancement in short run (1-12 session) play.

Re "who controls the pet" In general, I think you're right that the player should control the pet in most games—at least in combat! Out of combat, it's often better for the GM to control the pet so the player can roleplay with them, but within combat you don't want the GM deciding on the pet's tactics (one more thing to do!) in addition to the spotlight issues of the pet being cooler!

Re why Spider Queen didn't just have Spider Powers: I mean, you could have just giving up the bonuses. But it's a really interesting point that the most "natural" way to stat up her web shooters was simply too strong for the character concept, which was intended to stay within normal human + gear levels!

Statting up all the Puppeteers with the same rolled power array is slightly surprising, but it makes sense given the "impose order on chaos" approach to character generation that V&V takes. It also serves as a good demo for how flexible V&V can be even with rolled power sets! And also, wow!

Re fighters and magic swords: It's frustrating that all too often, table culture is to make magic swords *always* a trap (probably mostly pulling too much from Elric and Moorcock). Whether or not intelligent items need to be fighter-only or sword-only (keeping in mind the need to make sure everyone can be cool), there's no reason to make them inherently more dangerous than other adventuring companions when treated well.

Re domain level play in D&D: We've had a bit of this in various campaigns, but it tends to take a back seat to the plot (or at least the characters' wanderings) tending to not reach resolution until they've hit level 17 or more. I might try to talk people into running/playing a game where play is expected to shift, with the initial plots wrapped up, around the time the characters get to level 12 or so (this is likely to happen differently in the Strixhaven game, but there the characters will graduate around that level or a bit before, so I'd expect the characters, graduated but still quite poor, to have to adventure a bit before settling down if we continue play after college.

Re REIGN lifepath dice in GURPS: Agreed that it's challenging, but it's also a bit of a fit, given that REIGN's lifepaths are a way of allocating points randomly, and GURPS is a point system. The main concern is that skills and abilities scale upwards in cost, so while you can have rolls allocate a certain number of points towards increasing one or more skills or stats, you can't guarantee that the points will round properly; instead you end up needing a remainder collection mechanic, which can turn into a pool of extra points the player can

allocate manually. Still, it would be interesting to see how it played out and how often characters rolled up this way were functional (at least with some effective allocation of the remaining points).

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: I do like quite a lot of the stuff in Mazorra, including this issue, but I do wonder how long it would take to play out in practice. Structured as it is to date, I think it might have the feel of a campaign—but without much space for the PCs to breathe between "episodes", as one sequence leads to the next to the next.

Re Traveller, self-competing and setting fracture: It is a conundrum—fans have only so much disposable income, and a company only has so much capital to invest in and bet on new (or reprint existing) products. New settings will tend to sell well compared to adventures, but fans will then want them to be supported, which consumes operating capital/effort and risks fracturing your audience. And at worst, can make your business fragile enough that it's vulnerable to the first downturn (my understanding is that contrary to popular understanding, the setting explosion wasn't what doomed TSR, though it was contributory. They could have managed for an indefinite period. But the boom and bust caused by Magic, the Gathering's early expansion of the gaming market and a subsequent contraction put stress on their business that, stretched as thin as they were, they couldn't survive).

I think something like Traveller can avoid this by publishing adventures that can be run during multiple eras. After all, the system is the same, and it doesn't take that many extra pages to explain how a setup would work in era X vs Y and what would change. Hell, the same can be true of a D&D adventure (not so much for licensed material, but there you're hoping to attract a whole new audience). But for this to work, things need to be calibrated and thought through carefully. And it's going to be impossible if a gaming company is thinking of their adventures largely in terms of long campaigns with a pre-planned story running through them, rather than shorter vignettes that the GM is expected to bridge together.

You can, of course, pick up a campaign and plop it down in a different setting or era than the intended one, but that involves a lot of work on the GM's part.

I think part of the reason for our extremely varied opinions on intraparty (in-character—apparently I have to specify this) conflict is both individual experience—but also a vision of what, exactly, that means. My base model for conflict at the table is PCs having differing goals or moral compasses that, while initially yielding nicely to one another, eventually come directly into conflict. Not "one PC steals or tries to ambush another," but more "the party has rescued a princess, and this causes conflict when she is revealed to have dragon heritage—some of the group are extremely anti-dragon and want to arrest or kill her, while the others think she should be protected and her secret hidden". Or to pick a less fraught but no less divisive example: "Two of the PCs are secretly loyal to enemy countries, which causes no conflict, not least because they are unaware of it, but even when they do realize it, their bond as party members is more important than their opposing loyalties in theory. But what if they find a mcguffin that is valuable to both sides? What happens then?"

Of course, the other model I'm familiar with with common player conflict is classic northeastern LARPs. But there, there's no party to begin with. It's known that those games have few to no NPCs, so if you have any opposition, it's probably from another PC. More modern games in that tradition (but not from MIT Assassin's Guild specifically, which tends to cling closer to the old traditions) often favor more oblique opposition—PCs pursue their goals via a questing mechanic, and while there is plenty of indirect conflict and jockeying for position, there's rarely any direct unscripted conflict, at least until

the endgame. The MIT style games will often have betrayals, but there's also no assumption that any of the PCs, even the ones written with alliances, are truly allies. At least, not from experienced players; the games are pre-written and it's expected that the GMs wrote at least one traitor or spy into each group, so it's not necessarily a player decision.

Re a pulp game where the Big Hero can show up and rescue PCs (their allies and/or minions) who get into trouble: To avoid this being a Big Fiat, the players could have a meta-resource that would let them invoke the Big Hero—if the PC gets into trouble and doesn't have or want to spend their resource, maybe it's time for them to meet a tragic end.

Mark A Wilson: Ally the Piper is great; I've listened to a lot of her videos. I think I ended up unfollowing her on Tiktok, but I think that was because she was so insanely prolific that as long as she was in my list I barely saw anyone else!

Gabriel Roark: Oof, hope your sprained knee recovers well and smoothly—and that the court case also moves toward the best and most just conclusion.

re my essays on intraparty conflict (and single player/multiple GM campaigns): Glad you liked them!

Attronarch: "negotiations" indeed. Honestly, the bears, as cute as they were, would likely have done better if they'd lead with negotiations rather than sleep/poison darts.

Well, they had the sense to hide the treasure they couldn't take with them. Now, will it stay hidden? Only time will tell.

Re them not choosing to bring back Hagar: How surprising! But it did let you demonstrate that actions had long term consequences, I suppose.

I have to wonder how the Ah'sas episode would have gone had there been any female adventurers with the group!

Roger BW: Re AI and learning: While I very much agree with you (at least, for the time being) on the hazards of AI and students/junior developers, I've found over the last few years that to an experienced dev learning a new codebase, it can be a help—albeit a potentially Faustian one. Using it to locate a problem (presuming the AI has access to the entire codebase or enough of it to be useful), it can often come up with the right area of interest, and its suggestions can even be insightful. But just take all its suggestions without critical thinking and you'll create more problems than you solve; the key is to use the AI to find your place in an unfamiliar space, and to use its ideas for how to solve a problem as a possible path, not a map. But for a newer dev, the temptation of just letting the AI do everything and not learning anything can be far too high.

Re games that presume a non-adversarial relationship: We had a similar experience with Da'zoon (an extremely lite Gumshoe fantasy hack, run by the designer, Steve Dempsey) yesterday at Pelicon 2026. The game has numerous avenues for player co-creation—the classes each include two plot elements the player comes up with (the Mage describes an ancient threat and a magical prize, while the Fighter makes up a hero and a villain, for instance); a travel montage will have each player come up with a difficulty targeted to the next player to try to solve, and each player has a stock of "lore" points that can be used to make up setting and background elements to make the game more interesting *and* to provide benefits to their PCs or the group. Obviously, these can be used to generate wildly broken abilities, items, powers, and allies. But they hardly ever do; Steve described one situation where a player created an over-powerful item that they abused until he was forced to narrate the item being used up to prevent

it from permanently dominating play. But even then, the player didn't object to the item's loss; they'd gotten good use of it and had their fun.

Even in that game, I ended up being the most abusive of all, largely emergently—I turned my montage hazard—a giant phoenix, into an ally by spending a lore point to establish that my PC, the fire/air/spirit Mage Umbris had an established good relationship with the phoenix, and making a deal with it that she would allow it to drink from the group's quest object if it would accompany them and aid her—and thus she was holding a giant firebird in reserve for most of the game, unleashing it as a tremendous asset to defeat the challenge at the end of the quest! But we were all on board with the idea that this was too big and dangerous an asset/ally to invoke before it was really important (and in fact, when she invoked the phoenix, the bird single-handedly solved the main problem the group had been having trouble with and was a major part of their escape...while meanwhile, all of Umbris's magic went to making sure the group could *survive* the resulting explosion and the literal heat of the phoenix's "help").

Of course, part of this is that a system will to a degree self-select for the kinds of players that enjoy that kind of thing.

It's interesting that you say that "you have to play the pre-gens" doomed Indy, given that even though you didn't have to play pre-existing characters in Marvel, that seems to be most of what people want to do. But of course Marvel has a giant cast of characters and I suspect Indy had like five.

Re friendly rivalry vs serious antagonism: It depends on the game for me; as said, many games I play don't have a party, per se. But when you've got a serious disagreement between party members, while that can be golden, you need a way to go forwards from there—you can split the party permanently, or write out part of the group, or resolve the conflict and find a way to go forward, but it's certainly a potential pain point as well as roleplaying gold.

Of course, in stuff like Conan, you'd often have other heroes, when they were present, have a serious disagreement with Conan. But with the stories being episodic, the assumption is that people went their separate ways after whatever happened, happened (and they likely teamed up against whatever enemy they faced). If they then encountered one another in another adventure, well, perhaps there would be some comments or jokes about the previous encounter, but bygones were bygones. A similar, more systemic dynamic exists in Usagi Yojimbo. The cast of heroic characters—Usagi, Chizu the cat ninja, Gen the rhino bounty hunter, Kitsune the fox thief, and the rest often meet in adversarial circumstances. But inevitably, they'll spend much of the story (those who appear, always Usagi but often at least one other recurrent character) teaming up against a common threat, and then go their separate ways—with or without a final disagreement at the end. By letting time pass and not having the characters always travel together, Sakai can explore a variety of different stories but still benefit from familiar and beloved characters—rather like a RPG that had different mixes of players show up at each session.

Re "the only bit you can see is what you're involved in" the same is true of any LARP with enough players—but even so, the result can be glorious. That said, for short-run games you'll often have players spending the time afterwards (or online the next few weeks) discussing what happened and was likely to happen in the future.

Re Monsterhearts: I think this is a matter of what people bring to the game. Only one Monsterhearts game—a pickup one shot—I've been in devolved to a back and forth between PCs (and even then, there was resolution, as my Mortal who had been targeted by one or two other PCs, was "killed" and fell off a building forming a nice climax (but actually she went into darkest self and presumably was off planning a terrifying revenge against the bullies who wronged her).

Other games, where the players didn't start off with "my character is totally going to kill someone," have tended to more cinematic approaches. In one game the GM gave us a common threat, and also someone was playing a Chosen so the group coalesced quickly. In another (same GM as the one that did devolve, but players who all knew one another) we had a lovely little tragic Little Mermaid/Ponyo play with abuse escalating to revenge into reconciliation. And with Lisa's two seasons of Monster Hearts, the first had the group face off against a demon-led biker gang and eventually the Fey (one PC was an exiled changeling), and the second cumulated with a tearful confrontation with the werewolf PC who had been seduced (more or less) by a literal demon. Avram's game is significantly more PVP than most of my games, overall—but the GM is good, the players seem willing to work together whether or not their characters do, and the result is still quite satisfying as a result.

Re RPGgeek: Hmm. I have the game designer tag as well (I just checked), but don't get notified about E&A listings. Maybe because I'm not following the right topic? (1 hour later: I did NOT have time to get sucked into my own designer's page on RPGgeek. Oh well!)

Re scripting languages vs compiled languages: I agree with you that there's no difference in the languages (in essence), except that some languages are profoundly unsuited to being compiled without a large interpreter or runtime. However, quite a number of those languages are still native-compiled languages, technically (like Go, which ships with a large library runtime IIRC), so that can't be assumed to be a language constraint.

On the other hand, I jump the other way from where you do—a compiled language is a compiled language, whether it has native compilation or not. Ultimately, there's not much difference between bytecode compiled languages and native; even native languages aren't typically compiled down to the actual machine code used in modern CPUs, but an intermediate language. And while it's not commonly done, there's nothing stopping someone from writing a CPU (or intermediate instruction language) that allows native runtimes of theoretical bytecode (see: the classic Lisp machine). Or it could be "just in time" compiled into native machine code, as anything that's been bytecode for the Java virtual machine can be. Ultimately, a compiled language has been turned into a form that *could* be run natively on a machine (even if no machine that can run it exists and it's run only in emulation) while an interpreter, while in some ways having characteristics of a virtual machine, is in most ways entirely different. In theory; in practice many modern interpreters, like perl and emacs, actually *are* virtual machines that run just-in-time compiled bytecode.

Raku's slowness: Sadness. I've never gotten into the habit of using it, so I haven't noticed the slowness in practice, but my suspicion is that its tiny installed base that has resulted in not being able to create faster, more optimized builds. Unlike modern python, which is somewhat fast despite having to deal with the global interpreter lock from its inception. Spending far more time than it deserved on this and hitting a conversation from 6 years ago, I think the main issue with the speed of modern Raku is that it runs on MoarVM. Which is itself a 16 year old VM, and thus presumably less mature than the JVM. As MoarVM improves, presumably Raku's speed will also. But wow, a simple program that takes 15 minutes to run in perl5 takes 4 hours in Raku (as of 5 years ago)? Yowzer!

Re GURPS: I know some friends who used to use GURPS for everything did an odd thing with it: They dropped point totals entirely. Using it as a purely descriptive RPG language probably doesn't solve every problem with it (and it doesn't solve the problem the points are intended to solve) but it would likely be more congenial to me, albeit more detailed than I like to use.

Re Torg: Well, Designing a metaplot via survey isn't as good to my eye as not having a metaplot at all, but it's certainly better overall than the usual approach (of dictating endings to make your metaplot easier to railroad in, as far as I can tell).

Myles Corcoran: Re AI: In the spirit of AI nonsense, when I searched for Da'Zoon above, I accidentally spelled it Da'Zoom. At which point Gemini proceeded to give me everything *except* the thing I wanted, even with other details like the designer, the core game system (Gumshoe), etc. Only after I corrected that final letter did it start giving me something vaguely like what I wanted. I won't say current-gen AI can't produce useful results; it certainly can, but tiny changes in input still produce surprisingly large and often less useful differences in output.

Re Nomic: I also think that the game Credo has a fair bit of the Nomic nature.

Re problems with reviews: I wish meta-moderation was an answer to review corruption/abuse. Sadly, experience seems to show that meta-moderation is at least as vulnerable to abuse as moderation and reviews are, probably more. (maybe it's the implementations? Hard to say).

Re getting paid for disadvantages vs Fate: Well, fate has both, really; you get paid when it's compelled and pay to avoid, like Gumshoe Drives. (But yes, also they're keywords you can invoke for a bonus). I tend to prefer the pure approach that Faith Corps (Cam Banks' Fate/Cortex+ hack he uses for Demon Hunters) and (without aspects) Good Society use—without the "compel" of being penalized if you refuse a plotline, mechanics that reward you when stuff happens tend to feel less coercive.

Never the less, I'd put The Shadows of Yesterday (TSoY) and PbtA into a different category—both because you get permanent experience when they come up and because they're not consent mechanics—you get the point when the feature comes up, but this isn't an opportunity to refuse it. Instead, you set up the feature and when it comes up, you get your payment—the real choice comes when you decide to take a buyout in TSoY, or deliberately lean into the higher payout options that involve your character being more substantially inconvenienced. It's true that those mechanics involve tooling the game such that the higher expected experience is taken into account (and also deciding it's OK if some PCs have more experience than others), but that kind of asymmetry can be really fun as long as it works.

Dylan Capel: New School Revival! I love the use of that term; are there people using it regularly now? I admit, I'm much more interested in New Wave Reivval and New School Revival than Old School, which I didn't like that much when it was new.

Dale Meier: While you go through a number of popular ways to find players, I'll call out one that has worked well for us that I don't remember anyone mentioning: Join a RPG APA and reach out to players you find you're curious about or feel simpatico with. In our tenure with Alarums & Excursions, we played with at least 8 people we met through the APA (likely more like 15 together; Lisa doesn't count Lee while I do and I remember Patrick Riley's short-lived psychic game, which she doesn't, and she listed at least 4 people I hadn't thought of). Some of them we even play with regularly. It becomes much easier if you're not limiting yourself to people close to you; of course, it's nice to have a local group and we have one, but in this far flung world it can be easier to find a group that meets by zoom, and as long as people can maintain attention, quite effective, too.

In as much as we have streams and huge companies modeling murder-hobo play (or "heroic" but still combat focused play like Critical Role), we also have streams modelling and demonstrating more nuanced play.

Sure, D&D and D&D-like play has expanded and become even more mainstream and dominant—but we also have more people doing story-focused RPG play than ever.

No reason to apologize to anyone for falling behind on comments, except the you that's going to try to double up on it (I've tripled up on it in the past and that's no fun at all!). But I'm sure we'll greet your comments with joy when you have time to write them! Thank you everyone who wished me good luck on my new job! (I still have it).

Worldcon was lovely. On the one hand, I always love seeing people and doing the Worldcon thing, on the other hand, I couldn't but focus on the people I missed and the things I wasn't able to do. But isn't that the way of it? And, as Lisa's presumably given more detail on, we were able to take one day off from the con and go visit Lee and Barry for a few hours.

Reading: I read Chew (the comic) this month and caught up on the last two Wayward Children (Sean McGuire) novellas. Chew was brilliant and irreverent and kinda sad, with many, many weird food powers—I was not as disgusted by the more disgusting parts as Lisa was, but understand how some will be. And also, it had POYO, the bad ass rooster.

The Wayward Children novels were, as usual, quite nice, though this being the 10th and 11th in the series, I've played this game before. *Adrift in Currents Clean and Clear* is, as all the even books in the series are, a backstory novel, presenting the story of Nadya, a girl who very much loved turtles. the world it presents is weird and compelling, with its own interesting rules, and while the story has some odd tragedy in it (particular the meta-narrative about heroism with the frogs which I don't think reaches resolution; perhaps some day), it's ultimately quite satisfying. *Through the Gates of Garnet and Gold*, which continues the present day narrative, has some odd aspects to it, and largely takes place in the Land of the Dead [some spoilers for earlier books here]. Nancy, the protagonist of the first book, returns to the school, asking help for a problem within the realm of the dead, and the school's rule against quests is broken, yet again.

Nancy has always felt like a main character in the books, but appeared only in the first book and the third one, as she wanted nothing more than she wanted to return to the lands of the dead and play statue, and she was able to resume doing that at the end of the first book. Why would she leave? So it's nice to see a bit more of her here, and not as a brief interlude within a larger book the way she is in *Beneath a Sugar Sky*, but as a main character again. Typical Mcquire themes return, yet again—terrible people remain terrible, and people with authority are, if not terrible themselves, at least complicit (does Seanan have a problem with authority? Well, I've read dozens of her novels and I'd have to give that an unqualified yes), but I like at least *some* of the new people introduced in this book. At least one! Maybe more! The next novel in the series (coming out in January 2027) is another backstory—of Sumi, the sugar candy impossible magic pixie dust girl, and while she's sometimes insufferable, I suspect I'll enjoy this one quite a bit.

Oh, back to Worldcon for a moment: While I spent most of the con doing con things, I did get a bit of chance to play board games with old friends. One of them was even a game that was new to me: *Planet Unknown*. In Planet Unknown, players expand their presence on a planet by pulling pentominos, trying to have the most valuable planet by the end. But the game ends as soon as someone is unable to take a piece, and your choice of pieces is not free; instead, there is a roundel at the center of the table, and the current controlling player turns it to a side of their choice, thus taking their choice of pieces. But every other player must then take one of the two pieces facing their marker, with only the ability to choose which of those pieces to take—and where to place it, of course. Each piece might have an asteroid on it (bad, but

worth points if collected), and will provide two colors of the four the game runs on plus the wild-ish color, bumping up your civilization on (ideally) two colors, which may then produce side effects as you reach certain points. Build your civilization, and try to cover your planet, but the game isn't about who fills the most, but whose planet is worth the most points at the end. It's available on Board Game Arena as well, but I haven't tried it there yet.