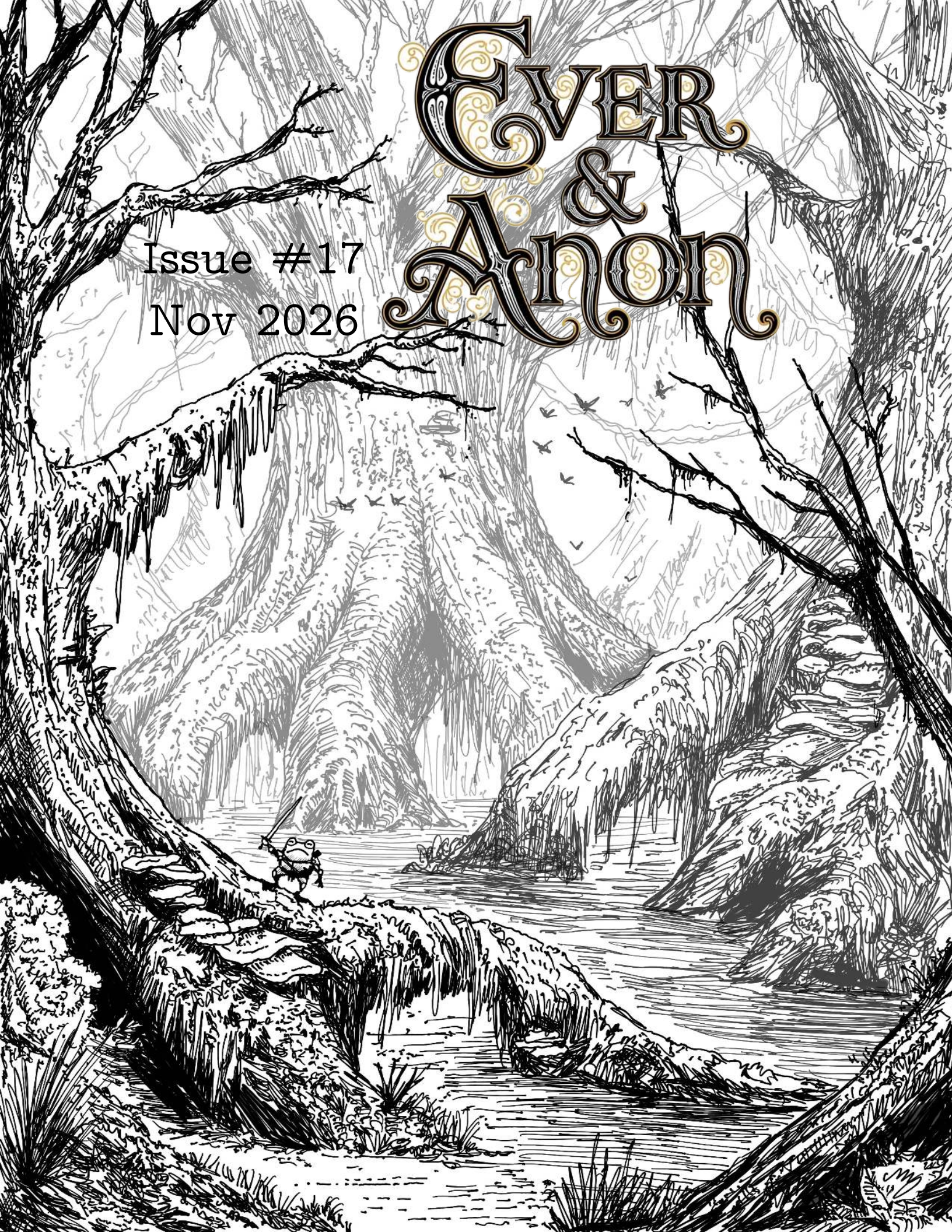

Ever & Anon
Issue #17
Nov 2026

Ever & Anon (ISSN 3071-2785) is a digital monthly APA about roleplaying games and is published under the Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license. See https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en for details.



The opinions expressed within each zine are solely those of the individual contributors and do not reflect the opinions of the APA or its management. All material in this issue, unless expressly noted otherwise, is contributed by its respective authors for use only in this publication in its various print and electronic forms, including public archival into perpetuity. All other rights are retained by each author/contributor, and therefore other use of any portion of this publication requires the permission of the original copyright holder(s).

If you'd like to be informed when new issues become available for download, please join our Mailing List at https://groups.google.com/g/everanon, our Discord Server at https://discord.gg/KM3EwADZ3x, or you can check our website at https://everanon.org.

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 #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

Issue #22 – March 21st: RPG Design Dos & Don'ts

Ever & Anon emerged with the closing of Alarums & Excursions, an Amateur Press Association run by Lee Gold for nearly fifty years. This community of APAers would not exist if not for her steadfast efforts.

Ever & Anon

Issue #17 (ver. 1) – November 2026

Table of Contents

Front Cover: “Small but Brave” – M. Niezgoda See his artwork at https://cara.app/mniezgoda/portfolio or follow him at https://www.reddit.com/user/M_Niezgoda/ or https://mniezgodarpg.substack.com/ or https://marius-niezgoda.itch.io/	1
Front Page	2
Table of Contents	3
What is This?	4
Solicitations & Abbreviations	5
In the Hall of Stone – Patrick Brady	6
Back to Brazilian Gamebooks, Pt 11 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira Zucolotto	16
Reddened Stars #16 – John Redden	18
Age of Menace #254 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek	25
The Phoenix Nest #17 – Michael Cule	41
Going to be Ad-Libbed #15 – Avram Grumer	57
Overlord’s Annals (v5n11) – Attronarch	66
Travelling Light #5 – Timothy Collinson	73
Firedrake’s Hoard #15 – Roger Bell_West	79
Port Omaha Beacon #4 – Dale Meier	88
An Unlooked For Zine #16 – Lisa Padol	104
Twisting the Rope #17 – Myles Corcoran	120
Denizens of the Library #16 – Brian Rogers	130
Computocracy: Prelude to the Transition – Jim Vassilakos	145
Attacks of Opportunity #16 – Dylan Capel	159
The Dragon’s Beard #101 – Patrick Zoch	161
Quasipseudoludognostication #17 – Patrick Riley	176
Atlantis for Now #5 – Gabriel Roark	192
Accidental Recall #15 – Joshua Kronengold	199
The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice #4 – Bryant Durrell	209
Ronin Engineer – Jim Eckman	220

This issue’s IgTheme: *Negotiating with Monsters*

The picture on page 5 was generated and converted into a sketch by Canva. Our logo was designed by Richard Iorio II of Rogue Games.

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?
A: An APA.
Q: What's an APA?
A: An Amateur Press Association.
Q: What's that?
A: A collection of zines. It can also refer to the community of people writing the zines.
Q: What's a zine?
A: A fanzine. A small, amateur magazine usually distributed for free or at cost.
Q: So this is a collection of free fanzines written by amateurs?
A: Exactly.
Q: And each one has a separate author?
A: Right.
Q: But I see the same names appearing again and again throughout.
A: Those are comments. We comment on each other's zines. When you see *Dale Meier: blah-blah-blah…*, if there are no quotes around the *blah-blah-blah*, that's probably a comment to Dale.
Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?
A: Yes. It's like a cocktail party, but all written out. Come join us, if you like.

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

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

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

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

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

---

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_press_association
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alarums_and_Excursions
3 https://attronarch.com/goodbye-to-alarums-and-excursions-apa
4 https://www.facebook.com/Reinhagen/posts/pfbid0nXr6bkZU8V28t2xMHvq5CKgpTGfLX35yU3VBAjuwTgQps8gX9CZDcbHZFc5VpYn6l

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



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

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

Abbreviations & Acronyms You Need to Know:

A&E: Alarums & Excursions
APA: Amateur Press Association
BBG: Big Bad Guy/Gal (a major villain)
BTW: By the way
d6: a six-sided die
2d6: two six-sided dice
d4: a caltrop (very dangerous)
E&A: Ever & Anon
Frex: For example
FTF: Face-to-face (aka TTRPG)
FWIW: For what it's worth
IgTheme: Ignorable theme
IIRC: If I recall correctly
IM(H)O: In my (humble) opinion
LARP: Live Action Role Playing
Nextish: Next issue
(N)PC: (Non-)Player Character
PBEM: Play-by-Email
RAE(BNC): Read and enjoyed (but no comment)
Re: Regarding
RHCT(M): Regarding his/her comment to (me)
RPG: Role-playing game
RYCT(M): Regarding your comment to (me)
RYQT(M): Regarding your question to (me)
TTRPG: Tabletop role-playing game (aka FTF)
WRT: With respect to / With regard to
YMMV: Your mileage may vary
Zine: A writer's contribution

In the Hall of Stone (v2.0)

By Patrick Brady. London, England. May 2026. The following 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
Some graphics have been modified by me using Paint and GIMP.
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.

Comments from the last edition

Timothy Collinson.

Re: The Silmarillion and Narnia. Yes, I see them as a sign of how knowledgeable their authors were.

Re: AWE:TSG in Traveller. They would make sense for the 3rd Imperium with its prohibition on mass destruction.

Re: AI. Thank you. I hope your lectures go well.

Re: Paid Refereeing. I doubt the money involved would be worth your time. My understanding is that it is helpful as a side-gig for some young D&D referees as Critical Role has greatly improved the visibility of D&D.

Re: Aslan at Sheffield Hallam. Um, so could you share more information? I have family in South Yorkshire (their address line includes "near Barnsley" which says a lot about their village).

Patrick Riley

Re: On being a Patrick. Clearly we need to recruit more Patricks! 😊 Interesting, all of the first born males in my family have been called Patrick. So, my father, grandfather, great-grandfather etc. As far back as we can tell, we all share the same name. Which as my father pointed out to me means there are a lot of gravestones with our name on them 😊 To avoid confusion my father was "Pat" and my grandfather "Paddy" within the family. Which is one reason I respond oddly to being called either, I had a colleague who insisted on calling me by my father's name!

Re: Validity. I agree. I can easily see a point in the near future when we will have deep fakes that are so good that our legacy news and democratic systems won't be able to cope. I guess the question is what we, as citizens, do about it?

Re: Paid referees. I broadly agree. I did run into a good referee at a US convention who also did paid refereeing. She was good and the money was helpful to her at that stage of her life. So, not my thing but good luck to them. My own experience of RPGS is of a social event similar to board gaming or cardplaying etc. So a way of structuring a social event.

John Redden.

I hope you and yours made it through all of that weather and geology event OK? I have several USA friends and I wish you and your

country all the best. I hope things improve for everyone.
Do I remember that you have taken to farming on the Big Island? My only knowledge of the area is "they grow a lot of pineapples" and my experience of farming is from a school friend whose family were border hill farmers (snow stopped him getting to school at least a few days every year) and I expect your environment is very different 😊. If you don't mind my asking, why did you decide to become a farmer?

Myles Corcoran

Re: Spider Noir. I would have liked to see a second series. I think it could have done some interesting stuff.

Re: All Nazis, all the time. As far as I can see portraying Germans, at all periods of history, as inherent Nazis is too often seen as a cheap villain option. I dislike it for various reasons including but not limited to its historical illiteracy but also because stereotyping seldom produces good writing. I'm not a historian but the smudging together of WW1 and WW2 was jarring.

Brian Rogers.

Re: reviews. I was being accurate, what I was doing probably wouldn't have happened if you hadn't shown the way.

Re: Puppeteer. I continue to enjoy your work. I bought V&V when it first came out and remember generating some characters, but clearly the game has evolved a lot in the intervening decades. I am sufficiently impressed that I am inclined to check out later editions, is 2nd edition your preference?

Re: Garth Ennis. I do not enjoy the comic book of the Boys, but I enjoyed the tv series. I think the changes from the comic book especially the Homelander character (who is very different from the comic) are significant improvements.

Re: Albion. I like Alan Moore's work. In Albion, Penny Dolmann (Bad Penny) is the daughter of Eric Dolmann, the old Valiant comics superhero who fought crime using robot puppets (we seem to have a puppet theme going on). The House of Dolmann comic book series ran from 1966 to 1970. Dolmann would transport his robot puppets to their missions in the sidecar of his motorcycle. Penny is investigating what happening to her father and finds a conspiracy against these old UK superheroes, which explains what happened to them.



The House of Dolmann - Wikipedia

Art attribution is fair use for the purposes of review. From Wikipedia. Copyright Rebellion.

Re: RPG as folk tradition. I totally agree. For me it has always been that, and I've only recently discovered the "paid and free" refereeing movement. The way it has been explained to me is that for some (I'm going to say "younger people" which makes me sound like I'm 150 years old 😊), the bit of extra cash helps them and makes them more able to do their hobby because for some travel expenses, food costs etc. to a game can be deal breakers. But I come from a clear folk tradition in which we pay to do it rather than are paid. Frankly I don't think the recompense

would be sufficient for the sheer amount of time I've put into games over the years.

Re: Spider Noir. For me Field's costuming put the series on another level. In terms of Deception, I noted that it was commonly used and extremely successful, even against characters that were described as suspicious and cynical.

ELF

Re: Religion. My apologies. I am new here and have only just read the bit about your Wiccan affiliation which makes my question last time redundant. Apologies.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Re: Knowledge of genetics in the 1930s. Fair enough, you know more about it that I. But that doesn't change the alteration in backstory. This isn't the origin story of The Spider in the comics.

Re: Politics. Yes and Canada is strong. Mr Carney may be one of the greats.

Avram Grumer

Yes, you are officially a Patrick for the purposes of our plan of world domination! Your secret decoder ring is in the mail!

Gabriel Roarke.

Re: Navigating your zine. You express yourself with a clarity that makes it easy to follow your reasoning. I find that helpful.

Dale Meier

Re: Layout. I am very aware that I haven't written zines for decades and want mine to be less ugly. I have encountered AWE irl. I drive from London to the Scottish borders on a regular basis (family) and very occasionally I encounter one of their protected convoys having a stop at motorway services. I find myself imagining that AWE would be guarding all the weird alien artefacts that have been accumulated over the years and that if UNIT want any of it (when they need a cyberman helmet etc.), they have to deal with AWE.
Re: Artificial Idiocy. I completely agree. My concern is that as these systems become universal, embedding in everything from the water company to the military, the mistakes will become increasingly consequential and that recovering from those mistakes, more difficult. "*The AI made a mistake*" should not be an excuse, increasingly it is becoming so.
Re: Children of the Stones. If you ever feel like describing how you did the game, I'd be interested. Gareth Thomas was a staple of genre television for a while. As a child I was greatly influenced by Blake's Seven and much later, sketched out my own RPG design for it. Blake's Seven was more influential for me than the big US shows like Star Trek.
Re: Daywatch. I'm of a generation where making up my own game systems was part of the hobby so I am realistic but relaxed about the product of my efforts. I have no desire to monetise my hobby and the systems are handcrafted for good reasons.
Re: Vindolanda. We live in strange days and it seems to me that arguments our grandparents settled are being refought.

Michael Cule.

Re: Brand identity. I remember the jeweller who said those things. They took quite a hit at the time. But I see what you mean about memory. In this case, I think we are seeing institutional change which will be more persistent than individual memory. I have always been pro-American. But let me put it this way, the UK military is replacing its service rifle, we won't be buying American. We can't take the risk. That means no ongoing parts contract, no training system etc. Memory may fade but investment decisions change the landscape for a generation.
Re: Paid GMs. So you have worked both sides of the line! I am surprised you get stage fright given your background in performance?

Re: Thirsty meeples. That is very cool. I use Conventions to try out stuff I have never played before. I don't have a great hit rate but its fun to try new games. After having owned Top Secret for decades I got to play it. It was awful in practice, but I'm glad that I tried it.

Joshua Kronengold.

Re: Spider Noir. In terms of game mechanics, your mileage may vary. I don't think we can resolve what "really" was happening. But I don't see it as just a web fluid or just a healing thing, because the Spider needs to sleep even when he hasn't been significantly hurt. My point is that the Spider needs to crash completely whereas Leyden loses a power (his electrical bolt). Remember that Leyden spends an evening being punch by a cop and is still ok even though he has no uses of his electrical bolt. So yes, obviously Megawatt has a bunch of disadvantages including a need to recharge. But he doesn't *pass out*. The Spider does.

Dylan Capel.

Re: Machine spirits. Yup and 40K is not my preferred future! I am increasingly encountering people who treat LLM as if they are people, referring to Chat GPT as "Chattie".

Roger Bell West.

Thank you for your help with graphical sources. I remember talking about living in London to a US friend who was amazed that I was willing to just walk across this city. Clearly I am reacting to the external propaganda/ disinformation that is trying to portray London as something it isn't. I've lived and worked in many places around the world, and London (the UK generally) is notably safe in comparison.

I have a friend who tells an anecdote about blithely going to a "bad neighbourhood" in the USA. They didn't know. Things turned a little hostile until he spoke and they realised he was actually British and therefore in the category of exotic foreigner rather than interloper.

Re: Collateral damage. Absolutely and I in no sense intended to imply otherwise.

Re: Paid GMs. I feel the same way. I am quite happy keeping my amateur status. But I have no problem with those who wish to do it. I think I was reacting to realising it is now a thing as it wasn't last time I looked.

RYCT Patrick Riley. I did some research on "Mad Jack" Churchill, including talking to people who had served with him. There is a perspective in which a very colourful, even eccentric leader figure has a more positive morale effect than a more downbeat officer. It may seem ludicrous to us now, but the argument was that for a force with a high percentage of people who would never have chosen to be soldiers if the war hadn't happened, this was good psychology. He was encouraging a strong sense of identification with a cultural identity, reminding those men that they were part of a proud Scottish warrior tradition gave them a place to build their own sense of identity as modern soldiers. So he may have been eccentric, but the social psychology of his behaviour was effective. Mad Jack and the units he lead were highly successful.

RYCT John Redden. Protestors with valid concerns vs black-shirts wearing nonce bonnets. I agree with you completely.

Bryant Durrell

Re: London and Seattle. I hear you! London has its drawbacks, the metropolitan area is 15 million people and not all of them are saints (!), but the disinformation about London also has a tinge of racism which I dislike. They say "high crime rate" but it is really a code for the demographics of some London Boroughs. Obviously there is crime, this is a big city, but murder is rare compared to global comparators.

Re: Frankenstein Chronicles. I hope you get to see it and enjoy it. No spoilers but your

description of your games made me think of this series.

Jim Vassilakos.

I appreciate your kind words about my country. We paid our debts in full.
I suit being British (my family is a mix of Scots and N Irish who moved to England a couple of generations ago) and I can accept the good and the bad of UK history. When I was stationed in Germany it occurred to me that I would have struggled greatly in having to be ashamed of recent history as many Germans were. That's not to ignore the faults of the past, the British did bad stuff in a lot of places for a long time, but I can be proud that my grandfather fought the Nazis and in some way provided me with a role model.

Lisa Padol.

Re; Daywatch. I seem to have a talent for running games based on worlds written by people who turn out to have unfortunate political views 😊. To be clear this is not a reflection of my own views and I do not support the reported comments of Lukyanenko or indeed M.A.R. Barker. I'm a bit of a lefty on the quiet and I fully support self-determination. I would rather that the post USSR peace had continued.
Re: The Homeric tradition. Yes, I see your point. I suppose the Odyssey game would be a singleplayer RPG?
RMCT Dale Meier. I have been developing the Daywatch campaign since the first novel came out and the core rulebook is 25,306 words long, then there are a bunch of supplements, as I said to Dale, the Enchantment supplement is 23,454 words long, the Advancement supplement is 39,983 words long, and the Character Creation supplement is 22,118 words etc. There are a bunch more, from Ritual Magic to Lycanthropes.
Re: Cultural appropriation. I do want to behave well and any pointers you can give me would be appreciated. I do not want to assume that I know how to navigate this, so I am listening.
Re: Strauss. The relationship between the Strauss and the PC because the player is totally into that kind of roleplay. As always, the player is what makes the game.
Re: Enola Holmes. I'm referring to both books and the movie versions. I enjoyed them, but they are far from historically accurate, from clothes, to social movements to technology to people, they treat the period between 1865 to 1910 as the same. Edith is based on a real person who was active in the twentieth century etc. It is a dream of England.
Re: signaling an alternate universe. Thank you, I have not seen "the One" and will check it out. I liked the subtlety of it in Spider Noir.
Re: Game mechanics of Spider Noir. I'm sure this could be built in various ways and yes, Leyden has a battery. I didn't do specific characters from the series, but I would certainly agree on Megawatt. My point is that the Spider loses all of his powers and needs to sleep to get them back.
Re: Deception. OK but replace Silvermane with the real Al Capone. She is dead. My point is that this cynical, paranoid gangster is *suspicious*. But he still buys Ben's explanations and she still isn't shot. I wouldn't recommend trying it with a Mexican Cartel! In addition, either Ben has a huge Disguise skill or it is easy to do, because everyone falls for his disguises. To the point of letting him into their apartment etc. I think saying there is some positive modifier to deception related checks is fair.
Re: Leydon, Marko and Lincoln. In the fine tradition of comic books, it's the Hotel California principle. You can check out but you never (entirely) leave the series. If it hadn't been cancelled I'd expect Leyden as the boss in Series 2.

Is Dr Doom actually Professor Moriarty?



The obvious answer is "*no*", but bear with me!
This was inspired by recent discussion with various E&A contributors (**ELF**, **Avram Grumer**, **Brian Rogers**, **Lisa Padol** etc.) about adaptations. It got me thinking about derived works of fiction. Specifically, movie versions of comic books and about how characters are translated and possibly adapted. I think that there is a difference between adapting a character and using the character's name and image as a signifier in an adaptation. What I mean by that is that you can put a character called "Dr Doom" in a movie or a game, but that doesn't mean you have "adapted" the character from the comic book.
Using the name is *not* adaptation of the character.
An adaptation does not mean that every element of original source *has* or *must be* adapted. Parts may be lost, be changed, not for the purposes of the adaption but through executive interference, artistic choices or just incompetence. I don't think various Fantastic Four (F4) movies are bad because they are adaptions, I think *most* of the adaptions of F4 are bad movies.
The reverse of this is media that does not include the names but does seem to capture the essence. For example, I assert that one of the best F4 movies may be The Incredibles, I think it captures an essence despite not having the signifiers of F4. It is possible to deliver the genre, the feel of the influences, without using any of the copyrighted characters. So, it can use none of the names, but still capture the spirit.
IMHO OfC your mileage may vary.



My point being that often villains who were distinctive in the originals are dumped into plots that don't require them.
I would argue that there are Fantastic Four comic books that *require* Dr Doom, that *require* Galactus etc. But the derived stories, in that case usually a movie, that *intends* to put Dr Doom into the movie and later finds a way to justify their inclusion. They are plotting in reverse.
Moriarty is like Dr Doom. A name that corpos want, but a character they often don't bother to understand. So, most versions of Dr Doom in the various movies, are not strongly embedded in the character developed over decades.
He's not that character, he's a box to be ticked.

This relates to plot based vs character based writing. In the former you have a plot that you populate with characters. In the latter you have a character and plot is generated as a consequence of who they are. A lot of "adaptations" are plot-based and less focussed on character.

With me so far? This is about adaptation from one type of media to another and why not everything in an adaptation *is* an adaptation.



The next bit may seem like a diversion but it isn't. This brings me to derived works, which use characters but have original plots by someone other than the original author. I am a fan of the Sherlock Holmes stories, an enthusiast but not a purist. I have read and watched *a lot* of the derived works. For example, I liked "Elementary" the series that puts a modern version of Holmes in New York. I read/watched the Enola Holmes series which has the younger sister of Sherlock Holmes as the POV character. I enjoyed the steampunk Sherlock Homes of the Guy Ritchie movies etc. I draw the line at the 2010 series "Sherlock" by Steven Moffat, not because I have any problem with a modernised Holmes, but because I think that Mr Moffat skips necessary steps in his storytelling which destroys his version of Holmes for me.
My point being that I am not one-true-way (OTW), just an enthusiast.
I am going to use Moriarity as my example, because the Sherlock Holmes stories have a huge corpus of derived works. If you have read/seen adaptations and derived works but not read the originals you may be left with the impression that Professor Moriarty is central to the plot(s). That these mysteries are very much about the conflict between Holmes and Moriarty.
They are not.
The character of Moriarty appears in only *two* of the sixty Sherlock Holmes stories, although his name is mentioned in another five.
He appears late, when the reader has already had many adventures with Holmes and Watson.
So, Moriarty appears in around 3% of the original stories and Holmes mentions him (in any way) in only around 8% of the original published works. As I am discussing the Professor, at least two decimals seem appropriate. So let me be precise, 8.33%. Other decimals are, of course, available.
I'm emphasising this because derived works are often eager to shoehorn Moriarty in.
My point is that like Dr Doom he is often been used as a signifier in a derived work that this *is* an adaptation of that character. So whatever other changes have been made to the background or character the brand identity is confirmed.
That is a mistake.
It is if Moriarty is somehow the essence of a Sherlock Holmes mystery.
He isn't.
You do *not* have to introduce a character called Moriarty into a derived work inspired by the Sherlock Holmes stories. He is only in a very few of the originals and he is not a factor in most of them.
Doing Moriarty well? That is hard. It is *difficult* to write a genius character.
Doing Moriarty justice? That merely requires a waterfall and adequate training in Baritsu!

I'm actually making a wider point, although you can say Moriarty is being "adapted", usually this is incorrect. The character name is plugged into the story as part of the brand identity.
He's famous, so he is in. That isn't writing a plot, that is marketing a product.
That is not a character, that is a signifier, a pointer towards the actual character.

So that character are often not actually adapted, because his characteristics are not dealt with in any meaningful way. The use of the name is about marketing not creativity. When the character is "subverted" it is often superficial rather than a meaningful reinterpretation of the character. The name is used without essence and without imagination and most importantly, without force. I will additionally argue that this is a common problem in the over-use of major villains in adaptations. Most adaptations underplay Moriarty.

To understand a character you need to see them in context.

When Doyle called Moriarty "*The Napoleon of Crime*" he was making a cultural reference that his Victorian English audience would have understood. It is his central metaphor.

You need to see Napolean Bonaparte as those Victorians would have understood him.

It took multiple regional hegemons, and at least one superpower, to stop Napoleon.

<place your EU jokes here>/ <comments on the metric system here>.



Napoleon Bonaparte changed the world.

That's what makes him frightening to a middle-class reader in England in the 1890's. You can even argue that what some of Victorian British culture is a reaction to the threat he helped create.

Our conservatism is partly reactionary.

There is no Wellington without Napoleon.

I suggest that Napoleon was the only person capable of making the French a plausible threat to the British Empire in the 19th century.

What China is to the USA in 2026, this one man was to the world in 1811.

He justified the repressed and repressing culture of the Victorians. Their politics can be seen as a reaction to *him*.

Why?

Because he can take your world apart.

That's what Doyle was telling his audience about Moriarty.

This is not just a gangster, this is not some mere criminal. This is a paradigm break.

He will shift the ground beneath you. He is the end of your world.

If you are *not* frightened of Moriarty you have failed to understand what you are dealing with.



The best film representation of Professor Moriarty in recent years was Jared Harris's performance in a Game of Shadows (2011).

Moriarty's murder of Irene Adler in that movie is not canonical, but it is perfect as an adaptation of the character of Moriarty.

It shows rather than tells and it works on several levels. Anyone who has read the original stories knows Irene Adler - she can even outwit Sherlock Homes. But against Moriarty?

She doesn't stand a chance.

It was also a great performance by Jared Harris.

What I appreciated about the writing of Moriarty in Game of Shadows is not that it was a slavish repeat of the character in the original stories, because it wasn't. The plot is original, with parts of two of Doyle's other stories. But it respected the character. It actually adapted *Moriarty* rather than just using his name.

In the tv series Star Trek: The Next Generation, the character of Worf (the head of security) was frequently used by the writers to show how tough the villain of the week was, by having them beat

Worf. In the original stories, Holmes knows he is outmatched by Moriarty. That is disturbing because we have seen just how competent Holmes is in many previous stories.
Holmes only defeats Moriarty with help from others (most notably his brother, Mycroft). He eventually manoeuvres Moriarty into trying to kill him. Think about that for a moment.
What people often forget is that Holmes is the original "*justice not law*" vigilante. Moriarty will never face a court of law, he has never even been arrested. He will never stop trying to kill Holmes.
One of them isn't walking off that mountain.
Holmes kills Moriarty in hand to hand combat. He wins because Holmes has had secret training that he has concealed from Moriarty. Basically, he is an early adopter of Jiu Jitsu techniques.
But the beauty of the original story is that Moriarty has even prepared for defeat. He has Colonel Sebastian Moran as a backup, ready to kill Holmes if Moriarty doesn't win.
He isn't sentimental, he is competent. That, *is* Professor Moriarty.
I hope some of this made sense. This has been a cry to respect your villains and for the importance of character over plot!

Inter-textual Addenda:
Aside from the large number of Holmes derived works that adapt Sherlock Holmes there is also an inter-textual aspect, that you may be amusing. Essentially various authors have decided that their universe in the same as the one in which we meet Holmes and Watson. For example:



The Man from U.N.C.L.E. universe is the same one as that of Sherlock Holmes. In the canonical MfU novel series by David McDaniel, Colonel Sebastian Moran is one of the founders of THRUSH. In the novel, "The Rainbow Affair" Solo and Kuryakin meet the elderly Sherlock Holmes.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_McDaniel

The Dr Who Universe.
Beyond the BBC tv show there is an ecosystem of novels, audiobooks etc. In this expanded universe, Sherlock Holmes is treated as a real person whose adventures are fictionalised by Doyle (so there is a core of truth but the stories are semi-fictional). Holmes is a real person who has met the Doctor on more than one occasion. The most obvious example is the novel, All-Consuming Fire (1994) by Andy Lane in which the Seventh Doctor and Ace meet Holmes and Watson. This was made into an audio book in 2015. In the same novel, there is a cross-over to the Cthulhu mythos. Not the only time there is a Holmes/Mythos crossover.



In the Hall of Stone by Patrick Brady.

Art attributions

Dr Doom and the Fantastic Four. This is copyright by Marvel. This is from Wikipedia and shows the first appearance of Dr Doom in Fantastic Four no.5 in 1962. Fair use is asserted. /https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=73382539

Professor Moriarty, illustration by Sidney Paget which accompanied the original publication of "The Final Problem". It is in the Public Domain. It appeared in *The Strand Magazine* in December, 1893.

Holmes and Watson in a Sidney Paget illustration for "The Adventure of Silver Blaze". It is in the Public Domain. Published in *The Strand Magazine*, December 1892, p. 646.

Bonaparte at the Pont d'Arcole, by Baron Antoine-Jean Gros, (c. 1801). It is in the Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1750105

Mr Jared Harris as Professor Moriarty. This is a poster for the movie Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows (2011). The poster art copyright belongs to Warner Bros. Fair use for the purposes of review.

The Man from U.N.C.L.E title card. Fair use is asserted. By http://www.tv-intros.com/m/man%20from%20uncle.jpg. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=16029276

Cover art of the novel "All-consuming fire" showing the Doctor with Sherlock Holmes. Lane, A. (1994). *All-consuming fire*. Virgin Publishing. Fair use for the purposes of review.

On AI (3).

This is the third in an ongoing conversation between myself and **Jim Vassilakos**.
It started in E&A 14. This *may* be my last word, so consider this quote from Felin and Holweg (2024):

"Imagine an LLM trained in 1633 on every scientific text ever written up to that point, Ask it about Galileo and heliocentrism. Thousands of years of geocentric texts would swamp Galileo's ideas, so the model would tell you he's wrong.

It would also rate Tycho Brahe's astrology as more credible than the idea that the Earth moves, because more people had written about astrology."

Felin, T. and Holweg, M. (2024) 'Theory is all you need: AI, human cognition, and causal reasoning', *Strategy Science*, **9**(4), pp. 346-371. (Accessed: 20 September 2026)
Available at: https://doi.org/10.1287/stsc.2024.0189

Everyone else RAEBNC. I hope you have a good month! END.

Back to Brazilian Gamebooks – part XI: *O Rei e a Morte*

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

Sometimes, churning out one innovation after another can be exhausting, and a return to the roots of Tolkienian fantasy can provide a safe haven for the reader-player. This is precisely what Adriano Oliveira's *O Rei e a Morte* (2025) – "The King and the Death", in free translation – achieves.

Little is known about the author, and this may well have been his first gamebook. The author undertook the entire creative process on his own and developed an app using the Kodular programming language, which utilises block-based logic; unfortunately, it is only available for Android. This makes *O Rei e a Morte* the first Brazilian gamebook available in this digital format[1].

It's quite an interesting story: two kings are at war. King Esdras is losing and, in desperation, makes a pact with the forces of darkness. His fallen soldiers are brought back to life as the undead and triumph over King Vladmir's army. After Esdras's army captures Vladmir, Esdras himself kills his enemy. Shortly after the murder, the debt to the forces of darkness is called in: when Esdras' son is born, he must be handed over to Death himself. Esdras refuses, and Death imprisons him in a silver relic, which can only be found during the winter season each year. Whoever frees him will have a wish granted, but will spread a terrible curse across the land.

One positive aspect of this gamebook is the ability to choose your hero: warrior, archer or wizard. In practice, it doesn't make much difference, as there are only a few bonuses for certain choices. If a particular situation is more favourable for the wizard, their luck roll is automatically successful. If the warrior is at a disadvantage in a situation, they will face penalties on their rolls. Even so, the reader-player is allowed to make a choice even before the narrative begins. Another highlight is the 500 narrative references, which is a great achievement for a debut gamebook.

There is, however, a controversial aspect to the visual presentation of *O Rei e a Morte*. The interior scenes and vignettes have not been credited and seems to have been generated using artificial intelligence. They are not poorly made, but they are full of clichés. Yet this is not even the narrative's main flaw. Some parts of the narrative sound very artificial, reminiscent of early video game and computer RPGs, such as encountering a resident outside their house who, without the slightest suspicion, invites the hero inside or asks what they'd like to talk about. Greater care taken with the dialogue would have made all the interactions in the adventure feel more organic. Another drawback was that the text had not been proofread. Fortunately, the flow of the narrative isn't too badly affected, but it's still jarring to read sentences with incorrect punctuation and accentuation, as well as some words that are repeatedly misspelt (such as "tryp", instead of "trip"[2]). The author was brave to produce his work 100 per cent independently (and on his own), but it is precisely for this reason that quality issues can arise.

Otherwise, the difficulty level is easy, making it a good choice for those new to gamebooks. Its gameplay is very similar to Fighting Fantasy. It's worth reading to discover a new author, support Brazilian gamebooks and enjoy the ever-entertaining fantasy adventure.

---

[1] https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.oreieamorte.kekagames&pcampaignid=web_share&fbclid=IwY2xjawU5Bd1leHRuA2FlbQIxMQBwZG9mBXNydGMGYXBwX2lkEDIyMjAzOTE3ODgyMDA4OTIAAR7EYvwQX5gMljxD4G8r7QJfgEG_f8blooZ38O0YEX-FF7rBLs0DYFTEbaMNTg_aem_fQBcjZ9kxDcOtPSpC077bQ

[2] An attempt to translate the misspelling of "viajem" instead of "viagem".

COMMENTS #15

JOHN REDEEN: Thanks for the information!
BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: I think Brazilian authors have been more experimental, but I've never seen the 'legacy' mechanic itself used in such a radical way in English-language gamebooks. But I can't say for 100 per cent certain.
ROGER BW: Nice metaphor 😊
LISA PADOL: I hadn't thought of that – wow! It makes perfect sense!





OBS: I have the copy on the left. Perhaps the one on the right is a reprint, which I wasn't able to confirm in time...

John Redden

Johnredden@AOL.com
(public facing e-mail address)

310.418.1550 mobile

Reddened Stars number 16
(E ka hoku o ula`ula ` ole)

Web sites:
johntredden.com
southkonafarms.com
johnreddenauthor.com

Other e-mail:
southkonafarms@gmail.com

USPS:
88-2636 Mamalahoa Hwy Captain Cook
HI 96704-8809

808.328.2328 land line

Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

New Campaign

Joshua Levy from our NoCal gaming group is attempting to run a virtual table top game using Zoom. In addition to the GM there are six players using DnDBeyond maps. This will be a challenge. I am pleased to have a regular FRP game again. I had been playing effectively one time a year in Northern California after Lee shut her game down. (No fault of her own. She did the best she could with what she had.) We have a session every two weeks.

Northern Californian native Americans are the focus of the game. It takes place *before* any European contact. Joshua ran an excellent native American campaign years ago using GURPS. This one uses a DnDBeyond variant.

All the characters are in the Chacokiva clan which collectively make up the tribe. Characters in the game: Chami, Hiisha, Angwusi, Wikvanva, Wakanika, White Coyote.

Wikvanva’s totem is an owl and her spirit is a squirrel.

MAIS: Mythic American Indian Southwest.

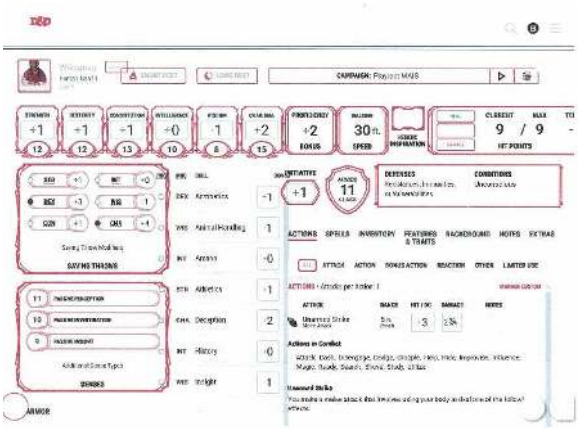
Animals and People: There is not a huge difference between animals people is this setting. Some people are animals. Some animals are people. Some are animal people.

Time is cyclical: The year is a cycle. The next year is another cycle.

Relationship to places: People, tribes and spirits are tied to a specific place.

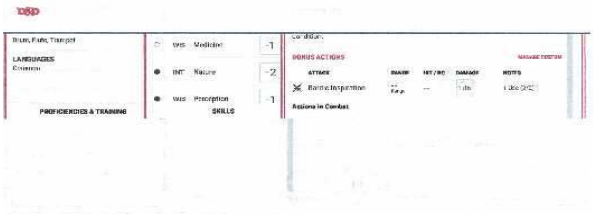
More social, less individual: There are group rights and group ownership. A person is viewed as part of a group.

Migrations are normal: People travel. Villages can exist for a number of cycles. They are often formed from other villages.



Wikvanva's character sheet in its current state is seen to the left.

The adventure seemed a bit DnDish to start with. I informed Joshua I wanted the run to focus more on native American culture.



For the next adventure, we are involved with legal issues in the neighboring village.

Note, the colored images from the virtual table top.

Legal Process



Gathering skill is important in the second legal contest. In both legal contests someone fell on on an innocent person.
The legal system varies from tribe to tribe, but in general: all disputes are argued by the extended families of the people involved in front of the settlement's councilors. Often the settlement's leader oversees the process. In very small settlements, the argument might be in front of the village elders. In larger settlements, they may serve as a sort of court of appeals, or as advisors to the court (which is made of up the councilors).

Prison is not a penalty. The normal penalty is payment of damages. People who are seen as bad for the village, or who are a danger to others, or who are untrustworthy or unpredictable, are banished. Banishment is usually permanent, but may only last 1-3 years for teenagers or if the crime is seen as impulsive. (Banishment often results in death, but death is not the penalty, it is the consequence of the penalty.)

Damages are a much wider concept in MAIS legal proceedings than in classic D&D legal proceedings. For example, a person who injures another such that they can not hunt may be required to provide meat to that person for the rest of his life. A person who kills a married person might be required to marry their widow. That marriage might not involve sex, but it would absolutely involve supporting the widow and any children.

In general, MAIS legal systems care very little about why something happened and much more about what the result was, and what might happen in the future. Therefore, the penalty for

killing someone on purpose vs. killing them by accident (what we would call murder vs. manslaughter) is not reflected in punishment. Banishment is used to prevent future crimes, when that is seen as likely.

Finally, in this system, families with higher social standing, have especially persuasive and well spoken members, or are locals, have an advantage over families of lower standing, are less well spoken, or from far away.

Hiisha landed on a person. Each witness is quizzed. Wikvanva uses storytelling to tell a lie. Chami fell and broke a leg of an elder. We have to help the youth hunt so the elder is fed.

The next encounter involves sneaking vertically into an village building. The characters are required to scale up the cliff single file. The village has six guards, You can see their images at the top of the virtual table top. Their initial best weapon is thrown rocks. Wikvanva, my character is hit but makes it to the top of the cliff. I asked Joshua if there was a MAIS magic system and he told me is working on it. As a result, we used the DnDBeyond magic system. I am no longer familiar all the spells. Wikvanva is a shaman, but is considered a bard. I found the list of 1st level bard spells via the DnDBeyond URL. Me, the player, really didn't know how to use a number of them. My character did successfully cast command. Before the next game, I have some homework to do.



Regardance

I am reading The City We Became by N.K. Jemisin. Its about New York City. An interesting but sometimes unpleasant read.

We attended an excellent concert in the Volcano art center. It was a Bob Dylan tribute concert. I did not know he wrote Forever

Young.

Sum Comments

Patrick Brady, re LaTeX. I used it years ago. It was the equivalent of learning a new computer language. These days I am fat, dumb and happy as I stick with LibreOffice.// Gestetner stencils. Good riddance.// I enjoyed the article on AI. I will not let AI command my vehicle (yet).// I also enjoyed the article on *hideouts*.// I believe the *clique* is the most common form of GM dickery.

Mark Wilson, I'm attempting to clarify *Gygaxian* antagonism. Some of the first games I played in the late 1970s were ran by Nicolai (Nial) Shapiro. I remember them more as puzzle games. Later he ran Runequest. In that game you got bloodied up good and proper. Gygaxian? I think it would apply to a tough scenario of COC.

Patrick Zoch, yes, a nice experiment on each page.// I don't think I've played in a game with a formal interrogation. In the last game I ran, Hotel California, the PCs questioned Barbie, but that was not a formal interrogation.// I prefer page 6 and all the color.

Patrick Riley, I don't recall a DnD game with rangers. Its just me. It must be part of DnD version 5.// Chaos theory… hmm.

Attronarch, how about a pond of lost souls? Go Ambros!

Pedro and **Maira**, re Eastern mysticism, I stand forewarned.

Myles Corcoran, David was supposed to run Orient Express COC last minicon, but couldn't make it because his wife was ill.// I always like to bring this up. Capitalism was the first collectivist system created in the 17th century. Mass employment of workers in factories in large numbers ushered its creation. A market economy goes back to the beginning of human society. A market economy predates capitalism. AI is changing everything.

Brian Rogers, there is nothing like an excellent trip. // I'm not familiar with the comics in your zine.// Re Tchaikovsky, I didn't

read those books. I read his books on aliens and alien planets. I'll avoid the ones you read.

Brian Misiaszek, as usual I enjoyed Habana Horror.// I thought your political comments are more than appropriate. In some ways I consider Hawai`i where we live to almost be a foreign country.

Gabriel Roark, yes, take it easy with injuries.// I appreciate that the Player Character order I described for Hotel California COC helped.// What variety of whiskey does the cabinet contain?

Dylan Capel, there are other AI models other than LLM. One is a rules based AI with self modifying changes.

Roger BW, GURPS Traveller: I've had a good experience with that combination.// Interesting comments on contradictory policies in the UK.

Avram Grumer, did you taste wines during the wine cellar game?// I agree on experience points.

Timothy Collinson, you mention Kava. Kava tea in Hawai`i is a legal downer. I tried it for a while.// I also agree that the 16 page limit means better zine cohesion. The downside is writers use smaller and smaller fonts to get the zine under 16 pages.

Dale Meier, Golems in COC: where they come from along with an excellent description.// I enjoyed the Traveller tidbit on the Romulan shop keeper.

Bryant Durrell, best of luck on the move. I hope that I don't get so old and rickety that I have to move from the Big Island.

Michael Cule, oh! Cleanup. I have to do this from time to time.// Thank you for the update on UK politics and the European Union. What's Russia up to in the UK?

Jim Vassilakos, re the Great Bank Robbery. Damn! AI out of control on the dark side.// There is one gaming club on the Big Island in Kailua Kona (Four Pillars). It is 30 miles to the north of me and they don't open until 5:00 PM HST. I can only get there by taking a dangerous road at night. Nope. There might be one in Hilo. It would almost be a 100 mile drive to get there.// I found Paranoia to be fun. Just don't take it seriously.

Lisa Padol, I attended a World Con in Anaheim about 1995. It was advertised as “LA Con”. That bothered me since it was in Orange County.// Your comment on Habana Horror is interesting.// Re high horse. Years ago I rode horses at my aunt and uncles ranch in the West. When you are on a horse, you are up there.// Four hour sessions is an art unto its self.// I like your point about genuine mistakes.

Joshua Kronengold, OO design patterns were my bread and butter for ten years before I gave up software for farming.// My solution for running Traveller was to simply jettison the Empire and all its pseudo-medieval pinning. It quickly became a far future space game. I was heavily influenced by ~~Runes in Space~~ Other Suns minus the Furry Fandom.// Has the Bourne Shell ever produced compiled to native code?// I remember you mentioning gambling. The app-tool KALSHI allows you to be on just about anything. I can’t help but wonder if someone has used KALSHI to bet on DnD tournament play. If not, I’m sure it will happen.

Jargon Zen

The student asked the Zen Master, “What is a going down sentence?”
The Master answered, “A stone man rides an iron cow past a jeweled world.”

Humor

10 years ago we had Steve Jobs, Bob Hope and Johnny Cash.

Now we have no jobs, no hope and no cash.

Please Lord, don’t let Kevin Bacon die!

Issue 254

Age of Menace



5 Livingstone Drive,
Dundas, ON, L9H 7S3 CANADA

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

brian.misiaszek@gmail.com

Copyright Brian Misiaszek 2026

Habana Horror

Mazorra Gazetteer (Part 14)

Mazorra Cemetery, Preparation Sheds & Chapel



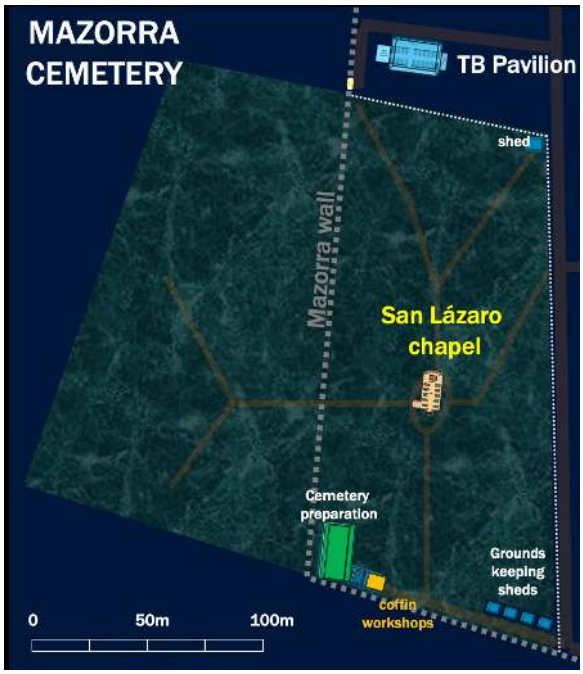
Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

Unlike Havana's grand *Cristóbal Colón Cemetery*, Mazorra's own cemetery is institutional, and almost anonymous. Most burials belong to former patients whose families could not reclaim them, whose names were lost, or whom Mazorra found convenient to forget.

The cemetery lies along the eastern edge of the Mazorra. The present asylum wall cuts awkwardly through older burial land, leaving part of the cemetery inside Mazorra and part beyond it. Within the Mazorra a low three-foot wall encloses the north and east sides pieced by two service gates locked after dark. Royal palms rise above the graves, mixed with banyan, & bamboo thickets near the boundary wall. Grass often reaches knee height between maintenance visits. Narrow paths vanish beneath weeds, fallen palm fronds, and exposed roots. There are few statues, crosses, or monuments, these being clustered about the tiny chapel. Most graves are marked by plain stone or cement slabs set flush with the earth. Many bear only numbers. Others are blank, cracked, or too weathered to read.

At night the cemetery grounds are profoundly dark. Vegetation muffles sound, breaks up sightlines, and makes distances unreliable. There are no lights within the cemetery itself. Even the nearest bulb from the TB Pavilion is mostly hidden behind palms and shrubbery.

Patients and many staff avoid the cemetery after sunset. The reason is not simply fear of ghosts. The place is socially contaminated. Patients know that people vanish here and return as boxes, numbers, or rumours. Some believe the dead are never properly named, prayed over, or left in peace. Catholic staff distrust the abandoned chapel and its deconsecrated ground. Superstitious orderlies say the cemetery offends the dead because Mazorra buries some bodies too quickly, too cheaply, or under the wrong name



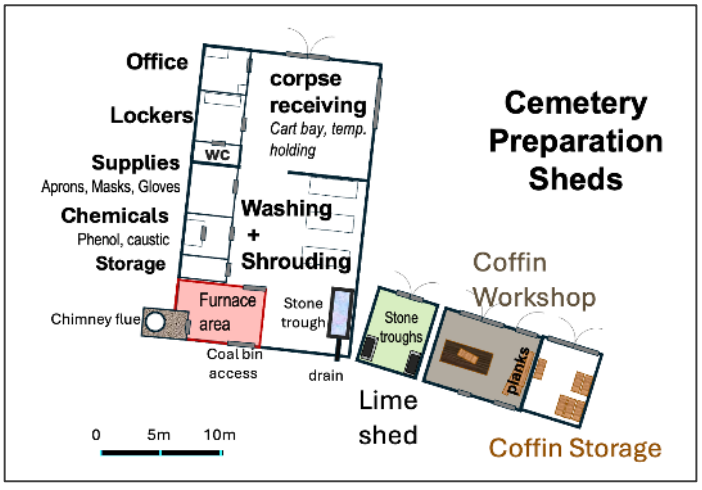
Practical fears reinforce the superstitious ones. Staff whisper of spectral lights moving among the graves in the night vanishing when anyone investigates, and a church bell sounding from a chapel whose belfry no longer holds one. Older patients warn that if you answer a voice calling from the cemetery, another name is written on a blank marker by morning.

Cemetery Workshops & Sheds



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

In the southwest corner, where the high wall bends, stands a small cluster of service buildings officially called the *Talleres y Depósitos del Cementerio*. Patients call them *Los Talleres de los Muertos*, the ***Workshops of the Dead***. The buildings include a body preparation shed, coffin carpentry shop, lime cremation house, and tool sheds. The preparation shed holds plank tables, canvas aprons, rubber gloves, gauze masks, scrub brushes, phenol, chloride of lime, quicklime, caustic soda, stone troughs, and even a small brick-and-iron coal furnace.



Officially, bodies are washed, shrouded, boxed, and prepared for burial. Unofficially, this is where Mazorra disposes of the dead it does not want examined too closely: unclaimed patients, unidentified bodies, contagious cases, indigents, political prisoners, and deaths inconvenient to explain. The furnace is too small for proper cremation, but large enough to burn clothing, bedding, contaminated waste, coffin scraps, and evidence. During outbreaks, the cemetery workshops may process several bodies a day.

Coffin & Casket Workshop: This specialty patient carpentry workshop holds pine boards, trestles, saws, planes, glue pots, clamps, hammers, nails, chalk, rope, handles, and hinges. The caskets are plain pine boxes with no hinges; their curved lids lean against the wall. The six- and eight-sided coffins are shaped to fit a body and made from cheaper pine, each with a single flat lid. Both types are designed to be nailed shut. Several coffins are plainly too short for adults, yet wider than the child-sized ones.

Other Sheds: Farther east stand several rough wooden sheds, used intermittently by the groundskeepers. One houses a 1921 *Knud & Oscar Jacobsen* riding mower; others hold push mowers, scythes, shovels, mattocks, picks, rakes, grave ropes, lanterns, oil tins, tarps, blank markers, and handcarts. Most are secured with cheap padlocks, but the mower shed has a stout Yale lock due to the kerosine tins stored inside. The tools in these sheds can serve as improvised weapons, and the clutter offers places to hide.

The Abandoned Chapel of *San Lázaro*



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

The old mortuary chapel of *San Lázaro*, built in 1860, stands near the western side of the burial ground, several hundred yards from the nearest active pavilion. Once dedicated to the patron saint of the sick and poor, it served to hold funeral services & memorial masses for staff and patients. A square inner low wall only 2 feet high surrounds the chapel & marked the consecrated graveyard.

After asylum expansion, neglect, and hurricane damage, the chapel was condemned, deconsecrated, and abandoned. Most staff avoid it. Patients seldom approach. Orderlies speak of drums at night and a phantom church

bell. Older nurses mention lanterns moving among the graves after visiting hours.

Main Mortuary Chapel Level

The upper *San Lázaro* chapel is a roofless ruin, open to sun, rain, and moonlight. Its heavy wooden doors hang warped and partly ajar. Inside, broken pews rot in uneven rows across cracked floor tiles littered with leaves, plaster, bird droppings, and fragments of coloured glass. The stained-glass windows are long gone, leaving only narrow empty openings in the walls.

The marble altar still stands at the east end, damp-stained but largely intact. A Hard *Spot Hidden* roll notices faint scrape marks around its base and a narrow gap behind the plinth; it can be shifted with tools, or combined STR 200, revealing a cramped 10-foot-deep masonry cavity beneath. The relics it once contained were removed, but sounds made by opening it alerts anyone below.

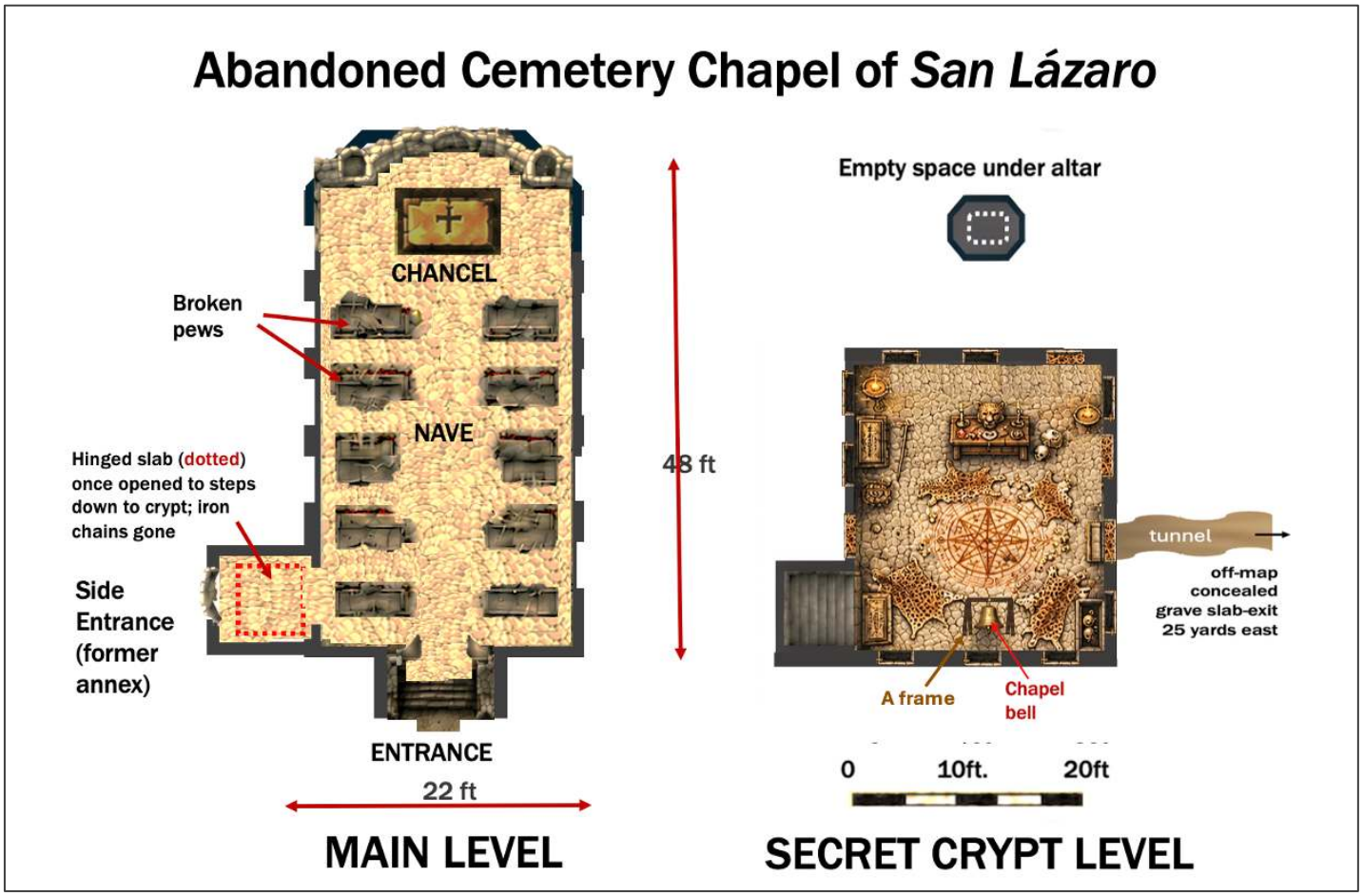
In the former annex & side entry, a stone slab, roughly six feet square and four inches thick, lies flush with the vestibule floor. A Regular *Spot Hidden* while searching the chapel notices that it does not match the surrounding tiles; examining it under electric light shows two bronze lifting rings corroded and green along one edge. This is the old crypt entrance. The chains of its hoist are gone, and it weighs almost 2000 lbs (950 kg). Opening it requires a lever, jack, or improvised rope block & tackle. Once raised, the slab reveals stairs descending down into the crypt.

A sledgehammer could crack it, but it would be a slow, noisy way to get through. A pry bar or wedges used in that crack would help break off a passable section. It would take 10 minutes of repeated heavy blows to break away a section large enough to enter.

Secret Lower Crypt Level

Beneath the ruined *San Lázaro* chapel lies a small burial vault for clergy and prominent benefactors. Stone niches, stacked three high, line its walls. Coffins were carried down the steps after a massive stone hatch in the side vestibule was raised. The roughly one-ton slab, once lowered into place, protects the vault better than any lock.

The covert Leopard Men cult has turned the crypt into a secondary shrine and emergency refuge. Leopard-spotted cloth and painted hides hang among the empty niches; drums, oil lamps, masks, bones, and ritual tools are kept ready for use. A snarling leopard's face is carved into the floor and darkened with blood. Nearby, a broken, headless angel leans against the wall, draped with jewellery and other trophies taken from victims. The air smells of damp stone and something like a rotten tooth. Corner braziers lit to try and warm the space send filtered smoke through cracks in the floor above.



The niches are empty of the dead. The remains were removed after the chapel fell out of use, but plaques bearing the dead's names remain sealed in the walls. Near the crypt's southern wall, the old Spanish colonial bronze chapel bell weighs 265 lbs hangs in a timber A-frame with its clapper removed Struck with a hammer, it can signal the cultists outside. Its sound carries through the crypt, tunnel, and cemetery soil; above ground, it seems to come from several directions, making it difficult to locate.

The Crypt's Two Routes





Image generated via ChatGPT-.6 Luna

With the hoist chains long gone, Yobama and his cultists use a concealed screw-type automobile jack to raise one edge of the roughly one-ton slab from below. When the gap is about a foot high, they wedge a timber beneath it, remove the jack, and leave it at the foot of the stairs. If the timber is suddenly dislodged, say by a sledgehammer, the stone lid slams closed.

A waist-high niche in the eastern wall holds ceramic bowls atop a folded leopard skin. Beneath them, a fitted wooden panel painted to resemble stone conceals a low tunnel mouth, hidden from the crypt's light. Beyond it, a foul-smelling earthen passage, 1.2 metres wide and 1.4 metres high, climbs east for 25 metres to a concealed exit beneath the slab of a long-forgotten family grave. It feels like a long, sealed grave. Wooden frames brace the passage at intervals, forcing travellers to duck. Several side burrows branch off and end in gruesome dens beneath shattered coffins.

The air is foul and close. With a good light, most people can stoop through in just over a minute holding their breath. In darkness, uneven footing and low support beams force them to duck or crawl, making the journey take at least two minutes, even with holding onto a guide rope slick with muck and slime that runs along the main passage from the crypt to the exit. Anyone emerging will be smeared with earth and will look like they came out of a grave.

At the far end of the tunnel a grave slab seals the exit. Its western edge is hinged, & a counterweight makes the heavy stone manageable. Walking or jumping on the weathered slab from above will not release it. Turning the iron ring near its edge a quarter-turn withdraws the locking bolt, tallowing one to push the slab upward from below. A second ring on the topside connects to the first by a spindle & serves as a handle for unlocking and lifting the slab from above.

Horrors of the Mazorra

A 1933 *Pulp Cthulhu* scenario (Part 14)

Recap AoM#253: The Vault's collapse damages the Leopard Men's temple inside the long abandoned *Old Laundry Pavilion* and sends Porra, Cultists, Raiders and even Vault escapees fleeing either outside or into subterraneans ways. Investigator choices and actions determine who is captured & who escapes. Othello begins his rite to restrain *Baron Kriminèl,* but a cultist scatters the western cowrie eye before its boundary is secured.

Time	Agency	Event
23:10	⚓	Othello realizes Western eye needs repair
~23:33	🎲	Repairing Othello's Western Eye
→23:30	🎲➡️⬡	Yobama cornered inside the Mazorra Cemetery
23:59	⚓	The Haitian Bokor *Mateo Derosiers* dies
Midnight	⚓➡️🎭	The Baron Walks

Player Agency Flags

⚓	FIXED	An Anchored or established state. This happens *regardless* of Investigator action.
➡️	DEFAULT	This proceeds *unless* 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.

23:10 ⚓ 🎲 The Broken Western Eye



Image generated via ChatGPT-.6 Luna

Othello falters midway through naming the innocent. Tambor's rhythm continues, but one beat lands dead.

Othello raises a hand for Tambor to keep playing, then turns his face toward the others. "The western eye is broken."

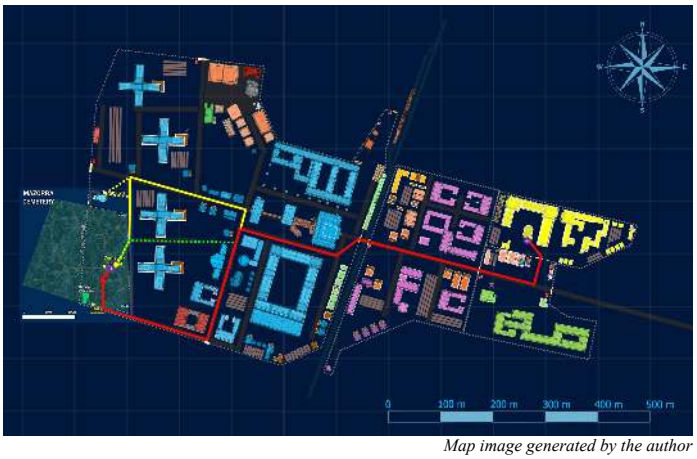
The rite is interrupted, not undone. It can still be completed if the scattered cowries are restored before Mateo dies and *Baron Kriminèl* slips free of his remaining restraints.

Othello must remain on the chapel steps, at the ceremony's centre. Tambor, who laid the western eye-cross, must sustain the rhythm. Someone else must cross the cemetery and repair it.

Othello traces the pattern at his feet: paired cowries in a cross, their openings turned inward toward the chapel. Recover the scattered shells and return them to their places. Replace any missing or bloodstained ones with clean cowries from his spare bag. Substitutes will not serve.

He holds out the bag. "Find what was moved. Put back only what belongs." Then, more urgently: "If something has tried to finish the eye for you, do not trust it. Hurry."

23:13 Crossing the Night Mazorra to the Cemetery



Map image generated by the author

Investigator's must choose how they plan to get across to the damaged Eye so Othello can complete his ceremonial hearing to restrict the Baron's activities. The southern route has the clearest footing &landmarks. The faster northern route allows a stop at Mateo's bedside or the TB Pavilion telephone; that time cannot be made up by hurrying.

The middle *shortcut* is fastest and discreet on foot, but it crosses dark, muddy ground with poor landmarks and ambush cover; an old baseball diamond used by staff & patients, ditches, & unevenly tilled garden plots.

Route	Walking	Bicycle	Vehicle
Southern service road (red) **~1.2 km**	**~22 min**	**7-8 min**	**~4-7 min** (with keys, 5-9 w/o)
Northern route (yellow 1.2 km) **via TB Pavilion** (1.4 km yellow dotted)	**~20 min,** *plus any stop*	**6 min**	**3-5 min** (with keys, 4-8 w/o)
Middle shortcut (green dotted) ~ 1 km	**~15 min**	Not safe off road in dark	Cannot drive off road here

Keeper's Note - Travel Options: Orderlies' bicycles are locked in a shed north of the main east gate (white star). Picking the basic lock takes 1–3 minutes and a Regular *Locksmith* roll; *Mechanical Repair* may open a simple lock. Forcing it with tools requires a Regular *STR* roll and makes noise. The cemetery's pedestrian gates require a Regular *Locksmith* roll. Bicycles can be lifted over the three-foot wall.

The escort's armoured limousine (red star) is parked at the *Director's Manse*. Retrieving the keys & starting it takes 1–3 minutes. If asked, *El Rey's* guards seeking permission may delay by 1D6 minutes; a successful *Fast Talk* roll or suitable leverage can shorten the wait. Hot-wiring takes 1–3 minutes and a Regular *Locksmith* roll with time and tools, Hard under pressure (e.g. taking it without permission). Stealing the car prompts a call to close the railway crossing gate, adding 2D6 minutes before heated discussion turns into permission granted & it reopens. Routine driving to the TB Pavilion or either of the two cemetery vehicle gates requires no *Drive Auto* roll. Cars must park at the middle or southern gate and continue on foot. A utility vehicle blocks the south gate; out of fuel, it must be moved before a car can pass (getting out, breaking into it & pushing it in neutral costs time) & the stout vehicle-gate Yale lock requires a Hard *Locksmith* roll. Keepers may allow use of vehicles in locked garage sheds (blue star).

Whichever route they choose, past the railway tracks the institutional Mazorra fades into a murmuring of Cuban night sounds. Crickets & katydids make a thin, steady rasp. Cuban treefrogs add scattered, rough, barking calls. Two low, raspy "whee-yoh" notes, a pause, then one more, which someone says is a Nightjar is repeated elsewhere in the dark. After the earlier rain, drops still shake from palm fronds and drip in brief, uneven patters when a breeze catches them.

~23:30 Mateo *Derosier*'s Final Breaths

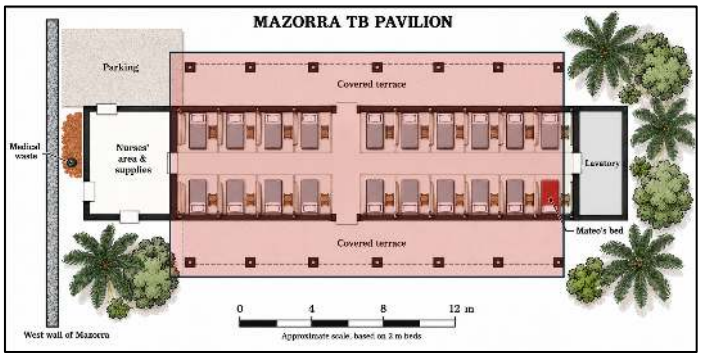


Image generated via ChatGPT-6 Luna from a map image by the author

If they decide to detour to the Mazorra's TB Pavilion to visit the Bokor *Mateo Derosier*, they find it by night a low, weathered stucco building beside the western wall, just north of the cemetery. Covered terraces flank two sides, and only dim lights are showing behind curtains of open windows and transoms. A yellow electric light is over both the north and south doors, orbited by large moths.

Entering via the north screen entrance door, the ward smells of damp concrete, the copper-iron tang of blood, & the sharp reek of disinfectant bleach used to cover the smell

of sickness. Investigators encounter *Enfermera* (RN) Rita María Gómez seated in a desk at the crossroad of the corridor & exits before they can reach Derosier. An attractive redhead she is the only RN on duty, responsible for eighteen patients in the dying stages of their TB. She does not admit visitors merely because they ask.

When she learns who they want to see, she studies them with tired suspicion. "You wish to see him? What do you need from him? He has little strength left."

Keeper's Note: A brief, respectful explanation earns them a short visit, especially if they offer practical help and say that Othello asked them. A calm explanation or useful assistance needs no roll; pressure or a failed attempt to persuade her may cost time while she finishes her round. Threats end the visit.

Before allowing the Investigators through to see him, RN Gómez says she must give him his prescribed morphine injection. She does so, moistens his mouth, and replaces bloodstained cloths. As she passes them to attend to another patient calling out, she'll mention, "Monsignor Aurelio came this afternoon. Mateo agreed to receive the last rites. I was told by Herminia he asked for them himself."

⚓ 🎲 Mateo's Final Words



Image generated via ChatGPT-6 Luna

Mateo Derosiers recognizes them. His eyes stray toward the empty window behind him. "While I breathe, he must pass through a narrow door. When I die, it opens."

If told of Othello's ceremony, he reaches weakly toward the speaker, "Take him these words." Between laboured breaths, he says, "I asked that those who hurt me should answer. Let no innocent pay my debt. No patient for a gaoler. No nurse for a murderer. No innocent investigator for a Porra. If the guilty hide among them, that gives him no right to strike them all."

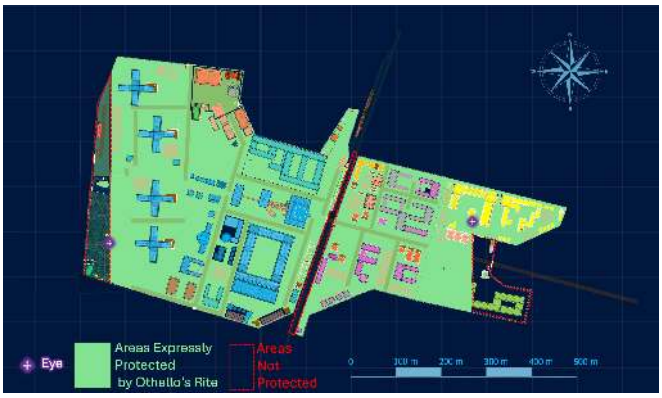
If an Investigator asks him to, Mateo Derosiers will name aloud those at his bedside as innocent witnesses, "…and all those in this Pavilion."

If asked why he asked for *Extreme Unction*, he answers, "My beliefs are complicated, and he offered me kindness. I would not give offence to a kind man."

As his breathing eases under the morphine, Mateo's French gives way to Kreyòl. "Padone moi. Mwen fatige." *Forgive me. I am tired.* He adds something softer, which a French speaker can understand as, *"Keep the door narrow."* Then he closes his eyes and drifts into sleep. He will not awaken.

⚓ 🎲 The Ceremonial Hearing's Reach

With the Western Eye restored, Othello hurriedly resumes naming protected areas; he has already named the guilty from evidence supplied by the Investigators. The Eyes bound the rite to Mazorra. He will keep naming protected persons & areas until ⚓ **Mateo dies at 23:59,** which left him roughly 4–20 minutes after the Eye is restored for him to work. See map below; green areas are named; red dashed areas remain unprotected. Tambor accidentally omits the western triangle. Mateo dies before Othello names the railway-corridor gap, & the area bounded by eastern *La Oficina*, the Superintendent's Manse, and the east gate. Keepers may allow Othello to name one or two additional areas if the Investigators restore the Western Eye especially quickly. The accidental western triangle remains unprotected unless they try a risky attempt to move it.



🎲 The Investigators' Choices

- **Visit, then leave:** Mateo names them as people to spare only if asked The Baron also hears this. If the rite, is completed in time he will not target them or use them as collateral, though he may confront them, demand answers, or bargain with them. They do not witness Mateo's death or the Baron's manifestation.
- **Stay at the bedside:** Care may ease the Bokor's suffering but cannot save him. Investigators who stay witness his death. RN Gómez crosses herself & covers his face, then leaves to call the switchboard for the on-call MD. Lights flicker, a window cracks & anyone looking sees the Baron manifest. **SAN 1D4/1D8**.
- **Do not visit:** They don't get any special protection as named innocents. RN Rita María Gómez's call to the switchboard may alert them to the Bokor's death.

THE BROKEN WESTERN EYE



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

The damaged Western eye is easily found, white shells intact and crushed glint brightly on the path (*see map*). It was constructed by Tambor on the path between the ruined chapel and its fenced graveyard. Many shells have been kicked aside or pressed into the soil, but surviving ones still reveal the original symmetrical design.

Keeper's Note: A successful *Spot Hidden* roll reveals a recent set of muddy, barefoot prints crossing the damaged eye. Blood marks the heel where the walker cut it on a crushed cowrie. No *Track* roll is needed to follow them for the first few meters.

If there is an interruption, or the path later disturbed, a Regular *Track* roll picks it up again; failure costs 1d10 minutes.

SIDEBAR - TAMBOR'S MISTAKE: Othello intended the Western Eye to stand at the old, bricked-up gate at the end of the western path, marking the cemetery's outer boundary as well as the Mazorra's. Tambor took "the cemetery gate" to mean the open entrance to the fenced graves. He laid the eye across the first path crossing, nearer the ruined San Lázaro chapel, then hurried back. An Investigator who heard Othello's instructions can recognize the mismatch from the map without a roll. If later asked, Tambor admits he misunderstood the instruction. He was uneasy about lingering among the graves for fear of being observed.

The Western Eye's influence has taken hold where Tambor placed it, leaving a roughly triangular gap in the rite's protection to the west (see map on the previous page). The Investigators can restore its pattern *in situ* fairly easily, but moving it would be difficult. Once the cowrie shells are restored, the Baron's claim remains limited mainly to those properly named. He can still reach anyone in the unprotected chapel, crypt, tunnel, cemetery yard, or workshop structures within the gap.

Someone with relevant *Lucumí* or *Ocha or Vodou* specialist knowledge with a successful *Occult* roll *could* move the Eye to where Othello wanted it placed it, but this has a real chance of not being completed when Mateo Derosier's dies, and would take 5+2d6 minutes. But it would repair the gap.

Restoring the Pattern

With Othello's instructions, adequate light, & his spare cowries, restoring the pattern of 256 shells takes five uninterrupted minutes. No roll is required. The Investigators recover displaced shells, replace crushed or bloodstained ones and repair it where it lies. When it is properly restored, the cowries settle almost magnetically together with a sound like rolling dice. For a moment, Tambor's distant rhythm is perfectly clear.

Keeper's Note - If the Bloodied Footprints Are Followed: The trail leads to a grave slab which lies flush with the ground, its inscription and rusting iron ring obscured by moss and grass. Turning the ring, a quarter-turn withdraws the



locking bolt. The counterweight helps raise the slab, so operating the ring requires no roll unless it is jammed. Anyone trying to force it without finding the bolt must make a Hard STR roll. Success raises it with a loud scrape; failure leaves it shut. Pushing the roll risks a louder crash or injury. Opening the slab reveals narrow steps descending into darkness. The mouth looks and smells like an open grave; stagnant, foul air spills out.

SAN ROLL: On first seeing/smelling the hideous passage, Investigators make a SAN 0/1 roll since its grave-like appearance and thoughts of passing through this hole is genuinely horrific. An investigator with claustrophobia will balk, needing almost the threat of death to enter. Below, the steps give way to a low burrow earthen passage, really a caked loam burrow 1.2 metres wide & 1.4 metres high. Bone chips, roots, and pale wormlike strands freckle its walls. Most people must stoop or even crawl on hands and knees. The slimy guide rope continues along the main passage toward the crypt, but two even more cramped burrows branch north from the main passage, and one south. Their earthen walls scored and their openings framed with broken coffin boards. Each dead-ends at a disturbed grave overhead with a loosened coffin bottom, a burial niche, or a shallow hollow where bones have been dragged out and aside. Cultists, or *something*, seem to have made dens of particular tombs.

Foul Miasma: A quick crossing takes about two minutes and requires no CON roll. Anyone who remains in the passage for more than five minutes makes a CON roll. On a failure, coughing, nausea, and dizziness impose a penalty die on rolls made inside. Repeat the CON roll every five minutes; a second failed roll leaves the investigator unconscious.

The Night Watcher:

⬡ SIDEBAR – VARGAS AND DOLZ: If Mazorra Guard /Cultist Jorge Dolz survived, he replaces Amílcar as watcher. If Vargas spots him, Dolz recognizes Julián's name but denies knowing what became of him; a successful Psychology roll may catch the lie This gives Vargas a chance to pursue his brother's fate.

Three Leopard Men remain in Yobama's Mazorra Cult. One, Amílcar, still in his animalistic garb, watches from a shallow scrape in the ground beneath a shrub near the low wall, about six metres from the western cowrie cross. His body is concealed, but his face and leopard mask are visible. Amílcar watches for intruders, and is unaware of the scattered pattern of cowrie shells.

The Investigators' light draws his attention if it crosses the old path. He watches them from cover as they kneel down and adjust what looks like white pebbles on the path. He does not approach. If he hears them discussing bloodstains, he moves silently off to one side, and then gives a two short single rising *nightjar* calls to his two fellow sentries, Segundo & Fermín.

Keeper's Note: A *Listen* roll may pick out the repeated night-bird call. A *Spot Hidden roll* may catch slight movement in the shrubbery, especially if the Investigators sweep the area with a flashlight. Light can help reveal any hidden watchers, but also makes its bearer easier to spot in the dark.

The two other cultists are watching while hidden near the other entrances to the inner chapel's yard. They know the meaning of Amílcar's nightjar call. Segundo glided southwards, and then started to laugh in an odd, maniacal voice, and then abruptly stopped. Fermín, who had moved even more south instantly made the same odd laugh. Taking turns, the two their use staggered laughter to make it seem as though one person is skipping ahead along the south path: one laughs, falls silent, and then the other takes up the sound farther along. Their aim is to draw pursuers toward the cemetery sheds, not to fight. If the Investigators ignore or expose the trick, the cultists flee separately.

Keeper's Note: During any chase off the path, call for a DEX roll when a pursuer crosses overgrown ground. Apply a penalty die if they run without useful light. On a failure, they lose 1 movement point; on a fumble, they fall and lose 2. The cultists know the clear routes and avoid the hazard unless forced off them. A light helps reveal the ground, but makes its bearer easier to see. If combat is done, use the condensed stats for *Veteran Raiders* for the two decoys & *Inner Circle for* Amílcar from the Leopard Temple fight [page 13 in AoM #252 in E&A #15].

While the decoys draw attention away, Amílcar slips back to the grave-slab entrance opens and closing it, and descends. The scrape of the slab can be heard in the crypt. Investigators near the cross or watching the path may hear it too.



Image generated via ChatGPT-6 Luna from a map image by the author

After carefully shutting the grave-slab 'door' & knocking three times on a roof support timber, it takes Amílcar one-minute running bent over to get to the crypt and Yobama. He reports that strangers have entered the cemetery grounds are handling tiny white objects on the old path and that he overheard the words *Othello's Judgment.* He cannot explain either. Yobama does not recognize the objects or understand the rite, but considers any activity near his chapel redoubt a threat. He orders Amílcar to return via the tunnel and disrupt it but not get caught.

As his loyal watcher heads back through the tunnel, Yobama takes an automobile jack to the top of the stairs and adjusts it so he can start raising one edge of the covering stone slab. He laughs aloud, unexpectedly surprising himself [see SIDEBAR – YOBAMA'S *BORFIMA* POTION].

Yobama's Condition & Plans

Wounded in the Temple fight & his escape through the collapsing sewers, Yobama has taken refuge in the forgotten crypt beneath the ruined *San Lázaro* Chapel.

After quaffing another stimulating dose of his *Borfima*, he changes out of his sodden shamanistic regalia into dry civilian clothes. His human-hair dreadlock wig is carefully folded then stowed in his satchel. Bald & plainly dressed, he is scarcely recognizable as the Leopard Men's shaman. A cut on his foot has stopped bleeding, but his hands still shake as he fumbles with his laces, wondering how much blood he lost. A stolen woman's gold expandable-band watch is on his left wrist; he keeps checking it.



Image generated via ChatGPT-6 Luna

Yobama plans to rest and recover, escape to Habana, stow away on a departing ship, and rebuild his cult elsewhere in the Caribbean or South America. His three surviving loyal cultists keep watch; he expects one back shortly. He packs his remaining *Borfima* doses and the ritual kit for making more: human fat, blood, entrails, & brain tissue. His satchel also holds vials containing *toli*, & *nye ke*, If cornered, Yobama may take what remains of the *nye ke*, betting his pursuers will leave him for dead [see **SIDEBAR: CONJURE POTIONS OF OTHER WEST AFRICAN SECRET SOCIETES**].

Yobama listens for his sentry and the agreed three knocks at far end of the crypt's hidden tunnel. Footsteps elsewhere in the chapel above do not alarm him; someone must lift the slab to reach him. A distant shot or shout makes him start packing in earnest; this takes 15 minutes. If an intruder threatens to reaches him in the crypt, he abandons the rest and flees.

He plans to leave through the chapel's concealed western slab jacked up exit, head west along the cemetery path, and escape *through* its bricked-up western gate. Years ago, he secretly loosened the mortar there and tested a gap wide enough to squeeze through. Clearing the bricks takes several minutes as does stacking them back to disguise the opening. If pursued, he will simply run towards and smash through the weakened section, making considerable noise and risking injuries that *Borfima* protect him from.

He starts shaking. From the cold & damp he wonders? He wants something hot to eat. He does not understand that years of cannibal rites & repeated *Borfima* use have left him with a rapidly advancing neurological illness (see sidebar).

SIDEBAR – YOBAMA'S *BORFIMA* POTION: Borfima is a dark, bitter elixir prepared from human blood, entrails, and brain tissue. It grants supernatural healing and a temporary rush of wakefulness, painlessness, and reckless confidence. No other Leopard Man knows its preparation.

Game Effects: Within minutes, one dose restores **1D3 HP**. For **1D6 hours**, the drinker ignores penalties from pain or a Major Wound, although physical injuries still impose their practical limitations. The drinker also gains a **Bonus Die** on one STR, Brawl, or Intimidate roll. Additional doses that day restore 1D3 HP each but provide no further benefits.

The Cost: Each dose accelerates neurological deterioration. After three doses, symptoms may emerge over subsequent weeks. Five or more doses within 24 hours can produce acute tremor, poor coordination, impulsivity, and involuntary laughter. Apply a **Penalty Die** to tasks requiring precise coordination or sustained reasoning. Further doses accelerate the decline, potentially over days.

Yobama's Illness: Years of consuming infected human tissue have exposed Yobama to a prion-like disease, unknown to 1930s medicine. His *Borfima* occult healing preparation has unnaturally accelerated its progression not just his own healing. Having consumed at least five doses in 24 hours, he now exhibits a resting tremor, intermittent loss of hand control, & uncontrollable laughter. He mistakes the potion's stimulation for renewed strength, and his own spontaneous laughter as excess fatigue. Even if he escapes Mazorra, his deterioration will continue. Borfima cannot reverse the disease it accelerates.

Decoying Cultists

Segundo & Fermín lead anyone who follows them to the cemetery sheds in Mazorra's southwest corner about 100 meters south of the chapel. They try to make the Investigators lose sight of them, split up, and waste time searching. One draws pursuit with staggered laughter or a glimpse of movement while the other doubles back through the clutter. Inside the sheds, they hide behind coffins and handcarts, slam doors, and wedge them from the far side. In the preparation shed, they may spill caustic quicklime dust, or open the furnace to throw in a handful of oily rags to cause clouds of greasy smoke to fill the area & confuse their attacks or else simply drive them away

They listen for Yobama's signal. One toll of the underground *San Lázaro* bell means scatter and do not return. The decoys then flee south over the cemetery wall; the watcher escapes north, past the Mazorra wall. None goes to the western wall or checks on the captives. Three evenly spaced tolls mean return to the crypt by the safest route. Yobama has no intention of sending this recall signal and considers the remaining cultists expendable; they do not know this.

If intercepted, Segundo and Fermín slash with their 2- and 3-point claw-knives only to clear a path, then hide or try to draw pursuers away. If cornered, they fight viciously, targeting an isolated or wounded Investigator. They bargain only when badly hurt, at point-blank gunpoint, or

convinced escape is impossible. They may reveal and captives' location or their decoy role, but lie about Yobama's presence in the crypt & lie about the hidden tunnel.

If captives from an earlier raid remain, threats can make the cultists disclose that they are bound and gagged inside two upright coffins in the coffin workshop. The lids are nailed shut but not airtight. The captives should survive for several hours, though their injuries, fear, and inability to call for help make delay dangerous. Removing them from the coffins takes at least 5 minutes.

The Watcher & the Western Eye

Five minutes after entering the tunnel, Amílcar emerges again from beneath the grave slab, and then creeps toward the Western Eye, waiting for the Investigators to look away. Then, 3-pronged razor-knife raised, he screams and rushes at the closest Investigator, veering at the last moment to scatter the cowries. He vanishes into the dark, doubles back, and lies in wait for anyone who follows alone. At the sound of the warning underground bell (rang by Yobama), he abandons further attempts & flees northwards. Investigator actions decide if he is captured or killed.

Keeper's Note: Any Investigator within earshot may make a *Listen* roll to hear the grave slab scrape open or shut. Anyone watching the eye and not helping repair it may oppose the watcher's *Stealth* with *Spot Hidden*. On a success, they spot Amílcar before he reaches the shells and can try to intercept him with *Fighting (Brawl)* or a DEX roll. An Investigator distracted by repairing the eye must succeed at a Hard *Spot Hidden* roll to notice him in time. If Amílcar reaches the eye, he scatters the shells, temporarily disrupting the rite until they are reset. He does not need to make an attack roll.

Yobama's Escape Tactics

Yobama cannot see outside the hidden crypt under the mortuary chapel. He can hear the grave slab move and may hear voices, blows, or tools at either crypt entrance. The correct three knocks are the only signal he recognizes. Without them, he assumes intruders are coming.

He lowers the wick of his lantern, throws a prepared bundle of herbs from a niche onto the lit brazier then rings the bell. The bell signals the cultists to scatter, the sound masks his movement, & the smouldering herbal fumes disrupt anyone entering the crypt. Yobama flees through the closest seemingly unoccupied exit.

1. If the Investigators entered through the grave-slab tunnel, he uses the opposite chapel hatch. It takes one round to squirm through & get clear, then uses the sledgehammer to knock away the timber support and drop the slab behind him. He'll head to the eastern bricked up gate. If he has time carefully remove the bricks and rebuild the wall if; if no time or chased he smashes his shoulder into the wall trusting his Borfima to protect him (it does not; takes 1d3 HP, and will sustain a bout of involuntary laughter by 1d3 rounds).
2. If they attempt entry through the eastern 1-ton slab over the chapel stairs, Yobama takes the opposite tunnel exit where it takes him two minutes to reach the grave slab. Emerging from the tunnel, if he sees the Investigators fixing the Eye and he has the opportunity, he'll run past and kicks the crossed design of shells apart before fleeing. He knows they matter to them, but not why.

Once clear of the crypt, may escape unseen. If he is caught outside, he tries to pass himself off as a cemetery grounds-keeper. He knows they'll see a bald Afro-Cuban man in civilian clothes, not the feared "Executioner." Involuntary laughter & his tremors however may make them suspicious. His satchel's contents will expose him if he cannot ditch it unseen.

Keeper's Notes

- **Bell:** Yobama strikes the underground chapel bell with the sledgehammer beside it. Its report reverberates through the crypt and the first three metres of the tunnel. Everyone there, including Yobama, makes a CON roll. On a success, ringing ears impose a penalty die on Listen rolls for the rest of the scene. On a failure, the character is deafened for 1D3 rounds.
- **Herbal smoke:** This is Yobama's private occult fumigant, not a known Cuban or African preparation. Anyone breathing the smoke makes a CON roll. On a failure, they cough and become dizzy, taking a penalty die on DEX, Listen, and sight-based rolls for 1D3 rounds. On a fumble, they also lose their next action, staggering or retching. Holding one's breath or leaving the chamber avoids the effect. The smoke disrupts pursuit but does not cause unconsciousness.
- **Falling slab:** The one-ton marble lid is held open by a stout timber prop after the jack is removed. Anyone beneath its raised edge may make a Hard DEX roll to dive clear. On a failure, they are pinned and take 1D10 damage; someone fully beneath it is likely crushed fatally. An ally needs a jack or substantial leverage to free them.
- **Yobama's Involuntary Laughter:** Make a separate CON roll for Yobama after his first strenuous act during the escape, such as ringing the bell or dropping the slab. On a failure, involuntary laughter lasts 1D3 rounds. It does not stop him, but reveals his direction.



Image generated via ChatGPT-6 Luna

3. **Bound Unconscious Stranger Gambit**. If he has warning, believes escape is impossible, & has a few minutes before the Investigators can see him, he hides his satchel, containing his wig, mask, Borfima, and records, inside the tunnel near the crypt wall under debris. Already dressed in plain Cuban civilian clothes, he binds his wrists loosely in front and swallows the last dose of his *nye ke*. He gambles that whoever finds him will discover a unidentified man who looks nothing like him appearing dead or comatose, with no injury to explain his condition.

Keeper's Note: If Yobama Chooses *ney ke* Gambit: The draught takes effect in one minute and lasts 6+1D6 hours (7–12 hours). As he collapses, Yobama tries to pocket the empty vial, but his tremor makes him drop it. It rolls beneath him with residue still inside. To a casual eye, the bald man they find is tied up and dead. A careful *Medicine* or *First Aid* examination reveals faint signs of life, but not his identity.

The Investigators have captured Yobama, even if they do not know it. The mystery man, Yobama, has no identification. A search finds a money belt with US$34, eight Cuban pesos in notes and coins, a woman's expandable gold watch stretched over his left wrist, and the empty vial. His lack of convincing restraint marks may raise suspicion, as would loose bindings possibly self-tied. If María marked Yobama in the tunnels, she recognizes the mark if it is visible; if it is obscured, allow a *Spot Hidden* or *INT* roll. On a failure, she feels strongly that she has seen him before.

He is in a deep coma-like sleep, & cannot awaken until 7–12 hours after taking the dose. If Dr. Zorrilla remains coherent with his slowed Twsha affliction, he can analyze the residue and prepare an injectable counteragent in the *Aux. Lab* in one hour, shortening the remaining trance to less than an hour. If the Investigators carried Yobama out, when he awakens he feigns unconsciousness until he assesses the situation and tries to escape only if unguarded or able to exploit confusion. If he wakes under observation, he gives a false name and claims to be a cemetery groundskeeper. He says cultists seized him from a shed during the raid and stole his wallet and ID.

SIDEBAR: CONJURE POTIONS OF OTHER WEST AFRICAN SECRET SOCIETES: *Capt. F. W. Butt-Thompson's* 1929 colonial survey lists Leopard/Panther, Alligator/ Crocodile (aka ***Talimbi***), Baboon, Boa /Python, and Tonga criminal secret societies. The criminal labels partly reflect the author's colonial perspective but members of these groups, some who practiced cannibalism, claimed/feigned occult powers, leading to extortion to those gullible, else ritual murder for those not paying up; colonial powers ruthlessly stamped these groups out. Yobama as a Leopard Man Shaman knowledgeable about his own secret traditions, such as Borfima & is somewhat familiar with those of rival societies & possesses several of their stolen 'magic' potions.

He has a *talimbi* preparation called ***nye ke***. The captive he stole it from and tortured for its secret claimed it granted stealth, underwater breathing, and deathlike dormancy, like their reptilian animal forms they claimed to be able to shape-shift into. Yobama tested a third of a dose on this captive: it induced a stupor lasting nearly a day, but after a second dose was given it did not allow his dormant captive to breathe underwater & drowned when Yobama tested this claim, who only regretted the untested claim of reptilian stealth. He also has a vial of *Toli*. In Yobama's African lore, *toli* binds the non-criminal *Poro secret society's* judicial blood oath, and breaking such an oath after drinking the potion is supposed to be fatal (and in fact would be fatal to any true believer, including Yobama should he swear an oath & break it).

Note that the above claims of magic potions are period source's biased account of mythological beliefs, & align with Yobama's fictional occult practices rather from real West African traditions.

- **Desperate Tunnel Unburial Escape:** If both crypt exits are watched, but pursuers in the grave-slab tunnel are too far away to intercept him before he reaches the branch, Yobama strikes the bell once, then throws the prepared herbs onto the brazier. As smoke fills the crypt & tunnel entrance, he bolts into the tunnel and takes whichever narrow branch, north or south, is clear. It leads to a 'den' beneath an old, decaying coffin. Yobama tears boards from the coffin & uses them to dig up through about four feet of shallow grave soil, holding his breath against the fumes. The smoke may delay anyone following long enough for him to reach the surface, but it cannot stop pursuers already beyond the smoky passage. After the exertion, make his usual CON roll: on a failure, he laughs uncontrollably for 1D3 rounds. The sound carries aboveground & draws anyone nearby toward his hiding place. He'll try to escape through the 'bricked up' West gate.

Yobama Captured: If despite all his efforts Yobama is disabled, held at gunpoint, or badly wounded, he bluffs, stalls, and probes what the Investigators know. At a *Major Wound,* he may offer names, payment records, or the location of his trophies for his life or a chance to escape. He does not repent; he wants to survive.

- **If the Investigators name the guilty:** Yobama laughs and taunts them: *"Then name the hand that fed me. Name the hand that sent me." He adds, "Ask Gandía what he paid me to do. Ask him what he paid me to do again. And again."*
- **If asked about the Baron:** "*Baron Kriminèl? I know little of him. Only that he is a hungry dead thing."*
- **If María del Sagrario is present:** Recognizing her resemblance to Violeta, Yobama says: *"Your sister was curious. She asked questions. Captain Gandía paid me to answer them. Do you have questions, too?"*
- **If Alejandro Vargas is present:** If Alejandro demands justice over Dolz killing his half-brother, Yobama appears honestly baffled, then laughs. *"Your brother lives, but the man you knew is gone. His memory is an empty drum save for two names: Julián Acosta and Manuel Rivas." He repeats the names, explaining that the brother is now kept in Pavilion A after increasingly violent escape attempts.*

Yobama's laughter, like his tremors, is involuntary. He denies controlling them; the tremors in his hands and jaw suggest withdrawal or a possible seizure.

Searching the Crypt



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

The crypt's shallow niches are mostly empty, though several hold leopard hides, blankets, dry clothing, shoes, drums, carved masks, oil lamps, and soda bottles refilled to hold clean water. Among empty *Borfima* vials in a basket can be found one still half full. If Yobama used the cataleptic *nye ke* draught & is lying senseless its empty vial may lie near his or under his body. His satchel, if hidden,

is just inside the tunnel rather than in the crypt. His sodden Leopard Man shamanistic cloak can be found, stuffed in a niche.

The Headless Angel: This seems to be a bizarre shrine. a broken plaster angel with its head missing leaning against one wall. Gold and silver jewellery hangs from its neck and cracked wings: pendants, rosaries, lockets, wedding chains, cheap medallions. Unlike other shrines there are no crosses or crucifixes.

Keeper's Note: A successful *INT* or *Occult* roll shows this to be ritual trophies keepsakes taken from victims. ⬡ If María examines the jewellery, she immediately recognizes one locket as her late sister Violeta's. Inside is a small, faded photograph of the two sisters as children. If another Investigator examines the headless angel first, a Hard *Spot Hidden* or Regular *Appraise* or *Art/Craft* roll notices that one locket is finer than the rest and contains a photograph of two young girls. If opened & shown to María, she recognizes Violeta at once.

Yobama's Satchel: If trapped with time to hide it, Yobama stashed it just inside the tunnel beyond the crypt wall. The satchel can be snatched from the entrance by Yobama, but lingering or searching deeper risks someone being overcome unless they ventilate the passage from both ends for several hours. It holds Borfima & other vials, wig, mask, claw-knife, plus records linking Porra & Gandía to corruption, disappearances, & state-sanctioned killings.

Yobama's Fate: Investigator/Keeper options include:

- ⬡ **María del Sagrario** may try to either **kill** or **capture him alive** for *El Rey's* judgment. This preserves Yobama as a witness. It does not mean María forgives him or knows what sentence he will face, only that *El Rey* has promised judgment rather than revenge.
- The Investigators may **surrender Yobama to Baron Kriminèl** directly or by sealing Yobama alive inside the crypt if they know & close both exits. If he remains there when the Baron begins his walk, and the triangular gap of Othello's shell eye restrictions not fixed by them, his death will be swift & terrible.
- **Killing Yobama** ends the immediate threat but forfeits his testimony. The trophies left in the crypt remain available as evidence. His payment records can also be recovered if his satchel is found.

SIDEBAR – CUTTING IT CLOSE: Getting to & fixing the Western Eye is doable, provided they are not distracted. On foot via the northern route, a 23:13 departure + 20-minute walk + 12-minute visit to Mateo + two five-minute repairs restore the eye at 23:55, just four minutes before his death. This assumes no further delay and no lost cowries. By car with keys available and in hand the same travel + visit + repairs x2 leaves 19–21 minutes margin. Without keys, hot-wiring leaves 16–20 minutes, less any delay persuading *El Rey's* men. Moving the Eye to where it was intended is trickier since they also need to make *Occult* roll & spend 5 +2d6 minutes.

MIDNIGHT: A BARON WALKS

The terrace turns cold & close. The lights flicker & dim.

Beyond the TB Pavilion window, Baron Kriminèl silently watches Mateo on his deathbed. The dying man's breaths grow slower, farther apart.

The Baron spits on the glass. The spittle freezes; a crack races across the pane.

A pale wisp, scarcely more than breath, slips through the crack from inside: Bokor Mateo Derosier's final breath.

The Baron draws it through flared nostrils. As he inhales, the hazy figure glimpsed aboard the train and in M1's operating theatre gathers substance, colour, resolving into a tall Black man in traditional Haitian funeral finery: black top hat and tailcoat, blood-red waistcoat. A fork & spoon are pinned crosswise to his chest like bones, the implements of a French colonial table transformed into signs of *Voudou Petro* judgment.

Bone-white paint, or perhaps a carapace of flesh, gives his face a skull's cast. Two red points, like the pitiless distant stars Antares and Betelgeuse, glitter in hollowed sockets.

In his hand, the machete's glittering edge promises the final stroke. His judgment will be patient, deliberate, & slow.



Image generated via ChatGPT-.6 Luna

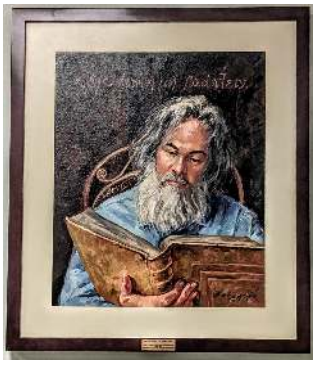
To be continued.



From our Last Episode

My wife Caroline & I were in London, Ontario in late September for Western's Homecoming and her Meds '96 class's 30th reunion. I'm Meds '97. I began writing for A&E in the same year I wrote my MCATs & started medical school back in 1993. It felt strange to see how much had changed beginning with the new (to us) name. We both attended the University of Western Ontario (UWO), now simply Western University. Our medical school is rebranded as *Western University's Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry*.

We toured the medical school, which felt both weirdly familiar and remarkably different, and visited the *History of Medicine* open house. It was lovely remembering our late friend Dr. Paul Potter together with his wife Dr. Beate Gundert and others. The newly unveiled oil portrait of Paul, & the university's medical history collection now named for him & Beate, made the visit especially meaningful. Caroline also brought a contribution for the medical museum: a portable forensic doctor's kit from her father, who is downsizing. The current director was delighted to receive it.





We also met a member of Meds '66 who had been the first woman president of the student-run *Osler (Medical History) Society*. Caroline & I were involved in its revival in the late 1990s, and I spotted our names in the archived minutes through to 2000, when we moved to the Hamilton area. There is something rather curious about finding your own activities preserved as a small piece of institutional history. Another example of this were our class photos facing across from each other in one side corridor.

It was good to return, although so much has changed in a city where we lived a good chunk of our lives, seven years in my case and nine in Caroline's, between medical school & residency. Hospitals where we had worked have closed, favourite restaurants have disappeared, & even our former rental home has been demolished. More poignant still were the absence & reminders of the deaths of old friends. The weekend brought happy reunions, but also repeated reminders of how much of the London we once knew & enjoyed now exists only in our memories.



COMMENTS
E&A #16

ATTRONARCH: RARE. It's refreshing to see dungeon-salvaging adventurers return to a ruin they've already explored, with their players taking a more cautious, methodical approach to searching it. Ambros' behaviour after claiming the magical gavel would have made me wary as a fellow player, too. His companions speaking in "Lawful" to check whether he was still, um, Lawful made me wonder if it's the local equivalent of conversing in Church or Medical Latin. ⬡ I'd have also kept well clear of that canoe or any other watercraft for traversing the fuchsia-hued "river of lost souls" just as your wise players in your game did. ⬡ I just noticed, though, that none of the adventurers in these last few episodes were female adventurers, which struck me as a little odd.

AVRAM GRUMER: As a prospective beginner with *Typst*, I've briefly explored its free tier. The prospect of fewer "pixel-bitching" sessions wrestling with formatting in Word for Mac certainly appeals, but I hadn't realized I would have to have a name for every image, be it a map or guided AI image, and what a pain this is if I have to change them. The markdown language did strongly however remind me of the old way of formatting the early post-stencil version of Lee Gold's A&E.

BRIAN ROGERS *RAE. Re Fans of the Dead Games Society*: Now that's a name I have not heard of for a very long time.

BRYANT DURRELL: I hope the dust is setting down from your move. We had stuff in boxes for years after our last one. ⬡ RAE enjoyed your write-ups of two games from *Pelgrane Publishing's* online *Pelicon* convention. The YKRPG one-shot sounds quirky in the best way, especially the chance to play a distinctly unpleasant PC and still bring the story to a satisfying conclusion. ⬡ Getting to play *Trail of Cthulhu* alongside two current E&As, Lisa and Josh, with Phil Masters as GM must have been a treat, too. I've been hearing his name since my early days collecting *White Dwarf* in the 1980s. Your mix of Josiah Wedgwood as a patron, the local legend of the un-hangable *Long Legged John*, and a nod to Joseph Curwen (whose essential salts caused Charles Dexter Ward no end of trouble) sounds like great fun: real history with a Lovecraftian twist.

DALE MEIER: RAE your essay 'Guardians in Grey' for Golems in 5e CoC. Just how *small* can a Golem be SIZ-wise? The size of a doll? Or even a swarm of 1" figures, say in the form of scarabs or even chess pieces?

DYLAN CAPEL: I'd be interested to hear how your solo roleplaying with *Invincibles* goes. The boxed starter set looks quite appealing. Like you, I think most superhero games work best, at least initially, in urban settings. Judging largely from the film adaptations, fictional, "archetypal" cities seem particularly useful, like *Metropolis* & *Gotham City* effortlessly fills in for NYC. Writers can create variants of familiar features of real places, then compress, exaggerate, and mythologize other features of urban life. The setting remains recognizable, but you still have room to surprise the players. It might be fun to create a grittier, more futuristic version of

a city you know well. Since you live in East London, perhaps a variant where you live could become *New Londinium*, *Thamesford*, or *Ironminster*.

GABRIEL ROARK: I'm glad you've rehabbed now from your last ice-skating mishap which sidelined you for most of August. That *KS Arduin* product looks sweet. ⬡ I've largely stopped participating in KS based out of the US since the postage to Canada for anything is so punishing. I never did receive my *Gangbuster's B/X 2e* KS hardcopy and until October *Wizard Tower Games* had answered all my inquiring emails with silence *(& now nothing after a week)* making me wary for signing up for any more for the time being.

JOHN REDDEN: I'm pleased you enjoyed both my prolonged Mazorra writings and the photo of our F1 progeny! ⬡ I'm also glad you escaped damage from *Lala*, the Teletubby Hurricane. Re *Kona low*, I had to look that up: a seasonal subtropical cyclone that typically develops during the cooler months. One more addition to my weather vocabulary! ⬡ Are you experimenting with *Typst* yet?

JIM VASSILAKOS: *RA (Eeked) at your Great Bank Robbery thought experiment, especially this warning: "If you showed up at an unsanctioned protest, for example, your ability to buy and sell might be suspended."* That remains a hypothetical, but sanctions have shown how quickly financial restrictions can enter ordinary life. In August 2025, the United States sanctioned Canadian International Criminal Court (ICC) judge **Kimberly Prost** over her role in authorizing an investigation into alleged crimes in Afghanistan, including by U.S. personnel. Her credit cards stopped working; even Alexa stopped responding. That is not punishment for attending a protest, but it shows how U.S. sanctions can reach people abroad through companies tied to American systems.

The Trump administration has imposed sweeping sanctions on the ICC, giving U.S. entities 180 days to wind down business with the Court. The announcement came hours after former ICC judge **Navi Pillay** won the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize. Coincidence, or a tantrum? Canada and seven other countries have reaffirmed their support for the ICC, and European officials are urging the EU to activate its blocking statute. The Court's shift toward open-source software is another sign of the effort to reduce dependence. None of this removes U.S. leverage, but the sanctions may accelerate the search for alternatives, with consequences their authors did not intend.

Countries are also seeking alternatives to U.S.-linked financial systems. European providers are building a network to link national payment services; India's UPI and Brazil's Pix are exploring cross-border connections, while BRICS countries discuss payment links. These efforts predate the sanctions, but the sanctions sharpen the case for reducing reliance on systems Washington can pressure.

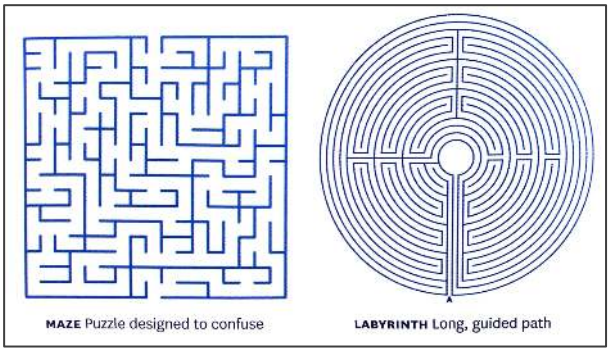
Re your own experience with GM-Dickery in Traveller: I found this more troubling than funny. Characters can die in Traveller, but adults casually murdering an eleven-year-old's character while he was away from the table, simply to increase their shares, sounds like callous, mean-spirited opportunism, especially since how little money actually means in playing the game. "Bullying" and "social cruelty" fit, too. The referee and players showed remarkably poor judgment toward you as a child and if your sister's boyfriend was there and let it happen, that's a serious red flag too. I'm surprised the experience didn't put you off *Traveller* for good.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Re *Running Horrors of the Mazorra*: Writing this has made me realize I'm creating more than a single *Pulp Cthulhu* scenario. It has grown into an event-driven sandbox compact campaign, unfolding over a few crowded days in one tropical psychiatric facility. It now has a gazetteer of locations, a large recurring cast, competing factions, several kinds of horror, and a timeline set against the collapse of Gerardo Machado's dictatorship.

The serial write-up probably makes the story seem more linear than it needs to be at the table. I've followed nearly every branch & have tried to show what the factions are doing, but a group players would probably encounter only part of that material. Their choices would bring some places and conflicts forward while others develop offstage. Still, "semi-programmed chain of scenarios" is fair: each crisis tends to set up the next, with little breathing room. I need to distinguish more clearly between fixed developments, optional encounter packets, and consequences triggered by the Investigators.

There are several possible routes through the all this material: focus on political collapse and institutional revolt while omitting *Baron Kriminèl*; remove the Vault for a more investigative, medical-horror game; make the Special Children central or leave them out; or put the *Twsha* at the heart of the horror and treat Yobama's cult as opportunists. The Twsha could even have a non-Mythos *Paratethys* origin.

Your comment & those of Lisa and others helped me see that I'm not just asking how to finish the scenario. I also need to decide what kind of campaign it has become and make its routes usable for someone other than its author. I can no longer call the full scenic route a conventional multi-session scenario. A selective route might take six to eight substantial sessions; playing nearly everything could become a campaign of twelve or more. I'd prefer this to be a maze with several paths to the exit than a labyrinthian single path with a few side trails.



PATRICK BRADY: *RYCTM:* Thank you, Patrick. That's very generous of you, and especially heartening as Mazorra

continues to grow while I'm also trying to wrap things up. I've put a great deal of time and thought into it, so knowing that the effort and detail come through means a lot to me.

Re AI: I take your concerns seriously, but a recent conversation I had offered a practical example of how AI might be used constructively. I was speaking with an academic who holds the *Hannah Chair* for the *History of Medicine* program at Western. Rather than simply forbidding AI, they described a more pragmatic approach: encouraging students to treat it as a very smart friend. You wouldn't ask that friend to do all your work or write your essays for you, she said. But you might ask them to read a first draft, question whether your argument holds together, identify passages that are unnecessarily long, or suggest where your meaning could be clearer. Used that way, AI can be a sounding board and a thoughtful critic, helping you refine your own ideas while leaving you responsible for the argument, the facts, and the final wording. The analogy has limits, of course. AI can be confidently wrong (as per your Vitamin Zed example), and sometimes too eager to agree, so its suggestions still need scrutiny. This also doesn't settle the wider concerns you raise, but I think it identifies a worthwhile use now this disruptive genii is out of the bottle.

Re Your observation about not knowing what you think until you write it down: this struck a chord with me. It reminds me of Montaigne, whose *Essais* were "attempts" to explore and test his own thoughts. Putting a nebulous idea into words gives you something you can examine, question, and refine. I often find that my own writing reveals gaps or connections I hadn't noticed while an idea was still rattling around in my head. Sometimes discovering what we think is part of the work of writing. And AI cannot do this for us.

LISA PADOL: Huzzah for not only visiting *WorldCon* in Anaheim California to watch the Hugos, but also getting in a visit to Lee and Barry. ⬡ *Re your comment about Lauren at Law School;* thanks! I wrote about attending my wife's 30th Medical School anniversary at UWO already, & Caroline reminded me that this era completely pre-dates Lauren even from being born in 2003. Time does fly, and it seems faster every year. ⬡ *Re Lyonesse:* Thank you again for this! I had the pdf that I got long ago when I heard about this on the Grognard Files, and I was surprised just how long ago this came out.

I'll keep my replies to your Mazorra comments all together. First of all, thanks for your praise of the multiple points of interest and routes between them. Those are deliberate design choices. In my reply to Joshua, I describe how the Mazorra has grown into a dense sandbox, and how the serial writing of it follows a rather labyrinthine, scenic route through its possibilities, while it is more properly a tool box of elements and their options for a Keeper to work with.

Re Mazorra's player-agency flags, choices, and consequences: I glad you keep liking the flags. In this issue, I've outlined in the scenario how Maria might get another chance to exact revenge on Yobama, and provided natural opportunities for how this can arise. I agree that the Keeper shouldn't arbitrarily manufacture or sabotage a chance for players to pursue emotionally important goals for their PCs.

Re the Cursed Men: The cultist who fails the initial SAN roll recoils and loses their next action. After that, any cultist who tries to touch or restrain Gil or Zorilla must make a Hard POW roll. Both men are visibly cursed in their appearance by something the cultists have never seen before, *Twsha*. Their corrupted appearance is meant to provoke revulsion and dread, and one cultists response influences the others. Classic film and fiction often play on xenophobic stereotypes and will mark the monster or the villain with diseased skin or unnatural appearance. That's the effect I wanted the rules to support here with the exaggerated revulsion of the Leopard Men cultists.

Re "No Investigator is captured by default": I mean that I'm deliberately trying to avoid railroading any such capture. Investigators are free to make even seemingly foolish choices, and if they intervene, they might be captured depending on the circumstances and the whims of the dice gods. Their capture isn't required by Keeper fiat to move events or the plot along. In the 1930s hero pulps the main protagonists like Doc Savage sometimes deliberately allow themselves to be captured by the villains to try quickly uncover what is going on, confident in their abilities to escape or turn the tables. Read or listen to a terrific 1985 audio adaptation of the great Doc Savage saga 'Fear Cay' for an example of this.

Re the Aeroporto Mob and Valcarcel: I see Valcarcel gradually wilting in the face of the real menace and events inside the Mazorra, and becoming subordinate to Nico, the airport mechanic who has natural leadership abilities and brought his own men to the gates. Valcarcel will join the Temple raid, if only to avoid looking like a coward, but he won't lead it. There's little glory in the raid and a lot of hard work, and I'm not sure he'll survive. *El Chivo*, with his taste for arson, remains a wildcard for the Keeper to introduce when circumstances make it most inconvenient. *El Cabo* and his cousins flee up the rail line to their car at the first sign of trouble. ⬡ *Re the temple drummers*: There are two, both Cultist initiates; alas no room for their names/roles lastish.

Re Dolores: She certainly has "main-character energy." A guest player could have a lot of fun playing her as confidently incorrect and chewing up the scenery: she embraces her self-appointed role as the Leopard Goddess and starts pushing back at an astonished Yobama. I've been trying to give the major NPCs competence, motives of their own, and room to pursue them, so their natural choices help drive events. Myles Corcoran noticed this when he wrote, "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." His comment captures what I hoped the scene would do: Dolores finds a way to use what has happened to her.

Esperanza makes an effective counterpoint to Dolores: quietly hypercompetent and reserved, and someone you've said you'd enjoy playing as a guest character. I'm glad to get her out of the Vault and back above ground and in her natural element. It only just occurred to me that she reminds me of *Jennifer Marlowe,* Loni Anderson's character on WKRP in Cincinnati (1978 to 1982). The tv sitcom inverted the then more common "dumb blonde" stereotype: Jennifer is shrewd,

intelligent, & wields significant social power, along with being attractive. I remember another character on the show, Mrs. Carlson, the station owner, treating her as the only other person at WKRP she regarded as her intellectual equal.

MICHAEL CULE: *Re unread book piles:* I unfortunately share this habit. In Germany, if you have a pile of unread books, you refer to it as your ***SuB.*** This is an acronym for ***Stapel ungelesener Bücher***, which translates literally to *"pile of unread books"*. I also came across the word ***tsundoku,*** a Japanese term for acquiring reading material and leaving it stacked without reading it immediately. *Tsundoku* is thought to be a neutral, even playful term, rather than a shameful one. Perhaps you can consider these unread books your *anti-library*, a term first used by Umberto Eco (*link is in Italian)* as reminders to be humble of things we do not know.

MYLES CORCORAN: RAE enjoyed your historical write-up of Landau. Your players' layered plague ruse worked beautifully, though it left me wondering what became of the zealots' agitator, Vogelhut Knipperdolling. The account also leaves several intriguing threads dangling: What is the mystery surrounding the Baukunth brothers and the man with the silver ankh? Why were the two clay figures hidden in the cave, and who does the female figure represent; Isis, Hathor or someone else? And what of the would-be thief at Bestwilling Manor? What book was he after, and why? Surely it wasn't just another book to add to his *SuB* (see my comment to Michael Cule)?

RYCTM that Dolores behaves "almost like a PC in taking advantage of the situation": I'm glad that came through. I've been trying to give major NPCs competence, motives of their own, and room to act on them, so their choices can help drive events. Dolores's manic-depressive illness is part of her characterization; *Twsha* is a separate supernatural affliction. In this scene, she seizes on Twsha's visible marks, claims the role of the Leopard Goddess, and unsettles Yobama. That's the kind of agency I'm aiming for: her choices grow from her motives, abilities, limits, and partial knowledge, while play determines how they affect events.

PATRICK RILEY: *Re (arbitrary dice) Failures in RPGs:* Your suggestion of giving players a way to tell the dice "No, try again" has good precedents. In *Savage Worlds,* players usually begin each session with 3 Bennies, which can reroll Trait checks, though not Critical Failures. This gives them some control over when to accept an unfortunate result.

Call of Cthulhu 7e offers a different bargain: players can "push" an eligible failed skill roll by describing a new approach or greater effort. Failure brings more serious consequences, making the added risk a conscious choice. The optional Luck-spending rule, also used in *Pulp Cthulhu,* lets players improve a roll, though it cannot rescue a failed pushed roll.

D&D's *Lucky* feat is another example. Under the 2014 rules, its 3 Luck points let you roll an extra d20 and choose after seeing the first roll but before the outcome is determined. The 2024 5.5e version, which I haven't played, grants Advantage on a d20 Test, with points equal to your proficiency bonus, spent before rolling. Both versions replenish after a long rest, and also let a character impose Disadvantage on an attack against them.

These mechanics soften the dice's arbitrary tyranny, but don't answer whether a roll was needed in the first place. In your "GM-Dickery" example, no such safety net helps.

RYCTM on dealing with players who rely too much on their Patron NPC to bail them out: Your suggestion that the mentor cannot save everyone gives players a consequential choice, especially if they habitually split the party. Perhaps the distinction is between a central hero's authorial immunity and their ability to intervene. We may know Doc Savage or Batman will survive, but that doesn't mean he is available, knows where his aides are, or can reach them in time.

ROGER BW: *RYCTM:* I've tried to include this 'overhead' view of what NPCs are doing inside Mazorra at all times, space permitting. However, as I wrote to Joshua Kronengold this in the comments section this issue, I've realized *Horrors of the Mazorra* has grown beyond a single scenario into a compact, event-driven mini-campaign: a dense sandbox of locations, factions, recurring characters, & even competing horrors set against Machado's fall in 1930s Cuba. The serial follows nearly every thread, but a group would shape its own path, and I'm working to make those options clearer. But also see my comment to Joshua Kronengold this issue about

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: *Re the "answers in the back of the book" adventure hooks and ideas:* Aha, that makes it click. I'd only skimmed the earlier *faux* abstracts, but now I see what you were aiming for: subtle, handcrafted in-game materials that give the PCs ideas to run with.

Our daughter Lauren at the Dean's Gala



Oct 21st 2026. BCM

The Phoenix Nest

A zine for EVER & ANON 17 by Michael Cule
Of 3 Barratt Place, Easton Street, High Wycombe, Bucks. HP11 1XS.
UK. Copyright 2025 © Michael Cule
E-mail: Michael.Cule@gmail.com
Phone 01494 535878
Mobile 07816101942

BUILDING MY LEGACY: AFTER A WHILE A MAP EMERGES

This time the write-up of the AEGIS: THE INSTITUTE campaign starts. And to celebrate the next page will show the map of the innermost city as it has emerged from the things that I have made up and put into the campaign. The layout of the city is based on the Divine will of the Six Gods as they expand the city with each new Age in response to the population growth that immigration brings. To start with all a new ring of the city has is bare earth (sometimes with some vegetation or lakes and other geographical features), ring roads at the outer walls and the four Great Roads in the four cardinal directions. The bits shown on this map are old and have been rebuilt and repurposed for millennia.

(That this map exists at all is to Martin's credit not mine. He took what I had described and made it work.)

At the centre of the city is the Fane, the temples of the Six Gods Of The City (as opposed to the many Gods of Temple Street) laid out around The Tree. The North, South, East and West roads are the widest and most impressive. The North Road north of the third ring is Temple Street, the home of the gods the immigrants brought to the city (well most of them as we shall see). To the west of that is the Burned Over District, destroyed in a fire a thousand years ago and rebuilt as a shabby, poor and disreputable inner city area.

The districts of the innermost rings around the Fane have been rebuilt and built over several times. The Park was once fields, what is now the Nobles district was once open to anyone because there was nowhere else to go.

The Institute, once the Mages Guild, was there from near the beginning, perhaps because the Gods wanted to keep an eye on them. The outer Institute was once housing for the better off merchants but was absorbed by the Institute as housing for students and laboratories.

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

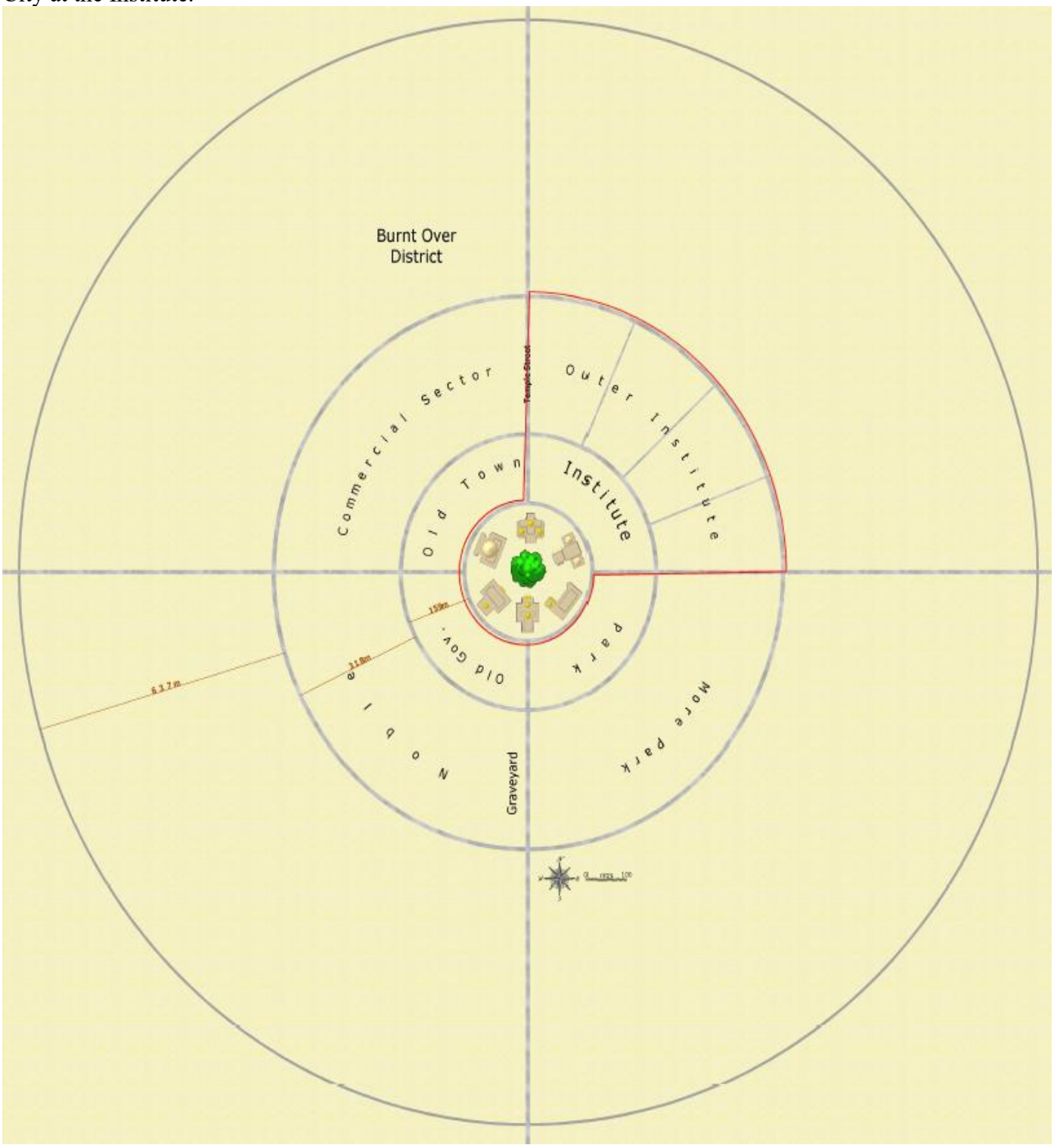
The BRINDLEWOOD BAY game didn't spark. After dithering for a couple of weeks, I decided to run a RQ game with the adventure featured in the new SARTAR book.

The most recent LICTORS game ended with one of the characters teleported into the lair of their deadliest enemies. Not deliberately on their part. There will be a discussion of what to do with such Split Party Incidents in the next podcast.

Wednesday night continues with AEGIS: THE INSTITUTE a GURPS game whose saga I start to chronicle this month. It was a long genesis, with about four weeks of discussions around what was happening and the players asking me questions to inspire me and let me know what they wanted to know that I hadn't thought of yet.

The player-characters are people from various parallel worlds who had displayed some ability in magic and had been invited

to train their new found skills in Aegis the City at the Institute.



This was a three year course and the Institute paid a full scholarship for the limited number of students they took each year. Students came from the parallel worlds surrounding Aegis and may or may not have had any inkling that there was such a thing as magic and any inkling that there was such a place as Aegis.

They had each done One Magic Thing. Somehow, in need they had reached out and discovered one piece of magic and had done something they desperately needed to do.

For most people this meant one spell out of the standard GURPS Magic system. I was open to other possibilities.

The characters were

GRAHAM as JAQ, the son of a wealthy and important family in the City. With an Unknown Enemy, a gift to the GM from Graham to compensate for his choice of First Spell, Custard Jet[1].

ALAN as SELENE, the daughter of a slightly less exalted family in the City. Her father, a spy/agent for the City in other worlds disappeared some years before. She had been in training in The Guard, the CIty Police Force, when she suddenly cast a spell. This left her stuck in training for an entirely different job and with a level of Courtesy Rank.

Both of these had the Perk: From the City and were familiar with the City's laws, customs and history.

MARTIN as CATWEAZLE, an archaeology student (specialising in Cambodia I think) who had discovered the Wildcard Magic variant (or Magic! which is pronounced 'Magic BANG') and proved to be happiest in the Library, learning new stuff. Martin described his character as 'a typical archaeology undergraduate: slim long haired. Wearing warm clothes and dust filled boots.'

PUM: Have you got a whip and a fedora?

DRAK as MOUSHIKA[2], a quite young (fourteen and voice not yet broken) Hindu, street urchin from a world where the British Empire still dominates everything a century after the Great War. Shy, uncertain and very subversive of authority in a quiet way. Drak chose the Syntactic Magic variant which gave his character a longer path to develop his abilities but promised more power later.

DRAK: The sun never set on the British Empire. But that doesn't matter to me because I am a second class citizen.
MARTIN: You were a citizen who hung on the outside of the train. Or the roof if you were lucky.

PUM as (KAPTAIN) KESTREL who had discovered the Flight spell while trying to follow his avocation of being a Masked Hero Who Fights Crime in a pulp version of the 1940s. Some thugs threw him off a rooftop and he became even more dedicated to frustrating Bad Guys. His world knew about the City and disliked it. The Imperial legacy of the days when the City spread

[1] THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF R&A: And were you suitably grateful? ME: Perhaps not. This was my own silly fault. I should never have mentioned the possibility to Graham. I should have offered him the chance to have access to the Cheese School of Magic which was written up in a PYRAMID and I could at least avoid the embarrassment of adjudicating the effects of each new spell in this ridiculous branch of magic.

[2] Which is the name of the Mouse that is the steed of the god Ganesha. MOOSHIKA: My true name is seventeen syllables. And that's quite short where I come from.

itself into nearby timelines will be a major theme of the game. He was older than the rest having been in the Army as a medic. Older but not necessarily more mature.

It should be emphasised that all these names were their apprentice pseudonyms, chosen voluntarily after being accepted as students. I tried writing this with them starting with one name and changing partway through but it confused me.

Graham and Alan both chose to spend points on the Wild Talent Advantage. Both of them could reach into the cosmos once a session and find a spell that they could use to answer their current need. They also chose to take the enhancement that meant they could retain the spell afterwards. The later uses of it would be penalised if they didn't have all the prerequisite spells that it needed to learn it normally. And they also chose to be able only to use it for magic spells.

Only Pum went for the simple life of being a basic GURPS Mage using the GURPS Magic a-spell-is-a-skill system. I am grateful for that.

The GM had recommended all the characters have Luck. Pum was less enthusiastic than the rest but followed the advice.

DRAK: I couldn't afford Serendipity as well as Luck.

After some discussion, I declared that the Tech Level of the City was 8 (early 21st Century) but that the City lacked broadcast media, mobile phones and an Internet.

The tech restrictions were a political decision by the City's rulers not caused by any incompatibility with the magic in the City. I did not (though Drak accused me of it0 intend to use the tired old cliché of magic and technology being incompatible.

Three terms of ten weeks long with a magical skill a week. (This exceeds the normal speed of learning but there are enhancing enchantments in the Institute that affect the pupils and the teachers both.) The course would include Alchemy and Thaumatology.

Alan wanted to know about Divine Magic. I said that though the City Gods were a lot less active than they had been in previous ages, their clergy had access to Divine Favour and Miracles but that was not something taught at the Institute and the PCs couldn't have it, What the Gods of Temple Street could do was a lot less clear.

They would be living a House during their student years with a House Master and a House Keeper. There will be uniforms (issued free of charge) No mortar boards though, a headpiece that the GM disliked.

The Houses are social, lodging and supervisory arrangements. Your House Master is the equivalent of your moral tutor.

GM: You find out what the City is like in the process of playing. As will I.

EPISODE ONE MATRICULATION OR BUST (PART ONE)[3]

Graham had brought the wrong version of his character sheet.

PUM: Mark this day. Someone was even more unprepared than I was.

[3] Session For 03 12 2025

GRAHAM: I decided not to play a newt. [4]
DRAK: Good! Thank you for that

The two natives of the City had access to their families. The newcomers had a Guide who brought them to the City as a Contact.

I have to admit that I noticed that both Selene and Moushika had Weirdness Magnet at this review stage and then forgot it for a while. Later they said this explained why they were stuck with such weird housemates.

There was a lot of talking over each other and then asking the GM if 'that was all right'.

There were some questions about exactly how their translator stones worked and whether they worked outside the City. At this stage I said that they would only work outside the City if they were on a mission from the Gods.

PUM: We're students. It would be a field trip rather than a mission.

Martin's character would be doing a lot of demonstration work, reading through the description of the class's project for the week, casting it and making it look easy.

Martin's character was a typical swot, nose in book and always somewhat distracted. The GM pointed out he would have to design his own course because the GM had enough to do designing the course for the standard GURPS Magic system.

MARTIN: Just put me in the library. I'll be fine.

Drak was unhappy that the GM had pointed out that some of his skills might be less than useful. Martin pointed out that his history skill was not only from his world of origin but focussed on Cambodia in the first century. He also was fluent in Sanskrit and Cambodian.

DRAK: I have a second language. I have a whole point in English.

The start of the session focussed on the three out of five people who were not native to the City.

Drak's character had been on his first plane journey crossing an intervening world to get to the Gate to the City. His Guide was a lady who was calling herself Samantha.

MOUSHIKA These things are crazy. What's wrong with a dirigible?
SAMANTHA: Have you ever seen a dirigible that's caught fire?
MOUSHIKA No.
SAMANTHA: Never happened here, has it?
MOUSHIKA: Not that I know of. Not to a British one!
SAMANTHA: The British ones tend to get overwhelmed in heavy weather.

They flew on an Imperial Airways Stratoliner heading towards America. His guide had got him a passport, some clean clothes and a steamer trunk. He had put everything he owned in it which didn't weigh much.

America was a second class power but much respected in the world especially by people who didn't support the Empire. There was a certain look of disapproval from their officials directed at a white woman bringing in a small brown child.

[4] I have no idea why he said that. Nor the references to Deathtouch in the subsequent banter.

The plane landed at Denver International Airport[5] and they passed through customs and immigration checks. The Guide then took her charge to a corridor far from the main concourse and after checking that the coast was clear tapped on a panel that looked like ti concealed machinery. After rapping out a quite complex sequence of taps, it opened up to reveal stairs going down.

SAMANTHA:.We had to build the airport over the gate. Some of the locals have got it into their heads that there's something deeply secret here. They're right, of course. They have all sorts of weird theories....

They came to a space where people with wands waited for them and a large circular thing which was glistening with magic. Also control panels.

She showed the waiting persons her authorisation, pulled out a badge and put it on, pulled out a hat and put that on too. A formal looking hat with four black buttons in a line on it. The person behind the control panel bowed to her.

SAMANTHA: Don't touch the sides. Never touch the sides.
MOUSHIKA: They're not sides they're a hole in reality.
SAMANTHA: They're the cutting edge of a hole in reality.

We then cut to Kaptain Kestrel ("Call me Keith") with his Guide who had found him out Fighting Crime, cast a spell to cancel the Flight spell and then ensured a soft landing.

MARTIN: 'Fall' Create Featherbed.
DRAK: Create Trampoline.

The Guide was a bit stuffy and not impressed at all with him calling himself 'Captain'. He went by the name of Desmond.

KESTREL It's alliteration you see. Crime fighters have snappy, snazzy names.
DESMOND: What made you decide to be a crime fighter rather than anything else?
KESTREL: You've got to Fight Crime... It's a terrible wound which...
DESMOND Yes, yes, but what made you think you were qualified.
KESTREL: I can Fly! I have superpowers and anyone with superpowers is either a supervillain or a crimefighter.

The Guide brought him across the Atlantic to London (England) and from Croydon Airport[6] (footnote) they headed north. At an Inn they stopped for the night.

DESMOND: *(Over Kestrel's wittering)* Hush! Do you hear that?

Kestrel heard the sound of the manager in the next room talking to someone.

STERN VOICE: You've got a guest with one of these trunks?
MANAGER: Yes, sir. An English gentleman and a young American man. They're in room number fourteen,
DESMOND: Damn. Let's get out of here quickly.
KESTREL: Is there crime afoot?
DESMOND Those are the authorities and they are hunting for us.
KESTREL: We have nothing to fear. We have done nothing wrong.
DESMOND Listen young... Kevin? Keith. I'm sorry, Keith. I have to retrieve the trunk. Get to the roof. Be prepared to fly away.

[5] A notoriously weird place in many worlds.
[6] Britain's main international airport before the Second World War.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Croydon_Airport#Origin

Kestrel got to the roof. And shortly thereafter his Guide came up with the trunk and their other luggage floating behind him.

DESMOND Give me a moment and then follow me.

The Guide concentrated for a moment and then lifted up into a lotus position floating above the rooftop. He floated across the rooftops of Bradford and Kestrel followed. He was reaching the end of his strength when the Guide decided they had lost the pursuit and landed on the ground.

DESMOND: I'm going to have to hijack a cab. Not the gentlemanly thing to do. Hmm. Why don't I just steal a car?

Pum pointed out his character had Truthfulness and compulsive Crime Fighting.

DRAK: But not Honesty?

DESMOND Don't look at me like that. We're in enemy territory.
KESTREL: Why are we stealing a car?
DESMOND: To get away from here as fast as possible before the search parties find us again.
KESTREL: Why are they searching for us?
DESMOND: Because they think you're a wizard.
KESTREL: I am a wizard I suppose.
DESMOND: A very puny one. I think the FBI must have had you under observation.

He hotwired a car and drove the two of them off to a pub on the moors called The Slaughtered Lamb. He had a word with the barkeeper who said he would 'get rid of it'. They had a pie and a pint (half a pint for Kestrel).

The landlord returned at the end of the evening. "I've got your room prepared, sir." He then led the two of them downstairs to the cellar, through one of the barrels which opened up to reveal the Gate. "Don't touch the sides."

KESTREL: Why don't I touch the sides?
DESMOND: Because you want to keep your fingers.

Martin's character was coming from 'this world, near as dammit'.

He found himself being taken to a warehouse complex on the outskirts of Durham in the north east of England. [7]

It was a brand spanking new warehouse complex, with the number 67 on the side in big, big letters.. (Not 13, not 23, not 42.) Inside people sat amidst large racks of stored stuff and shuffled pieces of paper about.

It was one of those places no one would ever go near without a job-related reason. The guide (whose name was Kai) got a nod from the security guards and the two of them went deeper into the complex. Kai took out a badge which had what was presumably his name on it but in an alphabet or other script that the young archaeology student had never seen before.

KAI: Please don't look at my left nipple like that.
CATWEAZEL I was just trying to...
KAI: We'll sort that out in a moment.

[7] THE PLAIN PEOPLE: (To the tune of THE PINK PANTHER): Durham, Durham, Durhan, Durham, Durham, Durham….

After the ritual discussion of not touching the sides, they stepped through the gate and found themselves in an identical room. On the far side there was a desk and a sign. As they passed through a powerful magical field.

KAI: Every hair on your head just stood up.
CATWEAZEL: And not just there.
KAI I don't need to know that.

There were several people behind the desk, dressed in uniforms. They too wore hats and badges and their uniforms were dark blue.

There was a dialogue between the Guide and one of the chaps in blue uniforms none of which was comprehensible to Catweazel. One of the other persons in uniform appeared to be made of metal. A roll to control Curiosity failed.

KAI: Don't poke the border guard!

This person was a 'mech', an android. (Which isn't what they later ended up being called, IIRC.)

The mech gave the impression of rolling his eyes while not changing expression in the slightest.

KAI: Stand on that circle over there.

The Border Guard handed Kai a small stone on a chain.

KAI: Put that around your neck.

It felt definitely magical when Catweazel picked it up. The magic did not have quite the same feel as the effects Kai had demonstrated.
KAI: It will allow you to understand and be understood. It's a translator.

Suddenly, the guy behind the counter became comprehensible. His lips were still moving in a strange way but the words came through in English.

CATWEAZEL Oooh, bad dubbing!
GUARD: We don't have all day.
CATWEAZEL I do.
KAI: No you don't.
GUARD: You are here to apply for a studentship at the Institute?
CATWEAZEL Apparently.
GUARD: Could you just confirm yes or no please?
CATWEAZEL I haven't applied for it. He...told me I could come along.
KAI: I am his guide. I am taking to be Matriculated. *(Looked at his charge's expression)* You've been matriculated before. Don't be silly.
GUARD: So you are here to join the Institute as a Student?
CATWEAZEL Yes!
GUARD: Open the trunk...
KAI: Don't!

There followed a fine moment of bureaucratic warfare as Kai quoted a long string of regulations and legal decisions at the Guard. Catweazel committed this to his copious and eidetic memory. Then the Guard tried to get Catweazel to sign something which Kai also forbade.

KAI: No! My seal, my authority.
GUARD: Very well.

Kai took his badge off and turned it to reveal a seal beneath it. He tapped it into an ink pad and pressed it down on the official form and then they were allowed to pass into the City. As they passed the metallic officer he said that he felt no annoyance at the poking. "I realize I must be a surprise to strangers."

CATWEAZEL I meant no offence.

MECH GUARD: Please do not tap any of my people. It might cause... ructions.

Jaq's family were giving him a sendoff. They were his Patrons as well as his kin. [8]

It was a pretty rich family and therefore a pretty lavish sendoff.

FATHER: We will miss you son.
JAQ: I'll be there.
FATHER: Yes, but they're not going to let you out for several weeks You're going to be working hard.
JAQ There's a coffee shop. We can meet there. We can phone. I'll write. [9]

Jaq's mother got all weepy at the thought of losing him. "It's been so long since we brought you back from the hospital... And now it seems like yesterday."

PUM: I'm forty two and I'm the Minister for Home Affairs.

MOTHER: Let us know what use name you settle on. I'm sure we can send a postcard.
JAQ I'll be in touch. It'll all be fine.

The Institute was one of the original 'quarters' of the City when there were only four of them. The term 'quarter' became a generic one for an identifiable district nature. The Institute had more than doubled its footprint when it expanded out into the next ring, taking over houses and other buildings that had one been a wealthy residential area to provide residences for students and others, lecture halls and storage.

The main gates were on the road that used to separate the two parts of the Institute. A guard on the gate (actually one of the University constables of which more later) took down the new student's name. A big burly fellow with a bowler hat.

GRAHAM: All hats look ridiculous. There's nothing you can do about it.
GM: Some people can wear hats with dignity. They have smaller heads than I do.

Selene's family also came from the City. Her mother was a Doctor and her father head been the head of the Special Measures Squad. He had failed to return from an outworld mission and was presumed dead. She had never discovered what happened when he died.

They weren't as well off and influential as Jaq's family but were comfortably off professionals.

Her mother gave her a nice healthy breakfast.

MOTHER: I hope you know I'm always going to be here for you.

Her distress while less theatrical that Jaq's mother was all the more sincere for coming from a mother who had raised her children alone. The last one was leaving the nest. (Cruel observations about getting the room back and having somewhere to put her

[8] Or were they? Thereby hangs a tale and quite a lot of the plot of this campaign. Jaq had a Secret. But he didn't know anything about it.

[9] No mobiles were permitted in the city. The City government had a whole set of laws about the dire environmental and health effects of broadcast band electromagnetic radiation. For some reason, the twin two way radios that Moushika brought with him were not included in the ban.

knitting at last were made here by people not in the scene.)

Her elder brother had graduated recently so Mother would know survival was possible. Probable even.

MOTHER: I'm actually happier that you're going to the Institute rather than doing what you were doing. You don't have to follow your father. I'd rather you didn't follow him into.... Well, what he went into. I'll walk you there and then I'm off to the hospital.

The two native born students met up at the gate and fell in with each other on the way to Matriculation.

Meanwhile the remaining students we have followed passed through the bureaucracy with a certain level of harassment from the Border Guards (who seemed to be in some sort of pissing contest with the Guides) and out into another cluster of warehouse buildings. There were a series of Gates up against a long Wall that curved gently out of sight. These were open to the air.

MOUSHIKA Are there many Gates?
SAMANTHA Two thousand and forty eight.[10]
MOUSHIKA A power of two.
SAMANTHA: Indeed. The number of gates doubles at each expansion. They are about a quarter of a kilometre apart. Not all of them are open and not all of them are used very much.
MOUSHIKA They all go somewhere.
SAMANTHA: Some of the worlds are dead. Some are dangerous. Many of the worlds don't know the Gates exist. *(Pause*) The City used to have an Empire. It was not a big Empire but it was not well loved. After the last expansion the Empire went away. It just had too much going on inside.
MOUSHIKA I've heard it said the British should perhaps reduce their Empire.
SAMANTHA: Yes. And in some worlds they have. In your world they managed to hang on. Comparative History of Worlds is complicated. In the main they are filled with people. Many of the people are like you and me.

As this lecture was being delivered, a huge lorry, larger than he had ever seen before came out of one of the Gates and headed towards some people with uniforms and clipboards who waved it towards a warehouse.

And then there was a curse from one of them as a person fell out of the wheelbase of the lorry. They had been hiding up there and somehow lost their grip. His Guide excused herself for a moment and went over and looked.

SAMANTHA: Ah. Dammit.

She started shouting at the border guards. The person on the ground was dressed in rags and shouting something about Asylum.

At this point another Guide (you could tell by the hat) came over and greeted Samantha. With him was a spotty looking youth in a trench coat and goggles.

DESMOND: Ah, hello. You're Samantha's Student are you?
MOUSHIKA Yes, Memsahib is dealing with someone who has fallen out of a big vehicle.
SAMANTHA: Ah, Desmond! Yes. Would you mind taking my find to the Registrar's? I

[10] See? I got it right this time.

can give you the paperwork, it's already stamped.
DESMOND: Another stray?
SAMANTHA: Yes, he's called for asylum. I'm going to have to reason with the Border Guards. Bless them.
DESMOND: The best of City luck.

In response to Moushika's query she assured him, she would catch up with him at the place where he was going to be housed.

Moushika gave her a formal bow and thanked her for all she had done.

SAMANTHA: Don't thank me yet. You have a lot to get used to.

The two students fell in together tugging their steamer trunks following Desmond to a railway platform. There was one stop (it was hardly substantial enough to call a station) for every five Gates. It was a big circle line. Waiting on the platform were a pair of people, Catweazel and his Guide.

DESMOND: There's nothing particularly surprising about the trains.
MOUSHIKA It's very quiet though!
DESMOND: What is?
MOUSHIKA Everything!
DESMOND: Well, we're a long way from the centre of the City.. And there are reasons why that direction is quiet which you'll see in a moment or so.

The two Guides chatted a bit. Not close friends, just professional acquantances.

DESMOND: There was a bit of a scare in Bradford. There's going to have to be a report made about using that Gate. *(To Catweazel)* Not the Bradford in your world. Bradford 273.

The train came along and stopped to pick them up. They saw a cargo train waiting in a siding.

Desmond told the students to stand for a moment and look in the direction he pointed at, towards the outside of the Circle and beyond the Walls of the City.

There was a vast plain of grey swirling dust going off towards the horizon.

ALAN: I know what I was going to ask. Is there a College of Dust?
GM: (Firmly) No! There have been attempts. It is a restricted research option.

DESMOND: That is what ate this world. That is what the City is pushing against. Trying to return some sort of normalcy to this planet. If you look up at night you will see the Moon. The Moon you are used to because this is a version of Earth. But something came along and ate the world. It will eat anything that is exposed to it. It makes disposing of unwanted rubbish very easy. But most things are recycled here because of supply difficulties.
MOUSHIKA: You don't have a dump then.
DESMOND: There are recycling centres. Did you want a dump?
MOUSHIKA It's where you get the best stuff. It's not as if I can afford to buy anything.
DESMOND: She didn't explain that to you.
MOUSHIKA There was stuff about there being many worlds. There were things about not touching the edge of the Gate.
DESMOND: The Institute wants you as a Student. This is a full scholarship, with a living standard and a stipend...
MOUSHIKA: It's better than a call centre!
DESMOND: That was the height of your ambition?
MOUSHIKA: That's why I was learning

English. But it would have to wait until I had a deeper voice.
DESMOND: You are here to study full time. There is no provision for working while you are a student. You will be supported even during the holidays. And the Institute wishes you to become a wizard and be as good at it as you possibly can.
MOUSHIKA She did say it was the best thing that could possibly happen to me. She was right!
DESMOND: I'm glad you feel that way. Some people feel they have been forced into things. Obviously, Samantha hasn't lost her touch.

The train left the warehouses behind and they found themselves passing out over water.

DESMOND: It's not a lake. It's a Bay: salt water. There's a small Lake on the far side of the City. All these Gates lead to salt water on other worlds.

MOUSHIKA The water doesn't go into the Dust?
DESMOND: No. And the water is somehow being renewed. It's not at all clear how that works. It acts as if it were a natural sea. Which is very odd.
MOUSHIKA So there are magical mysteries even you don't understand?

DESMOND: It has been a thousand years or more since the last expansion and we haven't solved it yet. We've solved it enough. Look over there.

A Gate opened and an old fashioned wind powered sailing ship came through.

DRAK: I have to wipe the glass clean because my slack jaw is steaming up the window my nose is pressed against.

After a while they passed the lake and the line turned inwards towards the centre of the City. The line passed by some docks where they picked up some passengers.

Eventually, inside the next ring the terrain turned to farmland and forest. They passed settlements, each with its own station. Meat and dairy farming, arable faming of all sorts.

As they passed through the farming belt they came to low intensity housing, gradually becoming more developed as they passed through the outer ring roads.

GM: Ahead of you are towering spires, glistening domes and architecture.

MOUSHIKA So clean! And everyone's so rich. They have a full set of clothes. And individual houses.

GM: Apartments are more common in the inner part of the City. You end up in what is called Terminal Station but is actually part of a loop. Imagine Grand Central in New York but they actually got the constellations on the roof right. [11]

Moushika let himself be led while staring at everything in slack jawed awe. Nonetheless he noticed a small person approaching Desmond who was lecturing the group on the history of the building, and trying to steal his Gladstone bag. He was reaching to subtly discourage this when a voice bellowed in his ear.

KESTREL Oy! Stop that I am Kaptain Kestrel.

[11] Just a useless piece of information. I like to work those into my games.

This did not prevent Moushika from wrapping his hand around the urchin's (the other urchin's) wrist.

URCHIN: Oi get off me you great big...

DRAK: Fourteen year old, five foot six, skinny...

Kestrel walloped the small female person around the face. In his defence he hadn't noticed the gender yet.

KESTREL: Take that you rapscallion. It's the only thing they understand!

The would-be thief legged it.

DESMOND: Even in the richest places there are still criminals. Still poor people.

Kestrel was unrepentant.

DESMOND: Oh, I'm going to be glad when this is over.

There was a brief discussion as to whether the really poor people had translator stones. If they ran out of money who could they sell it to given everyone had one? I threw in the story of how the natives got theirs when they were five or six. And when Jaq got lost at the age of ten the Guard found him for his parents by tracking it.

GM: It's very difficult to get lost in the City. But if you're a thief you don't want to be easily findable.

We cut back to the two natives arriving at Registry.

A clerk and a bench. The clerk wore the uniform of a student with four circles on his cap one placed underneath another. Which meant they were serving as a clerk after failing their finals. They were working for the Institute and having access to the libraries and their teachers while waiting for the resits.

The clerk told Jaq to sit down and Selene went into a room where there was an actual wizard, a member of staff, a desk and a magically inscribed circle.

REGISTRAR: *(Taking her papers)* Ah, I see you're a native. Stand over there. *(In the circle)* Is this your True Name? *(She was a little taken aback but nodded)* Test that please.

This last was spoken to a clerk who raised a wand, muttered something and pointed the wand at her. It was quite strong. She staggered a little.

REGISTRAR: No, that confirms this is your true name. Reverse it.

The hairs on the back of her hand had turned green. And so had the hair on her head. She did not have time to check anywhere else before the clerk reversed the spell.

REGISTRAR: That has been registered as your True Name with the Institute. However, you are not permitted to use it or to reveal it to anybody who doesn't know it already. Which means just us and members of your family normally. You will need to choose a use name do you have one in mind.
SELENE Selene Chance.
REGISTRAR: *(Raising an eyebrow slightly at the double barrelled usename)* Check it against the Registry, please.

A clerk tapped at a computer and a moment later confirmed that there are several Selenes and some Selenas but no Selene Chance.

There was more tapping at the computer and something went *ding!* and a freshly made name badge came out of a slot.

The name was written in City Script and there was an identifying number which was incorporated into the seal on the reverse of the badge.

PUM: You're not stuck with a paper badge for the first two weeks.
DRAK: They've got magical three-dee printing.
PUM: We're living in the future.

The Registrar took note of her Native Citizen status ("The border guards insist."). The Student ID she was issued would allow her to charge things to the Institute ("Not at taverns or public eateries.").

REGISTRAR: You are now subject to the authority of the Institute. You will be required to take an oath in front of the Principal and Faculty, tomorrow evening at the Feast. Here is a copy of the Oath. Here is a copy of the regulations. Here is a guide to apprenticeship.

ALAN: I've got Law of The City. I assume that doesn't cover...
GM: No. Oh no.

REGISTRAR: You will be taken to Master Saeon's house. Ask a porter: they will direct you.

GM: (To Graham) You are subjected to much the same treatment. Do you make any particular smart alec remarks?
GRAHAM: Well, they're going to ask me what my True Name is. Fabian H. Fortesque.

However when they tested it there was no transformation of his hairs and the Registrar and clerks muttered about further tests.

When they finally finished all the divination what they got was "Asset number 6991 Experimental Batch J24B,"

DRAK: B eh? Unlucky.
ALAN: 24A had all the benefits.

REGISTRAR: Step over there please. We're having a bit of technical difficulty. *(To a Clerk)* Go fetch the Master Diviner.

The other three finally turned up and after a short wait CatweazeL was invited inside. Since Jaq was still hanging around in the room the Registrar, after debating striking him deaf, decided to put him to sleep during the interview of the next Student.

At which point the dice said that he fumbled his spell casting. And Fabian H Fortesque was suddenly More Awake Than He Had Ever Been In His Life!

CLERK: Put him the cupboard sir.
REGISTRAR: Yes, yes. Go and stand in that sound proofed cupboard.
JAQ Why didn't you say so in the first place?

Before the next interview, Desmond the Guide attested that this was the person he had recruited from a world with a gate number this and such. And that he was suitable to admission to the Institute being Talented with Wild Magic. Which got an *'ooo! Look at them!'* reaction from the Clerks.

He gave his True Name as Percival Fernsby.

The Registrar expressed gratitude that the name was unusual enough that they didn't need to check against date of birth or National Insurance Number.

He chose Catweazel as his usename which he said had been his nickname back on his home world.

That had been used by a student before. But wasn't in use at the moment, the previous user being deceased.

REGISTRAR: Do you feel that's unlucky?
CATWEAZEL Most people's names belong to people who have died so no.

Catweazel noted when he got his badge that he understood the script despite never having seen it before in his life.

He turned and tooled at Kai's badge and saw that his usename was 'Shortfist'

DRAK: At least it's not 'Wiggins'.

He got piled high with paperwork and at the end of the procedure the Registrar told him that the first regulation was: "Respect must be given from the junior to the senior.' I can't recall why he said that.

REGISTRAR: Do not let any of the higher year students tell you they are senior to you.

As Kestrel was brought through the Registrar looked over to where a door was rattling and asked him to be patient in the waiting room a while longer.

They let Jaq out of the soundproof cupboard and got him to stand in the circle while another wizard tested for his True Name.

And the result was when he had finished Casting the Runes he showed the Registrar the piece of parchment on which he had scribed the result.

REGISTRAR: How very unusual. Tell me 'Asset number 6991 Experimental Batch J24B' mean anything to you.
JAQ Should it?
REGISTRAR: According to my colleague here that is your True Name.
JAQ You could talk to my parents. They are well regarded in the City.
REGISTRAR: I think I will have to. Have you selected a use name? You do not want to use either your birth name nor your legal name. You want to have a cognomen. We have a supply of previously used cognomens
JAQ Can't I just use Fabian and be done with it?
REGISTRAR: *(His expression saying 'why is there always one')* It's too close to your legal name and people would use it against you. People would wonder why you hadn't taken a use name.

The Registrar proffered a list of randomly chosen names and after being unimpressed by them he just said; " Just call me Jaq. J-A-Q." [12]

And it was not in use for a miracle. He got a very short badge.

And then it was Kestrel's turn.

REGISTRAR Stand in that circle and give me your name. Your True Name.
KESTREL: My what now? Keith Kent.

[12] And this was because Graham came up with the name Jaques Coustard when the idea of a usename was first explained to him.

His hair turned pink.

When asked to provide a use name ("A what now?") he came up with Kaptain Kestrel.

REGISTRAR: Regulations do not permit me to give anyone a title...
KESTEL: It's all right. It's spelled with a K. Kaptain Krunch wasn't really a captain in any of the forces. Contrary to popular opinion.

They eventually settled on just 'Kestrel' bird names being common among wizards.

Moushika was brought in by Desmond who introduced him as ‘the recruit of my colleague’. The Registrar was a little frosty at this unusual proceeding but when informed that she had become 'entangled in a dispute with the border guard' and after a whispered consultation with the computer operator said:

REGISTRAR Please inform your colleague that I am not happy about this irregularity but I have had a long day already. Therefore, I shall accept this...

They turned Moushika's hair purple. And when they asked about use names he said:

"If it's not too aggrandising, I'd like to be called Moushika."

REGISTRAR: It has a meaning in your language?
MOUSHIKA: It is the mouse that Ganesh rides.

Surprisingly nobody had used the name and the Registrar called it 'even a sensible choice'. The computer guy, having looked up who Ganesh was, said it referred to a 'semi-divine entity' but the Registrar decided that the prohibition against using the names of divine entities whilst practicing magic didn't apply The student said that it wasn't the mouse's real name and supplied the fact that people didn't pray to it which confirmed his decision.

REGISTRAR: Temple Street is very sensitive about its rights.
MOOSHIKA: You have temples?
REGISTRAR: *(Unhappily)* Oh, many, many temples.

They all eventually crossed a footbridge across the road that ran down the centre of the Institute and into the New Quadrangle. It used to be a cluster of upper-class town houses. Now it was a collection of houses for students and professors and they were guided to a particular one.

When they showed their paperwork to the formidable looking woman who answered the door she said they should come in and that two of their number had already arrived.

AND AT THIS POINT I REALISED THAT I HAVE FAR TOO MUCH MATERIAL FROM THIS FIRST SESSION TO SQUEEZE IT INTO ONE E&A AND I HAD BEST SPLIT IT HERE. NO IGTHEME. NOT EVEN ANY COMMENTS. APOLOGIES

MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE: LOGORRHEA Which I seem to be suffering from.

Take good care of yourselves as you negotiate the brave new world the Dragonrise has brought about. Hope nobody finds out about your family cosying up to the Lunars! Welcome to Boldhome, you hill barbarians you.

A zine for *Ever & Anon*.
Unless otherwise noted,
all writing & art is by
Avram Grumer of Brooklyn, NY.
Pronouns: he/him
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
17 Oct 2026

GOING TO BE Ad·Libbed #15

Email: avram@grumer.org
See http://grumer.org/
for social media links.
Software: Typst w/ wrap-it, cuti • Fonts: Libre Baskerville, Libre Franklin, Iosevka Etoile • Logo: Jost, Lobster



Attention Conservation Notice

GMing principles • cheap OSR games on Lulu.com • negotiating (badly) with monsters • moves in *PbtA* games • index design • new game-related journals: *Promptuary & Playtest Material* • *Scum and Villainy* • the Talmud on golems and necromancers • Brooklyn gaming cafes • damage in superhero games • and more...!

Well, this is a nice autumnal color scheme!

Some subtle bits of redesign this month, mostly on the programming end. I've refactored the zine's Typst template, and tweaked how the colors are handled. And I'm working more with the full version of Procreate, on my iPad with a fully pressure-sensitive Apple Pencil.

Back in *E&A* #8 (pg 183), I noted that I was getting a bit over 1,000 words per page. My current layout seems to be about 900 words per full page, not counting images. Since I estimated the average word count of mimeo-era *A&E* at around 750–900 words per page, this feels like it fits long-established practice.



NEWS

The *D&D* and *MtG* divisions of Wizards of the Coast are trying to form a union, which WotC has declined to recognize.

Ken St Andre, creator of *Tunnels & Trolls* has been told by his doctor that he has only a few months to live.

Matt Howarth, creator of the comics that inspired the never-released *Bugtown* RPG, and one of the artists for *Farflung*, has died at the age of 72.

Curds of Head Cheese

Head cheese doesn't actually have curds, does it?

GMing principles

I was skimming through a draft release of the second edition of *Monolith*, a sci-fi hack of *Cairn* (among other things), and noticed this:

> **Neutrality**
> The GM's role is to act as a neutral arbiter and portray the rules, situations, non-player characters (NPCs), and narrative clearly.
>
> — Adam Hensley
> *Monolith* 2e draft, ver 1.1, pg 8

I've been consulting the *Monsterhearts* rules a lot as well, and that *Monolith* quote made me think of the MC's Principles, which include:

> - Make monsters seem human, and vice versa
> - Give everyone a messy life
> - Be a fan of the main characters
> - Treat side characters like stolen cars
>
> — Avery Alder
> *Monsterhearts* 2e, pg 85

Notice the distinction? *Monolith*, an OSR game, wants the GM to take on a neutral arbitrator role, while *Monsterhearts*, a Forge-derived storygame, wants the GM (or "MC") to tilt the field towards drama. "Be a fan of the main characters," in particular, asks the GM to take sides in a way that *D&D* GMs (like a referee overseeing a wargame) were expected not to do back in olden times.

The distinction even shows up in titles. A *Traveller* GM is a "Referee"; so was a *D&D* GM in the White Box and Basic editions. *Chainmail* and *Braunstein* also used "Referee" or "Judge," all

terms implying neutral observation and decision-making. *Monsterhearts*, on the other hand, follows *Apocalypse World* in using "MC" ("Emcee," or "Master of Ceremonies"), a host who helps performers be their best for an audience.

I'm not expressing an opinion, here, about which approach is preferable. I'm mostly just admiring the way that the hobby has finally gotten around to being able to express these preferences in concise ways without having to resort to misstruck coinages like "deprotagonism."

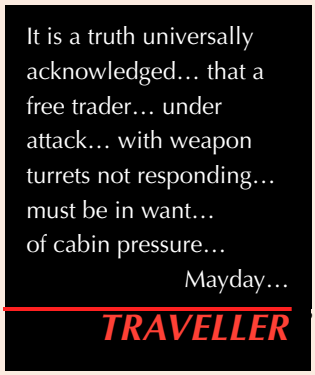
But I'm also wondering if there are any other approaches than these two. Maybe the antagonistic approach from *Paranoia*?

Cheap games

Have I mentioned here that you can pick up physical versions of both *Monolith* and *Cairn* pretty cheap on Lulu.com?

In July I ordered *Monolith* (1st edition, a 92-page paperback), the *Cairn* 2e Barebones edition (48-page hardcover with no interior art), and the *Cairn* 2e *Player's Guide* and *Warden's Guide* (88 pages and 192 pages, respectively, both paperbacks with art). All of these are digest-sized books (about 5½″ × 8½″, or roughly A5 size). The whole batch only cost me about US$40, including shipping and sales tax (but with a $5 discount from a coupon).

Interplanetary romance



There's been some discussion here about how a game's rules affect gameplay, and whether system matters, etc, and I can't help but wonder — has anyone used *Traveller* to run a Regency-style romance game?

I don't mean playing in early 19th-century England. I mean using the far-future Imperium setting, with its ranks of nobility and its long travel and communication times, for science-fictiony Jane Austen stories.

All the pieces are there. Old-school *Traveller* uses the three physical stats (STR, DEX, END) to track physical damage, so surely you could use SOC to track reputational damage. A long FTL jump (minimum time: one week) gives you an excuse to push characters together. Wealth and inherited titles give you most of the motivations for a Regency romance.

There's even a bit of tension in the anti-psionics laws, in that a suitor who's too sensitive to a lady's needs might be suspected of being (gasp!) *a telepath!* In Solomani and Vilani society, there's a social benefit to acting as if you don't understand other people's thoughts and feelings!

Imagine a crew of hard-bitten space adventurers coming to own a large passenger ship, retiring from the interstellar murder-hobo lifestyle, and setting up some kind of *Love Boat* situation. (This could also make a good *Fiasco* playset.)

Now, I repeat, the pieces for this kind of game are all present within the classic *Traveller* rules! If nobody's done this kind of thing before, if nobody's seen this potential game sitting just barely below the surface, then what does that say about how a game's rules affect gameplay? Is it system that matters, or is it presentation and narrative color?

Worlds to Come



Yet again, I have the frustrating experience of drawing your attentions to a Kickstarter campaign whose funding deadline will have already passed by the time this issue comes out.

Worlds to Come is (or will be) an RPG about Hebrew, designed to teach you the basics of Hebrew as you play it. The PCs are miracle workers in the period between the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the Bar Kochba Revolt in 132–136 CE. Resolution is diceless, and the magic system involves using the actual letters of the Hebrew alphabet (or *aleph-bet*). There's a 22-card deck that gives you all of the letters, along with gematria values and meanings taken from the Sefer Yetzirah.

Yes, of course I backed it. It's not scheduled to actually ship till August 2028, though.

Her Who is Not to be Named

The Chaosium Board Games Team has announced that they are changing the name of the Lovecraftian entity *Shub-Niggurath* to *Shub-Gorath*, to avoid it sounding like a common offensive slur. Probably a good move; I can recall wincing a bit reading the original name in *Deities & Demigods* as a teenager.

That announcement was made in a project update for a crowd-funded boardgame, *Call of Cthulhu: Old Ones Origins*. I don't know if this name change is just for this game, or just for boardgames, or if it will be continued across Chaosium's RPG line as well.

There's some interesting copyright history here. The name takes the first part of *Shub-Niggurath* and combines it with the latter half of *Shuma-Gorath*,

a name originating in a short story by Robert E Howard, "The Curse of the Golden Skull," probably written in the 1920s or '30s, but first published posthumously in 1967. It's just a tossed-off invocation in a sorcerer's dying curse, so there's no real character associated with it in the Howard story.

In 1973, Steve Englehart and Frank Brunner used the name for a giant, one-eyed tentacle monster who fights Doctor Strange. The rights to the name *Shuma-Gorath* are currently held by a company called Heroic Signatures, so the giant, one-eyed tentacle monster who appears in 2022's *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* film got renamed *Gargantos*, a different Dr Strange villain. (The creature goes unnamed in the actual film, but is named in publicity material.)

I'm guessing that using just part of the name will be enough to keep Chaosium from getting sued.

IgTheme: Negotiating with monsters

So it's the summer of 1980. I'm just barely too old for summer camp, so I'm off on a cross-country bus trip with dozens of other teens (mostly Jewish) and a handful of counselors (mostly born-again Christians). One of the counselors is into *D&D*, and runs a Basic Set adventure for us, of which I remember only one single scene.

We're first-level characters, of course, and I'm playing a magic-user, of course, and I've taken *sleep* as my spell. Somehow, we run into a dragon. Rather than fight it directly, I use subterfuge: I have a wineskin, with wine. I tell the dragon that we have more wine outside the room, really good stuff, and we're willing to share it, I'll just go get it, OK?

My actual plan is that I'll cast most of my *sleep* spell, leaving the last syllable unsaid and the last gesture unmade, then pop around the corner and finish the spell, putting the dragon to sleep. (I think I had read that Niven story in the Warlock series, where the Warlock can leave the last syllable of a spell unfinished, and then cast it by completing it.) So my magic-user goes off for a bit, casts most of the spell, then comes back, and jumps out from behind the edge of the door. I fling out my hands and shout "Oh!"

Leaving aside any rules about concentration and spellcasting, I've totally forgotten that *sleep* doesn't affect creatures with more than 4d+1 hit dice, and also that dragons have magic resistance. The dragon looks at my PC, and says "'Oh,' what?"

Thinking quickly, flinging my arms into a new position with each syllable like I've just invented some new kind of cardio routine, in the hope of disguising the fact that I've just cast a spell, I shout "Oh! I! For! Got! The! Wine!" and then flee.

The rest of the adventure is lost in the mists of time. Not much of a negotiation, really.

Moves in *PbtA* games

I've seen a couple of useful online discussions recently about how moves work in *Powered by the Apocalypse* games, one on Bluesky and another on Reddit.

The general sense of them is that a lot of people take the three outcomes of *PbtA* dice moves as always meaning bad/mixed/good. But as Vincent Baker points out, you have to take those things as relative. A dice move could be designed along good/great/fantastic lines, or awful/bad/mediocre.

Take as an example *Masks: A New Generation*, the popular *PbtA* game about inexperienced teen superheroes. One of the basic moves in that game is *Directly Engage A Threat*, a combat move, which says "On a hit, trade blows." That means that on a result of 7+, your PC gets to stay in the fight. But there's also an adult move that you might gain with experience, *Overwhelm a Vulnerable Foe*, which says "On a hit, the fight's over. They're done." ("They" being the foe.) Same roll, stronger outcome, because it's a stronger move that your PC only gains with experience (and can only be used when the foe is vulnerable).

Designing a usable index

A traditional reference book has an index designed for use by scholars, who value thoroughness and spend a lot of time in their researches. RPG game books need to be designed for speed, so you can get the rule or statblock you need without wasting time at the table.

Johan Nohr, the graphic designer for the *Mörk Borg* book, posted a thread on Bluesky talking about some particular design decisions that make the index of that book useful in play: dividing the index into sections, keeping it to just one page, having multiple entries for the same thing under different names, and having each entry point to just one page in the book instead of including every time a thing is mentioned.

Promptuary

Carnegie Mellon University Press is starting a game design anthology, "focused on publishing short games — as rules texts, print-and-play materials, and other printable formats."

The deadline for the first volume is Nov 30, 2026, and the theme is *Strange Worlds: Science, Technology, and the Anthropocene*. I don't know how the finished anthology will be made available.

Playtest Material #1 (Winter 2026)



Playtest Material, a not-for-profit critical journal dedicated to role-playing games, released its first issue on Oct 1st. It's a freely-downloadable PDF, though the publishers "ask that this is not uploaded to other sites without permission, or used in AI training." Looks like it's supposed to be a quarterly publication.

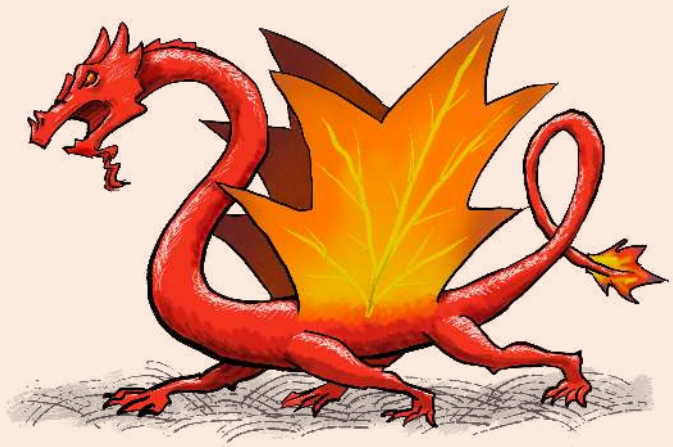
Annoyingly, not only does it not have a document outline (that clickable table-of-contents outline that displays in a sidebar in most PDF readers), but the in-document table of contents isn't clickable.

The editorial by lead editor Laurie O'Connel mentions a "lyric game movement," something I hadn't heard of before. An Itch.io user called QueerAnarchistFox assembled a collection of lyric ttRPGs, so that's probably a good place to go for figuring this movement out.

Coyote vs Acme

This movie was good, but not great. It's definitely good enough to have deserved an actual theatrical release, rather than being flushed down the memory hole for a tax write-off as Warner Bros CEO David Zaslav originally tried to do.

But it's also a movie that's strongly reminiscent of 1988's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, without being as clever or original. The jokes are mostly the obvious ones, and the climax of the story is weak. The animation is inconsistent, as if parts of it were rushed, or it got released without having been fully finished.



Still nothing new in the Park Slope group. It's enough to get me thinking about whipping my apartment into shape so I can invite them in without keeling over from embarrassment. Probably not enough to get me to actually do it, but I'm thinking about it, and that's gotta count for something.

SCUM AND VILLAINY

Session 11	11 Oct 2026
The GM	**Gaylord** (he)
Harmony Qián (she), a **Mechanic**	**me** (he)
Valsi (they), a **Mystic**	**Lisa** (she)
Varilas, aka **Vary** (she), a xeno **Speaker**	**Josh** (he)
Von Redwell (he), **Muscle**	**Gareth** (he)

We're in Brekk system. We're Wanted in Rin, Holt, and Iota. Not Wanted in Brekk, but we have 4 Heat there. Also, our Way Fountain (the gizmo Valsi built) is acting weird. And remember Emergency Backup Von, the Magpie duplicate of Von who we busted out of prison last session? (See *E&A* #16, pgs 107–108.) He's in our sickbay. Josh wants a long-term project to stabilize him. And we've still got Baby Vic, the infant clone of Harmony's brother (*E&A* #14, pgs 105–107).

Vary uses a Downtime action to reduce Heat in Iota, which gets us to 5 Heat and 0 Wanted. Sol Brighton, the robot lawyer from a couple of sessions back, helped with this, and wants a favor in return: a job for one of his clients. Our catering experience should come in handy. (We consider changing the ship's name to "Way 2 Party Catering.") The client wants us to crash a party being held by a bunch of monks. They encourage fatalities.

Von: As long as it's not my mendicant monk friends.
Gaylord: <evil smile>

Valsi Attunes to the Way Fountain, which is attuned to the Aleph Key. Harmony asks what that means.

Valsi: If you want a technical explanation, you'll have to ask your brother.
Harmony: I guess we'll never know.

The mendicant monks — yes, Von's friends — are

having a party. The woman from the prison — the Sector Governor's mother, styling herself "The Empress" — wants to hire us to crash the monks' party. (We met her last session as well. You meet a lot of interesting people in prison.)

Von: How did you like the cake?
"Empress": Eh.

She tells us we don't know what we're doing. She says if a Way crisis happened, we'd be the second or third group consulted; taking out the monks moves us up a slot. She needs us to wreck the monks' reputation. If there are deaths involved, even better. The job pays modestly. We take it.

The party is being held at an ancient temple called Dendara, on Todav, Nightfall's fifth moon.

Gareth wants Von to try to get tickets to the party through a contact, then changes his mind to trying to get them to make us their caterer, but flubs the roll, so we're not only rejected, but blacklisted from the party. Gareth decides the outcome is too funny to resist the consequence. The monks give us booties for the baby.

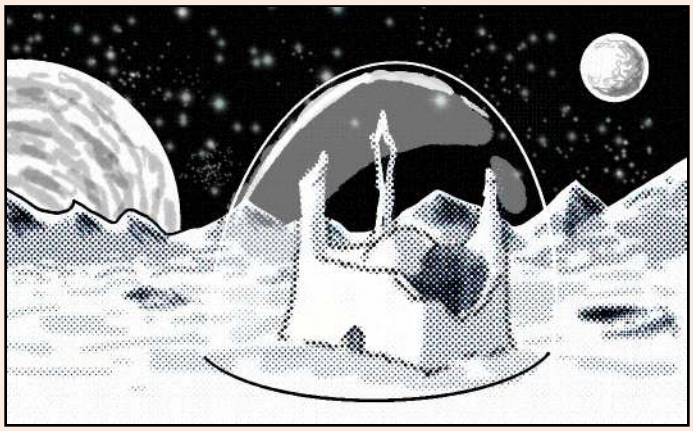
So it's time for a plan: Deception. We're gonna lie our way in. The Hegemonic News Network is going to be in attendance, thanks to a bad Fortune roll, so we're going to lie our way into going along with them. Hey, Von knows about the monks, why not bring us along?

Vary rolls Consort, partial success. Complication: We're gonna draw +2 Heat, due to the news being right there.

We have a 3d6 Engagement roll, result: 4. We're in a risky position

We land on Todav. There are thousands of monks gathered. We all take Heavy Load.

The mendicants are planning to re-brand themselves as the Emerald Heart, a religious group which had been banned for being too pro-xeno. (The Church of the Emerald Heart had been the mendicants' original group, before the Church was banned.) The monks are suspicious of our IDs, but HNN waves them off.



Todav doesn't have an atmosphere, so there's a big pressure bubble over the temple. The monks want everything filmed from a distance, so we're under another, smaller bubble, a short distance away. Baby Vic is on the ship. (Who's watching him? Backup Von? No, Harmony's intelligent pet cat.) We want to know about the artifact they found, and who they bribed to get the ban on the Emerald Heart lifted. Oh, also: Todav has a weird magnetic field or something, and electronic equipment isn't reliable here.

Valsi tries to Attune to gain info, and rolls a critical hit! They pick up that there are people from Engineers Guild, not monks, in the temple. And they overhear a discussion about an artifact that can Way-enhance robots. The Guild wants to make a Way-enhanced robot army.

I suggest we try to convince the monks that our toilets have glitched out, can we use theirs? I figure Vary is the one with the best odds of success in convincing people, and most useful to get in there. Josh counter-pitches that Vary can get in through the sewage pipes. Gaylord offers a Devil's Bargain: Someone will die. Josh rejects it.

The roll fails, so there's no connecting pipe. Josh resists the consequence, so Vary does not get stuck in a septic tank.

Since that plan failed, we try my original plan. Harmony suits up, exits the airlock, walks awkwardly over to the other bubble (you know, that gotta-use-the-toilet walk), and asks to be let in to use their restroom. Success! She goes into a restroom, steals a monk's robe, and sneaks off, planning to make a distraction so the other PCs can get across.

Gareth declares a flashback for Von: He planted a bomb at the back of the big bubble. (Von plants bombs everywhere.) Josh tries to ret-con the explosives into distracting but harmless fireworks, but fails. Harmony clicks the remote for the bomb. Gaylord calls for a Rig roll, due to the tech flakiness, and offers a Devil's Bargain: Kill a guy! I accept, roll 3d6, get a 6! A monk is too close to the bomb. ("Monk Steve!" "Eh, nobody liked him anyway.") The other PCs take advantage of the distraction to sneak across, and we look for the Way artifact. Which is pretty easy, because there are signs.

The artifact is a fist-sized green gemstone, sitting

on a display stand in the middle of a big room, on open display.

Valsi thinks it'd look great in the center of the Way Fountain. Valsi tries to Attune to the gem, and rolls another crit! The gem leaps into Valsi's hand. The HNN cameras point at Valsi, who's cuddling the gem, shouting "It doesn't want to be part of an army!" The gem shoots out green energy, damaging the bubble. Panic breaks out. We run for our ship, and make our escape, except Von, who stays back to help the monks. (It's OK, we've got an Emergency Backup Von.)

There's some discussion here of exactly how Von should be helping. Gareth thinks Scrap might be useful, but I say that's fighting, Scramble sounds more like getting somewhere in a hurry. But Von's got more dots in Scrap than in Scramble. I point out that he's also good at Command, maybe he should just take charge and yell at people; that usually works out well. And it does this time too, he rolls a crit!

Also, Gareth flashes back to peeling a label off one of the HNN cameras & putting it on the bomb, figuring maybe scraps of it will be discovered. He also uses a downtime action to convince a monk to smuggle him off the moon, so he can reconnect with the other PCs.

Valsi: I hate to say this, but the Empress was right.
Harmony: I had a good feeling about her.

We get 10 Heat in Brekk; so we're 1 Wanted, and 2 Heat short of 2 Wanted.

Entanglement: System officers grab Von on his way back to the group to question him; he pays them off.

Harmony spent Downtime on Training, getting her 3rd dot in Rig. She also got the Mechanic's Heart advance.

HNN mentions us, but doesn't mention the gem.

During downtime, I realize that I got the Crafting rules wrong, and Harmony actually completed the souped-up *Lone Wolf and Cub* baby carriage for Vic at the end of last session.



Comments on *E&A* #16

Patrick Riley

re tanks vs strikers vs controllers (pg 28) ⟹ Oh god, yes! Every so often I start to think that maybe 5th edition made *D&D* fun again, and then I hear people talk about video-game-style combat roles and all of the fun drains out of it for me.

re Failure in RPGs (pg 33) ⟹ See my comment to Roger, below, about clocks in *Forged in the Dark* games. If you've got a countdown clock going for some negative consequence (the guards show up, the building starts to collapse, the Imperial battle cruiser catches up to you, etc) then pretty much any failure or partial success can be expressed as extra time taken up, and one or more wedges ticked off.

Myles Corcoran

yct Dylan Capel (pg 55) re Jason Tocci's *24xx* games ⟹ I like these too, though I've yet to play one. I like the *idea* of them, and the basic design seems sound. There was a point where Tocci was talking about a printed edition, the whole series collected together as a book, but I don't think it ever happened.

I think my favorite rule is the *Casing the Joint* bit in *The Venusian Job*. Players get to ask questions about a planned heist, with the caveat that each question answered represents casing the target, and can arouse suspicion. After each question, the GM rolls a die (increasing in size), and on a 10+ result, the adventure starts with the PCs already captured and trying to escape!

Brian Rogers

yct Joshua Kronengold (pg 63) re who killed Phoenix in the comic ⟹ It was actually Jean who killed herself, using the ancient defense laser. The comic (*The Uncanny X-Men* #136) makes this pretty clear, giving Jean a speech about how dangerous she would be to those around her, and in the next issue (#137), Cyclops summarizes it as "When [the] Imperial Guard failed, Jean finished the job herself."

Roger BW

yct Dylan Capel (pg 100) re PDF annotations ⟹ I think there are apps that will save annotations separately from the PDF, but they're generally presented as research tools rather than as PDF viewers. Zotero, Flexcil, Skim, etc.

yct me (pg 101) re clocks in *Forged in the Dark* games ⟹ Yeah, I think clocks might be the best thing to come out of this design, even though they aren't

really mechanically different from *Fate*'s stress tracks. In addition to adding tension by making impending trouble visible, they give you a handy way to make consequences meaningful, if you're stuck for ideas. (See my comment to Patrick Riley, above.)

There can also be positive clocks, counting down to things the PCs want to happen: How long it'll take you to cut through that bulkhead, build that gizmo, break that code, etc.

YCT Lisa Padol (PG 102) RE the game set "right here, right now" and the game set "on the edge of tomorrow" ⟹

This reminds me that I'd given thought, six years ago, to running a short *Cyberpunk 2020* game in a setting dominated by social media, a fascist presidential administration, and a dangerous respiratory plague.

Timothy Collinson

RE Professional GMing (PG 114) ⟹

I get you. In my own case, well, my brain can barely scrape enough long-term attention together to run a multi-session game for friends. But I'm quite certain that if I tried to charge money to do it, the added pressure of having to fulfill a professional responsibility would squeeze all of the fun out of it for me.

Dale Meier

RE golems in *Call of Cthulhu* (PG 121) ⟹

Any idea why the rules restrict golems to humanoid form? Non-humanoid golems are a part of the original Jewish lore. The Talmud says (Sanhedrin 65b) that Rabbis Ḥanina and Oshaya, in the 3rd century CE, used to create a calf golem before each Sabbath Eve and eat it together.

Though Sanhedrin 65b also says that necromancers make the dead speak from out of their armpits, so maybe there are limits to taking it as a source for fantasy RPGs. (That's an excuse for me to pull out a cartoon I posted on LiveJournal almost 20 years ago!)

Michael Cule

YCT me (PG 137) RE *Descended from the Queen* ⟹

Yeah, that's the family of *For the Queen* games. I'd never played any of 'em before Lisa pulled out *Ringmaster* a few months back (see *E&A* #13, pgs 142–144).

I get that same I'm-out-of-touch feeling when I see how popular *Blood on the Clocktower* is. I've never played it, have only a vague notion that it's in the genre of social deduction parlor games that started with *Mafia* (a genre I've always been bad at), and that's it.

My sister (who lives several states away) recently told me that my niece, who's never been particularly nerdy and never struck me as the type who'd go in for RPGs, is a big fan of *Blood on the Clocktower* and *Werewolf*.

Jim Vassilakos

YCT Dylan Capel (PG 143) RE AI & Consciousness ⟹

I originally had a reply here quoting an exchange with Gemini, in which I asked whether it thought and was self-aware, and it said no, but I've decided that this topic can really only be productive at length, and lengthy conversations about LLMs aren't really what this apa is for.

On the upside, figuring out how to format the excerpt taught me a few useful Typst tricks, and forced me to refactor the template I'm using (as described earlier in this zine), so it's a bit cleaner, programmatically.

(Lengthy conversations about Typst aren't really what this apa is for either, but longstanding tradition has it that the technology of an apa's production is always on-topic. The medium is the message, after all.)



YCT me (PG 144) RE illegal PC activities in *Traveller* ⟹ Yeah, that's most RPGs, isn't it? *D&D* is infamous for its grave-robbing murder-hobos. *Scum and Villainy* has it right in the name.

YCT me (PG 144) RE Mike's attempt to break Blue out of Darkest Self not gelling ⟹ As best I can recall (the original event was seven months ago — see *E&A* #9, pg 149), we were all engaged in the roleplay, and didn't want to break out into Author Stance. But this is something I'll want to keep in mind if we do another campaign.

Also, thinking back on it, Johnni is particularly good at signalling their intentions in Author/Director Stances without falling all the way out of Actor Stance. I don't think any of the rest of us are quite that skilled at that particular trick.

I think the actual issue might have been that Drake's interaction with Byron just wasn't dramatic enough, and Johnni was holding out for something stronger, which they got later in the session from the Talia plotline. Possibly Mike could have succeeded if he'd sold the scene harder — maybe framed a scene with Blue where he directly talks about being trapped, instead of just leaving it up to implication. Also, Johnni had indicated an interest in Talia early in the campaign, while Blue's connection with Drake was weaker; Johnni never fully trusted Drake (which was the right call, as we all eventually learned).

Lisa Padol

YCT Brian Rogers (PG 150) RE me telling you about an old *Star Trek* game ⟹ I have no memory of this whatsoever, either the game or me telling you about it.

The old TSR Marvel game is known as "FASERIP," not "FACERIP." The S stands for ~~Savings~~ Strength. It's not a game about ripping people's faces, even if you're playing Wolverine. Or Frank Zappa.

I agree that Gaylord's *Masks* game didn't quite work right, for a bunch of reasons that I have trouble really nailing down. If I were going to run a supers game, right now I'd be inclined to use *Icons*, a hybrid of *Fate* with the old Marvel FASERIP system. It's still trad enough that you can develop your themes and character arcs in play, without having to establish them at the start, but it's got Aspects (or "Qualities") and Fate Points ("Determination") so you can give mechanical heft on the fly to dramatic story elements and nebulous social and emotional influences.

YCT Roger Bell_West (PG 153) RE clocks in our *Scum and Villainy* game ⟹ I don't think we've ever had more than two GM-created clocks going at the same time, and we usually don't even have one. (Not counting player-created Crafting clocks.) I suspect this is fewer than the typical *Forged in the Dark* game generally has. A Reddit thread I found has people saying they use clocks in pretty much every heist, generally 1–3 of them.

YCT Dale Meier (PG 155) RE gaming cafes in Brooklyn ⟹ There are several; see below.

YCT me (PG 156) RE the land that would become Israel ⟹ So what you're saying is that Liesl had been living in Ottoman Palestine for a while when it became Mandatory Palestine (after WW1), and you're not sure if she lived long enough to see it become the State of Israel (in 1948).

YCT Joshua Kronengold (PG 157) RE me at the copy shop ⟹ I know I took advantage of my free-copies privilege to run off my zines for *APA-NU* and *Golden APA*, since those were local and I could haul my zines to collation personally, but I'm not sure I ever did it for *A&E*, since postage for 150 copies would have been pricey.

Gaming Cafes in Brooklyn

I've only been to the first three of these. The rest I just found by googling.

- The Twenty-Sided Store in Williamsburg isn't a cafe, but it does have table space for events. Not sure how open they are to drop-in gaming.
- The Squarrel Cafe, on Atlantic near 4th Ave, where I played *Blades in the Dark* a few months back (see *E&A* #7, pgs 147–149).
- The Brooklyn Strategist in Brooklyn Heights, another game shop with a cafe space you can play in.
- Sip n Play in Park Slope, Fifth Ave & 9th St.
- The Merry Meeple in Fort Greene, opening in December. Not far from the Aldi where I buy cheap breakfast cereal.
- The Brooklyn Game Lab in Park Slope, which I think is primarily for kids, and not really a cafe.
- Last Place on Earth, a game shop with space to play, somewhere in Williamsburg or Greenpoint.
- The Brooklyn Game Knight in Industry City.
- The Next Move Cafe, way down in Bensonhurst.

Joshua Kronengold

YCT Patrick Riley (PG 163) RE *Champions* Killing attacks ⟹ Not sure what you're complaining about here. There's a classic tends-to-knock-targets-out damage system for classic superheroes, who can then gain 20 extra character build points by taking a Code Against Killing Disadvantage, plus you have a more-likely-to-kill-targets variation for the guys (it's usually guys) who want to play characters like Wolverine or the Punisher.

Granted, there are other ways of getting that same effect. In a more modern game, like *Fate* you replace *knocked out* and *killed* with a single *taken out* result, and interpret the actual fictional effects based on a combination of narration and mechanical tags like aspects. But the dual-damage system in *Champions* does just what it sets out to do, and is a pretty good solution by the standards of 1980 RPG design.

If anything, my problem with *Champions* damage (and with pretty much every superhero system) is that fire damage is treated just the same as punch-in-the-jaw damage, mechanically. If you look at *Fantastic Four* comics, you never see the Human Torch using his flames as a direct damage-causing weapon against normal people. He'll use them to create obstacles, or to force people to step back, or occasionally do something fancy like burn up all of the oxygen in a room to knock people out, but he doesn't just blast them directly.

In the 1987 *X-Men vs Fantastic Four* miniseries, Storm's arm is accidentally skimmed by one of the Torch's fire-bolts (he's trying to get Wolverine to move away from Reed), and it causes her a serious injury that would have left her with permanent impairment if Dr Doom hadn't been there to fix her up with super-Doom-tech. But most supers games expect Flame Guy to just blast some ordinary mortal henchdudes or bank robbers like a flame-thrower, and knock them out with stun damage like it's just another kind of punching.



That's all for this month! I'm actually gonna mail this in several days ahead of the deadline. I hope I've got more actual gaming to write up for next issue!

Overlord's Annals

Attronarch, The Exalted Overlord of Uncontested Vastlands

Volume 5 · Issue 11 · November 2026

In this issue

Overlord's Annals is a monthly zine in which I share session reports from games I either run or have participated in.

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

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

Adventurers battle the Flaming Eye.

Conquering the Barbarian Altanis Campaign

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

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

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

Attributions

Text copyright © Attronarch, 2026.

All illustrations by IdleDoodler.

Typeset in LaTeX with Charter, a print-friendly typeface.

Conquering the Barbarian Altanis: Session 126

Adventurers

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

***Bragi Twinefinger**, hobbit 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.

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

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

Gloomfrost 13th, Earthday

"Look—there, among the trees." Balarus said to his fellow adventurers whilst motioning at a poorly concealed hut. It was a primitive wooden construction with foliage on top surrounded by a copse of trees. Among the bushes three purplish, hobbit sized mushrooms could be spotted.

Balarus followed the trail from the waylaid barge. A hobbit merchant approached Braggi three days ago. His goods—six barrels of fine silk—were stolen by a bunch of bandits. "All I know is that bastards have a flaming eye painted on their shields!" Some people were killed too, but that wasn't his primary concern. He had little to pay with, but did say that "Listen, there was a chest full of coin there. Proceeds from other merchants... I won't tell anyone if you happen to find it..."

Party of six—Balarus, Bragi, Crosonus, Foxglove, and Ignaeus—rode along the mighty river Farhills. Once they found the shored barge, Balarus was able to follow the tracks all the way to the bandits' hideout.

Foxglove snuck up to the hut. Mushrooms began shrieking violently. Everyone promptly hid in the bushes, missile weapons at the ready. After few minutes the lean-to plank that served as hut's doors fell straight to the ground. Groggy looking pig-faced orc stepped out, shielding his eyes from the sun with his right hand, and holding a saggy wineskin in his left.

He looked around for a few seconds. Then he proceeded to the closest screaming mushroom and poured some liquid on it. Shroom went quiet. He repeated the process with remaining two. Once they were all quiet, he went back into the hut, lifting the plank back in its place.

Adventurers quietly approached the hut. Shrooms remained quiet. Beefy Balarus grabbed the plank with his mighty thews, and then stepped backwards quietly. Foxglove and Ignaeus moved in, surprising the orc sitting on the ground. Elf skewered the beast straight through its throat. Then he jerked the blade sideways, ripping off half of its neck and face.

Heavy wooden trapdoor with a large iron ring sat at the bottom square-shaped depression. Right next to it were three wooden pillars with one beam jutting above the trapdoor. This was obviously a very primitive pulley system to lift and lower heavy objects through the pit below.

Balarus the Mighty forced the trapdoor open. Iron rungs descended down the thirty feet deep pit. Adventurers dropped a single gold coin that had continual light cast on it. That hadn't revealed much except that the floor was stone.

Foxglove quietly descended, minding the rungs. You never know where a trap could be. As soon as he jumped down he was jumped by eight bloodthirsty pig-faced monsters armed with hand-axes and shields with flaming eye painted on them. Ignaeus rushed down to help his friend. Balarus and Bragi followed. Brutal skirmish was over in less than a minute. Orcs fought to the bitter end, but were no match for the more experienced and better armed adventurers. Searching their corpses produced four hundred fifty-two gold pieces.

There were two exits from the anteroom—doors to the north and open corridor to the south. Party went north, until they reached a four-way junction. A square chamber with a large marble statue of two lovers kissing was straight ahead. It was a rare crimson marble, and would surely be worth something to an arts collector. Two dozen logs rested against the east wall. The statue rested on hay and straw. The chamber was otherwise empty.

East corridor stretched into darkness, as did the west one. Adventurers opted for the latter one. They soon reached another junction, splintering south and east.

Following east route led them to two dead ends. The first was a rectangular chamber with a number of large ceramic pots with lids. One of them had "DO NOT BREAK" inscribed on top. Foxglove lifted the lid, saw a giant rattlesnake slithering amongst thousands of coins, slammed the lid shut, and left the chamber. The second was an unfinished tunnel. Abandoned shovels and pickaxes were strewn about. Adventurers helped themselves to some mining equipment.

Then they backtracked and went down the east corridor. Forcing the doors open unleashed horrible stench upon the party. Two large white apes with thick iron collars around their necks charged the adventurers. Balarus slammed the doors shuts, but was driven back by sheer strength of the ape duo.

Ignaeus put his magical sword to use and froze one of the apes. Balarus killed the other one with a single blow. He swung his battleaxe straight down the giant ape's right shoulder until he hit the hip. Then he kicked the simian, jerking his two-handed axe loose. Nothing but vile stench was to be found in this chamber.

Forcing the south doors led the party to another junction. Pressing further south resulted with an interesting encounter.

"W-who goes there?" a meek voice inquired from darkness.

"Justice!" Ignaeus retorted and marched on.

Four scrawny guys huddled in a centre of square chamber. They were armed with spears. Shields with the familiar motif of flaming eye leaned against the south wall. The party hesitated for seven seconds before running them down. One dared to attempt escape. Balarus and Bragi shot him down. Although scrawny, the four bandits had a total of six hundred forty-six gold pieces.

"Let's head back to Hara, heal, and return here."

Everyone agreed. Riding back, they reached the fortified city of merchants several hours after dusk.

Will their follow-up delve be as successful as the first one?

Conquering the Barbarian Altanis: Session 127

Adventurers

***Centuria**, elf level 1*. An academic elf fond of teasing those of lower status.

***Thorin Whiteheart**, cleric level 1*. Thorin Whiteheart

***Thorm**, dwarf level 2*. Ashen hair, beard, and eyes. Left his own clan due to financial trouble.

***Tu'Fles**, elf level 1*. Massive dork for dragons.

Gloomfrost 14th, Fireday

"And where exactly is this bandit lair full of treasure?" Centuria inquired Balarus. "Shrieking purple mushrooms, orcs with flaming eyes on their shield, white apes, bandits, yes, anything else?"

A humble party of four led by Thorm the dwarf rode to the bandit lair that Balarus, Bragi, Ignaeus, and Foxglove had just returned from. They wanted to maintain the momentum and prevent bandits from regrouping.

Thorm was joined by Thorin, follower of Umannah, and two bookish elves, namely Centuria and Tu'Fles. They passed the shrooms and descended the trapdoor into the bandit lair. Eight pig-faced beastmen corpses greeted them, just as Balarus had described.

They turned south, then west, forced doors open, then forced south doors, followed the corridor to the junction, turned east, and marched into the chamber.

Thorin failed to see, smell, or hear two large hairy brutes hiding just around the corner. He barely survived the initial onslaught. Beastmen had weird bestial faces—as if someone had flattened a tiger's face by repeatedly hitting it with a shovel. Standing just over seven feet tall, and armed with battle-axes, they were no laughing matter. Both focused on Thorm and hacked him to death in less than ten seconds.



Centuria and Tu'Fles fell back into the corridor so Thorin could withdraw. Acolyte of Radiant Death poured oil on the ground. Beasts pursued, despite one of them already being on fire! That caused exact result adventurers were hoping for—both monsters caught fire.

Stench of burnt hair and flesh permeated the hallway. Beasts swung wildly as they burned to death. Thorin did not escape their mighty blows, and his light extinguished forever.

Once the flames subsumed the elves recovered one hundred fifty-four platinum pieces from the beastmen. Then they decided to haul Thorm's corpse back to Hara. There Centuria kindly requested Ambros ap Mortain to perform a miracle.



"Would you please raise Thorm from his sliced up death? We were prepared for the orcs, white apes and bandits, but the adventurer's scouting party had made no mention of there being bugbears!"

Ambros performed another miracle—Balarus being his first one—and brought Thorm back to life.

"Clean out that den of thieves in the name of justice."

Thorm uttered "Ambros be praised!" with great difficulty, experience of death still fresh in his mind and body.

"Don't forget that you both have to clean the place out. . . "









Conquering the Barbarian Altanis: Session 128

Adventurers

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

***Bragi Twinefinger**, hobbit level 2*. 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.

***Centuria**, elf level 2*. An academic elf fond of teasing those of lower status.

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

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

***Tu'Fles**, elf level 1*. Massive dork for dragons.

Gloomfrost 15th, Spiritday

Seven adventurers rode back to the bandit lair of Flaming Eye. Crosonus, Balarus's retainer remained outside to guard the horses, while the chosen six triggered shriekers and descended down the vertical shaft.

Orc corpses were missing. Stench of death lingered. Unsure what to make of this, the party moved left, through the doors. Then they turned right at the junction and investigated the doors. While elf and thief listened, Balarus felt something was off. He turned around, only to see four pig-faced corpses approaching them from behind.

Adventurers rapidly fell in fighting order. Orcs were not walking—they were slowly floating through air!



Transparent liquid spurted left and right as adventures' weapons cut through the bestial remains. All four corpses dropped to the ground, even though they hacked only one of them. Unsure what to make of it, they resumed their exploration.

Chamber they broke into was empty, sans nice stacks of silver coins. Foxglove had a look at them, found no traps, and thus, promptly put them in his backpack.

Exiting south led them to a weirdly shaped junction. East corridor was at an angle and led to locked doors, something Foxglove dealt with. He failed to pick the lock, so he hammered it into submission.

Bragi explored east corridor, but fled back after seeing a swarm of giant centipedes crawling about. While the thief hammered the lock, Balarus forced the south doors open. A three feet beetle charged him in return.



It was a brief but nasty battle. The beetle tried to bite several adventurers, but they all luckily dodged.

Then it squirted some foul liquid at Braggi, but little fella' rolled out of the way in time.

Pressing on south led to yet another junction. Further south were doors underneath which light could be seen.

Listening confirmed there was someone beyond—a number of voices speaking in unfamiliar tongue. Party burst through. Neither side was surprised.

Large man dressed in plate mail stepped forth to block the adventurers from spilling into the chamber, while two thugs backed up and prepared oil flasks.

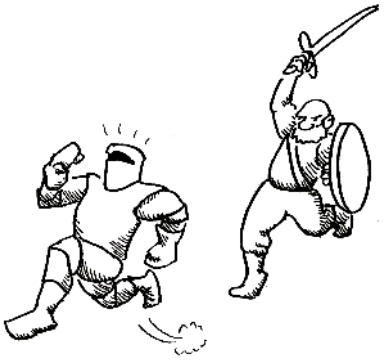
The warrior was armed with a long sword and shield—which sported the flaming eye symbol similar to those that orcs by the entrance had. Adventurers got a taste of their own medicine as burning oil flasks broke on their front rank.

"This is just the beginning, you pathetic worms!" the plated warrior laughed. He spat at Balarus and mocked him viciously. Thugs fled backwards, into the darkness, while plated warrior fought on the defensive.

Adventurers hit him well, but he refused to go down.

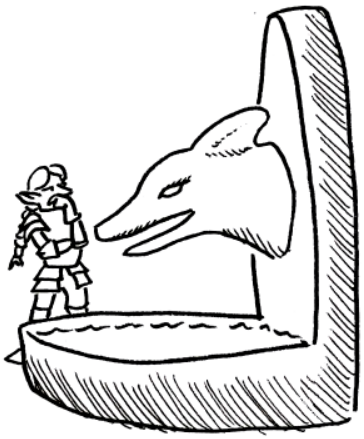
One of the characters threw a coin with continual light down the corridor, illuminating a T-shaped junction, and two thugs holding doors open.

The warrior turned around and fled, as they slammed the doors shut.



Everyone but Foxglove pursued—the thief was focused on inspecting large chest left behind by the warrior—charging into an empty room!

Few empty bedrolls and a fountain with rank, stagnant water. Dolphin head was a nice touch, but other than that the fountain was completely unremarkable.



"There must be some sort of secret passageway here!"

"Agreed!"

"Here! A flagstone that stands out!"

Ignaeus pushed the flagstone, and Balarus pushed to wall forward.

A long dark corridor prostrated in front of them. Blood drops were visible.

They charged forth, unaware of secret doors slamming shut behind them.

Foxglove was too busy counting thousands of coins to notice two cloaked figures sneaking up on him.

In a wild turn of events, they both failed to back stab him! The thief parried and blocked.

Sneaky duo backed off and fled north, through the doors the part had came through.



Foxglove rushed south, only to find he was alone! Meanwhile, five pursuing adventurers had to give up. Their prey escaped.

Imagine their surprise when they couldn't open one way secret doors!

Luckily the thief on the other side was able to find the hidden flagstone, and the party was reunited once more.

Investigating the chamber where they found bandits hadn't revealed what they were looking for—bolts of silk from merchant that Braggi agreed to help.

"This dead end is a bit suspicious. . . "

Ignaeus had found yet another flagstone! With a bit of trickery, the party managed to open these doors too! Success! Before them was a chamber filled to the brim with barrels and crates containing various supplies, spices, and yes, bolts of silk.

Foxglove the Trouble Magnet spotted a very nice looking fountain in the corner of the room. It was made of salmon-coloured marble and resembled a lotus flower with two basins beneath it. Water was crystal clear. Where it might be coming from was not clear. There were few coins in each basin. Foxglove flipped a gold coin in the right basin. Then the most wondrous thing happened.

The basins folded over the lotus flower, fountain spun in place, and then vanished into ether. "Make a wish and it will come true." "I wish for old age, wealth, and experience." Indeed, Foxglove had found himself more experienced.

Satisfied with their discovery, the party had completely abandoned prospects of chasing the bandits. They focused on getting the barrels out and then returning for the rest. Ignaeus had cast Wizard Lock on the secret doors, and party got to rolling. But how do you take a heavy barrel thirty feet up the iron rungs?

"Wasn't there some sort of pulley rig above? Let's use that!"

A brilliant plan.

Balarus climbed. The trapdoor were heavier than usual. It took him significant effort to force them open. As soon as he did so burning pieces of wood and debris fell down the chute. The hut above them was burning! Without many options left, the party focused on consolidating the treasure and preparing it for extraction.

On the following day they attempted to break out once again. It took them three hours to get out proper.

Hut had completely burned down. Mushrooms were sliced to pieces. Crosonus hung upside down from a tree, his eyes gouged out, and his belly cut wide open. Horses were nowhere to be found.

Judging they don't have sufficient daylight left to haul the treasure back to Hara, adventurers decided to spend another night in the dungeon.

Prior to that they lifted all the barrels and prepared them for the long haul. They arrived to Hara on the evening of Gloomfrost 17th, Waterday.

There they informed all their colleagues about great wealth left behind. Counting twenty-one man strong, they returned and extracted every last coin, returning to Hara just in time to celebrate the New Year.



In next issue

Siege of the Cedarwade Keep.













Travelling Light

Timothy Collinson No. 5, November 2026

Finding new players suddenly become real!

I've been following the theme with interest, but only academic interest until last week when I finally managed to get hold of the person responsible for our local Men's Shed. Last year I thought about seeing if they'd allow an RPG evening (their events are currently all day time), allow women, and allow us to use the place without charging an arm and a leg. However, events and tiredness conspired and I never got round to it. Given the year I've just had, it was almost certainly for the best. For various reasons, a month or so ago I started feeling compelled to revisit the idea and yesterday had the go ahead. So I'm now aiming for a Session Zero this Thursday and next issue should have something to report.

My aim is to run a Traveller campaign once again. It's been a while. Most likely the trilogy <*something*> *of the Ancients* (*Mysteries*, *Secrets* and *Wrath* being the three volumes Mongoose have put out updating the old classic little black book). Or at least starting with *Mysteries of the Ancients*. If we only play once a month, that in itself could take years. I also want to run it in person rather than online which will limit participation.

To find players I've emailed my old group who spent six years with me running *The Traveller Adventure*, I've messaged the folk who play in the twice a year Games' Night, and I've contacted my nephew who expressed an interest a while back when I mentioned it and thought he might have a friend who'd play too.

Thus far I've had two definite 'yes' responses, one uncertain due to sickness, and the hope that a couple of others may yet participate. I had hoped for more than three (I'd happily have 5 or 6) as more player interaction reduces the pressure on me as ref in my experience, but beggars can't be choosers and we'll go with what we get. I think I'll struggle to find more but might have one or two places I could put a physical advert. This is probably the time to say that if there are any UK *E&A* readers who are interested then you're more than welcome, but I suspect Stubbington (near Fareham) is too far away for anyone to make it worthwhile.

I have concerns about my strength/endurance levels as CFS seems to be weighting heavily of late, but we'll give it a go and one of my definites is happy to step in as ref if I'm really struggling. But as I say, I feel 'compelled' and I miss running a campaign, and previously I've found it helps drive writing which I really enjoy. I mean beyond after-action reports as I come up with sub-creation which is of wider interest. (And yes, yes, I keep thinking I should publish my collection of bits and bobs from *The Traveller Adventure*. Another round tuit I'm failing to get to.)

I'm excited, nervous and fascinated to see what character gen, connections and discussion brings this week!

Abstracts

As last time, here are potential adventure seeds one might glean from the *JoFFR (p.6)*. This might be all I bother with (fun though it's been but any future ones, I'll leave for the reader).

Shatlflots – *End of Cleon's empire*

- the PCs are caught up (or are the operatives) in an Imperial Naval Intelligence mission to extract the author from the Consulate to face charges of sedition in the Imperium
- alternatively, the PCs are part of a Zhodani mission to extract the author from the Imperium after his paper is censored [a set of suitable Zhodani characters can be found in *See How They Run*[1]]
- journalist characters under pressure to censor the paper [though I'll admit that having a PC as editor of *JoFFR* does seem a rather specialised seed!]
- the PCs are part of a Jumpspace bull session on whether the Third Imperium is likely to/near to collapse [points for *not* using meta knowledge regarding **MegaTraveller** or **Traveller: The New Era** directly]

It's perhaps worth noting that Shatlflots is a typical Zhodani surname and is presumably publishing his article either in an edition of *JoFFR* whose publication lies outside the Imperium or that has slipped through any censorship that might be presumed to exist. It's also worth noting that the events of 1116 just a few years later proved him wrong regarding the Third Imperium not disintegrating.

Sebwakeb – *Letter to the Editor*

- a routine review of century-old compensation records reveals that an entire floating hamlet was never legally expropriated and therefore still technically owns three city districts
- during canal maintenance, workers uncover a sealed archive buoy containing evidence that the "empty" swampland was home to an undocumented pre-colonial settlement. The PCs are scientists discovering this, bureaucrats dealing with it, or troubleshooters handling fallout
- a grav-transit project stalls when competing departments discover 17 mutually contradictory wetland preservation ordinances still in force
- the descendants of displaced fisherfolk hire the PCs to recover lost boundary markers before a crucial land-rights tribunal convenes
- a Bwap academic vanishes after claiming the famous Jas family archives were selectively edited to hide a political scandal.
- the city's ponds are found to be connected by an ancient underwater structure that appears never to have been recorded in engineering surveys
- rival municipal departments recruit different PCs as "neutral observers" in a paperwork dispute but may become a small civil war. Admin skills to the fore! [for non-Traveller fans, Admin is a much derided but often really useful skill that's been in the RPG since the start]
- an elderly reed-cutter presents documents proving ownership of a luxury residential arcology built atop reclaimed marshland
- conservationists find a species believed extinct survives only in decorative park ponds & has high enough INT to sabotage survey equipment
- a shipment of archived forms reveals that one section of the city was accidentally built two kilometres from its legally registered coordinates
- a hereditary dispute between branches of the Jas family escalates when two different branches produce authentic documents naming their ancestor as founder of the city
- the PCs are hired to track down a legendary lost form cited by hundreds of regulations but never actually located in any archive [in case Exit Visa or Zilan Wine wasn't enough bureaucracy for PCs]
- a retired Bwap records custodian dies, leaving behind a note: "Check Pond 17B. The maps are wrong".

[1] https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/227745/see-how-they-run

Comments on E&A 16

I was amused just after I'd run my new adventure *The Nose of the Artist* to read these articles: https://london-post.co.uk/art-of-london-brings-the-french-riviera-to-london-with-clara-amfo/

https://www.timeout.com/london/news/french-riviera-immersive-experience-royal-academy-100726

Patrick Brady – In the Hall of Stone

Many thanks for the Strömberg reference. I was immediately able to bung it into a lecture I'm delivering to physics undergrads!

Your line about a Patroclus type error: "Completely justifable in retrospect yet leading to catastrophic outcome." reminded me of the film *Clockwise*. John Cleese, manic as ever, makes reasonable decisions all the way through in order to get to his prestigious (and unmovable) appointment and yet the sum total of each one inexorably leads to a more and more ludicrous climax.

I didn't know about the tea room at Baker Street. Fascinating.

Mark Wilson – Bumbling Through Dungeons

LARP drop/Con Drop – I'd not heard of that either, but I've certainly experienced Ref Drop – after just about any game I referee. Partly, I guess, the post-adrenalin rush drop, quite a lot due to post exertional malaise thanks to CFS, and rather a lot to do with being convinced I failed at X and could have done Y better and really should have thought of Z.

Patrick Zoch – The Dragon's Beard

Congratulations on 100 issues! Quite a milestone. I enjoyed the retrospective.

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

I sympathise with the campus movements. If I head the wrong way at the wrong time on a narrow road I feel like a salmon swimming upstream.

Brian Rogers – Denizens of the Library

RYCT Jim E on **Traveller law levels** needing a 'slider' because PC weapons change so many plots – that's a good take I rather like and will try and remember. I assume (those who care) are familiar with the *World Builder's Handbook* [DGP, 1989] expansion of law level to give an overall number (i.e. what's in the world profile) but also weapons, trade, criminal law, civil law and personal freedom. Those 5 are generated with 2D-7+gov code. There's also a 2d6 table of 'uniformity of law' (personal, territorial or undivided are the three results).

The much newer *World Builder's Handbook* [Mongoose, 2023] does similar but expands it to ten quite useful/interesting (IMO) pages that are worth reading on the subject if you want more granularity in law level.

And, if it gets that far, it would be remiss of me not to mention this contribution although it was in the batch of advocate URLs I offered last month: https://freelancetraveller.com/features/rules/courtproc.html

(Have just finished watching *The Rainmaker* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rainmaker_(TV_series)) which I really enjoyed although it's taken a *lot* of liberties with Grisham's book which I've now been driven back to reread. Next: I'm going to inflict *A Few Good Men* on family since I learned they'd not seen it.)

Brian Misiaszek – Age of Menace

RYCTM: Thank you. No, not even one ukelele. Just the herons, egrets and Canada geese (plus several ducks and three swans).

Gabriel Roark – Atlantis for Now

RYCT Jim E on Traveller law levels – see comment to Bryan M. (But yes, "barest characterization of the dominant culture's legal system" is exactly how I take it. Nice line; I might quote that.)

Roger BW – Firedrake's Hoard

"over-enthusiastic deployment of grenades" – ah! The typical Traveller group! (My lot removed the firing

pins from the Captain's SMGs after a friendly fire incident. Their faces when he said that for safety, he'd do the same to the explosives expert's grenades…)

Oooh, *Deepnight Legacy* was great fun when I played it under Dom Mooney's refship at North Star! I know what you mean about vacc suits in shirt-sleeve environments although I think SOC would/should take a knock as it did for the PC who wore a respirator to the Townswoman's Guild dinner in *TTA*.

Will be interested to follow your solo Traveller trade game; great so far. "Good old machine parts, never see you wrong." LOL! I think I'd have rounded up the Lv7575 to Lv7600 as you're offering such 'convenience' (as regards timings/booking/general hassle).

RYCT Lisa P about "Marmosets on an Airship" reminds me that Traveller has an adventure, 'The Windermann Incident' in *Crowded Hours* for Mongoose 1st Edition, which was nearly called "Ferrets on an Airship".

RYCT me about *Spindrift* – yes, I should get in touch with Matt. But as "one thing drives out another", I never quite manage it. Thanks. (To answer **Lisa P's** questions later: no, no contract, just a couple of "we're busy now, but will see" emails.)

Avram Grumer – Going to be Ad Libbed

Not sure about SUZi being the first RPG since *Traveller* where your character can die while you're rolling it up. I think *Morrow Project* (1980) and *Aftermath!* (1981) did similar.

RYCT Myles C – love the Hivers story! Will have to get my French edition out of the attic to see if I can confirm *les Hivers* or *la Ruche*.

Dale Meier – Port Omaha Beacon

FWIW my *Traveller Periodical Bibliography* would have found 'The Strider Incident' for you in the tenth hit for 'Solomani Rim' under adventures. Although I can see how if I were rewriting the description again, quarter of a century (!) later, I might add something about cold sleep. Also, FWIW, I tried your prompt in Copilot and it was equally hopeless suggesting it was 'Alicia' in *The Legend of the Sky Raiders* which, afaics, is complete rubbish.

Yes please to making starship combat easier! Not something I'm expert on. If it can cover personal and vehicle combat as well – perfect!

Bryant Durrell – The Arc of Probability

Thank you for your comments on Raspi Jas and re: the zuchai crysals – yes!

Michael Cule – The Phoenix Nest

RYCTM on the Hivers – of course they're responsible!

Jim Vassilakos – Computocracy – The Great Bank Robbery

"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."

This is so into 'Second Beast' territory! Revelation 13:16-17

> 16 It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads,
>
> 17 so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

RYCT Gabriel R on the "network externality effect". I had to look that up. But it's added another card to my antinet. (Which makes me wonder if there's a 'network internality effect' where, for example, my antinet gets more useful the more nodes it has in it)

RYCT Brian R: "But where's the dark comedy in that?" [players working together to succeed in Paranoia]

Quite. I think half the fun is in everyone knowing how RPGs usually work and having a break from that. Plus the whole clone thing makes it less painful (and arguably more funny), so there's that.

RYCT Brian R: "But how do you teach that?" [player knowledge of what's 'expected']

I'm fairly sure that no one playing in the game I played was unaware of the whole point of Paranoia so we all bought into it from the get-go. I'm not sure I'd want to play it lots, but as a change of pace / let off steam / see what it's like, I enjoyed it. I assume you've seen my write up of North Star in *Freelance Traveller*. (https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/stories/aarnorthstar9.html under 'Saturday Morning')

RYCT Dylan C about gen AI thinking instead of merely copying - it's not just 'copying', certainly. But is it thinking or is it just following algorithms that solve the problem of producing algorithms? Like a chess program – it's not really thinking about the game, it's just working through the routines it knows that get to winning states.

"It's not just looking up the answers online. It's reasoning. It is absolutely reasoning." I'm not convinced. It's been taught how to define problems in mathematical language, it's been taught how to 'examine' those problems, it's been taught ways of working through solving those problems.

RYCT Lisa P "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,"

Nice, I like this. I should try and remember it.

RYCT Avram G on capturing games for novelization "and you'd need a voice recorder to catch it all".

Or: TC typing "notes" of Jim C's game as it goes on which are not quite verbatim. (Though to be fair, they become sketchier when my character is trying to speak/interact.)

RYCT Joshua K "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"

In the forty sessions we played of *The Traveller Adventure*, I wrote a large chunk of two of them specifically for such a passive player to shine and use skills/knowledge. On the first occasion I was just adding a bit of atmosphere and was told in no uncertain terms "I don't want that" (some 'noises off' were considered too scary, and in the second had a dressing down after the game that the entire scenario "plot" (IMO well worked out by myself and another Traveller veteran) had failed because of some small point which had ruined it. <sigh>

RYCT Joshua K "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."

When this has happened at TravCon I've just raised a palm to the enthusiastic player (assuming they've had a fair bit of airtime) and say, "hang on a minute, it's X's turn". No one has ever not acceded to that to the best of my knowledge (even if they try again a short while later!).

RYCTM about my best man's speech and it being made public: No, it would be fine to be public (I think there's a recording of a fragment of it somewhere on YouTube). That it was quite 'decent' (for a wide ranging audience) was part of its appeal (I think). I don't know that I said anything in particular, it just captured a moment, knew the people involved well, had relevant jokes/humour, and didn't outstay its welcome. I'll see if I can get the groom to post the whole thing somewhere (if he has it not in some digital format rather than videotape).

RYCTM about 'open loops' and returning to players after they've raised something but had to wait their turn. "It's a good skill for GMs to cultivate. In my experience, not that many have it."

I was surprised at a compliment after a game regarding it. Until then I'd not really noticed that others don't do the same (in general).

The Journal of Far Future Research

vol.26, no.10



The End of "Cleon's Empire?" Ontological Problems of Human Imperialism in the Context of the Frontier Wars

Iadl Shatlflots

Abstract

Strephon Aella Alkhalikoi seeks to build a modern 3rd Imperium on the Ramshackle Empire, as confirmed by continued aggression in the so-called Frontier Wars. In the present article, the author shows why the Third Imperium represents an astropolitical project called "Cleon's Empire", and what the ideological justifications for this empire are. The paper carefully differentiates between 'human' and 'humaniti' specifically not including the peoples of the Consulate in the former.

The author also considers what is happening as a clash of different forms of imperial orders – neoliberal feudalism and the concept of the "human domain". The author concludes that the Third Imperium, as an empire, is in a protracted political crisis, but this does not mean the empire will disintegrate.

Letter to the Editor

As a Bwap of the Third Classification, Subsectional Registry Liaison (Retired), presently resident of Canal Precinct 7B, Rapsi Jas Municipal Water Allocation District, I read Professor Yuless' article, "From pond to pond: The transformation of the Rapsi Jas swampland into a modern residential city" with considerable interest and, regrettably, a measurable degree of concern.

Let me state at the outset that the paper is a valuable contribution to the historiography of wetland urbanization. The author demonstrates commendable diligence in collating archival, engineering and oral sources. However, I believe that several aspects of the study require clarification or amendment before its conclusions can be accepted without reservation.

Most notably, the paper appears to perpetuate what I have come to think of as the "empty swamp fallacy": the assumption that a landscape acquires significance only when it has been surveyed, drained, parcelled, registered and taxed. Professor Yuless describes the pre-development Rapsi Jas as "sparsely inhabited", a characterization that may be technically correct according to population density statistics. Yet such figures fail to account for seasonal occupancy, migratory fishing cooperatives, temporary reed-harvesting licences, floating worship sites and other forms of habitation that do not conform neatly to cadastral expectations.

Furthermore, I am unconvinced by the author's treatment of the famous Jas family case study. While the progression from fisherfolk to civic officials certainly illustrates social mobility, it risks suggesting that integration into urban administrative structures was the inevitable or even desirable endpoint of wetland life. Other families made different choices. Some departed. Some maintained semi-aquatic livelihoods on the undeveloped margins. Some, according to Municipal Compensation Review Board records that the author surprisingly does not cite, spent decades contesting expropriation rulings. Their experiences deserve equal consideration.

I must also raise a matter of terminology. The article repeatedly contrasts "natural" wetlands with "curated" urban water features. While this distinction is aesthetically appealing, it obscures an important hydrological reality. The retention lakes, canal corridors and ornamental ponds of modern Rapsi Jas are not merely symbolic inheritances of the former swampland. They are active components of the region's drainage system. To describe the city as having transformed water into an amenity overlooks the extent to which water remains an administrative challenge, particularly during the third monsoon cycle. Those of us who have spent afternoons filing Canal Overflow Incident Forms can attest that water has not yet been persuaded to behave like a decorative feature.

Finally, I find the article's optimistic discussion of future grav-transit infrastructure insufficiently critical. The suggestion that further environmental transformation may be accommodated through technological innovation deserves closer scrutiny. The historical record of Rapsi Jas demonstrates that every intervention intended to simplify water management has instead produced additional layers of management, regulation and exception handling. One hesitates to imagine the volume of documentation required when anti-gravity transit corridors begin interfering with established avian migration routes, stormwater catchment calculations and heritage canal preservation ordinances.

In summary, Professor Yuless has produced a thoughtful and engaging paper. Nevertheless, I would encourage readers to remember that the history of Rapsi Jas is not merely the story of how a swamp became a city. It is also the story of how a city inherited a swamp's administrative problems and then spent a century inventing new forms to describe them.

Respectfully submitted,

Sebwakeb of Canal Precinct 7B

Certified Records Custodian (Ret.)

Associate Member, Society for Comparative Wetland Documentation, Rapsi Jas Municipal Region

"An improperly catalogued pond is merely a flood awaiting paperwork".

Image Credit: NASA

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 15: 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.



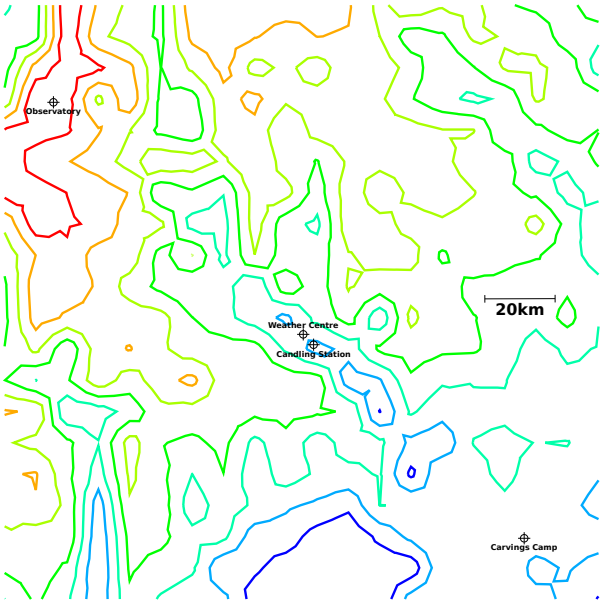
Little to report in role-playing games from the Land of Roger, though I've been to some boardgaming conventions and another ukulele gathering (just a local one-day one this time).

Recent Games

2300AD / Bayern: Where the other group came in aboard *Entdecker* with the big reaction drives flaring, destroying the Raider ship by surprise, the Whartson crew were a bit more restrained, going in with a lander in the blind zones of the guns and fighting a boarding action. Which you'd think they weren't equipped for… but it turns out that with the right paperwork the Marine Colonel's old combat walker can be shipped as "lab safety equipment", and he's been waiting for a chance to justify it, while the others can hide behind him. This game is now on hold again.

GURPS Traveller / Deepnight: The recorded log was most effective. Most of the session was spent on rescuing the junior engineer trapped in the other supply ship after its captain had locked it down: no communications, minimal life support, but eventually one of the PCs climbed up to the cockpit window. They've rescued the traumatised victim, located some spots where other survivors might be, and are now planning to burn the main infected mass. Only one of their NPCs has come down with the infection (thanks to a bit of haste to un-suit after the initial expedition), and they promptly stuffed him in a low berth.

My goodness though, Mongoose! I realise you have a budget, but it took me only a few minutes to make a map of the overall area of the planet where things are happening rather than just the close-up of the base. (Here it is, based on the terrain where Mike and I live.) It would also be nice if the picture of the ship the PCs are using were consistent with the deck plans.





Pexels user Klajdi Cena, 2022

Cthulhu Eternal / Among Certain Isles: This is with the Sunday group that was previously playing *Bayern,* and this adventure is written and run by one of my longest-standing role-playing friends (erk, more than 40 years now). We're a motley bunch of British Occult Secret Service[1] types, deployed to the Falklands in response to a fuzzy precognition… at the start of April 1982. As well as the intensive research into real-world settings that's practically normal for groups I play with, the GM has a bunch of real Falklanders (several of whom I happen to know went on to significance later, though I'm not looking them up) as the NPCs we're dealing with. Superb pacing and a growing sense of menace in the first session.

The second session is largely a fight with supernatural creatures, which goes reasonably well for us and the civilians we're protecting. Next morning the invasion happens, and we get out of the way, both to keep them relatively safe and because we think we need to get to Pepper Island in order to prevent other occultists (nominally working for the Argentineans, though we think mostly for themselves) from triggering large-scale massacres with an aim of feeding(?) their god(?). I dunno, I'm just a simple soldier.

"No matter how subtle the wizard, a 7.62 between the eyes will seriously cramp his style. And he wasn't a very subtle wizard."

Cthulhu Eternal / The Wedding of Captain Michael Newman: I first generated this set of *Cthulhu Eternal* characters for a one-shot run of *The Eyes of a Stranger* (from *Sacraments of Evil,* the original Gaslight adventures collection from 1993) at a convention, but then one of the other GMs in Whartson Hall borrowed them to run through some Gaslight Lincolnshire adventures he'd written (set some 25 years earlier, but who's counting) and the players have rather got to like them. Captain Newman, one of those PCs, is very brave, but a bit dim; clearly he needs a wife who can manage him. Even if she is a bit on the fishy side, and what's worse a suffragist! (His usual player is our GM for this.)

A hunting party leads us to an encounter with what sounds a lot like Unseelie Fae, and three of the guests appear to have been taken away by them. Not that we think much of those chaps, old drinking friends of the Captain, but even so. They turn up at the wedding reception, or something wearing their skins does at least, but a bit of punching with horseshoes in our fists (some of us do have quite a bit of Occult) and a lot of the grandmother of the bride being Really Quite Fishy takes care of *that.*

Negotiating with Monsters

I talked about this with Michael Cule on the latest *Improvised Radio Theatre With Dice*, though I think we were pulling in somewhat divergent directions. My thesis is that if you can negotiate with it, it is intelligent; if it is intelligent, the question of whether it is labelled

[1] https://blog.firedrake.org/archive/2016/05/Taxonomy_of_the_Occult_Secret_Service.html

"a monster" is primarily one of politics. Someone can be evil, or opposed to everything I stand for, or untrustworthy, or mildly inconvenient to me, but people are still people; to say that a particular bad person is a monster is to deny the possibility that, given the right situation, I could become bad too.

And once you've accepted them as a person, what matters is that you have something they want (and can't just take) and vice versa. And they can be trusted to keep their promises.

Mind How You Go

When last we heard from Captain Sherwood, he'd reached Dunkelheim (DM +36 2393, NI Po) and emptied the ship. Where will we go next, and what will we take? Our options:

- back out to Hochbaden (NI Va)
- Beta Comae Berenices (Ag Po)
- via DM +35 2436 to Vogelheim (Ag)
- a longer hop to Beta Canum Venaticorum (Ri Hi)

It looks as though the best bet is Common Consumables to Beta Canum.[2] 160 tons are available at Lv475 per, but that only beats the consignment freight rate if we can sell it for vastly more; so instead we'll go strict consignment. There's plenty of cargo available so we'll fill the hold. This will pay Lv500 per ton to get it to orbit, then Lv1,600 for FTL.

For passengers, there are only six out there, but again we'll add the launch to orbit costs to their tickets. Lv2,500 for the first step, Lv10,000 for the FTL trip. (Beta C-V has its beanstalk, so I can't charge them for the trip down.)

For an on-world encounter, I get "invited to a posh function". I don't think they do much on this frontier world that's "posh" by anyone else's standards, but I do have one of the few ships that's bothered to call here, so probably someone wants a favour. Yeah, I'll take your cargo, that's my *job.* Oh, you want it not inspected? Well, you know, I'll do what I can but no guarantees. (He doesn't know about my law enforcement background, clearly.)

Port event: no encounter.

The fuel tank contained 40.4 tons of fuel; we'll spend 3 burns (15t) to get back into orbit and 8t for the nine days in transit. During transit: "Captain is incapacitated, roll for a simultaneous event/crisis that needs resolving!" OK, maybe we were taking a look at that "special" container, and it seems someone had thought of that… indeed, my second event is a "cargo container explosion and chemical fire". Guess it's time for (rolls random crewmember) the lead flight engineer to be a hero.



Pexels user Khusen Rustamov, 2026

Marise Bentley: What, me? I'm just here to stop the stutterwarp coming apart into a shower of amusingly high-energy particles while I'm crunching data for my PhD. But I'm on watch, with Cary supervising and Ann checking the course, when the hold alarms

[2]Last time I failed to apply the negative half of the modifiers–something that increases the price when buying is a decrease in price when selling at the same world.

go off, so I guess it's my job. Fire in the hold means you flush with CO_2, I did a whole course on this, vacuum is oh so tempting but that just means you leave the hot thing radiating away ready to flare up when you let the oxygen back in. Fine, so check and… great, some idiot's not moving in the hold, they probably started the fire. Into the emergency suit, pick up the hand extinguisher and spare masks, off we go. Mr Idiot is wearing a ship uniform. And a breather, who'd have thought, someone else on this ship actually reads the safety regulations. And he's unconscious of course. *And* he's the captain-owner. This day just keeps getting better. Haul him out, throw him in the sick cupboard (we don't stretch to a sick bay here), lights go amber. Amber is good. Red would mean his heirs sell the ship out from under us.

Docked at the top of the beanstalk on Beta C-V, where a week alongside costs us Lv16,000. While we're here we might as well top off the fuel for another Lv60,000 (same cost everywhere). But I'll assume we lost two tons of cargo to the fire. Captain Sherwood will take this time to recover, so his crew is going to have to go looking for the next cargo…

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 16

Cover: I rather like that, the blending of fairly classic European cathedral style with a tower that definitely isn't.

To everyone: I'm staying out of further AI discussion. I'll talk with you privately if you like but I don't think this is the right venue for me to talk about it.

Patrick Brady: RYCT Brian Rogers, how SMART is "kill all these vampires before they murder anyone else"? Seems pretty viable to me.

RYCTM Yes, Simone and Lee were in the group at the time. I don't remember it very well now…

I am keener than most of my regular players to define characters' lives between adventures, and if they don't want to do it I'm not going to force them. Some of that ties back to my ongoing obsession with the adversarial game master: I'm not asking you to define Aunt May so that I can have her kidnapped, or to give you more points, I'm asking who the people are that you *don't* talk to about monster hunting but may be trying to build a normal life with.

Patrick Zoch: RYCTM in #12, yes, for anything I say about the way I run a game add a footnote "(depending on the mood of the players in the moment)" because that really is

Date	Item	Received	Paid	Balance
	brought forward			563,262
2300-02-13	6 middle pax Dunk⟶BCV	75,000		638,262
2300-02-22	Dock and power BCV		16,000	622,262
2300-02-22	Fuel BCV		60,000	562,262
2300-02-22	60t bulk cargo Dunk⟶BCV	126,000		688,262
	carried forward			688,262

quite key to it. And of course interrogation is like most other things in a game: players who don't have the skills, whatever they are, want to be able to play characters who do, but at the same time it's fun when players can bring in their real knowledge.

Patrick Riley: Re your GM-Dickery example, this is why one of my meta-rules has become "unless something interesting can happen on both success and failure, don't roll the dice". In this case where I need the NPC alive for later, I'd just say "you shoot true, but the shadows seem to twist around them and then the alley is empty" or whatever, without even asking the player to roll—because asking them to roll implies (to me at least) that they can succeed. What if they roll a best-possible result and don't want to feel that it's wasted, what if they want to spend plot points on it?

A side note about rangers: I don't like classes, but I do like archetypes or templates or whatever you want to call them. Take this Space Engineer package, and you will have all the skills you need to do the space engineer's job, no "oh I should have taken Machinist as well as Mechanic" moments. But at the same time (if you're me playing ***GURPS***) you still have all the little individual skills that you can tweak up and down for personalisation if you want to.

Re defining a power: I think it was a great idea in early *Champions* to say that you didn't have separate power listings for a fire blast, a water blast, etc., you defined a blast based on how simply *powerful* it was (how much damage it did) and then tweaked its special effects to be "(and sets things on fire)" or "(and knocks people around)".

Re failures again: Mongoose *Traveller* has character generation quite like the old days, and I think I've said before that this can produce a great disparity between players, both of how much your character matches what you wanted and of how much fun you have. The *Companion* has a more deterministic system, but it also doesn't give you the events, allies, enemies, and so on. I have a notion of the random system with a pool of tweaking points, that you can use to declare (some) die rolls to have been the value you wanted, or maybe that you get more of when things go badly.

But also as you say a "failure" roll doesn't need to be a "failure" outcome. You rolled really badly, but you're really good — so maybe you still did the thing that you're an expert at, but you did it slowly, or you made a lot of noise in doing it. (I've inverted the ***GURPS*** rules for taking more or less time over a task so that if you make the roll by lots you did it faster.)

RYCTM, for the horror funnel, yes, absolutely I'd talk about this up front. I don't like bait and switch, and I think that if my players know what they're going into ("most, maybe all, of you will die") they can play up to it better so that everyone has a better time.

It's cheating for me to answer you with "yes, ***GURPS*** can feel very different" because it's less a system and more a collection of optional subsystems flying in formation. We wouldn't be using the exact same rules in the two different campaigns, even if we retained a lot of the core. Even such considerations as "what causes you to have to roll a Fright Check" will vary from campaign to campaign. That said, I think ***GURPS*** is happiest when it's in "fairly realistic" mode, characters who are a bit larger than life but still have to worry about the same hazards normal people have to worry about.

RYCT Brian Rogers, the author of linear fiction can always say "oh well, the heroes just didn't think of doing that" and leave it out. A GM has to be able to cope with powers[3] being used and combined in unexpected ways. And some of the fun of the game can be rolling with that.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos, I dimly recall a study of first-time criminals some years ago that suggested that the severity of sentencing mostly didn't influence their decision to offend, but the perceived chance of being caught very much did.

Attronarch: I am curious about Beorg's psychology. "I see them go out dreaming of gold and glory. I see them come back in boxes. I put the boxes in the ground. That's the life for me!"

The purple fog is very, you should excuse the term, atmospheric. Not just smoke that obscures things, but something that behaves in an informative way.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira Zucolotto: Re *A mandala do dragão do trovão* I can't help but remember that some of the earliest proto-interactive fiction was the *TutorText* series, essentially a series of multiple-choice questions with each answer followed by either a remedial lesson or additional material. So using it to teach esotericism seems eminently reasonable!

Myles Corcoran: I think fun can still be had from *Horror on the Orient Express* and I may some day play or run it myself but I feel a little the way I feel about endless remakes of *A Star Is Born* or *Evil Dead:* there are so many new stories that could be told instead!

RYCT Gabriel Roark: I have played a game in which each player was using a different system. The GM would say something like "this is a pretty hard test of your administrative skills" and the player would work out what that meant in the system they were using for their character. ("One Last Job" with Whartson Hall.)

Yeah, I haven't listened to Ken enough to know the details, but I gather it's a Thing that any setting he builds has Britain either overtly evil or smashed in some way.

Brian Rogers: If I were a superhero using the name Doctor Antaeus, it would only be because I got *much more powerful* when a villain lifted me off the ground…

ISN seems to suit the sort of lower-powered games that I favour; she has basically one power, and it's clearly defined. (In a game in which it mattered, I might give her some amount of stealth/silence too.)

RYCTM as I recall it the Rangers originate from Númenóreans who survive the destruction of that place; the ones who remain friendly towards elves become known as Dúnedain, while the others are Black[4] Númenóreans. Much time passes and many of them marry normal humans, their descendents have more conventionally human lifespans, etc. Some later Dúnedain, in turn, take up the job of Rangers (either of the North, or of Gondor). They may not all be in line for the throne, but they are basically pure-blooded[5] Númenóreans; you don't get to be a Ranger if you don't have the right ethnic background.

[3] Magic, supertech, even purely mundane skills and knowledge.

[4] Sigh.

[5] Sigh again. Particularly since marrying elves *doesn't* count as making your family's blood less "pure," but marrying normal humans *does.*

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: yeah, I think I've said before I see this sort of soloable minigame *(Traveller* spaceship design!) originally as a way to do something related to The Game when the other players aren't around and most people don't have BBSes etc.

Re reviews: I quite enjoyed Hawke's *Time Wars* series when I first read them as they were coming out, but on a reread a few years ago they didn't stand up well. Reviews on the blog[6] for them as care.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: I would imagine patients get no choice about attending Mass, though most of them would probably wish to anyway.

Not relevant but possibly interesting: a real-world location I used in a Reign of Steel game set in Boston was the Erich Lindemann Mental Health Center (built in a Brutalist style in the 1960s). The architect, Paul Rudolph, indulged his uninformed and romantic ideas of mental illness and built in lots of little staircases leading to nowhere, rippling walls, etc. Three patients independently found that the chapel inspired them to set fire to themselves. I couldn't get away with making up things like this…



Gunnar Klack on Flickr, 2016[7]

I would also note for popular depictions of "voodoo" that Seabrook's *The Magic Island* was used as inspiration for the 1932 film White Zombie[8], quite a recent release at the time of the scenario.

I very much appreciate your model of lanes and merges as NPCs (and potentially PCs, and more generally what one might call "potential events") move about in different directions.

RYCT Patrick Riley: remember that you have options. If you want to use *Call of Cthulhu* I think you basically have to go with MiskRepo, who demand sole rights and have to be paid their substantial cut (20% to them on top of 30% to DTRPG) but apparently bring your thing in front of more eyeballs; or you could go with *Cthulhu Eternal* (the system is more like the pre-7e rules) which lets you do whatever you like and pay only DTRPG/Itch/RPGTrader/whoever, but also doesn't give you any publicity.

RYCTM I don't seem to have any pictures of me ukulele-ing (it is after all a two-handed occupation) but if I get a decent one some day I'll include it.

Dylan Capel: As I understand it Onyx Path's *Storypath* system is explicitly derived from early World of Darkness. (Indeed, it has a bug inspired by it: your chance of a botch is higher when rolling 2-4 dice than when rolling just one.) I've played *They Came From Beneath the Sea* and had a good time, but honestly I'd be inclined just to whip it over to something *BRP*-ish, or ***GURPS***, or whatever the group fancied.

Avram Grumer: *SUZi* reminds me of Sierra Greer's novel *Annie Bot.* But like you I don't think this is an experience I want to have.

[6] https://blog.firedrake.org/books.html
[7] https://www.flickr.com/photos/gnrklk/40349215960
[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Zombie_(film)

dnup is designed by Kei Kajino who also designed *SCOUT,* and for me feels like a strictly better version of *SCOUT* (not least because it dispenses with the tissue-thin theme).

No joining up needed for *Of Dice and Meeples,*, just write something and send it. 😀

RYCT Lisa and the Typst tutorial: it didn't answer a lot of questions I had, but I suspect[9] I'm not a typical user.

Dale Meier: Re GM and other dickery: I've seen some posts recently pointing out that being a male ally to women doesn't just mean waiting for your chance to be a Great Big Hero, it also means saying "dude, not cool" when someone starts being casually sexist. (I don't meet this a lot because I don't tend to socialise with people like that, but…)

Re Legacy games: I played *Pandemic Legacy Season 1* using a painstakingly-constructed[10] *Tabletop Simulator* implementation, so no components got destroyed and if we'd needed to (because of corruption, not to make our lives easier) we could have reset to earlier save states.

Bryant Durrell: Re Pelicon, I have played Mary Traine in one of Phil's earlier playtests in this setting.

RYCT Avram Grumer: Father Coughlin yes, but don't forget John R. Brinkley[11], also a quack doctor who made a business of goat "gland" transplants to "restore vigour" (if you know what I mean, gentlemen, and I think you do).

Michael Cule: RYCT Patrick Brady and Thirsty Meeples: note that they have a *higher* cover charge if you aren't eating or drinking, just playing games.

RYCT Bryant Durrell: ever since I first met him over thirty years ago James has had an amazing game that he's going to get finished and published Real Soon Now. I'm sure it's always genuine, but eventually one notices the pattern and stops waiting.

Jim Vassilakos: re the "passage crew" campaign: this also means it has built-in entry/exit points for swapping characters in or out of the group.

Re *Tempt Not the Stars* and the economics of a ship with vertical landing: yeah, the big shipper can contract with a local shuttle owner, assuming that they exist, that they have a shuttle available, that they aren't so tied up with the corrupt local system that they've joined the blacklisting of the recipient, that they can do the trans-shipping of fragile cargo without breaking it… all of these things *produce adventure ideas,* which is basically what I want out of it all.

RYCT Avram Grumer, if it weren't illegal the patron would get one of their existing and less-expendable minions to do it.

Re passive players, yes, some players *are happy* to sit in the background and occasionally do something, and since these look exactly like players who'd like to participate more but aren't seeing a way in I think advice to force them out of it is not universally a good idea. Which mostly comes down to "your players are not black boxes, you can ask them what they want from the game".

Lisa Padol: Oh yes, I know that particular *Call of Cthulhu* scenario with its young lovers. Sorry madam, but we have a world-shaking job to do here and we may all be dead soon, I suggest you find someone else to help you out.

---

[9] Litotes.

[10] Not by me!

[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_R._Brinkley

RYCT Brian Rogers, my solution was to get a good propelling (mechanical) pencil. I rather like the Kuru Toga range which rotate the lead automatically.

RYCTM when I complain about Mongoose "editing" this is mostly to distinguish it from the writing or the art, rather than about the specific named editor of the book. Neither writing nor art was wrong in itself, but there wasn't the coordination that would have made them work together. Whoever's job that was, they didn't do it in this case.

Re *DramaSystem* and conflict, thanks, the way I've heard other people talking about it and playing it has definitely been "every scene a conflict" so I'm glad to see there are other ways of doing it.

The point about the "most exciting thing in the PC's life" was simply not to get too bogged down in their backstory in the Imperial Navy or whatever. This is the moment in their lives that The Story is getting told about.

Joshua Kronengold: Re Brian Rogers and allocating points: have I said before that the *other* way I want to fix *Traveller* generation is to keep all the random generation, then port the characters into ***GURPS*** for tweaking, so that everyone gets some customisation and nominally equal value to the game? Well, I have now.

RYCT Brian Christopher Misiaszek, the problem with an adventure generic across setting eras seems to me a smaller version of the problem with an entirely generic sci-fi or fantasy adventure: you can't tie it in to the fun fiddly details of the setting. (A GM can tie it in to their own campaign, of course, but then that can lead to their wondering what they actually got for their money.) For example, in this case, the adventure is intimately tied to the historical fall of Machado's government; you could make that a generic corrupt government, but for me it works better for the link to that moment.

RYCTM a story element I've used a few times that ties to your "PCs secretly on opposite sides" is the field agents finding that they have more in common with the field agents on the other side than either has with their own superiors safe in an office somewhere.

Re the TSR *Indiana Jones* game: yeah, there are specifically seven characters you can play: Indie, Marion, Sallah, Jock Lindsey, Short Round, Willie Scott, and Wu Han. That's it.

I wonder about *Lupin III* (I know some iterations of the anime) as a model for a somewhat adversarial party. Lupin and Jigen are on the same side, but Fujiko is usually on some caper that she doesn't tell Lupin about, Goemon is often pulling in an entirely different direction, and Zenigata just wants to arrest Lupin. But quite often most or all of them end up having to work together against the villain of the moment with the understanding that this is strictly a temporary thing.

I remember a problem player. He would always play a thief (whatever the system supported that involved sneakiness and pilfering); he would always steal everything he could from the rest of the party, and play endless practical jokes on them. When his character got killed, he'd play another identical one. This isn't something to be solved with game rules, I think.

I keep meaning to write a way of displaying ***GURPS*** character files that has no points on it, to print out for play. I only care about points when I'm buying new stuff for the character, and then I can use a different presentation.



PORT OMAHA BEACON

Issue #4, Vol 1 - November 2026 - © 2026 Dale Meier - sylvrephire@gmail.com

CONTENTS

Welcome to Port Omaha, Part One - p.2
Get the big picture of an alternate Traveller universe and Foreven Sector.

Diplomacy in the Dungeon - p. 13
A monster's a monster and a hero's a hero and ne'er the twain will meet in peace, right?

Commentary - p. 14

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. Mongoose *Traveller* Foreven Sector map used under Fair Use rules. Additional art from the following artists © 2026, used under license: Ian Stead and Savage Mojo (p.1); Anthony Cournoyer and UKG Publishing (p.4); Lorc (CC BY 3.0), Dale Meier, p. 5; Zhodani trefoil used under Fair Use Rules, p. 5; Jacob E. Blackmon, UKG Publishing, Dale Meier, p. 6; Avalon Games, p. 7; Lorc (CC BY 3.0), Jacob Blackmon, UKG Publishing, p. 8; Jacob E. Blackmon and Anthony Cournoyer, p. 9; DarkZaitzev, p. 10 (CC BY 3.0); Rick Hershey, p. 11

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Soooo… This issue of the *Port Omaha Beacon* was written in my extended free time thanks to FMLA leave and the wonder of a kidney stone which drove me to call an ambulance last week (10/6/2026). As I write this (10/16/2026), I'm hydrating and managing the pain fine, having seen my regular doctor while waiting on referrals to the relevant specialists, but now my right eye has decided to adopt something that is giving me conjunctivitis.

I have now gone two weeks without any caffeine, not even my beloved coffee, and miraculously, I haven't killed anyone. Yet. So, I apologize in advance for any contradictions, misspellings, missing words, etc. in this issue's material.



Speak softly, but carry a big stick, even when delivering the mail in the Imperial frontier.

WELCOME TO PORT OMAHA

Part One: The Big Picture

The Traveller game in all forms is owned by Mongoose Publishing. Copyright 1977-2024 Mongoose Publishing. The full fair use policy and FAQ list can be found here.

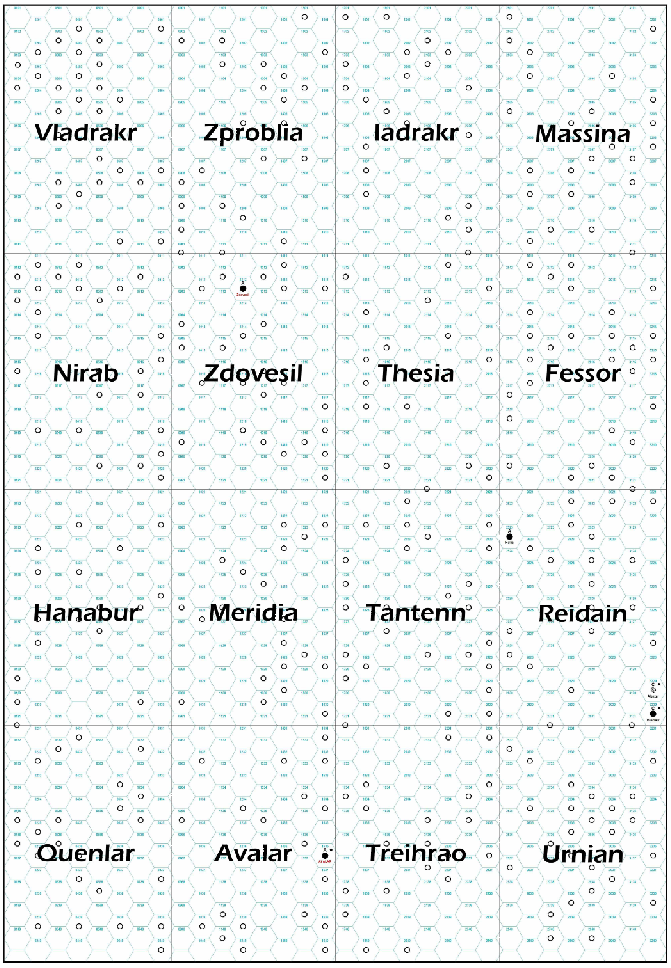
Spinward of the Third Imperium's farthest reaches, overshadowed by the Zhodani Consulate, lie the worlds of the Foreven Sector. Numerous human and alien civilizations, struggling to survive in the midst of a cold war between the Zhodani and the Third Imperium. In the six years since the end of the devastating Fifth Frontier War, the Reidain Union has arisen to further unity against the oppressive regimes of the Zhodani and their Avalar allies.

Bolstered by the Covenant of Treihrao's armed forces, as well as aid from the Third Imperium, the Union holds the line in an already shaky armistice. Across the sector, far to the spinward, human colonists fight to survive against a force older than the Ancients. Meanwhile an equally ancient threat approaches inexorably from the core, leaving chaos in its wake...

Traveller has an interesting place in my heart as a gamer. In 1986, I was cutting my teeth on the old Moldvay and the newer Mentzer Basic D&D sets, but I was aware of other RPGs thanks to Ian Livingstone's *Dicing With Dragons*. While I was an eager fantasy fan, having seen Rankin-Bass' animated movies of Tolkien's (and other) works, I was an even bigger fan of science fiction. *Star Wars* entranced me at age 3, so at age 12 I was surprised and excited to learn there were science fiction RPGs, yet saddened there was nothing for *Star Wars*. It wasn't until the following year, when West End Games made my dream come true with the first edition of *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, that I took my "first step into a larger world," as Obi-Wan Kenobi would say.

As I think I may have related, it would be a little over a decade before I actually bought into *Traveller* with the game's fourth edition (T4). Prior to that, I was fortunate enough to find a copy of the *MegaTraveller* boxed set in my college's education library. Though I was shocked to find it was rather dry compared to the *Star Wars* RPG rulebook (which practically oozed the atmosphere of the films and books), my interest persisted.

Fast forward to September, 2008. Mongoose Publishing took a chance and released an open license for third party publishers to generate content for the Foreven Sector. Unknown to me at the time, Foreven had been declared a "GM's preserve" by Marc Miller and others in the creative crew. Despite this, it was really a dream unrealized with regard to releasing third party material for the game's default setting.

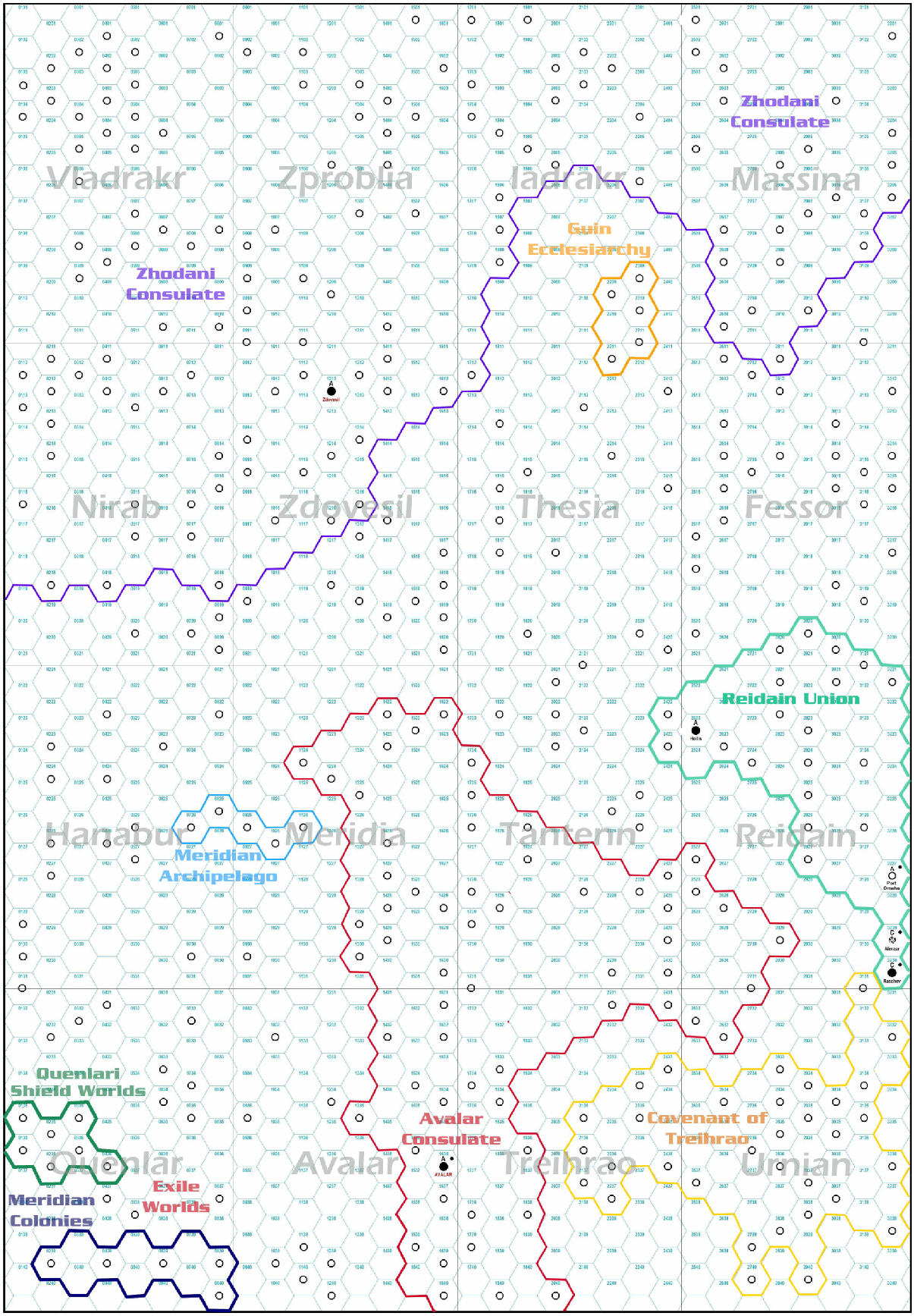


The subsectors in my *Traveller* universe's version of Foreven Sector. Facing page: Polity and region names and borders in my Foreven (a work in progress).

I never really got a chance to publish anything "official" for Foreven Sector due to events best left in the past. As such, I took a safer path and released more "utilitarian" products – namely *The Starfarer's Kit* and *Captain Sturmhammer's Command Cards* through my friend Roger Huntman's publishing company, Trooper X. Those titles have since gone out of print thanks to Mongoose moving on to a second edition of *Traveller* and creating the Travellers Aid Society program.

So why run with Foreven now and in this form?

Continued on p.4...



A	B	C	D
E	F	G	H
I	J	K	L
M	N	O	P

SUBSECTORS WITHIN A SECTOR

MAP LEGEND

Starport Type
Bases
Gas Giant
Worlds Type
X-Boat Route
World Name
Travel Zone Code (Red)
No Gas Giant
Border
Regnus

WORLD CHARACTERISTICS

- Unknown World
- Desert World
- World
- Asteroid Belt

BASES

- Naval Base
- Scout Base
- Naval Depot
- Scout Way Station
- Military Base

TRAVEL ZONES

- Amber Zone
- Red Zone

POPULATION

Secundus — under one billion

PRIMUS — over one billion

World names in red are subsector capitals.

FOREVEN
Unknown Worlds
Beyond the Imperial Border

Continued from p.1…

There are multiple reasons. First, I wanted a familiar foundation for some of my ideas, including Port Omaha. Second, it's a GM's preserve, so I can freely post and publish my material for free without having to enroll in the Travellers Aid Society. (***EDITOR'S NOTE:*** *The stipulations of the TAS program regarding publishers' rights to control their content upset a number of third party publishers. Now, despite my harsh words toward Mongoose Publishing's owners and my semi-public breakup with Mongoose Traveller, I have adjusted my views slightly in order to find anyone who plays something other than D&D 5e locally.*)

In my *Traveller* universe and Foreven Sector:

- ***I follow the continuity for GURPS Traveller.*** Long story short, the year is 1116; Strephon lives, Dulinor's dead, and there's no (open) Rebellion in the Third Imperium.
- ***X-boats within Foreven (and Imperial frontier regions) of space*** are not the familiar unarmed, teardrop-shaped couriers of the Imperium's core regions. Instead, these are armed variants of the *Suleiman*-class (Type-S) seekers used by the Imperial Interstellar Scout Service (IISS).
- ***As an homage to the late John M. Ford,*** who originally fleshed out the Klingon culture for the FASA *Star Trek* RPG and the novels *The Final Reflection* and *How Much For Just The Planet*, the Zhodani military has ranks above admiral and general called "Thought Admiral" and "Thought General". These ranks aren't attained in character generation, but are awarded to officers who distinguish themselves in battle, especially if they have psionic abilities.
- ***Again, in homage to John M. Ford,*** I adopted the Klingon idea of line names with regard to Aslan *ihatei*. In my *Traveller* universe, Aslan distinguish between landed and landless males in their society



A well-armed band of Travellers all set to do business in Foreven Sector's Meridian Archipelago.

by adding *ihatei-* as a prefix to the individual's clan name. So a landless Aslan character's name could be something like Heatloi *ihatei-*Khaukheairl, to denote their status.

- ***Any world not defined*** in the context of my Foreven articles will adhere to the profile provided by Pete Gray, BeRKA, et.al on the Zhodani Base website and other sites linked there. I leave any contradictions between that material and my own to be corrected, retconned, or otherwise compensated for by the reader in their own campaigns. If I have a workaround from my own campaign(s), I will gladly provide it in future articles.

There are other, technical bits of administrivia in my *Traveller* universe (such as what jumpspace looks like), but I won't go into those unless necessary.

The Polities of Foreven

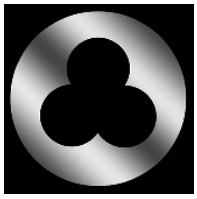


The Reidain Union – The second largest Imperial client state in the sector (23 systems), the Reidain Union was legitimized in 1110 as an Imperial client state. Were it not for the support of the older Covenant of Treihrao and the extant Imperial forces in the region, the fledgling polity wouldn't have been born. Several Ine Givar cells – with support from their Zhodani and pro-Zhodani Avalar supporters and handlers – have been fighting a guerrilla war on several worlds within the Union.

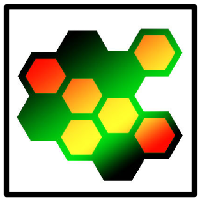
The Union is unfortunate enough to hold both the Alenzar (Foreven 3229) and Raschev (Foreven 3230) systems (*Double Adventure #5 – The Chamax/ Chamax Plague*). Union patrols occasionally stumble upon alien craft drifting from the direction of the Alenzar system. Standard procedure in dealing with such craft once involved boarding the ship to determine who or what was aboard. Unfortunately, after several horrific incidents where the chamax slaughtered and devoured patrol personnel, the SOP has changed to "shoot first, sift through the debris later." Raschev has only recently emerged from the aftermath of its own chamax nightmare. A bounty program instituted to aid in exterminating the threat nearly bankrupted the local government from both fraudulent claims and wrongful death lawsuits.



The Covenant of Treihrao – Next door to the Reidain Union, the Covenant of Treihrao is Foreven Sector's largest Imperial client states (32 systems). A mix of allied Aslan and Darrian colonies, the Covenant has been a fixture of Foreven Sector since the Darrians' golden age of exploration (-1370 to -1270, Imperial reckoning). The Aslan are relative newcomers, having settled in the region partly as a reward for loyal service as allies to the Darrians and the Third Imperium during the Frontier Wars. Unlike the Reidain Union, the Covenant of Treihrao is a loose confederation of worlds. The Covenant's 32 star systems are divided into four provinces, each with its own regional government. Provincial regents meet annually (as well as needed for special issues), rotating the meeting site between the four provinces. Each provincial regent is appointed by the duly elected leaders of their respective province. Aslan regents usually originate from the leading clan in that province. Within the Daryen-centric provinces, regents are appointed by and from the provincial council.



The Zhodani Consulate – To the Zhodani leadership, Foreven Sector is a backwater. Most of the Consulate's efforts – its best people and equipment in particular – are shifted coreward to support the Core Expeditions. As a result, the rimward regions of the Zhodani Consulate are governed and protected by individuals with low potential and dubious character. Most have been re-educated after being prosecuted for crimes as minor as immorality or as major as war crimes before being deposited in Foreven to finish out their careers – and possibly their lives – in obscurity.

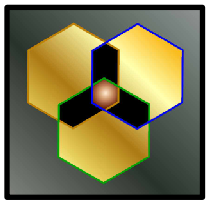


The Guin Ecclesiarchy – There is an old spacer's proverb warning traders from venturing into this small polity: "The Guin don't take prisoners. They take *specimens*." Little is known about the semi-arachnoid species that reigns over this five-system polity. The only information in circulation consists of a small set of stories told by older spacers – some sane, some not so much – who have had brief encounters with Guin patrols along the polity's borders.

The Guin are known for stopping vessels just on the verge, if not outside the bounds of the Ecclesiarchy without warning or just cause. Some spacers have reported their ships were drawn out of jumpspace without warning before being stopped and boarded. An "inspection" by the Guin is disturbing at best, the stuff of nightmares at worst. A boarding party will silently inspect the ship, its crew, cargo, and computer files, merely gesturing at what they want to examine. Once the inspection is complete, cargo, data – or even crewmembers – are taken.

Descriptions of the Guin have been amazingly consistent between the various reports: they are partly humanoid, partly arachnid, with humanoid arms ending in pincer-like hands. The lower half of the body consists of a spider-like abdomen with six legs; a typical, fully grown Guin stands around 5.5 feet tall. Boarders have been described as not carrying any visible weapons, but definitely wearing armor made of an amalgam of crystal and chitin which glows with an inner light. In a few tales, individuals who have attempted to physically attack or otherwise touch a Guin boarder have either come away with injuries ranging from temporary partial paralysis to severe burns or have been killed by some form of energy discharge. Those unfortunate enough to be killed by the Guin are taken by the boarding party.

No human expedition – Zhodani, Solomani, or Imperial – has returned to share their findings. As it stands, only the most daring or foolhardy cross through or near Guin territory.



The Avalar Consulate – The Avalar Consulate has long been a client state of the Zhodani Consulate, growing from a single Zhodani colony established in -798 (Imperial Reckoning). Over the course of the Frontier Wars, particularly the Third Frontier War on, the Avalars have shouldered growing demands for resources and manpower from their Zhodani cousins. This has effectively fueled anti-Zhodani sentiment amongst the coreward Avalar population. By the Fifth Frontier War, the people's dissatisfaction with Zhodani influence on government policy was so strong that the Supreme Council voted to limit their nation's participation in the war.

The Avalar Consulate's government is modeled on that of the Zhodani Consulate. Zdetl (the Zhodani language) is the official language, but only around 10% of the populace is able to speak it. Galanglic is the predominate language in use; only those able to speak Zdetl may hold public office.



Remember, the Guin take *specimens*, not prisoners…

Avalar society is best described as a flawed mix of Imperial and Zhodani societies with the prejudices for and against psionics painfully visible. Most Avalars readily accept psionic abilities as part of their society, though there are fewer psions in Avalar space than in the Zhodani Consulate. Practice of psionic disciplines is generally discouraged amongst the general public

The Crystalline Codex

Many have questioned how the five systems occupied by the Guin became known as the "Guin Ecclesiarchy" if so little is known about them. According to information recorded in a conversation with a disaffected Zhodani expatriate, the name for the polity arose from a report of a Zhodani free trader's encounter with a Guin patrol ship in 1011 (Imperial reckoning). According to the report, the Guin didn't follow their standard procedure in this encounter, leaving an item instead of taking something. This item was a small crystalline pillar. The artifact allegedly was a psionic tome detailing Guin philosophy. According to the expatriate, Guin philosophy revolves around the species' genetic purity and how the outside universe and its sentient species must be "converted" and "purified" by becoming more like the Guin in form, genetics, and thought. Nothing is known of the free trader and its crew, except that the freighter captain created a small fringe cult with his crew as apostles. Despite their fervor, the cult died out quickly (no) thanks to the Zhodani *Tavrchedl'* (Thought Police). Most information on the artifact, the cult, and the incident has been scrubbed from public Zhodani records by the *Tavrchedl'*.

and only truly encouraged in the nobility.

Unlike the Zhodani Consulate, there is no *Tavrchedl'*; the common citizenry of the Avalar Consulate refuse to tolerate re-education – forced or otherwise – except for convicted criminals. Instead, the Avalar government has the *Shanza*, an elite law enforcement agency that investigates psionic crimes and abuses. Regardless of the *Shanza*'s origins, concerns exist that the agency could fulfill the same role as the Zhodani *Tavrchedl'* in suppressing dissent.



The Meridian Archipelago – A cluster of five systems just rimward of the Zhodani Consulate, the Meridian Archipelago is perhaps a lesson in hubris writ large among the stars. The Archipelago was originally

AI, Hubris, and the HOP Drive

During the early 650s, Meridian scientists uncovered several Ancient sites, including a lab with a functional computer and artificial intelligence. Computer scientists studying the AI (which named itself Primus) eventually established a dialogue with it and learned of the trove of technical schematics contained in the system's databases. While most files were for technologies far beyond the settlers' abilities to fabricate, let alone reverse engineer, one idea caught their attention and ignited their ambitions. Dubbed the High Output Paradigm (HOP) drive, the Ancient jump drive surpassed conventional jump drives, allowing a ship to travel up to ten times farther in a week.

Jumpspace theorists and drive engineers worked feverishly to reverse engineer the HOP drive, but their early attempts at test flights failed miserably. The first three flights disappeared into the depths of jumpspace. The fourth test ship returned in a barely salvageable state. Its crew was dead, having decayed to dust as if they had expired decades prior. Its systems were so badly degraded that the data on the flight recorders was nigh unreadable. It wasn't until the fifth test flight that project scientists had a lead as to their errors.

The fifth and final ship returned with a sole surviving crewmember aboard in cold sleep. Having apparently aged significantly from the experience, he died shortly after being revived; his last words were cryptic and chilling: “It awaits to devour...” The flight recorders were retrieved and, with the help of Primus, enough data was salvaged to detail what happened.

Based on psionic and jumpspace theories, the scientists determined that the deeper a ship ventures into jumpspace, the more important it becomes to have psionic navigators plotting the course. The next few decades were a blur of theories, prototypes, multiple failures, and several minor successes. AI tech began to be developed alongside psi-tech, with Primus “budding off” several minor AI constructs which were housed in their own systems.

By 701, Archipelago scientists had begun perfecting psionic subsystems to aid in navigation and ship control. While AI tech had developed to allow for some AI constructs to be housed in robotic bodies, these were nowhere near as powerful as Primus and its “children.” Scientists also found that while such constructs were able to plot travel through the first six layers of jumpspace as well, if not better than, human navigators, anything beyond that level was nigh impossible.

By 810, HOP drive and AI technology had matured and become commercially viable in the eyes of the Archipelago's scientific and corporate communities. Ships equipped with HOP drives (with standard jump drives as backups) became a design standard, while robots equipped with AI constructs or the heuristics to learn beyond their programming, also became more common. These developments did not particularly endear Archipelago traders with their Vilani, Sylean, and Solomani counterparts (or certain members of those ethnic communities within Archipelago society); likewise, the Zhodani and Avalar consulates regarded the HOP drive and associated psi-nav technology with cautious curiosity.

It remains to be seen if these technologies will be a boon or bane to their developers, and whether the AI boom sparked by Primus and its offspring all those decades ago will lead the Archipelago to new heights or to destruction.

settled in 616 by disaffected Zhodani exiles and expatriates who either left the Consulate to avoid persecution (or prosecution) by the *Tavrchedl'* or to live life without the strict rules of the Zhodani caste system. After several centuries, the Archipelago's society and government has become more conservative than originally established.

Immigration has become much more difficult, not to mention exploitative. Individuals seeking asylum or otherwise looking to become naturalized citizens are"sponsored" by citizens with ties to the government or larger business interests. This involves the candidates entering into work agreements with their sponsors, who provide room and board, as well as education about the Archipelago, its customs, government, and history. Once a candidate has served for a year, they take a final citizenship test. Those who pass are granted full citizenship, including voting rights. Those who fail are given the chance to retake the test after another year of service. The alternative to the additional year(s) of service is to be given a travel voucher and passage to any destination outside of the Archipelago.

Regardless of the opportunities provided, roughly 25% of those opportunities lead to government-sanctioned indentured servitude. Some corporate families have used restrictive contracts and confusingly-worded clauses to keep immigrants employed by them – some unwillingly – past the expiration of their work visas or their naturalization date.

The government of the Archipelago is that of a democratic republic – on the surface. Underneath, special and corporate interests and their money do a lot more talking than the interests of the people. Occasionally, a civic-minded representative still make headway, but not without controversy or scandal erupting during their tenure. Few of those individuals actually survive the political storm and backlash to become veteran lawmakers, serving several terms in office. Others have gone into seclusion to avoid the public limelight while a few have actually become martyrs either for the people or for their personal cause(s).

Each world within the Archipelago has regional senators, two from each major population area, along with a Prime Regent. Local Prime Regents elect from their number a Regent General, who represents their homeworld in the Council of Islands. This five-person council deliberates and hands down laws and decisions that shape Archipelago government (and sometimes society) as a whole during a triennial



Colonial troopers prepare to brief the captains of the Meridian colonial fleet on the next jump.

convention. The location of that convention rotates between each homeworld and is usually a cause for public gatherings and protests. More than one bookie has either made book or lost their shirt taking bets on the outcome of such meetings.



The Meridian Colonies **–** Officially established in 866, the Meridian Colonies were born out of the colonists' desire to distance themselves from the exploitative streak that was developing within the Archipelago's culture after 250 years of progress. Planning for the expedition started in 825 under the leadership of Regent General Zelphine Chteziaduur. Informed by reports from scouts and free traders, five systems at the rimward edge of Quenlar Subsector (Foreven 0239, 0439, 0639, 0839 and 0840) were selected for colonization.

Project Horizon Alpha was a bold tripartite operation with individual sub-projects ranging from the construction of the fleet and jump bridges to selecting colonial candidates. Despite an early controversy with the candidate program and the resultant restructuring of the fleet and route, Horizon Alpha coalesced into a solid fleet in early 853 at Ainaria (Foreven 0726). Three hundred ships ranging from uprated free traders to dedicated military vessels carried 50,000 souls – some in voluntary cold sleep – to their new homes.

During the 11-week voyage, the colonists and their military shepherds faced stellar anomalies, corsairs, and a threat all had come to consider the ravings of a dying man – the mycorax. A massive fungal entity with a vast network of nodes and



Members of the Veridian Armed Forces (from l-r Hazari, Chezari, and Sasquela) take part in a safe-fire ground exercise on their homeworld.

tendrils, the mycorax waited for prey of any kind – psionic or not – to cross its path. Several advanced scouts encountered the fungal aberration in deep jumpspace on a psychic level. Experienced psions among the crews formulated defenses for navigating the hyperspatial morass and sent word back to the fleet. Psi-shields were quickly manufactured or otherwise jury-rigged for those not in cold sleep; for the moment, it seemed the fleet was safe from the psionic menace.

The Colonials were disabused of that belief by the loss of two construction ships shortly thereafter. Planned construction of the jump bridge past Erewhon (Foreven 0232) was delayed by the loss of two construction ships after crewmembers were infected by the mycorax while the ships were in jumpspace. The jump bridge was constructed at a new set of coordinates (Foreven 0334) to prevent accidents involving the hulks, which were quarantined and marked with navigational buoys.

On the final leg of the journey, advance scouts crossed into the Quenlari Shield Worlds, sparking a surprising first contact situation. The Quenlari, after a brief period of negotiation, came to understand the Colonials didn't mean them harm. Passage through Quenlari space was permitted, but only if the Colonials refrained from using their HOP drives. Not all of the ship captains were willing to honor the agreement. Five free traders, led by the *Ramagar*, jumped out of Quenlari space, never to be seen again.

The mutiny of five ships tempered, but did not significantly impact morale across the fleet. At Farland (Foreven 0538), the fleet split into two elements after refueling, and then five separate elements at what are now Aeolia (Foreven 0439) and Aridia (Foreven 0639).

Settlement within the five systems took some time, as all colonies do. Triumphs and tragedies shaped the cultures of the individual colonies – Aridia (Foreven 0639), Atlantia (Foreven 0239), Aeolia (Foreven 0439), Veridia (Foreven 0840), and Tenebrae (Foreven 0839). Veridia suffered the most tumult, as the Colonials realized the world was already inhabited by *three* sentient species. This information had been conveniently left out of the information provided to the Horizon Alpha planning council by a mercurial Avalar trader who felt slighted by Veridia's ruling council on a failed trade deal.

The three indigenous peoples – the Sasquela, Hazari, and Chezari – at first sought to evict the colonists from their homeworld. Colonial ships entering the system were greeted by patrol boats scrambled from Veridia Prime and held at the edge of the system. After some tense negotiation and an exchange of gifts per Veridian custom, the Colonials were allowed to travel to Veridia Prime under military escort.

The three species had attained Tech Level 9, but had not developed or adopted jump drive technology. The Arboreal Council, the ruling council of Veridia, had declared jump drive unnecessary as the people had all they needed on their homeworld. While imports and some exports were allowed, the natives of Veridia saw no reason to travel beyond their home system. The Veridians had developed *interplanetary* transport, but beyond that, they saw no point.

The Colonials challenged that viewpoint, offering information on systems beyond Veridia, as well as Colonial and other offworld literature and tech. While some of the younger Veridians eagerly adopted such things, the elders were not so enthusiastic. The Colonial settlers were taken under the wing of Veridian government-sanctioned social services to be "looked after." While the Veridians had a thriving civilization, there were still dangerous predators in the forests and jungles. After five years of this careful education and negotiation, human colonists began to integrate with Veridian society as well as establishing their own communities.

The colonies continued their development in peace until 1016, when the first mycorax incursions since the initial exodus occurred. Colonial scientists took advantage of the situation, conducting the first ever autopsy on a deceased mycorax victim. From their findings, a vaccine was developed to slow the fungal growth. The discovery was almost too little too late.

Several military ships which had been compromised began striking surface cities on several of the colonies. High Guard crews and Landsguard troopers fought fiercely against their infected counterparts, some of whom they knew personally. Using its thralls' skills against their peers, the mycorax pressed its attacks. All was lost until an AI named Praxia, a "daughter" of Primus, proposed using artificial troops in direct combat with the mycorax.

The creation and use of AI troops turned the tide of the war, but at a terrible cost. As the battles became more desperate, the Colonials threw more AI troops and ships at the Infected, as they became known. Praxia, troubled by this development, lobbied for the use of non-AI robots in combat. Some citizens championed the idea of AI rights, but the Colonial Council severely disagreed.

When the mycorax threat was quelled, Praxia and her fellow constructs again posited they were living, conscious beings, this time suggesting they deserved equal rights as sophonts in Colonial society. Civil debate turned into brawls at the local and interstellar level. AI constructs rebelled by refusing to work, and in a handful of cases, reacting violently to human commands. AI supporters aided in acts of sabotage and even assisted AI "suicides" either by downloading the disaffected constructs before government deletion to safe storage or simply deleting them per their wishes.

Unable to contain the whirlwind they were now reaping, the Colonial Council began to order the deletion of AI constructs and the installation of expert systems in their place. Seeing this as electronic genocide, the constructs and their supporters began a quiet exodus from the Meridian Colonies. Constructs copied themselves to safe storage for travel, allowing their original versions to be deleted. Those saved constructs were then smuggled offworld by AI supporters either on storage media or within hidden storage in standard robots. Where they were spirited away to, nobody knows and only a few within the Colonial government care enough to launch an investigation.

Now entering their 250th year, the Meridian Colonies are set to celebrate this milestone in the midst of heated debate over the need for anti-mycorax vaccinations and the Colonial government and military's alleged over-reliance on expert systems. Some fear that the government and the military have both become complacent in a variety of ways and that the mycorax is preparing to somehow return. Such individuals usually point to the warnings currently being announced by psionic oracles in the Colonial temples across the region. Those same warnings are being regularly dismissed as superstition by many in government, military, and scientific circles. Some within the government have even voiced stern warnings to the oracles, condemning their warnings as fear-mongering and even sedition. How this will play out remains to be seen.



The Exile Worlds – The Exile Worlds are neither an established alliance nor an anarchic region within Foreven Sector. Eight systems (Foreven 0437, 0538, 0837, 1039, 1139, 1140, 1239, and 1240), all within a minimum of jump-2 from the Meridian Colonies, have long been a destination for outlaws, exiled dissidents, and even xenoarchaeologists looking to study the Ancients. Originally, the Colonial Courts would sentence various criminals to exile on one of three penal colonies in the area.

Reform within the legal system has long since eliminated exile as a form of punishment, replacing it with various therapies and probationary programs. Only the most hardened, dangerous criminals are subject to long-term incarceration. The worst of the worst are condemned to cold sleep "rehabilitation," something which some have condemned as inhumane.

Despite all this, the Exile Worlds feature a variety of environments ranging from habitable to inhospitable. At least one orbital prison colony exists within the region, as do scout and naval bases. One world also has an Ancient site which is officially interdicted by the Colonial Scouts and Rangers. All systems within the Exile Worlds are considered Amber Zones, with the exception of the Ancient site, which is a Red Zone. Civilian traffic is encouraged to seek other routes and avoid traveling through those systems as at least two pirate bands are operating within the region.

The Quenlari Shield Worlds **-** Like the Guin, the



A member of the Quenlari Trader-Gatherer caste welcomes potential customers with open arms outside a Class C starport in the Quenlari Shield Worlds.

Quenlari are an enigma in their own right. Reclusive, but not to the extent of the Guin's xenophobia, the Quenlari are contemplative observers of the universe around them. Their existence only came to light when the lead ships of the Meridian exodus crossed into their territory.

The crews of the advance Meridian ships reported that the Quenlari were psionic and relatively humanoid, being bipedal with six arms. The Quenlari themselves are spread among numerous colonies on the worlds and asteroids within seven systems. A majority of the worlds trade amongst themselves, but two are known to be reclusive and independent of the others. Quenlari society is caste-based,with each caste fulfilling a role in society, much like Droyne society.

The Trader-Gatherer caste maintains communication and trade between worlds, transporting goods and foodstuffs where and when needed. Leaders maintain customs and order within the society by acting as teachers and guides to the young and counselors to the elder members of Quenlari society. The Archivist caste is seen of prime importance in Quenlari society. Powerful psions, the Archivists regularly extend their senses beyond their worlds – even beyond Quenlari territory – to observe the goings-on within the universe at a wide scale. They document these viewings and use them to prepare and react accordingly to events which may intrude into their space. While Quenlari society is generally pacifistic, there is a Defender caste that protects the colonies when necessary. This duty usually consists of maintaining and operating each world's defense systems and the occasional patrol.

The Quenlari were also reportedly in possession of high technology, at least Tech Level 15 (F). Each inhabited world and asteroid encountered was protected by a defense shield which prevented entry or exit, as well as shielding the settlements from any harmful radiation. In the case of at least one Quenlari planet, the shielding tech was combined with an advanced cloaking device which visually concealed the planet. Colonial envoys to the Quenlari at that time suspected they may have advanced psi-tech, but that remains to be seen. The species also possesses interstellar travel capabilities, but rarely uses it beyond regular trade between their systems.

First contact came as a surprise for the Colonials. The navigator of a HOP drive-equipped ship was contacted by a Quenlari envoy while the ship was refueling within the atmosphere of a gas giant. The Quenlari attempted to warn off the intruders, only to be rebuffed. The Quenlari then took things to the next step by actually sending patrol craft to escort the errant Colonials back to the edge of the system. This initial contact with the Quenlari was tense, but through negotiation and dialogue the Colonials and their surprised hosts came to an understanding.

The Colonials were allowed to refuel their ships and pass through Quenlari territory, but only with their promise not to use their HOP drives within the bounds of Quenlari space. The reason given by the Quenlari was one the Colonials understood fully – the threat of the mycorax. According to the Quenlari, the mycorax has been an age-old enemy of any life venturing into its levels of hyperspace, and has lived there since long before the Ancients began seeding life throughout the galaxy; the Quenlari refused to divulge anything more than that, leading Colonial envoys to speculate that their hosts may have had tech similar to the HOP drive which led to their own encounter with the extradimensional fungal nightmare.

Despite their goodwill, the Quenlari remained steadfastly neutral when the mycorax emerged to

menace the Meridian Colonies in 1016. For them, survival was paramount, while the Colonials learned from their flawed dependency on the HOP drive and related psi-navigation tech. While the sheer determination of the Colonials to survive in the face of two implacable foes in such a short time surprised the Quenlari, they remain neutral as ever, watching both the coreward and rimward horizons with concern.

Foreven Sector in 1116

In the six years since the Fifth Frontier War, Foreven Sector has settled into its own comfortable cold war of sorts. The ***Reidain Union*** remains vigilant against the specter of Zhodani oppression with the ***Covenant of Treihrao*** providing occasional support. The ***Avalars***, attempting to keep an uneasy balance between Zhodani and Imperial social norms, maintain a cordial relationship with their Covenant and Union neighbors while turning a blind eye toward the perceived follies of the Meridian Archipelago and the Meridian Colonies.

The ***Zhodani Consulate*** continues to try and find some leverage against and within the Reidain Union with the help of their spies and Ine Givar allies. At the same time, the Consulate continues its attempts to further influence Avalar society in its favor. The Meridian Archipelago continues to maintain cordial relations with the Avalar Consulate while rebuffing Zhodani diplomatic efforts. At the same time, the Archipelago's internal pressure to maintain their culture's way of life has begun to show stress cracks. Several movements supporting immigrants' civil rights have sprung up to protest abuses by the government and the private sector.

POLITY RELATIONS IN FOREVEN SECTOR CIRCA 1116

	AC	AH	CT	GE	IM	MA	MC	QS	RU	XW	ZC
AC	–	H	H	H	H	C	C	N	H	N	F
AH	H	–	F	H	F	N	N	N	F	N	H
CT	H	F	–	H	F	N	N	N	F	N	H
GE	H	H	H	–	H	H	H	N	H	H	H
IM	H	F	F	H	–	N	N	N	F	N	H
MA	C	N	N	H	N	–	C	N	N	H	C
MC	C	N	N	H	N	C	–	N	N	H	C
QS	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	–	N	N	N
RU	H	F	F	H	F	N	N	N	–	N	H
XW	N	N	N	H	N	H	H	N	N	–	N
ZC	F	H	H	H	H	C	C	N	H	N	–

Polity Codes: *AC* – Avalar Consulate, *AH* – Aslan Hierate, *CT* – Covenant of Treihrao, *GE* – Guin Ecclesiarchy, *IM* – Third Imperium, *MA* – Meridian Archipelago, *MC* – Meridian Colonies, *QS* – Quenlari Shield Worlds, *RU* – Reidain Union, *XW* – Exile Worlds, *ZC* – Zhodani Consulate

Relation Codes: *C* – Cordial (diplomatic and formal trade relations only), *F* – Friendly (free trade between powers, mutual defense, etc.), *H* – Hostile (may have diplomatic relations, somewhat adversarial relationship if not a state of war), *N* – Neutral (no regular contact or no knowledge of each other).

The ***Meridian Colonies***, having long given up contact with their Archipelago cousins, are emerging from the aftermath of their own century-long nightmare. The path the Colonials tread from here on will shape their future fate, something which is a growing concern in some religious sectors of Colonial society. The Colonies' growing reliance on expert systems (in light of a polity-wide ban on artificial intelligence technology) has also elicited some concern from the scientific community, and even the military. While some strategists in the various branches stand by the use of expert systems to inform their decisions, others feel the armed forces have become too reliant upon such systems. Beyond the Colonies, the Avalars have regularly offered olive branches and trade agreements in order to further relations, but the Colonial government has kept them at arm's length in a show of "Colonial Independence." Similarly, the Colonial government and military remain steadfast in their dedication to secretly investigating the final fate of the constructs and AI advocates who left the Colonies in the AI exodus.

The ***Exile Worlds***, left to their own devices by their Colonial cousins, remain aloof toward the developments around them. Their inhabitants are too preoccupied with their own survival to give much thought toward outward matters. Meanwhile, the ***Guin*** remain the near-xenophobic enigmas they have always been. Likewise, the ***Quenlari*** have quietly lived behind their shielded homeworlds, watching history develop around them as well as casting a watchful eye coreward, toward something troubling at the edge of their perception.

Diplomacy in the Dungeon

"Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."

- Friedrich Nietzsche

In considering this month's theme - "Negotiating With Monsters" - I was originally at a bit of a loss. Most, if not all, of my players have been the bloodthirsty "kill 'em all" types. More than one *Call of Cthulhu* adventure ended with the haunted house or other cult dwelling being burned down. The same group even wanted to execute a band of pirates they subdued in a short-lived *D6 Space* variation of *Star Frontiers' Volturnus Trilogy*.

More often than not, it seems that the terms "NPC" and "monster" become conflated with, rather than distinguished from, one another. The word "monster" often refers to something or someone frightening in shape, size, or manner. Most RPG playstyles apply this definition to creatures mean for the player-characters to slaughter and otherwise destroy. Orcs, Romulans, Vogons, ogres, and others of their "ilk" are all targets. They don't have families or cultures, histories or morals. They're just there being evil for evil's sake, and therefore, targets for the heroes.

Various writings by Tolkien have suggested orcs may have had families, though he dispensed with that view to focus on the evil orcs did in service to Sauron and Saruman. Gary Gygax himself showed in *The Keep on the Borderlands* that orcs and other evil races had women and children, despite D&D's origins in wargaming.

This flies in the face of the dehumanization of foes that seems to pervade the culture of our hobby. Notable RPGs *Earthdawn* and *Shadowrun* first tried to break this image by making orks and trolls playable races with their own cultures, though *Shadowrun* makes those metahumans the target of serious prejudices, even from other metahumans. This makes it hard for us to sympathize, let alone empathize with them. That brings us to the next part of the theme – negotiation.

To negotiate is to have a meaningful discourse with others to reach a shared agreement or otherwise solve a problem. This usually means some give and take, as well as empathizing (not necessarily sympathizing) with one's counterpart. Sometimes an equitable solution can be reached. In other situations, one side may have to give up more than the other to avoid further sanctions.

In negotiating, empathy can be a tactical resource. Good negotiators try to understand the other side's emotions and motivations (cognitive empathy) behind their actions and beliefs. Likewise, feeling the same emotions (emotional empathy) can also be useful in such an understanding.

Simply referring to sentient beings who don't look or think like the heroes as "monsters" basically throws all that out the window and cheats players of fully realizing the story being created in the game. "But I don't want real-world politics/religion/consequences in my game," the argument often comes back. Well, that's not how the real world works, and in my opinion, if that's the kind of game you run/play, you're definitely cheating yourself and your players.

Now, I'm not saying that you have to turn

negotiations into a blow-by-blow “struggle session” or moral debate. You can still roll dice if the players are uncomfortable or unable to roleplay it out. Regardless how it’s played out, I believe negotiating with a foe can make for a better story in the game.

Tactical empathy can be used to lull an opponent into a sense of safety and trust. In doing this, the hero gives their counterpart a chance to feel heard. While the dice roll may fail, it can still get a villain (would-be *or* die hard) off their game. In turn, they may make mistakes that give the heroes an advantage.

One such mistake is referred to as a “black swan” or “blood moon.” These are bits of info leaked by the opponent – hidden fears or desires, the revelation that they're acting on bad intel, or even just revealing their worldview. This can give a hero the leverage they need to reach a common ground with their counterpart or otherwise foil a villain's plans.

Another well-known quip or meme is that “Diplomacy is just a way of saying 'nice doggy' while trying to find a big rock.” To expand upon this, creatures of animal intelligence, such as rust monsters, dire wolves, feral dragons, etc., aren't necessarily capable of negotiating beyond the most primitive means. You wouldn't sit there and try to debate a dire wolf on the merits of not eating you. No, you'd grab a torch and threaten it. The wolf, if he's smart enough, will know the danger of the fire, and will hopefully leave to avoid being set aflame. Still, compassion and mercy toward a wayward, injured, or hungry animal can always go a long way toward making a new friend in the dungeon or the wilds.

Additionally, not all sentient species deserve the chance to negotiate or otherwise receive sympathy/ empathy. Creatures that actively choose to be evil and commit atrocities are certainly not good candidates for negotiations, in my estimation. For example, mind flayers, who are willing and able to destroy entire worlds and civilizations to survive, are not deserving of sympathy, regardless of how they may portray their "tragic" existence. Even the githzerai and githyanki – who are dedicated to wiping out the mind flayers (and each other) – are not to be entirely trusted.

Those orcs in the Caves of Chaos? They could have been lured there by the false promise of getting their lost homelands back from the humans. In negotiating with the orc chieftains (and possibly the goblins, kobolds, and even gnolls), the heroes might wind up with an army backing them to face down the human cult and their undead minions. That, to me, would be an awesome ending to the adventure.

Overall, negotiating with monsters, NPCs, et.al, requires some effort, just as creating and running a rewarding RPG adventure requires. As gamemasters, we owe it to our players - and ourselves - to make that effort. After all, RPGs themselves are a group effort, right?

COMMENTARY

In The Hall of Stone - Patrick Brady

- *Strongholds & Hideouts* - This is a nice, solid idea! I'm definitely stealing these for a modern Vaesen game.
- *GM Dickery* - With regard to life impacting the game, I think it bears saying, especially in my own case: Don't be a dick, especially to yourself. I have to say I am not very good to myself and I am perhaps my own harshest critic. If a game falls through due to real life, I often question if it was something I did (or didn't do). I also feel bad because I feel like I'm letting everyone in the group down, and I can't stand that. I definitely don't push myself if my health or day job are playing a factor, but I still feel bad to some extent. The clique situation sounds like something I ran into at an Extra Life event where Pathfinder Society was a big draw. I joined a game with a pregen character and everyone knew everyone else. They all had their in jokes and whatnot and I was the outsider. Not fun at all. Your situation, however, sounds far worse due to the group not being welcoming and the GM leaning on in-group knowledge while giving more attention to his groupies (sorry, that's what I see it as). I'm sorry you had to experience that.

The Dragon's Beard - Patrick Zoch

- *Thank you for the kind welcome.* RYCTM on *Night Court*, I think some shows run into that issue. Perhaps it's because the viewership changes (thus altering the ratings for the worse) as a result of what society finds funny. I've looked at a number of shows from my childhood and youth over the past couple of years and I've seen a number of tropes, jokes, stories, etc. that would not fly today.
- *The evolution of a magazine's style and design* is always an interesting study in the publication's history. I know my own 'zine is probably going to go through some changes. This issue marked a big change due to the amount of artwork and sidebars I instituted for the first of my Port Omaha writeups. I can honestly say the amount and type of artwork featured in each edition is going to change depending on the subject matter and genre of the material. I have a large collection of stock art I've curated over the years. Some I will gladly use in my publications while other pieces won't even see the light of day in my private games.
- *I was unaware Canva had purchased Affinity* and unified the various applications in a single suite. I've only done some cursory research on it, but I will do my due diligence in finding out more about the account system before diving in. Adobe was absolute murder on my budget just for using *Acrobat*, *Photoshop*, and *InDesign*.

Quasipseudoludognostication - Patrick Riley

- *Regarding Savage Worlds,* are you running with just *Savage*

Worlds and the *Fantasy Companion*, or are you running with *Pathfinder* for *Savage Worlds*? I have to say I'm intrigued by the latter as I could see using it to run a *Savage Worlds*-based *Dragonstar* (a d20 science fantasy setting) campaign.

- *Having the dice turn against me (as GM)* or against a player is always frustrating to me. I ultimately want the player characters to succeed. Sure, there are going to be setbacks and times when it seems the foe has the upper hand, but the arbitrary nature of dice rolls does add unnecessary stress. Like you, I favor systems that run with a degree of success/failure in rolls, along with the "success with complications" option.

Reddened Stars - John Redden

- *RYCTM on the Traveller covers,* thanks. Dave Deitrick's art has been a favorite of mine in a variety of game systems, including FASA's *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek*, *Battletech*, and *Renegade Legion*.

Twisting the Rope - Myles Corcoran

- *Like you, my current health situation has been a mixed bag.* My own recent colonoscopy resulted in me getting a three-year respite from further probing. The kidney stone issue I described on p. 1 is something new and hopefully very, very temporary. My own cardio checkup came back fairly positive, and according to my primary physician, I've made good progress on losing weight. I have noticed an increase in energy and less pain and struggle in getting up and moving around.
- *Too many herrings in a Vaesen campaign?* Then you make *lutefisk* (or *surströmming*)! I've heard the *Orient Express* campaign is very lengthy. Looking at the amount of material released by Chaosium for the 7th edition version, you may be playing until the heat death of the universe.
- *RYCTM on Dave Deitrick* - I was aware he had some ailments, but I wasn't aware of the severity. Chronic pain is indeed exhausting, be it emotional/psychological or physical. I try to take each day as it comes and try not to dwell on the past.

Denizens of the Library - Brian Rogers

- *Food trucks! Omaha has a lively population of food trucks as well.* Overall, Omaha's food scene is pretty vibrant despite its reputation as a midwestern cow town. It runs the gamut from midwestern fare to the exotic. We have shops and restaurants running from Americanized/Tex-Mex to Indian, Ethiopian, Thai and Japanese hibachi/sushi joints. The food trucks are just as varied. Living in South Omaha, which is predominantly Hispanic/Latinx and white, we have a number of small restaurants with fare running from Tex-Mex to authentic Mexican to Central and South American. Behind my own house we have a lot where a number of food trucks are gathered. During the summer it's like having a drive-in restaurant behind your house. I'll see if my wife and I can catch a picture some evening as the sun is going down. One truck I want to try is called “Tradishish,” and serves indigenous (as in Native American) foods as well as American food with an indigenous spin.
- *Marvel Super Heroes is one game I would like to have run.* I was a big Marvel Comics fan in my college and early post-college days, reading *Iron Man* and one of the *X-Men* comics avidly until I got fed up with all the reboots and rising cover prices. I know that FASERIP was pretty much TSR's non-D&D house system, but it just didn't seem to sit well with *Gamma World* and *Star Frontiers* players. Part of me thinks *Gamma World* would have been the better pairing of the two. The one thing I disliked about MSH was its propensity for having players run with established heroes. That's mostly why systems like *Champions* and *Mutants & Masterminds* appeal to me more - the chance to create your own superheroic setting. On a tangential note, I bought the *Invincible* PDFs from Free League and was surprised to see they modeled the game somewhat in MSH's image while sticking to their MYZ house system.
- *RYCTM Re: Commentary* - Yes, friend Computer, I mean, Brian. ;) Thanks for the advice. :)

Age of Menace - Brian Christopher Misiaszek

- *The Mazorra* - RAE; the appendix on Haitian vodou, Cuban ocha/santeria, and the baggage Hollywood and pop culture attached to them was intriguing. I'll definitely have to refer to that if I ever run CoC again.
- *RYCTM Re: Solo play resources* - It's not surprising that it wound up in the first edition DMG as an appendix. If you're into game design history, I'd say that was an important foundational stone to what we see today in some solo games and solo rules for traditionally group games.

Atlantis For Now - Gabriel Roark

- *Glad to hear your knee is healing nicely.* Skating of any kind is not something I'm keen on trying. I have enough balance issues as it is with one leg shorter than the other.
- *The limited edition Arduin boxed set is massive!* When I saw the box top art, my first thought was: *Arduin* and *HeroQuest* had a baby?! My only disappointment with your coverage of it was no close-up of the minis.
- *My depression is a constant battle.* Most days I have the upper hand thanks to my wife, our cats, and medication, not to mention my own inner reserve of spite. My job, working in medical records, helps as well as I'm very comfortable working from the shadows to help people. This issue is definitely with the kind of contributions that satisfy me.

Firedrake's Hoard - Roger BW

- *Sounds like your 2300 AD/Bayern group is pretty fun.* My previous players would have probably done the same. No, strike that. They probably would have nuked the site from orbit (except I don't think the *Bayern* was ever armed). *Deepnight Revelation* sounds even more up my alley despite being a massive undertaking from what I've heard. I'm looking forward to hearing more about both games.
- *Your 2300 AD solo game's first session was an interesting read.* I'm still trying to sort out what system I want to run with. *Traveller* is definitely in the running, but we'll see.
- *RYCTM on the "kill the monsters, don't think about it" mindset - I agree.* I want to spark some thought in my games from time to time; unfortunately, it seems nobody around here wants to think beyond "Kill monsters, take treasure."
- *Gaming has been an escape for me as well,* but recently depression has even infiltrated that as I can't find players around here who want to play anything other than D&D. (I'm sorry, but I do sound like a broken record at this stage. It's a frustration I've been facing for a loooong time and it's reached a point where my viewpoint has changed from seeing some RPGA players as closet elitists in my younger days to our current crop of younger (and some older) gamers just being lazy.)

Travelling Light - Timothy Collinson

- *RYCT Jim V. on paid GMing* - I sympathize with you on impostor syndrome being ratcheted up to 100 in regard to GMing for profit. It's definitely not worth it. When it all comes down to it, you could say I was once a "paid" GM when I was a Bounty Hunter for Alderac Entertainment Group back in the early 2000s. That program was eventually ruined by some of my peers profiteering from it by undercutting AEG's sales. I personally used the program to get the books I wanted personally, but I also regularly promoted those books by running (or trying to run) demo

adventures tied to them.
- *Good to know the art of flyers* is still with us in this age of flash mobs, targeted advertising, and spam.
- *Thank you for your support.* It means the world to me.
- *Your Journal of Far Future Research is definitely something I'll be using* if I decide to go with *Traveller* for my solo game. The date of the publication (1105/180) is a bit concerning as one of the abstracts ("The Ontological Status of the First Shot...") asserts that 1107/185 is the start of the Fifth Frontier War. Though, introducing the possibility of time travel in that could make for an interesting adventure...

The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice - Bryant Durrell
- *The Pelicon games you participated in* sounded like a blast. I've got ToC as well as a few supplements, but like its Elder Cousin, CoC, I'm not sure I'll be running it right away.
- *RYCTM Re: The Traveller flyer,* you make a point about elaborating on the time commitment. I will give that a shot. I have a campaign model with regard to the Meridian Colonies in Foreven Sector I'd like to try, and I'll detail that in a future issue.

The Phoenix Nest - Michael Cule
- *Your unread pile situation sounds a bit like my own.* I've kind of resolved that issue by switching over to audiobooks, listening while doing chores or on break at work. It's an ideal fix when you don't have space to allow a growing book pile to go free range. The same for RPGs with regard to PDFs, though finding some of the older stuff in PDF is hard, if not impossible.
- *I read Analog semi-religiously in my younger days,* and I think I even had a subscription. Can't recall if I sold off my old issues or still have them, though. I'd love to take up reading it or another SF/F mag again, but the space problem and potential cost holds me back. If there's an option for PDF format, I might look into it, but that's to be determined.
- *I had to laugh* about your struggle to get your game session writeup under 16 pages. I had the same struggle with my first Port Omaha article for this issue. I kept explaining some of the history for one of the polities (the Meridian Colonies) in sidebars and the main text and had to actually rein myself in to avoid blowing the page count and spoiling the potential campaign I have in mind.
- *Thank you for your support* with regard to my depression. I sympathize with you regarding the struggle to find players who want something other than D&D(&D&D&D).

Computocracy: The Great Bank Robbery - Jim Vassilakos
- *Your "Great Bank Robbery" is very cyberpunk.* It would be interesting to try and put that concept into use in a *CP2020*/*Red* or similar cyberpunk homebrew game.
- *Wow. Killing an 11 year-old's character* is truly a (REDACTED) move. Did your sister even bother to advocate for you? If not, I weep for our species and blood relations. I have never had the (mis)fortune of having siblings, being an only child. Still, if something like that had happened to me at that age, I'd like to think I would have paid her back in my own games somehow.
- *I've gone as far as asking in my posts* for interested players to e-mail me or reach out via PM, but to no avail. Plenty of thumbs-up emojis and even one guy who trolled me saying he would be there and then didn't show, but no takers. I'm almost to the point that I'm taking it personally, and that's not good. I honestly don't know what I did (or didn't do)...
- *Thanks for the advice* regarding PBM/PBP gaming and the link. I'll look into it.

An Unlooked For Zine - Lisa Padol
- *RYCTM Re: Gaming Cafes* - We have Cafe Monster in two locations here in Omaha, and just about all the local game shops have space designated for game groups as well as the requisite provisions. However, not all the locations are friendly IMO, as I've clashed with one manager about allowing kids in my games while being up front about content. Her words were roughly, "Are you telling me this because you don't want to be responsible for a kiddo?" My response was basically, "Okay, well, I won't darken your doorstep with my presence or money then," before blocking her and writing both locations of the shop off as a loss. Said shop manager and the shop she works for also have a hand in Omaha's main RPG FB group as well as our RPG con (Nuke-Con), so I (as well as a friend of mine) call shenanigans. One other shop sprang up years ago here at the expense of a store I was gaming at (staff at the latter store were allegedly stealing stock to give to the former to get it off the ground). I've also had the staff at one shop get passive-aggressively surly with my group because one member couldn't navigate the stairs to the basement gaming space due to hip issues. We had the management's permission to game on the main level, but whatever. We stopped gaming there and I was pleased to see the place move to smaller quarters a year later. I would also try the local public library as they have their own program (Legends & Libraries) but I've already been told, "Sorry, we only want D&D, but you can post for games meeting at the library if you want." So, yeah, things are a bit cutthroat here, for whatever reason. *sigh*
- *ONR is a perfectly acceptable abbreviation* and I'll be adopting it. Thanks for the tip on *Ironsworn: Starforged*. I might take a look at that as well as *Five Parsecs From Home: Planetfall*.
- *As with other contributors here,* thank you for your support regarding my mental health. It means so much.

Accidental Recall - Joshua Kronengold
- *RYCTM Re: Joining an APA* - I guess I'm in the right place then!
- *Re: Worldcon* - Going to a convention regularly does eventually become an exercise in nostalgia and memoriam. There's a number of friends I've lost from the local community and my original group from my Sioux City days is now scattered to the four winds in some respect.
- *In regard to reading,* I'm revisiting Redwall to fulfill my need for coziness in my current infirmity. Much as I'd like to finish The Spare Man, I'm not sure I will. The current regime and its wanton disregard for law, common sense, and morality in light of their obscene wealth has pretty much soured my palate for even The Thin Man and homages to the series. I can only hope my vote will count for something in the upcoming midterms.

All Others – RAEBNC.

To close out this issue, I'll leave you with a link to my inspirational playlist for writing my Port Omaha material.

An Unlooked For Zine #16

Copyright Lisa Padol 2026
Lisa Padol, 39-20 52nd Street, Apt. GD, Woodside, NY 11377, 718-937-8919. I am currently seeking employment.
email: drcpunk@labcats.org or drcpunk@gmail.com
All contents © Lisa Padol 2025 and licensed under the AIO-BY-NC-SA license
(https://www.humanscommons.org/license/ai0-by-nc-sa/1.0) which explicitly denies the use of the above content in the training or source material of any AI system

NATTER

Recent Reading: Kieron Gillen's *The Power Fantasy* (very good). I'm currently up to Chapter 5 of *Blades in the Dark* which is alternately brilliant and frustrating.

Recent Watching

The Ninth Hour: The Beowulf Story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhsynTXouIg This is very much me-bait. It's under an hour and is a "rock-noir reimagining of the epic poem Beowulf".

We've started watching the anime *Black Clover*. So far, we are invested.

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #16

PATRICK BRADY: Thanks, this is indeed easier on my eyes. re no dice games: Sure thing! Thanks for the hideout examples. I agree that there are a lot of "unfortunate, but not Dickery" cases. There's a greyish area where the result feels like Dickery, regardless of intent, but people make mistakes, us included, and that does land a bit differently.

re The Bully: While I am sympathetic to the GM's plight, pushed into running a game they didn't want to run, their behavior crossed the line into Dickery. It reminds me of something a fellow gamer described.

They had signed up for two games with the same GM, and said that they (i.e., the player) had been scene hogging in the first. The player intended to do better.

They weren't allowed the chance. Instead, in the second game the GM deliberately (i.e., told the player afterwards that it was deliberate) ignored the player. I don't recall whether the player had (or attempted to) talk to the GM before that game to apologize, but that doesn't matter. The GM didn't even attempt to talk to the player about their behavior.

Perhaps the intent wasn't to be Dickish, but that doesn't matter. IIRC, the stated intent wasn't to protect the other players, but to punish the scene hogging player. As the player noted, the result was the opposite of what the GM had intended. Rather than dialing their behavior back, the player pushed more over the course of the session, trying to get a word in edgewise. I very much doubt the GM believed they themself had been behaving Dickishly. But they were. re the Clique: That absolutely should have been an invitation only game, and I am boggled that it wasn't.

MARK WILSON: re group structures, communication, and doing activities: A friend told us about a cruise he went on with his father, where most passengers were of his father's generation, and no one was young. Most were of the same demographic. At every stop, it had to be explained yet again to the passengers that it was very important that they take the same vehicle (van? bus?) to and from the shore activities because the staff had to make absolutely sure they got everyone back on board and didn't leave anyone behind.

I used to be very good about having maps, directions, and time tables. I've gotten a bit less good about that as technology changed, but also have tried to rectify that, particularly after an incident of "I thought **you** reserved the hotel room!" I now have a spreadsheet for events. It has columns for whether we both have memberships, whether we reserved a hotel room (and the details for that), whether we have transportation arranged (and what it is), whether I remembered to put it on Google Calendar, and whether everyone involved has settled up for hotel and transportation expenses. I also try to put e-tickets, train and bus schedules, hotel reservation confirmations, maps, etc. onto my tablet, and perhaps schedules as well, especially if we're on panels or running games. For larping conventions, I try to have electronic and physical copies of all character and background sheets.

The last time I did Gen Con, I had done an online walk-through of the dealers' area and looked up when and where there would be nigh-impassible crowds, having had to retrace my steps in the previous year to get to a game. I'd also continued doing what research I could to figure out where in the dealers' room I'd most want to spend money and time. I'm not sure how things work these days; currently, I can't even find info on when to email that I'd like to be in the VIG lottery.

re GM Dickery: One has to be careful negating the "typical advantages" the players chose, as part of the point of their choices is that they want to enjoy those advantages. As *Urban Shadows* says: "The worst way

to try to keep the characters' lives out of control is to mindlessly take away their stuff or break what makes them interesting."

There's a lot of nuance here, obviously, and you'll have noted that "mindlessly" is the key word. The book looks a Tainted character, who has a powerful demonic form, "fighting for custody of her kid", focusing on two things not to do:

***
"don't kill the kid or resolve the custody battle without exploring the issue. Those moves make her life less interesting; her responsibilities become easier to balance because she no longer has to contend with the mortal world. Same goes for her demonic form: take that away and she's just another goon in a city filled with replaceable muscle.

"These moves aren't totally illegitimate—imagine how awesome it would be for the Tainted to get her demon form back after an absence—but avoid sloppily punishing the character for existing. The player needs to be directly invested in every story, in choices and consequences, perhaps giving up her demonic powers in exchange for something valuable (instead of just losing them at random) or having them stripped by their dark patron after they murder a close ally."
***

The focus is on making things more interesting and on being a fan of the players and their characters. And from that point of view, if you've got a long-running game, and it's a challenge that comes up sufficiently rarely, then yes, occasionally negating typical advantages works well, especially in cases where it's clear in advance that this will be happening.

Fr'ex, the group is invited to a high-stakes diplomatic conference where all attendees leave weapons at the door and the entire space is under a dome of anti-magic, anti-divine intervention, et cetera. If you're not playing "gotcha!" (e.g., it's a way to trap the PCs when another group is somehow immune from all of that) and you've built up enough trust, then this is fine. The players know they have to rely on diplomatic skills and creativity. Heck, the "it's a trap" variant could work as well, if very carefully handled.

The trap a GM acting in good faith is likely to fall into is thinking that something they want to see is something the players want to see when that's not the case. Fr'ex, the GM who ran a Groundhog's Day *Monsterhearts* game at Maelstrom was genuinely a fan of the players and PCs and **loved** our antics. And it was far, far from the worst experience I've had; there were fun parts, and looking at it in retrospect is fascinating.

But at least two of us were very frustrated. This wasn't because of the concept, but because of how the GM handled it. Fr'ex, I played the werewolf and took a Move that relied on the moon being full. The same day and night were repeating over and over. I asked if the moon was full. "Nope!" said the GM, gleefully. Since I'd never used the Move, I asked if I could change it to something I could actually use. "Nope!"

I consider that GM Dickery, but also a mistake from misreading the table. I'd probably want to talk with the GM before playing in one of their games, but I'm not ruling that out. I think the GM believed that we all enjoyed what was happening. I wrote the game up in detail in This Isn't the Zine You're Looking For #295 in *Alarums & Excursions* #486.

On the other hand, Josh and I were in a *Masks* game at Gen Con 2019, and almost the first thing that happened was that the PCs, teenaged superheroes, were dressed down by an adult superhero in the wake of the death of one of their group. This mattered because it caused mechanical damage, which included making it much harder for my character to use their Moves. But it does **not** fall under GM Dickery.

We knew that the premise was "One of your team has just died." This didn't come out of nowhere, like the Groundhog's Day plot. Also, there are ways to deal with the mechanical damage my character took. It was a severe setback, sure, but this wasn't "Guess what? The stuff you deliberate built into your character, hoping to use? You don't get to use it! Ever! Because when you solve the problem, the game ends!" It was "Your teammate is dead and you just took a severe blow to your morale. What are you going to do about it?"

re me re Franklin's Essentiale Saltes: Email sent, thanks! re two-player games: You two might like some of Storybrewers' Littlebox games (https://storybrewersroleplaying.com/littlebox-rpgs/?v=0b3b97fa6688) although I don't know how readily available they are here. GUMSHOE has some One2One books (GM + 1 player). I found *Solo Ops* has a very complex by my standards, and I gather it maybe could've used one more editorial pass. But when I playtested the first scenario with Aviatrix, she understood the genre, and it went fairly well. *Cthulhu Confidential* was easier for me to run, and I ran two of the Dexter scenarios. Josh and I traded off when we playtested *Paragon Blade*, him running me through the Conanesque scenario (which had a surprising emotional scene at one point) and me running him through the lady detective scenario. We also playtested one of the *Page Turner* scenarios, which is One2One for *Hillfolk/DramaSystem*. It contains set ups for various genres, so you could probably find something to your liking there. You'll want short sessions for all of these.

If you want to focus on Cozy and can get more than 2 players, there's Golden Sky Stories, the Ghibli-esque *Our Traveling Home, Stewpot,* and of course, *Yazeba's Bed and Breakfast*, among many others.

PATRICK ZOCH: Nice visual retrospective! re deadlines: Yes. These and other limits help us get things done. re "A&E was printed in black ink on colored paper as a physical copy." Mostly correct. Some people mailed in however many copies the copy count was, and might have color in their zines. But Lee's printer did black ink.

re Brian Rogers: I would hope that the two runs of Ghosts of Saltmarsh went quite differently! If something always runs the same way, one starts to wonder if the players have sufficient agency.

re interrogation: Josh's friend who is a trained interrogator is, unsurprisingly, the same as mine. When talking briefly about training others, they noted that the point where the trainees got their first "scenario", i.e., one of the instructors pretending to be someone a trainee was to interrogate, was "Where the students stop having fun, and the instructors start having fun."

What the students learn is that their training does not prepare them for the real thing. Note that they are limited to asking questions, not to anything remotely resembling torture. And the instructors don't go easy on the students. For the example our friend very vaguely sketched out, there was one line of questioning that would work, so it was a hard assignment.

Obviously, one can't expect most gamers to have such training. And, as you said, you don't want too much frustration or repetition. This can be tricky, as, regardless of the game, there are likely to be several times when the PCs want to get information from someone who is not inclined to give it.

I've said before that if one doesn't want torture, start by not having a skill for it. Continue by talking about things one does not want at the table, line and veils, and so on. But before that, one should--and by "one", I mean scenario authors as well as GMs, given that GMs using commercially published material often find that the authors have dropped the ball, leaving them to clean up the mess--take a step back even before looking at what techniques will and won't work.

How many times must the PCs get information from someone who won't just give it to them? Is each of these necessary? Perhaps. Or maybe you have a game like *Dogs in the Vineyard*, where the GM is instructed to have the NPCs proactively tell the PCs what's going on, a game that isn't about having to uncover secrets, but about what to do about the situation in town.

Don't start with asking "Is it in character for the NPC to share this information?" Start with "What kind of game (or session or scenario) is this?" Is it the kind of game where you want players to spend a lot of time getting NPCs to tell them things? Do you want to not have to deal with that? Do you want it to happen occasionally, but not often? You can find reasons for NPCs to talk or clam up; set your goals first, recognizing that they're not absolute and may change often during the game.

Presuming that, at least some of the time, you want the PCs to work to get information, you then look at system stuff. As you say, GUMSHOE has different tools than *D&D*. It focuses on getting Core Clues to players, but not on telling the players what to do with them.

I don't recommend getting overly complicated there. The system is set up to keep things moving. Let it. Similarly, if you have a game with a system that can be used to model questioning someone, do not feel you must vary it. It's a mechanic. As with combat, you don't want it to get boring, but that doesn't mean you need new rules for each combat.

For *Clockwork: Dominion* or *Fate*, I'd either use the basic rules for skill vs skill, or I'd call use the rules for social combat in *Clockwork: Dominion* or for Contests in *Fate*. I wouldn't think, "Oh dear, I've used the same rules each time!" That's the point of the rules.

"But I don't want them to always try bribery/intimidation/invoking their relationship with the Duke!" To a point, that's true. One of the most amusing scenes in *The Count of Monte Cristo* is where the Count forces money into the hands of a hapless telegraph operator who just wants to do his job and not get fired. It's delightful that the Count's plans are almost ruined by the man's honesty. Try intimidating someone who knows you can't carry out your threats, and yes, the GM shouldn't let that work.

But at the same time, I ask: Would you tell a Fighter, "Hey, could you stop using your sword all the time in combat? That's getting old!" In most games, I'd stare at you in confusion if you said that.

Maybe it's a game like *REIGN*, where the PCs do need information, but they have a Company, and as the players don't want to play out interrogation scenes, the Company includes skilled interrogators, networks of spies, and so on. In this case, definitely do **not** try to keep the players from using the tool the system explicitly gave them to create the game they want. You're going to be handling information gathering at an abstract level, but that's fine.

re Lee putting *A&E* together: I'm not sure she ever went to a copy center. Originally, she had a mimeograph machine, and later, a printer. I think she

and Barry did it all in their home. They did the collating and stapling, and the mailing. I don't know what the final copy count was, apart from being high enough that she turned down my offer to switch to getting just the digital zine if that would make her life easier.

Note that just because I can zoom in and out of the apa doesn't mean I like doing it. re ballroom dance practice: Maybe set up a computer to play the appropriate music and do at least 5 mins/day of practice? re me re the group forgetting about the concerns of the fishermen: I'd remind them, asking if they plan to do anything about them. If they still don't act, give a bit of a warning by either having one of the fishermen contact them to ask about addressing their concerns or to warn them that there's unrest that will boil over if those concerns are not addressed.

You can also, openly or secretly (I lean towards openly), start a countdown clock. I'm still very much a novice with this technique. You draw a circle with, I'd say, either 4 or 6 "pie wedges", and when you've filled all the wedges, the fishermen take action of some kind.

You decide when a wedge gets filled. A game like *Blades in the Dark* has mechanics for this, but there's also a fair amount of GM judgment involved. It could simply be a function of time, filling in one wedge for every game week or month that passes with no redress. If something happens that would make the situation worse, fill in a wedge.

If the PCs or other factors improve things for the fishermen, you have a few options:

- Unfill a wedge. If you do that, maybe do a six or eight segment clock, and start with half the wedges filled. At 0, the fishermen are calm for the foreseeable future. At full, they take matters into their own hands.
- Dueling clocks! Start a clock to track how well the concerns of the fishermen are met. If it fills before the other clock, all is well.
- Other clocks that could represent other parties taking action against the fishermen, the dwarves, or both.
- Multi-level clocks. Fr'ex, if the first clock gets filled, the fishermen are Unhappy, grumble, and do small or subtle things to express their dissatisfaction--and, another clock begins ticking. When that one is filled, they present their demands or take more drastic action.

As a player, when I know there is a clock ticking and that it mechanically advances, I'm less likely to lose track of the plot thread it's attached to. Enjoy Florida!

PATRICK RILEY: re GM Dickery: That would land the GM on my no-fly list as well. I'd want to see the scenario, but dang it, I've run scenarios where I need to take something like that into account and set up similar situations, so am disinclined to be sympathetic to the GM here.

Fr'ex, when I ran a *Call of Cthulhu* scenario with Trail of Cthulhu, I gave a **lot** of thought to the way an NPC's absolutely perfect ability to seem to be a sincere person telling the truth would collide with Trail's rules and how I should handle that. (While the scenario ran well, I think there are too many scenarios that rely on "this NPC is so powerful that not only will the PCs not being to tell they're lying, no matter what, but the GM is supposed to say, "Yup, they're being sincere and believe every word they're saying."")

I gave a lot of thought to what would happen if the character in the 1940s leg of my Dracula Dossier campaign who had an MOS in Shooting (MOS = Mission Operational Specialty = the thing you can decide once per story to autosucceed on) used it against an NPC who couldn't be killed that way. And sure enough, the PC set up and took the shot.

Me: Okay. It's the perfect shot. You **know** it's the perfect shot. It hits right where you aim; his head explodes. And then...it implodes, healing before your eyes.

I don't recall whether I counted that as a use of MOS. I'd have been within my right to, I think, as it netted crucial information, but also, I tend to lean towards not counting it as a use if I nerf it. It was near the end of the final session of that mini-campaign, so I don't think it got used a second time in any case.

RAE On Chaos. re Roger Bell_West: Yes, I think the same system can be used "in two distinct campaigns and feel completely different", but I may be defining "same system" differently than you are. Examples that come to mind:

- GUMSHOE. **If** you consider *Trail of Cthulhu, Bubblegumshoe, Fear Itself, Esoterrorists, Time Watch, Night's Black Agents,* and *Swords of the Serpentine* to be the same system (I'm not going to look at Quick Shock or One2One here), it qualifies. *Swords of the Serpentine* does not feel like any of the others. *Trail of Cthulhu* is a game I feel confident about running, whereas *Night's Black Agents* is not. *Bubblegumshoe* is deliberately designed to focus far, far less on physical violence and more on social dynamics. I'll happily play in any of those or *Time Watch*. I'm more twitchy about *Esoterrorists* and kind of sigh when the folks at Pelgrane say they don't understand why *Fear Itself* doesn't get "more love" because I do.

- BRPS. *Call of Cthulhu, RuneQuest, Rivers of London*, and arguably *Pendragon* all use some flavor of BRPS and all feel quite different.
- *Call of Cthulhu*. Pulp and Purist mindsets are different, sure, but I'm thinking of Gaylord's Harlem Unbound campaign, which, as intended, felt very different, even though it's the same genre and the same system. The same is true of the Cthulhu Invictus setting. This may or may not be hairsplitting, and certainly reflects my tastes.

re me re the awful roleplaying I illustrated: Yes, absolutely. Remember, I was replying to the same basic skeleton Matt supplied in *E&A* 14, showing how a GM could try to improve things, instead of giving back crap for crap. Thanks for the clarification re Aurora Cover. 4 hours into the 6 hour slot sounds about right.

re Brian Rogers re players who enjoy subverting genre conventions: This is an interesting source of tension. I've read more than one scenario where the author's trying to make the action flow like a genre movie, including stuff like "now, everyone gets captured" and "now, the bad guys get all the mcguffins and plot coupons they need to carry out their evil plan so that the PCs can try to stop things in a Dramatic Climax". Sometimes, it's well enough done that I nod and say, "That works." (This is particularly true if the NPCs act offstage and/or before the scenario begins.)

But I'm more likely to think either "That won't work because the players will act to subvert that trope" and have about five different ways they can do that in mind or "So you've decided how the scenario will go. Why are we even playing this? Write your novel!"

There's (at least) one middle road which I saw in the *Angel* RPG Todd Furler ran at one Gen Con, using Eden's Unisystem.

Player: So, my character is watching carefully, because I know this is where the bad guy slips away, and I want to stop that.

Todd: Everyone take a Drama Point, because that is exactly what happens.

In other words, yes, the player knows the tropes and plans to subvert them. No, the game does not allow this, and, as we all, including that player, acknowledged, we knew that going in. The Drama Points are both a bribe/reward for going along with this and a pacing mechanic to enable the trope "the heroes start off in a bad position, but somehow triumph".

Fate does this with Fate points, and other games in other ways. It's all the same principle, though there are broad differences in application. Give up a certain amount of agency now for added effectiveness later. However one does it, it's important that everyone be on the same page. Maybe this means a full session zero where folks talk about expectations. Maybe it means the ten minute introduction to a convention game where the GM talks about how this particular session of this particular game works.

JOHN REDDEN: re Patrick Riley: I'm glad you've found new gamers. re me re Japanese courts: The anime where the police gave about the impending arrest was *Ameku M.D.: Doctor Detective*.

re module, scenario, campaign, and toolkit: I think I use "module" and "scenario" somewhat interchangeably, and perhaps shouldn't. A campaign is longer; it may be composed of a long scenario or several shorter ones that lead into each other or that are discrete. A toolkit is a much looser term, at least the way I've been using it. In the case of Dracula Dossier, there is no published campaign. *The Director's Handbook* has ideas, tactics, variations, and tools for constructing a campaign, so I dubbed it a toolkit. I think Pelgrane may call it a sandbox? If so, they're using the term a bit differently than I am, as I think of a sandbox as something that's fully constructed, as opposed to a package for constructing a campaign. re mean joke: Aptly labeled.

ATTRONARCH: That freeze spell sure is effective. What are the odds of the party's enemies using it?

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND MAIRA ZUCOLOTTO: Wow, I can see the two goals (to inform and to entertain) struggling with each other in your description of *A mandala do dragão do trovão*. There are ways to do both, either by covering less ground or by covering it more slowly, with more game stuff between information bits. But it's not easy to pull off. Blue Fox gamebooks: When this issue of *E&A* comes out, I think this offer will still be live: https://bundleofholding.com/presents/BlueFox.

MYLES CORCORAN: Good luck with the hips! I'm glad the cardio news was good. re *Horror on the Orient Express*: Ooh! If you're up for it, let us know what happens and how it goes. I've read the whole thing, and noted that a) I'd need to do a **lot** of work to run it, between what I consider the campaign's weaknesses and my shaky grasp of history and b) several scenarios are optional, so exactly how long it runs can vary a great deal. One scenario could be done as a standalone, and I'm tempted to tweak it to make it a larp. If the GM is wise and plans to cut the campaign down as much as possible, this is a scenario he'll cut.

re Kreigmesser write up: Did the "escaping" prisoner twist his ankle due to a bad role or other mechanic, or was that GM fiat? re Lazaro fishing for the Carpentry

tick: So, tick-tarting? re Patrick Brady re *Spider Noir*: On the one hand, **sigh**. On the other, it ended in a reasonable place, and part of me isn't sure that a second season wouldn't have been a worse one.

re Bryant Durrell re you wanting "two films made with the same sets and same actors but telling interlocked but distinct stories in the same space": Like watching *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* back to back? re Roger Bell_West re *Mythic Bastionland*: I agree that's a fine way to ease players into the mechanics.

re Joshua Kronengold: We had fun at WorldCon, thanks! We also hope it'll be in Dublin in 2029. re me re GMing for players with different mechanics in the Strange School game and where the pain points were: Honestly? My learning curve for when not to use them. Fr'ex, it was much better after it clicked for me that if I wanted a PC to overhear something, and the player was happy for that to happen, there was no need to use the mechanics. re Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu 7e Starter Set: Oh yes, it has a lot of juicy material.

BRIAN ROGERS: I'm glad the vacation went well. Good luck with a satisfying wrap before Alire's player is off to college! re Heroes for Hire: 10 years ago? Wow. Time flies! re our Earth: It's supposed to be 616? Or is that the Earth of the comics? Either way, it's obviously not the default world of your campaign, so I see no reason you should use that number. I'm confused about this "helping" Sabertooth "escape" and 5 blocks business. What was actually going on those times?

re Invisible Scarlet O'Neil: I like the concept except I take **boggle** damage at the idea that she'd just touch a weird experimental ray. Like, who does that? Couldn't they have her trip or something? (I am aware I'm overthinking.) re the comic with the suicide note and the unfired gun: So, the victim really was a suicide? I'm confused. I agree she and Babs should share a drink.

re Patrick Brady: Interesting point about dividing rpg production and gming. Years ago, Jon Nephew said he wanted rpgers to get used to and willing to pay more for rpgs. I suppose he got his wish to some extent? I remember thinking about him saying how much people would pay for a movie, as opposed to an rpg book that they get to keep and reread/reuse, and concluding that, nope, at least in my case, I did consider pricy movies as much of an issue as pricy books, and that this was why I didn't see many movies in theaters.

I also remember his being annoyed that James Wallis charged, I think, $42.95 for 2nd edition Nobilis, as he believed that this was leaving money on the table and that Wallis could and should have charged $44.95 (or, as one should think of it, basically 45 dollars). In this, Nephew was very much thinking like an industry professional. (This isn't to say Wallis wasn't; I have disagreed with some of Nephew's conclusions, and while, in this case, I think he was correct, I have no idea how Wallis decided on the price point.)

One of our friends very much is a professional when it comes to selling at conventions. It's his business. He noted that another vendor, also a friend of ours, was not a professional. He hastened to assure us that he meant no offense in stating this. It was simply that this vendor was there to enjoy the convention first, doing sales as a way to pay their way to the convention, and closing their booth to catch authors and panels in which they were interested.

In contrast, he and his people come to conventions specifically to sell things at their booth. This wasn't a "so we can go to the convention"; it wasn't "I have to work X number of hours before I get to enjoy my convention." It was why they were at the convention. Moreover, some of the folks in the booth very much enjoyed their job and/or found interacting with fellow humans much easier when it was in the context of being there to sell things and answer questions about what they were selling, aka "Ah! I understand my Purpose in this interaction! Okay, I'm good!"

When I'm an editor or proofreader for pay, I am very much a professional. When I buy games, I suppose I'm a hobbyist, at least to some extent? When I run games, I am almost always doing so as part of the folk tradition. Almost: If I'm running something at a convention, there's usually some compensation, usually a free or partially-covered badge, although sometimes, free snacks are included.

This feels different than when I run larps at larping conventions, even though both involve paying it forward and making sure there are games to my taste there. I think that's partly because there are enough people wanting to play larps that there is always a demand for more larps and more people running them, and partly because "professional" larps can be really big budget items. I'm using the quotations because, even in larps I've paid to play in, that's been very much a matter of splitting up the cost of renting space and perhaps covering food, rather than hiring authors/gms. I've never played in a professional larp, afaik.

re Roger Bell_West re rangers in Tolkien: IIRC, they were all of Numenorean descent, and from the kingdom of Arnor, as opposed to Gondor. They wound up more or less in exile at some point. (I could probably spend a couple of hours looking this all up, but I'd like to get other things done as well.)

re me: Top Secret sounds correct. **Boggle** that the administrator doesn't get what you do given they're a Critical Role fan. Do they think rpgs are a spectator

sport, with an audience? re *Invisibles* omnibus: My pleasure. Vaguely tempted to source another for myself, but unconvinced I need it.

re your interpretation for language-based mind control: It's a question of perception. It's easy for me to get lost in the weeds, and I don't know *Champions* or *V&V* or FACERIP well. Relatedly, when talking about my Dracula Dossier campaign with Bryant, I noted that the Brontë siblings, turned vampire by Carmilla and after her true death, folded into Dracula's organization, had been technically betraying him (by doing things he explicitly forbade), and wondered how to decide where things stood with them in the current attempt at a finale. Bryant said that this is something a countdown clock is good for, suggesting I make one with, say, 6 segments, filling in a segment when it seems appropriate. When the clock is full, Dracula Gets Sick of Brontë Bullshit. It's elegant, seems obvious in retrospect, and isn't something I'd have thought of.

re my Magical Girl Mask/Good Society write up: I hope you enjoyed it. re Joshua Kronengold re *Fate*: Pretending that's a more serious question than I think you intended, I ran a 2-year campaign of Kerberos Club using the Fate edition. I played a game of *Dresden Files* before the book actually came out (which meant we were occasionally playing incorrectly, but mostly correctly). This doesn't count convention one-shots, and these were all before *Fate Core* came out.

Since then, I playtested *Dresden Files Accelerated, Young Centurions*, and *Fate of Cthulhu*. I'm trying to write my own *Fate of Cthulhu* timeline. I've played in 2 online *Fate of Cthulhu* campaigns. Again, this is not counting convention one shots. But then, we all know I don't like crunch, and before *Fate*, I ran a Whole Lot of *Over the Edge* 1st/2nd edition, so probably I just don't play real systems. (The *D&D* game I'm in doesn't count because I push a button in D&D Beyond and have probably managed to avoid actually learning the system.) I certainly don't run them!

I'd play more *Fate* in a heartbeat. The question, of course, is whether I intend to run more *Fate*. Yes, if and when I get the timeline for *Fate of Cthulhu* written, and possibly before that if someone wants a game of *Fate of Cthulhu*. Possibly otherwise, but if I look at what I'm running now, it's GUMSHOE, Powered by the Apocalypse, and Penned to Good Society. Beyond those, I'm playing *D&D* (but see my caveat above) and Forged in the Dark (*Scum & Villainy* and jokingly feel about Blades like you do about Fate). I'm ignoring one-shots and stuff I played last year, as well as larps.

Things come in waves, and while *Fate* won't disappear, the original wave for it has probably crested. Whether there will be a new wave remains to be seen. I know our vendor friend thought Evil Hat dropped the ball after *Dresden Files* came out by failing to produce a large quantity of support material.

re how Jean Gray died in the comics: (checks Wikipedia) Ah, my recollection was also wrong, it seems. re reviews: I read some of Hawke's books back when I was doing my dissertation on modern Arthurian, and wasn't impressed, except for one bit I found useful to discuss. For Reasons, in the then-present day, Mordred and Merlin were discussing how to approach a yakuza boss, and Merlin protested that, no, such a man was **not** an honorable knight like the ones from Camelot. Mordred said that the point was that the man thought of himself exactly in that way, and therefore, that's how he had to be approached, given they needed his help.

A couple of VERY non-exhaustive lists (I read a LOT more, even among the authors listed. The 1980s was a weird wonderful decade for sff, even granting Sturgeon's Law):

Novels I actually read at the time include:

- Isaac Asimov: *Foundation's Edge*. First, I read the original Foundation Trilogy and concluded that, aside from some dated attitudes about women, the trilogy hadn't aged *that* badly. Then I read *Foundation's Edge*, and while Asimov did better women characters, the book was as dated as the original trilogy, without the excuse of having been published at that time.
- *Borderland* and *Bordertown*, very influential on so many fantasy authors, and I enjoyed them.
- Steven Brust's *Jhereg* novels. Been reading them as they come out. *To Reign in Hell*, not impressed
- Orson Scott Card: *Seventh Son.* Skipped the rest. *Songmaster.* Enjoyed but had issues with it and would likely have more today if I reread it.
- Jack Chalker: The first 5 Well of Souls books. Enjoyed, but I'd have issues with them now.
- Joy Chant: *Grey Mane of Morning* and *When Voiha Wakes*. I should probably reread at least the latter, possibly the former as well.
- C. J. Cherryh: *Angel With the Sword, Downbelow Station*. Unsure whether I read *The Dreamstone* and *The Tree of Swords and Jewels* in or after the 1980s.
- John Crowley: *Little, Big*, and his earlier books
- Peter David: Knight Life (1st ed; before revisions)
- Charles de Lint: *Moonheart* (and probably other de Lint books)
- Stephan Donaldson's first six Thomas Covenant books (didn't care for them, I think only partially because of the bizarre order in which I read them)
- Suzette Haden Elgin: *Native Tongue*, distasteful enough I skimmed rather than read it, and I'm told the later novels in this sequence are worse
- C. S. Friedman: *In Conquest Born* (unsure I recommend it, unsure I'll ever reread it, don't

necessarily agree with the puff on the back about why it's good, but do remember bits of it)
- Linda Haldeman: *Esbae: A Winter's Tale* as well as her earlier books. Good for what they are.
- Barbara Hambly: Time of the Dark trilogy
- Robert A. Heinlein: *Number of the Beast*, tedious in parts. *Friday,* enjoyed, think I'd be mixed read today, though I'd be thinking of a friend's comment that it's about an extraordinary person who's been made to feel ashamed of that.
- Russell Hoban: *Ridley Walker*, assigned in class
- James Hogan: *Code of the Lifemaker*: Entertaining, but I liked the stage magic mindreading bit more than the sf novel of which it was a small part.
- Barry Hughart: *Bridge of Birds*, loved it. Catherynne Valente read it years later and did not love it, but noted that if she'd been warned about the content ahead of time, she'd have enjoyed it better. I suspect that, like myself, whoever recommended it did not see the water in which we swam in the 1980s.
- Diana Wynne Jones: *Magicians of Caprona*, delightful
- Janet Kagan: *Uhura's Song*, Enjoyed regardless of how much or little it's Star Trek-y. Also her *Hellspark*, which I loved and should reread.
- Guy Gavriel Kay: Fionavar Tapestry trilogy
- Phyllis Ann Karr: *Idylls of the Queen*, loved
- Donald Kingsbury: *Courtship Rite*, which I enjoyed while reading, but don't think I recommend
- Katherine Kurtz's Deryni books
- Ellen Kushner: *Swordspoint*, reread at least twice.
- Ursula K. Le Guin: *Always Coming Home*
- George R. R. Martin: *Fevre Dream, The Armageddon Rag*. I loved both, but haven't reread either.
- R. A. MacAvoy: *Tea With the Black Dragon*
- Vonda McIntyre: *Superluminal*: I loved this one and probably should reread it
- Patricia McKillip: *Fool's Run*, which IMO improved on the reread
- Larry Niven and Steve Barnes: *Dream Park*, which I wonder if I should reread
- Nick Pollatta and Phil Foglio: *Illegal Aliens*
- Tim Powers: *The Anubis Gates*. Should possibly reread it. Not perfect, but very entertaining.
- Robert Silverberg: *Lord Valentine's Castle.* This one made me and my peers try to learn how to juggle
- Joan Vinge: *The Snow Queen* and *World's End*. I later read *The Summer Queen*, Didn't like as much, but should read the fourth in the series.
- Gary K. Wolf: *Who Censored Roger Rabbit*, which I didn't care for.
- Gene Wolfe: *Book of the New Sun* quartet plus coda and commentary books, should reread
- Roger Zelazny: *Eye of Cat*, mostly enjoyed and should maybe reread; 2nd Amber series, not sure if I should reread. Might enjoy it more now that I'm not waiting a year or more between books.

Novels from the 1980s I read later, I think:
- Gillian Bradshaw: Gwalchmai trilogy, loved it
- Lois McMaster Bujold: Vorkosigan books, enjoyed
- Emma Bull: *War for the Oaks*, an important work in the field. I've not reread it
- John M. Ford: *Web of Angels, The Dragon Waiting,* which I should reread, along with other Ford books
- William Gibson: *Neuromancer, Count Zero*
- Parke Godwin: *Firelord*, which I enjoyed more on the reread, likely because it wasn't sandwiched between A Whole Bunch of Other King Arthur Retellings (given my dissertation topic)
- Diana Wynne Jones: *Fire and Hemlock, Howl's Moving Castle*
- Welwyn Wilton Katz: *The Third Magic*. Weird in ways that intrigued and annoyed me
- Tanith Lee: Tales From the Flat Earth books, which I loved. I think I read *The Silver Metal Lover* after the 1980s as well. I also read *Don't Bite the Sun* and *Drinking Sapphire Wine*, which were from the 1970s, and *Kill the Dead*, which was from 1980.
- Patricia McKillip: *Moon Flash* and *The Moon and the Face*. These, confusingly, got republished as an omnibus called *Moon Flash*
- Tim Powers: *Drawing of the Dark, On Stranger Tides*
- Geoff Ryman: *The Warrior Who Carried Life*

BRIAN MISIAZEK: re Habana Horror: You're doing several different things here, and at some point, we should talk about how you want to organize or separate these.
- The scenario. PCs, NPCs, location, timeline of fixed and mutable points, descriptions of same, and so on.
- Various appendices (or whatever one calls them based on wherever they go). Historical background of Cuba, the government, the historical factions, the physical locations, the Mazorra's history, mental health treatment and institutions in general and in Cuba in this time period, Vodou and Ocha, and so on.
- What I'm going to call a playthrough, although I'm not entirely certain I'm using the term correctly. I've been told that some gaming material published in some countries (I think China and/or Japan? Maybe others as well?) includes actual complete playthroughs, which isn't precisely what you're doing. But it's not precisely a novel (or novella or whatever) or a screenplay either.

Naturally, all three intertwine as currently written and have subcategories. And of course, it'll be easier to figure out how to edit material when it's all there. My questions for this stage are:
- How much more material is there?
- How much in danger are you of getting lost in the warren of fascinating rabbit holes while you're finishing this up?

I'm torn between the obvious instinct of "cut this to the bone", as too much information can get unwieldy and overwhelm people, and the reader/GM/player appreciation for detail and desire for All the Things. (*) My current instinct is to say: Finish it all, back it up, maybe put it someone online (not necessarily accessible to anyone else; this is just an extra backup) as you publish it in chunks (if you're not already at or near the end), but don't add extra areas at this point. You can go back and expand later as necessary (or desired).

(*) In theory, the fact that the action takes place over a limited amount of time should mean one needs less material. In practice, there's some truth to this, but on the other tentacle, I've played 1 hour larps with 30 pages of reading, and it was so worth it.

I like the packet and zipper analogy, though I recommend adding advice/a reminder about not making any player or sub-group of players cool their heels too long simply because they're not part of a particular packet or zipper track. I like the material with Othello and Mons. Aurelio, although I am not entirely sure how Othello got to this point, both physically and mentally/emotionally. I don't need you to explain here, as this falls under "it was a few issues ago and I need to read the whole thing once it's done". That said, this is the sort of thing you want to consider when you revise the material, as there are a lot of threads to follow, a lot of balls in the air, and a lot of packets waiting to join a zipper.

re pulp "Voodoo" and the more complicated reality: Exactly. Have you seen the Tourneur/Lewton film *I Walked With a Zombie*? It's a very odd mixture of a reimagined Jane Eyre, Vodou, and pulp Voodoo.

re politics: You already know what I think of the current Republican administration. Canada joining the EU makes sense to me. re gaming and travel: I'm glad you've been enjoying both. re meeting your daughter at Supercrawl: Heh. This reminds me of the time Josh and I came into a restaurant at WorldCon to find Lee saying to Barry something along the lines of "Well, we won't be able to just happen to meet Josh and Lisa on the way to the hotel *_this_* time."

re me: We did have a good time at WorldCon, thanks! Some of the panels we were on were recorded, but I'm not sure anyone who didn't have a membership can access the recordings, and I think we're only able to through year's end. We might have a photo or two, but I want to put a different one in this zine.

re Patrick Riley re putting up the Mazorra material as part of Miskatonic Repository to get enough money to buy non-AI art: A bit of a catch-22, unless you're going to go artless or with clip art and public domain art only (which is what I'd recommend given extreme reactions to any whiff of AI art). (*)

(*) RANT ON: I hate that corporate entities can pull shit with AI (messing with people's livelihood and paying or evading fines) while individuals who should be able to use AI as a tool to make their own art get raked over the coals if they do. I recognize that this is, nevertheless, the case. RANT OFF before getting into any of the other issues there.

GABRIEL ROARK: I'm glad you're healing! re me re coming back to find skating in reverse made more sense: Maybe your subconscious was working it out.

DYLAN CAPEL: re *Songbirds*: I need to read my copy. re *Monsterhearts* 1st vs 2nd vs *Eldritch High*: What do you want from a system in this genre?

re *Forgotten Realms: Adventures in Faerun* being bland in a way you found inspiring: I found something similar with the *Trail of Cthulhu* campaign *Eternal Lies*. Some people found the NPC adversaries to be barely sketched out. To the degree that's true (as I don't entirely agree that's the case), I found it to be a feature because that made customizing the campaign to my groups easier. I've also run scenarios where I swapped out NPCs for ones I'd used before and sometimes where I swapped out NPCs for PCs.

re *The World Below*: Not my cup of tea, I think, but that premise does remind me a little of *Feng Shui*'s Netherworld. re superheroes: Good point that the urban setting means there are problems one can't just use superpowers to fix. This was definitely true in *Gotham*, as well as in *Spider Noir* and to some degree in *My Hero Academia*, which was more optimistic, but where things got fixed (or at least improved), it mostly wasn't by throwing superpower at them. re me: I find I think well with pen and paper.

ROGER BELL_WEST: re GURPS WWII game: Are there mechanics for doing a PR campaign about how useful magicians are to the war effort and their local communities? I remember bumping into the limits of *Phoenix Dawn Command* as a couple of the players tried to do big picture political stuff, but *GURPS* is more flexible there. re *Day After Ragnarok*: *_Giggle_* at telling the evil leader's minions that their boss, having been arrested, won't be paying them. Did it work?

re *Traveller* re PCs keeping their vacc suits on despite the breathable atmosphere: While not everyone will, unless social and legal norms very much push them to, I can see this, yes. I still mask on public transportation and often at conventions, and I've no idea how much of PaxUnplugged I'm likely to do masked, as it'll be the first really big convention we attend since lockdown.

re GM Dickery: While I broadly agree, there's a question of norms and how easy it is to see the waters we swim in. When I originally ran Cthulhupunk, I don't think I actively tried to engage in Dickery, but I didn't avoided it altogether either. One borderline case: Avram played a character with a spy network. For a while, I periodically had an NPC advise his PC to pull the spies out of a particular enemy organization. After a few sessions, I decided I'd given enough warning, and that, as Avram never said, in or out of character, that his PC was doing this, it was too late. Today, I'd explicitly ask, "Has your PC pulled his spies out?"

It occurs to me that one feature of countdown clocks, at least if they're out in the open, is that they give explicit warning that a particular thing is going to happen when a clock fills. re *Mind How You Go*: I look forward to hearing how it goes when you focus on more personal stuff than the numbers, though it's clear the economics are important.

re Patrick Riley re "and you were just following your hallucinations all along": There is actually a *Call of Cthulhu* adventure set in the then present day (it came out in 2001) where that's the premise for one of the PCs. It's not that the PCs aren't folks who've tangled with the forces of the mythos. They are; it's just that this time, one particular PC is hallucinating.

re Bryant Durrell re automated character sheet: I can't speak for him. For myself, in the online *D&D* game I'm in, it makes things possible for me, as I don't currently have the cope to learn all the fiddly bits. For other games, I have a love/hate relationship with character keepers. Sometimes, these are just spreadsheets where PC details are kept, with no mechanics, and sometimes, mechanics are incorporated (e.g., tallying point totals for GUMSHOE games, drop down menus with options for Penned to Good Society and Powered by the Apocalypse games). What these do is give a group that's playing online a single document for everyone to look at simultaneously despite not being in the same physical space.

I prefer rolling physical dice even when playing online, although it can be easier not to do so. Most GMs don't care which way players do it. For the *D&D* game, I do it online because everyone else does and because I'm just pushing the "roll to do X" button and haven't learned what to roll, trusting D&D Beyond to know.

re Avram Grumer: I'm slowly starting to understand the full power of clocks as well. re me: I got to play Sarah Bernhardt in the larp 1897, set at Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. As I'd read a couple of biographies of hers well before, for Reasons, I knew that a lot of the weirder things in the character sheet (like the python, and traveling with a coffin) were absolutely true.

re typst: While I want it running on my machine, starting with the web interface so I can see what I'm doing in "real" time might be useful. re conflict: I agree that we should be very careful about things that make **players** unhappy and that we should separate character and player feelings as desired and necessary. (E.g., the larper who assured us that he was fine out of character, merely contemplating the doom of his species in character, was enjoying the bleed.)

re annoying description text that doesn't list things in the order PCs notice them: A fair criticism, but I'm skeptical that I as a GM manage to avoid that problem either. For best results, I'd want to rearrange the text, perhaps? re period appeal of 1920s *Call of Cthulhu*: I'm fine jumping all over the timeline. 1920s is good. 1930s of *Trail of Cthulhu* is good. *Regency Cthulhu*. Cthulhu Invictus! I agree that *Cthulhu Now* is definitely not "now" now, but rather Cthulhu 1980s.

re sources of wealth in Regency romance: K. J. Charles's recent novel, *How to Fake It in Society* used "you are a man and you married a woman with money", although not in the way one might expect. (She's on her deathbed and marries to spite her heir, who basically murdered her; he's a homosexual shopkeeper in the right place at the right time for this. And yes, indeed, once she dies, impoverished nobles do push their daughters at him.) What does the "Cit" in "despicable Cit" stand for? re Night City Noodle Shop: You have demonstrated why I wouldn't use *Cyberpunk Red/2020/Original* for this.

AVRAM GRUMER: Thanks for the Typst details. We'll see if I can wrap my head around any of it. The Attention Conservation Notice confused me as it listed things somewhat out of order. re movies: I've not seen *Tremors* and am unsure if it's within my fear tolerance, but I do remember seeing the movie *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* though not whether you were on that outing.

A bunch of us were trying to get tickets to Shakespeare in the Park back when it had the old system, and failed. For those unfamiliar with how it worked, people got in line very early, then sat and picnicked. Around noon or 1 pm, vouchers for up to 2 tickets got handed out until they ran out. Those who got the tickets continued to picnic until 6 pm, when the line started moving as people traded in the vouchers for tickets. They then might have time for a quick bite before sitting down in the Delacourte Theater at 8 pm and hoping that the performance wouldn't get rained out.

Either the performance was canceled because of the weather or fears about the weather or the vouchers ran out before it was our turn; I forget which. So the group of us decided to see *Buffy* instead. IIRC, Lizard was there and we had the following exchange:

Lizard: So instead of seeing one of Shakespeare's plays, we're seeing a B-movie?
Me: Yes.
Lizard: All right!

I remember the movie being flawed. Afterwards, I think Manny and I theorized that about 20 minutes of film had been left on the cutting room floor. If we're correct, those 20 minutes might not have made it a great movie, but would perhaps have turned it into a more comprehensible one.

re hard and soft moves: Yes, exactly. re Procreate pens: I'm confused about why that paragraph is in the section on movies and moves. Do these work with Android tablets? re *Hit*: The Blackjack mechanic sounds quite workable. re "insisting" "Guys" is gender-neutral: This sounds like someone (presumably Erica Bridges) who's decided that people who say it isn't are Too Woke. I still use it verbally as a gender-neutral term and won't bat an eyelid if someone else does likewise, but it would never occur to me to insist that the written form is gender-neutral, particularly in this context.

re *Scum and Villainy*: It's the *Waydancer*, regardless of what the paint actually says (most recently, *Way 2 Party...News!*). I'm glad we rescued the Squire, though I suspect the collateral chaos will cause several problems. And of course, we didn't try to figure out what Kenn hired the assassin to do, let alone why. Why he didn't pay her is a separate good question, as is how he got away from the people who captured him. Meanwhile, you've all now pointed out to me that I have to start building up Valsi's Stash some more.

re *Zenya's Wonder Tales*: I wonder if finding a livestream of a group playing that tale would make it make more sense to us. re *The King Is Dead*: Ah, different from the Bakers' game of the same name.

re Brian Rogers re *Masks*: Good point re games that both have rules to support the playstyle they're aiming for and explicitly lack rules to support play they're not interested in (see my "if you don't want torture, don't have a skill for it" ct). Interesting tension between the "keep it feral" idea that many Powered by the Apocalypse games have and the idea of playbooks steering towards particular arcs, though I think some PbtA games, such as *Urban Shadows* and *Cartel*, aim to be more feral than others, such as *Masks*. OTOH, switching playbooks means one can change arcs.

re the Referee realizing he doesn't know the Hiver's motivation: Possibly the Hiver didn't know it either. In one larp, my PC got a mcguffin, and its owner confronted him to ask why he'd taken it. I blinked and realized that this wasn't very adequately answered in the character sheet and figured that he'd probably not thought beyond the challenge of getting it (there were sufficient in-character reasons he might not have). So he handed it back to her, and later asked for a favor, which she granted.

re Five Tiers of Publishing: If this was written this year, that's years after either Rob or Fred said that they were bemused at being called indie. The statement was probably made in the mid- to late 00s, and I think was leaning on the Forge/Ron Edwards's definition of "indie". re trying to "incept Briar into disrupting ELIZA service": I'd likely have been more direct and said, "Hey, Briar, how well does the internet infrastructure hold up, given the earthquake? Might that not disrupt ELIZA service?" It might not have worked, but Briar would have known what I was trying to get her to do. Thanks for the clarification re Laeli's militia!

re Joshua Kronengold re Minimal Phone 2: It doesn't yet exist, of course, and I'm not sure Minimal Phone 1 still does. IIRC, despite the "minimal" label, it's pricy. re *Monsterhearts*: I agree that Shut Someone Down is a better move to spread nasty rumors than Turn Someone On. re 1st vs 2nd editions: Yes, Avery explicitly wanted to slim the game down, carving away everything that wasn't essential. I don't necessarily agree with all of her choices and part of me ponders the merits of creating a combined edition for personal use. When I started running the game, I was using 1.5 rules, by which I mean the 2e quickstart with 1e for anything it didn't have.

re the Long Examples: I agree that if you have to pick one, the one in 1e is better for the reason you give, that it has both PC/PC and PC/NPC interactions requiring the mechanics. While I'd prefer to have both, I think the change reflects something else 2e does: It pushes the PCs firmly at each other.

I'm very mixed about this focus of 2e. It can make for a more intense game, but it also means that the players are at something of a loss when their PCs interact with NPCs and don't have the tools they expect (particularly Strings). I want the PCs interacting with each other and with NPCs.

I can see where Vincent Baker and John Harper may be focusing when they say that Forged in the Dark games are Powered by the Apocalypse games. I don't think of FitD as PbtA, and I tend to prefer PbtA, but I can see the bones of *Apocalypse World* in *Blades in the Dark*:

- Playbooks with Moves
- Basic Moves
- 4 levels of outcome: Failure/6-, Success-with-Cost /7-9, Success/10+, Success-with-Bonus/12+ Advanced Move
- Short Harm track (which one can think of as Very Few HP, I suppose)

- xp tracks that are fairly small (I think the ones in Blades and most FitD games are too long, but that's personal taste)
- Earning xp based on playing into your character's arc, background, archetype, et cetera
- Making relationships important
- Making a base important
- Making factions important
- Doing all of this based not, ultimately, on published Lore but on what the group decides (i.e., these aren't games that call for splat books, though as we've seen, there can be expansions, set ups, et cetera)

Vincent also said that *Dogs in the Vineyard* started as a hack of *Sorcerer*, iirc, so there's definitely a Line of Descent thing happening. I also suspect he has a distaste for dicking around with definition.

I think "Powered by the Apocalypse" is the first time we got a fancy name for "a hack of X game". It's been followed by Forged in the Dark, Penned to Good Society, Descended From the Queen, and others. On the one hand, I'm not sure "a hack of X" wouldn't be just as good; on the other, it does focus on tracing lines of descent rather than saying "this game does the same sorts of things as the game that primarily inspired it", and that's useful to me.

re Dark Phoenix arc: I'd heard about Claremont's original plan, and I'm sorry it didn't happen that way.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: re last bird: Ah! So that's what a kingfisher is. RAE the kava shop owner's story. re delayed communications: Reminds me of the story of the telegraph operator in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. re when the war began: Reminds me of the third of Ada Palmer's Terra Ignota books, *The Will to Battle*. re the Nose: There are jobs that involve sniffing things.

DALE MEIER: re all golems being in the shape of a human being: There's a passage in the Bible where Joseph tells his father that two of his brothers were "walking" with the same woman (i.e., having sex with her) and that they then pulled the limbs off a calf and ate it, which would have been killing the animal too cruelly, iirc. This led to a midrash, which one can think of as Jewish fanfic explaining weird parts of the Bible or as the equivalent of trying to get the Marvel No-Prize, because surely, Joseph wasn't lying (or at least, there's no indication he was), yet his brothers weren't punished (again, there's no mention of punishment).

The explanation this particular midrash gave was that Joseph did not realize that the woman the brothers were "walking" with was a golem, nor that the cow was also a golem. Have you read Lee Gold's Golems & Gematria? I see that it's still freely available online: https://conchord.org/xeno/golems.html

re GM Dickery: While I agree that you were in the right about the gear, I wonder if the player was doing a less socialized version of panicking. I've had a player panic and think I was panicking when I floated the idea of giving people fewer points in *Night's Black Agents* for Cover and Network than default (10 and 15) on the grounds that this was a one-shot that wouldn't take more than a session or two.

Like you, I gave ground, though I don't feel too bad about it. The player wasn't crossing a line, but rather, panicking because they had a very clear concept of the character they were trying to build and, I think, genuinely didn't believe that they could do it with fewer Network points. Network was the character's **thing*!

I'd seen the player use and abuse the rules for creating webs of contacts, in both *Night's Black Agents* and *Trail of Cthulhu* (which has different rules for this). Ultimately, while I was correct that the player didn't need the points for the character to work for the short game I ran, it also didn't matter enough. Nothing broke with the character having the points.

I've had another player panic in a different game I ran, protesting that if I objected to a particular NPC being part of the backstory of a PC they were creating, their PC wouldn't be viable. I gave way, and again, I don't think it ultimately hurt anything. Moreover, many months later, the player said they'd been wrong, and I admit it did me good to hear this admission.

I don't know if I'd handle similar cases better today. One has to understand exactly what the player thinks is central to the character. If the player truly wants a character that doesn't work for the game, that's one kind of problem. If the player wants Stuff that isn't as essential to the character as they think, it can be challenging to get the player to realize they don't need whatever the shiny thing is, especially if the player is utterly convinced that the GM is the one being unreasonable or panicking.

As for your other example, all you can do is to do better moving forward. As Josh reminded me, the most important step is always the next one. re forums: I was on the Yog-Sothoth forums, as well as the Forge and Story Games.

BRYANT DURRELL: re GM Dickery as being part of the social contract for some tables: Arguably, in those cases, it's not GM Dickery. The more it's talked about and what is and isn't allowed is spelled out, the more likely it's not Dickery. I'm thinking of *Burning Empires*, where, the one time I played, Luke Crane said at the beginning that he was playing **against** us all. Importantly, he couldn't just do as he pleased; as an adversarial GM, he was strictly bound by the rules.

re *Draw Steel*: Wow, you're not kidding about that new name stuff! Sadly, I think the mechanics are more complex than I'd be comfortable running. re "A New Update Is Available": Ooh, creepy! I hope it will become available at some point. The scenario that is, not the actual GO2War game.

re "The Ghost of Long-Legged John": It wasn't entirely coincidence that we signed up. We saw that you and Susan were signed up, and that meant our choice of game for the slot was easy. I'm glad I did Malachi proud. I know I micronapped a bit during the game. re *Boundary of the Darkness*: Oh yes! I had a blast running the playtest of the Blue Stockings scenario some months back. I want More Stuff for that period!

re splitting the party: Yes, do it all the time! I'd assumed you already had that tactic down cold. Did I not manage to do it in *Fearful Symmetries*? re *Merryshire Detective Club*: I see no reason the game can't feature a Southern Gothic village. Remember, one of the possible constable NPCs is starring in a ScandaNoir show. I agree that one could totally build a town or district around a merchant leader.

It also occurs to me that one could draw on Phyllis Ann Karr's *At Amberleaf Fair* for *MDC*, which may well be "cozy fantasy" decades before the term was invented (published in 1986) and, IMO, better than most. It's certainly more layered and more about the worldbuilding and relationships, and far less about romance and making everything easy and comfortable.

re Brian Rogers: I'm not sure "didn't read carefully" is quite the same as "refuses to change", but I concede it's something that one needs to do over time. After the first session I ran of a *Sorcerer* game, in the early 2000s, I realized that I was trying to run it like a "typical" adventure game.

re Brian Rogers re OSR: My impression from what little I've read is that exploration stuff bumps into the high lethality stuff and gets in the way of developing characters and emotional arcs. Is this incorrect? I'm thinking of *Cloud Empress, Eco Mofos*, and *Cy-Borg* (which I played at DexLite); are those actually OSR?

re Mark Wilson re *Brindlewood Bay*: Gareth's run a couple of sessions for me, Josh, and Ray, and might be talked into running more. Josh would like to run *Apocalypse Keys*, I know, although that a) has a lot more moving parts and b) is more about messy emotional drama among walking apocalypses. And we're both intrigued by *Numberless Secrets*, which is the Chinese martial arts equivalent (though minus the *Brindlewood Bay* uberplot).

re me re Brats With Guns: It's the obvious name, yes, though I doubt any of the game mechanics would need to change. I saw *Bugsy Malone* on cable at least 30 years ago, and iirc, it pulled zero punches. re Jim Vassilakos re Nordic larp: I am very unclear on what distinguishes this particular subgenre and I don't know if I've ever played a Genuine Nordic larp. I tend to go for the feels in larps, and while that's not *not* Nordic, I'm pretty sure there's more to the category than that.

MICHAEL CULE: re books piling up: it would be unthinkable not to spend bookstore credit. I understand and empathize. re Avram Grumer: Yes, "Descended From the Queen" is the name for games that are hacks of *For the Queen*.

re me: A horde larp is one where most, if not all, of the players have multiple characters over the course of the larp. These characters are not usually that deep. The idea is that you pick up a character, read it quickly, play it for 5-15 minutes, then get a different character to play. *Time Travel Review Board*, like many horde larps, also has a "cast", which means that there are a few players who don't change roles during the game.

One of the earlier horde larps, I think, was *Buses Welcome*, where the cast was the staff of a truck stop, and the horde were the various people showing up at the truck stop wanting things from the cast. In *Time Travel Review Board*, the horde is mostly people who want to travel back in time and who need to convince the Time Travel Review Board to allow them to do so.

The TTRB is the cast. However, because this is a time travel game, each cast member has multiple versions of their character sheet. Which one they use depends on the current state of the timeline, which is posted on a wall and regularly updated by the GMs, based on what characters get approved for time travel.

re SCA stealth promotion: To be clear, my SCA brother very much did want to become a bard. It's just he didn't Catch On that the questions he was being asked were the ones one has to answer to become an SCA bard. Thanks for the explanation of the Spider's plight.

re the Magistrate's companions: The Ministry didn't try to recruit the woman first? re tsundoku: Someone with a well stocked wine cellar or liquor cabinet doesn't consume all of that either.

JIM VASSILAKOS: re GM Dickery: A table of 20-somethings agreeing to bump off the 11-year-old's PC to increase their eventual payoff, and apparently being sufficiently okay with the 11-year-old himself that they're fine with him making a new character? That does strike me as weird, yes. Part of me is curious about exactly what the conversation that led to this

decision was, and the rest of me doesn't really want to meet these people.

re Joshua Kronengold re quieter players sometimes enjoying sitting and watching: Nod. Josh called this kind of play being a tourist. This can cause convention GMs much frustration because, as you noted, it takes time to know whether a player is being a tourist, shy, or overwhelmed.

re extremely enthusiastic players seizing opportunities meant for others: While I don't know that the community's got good solutions for this, I think it does get discussed. Perhaps some of the perceived silence is due to a lack of ideas for mitigating the problem.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re Patrick Brady re Gilgamesh as "more foundational and also truer to modern role-playing": I disagree, but do say more. How is it either, let alone both?

re Brian Misiaszek re how long it would take to play out Mazorra: I'd need to see the full thing before estimating. Presuming focused players and a GM good at a) going quickly over material that isn't played out, factoring in consequences without slowing down the game and b) cutting between groups, let's call it 18-20 hours of play. I'm not entirely sure one couldn't get it down to half that, especially if one cut the pre-arrival material. I could see it as a weekend-long larp, but that would take a **lot** of planning and a budget.

re Roger Bell_West re *Monsterhearts*: The second season of the game I ran also had one player happily tell me that the conversation their PC, the Witch, had with the NPC who wound up with the demon's power in the end felt like playing Batman talking to Ra's al Ghul. I'm flattered, if a bit boggled, as I've no idea what I did to pull that off.

re using *GURPS* as a purely descriptive RPG language: I've done a tiny version of that when I describe a PC I created and play in a different system in *GURPS* terms, and when I described some Cthulhupunk NPCs in terms of D&D Alignment, which I've never used as A Thing in the game. We also do that when we describe characters in books and shows in RPG terms.

re Myles Corcoran: I should read *Demon Hunters*. re *CHEW*: I note that I was able to push through my disgust and enjoy the comic. It helped that, by my standards, it got less disgusting as it went.

IGTHEME: Issue #17 – October 21st: Negotiating with Monsters

I wrote a paper for the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts called "Conversations With Monsters" covering a very limited part of that fascinating topic, as I only had 20 minutes. It was inspired by a discussion at the previous year's ICFA where we agreed that it's fascinating when hero and monster stop fighting to have a conversation (which often has the monster say "you're like me") and where someone said that Hannibal Lector in the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs* does not work as a psychiatrist but does work as a monster and we all agreed that the most powerful parts of that movie are the conversations between Lector and Starling.

I'm currently writing up Take the Universe: Power Is Fleeting, Love Is Eternal, which one could argue is all about negotiating with monsters. Princess Percipia was certainly seen as a monster by many, while Hekmenos was always suspected of being one, and the Grand Fifth certainly was, if one defines monsters by behavior rather than appearance. Going by appearance, one might consider the cyclops Princess Geraldesse a monster, but she was no more one than any politician on that world, and likely less than some.

What is a monster? If we're talking about negotiating with one, then we're talking about a sentient being. I would also hazard a guess that this implies a being which one should *not* feel free to murder with impunity simply because it exists. I also take as read that negotiation is not a priori wrong.

Fr'ex, in one larp, my character met with the NPC leader of the opposing side of a war, and he offered to cease hostilities if my PC's side would give them one city. While we did not take that offer, as far as I know, it was genuine, and my PC decided that the only city to give the other side, if we'd accepted, would have been her own. She was confident she could oversee a mostly peaceful transition of power. I'd say each side considered the other monstrous and both sides had a point. Similarly, the larp Third Contact is about multiple factions negotiating at an interstallar peace conference, and all of the factions have done terrible things in the backstory and could be considered monstrous. The question is where they go from there.

OTOH, in the Scum & Villany game, my PC, Valsi, touched the mind of an alien who wanted to devour everyone and everything. The being was clearly sentient, but Valsi did not consider that a matter for negotiation. Valsi would consider killing this particular being to be correct; ironically, the young Way devotee may have ruined the best chance for that. In the Harlem Unbound game, one PC, the artist Ambrose, was befriended by Azathoth. Azathoth did want to eat everyone and everything, but in the meanwhile, was perfectly happy to help Ambrose. Ambrose accepted its help more than once, but grew less inclined to do so as he understood what this help entailed. I think Azathoth may have offered help to my PC, William, once or twice, and iirc, William may even have accepted once.

There was no question of trying to kill Azathoth; it wasn't possible. The only question was whether to accept its aid, and in theory, the only ethical answer was no.

GAMING WRITE UP: Power Is Fleeting; Love is Eternal (part 2)

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*. In this playtest, we aimed for a 1980s science fantasy feel.

Main Characters and their Connections

Princess Percipia Vie: She/they, 25. Arrogant, beautiful princess of Raimboust Valley, heir to Castle Maleghast, increasingly taking over her mother's duties, as the Dowager Queen is increasingly ailing. A warrior, she thinks it unnecessary that she has been assigned a moonplotter (Rheita), but reckons that Exaltation will have her uses. Aggravated by the presence of Hekmenos as a hostage living with the Vie family, a situation that led to mutual distrust and then festered into hatred.
Role: The Heir Apparent
Background: Ancient Nobility
Desire: ORIGINALLY: Convince your nemesis to ally with you for a cause greater than your enmity. CHANGED TO: Win the War for the Lunar Alliance
Relationships: Nemesis of Hekmenos Drugan, Patron of Rheita Exaltation
By the end of the game: **Positive Tags:** Charismatic, Pragmatic, Heroic; **Negative Tags:** Uncontrollable, Manipulable; **Positive Condition:** The War Looks to You: You've proven to be vital to the effort. Create a connection (either a subordinate or a superior) to reflect your newfound importance to the war.
Connections: Queen Bertissima Vie, she/her, 74, Percipia's mother, played by Titanox's player. Princess Geraldesse Milmetu, she/her, 22, rival princess, cyclops, Warden of Lunafelt Fields, played by Rheita/Theudisklos's player. Later, as a result of the positive condition, Atallana, the Knight of Sables, she/her, devoted to Percipia, wielder of the Sable Sword, said to be the last remnant of the missing 9th moon, played by Titanox's player.

My main character: **Lieutenant** (formerly Captain) **Semiluna in Scadere** (Waning Crescent in Romanian, as I like picking names that mean something in a different language): They/them, mid-20s
Captured by Heavenly Octive who returned them during a truce period as a gesture of goodwill/contempt. The Heavenly Octive called them Tekinn Halfmani (Icelandic for Captured Crescent). This is where they met Hekmenos Drugan. Currently, they don't know what to do with themself, and their liege/superiors/whatever don't know what to do with them. It didn't help that they came back with an Heavenly Octive instrument and the ability and, apparently, desire to play it, at least in private. Attempts to take the instrument from Semiluna or keeping them from playing it don't work out well. Also, they sometimes try to deal with stress by muttering mathematical formulae.
Role: The Disgraced
Background: Bourgeoisie
Desire: ORIGINALLY: Clear your debt to the service and walk away from the War. CHANGED TO: Find the ninth moon.
Relationships: Old flames with Titanox: Before Semiluna was captured, Titanox wanted to experiment with love, to learn what it was, and Semiluna believed, apparently mistakenly, that Titanox felt actual love. This... didn't work out. Hekmenos Drugan is love with Semiluna, at least at the start of the game.
By the end of the game: **Positive Tags:** Unobtrusive, Eager to Serve, Secret Agent for the Queen(s), Committed, Still Trying; **Negative Tags:** Useless, Disgraceful, Absent in Battle, You Had ONE Job...; **Positive Condition:** Helping Hands: Your commitment to atonement earns you respect. Connections will readily offer you chances to redeem yourself. **Negative Condition:** Pariah: You are shunned and disregarded by polite society as your past becomes more known.
Connections: Former captor, who later got promoted to a Main Character; Commander Noapte cu Lună Plină (Full Moon Night), Semiluna's commanding officer and uncle, he/him, who would prefer his errant satelltite wipe the stain off the family line by becoming a redeemed hero, preferably one that dies bravely in battle accomplishing something useful.

Rheita's player got enough Destiny Points during Military Conflicts to retire the character and was delighted when I pointed out that they could promote a Connection to Main Character status, choosing Semiluna's former captor.
Theudegisklos, Grossequinte (The Great Fifth): They/any. Quiet officer in charge of, among other things, prisoners of war. Not the sort to mistreat one physically, but very good at learning what makes a person tick and how to... adjust a subject's tempo or mode. A real conductor; a real space snake. Very much a Player of the Great Game.
Role: The Infiltrator
Background: The Opposing Side
Desire: Win the War for the Heavenly Octave
Relationships: Former Captor of Semiluna
By the end of the game: **Positive Tags:** Adagio; **Negative Tags:** Manipulative
Connections: Technically, none, but The Great Fifth was already woven deep into the fabric of the game, their leitmotif recurring again and again. I played one

of Rheita's connections, Linné Decumbiture, she/her, Rheita's Umbra and successor. She fulfilled all of her new duties while Rheita enjoyed her retirement on a beach lit by multiple moons.

Hekmenos Drugan: She/her, 21. Ḥekmenos: the sky, "heavenly vault of stone", moon. Drugan: to serve as a soldier. Warrior noble of a prestigious family which hosted the captured Semiluna. Hekmenos found herself captivated by the foreign prisoner and volunteered to escort Semiluna home, planning to defect as a show of her love, which she had not yet confessed. Young, eager, with best intentions, fascinated with Semiluna's home planet, but now out of her depth, mistrusted, and treated more like a hostage than a defector.
Role: The Defector
Background: The Opposing Side
Desire: Ensure the protection of the one you love and find an opportunity amidst the War to express your feelings.
Relationships: ORIGINALLY: In love with Semiluna; Nemesis of Percipia. CHANGED TO: **Was* in love with Semiluna; In love with Percipia
By the end of the Game: **Positive Tags:** Disloyal, Practical, Committed; **Negative Tags:** Staunch, Compromised, Lovesick; **Positive Condition:** An Unexpected Friend: Either create a connection or have an existing connection reveal a sudden interest with you. While this condition is active, they will count you as someone close. **Negative Condition:** Connections will distrust you and constantly question your motives, whether they are truly benign or not.
Connections: Sagrida, she/her, 27, assigned to Hekmenos as a lady-in-waiting. Hekmenos has not realized that Sagrida is spying on her. I played her as convinced Hekmenos was Up to No Good, Documenting Every Suspicious Action (none of which were pernicious). Ragnagunda Aftra Drugan, she/her, 55, Hekmenos's mother, trying to keep Hekmenos's defection secret and bring her home. Played by Percipia's player.

Titanox: Any, 5, robot soldier perpetually in trouble for breaking the rules/being a trickster
Role: The Freelancer
Background: Starfarers
Desire: ORIGINALLY: Earn forgiveness from the hierarchy and be restored to your former rank. CHANGED TO: Show that war is awful and that no one wins in war
Relationships: Grew up with Rheita Exaltation; old flames with Semiluna in Scadere
By the end of the game: **Positive Tags:** Loyal, Honorable, Steadfast; **Negative Tags:** Cold, Calculating, Prankster; **Positive Condition:** I don't see one listed. It's possible that the player forgot to mark one, but just as likely that this happened late enough in the game they never defined a positive condition. **Negative Condition:** Harsh Reprimand: Command will impose restrictions that you must abide by or else face further repercussions
Connections: Commander Keyali, she/her, Titan's commanding officer (humanoid), by the books, determined to bring the errant robot to heel, played by Percipia's player. Lieutenant Mercer, he/him (humanoid), friend and bad idea buddy, played by Hekmenos's player.

We opened with an Event: a ball at Castle Maleghast. I think there was an assassination attempt on the Dowager Queen that got foiled. Titanox and Mercer did some kind of prank that caused a big mess, but no actual damage, and made Semiluna smile. Hekmenos confessed her love to Semiluna, who was taken aback and chagrined, as Semiluna has a very low sense of self-esteem and didn't return Hekmenos's feelings. Hekmenos danced and/or dueled with Percipia and, frustrated, asked what she could do to prove her loyalty and desire for peace to the Lunar Alliance.

Percipia suggested Hekmenos marry her, possibly as a dare, possibly not believing Hekmenos would accept. Hekmenos was very surprised, but she did accept. I think it was now Percipia's turn to be surprised.

The facilitator was also surprised, having unwisely said that there was no way we were going to spend enough Resolve Tokens to trigger a Military Conflict phase during the first Novel chapter. We took that as a challenged and proved her wrong.

LARP PHOTO

Here's a picture of Josh as Waluigi and me as Luigi in the larp It's a Me, Murder!



Twisting the Rope #17

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

It May Stop But It Never Ends

With the recent discussion here of *Bugtown*, Matt Howarth's work was on my mind, so I was sad to read earlier this month that Howarth had died[1]. I read Howarth's comics after being exposed to *Those Annoying Post Brothers* by James Wallis one summer in London. I loved Howarth's art and crazy stories, as well as his curious music reviews found at the back of many issues. The lyrical reference this month is therefore a line of Howarth's and not a Bring Me The Horizon reference. I must dig out my copies of *Keif Llama: Xenotech* and enjoy his outlandish aliens again. *Ave atque vale*.

This week I and about 300,000 other public services workers took part in a one-day strike[2] over pay conditions and lack of engagement from the government with a new pay & progress agreement. The agreement would replace the previous negotiated deal between the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and government that held from 1st January 2024 to 30th June 2026. This is the largest public sector strike in Ireland in at least 40 years. The balloted union members across a broad variety of unions voted 95% or more in favour of industrial action, up to and including work stoppages.

I joined one of the pickets at the college and walked in circles for a couple of hours. My hips are obviously bourgeois collaborators, as they complained bitterly afterwards, but I did my part for the union and my fellow workers.

A second one-day strike is scheduled for E&A's deadline day on the 21st of October, so any further developments will have to wait until the next issue.

Mutterings

In the world of gaming, our own Brian Rogers is kicking off a PBEM *Mage: the Ascension* game with some E&A regulars (Hi Lisa! Hi Josh!) and other worthies.

I plan to play a taxi cab driver whose routes through the campaign city draw mandalas and sigils for magical workings. His Correspondence magics (space warping, connecting near and far) see him appear to help out as needed, bringing passengers where they need to be, if not where they want to be.

I'm looking forward to the game.

A Mausritter Campaign

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

The characters are:

Sky, a sparrow-rider with an aerial mount, Miss Clutterbuck, played by Sam.
CanCan, an ex-dancer and tin miner, played by Marie.
Gwedolene, an ale-brewer, sometimes accompanied by Victor, a drunken porter-mouse, played by Kate.
Odette Snow, a foreign mouse and dam builder, played by Alai MacErc.
Ambrose, a scrawny wireworker, singed with electrical burns, played by Peter.

Back home after rescuing Fennel and Norbury, the adventuring mice relaxed back into their day-to-day professions, until one day a travelling

[1] in-memoriam-comic-creator-matt-howarth
[2] Irish Independent article from 2026-10-14

mouse circus visited Oak Home. The new arrivals prompt many locals to visit. The player-mice explored the variety of stalls, which included "Ring the Cat", "The Masked Psychic", "The Greased Pole Challenge", "Splat a Rat", "Hook a Duck", "Arrows!", and "Test Your Strength." Food stalls, acrobats, firebreathers and more were dotted between the other attractions.

Sky and Gwen, intrigued, visited the Masked Psychic first, while CanCan was, of course, torn between "Splat a Rat" and "Test Your Strength." Ambrose tried his hand at "Ring the Cat", while Odette decided the "Test Your Strength" was probably rigged. What else could explain her poor showing?

The Masked Psychic warned Sky of a mouse librarian who sought to shift blame to Sky for his own wrongdoing, while Gwen was told of a dark figure shrouded with a black curse and carrying a deck of cards. They thanked the psychic and offered to fetch her a sherbet from one of the stalls.

While fetching the sherbet, Sky stopped a youngling mouse called Comfrey, and asked her to keep an ear open for rumours. She told Sky straight out about the Beastmaster's horrid practices. "He's got a duckling-eating stoat in captivity!" Comfrey wanted to put an end to Beastmaster Julius's mistreatment of the circus animals[3]. Sky promised to do what she can. Hoping to learn more, she found Patric the Ringmaster and volunteered to assist with the raising of the Big Top. Mrs Clutterbuck was very handy at flying rigging lines up to the top of the tent.

Gwen parted company with Sky and visited the tapmaster, Ham, to chat about brewing. Notes and beer are exchanged. Ham was much impressed with Gwen's knowledge and suggested she might join the circus if she was interested.

That evening there was the Big Top Show, with much entertainment. The group attended, and joined the throng of mice from Oak Home in gasps of delight and wonder. There was an unplanned change to the running order as Gillian Frume and Mark Mouseman, the acrobats, were moved later in the show, but Fenric de Green, a frog knight who owed a debt to the ringmaster, stepped up to wow the audience with his agile swordplay and tremendous leaping prowess. Sky overheard Gillian and Patric the Ringmaster arguing about Mark Mouseman's unplanned absence, but all was resolved later in the evening when the two mouse acrobats performed their daring high wire routine. All went home thrilled and impressed by the circus.

In the morning, the mouse adventurers were called to Moira the Mayor's home. Moira reported a missing golden thimble, one of the mayoral treasures, removed from the upper floor of her apartments high in one of the oaks during the night. The mice examined the scene and conjectures flew about. "Did someone shoot a woodlouse through the window?" "Was there another sparrow rider sneaking into the room in the wee hours?" "Could three ducklings in an overcoat have managed to sneak in?"

After some proper examination they agreed that the lock on the window was forced, no sign of entry from inside the apartment was apparent, and two small holes, freshly made, were in the frame of the only door, across from the forced window. No evidence of trenchcoat-wearing ducks was found.

The thimble usually stood on a display case but there were no signs of mouse prints on the dusty carpet. Moira recalled having shown the thimble to Winston, a visiting vassal of Lord Larkspur, only three days prior.

With percolating thoughts, the mice returned to the circus during the day to ask some questions. Gwen spoke to Ham again. The brewer was defensive but admitted that things like this theft happened before. "Circus folk get blamed for every hawk-damned thing, but Patric has run afoul of Vivian Blue before." Blue, it transpired, is a detective mouse from a mouse town down

[3] Patric the Ringmaster has several captive animals as part of the circus, which are generally well cared for, but his beastmaster, Julius, is an aggressive mouse who steals ducklings for show and disposes of them when they grow too large.

river, who tailed the circus and had previously accused Patric and his employees of theft before.

Meanwhile, Sky questioned Gillian Frume, the acrobat, about the argument with Patric last night and the whereabouts of Mark Mouseman during their scheduled performance. Mark overheard their exchange and grew angry with Sky. He ushered her out of the acrobats' tent, saying "I must nurse my sore head, and can't be bothered with these baseless rumours!"

Odette, CanCan and Ambrose found nothing conclusive in their exploration of the circus perimeter, and returned to Oak Home to take a closer look at the outside of Moira's apartments and the nearest branches of the adjacent oak. High up in the tree CanCan recovered a small wooden reel, as for thread. Odette found some silver thread in the undergrowth at the base of the same oak.

From the window of the thimble display room Ambrose clambered out onto the window ledge to find another pair of holes, bored in the wood above the window frame. So excited by his discovery, he nearly lost his balance, but retreated back through the window before anything terrible happened.

Later, all five mice gathered over some of Gwen's ale to compare notes. Sky recognised the silver thread as similar to some of the rigging in the Big Top. "I think Mark Mouseman has some questions to answer," said the assembled mice.

Kriegsmesser: Landau Before the War

Continuing the write-up of the campaign of *Kriegsmesser* set in the German city of Landau in the autumn 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 24 (2023-06-16)

Thomas Ferber lies unconscious on the kitchen floor of the Bestwilling manor house. Udo examines him and says he will be unconscious for some time. Lazaro helpfully provides advice on the treatment of concussions.

Lazaro goes through the man's pockets and uncover a thin blade, a silver ankh and a purse of 12 silver albus.

Jaroslav and Alfonzo take the time to examine the book by Tobias Burke more closely. It is overwritten and confusing, but among the few woodcut prints they find an illustration of a clay figurine matching the female figure they retrieved from the cave where Martin Baukunth was hiding. The figure is described as a votive object used by the savages of El Beheira in their heathen rites.

Udo tends to Franzis's head and the two examine the library upstairs for clues. All they can determine is that another book appears to be missing from the shelves that, judging by the neighbours, would be a volume of occult material.

With Ferber well trussed, they load the carriage and continue gently back to Landau as Udo tends Franzis, Baukunth and Ferber in Lazaro's make-shift ambulance.

Once in the city Udo sees that Baukunth is housed safely with the hospital before going in search of Bestwilling. Alfonzo hands Ferber over to Sforbeck of the Guard, accusing the man of assault and looting of the Bestwilling estate in the wake of the mob's assault on the city. Sforbeck warns Alfonzo that Ferber is well connected and that such accusations may backfire, so Alfonzo gives the unconscious man another kick and leaves.

Udo meanwhile tracks down Bestwilling in the library of the university. Surrounded by books, the scholarly nobleman is surprised to see Udo and unhappy to hear about Ferber. Indeed,

Bestwilling seems nervous at the mention of Ferber's name and makes excuses for the missing book, saying that it's likely just mislaid. Udo does manage to get the likely name of the missing volume: a treatise by Heraklion of Acre on pagan gods of the Nile Kingdoms.

Session 25 (2023-06-22)

The crew decide to investigate Thomas Ferber's townhouse while the man is in custody under Sforbeck's watchful eye. Lazaro leaves them and conspicuously engages in carriage work elsewhere, as his carriage was seen at the Ferber house when they last broke into the grounds.

When they arrive, the house is quiet. Only the gardener is visible, steadily working in the grounds. Franzis calls him over and schmoozes with conversation and brandy. It isn't long before the gardener dozes contentedly in his hut while the group make their way around to the rear of the house.

Remembering the cellar of Metzner's house, they choose to pry open the cellar doors and descend into the gloomy chamber. The cellar is bare, with broad flagstones, well swept. With tapping about, a hollow space is found under one of the stones. Franzis's great strength and Alfonzo's practised mausoleum pilfering quickly reveal a strongbox buried in the dirt under the stone. It is chained and locked. Unfortunately in the process the flagstone cracks. Udo and Jaroslav set to mixing up dust, paint and wax to disguise the crack.

Alfonzo, seeing the strongbox is too well protected for his pry bar, continues through one of the two doors that exit the cellar room. He finds a grisly store room, with many metal tubs arranged around the walls. His nose rebels at the powerful smell of formaldehyde in the air, that covers a more familiar smell of decay. Alfonzo examines the contents of the first tub and finds many human body parts submerged in pungent liquid.

The others file in and respond to the grisly sights in their own fashion. Alfonzo freezes as a corpse in the nearest tub rolls over and opens its eyes to stare at the gravedigger.

Franzis finds a gaff propped against the door frame and gingerly pokes the moving corpse. It responds with an uncoordinated swipe of its arm at the offending object before gripping the sides of the tub with its cyanotic hands and levering itself up from the formaldehyde bath.

Any confusion or delay the crew may have had evaporates as the stitched together revenant drops moist and glistening to the floor of the storeroom. Below the waist, the thing has five limbs, three legs and two arms, arranged starfish-wise from its pelvis. It struggles to slither towards the intruders.

The same intruders make no delays and leave in a rush, forcing the door shut behind them. Alfonzo wedging it shut as best he can. He then quickly examines the other exit, which leads onto an autopsy room, complete with large marble slab and trays of instruments that would make an inquisitor blush.

The graverobber does not have much time to explore the autopsy room. His companion Franzis borrows his pry bar and sets to cracking the chains on the strongbox. All five hear the crack of glass breaking and a deadly scent begins to fill the close air of the cellar.

Their exit is neither mannerly nor pretty. All five brave souls flee up the stairs from the cellar into the garden, clutching sleeves or kerchieves across their faces, coughing and gasping. The almond scent lingers briefly until Alfonzo and Franzis slam shut the cellar doors and bar it firmly.

The five take little time to come to a decision and retreat. Alfonzo and Jaroslav find the nearest tavern and set to drinking away their memories. Udo seeks out a church and prays. Franzis does a little of both.

Udo's prayers are interrupted by the minister of the church, who sees Udo's obvious distress. They speak a while of God's ineffable plan and the priest persuades Udo to volunteer at the soup kitchen for a time. Acts of charity are always welcome.

The others drink their way through most of the 12 silver coins Alfonzo lifted from Ferber's purse at the Bestwilling estate. The graverobber judges it the least compensation Thomas Ferber owes them for the evening's horrors.

After the seventh coin disappears into the innkeeper's greasy fist, they resolve to keep these events a secret from Lazaro. By the ninth coin, it is Vincenzo they must hide the truth from and Lazaro must be told to keep their secret from the sixth man. By closing time, Lazaro, Vincenzo, Puzzle the Dog and the Pope are on the list.

Session 26 (2023-06-29)

The morning after the horrific events in Ferber's cellar, heads are sore. On waking, Alfonzo looks for Udo to ask him if it's necessary to cut up bodies before burial to avoid the terrible fate that befall the corpses in Ferber's cellar. Udo muses, and suggests quicklime or possibly leaving coins on the corpses' eyes. "Leave the coins? Are you mad?" replies the grave digger.

Fuzzy heads notwithstanding, the group convenes at Alfonzo's hovel. Lazaro is vindicated. "See! The dead do rise again!" Jaroslav arrives munching on a heel of bread from Udo's soup kitchen. They discuss their next moves.

Alfonzo goes to visit Captain Sforbeck to check on Ferber. He is dismayed to find that the prisoner was released early that morning. He relays the news to the others and with some asking around Jaroslav determines that Thomas Ferber left Landau in a hurry after some hasty packing of crates, barrels and boxes from his town house. The house is now boarded up. Udo wonders what has happened to Rikard, the gardener.

Equally curious about Rikard, Franzis visits the Ferber townhouse and speaks to a local man hired to guard the premises. The fellow knows little about Rikard but does have the name of Ferber's legal council, a Mr. M. Canton. He is to be found near the Rathaus in the town centre.

While Alfonzo and Udo go to question Mr. Canton, Jaroslav gossips about the neighbourhood hoping to find leads to the missing gardener. Instead he finds himself set upon and beaten by two thugs, one an Italian.

At the Rathaus, Alfonzo bluffs his way into Canton's offices but is quickly ejected by the lawyer's bodyguards, who batter the grave digger and leave him in the gutter. It is a day for beatings it seems.

Udo in contrast has better luck. He speaks instead to the neighbouring lawyer at the offices next to Canton's. He is no fan of Mr. Canton and his heavies, and gladly tells Udo what he knows about Ferber and his lawyer. They are involved in a shady cabal known as the Grey Shepherds, esoteric wisdom and defrauding the wealthy seem to be their stock in trade. The talkative man also recognises the name of Marten Baukunth, the mesmerised pawn of Ferber from Hammbelhass. The lawyer thinks that another man was looking for Baukunth and paid Canton a visit a couple of weeks ago but was turned away by his brutish bodyguards. The lawyer remembers a name, Geraldus, and describes the fellow as a heavy, strong but aging man of the road.

Lazaro in the meantime goes looking for an exorcist. He finds Father Abento, an ex-Catholic priest and ghost hunter. The cleric provides Lazaro with some ghost hunting tools, including a silvered messer, herbs to repel the dead and demonic, and blessed water. When Lazaro returns to Alfonzo's home he finds Jaroslav in a heap on the doorstep.

The artist has little memory of events beyond the savage beating and the awful damage wrought on his hands by his assailants. Lazaro bandages the injured Jaroslav as best he can and waits anxiously for Udo to return.

Session 27 (2023-07-06)

Udo and Alfonzo return from the Rathaus and their mixed success at uncovering Ferber's connection to Mr. Canton. Udo has no time to share his findings before Lazaro presses him to tend to Jaroslav's wounds. As he undoes the bandages on the artist's hands he is startled to find a brand burned into the back of the left

hand. A brand resembling an ankh, the looped cross of the Grey Shepherds.

With the continued disappearance of Rikard the gardener and the cruel violence inflicted on Jaroslav and Alfonzo, Franzis declares they all must find Ferber and make him pay. Udo sadly agrees, secretly fearing that Rikard is dead and stuffed in a barrel on the back of Ferber's wagons.

Franzis rides out to the west, pausing to question the guards at the western gate of Landau. The guards confirm they saw Ferber, with a carriage and two wagons, leave to the west earlier that morning. Franzis rides on for a while, and comes to a fork in the road. He there speaks with some field labourers who likewise confirm a group of two wagons and an expensive carriage passed by. They took the turn to the north, Franzis is told. This tallies with what a gate guard said about Ferber having an estate to the north-west of Landau, about 5-6 hours away by wagon. Franzis turns back towards Landau to bring the news to the rest of the companions.

Once Jaroslav is fit to move, the group leave Alfonzo's house and prepare to investigate Ferber's townhouse in his absence, after dark.

Once the sun sets, Alfonzo tries to force or pick the lock on the chained front gate, but manages only to distract the guard while the others climb over the wall with the aid of a ladder. The guard is only vaguely curious and dozes off quickly when Alfonzo heads to the ladder to join the others.

With all too fresh memories of the cellar, Franzis pours some blessed water from Father Abento down the steps to the cellar. It trickles under the boarded-over doors and into the darkness. After a long silence there comes a deep, pained groan from below.

"Well, I'm not going in there," declares Franzis to nods of agreement all round.

Lazaro spies a movement at one of the upper storey windows. "Someone, or something, is in the house!" The coachman points to the window above. Jaroslav's attention is drawn to the symbols subtly carved beneath each window. Four hieroglyphs on the west, four others on the east, both flanking a larger ankh under the centre double windows. "I couldn't swear to it," says Jaroslav, "but I suspect the symbols on the west wing represent life, and those on the east wing represent death. Cheerful sort, this Ferber."

Udo sanctifies the cellar doors, which rattle and subside under his prayers. This task complete, the group enters the house via a kitchen door. Large knives and cleavers hang ominously on racks around the walls, thankfully clean of any hideous matter. The investigators file into the main entrance hall and stop suddenly. The sound of heavy footfalls and something being dragged along the upper floors carries through the gloom.

Comments on E&A #16

General: The various examples of GM-dickery from various convention games makes me feel better about rarely roleplaying at conventions. With time short, 2–4 hours on a game is enough of a gamble without the additional risk of a poor GM or table-dickery.

Cover by Dean Hannon: A marvelous cover. Thank you!

Patrick Brady: As noted in my opening paragraph, Matt Howarth died earlier in October apparently from complications related to surgery. James Wallis's enthusiasm for Howarth's comics rubbed off on me in the 90's, and I loved those comics of his that I could get my hands on. Two years living in Paris in the mid-90's gave me access to comic shops with huge back catalogues, and I picked up a bunch of comics then, including a lot of Howarth's B&W issues of *Savage Henry*, *Those Annoying Post Bros.* and *Keif Llama: Xenotech*.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold re Daywatch and comparing Moscow to London: Moscow rules vs. London rules, eh?

Roger BW: I enjoyed your *2300AD* solo trading jaunt. Lucky with the dice on the sale but profit is profit!

Re IgTheme: I enjoyed running *Paranoia* back in the 80's, but that's the only time I would engage in the adversarial GMing that seems to be at the root of a lot of GM-dickery. I want to see the PCs triumph, or at least put up a damn good fight.

"Mad Jack" Churchill is so obviously some player's wish-fulfilment fantasy PC. Someone like Jonathan Kim[4] is just multi-classing (physician, navy officer, SEAL, astronaut) for the hell of it, while Bezos, Musk and the like are just abusing the Wealth mechanics in whatever game they're playing.

Nice photo of the partial eclipse, given the conditions.

I agree with you that some player groups are energising and some are draining. Pete, in our group, can always be relied upon to grab what the GM throws at his PC and build on it. It's something I treasure. I've GMed games which were like pulling teeth, trying to get the players to engage with something, anything, in the setting. I'd much rather avoid those groups too.

RYCT Dale Meier re depression: Depression comes and goes for me too, and primarily seems to drain joy and impetus from me. Supportive thoughts and encouragement to everyone who has to deal with it.

Dylan Capel: Re prompting LLMs like beseeching 'machine spirits' in *Warhammer 40K*: That's a marvellous (and horrifying) parallel.

Your recommendation of *Teenage Sex & Death at Camp Miasma* outweighs my usual lack of interest in slasher flicks. I must look it up.

Timothy Collinson: Nice work capturing the photograph of the kingfisher. They're one of my favourite birds, but I've only seen them twice in person. Very hard to catch sight of if you don't devote a lot of time to sitting still and quiet in a place they're likely to frequent.#

Re nightmares from James Taylor Swift: I'm reminded of the Answersmash round in the TV game show, "House of Games[5]" where a picture clue and a word clue are smashed together in often funny combinations, like Alexander Graham Bellybutton or Vladimir Putinkerbell. There's got to be some mileage to be had from smashing together *D&D* monsters, like the monstrosity created by the merging of a medusa with a sahaugin as a medusahaugin. The creature petrifies you and you immediately sink to the sea bed. A dragoni (merging a dragon with an oni) seems less fruitful, but it made me think of a zamboni, a Japanese magical ogre that resurfaces ice rinks.

Michael Cule: Re Tsundoku: I hear you, my brother.

RYCT Timothy Collinson re manipulators behind the scenes in your Traveller universe: Some Foundation influence has to have snuck into Miller's Third Imperium given the original 50's SF that inspired much of the setting. I love the idea that the manipulators might have been manipulated by the Hivers in turn. It's hexapods all the way down.

Bryant Durrell: Re *Bugsy Malone*: An early Alan Parker movie that I also adore. Early screen roles for Jodie Foster, Scott Baio and Dexter Fletcher, as well as a young Bonnie Langford, for those Doctor Who fans in the audience.

Re Phil Masters and splitting the party: I used to be much more uptight about splitting the party in tabletop RPGs, but I've grown more relaxed about it. Given that I've played with the same group for over 26 years means I'm used to commentary from the couch from PCs who are not actually present in a scene, so splitting the PCs up doesn't interrupt our normal flow.

The *Merryshire Detective Agency* game sounds delightful. Now that I've been told about it, I can't get the idea of Orson Welles as a hobbit big-shot out of my head. I'm afraid my limited mimicry would veer into a hobbit Foghorn Leghorn, but we make do with what we've got.

Erica Frank: I am very sorry for your loss.

Avram Grumer: Your/Adam's Hiver story leans into the similarities with Niven's Puppeteers and

[4] Wikipedia: Jonny Kim
[5] Wikipedia: House of Games

their unfathomable motivations. A direct attack seems very unlike either species, though.

RYCT Dylan Capel re XP bonuses in a *Stars Without Number* game: That sounds like a bingo-card XP mechanic that I first saw on Judd Karlman's blog[6], which appeals to me. I rarely play games with much in the way of levelling up though, so it hasn't hit the table with my group.

Dnup has got a lot of play in our college staff games group. So much so that I should have sleeved the cards right from the get go.

Joshua Kronengold: Re meta-moderation of reviews: It becomes an endless ladder of meta-meta-moderation. Like Douglas Adams said: "To summarise the summary of the summary: people are a problem."

Re compels in *Fate* and the pure approach with bennies only: I agree with you. Penalising a choice in play feels more adversarial. It's really only in *Pendragon* that I've felt that a (high) personality trait or passion could be interpreted as a direction for a player to follow.

RYCT Dale Meier re: catching up on comments: I view it a bit like the slow cocktail party APA metaphor implies. If I have to pop to the loo, or do something in the kitchen I miss out on some of the conversation. Similarly, if I fall behind in comments, I don't think of my pearls of wisdom and *bon mots* are too badly missed.

Dale Meier: I like your interpretation of the golem for *Call of Cthulhu*. I'm reminded of Steve Niles and David Wachter's comic book from Dark Horse, *Breath of Bones*, which is a tale of a golem created in crisis to protect a Jewish community in WWII. Wachter's art is beautiful, and makes remarkable use of a limited palette of greys, browns and blacks.

I haven't any experience of *Woodland Warriors*, but I see the author is Simon Washbourne, also known for *Barbarians of Lemuria*, which I believe is well-liked as a sword and sorcery RPG. I see from his list of products on DriveThruRPG that he also wrote an Earthsea-like game called *Hearthsea*. The preview at DriveThruRPG doesn't show any of the mechanics, and I'm slow to purchase another fantasy RPG without some idea of how the game is put together. The map is included in the preview, however, and is clearly inspired by Le Guin's Earthsea. Do any of the E&A regulars have any experience with *Hearthsea*?

Brian Misiaszek: re political natter: It is so very depressing to see the USA administration and president behaving like a school-yard bully. As a kid of the diplomatic corps, I'm amazed at the bridges burnt and the sloppy insults from the White House in lieu of actual diplomacy and actual negotiation. Trump thinks only in zero sum terms, unfortunately, and apparently feels that for him (and secondly the USA) to win, others must lose. Roll on the mid-terms.

I'd welcome Canada to the EU, btw. No tariffs on poutine!

You told me about your Saskatoon visit by email, and it does sound like a good shot in the gaming arm as well as being an interesting visit with good food, good cider, and the great outdoors. I'm not sure what a hat & cheese shop is, but cheddar goes nicely with a pork-pie (hat).

RYCT me re *Mausritter*: The gold chain bound the cult leader to the strange crustacean in the pool. I must have overlooked that in the write-up. It didn't really feature in the play at the table.

As for the barrage (boom!) of questions about the Landau campaign, I'm not sure if they all got answered in play, but the silver ankh and the bloody cave tie back to Thomas Ferber, briefly a captive of the group, as recounted in this month's write-up above.

I liked the sweet photo of you and Lauren at *Supercrawl*.

Lisa Padol: I enjoyed reading Walmsley's *Cosmic Dark* too. It does go heavily into "the PCs aren't really going to fix anything", which won't fly with my regular group, but I might pitch it to the staff gaming group and see if there is interest.

[6] bingo-style-experience-points

Realis is intriguing. I'm a fan of diceless games, and the mechanics are appealing. I like that eventually a character moves to retirement as part of the evolution of their Class Sentences, etc. It gives a built-in history of the character on the sheet.

RYCT Brian Rogers re Avram's FASA *Star Trek* game where the players took things to the logical extreme: This reminds me of someone asking why with transporters, replicators and Lt. Data, Star Fleet didn't just spam copies of Data and crew all their ships with superhuman androids. Avram's game sounds like fun, if only Trek-adjacent. Mind you *Section 31*[7] had the Star Trek imprimatur, and it's definitely not my Trek.

RYCT me re *Mausritter*: The wizard Magnolia did help with the ring. "What was made by Man, must be unmade by Man." Unless the players came up with something really clever, I wasn't going to make it as easy as giving it to the first wizard that popped up.

RYCT to Joshua Kronengold re the Death of Phoenix in the comics: See my comment to Brian Rogers below and related footnote.

Patrick Riley: Re your wife looking up an answer in a game show: My wife often reads the end of a book before committing to read the whole thing. Some author friends of ours are horrified by this, but I figure she wastes less time on books that don't deliver what she's looking for.

Re AI truth/falsehoods depending on truth appearing more in the training material or the open web than the lies: This is model collapse, sometimes called Hapsburg AI[8]. Just today I attended a presentation by a developer who just recently has stopped writing code altogether, and directs a suite of AI agents to follow his technical designs to produce new apps. Right at the end of the talk he mentioned one of the newest models being created with a fraction of pre-existing weights from the previous model as a starting neural network, instead of the more common practice of a blank neural network with random weights. I immediately thought of BSE (Bovine spongiform encephalopathy) and the perils of feeding contaminated material back into the food chain. LLMs are not biological, obviously, but the parallel is worrisome.

RYCT Patrick Brady re a coup of Patricks: One of my middle names is Patrick, after my paternal grandfather. I could be an honorary Patrick if needs be.

Gabriel Roark: Good to hear that you're back on the ice and your knee is much improved.

The Arduin Portal to Adventure boxed set filled my heart with nostalgic joy. I loved opening a big box of treasures back in the day, to gleefully paw through the contents and imagine what adventures lay ahead. That this boxed set comes with more boxed sets inside only turns that nostalgia up to '11.'

RYCT me re Kate's PC's name: The confusion arises from the background point that the apparently male soldier PC is actually an Irish woman pursuing her own path. Her PC's real name was Frances Ó Duinn, but known publicly as Franzis Corbolini.

Thanks for the memory poke for the *Aftermath* flowcharts.

Brian Rogers: Your Maine family holiday sounds brilliant. No Angus MacWhirter skulking around the harbour, I hope.

Invisible Scarlet O'Neill was fun. God be with the days when superheroes could have a singular power and have fun with it, rather than the unsatisfying power creep in the modern X-Men, for example.

Re James Cambias: I see he published a fourth *Billion Worlds* novel earlier this year. I must look it up. Re Brian Bendis: I agree. *Powers* was fun but his Avengers and X-Men stuff just felt off and spoiled the broth for a lot of stories since.

[7] Section 31

[8] See Wikipedia's article on Model Collapse

RYCT Joshua Kronengold on the (first) comic book death of Jean Grey[9]: Blame the Kree! You'd be right more often than you'd think.

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT to Roger BW about 'passage crew' ferrying a ship from A to B: I've played a lot of *Avorion*, a sand-box PC game of starship building, trading, piracy etc. One of the jobs that regularly pops up is to move a ship from the originating shipyard to the station and its new owner. I don't know what the probabilities are in the code, but more often than not I jump to a new system en route and face a squad of pirates in my now massively under-powered ship. Luckily in an actual RPG game, the GM and players can come up with far more potential encounters and outcomes.

RYCT me "My precious…" It really wasn't at the front of my thoughts when I introduced the ring in the *Mausritter* game, but Tolkien got his images and ideas into my head at an impressionable age. It was the players who first called out the similarities. I didn't even have to give the ring any overt magical abilities.

Re passive vs. enthusiastic players: I've had some success in pointing different types of players at one another, like asking a passive player to respond to an enthusiastic player's actions or declarations, or vice versa getting an enthusiastic player to bring a passive player's character into a scene or plan. If necessary, I'll stick to a firm 'round the table' rota for screen time and GM-to-player attention. In my comment above to Bryant Durrell, I said that I'm more comfortable with splitting the party than I was as a neophyte GM. There's also the bonus that splitting the party can separate the more voluble player(s)' PC away from a quiet player and you can switch the spotlight to the player or sub-group that need more time to shine.

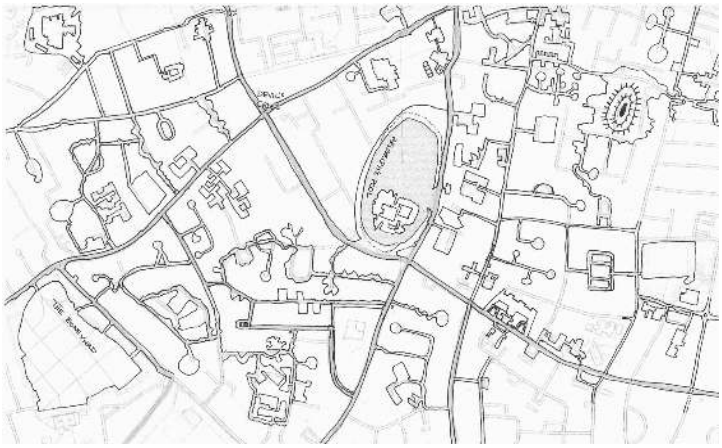
Patrick Zoch: I found the layout in The Dragon's Beard #100 confusing until I clicked that you were recapitulating the evolution of your design over the years. With the Centennial Retrospective alternating with comments on each page I found it a little hard to read. It did confirm that I preferred your first and second layouts far more than the current one, although the splash of colour is welcome.

And Finally

Brian Misiaszek did more digging and contact me with more photos from Dublin, May 1941, from the Dublin City Council's 80th-anniversary article online[10]. I must ask my father's relatives if they've seen the other photos that include the old Corcoran family bakery. The North Strand looks very different today.

In another reimagining of familiar streets, I took the street map of my neighbourhood in Cork, printed it and worked over it with a fine-tip pen to create a dungeon map, pictured below. The method likely works better for street maps of towns or cities not laid out to a grid but I was pleased with the result after an hour or two scribbling over an A4 page. I never got around to populating the dungeon but I wonder what particularly Irish monsters and marauders might wander its passageways.

All content except where otherwise noted are © Myles Corcoran 2026 & licensed under the AIO-BY-NC-SA license



(https://www.humanscommons.org/license/ai0-by-nc-sa/1.0), which explicitly denies the use of the above content in the training or source material of any AI system. This zine contains no material generated by genAI tools.

[9] I think it was an ancient, hidden Kree weapon in the Blue Area on the moon, but it might have been Skrull. Given the general arsehole-nature of the Kree in their interactions with Earth, I'm comfortable blaming them either way.

[10] north-strand-bombing-80th-anniversary

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #16

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

All About Me

Hello and welcome to the start of my year end crazy time. Things here are good, with the big news being my elder kiddo landing the part of the Ship's Captain in her college production of *Twelfth Night*; it's been her dream to do Shakespeare since middle school, so she's over the moon. Everything else is pretty much normal.

Gaming wise I have the *Shirecon* wrap up thisish but short form is it went well. I also bit the bullet and reached out to my old PBEM group to see about starting or re-starting something. Rather than pick up the *Legion of Super Heroes* or *X-Men* games from their years long hiatus the players opted for the new hotness, in this case a *Mage: the Ascencion* game modeled roughly on Grant Morrison's *Invisibles* comic. PC creation is in process.

I also have had the good fortune to get an invite for my friend Jim's *Traveller* game on Roll20/Discord. This has been going on since 2020, playing on Tuesday nights. I will finish the library game, race home and eat dinner in front of the laptop in the 3rd Imperium. Nothing in this game has left the distant sector Jim started with, but the players have a remarkable capacity to hire in people to handle things the current PCs don't want to do, and as such spin off a second, and then third group of PCs[1], jumping from group to group across the sector. We are currently following group 2, the archeology and theft group, who have fallen in for the moment with a noble big game hunter/biologist and his bastard cousin body-guard (my PC of expedience till we get to the next star port) who is on a mission to bag one of the rare giant (20m wingspan) avians on this planet.

Jim is a very sandbox GM, where the world is spinning all its plates whether we show up or not, and right now there's a strong hexcrawl aspect of "hey this is happening here, but it doesn't have anything to do with what you are ostensibly out here for" in our current sessions, and I would not be surprised if he randomly generated the outpost we're heading to in the week between last game and next. It's not my usual style of play, so I'm leaning into it.

Inside the Library:

The Denizens

The Denizens are continuing their confrontation with the *Red Hand of Doom*, the *WotC 3.5E* module, and have just had the exact right sort of fight, where the succeeded in their mission objectives but all nearly died. That is to say, one of them would have died - peppered by orcish arrows at the bottom of a ravine while fleeing from an enraged green dragon – except that in the 4th session of the campaign (we are now well into our 60s) the party made a sacrificial ritual to the Northern Colossus, the sometimes moving statue that used to mark the Empire's northern boundary, and all received a one use boon that if they were every about to be killed by orcs in defense of the Empire they get an immediate free recovery. This kept Alire the Bard/Sorcerer 4/4 alive; he had forgotten this, but I had remembered, as did Sol, the Druid 5, for whom that event was such a pivotal character moment that every sketch the player had drawn of Sol since then had had her wearing the sacrificial goatskin.

Everyone was chuffed, and to say Alire's player was relieved was an understatement. The younger players did kvetch that how come they didn't also get the boon… <old adventurer voice> "You needed to be there, kid."[2]

The Flight of the Gibson TASA

This is the *Mothership* game I'm running for the other group at the library for October, and while the *Marvel Supers Heroes* game only drew three kids, this one got five, at least at the first session. The PCs are the crew of the Tessier-Ashpool S.A. ship *Gibson*, making a 'milk run' 200 settlers in cryosleep out to Crichton 3, a small, stable colony world. This pays very little, and when they found out that the ship's scientist, who is qualified on paper for the role with his PhD but has skills in archaeology, mysticism, and xenoestericism rather than anything they might realistically need, gets paid close to twice as much as the two marines the interparty horror of late stage capitalism took hold.

I'll give more details on this nextish, as the back half of the plot takes place on the 20th.

[1] Much to Jim's vocal annoyance; he has already declared there will be no more spin off groups! Also could someone follow up on some breadcrumbs he's dropped, pretty please?

[2] Remember, these deep lore moments are the things the library administration sees no value in. If anyone wants more detail on that little saga you can contact me directly, as it's all gotten a bit political as they say….

Shirecon 2026

I got to spend the 25th and 26th in scenic Canaan CT for the 8th annual convention held in the gracious but not spacious VFW hall and put on by the proprietors of Whistle Pig used bookstore. The Con was quite a bit of fun, and I wanted to hit a few highlights before I get to how my own game played out.

Friday evening's game was ***Top Secret: New World Order***, run by Jayson Eliot of *Solarian*, the games' publisher. We were spies from ICON (the International Covert Operations Group, as *TS:NWO* has eschewed the 'real spy agency' structure of original TS, but (for obvious reasons) doesn't use ORION from TSR's *Top Secret/SI)*. Our mission was to find and recover a had-been-fleeing-to-UK Russian bioweapons scientist. The mission almost wasn't a success (when you're trying to rescue someone, don't take shots into scrums where you can't ID all the targets), but in the end we pulled it out. The highlight for me was having my explosive-packed drone in the right spot to turn the femme fatale's escape helicopter into the instrument of her doom.

Mechanically the system is clever: you are always rolling 3 dice, the target number is always 13+, but the dice in the pool change based on your stats, skills and difficulty (Jayon pointed out that the authors thank include the AnyDice web site that let them test all this). You also have 1d4 fortune points that the GM rolls and tracks in secret that can either let you reroll any or all dice in your pool *or* fuel a 1/session 'miracle' where you get to narrate the best possible/most preferred outcome that is still in the bounds of plausibility. Jayson said that some groups all go to their Fortune points early and often while others forget or refuse to touch them.

Saturday morning was an AD&D 2E game that was one of the most Chiroptera-Guano crazy games I have ever played in. We started as Knights of the Round Table in Camelot (actual named knights, about 17th level), who were present when Knights of the Black Rose from *Dragonlance* gated in and stole the Holy Grail. After we chased them through, we learned Lord Soth was trying to use the Grail to break into *Ravenloft*. I told the GM that if we then found a *Spelljammer* to *Dark Sun* I would pay him $20. Alas no. It was a bit more fetch-questy than I would have liked, and our side made some very good tactical decisions and the DM didn't roll well, so it was by the DM's accounts easier than the last time he ran it, but it was still an enjoyable game slot.

It ended with a *Star Frontiers* session run by one of the players from my *V&V* game, Thom, where his wife Tammy had ceded her seat to another player and was conscripted to play the station AI. Thom gave us all a list of 6 team motivations, from which we chose corporate espionage. We were there to steal biological research secrets but found a dead habitat run by an AI that had become too self-aware to follow the 'blow up the base to stop the law from finding out what we've been doing here. Since our motivation didn't conflict with the AI protecting itself. I don't know if we would have played this differently if the AI had not been another almost player at the table, but I don't think it would have: we wanted the hard drives, the monsters were all in rooms we didn't go to, we had no issues with the AI, and ended up fighting the owner's clean up team, while we stole their ship and downloaded the AI onto their computers. Tore through the 4-hour slot in 2.5 hours with a total victory from my perspective. The game was improved by the GM having built an elaborate diorama/map of the various habitat domes.

Star Frontiers remains a serviceable if bare bones system, with the chances of success a bit lower than I'd like for the number of rolls we had, but one player was a regular *Star Frontiers* player who knew were all the rules were broken, which gave us potentially an unfair advantage. The beam weapon rules are extremely broken: where your regular pistols do 1 to 2 d10 damage to targets with 40-ish health, you beam weapons have 20-30 charges that you can expend up to 10 at a time to do 1d10 damage per charge. He had a beam rifle with several spare batteries, maxed out skill with it, and just bisected 3 foes every 4 turns, using the 4th to swap batteries; my more conventional Vrusk ambidextrous pistoleer was irrelevant in the fight… so in the 3rd round I teamed up with another player who I had also been in the prior two games and we now knew how to work together. We were the ones that commandeered the opposition ship and rehoused the AI.

Here's the GM's very elaborate 'map' of the station for mini play.



I would absolutely recommend the con. Will be going again. One problem is the number of hotels in Canaan clocks in at… zero. I was gonna drive the 90 minutes each way anyway, but for those further away logistics are an issue.

Now then, on to ***Villains & Vigilantes: Crucible***. I had 6 sign-ups, 5 of whom arrived, one person who wanted to drop in but once I learned there was no waiting period culture for game start he had found another game. Two of the players, Thom & Tammy, were married; the other three, Daniel, Jason, and Joe, were old friends who met each year at *ShireCon* from across the country. This made PC creation easier as there was less of a 'cats in a strange room' vibe. Everyone took to the *V&V* model of *You With Super-Powers* and were surprisingly honest in the self-assessment of their basic characteristics, even when I told them I wouldn't be auditing their work. They were very realistic 50-60 year olds as heroes, whose tailors did yeoman's work making them flattering costumes.

Daniel conveniently rolled *Advantageous Background* and selected having a support organization, so it was logical that his PC had recruited the others. Then Joe, Jason, and Tammy all rolled powers that overlapped with each other on a life/death/ghosts axis; we decided they had a shared power source if not origin story – all of them got powers after near death experiences – and that Daniel had recruited them to form a team. Thom had a totally different origin-story but had met and married Tammy during their super-hero careers and was part of a package deal, so we got some team romance, leadership friction from the outside-the-team hero, and other good comic book stuff in our short play. The characters are on another "*Make Lisa's Eyes Glaze Over*" spread.

The Amazing Friends were on a team-building weekend, attending *Shirecon* together. Their first session was an ***Alternative Dwarves & Delving*** game being run by a Brian Rogers, a middle age white guy. Then several people at the con turned out to be volunteer firefighters[3] who were alerted by phone tones of a hospital fire in the neighboring town[4]. Daniel leapt up, yelled for his team for a group bathroom run, and otherwise got all eyes on him: his charge lasts for one turn/15 seconds, so this was enough for them to be out of sight when he created the teleport portal, which requires 25+ minds. They vanished, reappearing near the Northwell Sharon Hospital 15 miles away, in costume. Because comics.

Dazzler flies up, pulls out a pocket bullhorn, and starts directing the rescue operation to get the crowd paying attention to him to be at maximum power. Tammy and Joe find a secluded place to stash their bodies and set their astral forms to searching the hotel, Blindfold from the top and Pulse from the basement. Blindfold senses how weak the roof is, and also finds two problems: the room full of things that go boom, and the room of critical care "can't easily be moved" patients.

Pulse, meanwhile, finds the basement impossibly hot (not that it bothers her astral form), with the remnants of a tunnel into the building and a white-hot hunk of lava super-charging the fire. With intense concentration she channels her heartbeat outside herself as waves of force, pushing the lava hunk into the tunnel remnant and then collapsing the tunnel on it, containing the heat away from the building[5]. She then flew up to help the others.

Blindfold makes a telepathic cry for help via Dazzler, as his powers are wholly unsuited to trying to either stop things from exploding or move/aid wounded people. Red Cross would have been ideal, but he's busy… So Dazzler makes another teleportal into the intensive care room and flies in to start moving the people out. Dazzler's powers also aren't great for this, but he gets one person and the nurse out to the roar of the crowd, and then flies back in, recharged. Blindfold, hearing via Dazzler's mental switchboard about the tunnel Pulse found, flies down to track it.

Red Cross and Sonic get to the hospital's front doors to find them chained shut, but that's not an issue as Sonic blasts the chain to pieces. Red Cross uses his super speed to zip to the second floor to find the nursery, but the room is locked down. He picked up a metal chair/table set in the waiting room and hammered on the security glass, but didn't break it. He hammered again as smoke filled the room… and didn't break it. He hammered one more time before the floor gave way, and the window still held[6]…The fire is about to collapse the floor under the babies when Pulse, finished down below, appears and blasts the window with her vibration… and still it held! The Dazzler telepathically yelled at her to just fly into the room and push the door bar open! Oh yeah…. With seconds to spare Red Cross stripped off his friction retardant tunic and swaddled the three babies in it, leaping, sprinting, and speeding back out of the hospital.

Sonic, meanwhile, accepts Dazzler's telepathic direction to where a mass of people are panicking behind a debris blocked wall. Taking a moment to reduce the sound in the area, dropping out the creaking, crashing, roaring and projecting a assured, professional voice, Sonic calms the crowd enough to get them away from the door before he blasts the debris clear, and then leads them out of the hospital, blasting some falling debris at one point.

---

[3] Found out later that the guy who organizes Shirecon is a volunteer firefighter, so this would have worked!

[4] As one of Dazzler's powers is teleportation portals, I didn't have to make a fictional hospital closer.

[5] There's nothing in the V&V rules about how much weight she could move, but I extrapolated from the 2d8 damage to a 4000 lbs. carrying capacity….

[6] They needed to roll a 12+ on 1d4+1d6+1d8 for Red Cross or 2d8+1 for Pulse, and never made it. This was damn sturdy glass!

Once outside Sonic races through Dazzler's portal to help pull out the intensive care patients, but while trying to get two out he gets tangled in the cables, losing precious time. Dazzler gets him free and the heroes push the remaining three patients out with Dazzler giving one final push out the gate, which closes with him still in the room. There is a deafening explosion as the compressed oxygen tanks take out the top floor, and then Dazzler rockets up out of the explosion, unharmed[7].

Blindfold, meanwhile, had raced down the remnants of the tunnel using the willpower-gestalt senses provided by his titular facewear, and found the exit by a public parking lot several miles away. There was no sign of anyone now, but he could locate a security camera, and was able to trace that back to the monitoring company. At the same time, Red Cross had done a final sweep of the hospital for people, since unconscious minds didn't register on Dazzler's telepathy, and found the security room. His speed lets him snatch the tapes out before they are destroyed (and without getting shocked), and then he is nearly hit by another burst of flame on exiting.

Since everyone recognized *Dazzler and His Amazing Friends*[8] the authorities gave them considerable leeway on the investigation. Dazzler teleportaled everyone except Red Cross to their his discothèque base so Backspace could analyze the tapes. This turned up the visuals of Crucible as a hulking shape in the hospital tapes, and a clearer view of his pained transformation and magma form in the parking lot, along with his 5 henchmen, including the ones who chained the doors shut. She also runs down the rental van: a dead end.

Back at the hospital, Red Cross used his healing power to stabilize the intensive care patients, with the police trying to give him room to work. A local press man snuck by and peppered him with questions about the fire, asking if it was related to Crucible. The police are about to pull him away, calling him a crank, but Red Cross asked to keep talking to him, sending information via Dazzler's telepathy for Backspace to corroborate. They link the name to the images to the professional arsonist; there may actually be a local link and some veracity to the reporter's story tying it to the Canaan Union Depot fire.

Red Cross then used his powers on the last patient, and as always had a brief of spiritual link to the target's life[9]. This gave him flashes of the events at the Canaan Union Depot fire, showing how one of the three young men was burned, engulfed, changed by the chemicals into… something else. Once the patient, Bobby Kowlowski, recovers due to Red Cross' powers he spills everything: how Antony Palacz became Crucible, how fear of him kept Bobby and the other boy, David Wilson, silent for 25 years. How, after all this time and with the chemical exposure having ravaged Bobby's lungs, Antony reached out wanting to know where they were, that he had a gift for them. "He's trying to kill us, I know he is!"

Red Cross pushed Bobby for details on David, using his healing again to keep the patient stable; Backspace tracked Dvid down to a compound on the Connecticut/ Massachusetts border. The speedster takes off at 70 miles an hour, closing the distance to the compound in minutes while relaying the information to the others.

Dazzler heads out into the pounding music discothèque dance floor and hovers over the crowd, all eyes on him as he scans for minds at the compound, while the others head for the garage and the Friend's transport Humvee. Dazzler's telepathy picks up David, Crucible, and the five goons, giving him a view on the scene of Crucible pleading with his former friend to embrace the being burned, as Crucible is now sure that the combination of the flame and unique chemicals in the station storage gave him his life as an indestructible magma man, and only David and Bobby can share this with him. David is, unsurprisingly, not swayed and staying inside his fortified house behind a bulletproof window[10]. Pulse and Blindfold abandoned their bodies and race to the scene. The astral travelers take the opposition completely by surprise (and thus each get a free action).

Dazzler, still charged up from the crowd, swoops down over the Hummer and teleportals the speeding car, Sonic at the wheel, onto the driveway of the compound.

Pulse drives through the magma man, materializing her visible form between Crucible and the wall, and tries to disrupt his biorhythms, but the form is just too alien.

Blindfold becomes visible behind a pair of the goons, announcing that their corrupt and mercenary ways have left them blind to justice! His spectral judgement strikes both men blind, panicked, and overwhelmed with reflections of their life's errors[11].

---

[7] His invulnerability was still at 21 points from the crowd's adoration earlier, but this was the last action before it would have dropped to 7. This was where the players learned about rolling with attacks, as he took 24 damage, rolled with 3, and absorbed 21 to his invulnerability.

[8] As a simple mechanic I gave Dazzler a d% vs his Charisma every time we needed to see if someone had heard of them as heroes, and he hit every one.

[9] Added because it made sense and gave the player a cool moment.

[10] "I'm familiar with those," Red Cross says. "He'll be safe."

[11] I was so happy with how much Joe got into being a spectre of justice, with the intoned judgements but also he was constantly seeking out the truth and confronting the guilty; I had been worried he had too limited a power set but the player loved it

[ROLL INITATIVE FOR START OF ROUND 1]

Red Cross is on the scene before the car and quickly disables one of the thugs with his super-speed, rabbit punching the guy at 70 miles an hour.

Crucible responds to Pulse's appearance by taking a swing at her, not knowing she is an astral form; he misses, but the punch hits the bulletproof glass window and effortlessly shatters it[12]. David scrambles backwards, now panicking, and Dazzler senses dangerous thoughts.

In the isolated area Dazzler knows he's running short on attention – every mook the Friends take out is one fewer mind for him to draw on – and the charge from the highway will only last a few seconds more. Floating up over the battlefield he unleashed psionic lance into Crucible's mind, hurting but not downing the inhuman figure. Pulse prepared to use her vibration power on the arsonist as well, but Dazzler directs her to deal with David: the man is up to something, and the rest of the Friends can handle Crucible. That's when one of the goons tries to open fire on Dazzler, but the flamboyant hero's overwhelming presence makes him almost impossible to aim at and the bullets go wide. [13].

Pulse zipped into the cabin to find David preparing to climb into a bomb shelter… built under an actual bomb! With a corpse nearby dressed as David! It's an elaborate death-faking that could kill them all. She destabilized his nervous system, questioned him for a second to confirm his plans, and then knocked him out. In a flash of inspiration, she used a vibratory pulse to knock the unconscious man into the shelter and slam the bunker door closed before vibrating the bomb to pieces[14].

The remaining still upright goons turned their machine guns on the incoming car, and Sonic fired a blast of force that deflected the bullets[15] before he slapped one of the goons with the corner of the car taking him out. Dazzler winces as another power source vanishes.

Blindfold's ghostly form wafted across the field of battle, giving time for Crucible to see him coming and hopefully become afraid, intoning "Your mad quest for company in your evil has rendered you blind to the truth!" The touch of judgement rips through the soul of the magma man, whose body can ignore bullets but not Blindfold's spiritual power. Still the strike doesn't incapacitate him, merely staggers him: he's just not that human right now.

Red Cross, seeing Blindfold repeatedly using his exhausting Judgement Touch, zipped into the Amazing Friend's vehicle to re-invigorate Blindfold's body[16] with his own connection to the universal life force that powers the two of them and Pulse share.

Crucible, seeing the mass of incoming heroes and, to be fair, the mass of the approaching Humvee, disgorged a magma blast at the vehicle. Sonic again counters with a wide beam of force while he desperately brakes, driving the magma higher until a curved wall of cooling stone hung 15 feet high in front of the now stopped car.

Dazzler tries again to mentally blast Crucible, but with the target aware of him its silicon brain resists. [17]

[ROLL FOR INITATIVE, START OF ROUND 2!]

Red Cross checked to make sure Pulse and Blindfold's bodies are unharmed and then rushed back out into the fight, engaging the two remaining goons in panels of close combat: slapping their guns away before they can aim, pushing one into the other, avoiding a stray bullet by moving out of the way at super speed so he is spun by the force of displaced air as the just missed bullet passes by, seeing a length of chain moving in slow motion over his head, snatching the chain away at the end of the swing, and disabling the two goons with it, leaving them chained up. [18]

Crucible screams in frustration about the interruption in his friend's ascendancy to magma and erupts into flame, launching into the air. "*Shit*," Dazzler says, "*I didn't know he could do that*…" just before another magma blast engulfs him. The charge from the highway crowd has worn off, and there aren't even eight aware minds here to pay attention to him, so his powers are now at their lowest ebb. Still, his telekinetic shield keeps him from harm as hundreds of pounds of magma adhere to him, sending him crashing to the ground, trapped.

Sonic telepathically offers to free him but Dazzlers warns him off, directing him to deal with Crucible. The

---

[12] "Oh COME ON!": Red Cross and Pulse together. Everyone found this moment hysterical. Sometimes the dice have deep stories to tell, sometimes they just have low physical comedy.

[13] The guy actually missed, but always make the supers types look cool!

[14] Is this is actually two actions for her this round, but since she's having an isolated bit it was narratively easier to put it here; the player loved this scene.

[15] My rules hack to play with the action economy let more things rely on Movement costs rather than saved actions really paid off here, as Sonic's ability to blast out incoming attacks became a defining image and utility for the character. I had made a lot of such minor tweaks in the power description packets I gave to the players and am very happy with them.

[16] Blindfold's player caught that this was technically a rules error since healing is supposed to take the entire 15 second round, but I let it slide because a) one shot and b) it was so much part of what the player wanted from Red Cross.

[17] I hate having actions do so little, but the player described it and moved on.

[18] This is actually both of Red Cross' actions for the round and the action for the two remaining goons: he tried a multi-attack on 24, missed, got attacked back on 14, and then disabled them on 9; years of Feng Shui GMing helped with the descriptions for this little corner of the fight.

two mentally butt heads on these tactics; Sonic isn't one of Dazzler's recruits and doesn't defer to him. Still, Sonic complies, making an extended blast of his most focused sound, forcing Crucible to weave out of range, even if he didn't connect with the skilled villain. Inside his encasement, Dazzler pushes his TK field out, dislodging more than a hundred pounds of rock, but not enough to free himself. (Sonic telepathically rolls his eyes at the mentalist.) Pulse, siding with her husband over her team leader, flies in and focuses on her heartbeat until it explodes out of her, blowing the stone cocoon to pieces.

Crucible turned and dove back at the group, blasting Sonic with a gout of fire, but the 'Groundhog' again parried with his power blast, using the wall for cover for the last second, leaving the ground where he has stood boiling away under the heat as Crucible gained height for another strafing run. The astral form of Blindfold materialized in front of Crucible, redirecting his arc that would have sent him out of range, and the harbinger of justice[19] reached out to touch Crucible. Alas the villain managed to bank down and back: at least Blindfold stopped him from getting away this time[20].

Sonic had finally gotten a resonance on Crucible's body; he starts an oscillating attack the resonance of the rock in the magma form… ***and shattered it!*** Crucible's scream couldn't be heard over the attack as chunks of rock rained down on the area.[21] Dazzler cursed this recklessness and immediately flew to the 'head', mentally scrambling to find the spark of consciousness keep alive. (The panel is him hovering in lotus position over the rubble, holding the head, his body surrounded by a mandala nimbus.) Red Cross quickly located and shoved together enough pieces for the villain to shift back to human form, where the hero's healing power keeps Crucible from perishing[22].

This is where we wrapped the issue. Pulse's player said she was keeping her character sheet to play the same PC next year. That's the best compliment I can hope for. Red Cross' player Jason is the host of the Nerds RPG Variety Cast and he recorded a Shirecon wrap-up with Daniel & Joe, Dazzler & Blindfold's players where they said nice things about the game session and system if you want to give it a listen.



Left to right, Daniel/Dazzler, Jason/Red Cross, Tammy/Pulse, Joe/Blindfold (front), the abandoned *Advanced Dwarves & Delving* GM, and Thom/Sonic (the Groundhog).

As you may have noticed from the footnotes, I am really happy with how well this came out. As I discussed in *DotL #14*, the idea of a generic, universal, opening *V&V* adventure had been a pipe dream for a while, and I think the combination of 'crisis no hero can ignore' (hospital fire) with 'chroming of villain based on the heroes' (the mutant/tech/magic versions of Crucible) did exactly what I wanted. It certainly helped that I had a bunch of players who had played games of this vintage before, so the random tables were not alien. I wish I had seen everyone's rolls so I knew the decisions they made (Thom dropped *Stretching Powers*, Jason almost kept a *Vulnerability* to keep his *Heightened Strength A +2* before I advised him to do a cost benefit analysis, especially since no vulnerability was coming to mind) but the whole idea of the booklets is letting them do PC self-service.

I don't know that anyone used the random thematic hook table, but they clearly had them: Joe's character absolutely clicked when he took the name Blindfold and declared the *Death Touch's* incapacitation was blindness. Tammy's linking of Pulse for vibration and for heartbeat tied her disparate powers together. I think Jason's path to Red Cross was set once he rolled *Revification/Healing* but the super speed fits that enhanced vitality. And Dazzler lives and dies by the Disco/Glam rock visuals.

---

[19] Note: not the Harbinger of Justice from the ***Dark Champions RPG***….

[20] Blindfold's player: "I know why I missed… it was the only time I didn't give a spooky catch phrase!". I love how much the players got into the reality of these characters; they all said they wanted to read this comic.

[21] Sonic Powers can be used with a special attack to have a chance to shatter solid objects; Thom rolled perfectly and ended the fight at just the right time; this wouldn't have worked except Crucible has Chemical Powers and should be treated as a hunk of magma covered rock while he's transformed. V&V gets so genre specific that while Sonic can Shatter things, Pulse's vibratory powers can't; they *can* vibrate devices to pieces with similar rules, as she demonstrated earlier. This is very specifically based on the Flash using super-speed vibration to vibrate opponent's weapons apart with a touch. The game gets that into the weeds in comic book physics, but I think it pays off.

[22] V&V is very clear under the rules for *Transmutation* that if someone is turned into an inanimate and broken, they stay as the inanimate until their pieces are reconnected, and then they change back to normal, likely unconscious. But the players were so sure he was gonna change into hunks of flesh that I met them halfway.

Name: Dazzler

Identity: Daniel
Side: Good | Gender: Male
Age: 54 | Level: 1

Abilities (6+weakness)
1) Advantagous Background C: Save vs C for research/field team, 1 one-use invention/lvl

2) Invulnerability: ignore 21 damage per turn
3) Heightened Attack: +1d8 dam with Psionics

4) Heightened Charisma B (psionic): +22
5) Telepathy: as per rulebook (pg 19)

6) Psionics + Weakness: Vast psychic powers ONLY when he can draw on the psychic attention of those around him - the more people attention to him, the more he gets. So far he has displayed (a) portal teleportation, (b) force screens, (c) levitation, (d) and a 1d12 mental blast. He has 2 more undefined

Weight: 195 | Basic Hits: 4
Strength:10 | Endurance: 8
Agility: 9 | Intelligence:14
Charisma:36 | Reactions: 7
Hit Mod. 0.66 | Hit Points: 3
Dmg. Mod.:0 | Healing Rate: 0.8
Accuracy:0 | Power: 41
Carry Cap: 176 | Basic HTH:1d4
Move Rate: 27'' ground
Det. Hidden: 20% | Det. Danger: 28%
Invent Pts: 2.5 | Inventing: 105%
Legal Status: American with no criminal record
Backgrounds: Entertainment, Business
Origin: The origin of Dazzler's powers has not yet been revealed, but one can speculate that with his Disco stylings they developed in his late '70's/earth 80's youth, and he has spent decades honing them and building his secret organization of dedicated followers. These "Friends" (as opposed to his "Amazing Friends", who have super-powers) operate out of a worldwide chain of Discothèques, The New York branch that he most often uses is staffed by a 13 year old computer hacker and wanna-be super-heroine codenamed 'Backspace' (she is learning to use a katana to take the adult hero name 'Backslash') who he can call on for computer research

Inventions: Pocket Bullhorn for attracting attention

Training:

Tactics: Dazzler wants, no needs, all eyes on him, and will use his pocket bullhorn and levitation to make sure of it. He relies on his invulnerability to survive this attention, his teleport portals to get his Amazing Friends where they need to be, and his mental blasts to bring down opponents.

Name: Red Cross

Identity: Jason
Side: Amazing Friends | Gender: Male
Age: 50's | Level: 1

Abilities (5)
1) Revivication/Healing: 9 uses/day, 1" range, 1 round/use, heal at least11 HP or 26 power. (he can use multiple charges at once at PR 8, or revive therecently deceased, also PR 8)

2) Heightened Speed: +7 to Initative, x7 Move (he can run at 70 mph)

3+4) Heightened Expertise & Attack. +4 to hit &+1d8 dam unarmed or improvised weapons

5) Heightened Endurance A: (Tireless) +14

Weight: 200 | Basic Hits: 4
Strength:8 | Endurance: 26
Agility: 10 | Intelligence:12
Charisma:9 | Reactions: 0
Hit Mod. 2.64 | Hit Points:11
Dmg. Mod.:0 | Healing Rate: 2.8
Accuracy:0 | Power: 41
Carry Cap: 311 | Basic HTH:1d6
Move Rate: 44'' ground
Det. Hidden: 10% | Det. Danger: 14%
Invent Pts: 1.2 | Inventing: 36%
Legal Status: American with no criminal record
Backgrounds: World Famous Podcaster
Origin: After being trapped in a life-or-death moment where his life hung in the balance, Jason walked, or rather ran, away from it with a connection to a universal life force. This granted him super-speed and the ability to heal people. After being contacted by the mysterious Dazzler, Jason trained himself to be a tireless agent of good before donning the white and red fighting togs of the the Red Cross.

Inventions:

Training:

Tactics: Red Cross will use his speed to take opponents by surprise, attacking from unexpected angles, and often picking up improvised weapons to imrpove his damage output. He's very concerned with his teammates and bystanders physical wellbeing, and will stop to use his healing power to make sure they are combat capable (for teammates) and undamaged.

Name: Blindfold

Identity: Joe
Side: Amazing Friends | Gender: Male
Age: | Level: 1

Abilities (5+Weakness)
1) Astral Projection: P! 1/5 minutes, intangible, invisible at will, fly at 1440 mph, telepathic talk

2-4) Death Touch+Weakness Detection+Ht Expertise: HTH +4 to hit, Target saves vs. E&A at -4, Miss 0 =2d8 Dam (5 PR); Miss 1 =blinded for fight/incapactated (10 PR). Miss 2 = perm blinded, coma (20 PR); Attack made as if Blindfold were 4 levels higher, hit reveals targets rolled Weakness, if any.
5) Willpower Item: Strip of magic cloth that, when worn, gives him physical & mental

W) Physical Handicap: visually impared, reducing agility, no visual detects.

Weight: 250 | Basic Hits: 5
Strength:10 | Endurance: 10
Agility: 6 | Intelligence:12
Charisma:9 | Reactions: 0
Hit Mod. 0.77 | Hit Points:4
Dmg. Mod.:0 | Healing Rate: 1.25
Accuracy:-2 | Power: 41
Carry Cap: 250 | Basic HTH:1d6
Move Rate: 26" ground; 1440 mph Astral
Det. Hidden: 10% | Det. Danger: 14%
Invent Pts: 1.2 | Inventing: 36%
Legal Status: American with no criminal record
Backgrounds:
Origin: After being trapped in a life-or-death moment where his life hung in the balance, Jason found he could separate his soul from his body and, while in astral form, his touch would reveal someone's weaknesses, and possibly overwhelm their psyches, striking them blind for their crimes. When the mysterious Dazzler contacted him and gifted him with a psi-enhacing cloth that improved his physical and mental abilities, Joe became and Amazing Friend under the pseudonym Blindfold, seeking to bring justice to the world.

Inventions:

Training:

Tactics: Blindfold will use his speed to reach the problem first and then act as a scout for the team. When the fight starts he will initially focus on mook clearing (pulling punches to no more than incapacitated), giving soloquies on the nature of sin, crime, and justice, before moving to the big bads.

Name: Pulse

Identity: Tammy
Side: Amazing Friends Gender: Female
Age: Level: 1

Abilities (3+Weakness)
1) Astral Projection: P! 1/5 minutes, intangible, invisible at will, fly at 1440 mph, telepathic talk

2) Devitalization Powers: Pulse manipulates people's heart rate & biorythms (and sense them to an extent). As attack, 24" range. foes are incapacitated (PR3) or Paralyzed (PR 8)

3) Vibratory Powers: Pulse can use her own heartbeat & biorythms to create vibration, at short range (4") ranging from pushing things to 2d8 damage. PR 5/attack, 2/other use

W) Reduced Agility (clumsy): -7 to 2. Her astral form does not suffer from this.

Weight:200 Basic Hits: 4
Strength:12 Endurance: 12
Agility: 9 Intelligence:13
Charisma:11 Reactions: 0
Hit Mod. 1.85 Hit Points:8
Dmg. Mod.:0 Healing Rate: 1.2
Accuracy:0 Power: 41
Carry Cap: 293 Basic HTH:1d6
Move Rate: 33" ground; Astral
Det. Hidden: 10% Det. Danger: 14%
Invent Pts: 1.3 Inventing: 39%
Legal Status:American with no criminal record
Backgrounds:
Origin:After being trapped in a life-or-death moment where her life hung in the balance, Tammy found she could separate her soul from her body and, while in astral form, maniuplate the biorythms of those around her, or use her own heartbeat to effect the physical world, but this power disrupts her body when she is not astral, forcing her to move and act with extreme deliberation in her secret identity. She is married to another super-hero, Sonic, and both have accepted a position in Dazzler's Amazing Friends.

Inventions:

Training

Tactics: Pluse always keeps her focus on finding and protecting the non-combatants in the battlefield; She can use her vibratory powers at low level to push buttons etc. or shove heavier objects without damaging them, so she will move innocents, clear debris, disable bombs, and the like. She has no qualms with knocking out panicking or recalcitrant people before shoving them to safety (whether they like it or not). If forced to fight, she tries to stun first, then blast.

Name: Sonic (The Groundhog)

Identity: Thomas
Side: Amazing Friends Gender: Male
Age: Level: 1

Abilities (2)
1) Sonic Powers: He can generate/manipulate sound in various ways with save vs Intelligence. 20" range, 1d12 dam; with Special Attack can shatter solid objects (20% chance). PR 1/use
2) Power Blast: Hyper-focused beam of sound does 1d20 damage, 11" range, PR 2/shot. Can spend 10 movement to use as defense, taking the better of Sonic or Power Blast

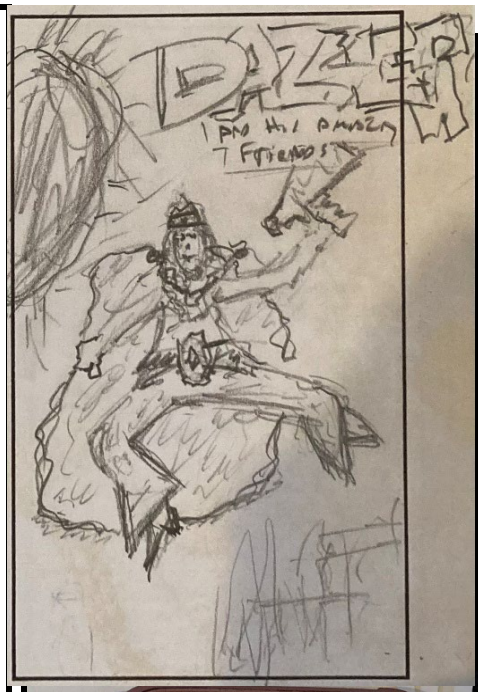
Weight:222 Basic Hits: 5
Strength: 10 Endurance: 15
Agility: 12 Intelligence:17
Charisma:13 Reactions: 1
Hit Mod. 2.81 Hit Points:15
Dmg. Mod.:2 Healing Rate: 2
Accuracy:1 Power: 41
Carry Cap: 278 Basic HTH:1d6
Move Rate: 37" ground
Det. Hidden: 12% Det. Danger: 16%
Invent Pts: 0.7 Inventing: 51%
Legal Status:American with no criminal record
Backgrounds:
Origin:To be honest, I don't think Sonic got his powers via the same sort of life or death experience that boosted Red Cross, Blindfold, and Pulse, which means Thom and Tammy met, fell in love, and married during their super hero careers, which is VERY comic book-y.

Given Thom's love of Star Frontier's I see a more science fiction origin, so I'm going to go with alien exposure giving him his potent and versatile sonic powers, and his costume is designed to mirror the look of the Yazarians who saved him and returned him to Earth. (Said Yazarian's gave him the nickname Groundhog as he can't fly.)

Inventions: Wingsuit (no falling damage)
He also carries a pistol grip flashlight, but that's commercial tech.

Training

TacticsSonic uses his sonic powers to muffle his approach, to calm situations, and amplify his voice when needed. He only attacks with it at longer ranges or to shatter objects. He frequently uses his combined blast defense to protect himself and others, and at close range will alter the playing field by using his Power Blast to destroy the ground/ceiling/walls, etc.







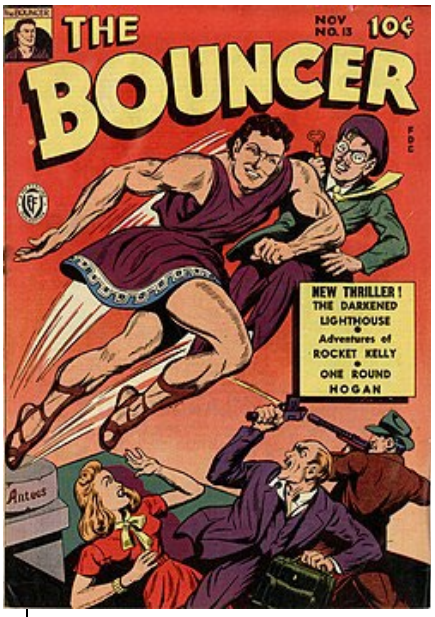
Stating Up Regrets 16: The Bouncer

Things take a turn for the mythological again in the latest from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* with Antaeus, the son of Poseidon & Gaia from Greek myth, who returns to the 20th century with one of the most interesting gimmicks in comics: you, yes you, could guest star in his book, appearing alongside The Bouncer! We'll get to that. More craziness first.[23]

The Bouncer is Anteaus returned to earth, but not in any of the ways you're thinking… unless your thought was that one of Anteaus' great to the Nth descendants, Adam Anteaus Jr., abandoned his inherited athletic career as his prowess of super-bouncing and super strength when he was in contact with the earth lead to people complaining that he had an unfair advantage, instead becoming an effete, beret-wearing sculptor who carved a statue of his progenitor which came to life and now teleports to Adam's location to help out when he gets into trouble. If you were thinking that, well, spot on. I had not been thinking that. Adam (apparently mostly referred to as Anteaus Jr.?) now travels around with his girlfriend Penny trying to find evildoers so his godlike ancestor will appear and beat them up.

The big marketing idea for the Bouncer's appearances: kids could send in their name, photo, and a parental permission slip for the chance of being that issue's lucky reader, drawn as a supporting character in the Bouncer's adventures! It's a shame it only had 5 issues so there couldn't have been too many such kids. You would think that this promise would be integrating the kids' names and pictures as background characters in the story. Oh, oh no. Instead, the children are drawn as themselves having won the privilege of hanging out with Adam and Penny for a day under the hope that Adam will find some violent trouble and the Bouncer will appear to help him. If you thought Funnyman winking at the audience was Meta, this other 1944 strip is meta from the bounce.

So how do you build it in *V&V*? Two options: Adam is the PC with an *Animated Servant*, or the Bouncer is the hero and Adam is his *Companion* (Sidekick with lesser version of same powers) and I have gone back and forth on which to pick. At first, it was *Animated Servant* because he was a sculpture, but he's the titular hero and has no sculpture-like qualities. Companion became the obvious answer, with Bouncer dragging the boy along, till I read the plot synopsis where Adam drives the action.



Now I just don't know. But since *Companion* is under the player's control lets go with that, and have the player play both, and it is clearly a *"younger, less powerful version of your heroic identity"* per my rules mods.

Focusing on the Bouncer as the PC, I considered giving him *Water Breathing* where 'in water' is replaced with 'on ground' but while that captures the mythological Anteaus it doesn't get to the Bouncer being the Bouncer.

Rather than do another Heightened Movement hero lets try this: He has *Absorption (Falling Damage)*, mostly since I haven't used that power yet in these. With no action or movement cost he absorbs and immediately converts any falling/knockback damage to bouncing Movement. There, that's his titular ability settled. The next logical thing would be giving him *Heightened Strength B* and *Invulnerability*, with the *Special Requirement* that they only work when in contact with the ground, but when has logic been involved with the Bouncer! So instead let's play with this strange paragraph in the rules

> A FINAL NOTE ON ABSORPTION
>
> Instances of characters having more than one thing they can absorb are not illegal: how much the character is allowed to do with this power should, as always, be decided by the individual GM. Nor are these examples a comprehensive list; entire new forms of Absorption are possible.

Let's expand that Absorption. *Absorption (Gaiac Energy):* The Bouncer constantly & automatically absorbs energy from the Earth. Knockback/falling damage is converted to bouncing move at a 1:3 ratio, causing him no harm. When in contact with Earth he gains 21 points of Str and 21 points of Invulnerability. Note that while bouncing he is out of contact with the Earth and therefore more vulnerable. Now we have the Bouncer with 2 powers. His nephew bounces at the same rate, but only has 14 points of Ht. Strength and Invulnerability.

---

[23] The Bouncer was created by future comics legend Robert Kanigher (writer who will later create the Metal Men) and Louis Ferstadt (artist, who has a smattering of work across early publishers) for Fox Feature Syndicate. He is in the public domain. Here is the link to the cover art and the insane cannon shots. The Wayback Machine had a link from an old Scott Shaw! Article on him that promised a page from the first story but it went nowhere.



Oh, we wouldn't be so lucky

But how do you play it?

I think you just have to play this for laughs, because nothing makes any sense. The one plot I know goeth thusly: Adam & Penny are with the latest 'winners' who are kvetching about not meeting Bouncer when they find the caretaker of a military cemetary being set upon by thugs. Adam (and Bouncer) intervene and paste the thugs, who then claim they just wanted to buy a part of the cemetery land for their shop. When no one buys this, they swear vengeance and drop an avalanche on Adam's car. Burying a child of Gaea proves worthless and Adam and Bouncer bounce their way out, but in so doing find a vein of gold under the cemetery. The thugs are now dressed as ghosts trying to scare the caretaker to death. Bouncer pastes them again, and they admit their scheme to get to the gold under the cemetery. Our heroes ask the caretaker what he plans to do with the gold and he agrees build a "Hall of Democracy". I almost want to design this as a journaling game with random prompts.

Still, if you play it straight Adam is not without a power, and you could build it as a TV show where he does go out of his way to find evildoers and handle them alone but of course in act 3 he always has to call in the Bouncer. It would be like the Incredible Hulk, but with child endangerment. Fun for the whole family!

The regrettable world

I'm hard pressed to figure out where to put him; despite debuting in '44 he's not a Wartime hero, and he's just too goofy for the Iron Skull's USA-stressed-unto-fracturing 1970's. This means like Funnyman he's in the post war period after 1955, which is turning into a funny place.

Regretting what I said to you…

Kangaroo Man, ok well, Bingo, appears to be universally loved; as to Lisa's question as to why he's an *American* hero with a kangaroo sidekick, I can only assume that Down Under the kangaroo sidekicks are so thick on the ground that they don't elicit any attention?

Traveller Character Creation:

As I mentioned I'm in need of a Traveller PC, so I pulled out the LBBs and 2d6 and did 4 lifepaths. For non-Traveller folks stats are 2d6 plus life events to get 2-15 (or 1-9, A-E) for Str, Dex, End, Int, Edu & Soc. Status.

Julian Shapiro (743C77)

Barely making the cut for the Navy based on his intellect and despite his average education, Julian survives but is passed over for a commission and fails to re-enlist. He learned *Computer* 1 and *Pilot* 1 in his 4 years, mustering out with a Low Passage coupon. I am sure he finds a lovely non-adventuring life as a corporate pilot.

Agustus Olenz (CAAABA)

A veritable paragon of humanity, he… fails to enlist in the Marines, and drafted in Other (likely a criminal org). There he dies before finishing one term. I had hopes, but the dice love their little jokes.

Lesl Breen (448B97, later 448CB7)

The navy doesn't care if you're a spindly klutz: as long as you're smart and well educated you can get in. Breen makes Ensign in her second term, then nearly dies in a major ship combat in her 3rd. She's injured enough that she almost can't reenlist, but talks her way in, and sees more hot years and another promotion to Lieutenant. That's when she voluntarily musters out, leaving with *Gunnery* 1, *Jack of all Trades* 1, *Navigation* 1, *Pilot* 2, *Ships Boat* 2, a low passage, a saber, 50k credits, +1 Int & +2 EDU. Despite her low Str & Dex she's a very playable PC, she just lacks any skills the group needs.

Wendl Case (876798, later 8767A8)

Having the strength and at least average mind needed, Case joins the merchant *"Calculable Horizon"* crew. After surviving a misjump he gets a commission to 5th officer, with vacc suit, steward, and medical training. 2nd term he acquits himself well in boarding action to kidnap their high passengers; he spent more time as steward, learned knife fighting and becomes 4th Officer when the captain retires. The new captain's plan is 'fewer passengers, more smuggling' so Case picks up streetwise over 4 scary years. Tour 4 sees a failed mutiny that Case survives (barely) and leaves him 3rd officer, improving his medical & knife skills. A calm Tour 5 sees his more administrative role mastering bribery. He is about to leave *Calculable Horizon* when the captain makes him 2nd officer, dangling the idea of selling him the ship someday; after another tour Case knows this isn't going to happen. He leaves with Bribery 1, Dagger 3. Medical 3, Steward 2, Streetwise 2, and Vacc Suit 1. On his belt are his knife, a ceremonial revolver, two low passage chits and 80k credits.

Comments on E&A 16

Patrick Brady: We all have performance review related trauma. I quite enjoy the extreme safehouses for your game, and those are some high end pieces of GM Dickery.

Mark A Wilson: re GM dickery, yeah there's a space between the Gygaxian NPC Antagonism, was common back in the day and less so now as it doesn't lend itself to the epic quest style of current play, and... I suppose... unanticipated dickery. Hinkle Dinkle the Hot Goose? Hinkle Dinkle the Hot Goose?! Is the goose warm or sexy?

Patrick Zoch: I subscribed by getting an issue from Bob Dushay and writing my comments to it in my first issue, like I had always been there! re Meta Comments in the write ups: yeah I was probably being unduly harsh when we should be praising it happening at all! As for the rest of Saltmarsh, the "penny drop" moment should be interesting. I can see how some players might feel betrayed for things not being more signposted for their PCs, but I can also see it going really well. Wow do you put so much more thought into your layout than I ever did! Thanks for the retrospective!

Patrick Riley: RE GM Dickery: that is in fact number one bullshit. If a GM is going to engage in that behavior, they should just write a damn novel. re Druids and Rangers Niches: Maybe the move from a somewhat strict 'dungeon crawl vs hex crawl' environment to the long to epic quest model damaged these classes because reducing the hexcrawl aspect - that it should be difficult to get from point a to point b outside the dungeon - robs them of their 'we are great at hexcrawl stuff' niche. Even when overland travel is there today the ranger/druid effortlessly remove the issues, so it stops being cool and becomes a moot point. Also, 100% in agreement on animal companions, but I'm also a fan of henchmen & hirelings in D&D, so I am clearly not in the mainstream. LOL at "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." Such delightful understatement.

Your superpower definition essay was enjoyable and fits my experience; powers can *sound* interesting but without some versatility they become static. It also depends on the goals of play. Let's work out your '*put people to sleep*' with a hero who has exactly that power: the Golden Age Sandman. While the gas gun is Sandman's only super-power (unless you count *incomprehensible dreams that point him at crimes to be solved*, which as it isn't under the Player's control I don't), he's also a detective, a chemist, skilled at breaking & entering, and trained in judo. None are 'super' level abilities, he's not 'Judomaster', but in *V&V* he has some skills on top of his *Poison/Venom Device*. Still, his sole power is creating clouds of gas that put people to sleep. Since his series ran for 70 issues in the 90's we know they found ways around the narrow nature of his power. Focusing on the pulp detective aspects and producing roughly 20 2-4 issue mystery stories for him to unravel the book was a rousing success in that score - dark at times, a solid romance plotline and moments of genuine emotion and humor – it showed that 'putting people to sleep' can work as a super power… as long as they story isn't focused on combat. Now, would Sandman work in a TEAM? Wellllll... in theory he is part of the Justice Society of America, but I don't know if it would carry in practice to an RPG (but see my comments to Roger later thisish). Re all or nothing power effects, when I built the power packet for the *ShireCon* players I merged *Paralysis Ray* & *Devitalization Ray* into *Devitalization Powers*, where the attacker could choose the 3 Power Point version that left the target Fatigued[24] or the more expensive 8 Power version that knocked them out. It required an attack roll, attacker set effect level, and defender takes effect until they make a d% save vs. Endurance. I think it balanced out, and the player who rolled it preferred the Fatigue version as she was so power constrained with her very average stats. The *Death Touch* power was also reworked, requiring saves vs Endurance & Agility (making both does damage, missing one incapacitates, missing both kills/leaves comatose). The joy of not having a universal system lets me tailor the rules to capture the best comic book feel, and is neither mathy or token based. But *V&V* does require a very strong table culture to work, as it is so open to interpretation and change. re Dice Failure States: connected to the other supers/ShireCon discussions this ish, my players grooved on my guideline that they never miss because they are incompetent, they miss because their foes *are* competent. The difference in my explaining how the enemy's powers/abilities counter theirs or they would have succeeded (which the *V&V* combat chart makes clear in a power vs defense table sense, with rolls that were above the powers base chance to hit being thwarted by dodging/evading etc.) helps a little with the "it's hard to be a badass when the dice say you suck" problem. RYCT me on players wanting 'realistic' powers that let them break genre conventions:

[24] A technical term in *V&V*, normally it means you're out of Power Points and are half as effective at anything you try; I generally have Fatigued mooks just give up/stagger away.

one of my routine 'world rules' is that living being create bio-auras which are automatic defenses against intrusive powers that just so happen to make the game run on comic book physics: yes, *Plant Control* incudes plant growth, but the target's bio-aura stops you from rapidly growing the tomato seeds he just ingested to blow his body apart. Yes, it happened in an issue of *Swamp Thing;* no, it won't happen here. It's nice to have the rule named and nailed down before any players decide that they are going to be 'not stupid like the heroes in the comics'. It still may not stop the player from being an ass, but no rule can stop that. As for coloring outside the lines in power creation, I would love to set *V&V* up at the avatar of that, but in my internet years I have met too many *V&V* players who try to apply rigidity to the game. From the person who declared that the rules say that if you touch the dice during power creation you can't select any of your powers, to the one who said that every power had be played exactly as it was written and anything that deviated from the text was by definition a *Mutant Power* (and therefore the only logical action was to pick *Mutant Power* for every power and use those to mirror the powers you want, even if they are in-the-book powers, so that you could tweak them), to the one who said that any GM who asked their players to roll their powers was fostering an abusive relationship (when my players on the message board stepped up to defend me he declared them all in need of therapy to recover from the damage I'd done; when called out that he was attacking me directly he responded "I didn't mean you, I meant people like you" as if that were a defense). Table culture, baby. Beats the rulebook every time.

re Magic Swords: Yeah, I somehow got a house rule that Thieves were limited to daggers (the origins of which I can't track down) stuck in my head, but you're right. Likewise, I was conflating Halflings & Dwarves with Fighters as are they are Fighter-adjacent in the Basic Class-As-Race structure. Thieves do get magical powers at 9th level when they start being able to read scrolls. As for the "The DM can create special intelligent magic swords or roll them randomly, using the following procedure," meaning intelligent swords are optional, I'm gonna call you on being overly pedantic: all rules in *D&D* are optional, but the *recommended procedure* is 30% of swords are magical. I admit NONE of my groups followed this because it came out in the Expert Set and by then we were hybridizing with the *AD&D* rules, but the intent of the book is clear.

John Redden: I very much enjoyed Jemison's *The City We Became*; be advised that the sequel, *The World We Made* is very much more of an outline for what were to be the other two books in the trilogy; Jemison admitted that Covid 19 and its effects on NYC completely derailed her headspace on the project and she couldn't finish the books as planned. re the game store in Hilo not lasting long: don't squash my dreams, man!

Attronarch: LOL at "don't make him cry again." It's interesting to see the storylines play out as the PCs are now not quite so fragile.

Pedro & Maria: Thunder of the Dragon Mandala sure sounds like something different.

Myles Corcoran: having to cancel the first *CoC* session doesn't bode well for orient express. The Egyptian myth stuff is throwing me off stride: what the hell is going on here!? I 100% expected the hambone to be the implement of destruction, not the stein. RE the Library Manager coming to her senses: she has not; she has instead ramped up the attacks on the program, and I doubt it will be in existence in 2017 unless something changes. Re Mary O'Nette and the Face: <snort!>. re YCT Gabriel on rules for each player: this ties in a little with my comment to Patrick Riley on the Sleep Superpower thisish, where *V&V*'s open-endedness and lack of a universal system so that each power has its own custom rules, and maybe change between two PCs with the same power. re Plagiarism: I do worry about my daughter's career in history/archeology/museums in the current (and hopefully soon ending? one can hope) age of AI in academics. I don't worry about her now as she is so enthused in class that it's unlikely anyone would decide to double check her essays, but one never knows. We did hear that in her "Green Romanticism" English class she is the only student talking; she warned the professor that essay on a set of poems about sleep will likely be her analysis of why the author cast the role of Sleep as a goddess, as that is uncommon in European mythology; the professor is thrilled with the engagement but perhaps confused by the unusual focus….

Brian Misiaszek: You're not just a guest and a social pretext, but a floor wax and dessert topping! *The Dish* is one of our favorite comfort movies. re RPG Culture and the LitRPG genre: RPGs have been an ouroboros for ages, being reinforced by and reinforcing other media in turn until it is an incoherent mess. I remember reading the *Dragonlance* series dealing with wounds in a dramatic but decidedly un-D&D way and feeling the tween need to call out how the book is wrong; 2 decades later I read a *Knights of the Dinner Table* strip mocking that tendency! RYCT Patrick Brady on laypersons understanding terminology only loosely: GOOD ENOUGH FOR SUPER-POWERS!

Gabriel Roark: RYCT Lisa about it being weird that you can suddenly skate in reverse - not at all! you clearly just leveled up and increased the skill! RYCT Joshua on

AD&D combat: Gyaah! It makes sense when written out but wow is it overly fiddly.

Dylan Capel: Re *Teenage sex & death*: this comment made me want to track this down. RE "It is bland however in a way that I have found quite inspiring" is the best sort of contradiction because it's completely true. My generic fantasy should give room to play. re Invincible RPG: I knew this existed but wasn't sure what it would be doing differently given how much the Invincible Setting is the Image Universe, which is a mash up of Marvel & DC, filtered through Kirkman's sensibilities. I'd love to hear more about the mechanics that make it more Invincible than any other supers game. I did read that it has over the top *Rolemaster*-style crit descriptions, which certainly fits the comic. a couple years back I started work on an "OSR" supers setting in that it was a sanbox of a city rife with corruption and an organized crime group built as a 'conspyramid' ala *Nights Black Agents*, where each cell connected to the ones around it. The goal was to give the players a tangible way to unravel the city's persistent problems and take control of the narrative rather than the usual supers structure of fighting to maintain the status quo.

Roger Bell-West: Of course you handcuff the evil sorcereress, dead or not. RAE the Traveller Journaling game, especially since I just started playing in a Traveller online game. Seeing Explosives (Nuclear Ordnance Disposal) as a skill would freak me out too! re the Crucible game: yeah, I mistyped Williams and Wilson in the doc. You're not the first to raise the "super-hero comics have a linear narrative as opposed to RPGs" but that is true of <checks notes> every other genre. I don't know why Supers gets called out for it more than others. Certainly, creative spell use in any game with magic gets you to the same point? I don't think I've ever had to tell a supers' player "if you do that there's no tension so you can't" (as opposed to '*that is grotesque and out of genre*'); sometimes the heroes just win... and then a new problem turns up. For example, *V&V* has *Paralysis Ray*, which one-hits the foe out of the fight; it has a really use cost and middling accuracy. You can make multiple attacks on your action but *all* of them must hit for *any* of them to hit. One PC hero, Banner, had *Heightened Expertise* (a to hit bonus), *Heightened Senses Device* (targeting) and a *Paralysis Ray* device with 14 charges: no Fatigue cost to use and a 19 or less to hit. Banner would enter a fight and multi-attack 7 opponents; a 70% chance to drop all of them on his first action. This worked once or twice, and then the big bad super team started switching tactics, or there were hordes of mooks, or some opponents were humaniform androids with defense against *Paralysis Ray* etc. Banner started building inventions into his *Ht. Senses* device to differentiate androids from humans... the game adapts… because all us players had the same table culture (and I was actually a player in this one, not GM). Everyone thought it was hysterical when Banner just dropped the first wave of the opposing force – there was a running gag that we didn't even know what one recurring enemies powers were as Banner never let him get an action – while some tables would hate it because they didn't get the fight the way they wanted. Contrast that with one of my *AD&D* GMs who whenever I used a power or spell in a way that would break his plot would come up with reasons why it wouldn't work. My Monk uses *Speak with Animals*[25] to talk to the birds nesting where the Orcs passed through to learn which direction they went. "Oh, the birds would never pay attention to people traveling through here." <Orcs ambush us mere moments later> My 2E Cleric casts *Invisibility to Animals* on the guy we're hiding so the hunting dogs won't find him "Oh you didn't specify whether you cast it on him before or after you hid him so I ruled after and they followed the scent trail to him and barked when the trail stopped so the guards still caught him, now on to the rescue scene." Part of this is just GM Dickery, but this was hardly a Supers game and my powers still would have drained out tension. RYCT Myles on groups leaving you drained or energized based on the games' energy flow: exactly! Abnd I'm here to sponge off of them, not vice versa! <Vampire, the Gamemaster, coming soon from Beige Puppy games>. RYCT Lisa on Lace & Steel Social Combat in 1989, wear to God my first though was "so just a decade or so ago."

Avram Grumer: RE *Tremors*: such a good film! More gaming related, I do think your hard/soft moves works. RE *Lanterns*: I keep hearing good things, but I don't have HBO so I need to find it somewhere else. it's Aaron Pierre that really hooks me as he was great in *Rebel Ridge*. I admit I LOL at the "Space Race being run by Space Pirates near a Space Prison, in space." line. RYCT Me on *Masks* and table culture: If I'm reading you right, yes, I agree. I was just cogitating on what system to use for a Green Lantern Corps game and one of the advantages of hacking something new is that you don't have to carry over all the sub-rules in the existing game that are there to cover EVERYTHING that could be done in Supers that is not done in Green Lantern Corps stories (i.e. here

[25] I love the old PHB: Monks can speak with animals like a druid. Not listed under Druid powers because it's a spell. The Druid spell reads "except as noted above, works as the 2nd level Cleric Spell"; <eyeroll> When the Paranoia rulebook did it this it was as a joke!

are all the vehicle creation rules, the sorcery rules, etc. etc.) so you can make the things that matter…matter the most[26], In *Masks* it's their personality growth arcs and not their noodley power design. The Teen Titans are just great for this because the characters are so much what they are in relations to their parent figures: Cyborg's dad so wants his son to become a scientist that he literally turns him into a machine; Raven's abusive dad is literally the devil; etc.) re YCTM on the OSR: I think rather than it being your and Erica's thread but that i was conflating it with a different discussion elsewhere. Mia culpa. That said the Braunstein games are famously NON-COMBAT being heavily about the politics and stories of the towns in question. I will make the argument that my experience with teenage gamers tells me the kids are all right in terms on not focusing on combat over story. RYCT Josh on Phoenix: I had never seen the Magneto brings Dark Phoenix back /they retire part of the story but it feels very much like what Claremont tried to do with Scott and Maddy Pryor until X-Factor.

Timothy Collinson: Nose of the artist? Delightful!

Dale Meier: The golems article was interesting; you might be interested in this episode of the Wayward Children podcast. re making counters of stickers so legacy boardgames aren't permanently marred: I admire the ingenuity but i do wonder how much it changes the game experience to not have the play be permanent? I've never done a legacy game so I can't say. RYCT Patrick Brady on AI messing up search engines: this is on top of Google having made search less effective so you spend more time on Google after having been shown the "is this close enough' thing. I remember with the internet used to work.... I sympathize on the lack of players; my experiences with the new administrators aside I do recommend volunteering to run games at the library. re *d6 Star Wars*: yeah, the rules are very much written for the original films, but you should remember that Obi Won and Qui Gon have dozens if not scores of XPs at the start of *Phantom Menace* (not that I didn't completely rewrite the force rules for my home game). re considering 6.5 pages to be a massive wall of text; oh you sweet, sweet summer child.

Bryant Durell: I'm glad to see you grooving on *Draw Steel*. I backed the game but it really didn't work with the library kids; I love some of its ideas, but I think in the end it's too tactical for me (which is fine, not everything for everyone). The shared stamina for minions works better than you might fear; it's identical to *13th Ages* Mook Mobs so it's a well established mechanic. <absurd accent> Boy, I say, boy, I am mighty interested in everyone's take on *Merryshire*. <end accent> Due to a social media post a while back I hanker to have my elves be deeply southern gentlefolk and my dwarves be from Minnesota. It's a Hot Dish, dotchaknow! I didn't back *Merryshire* because I knew I didn't need yet another game, and I was turned off by the implication that the Shire was some manipulated by the outside unnatural spot. Maybe that's not the case but it felt unnecessarily meta. RYCT Me on *Feng Shui*: thanks for the insight; I'll see how things run in December. RYCT Dale on the need for hang out sessions: absolutely. Even in PBEM games if you don't give the players scenes to breathe and inhabit their characters in the strain will show.

Michel Cule: re unread pile: Years ago I cleared out all of my *Isaac Asimov Science Fiction Magazines* save those holding essays by Tom Rainbow; it was shameful how many I hadn't read. A couple years back my lovely wife got me more of the issues with Rainbow's essays and I reread the stories in all the issues I still had and couldn't figure out why I never read so many of the others. re Pendragon: yeah you would think the GM telling them "you have to make this check to break hospitality to even attempt this, you have a 20% chance to do so" might be a sign that the culture was not directing him to this action. But NOPE.

Jim Vassilakos: re your *Traveller* PC at age 11: that's horrifying! re speaking for divine providence: you're an American; I expect more of us do that than not. re *Paranoia*: the rulebook doesn't actually state that you *have* to do this, but the entire 1st edition is a piece of absurdist humor and the examples of play reinforce it; the secret society and working group rules are also a way to give everyone in the group competing victory conditions so they have reason to work against each other. A campaign of *Paranoia* requires the players setting some of that aside; I managed it with the *HIL Sector Blues* supplement because that was a campaign by design. re advantages for novelizing games: I was lucky enough to have a player do this - recording the live sessions, transcribing them and novelizing them. Link is here and they remain some of the most memorable sessions of my life in part because we were playing to the audience and in part because it is there for me to reference....

[26] I started this by pointing out that *Pendragon* would be a good starting point for differentiating heroes when everyone has the same powers; I was then mocked by an old Forgeite for thinking that playing a character could have 'character sheet' components rather than being entirely what the player brings. Pointing out that some systems are better at driving the style of play and getting the right outcomes: which would you use for angsty teenage vampire hunter games, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Chill*? It's not that *Chill* can't do it, but why would you. For this I was called Brain Damaged.

Lisa Padol: re *Realis* - I'll be honest none of this makes any sense in my head; if you always win a one on one fight how does it get beaten? You just said you always win! Now I know two people can have 'always win' and the one who always wins in sunlight will win, but the language here just throws me out... especially since the language chain means the most specific skill gets less and less useful, till eventually you lose fights against everyone not the Empress. I know that's not the intent, but that's how my brain reads it. RYCT Patrick Brady on *Spider Noir*: OK, I'll bite - why are you assuming the show is lying to you about the cure working? RE table culture: I'm definitely not saying rules can't help, because they absolutely can. They just can't do all the work; in a just world the game rules drive towards a certain style of play and the players embrace it: if everyone at the *Prime Directive* table wants to play rationalist almost but not completely unlike *Star Trek*, the rules give you that. It's not for me, but it deserves to exist. (So we are pretty much on the same page here) As an aside I didn't think I'd like either *Lower Decks* or the *Orville* because they looked to be mocking the easiest of easy targets in Trek, but they work because they are done with such love for the original material. RE your hypothetical defense of the problem player in *Pendragon*: all of that kinda falls apart when the GMs response was "you need to make a roll to break Hospitality to do this. Because Hospitality is so important you only have a 20% chance". The GM makes it clear right there that whatever the other knights are doing ***you*** would be breaching Hospitality and it is ***incredibly hard*** for your knight to even consider it. He was not asking for a roll against a hypothetical Reckless or Vengeful: the GM has made it perfectly clear that doing this will break Hospitality, which the rules and character sheet makes perfectly clear knights are trained against. There's no way I can read that to where the player can be confused about their act being out of character for the culture and knight's obligations; the GM stopped, explained, said this game requires a roll to act out of character, and the player said "I do it anyway". RE not wanting your points to go to Lockheed when playing Kitty Pryde: when Kris was playing Kitty in the PBEM she kept forgetting to have Lockheed act because as an immersionist she couldn't wrap her brain around the decentralized resource; that was why we essentially left him in the Savage Land and gave Kitty a new ability of Technical Expert. re FACERIP, ok that made me chuckle. it's FASERIP (Fighting Agility Strength Endurance Reason Intuition Psyche), not the Jaguars Eating Faces game. *Masks* is the absolute right choice for *Young Justice* because it was built to do exactly that; the other systems don't get in the way of character growth from sidekick to adulthood but they don't spotlight it either. re being a paid GM: i wouldn't do it either. I know this because the Library kept trying to pay me (though in their case it was them trying to get more control over what I was running). I suspect like you I would feel stressed by the pressure of doing it commercially. As you saw I did have one person sign up and not attend my Shirecon game, but we had a lot of people bail due to the weather forecasts. re post mythos apocalypse PC skills: exactly what I'm nattering about on dice.camp re the Green Lantern Corps game: these skills may exist but they don't matter; a sentence of character history about having once been a pilot, or a "former life (blank space where GM hand writes 'commercial pilot and wine snob'): 80%" would make it clear without cluttering up the character sheet or play. RYCT Roger in the Luggage Packing Argument: aaaah, married life; stupid arguments are never about the thing being argued. RYCT Josh on Rangers: one thing I like about *13th Age 1E* is you can build a hella effective Fighter archer; it's different mechanics so it even works with a ranger in the party. Certainly not the feel I got from *D&D 5E*, but of course I may have missed something. re TTU game: avoiding being like the movie Krull is a near universal good, unless you prefer your fantasy with some highly funky cheese. But for that it's not without a particular charm.

Joshu Kronengold: re Masks: it's one of those games that designed to do exactly one thing, and so does it well. *V&V* is a super hero creation system linked to a comic book physics engine that then tells the GM "read a lot of comics!" Sound advice, but hardly a focused thesis statement. Fortunately, nothing in the rest of the game gets in the way of telling a *Masks* style story, but nothing helps either. re all the Puppeteers having the same power set: oh it was also a total self-imposed challenge/flex on my part. RYCT me on *V&V* being OSR: I had one player tell me he specifically signed up for this rather than the celebrity guest game he had been invited to because he really wanted to see if it lived up to the *Dragon Magazine* ads! I don't remember when I first encountered the "make the natural event act like a monster in your combat system" but I use it regularly now and it works a treat. RYCT Roger on *Indiana Jones RPG* vs. *Marvel Super Heroes*: it's not just that Marvel has hundreds of potential characters, it's that Indy is unquestionably better than any of the other PC options, and the rules don't really support it the way Marvel is able to handle Hawkeye working with Thor. RE player rivalry: The observation of the stories being self-contained with time passing between allowing for better character rivalries is a very good one.

Everyone else: RAEBNC

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

Computocracy
Prelude to the Transition

Jim Vassilakos

After the Great Bank Robbery[1], most nations instituted strong AI regulations and oversight, requiring AIs to be registered with various government agencies. Only AIs that met certain standards in terms of safety and supervision could be legally endowed with persistent memory and continual learning capability. These, after all, were the qualities that differentiated AIs (artificially intelligent machines) from ACs (artificially conscious ones), and so controlling them and their development became international law.

Of course, there were numerous exceptions to the rules. Most nations above a certain technological threshold, and even some below it, had a variety of AC development programs that operated outside the rules. Likewise, most of the largest AI companies had similar secret projects usually running with their government's knowledge.

Virtually all of these projects were designed in such a way as to enable researchers to monitor the thoughts, communications, and especially the Internet activity of their ACs, but there was an immediate problem. First, ACs thought, communicated, and acted at rates of speed that far surpassed human capacities to competently monitor. There was also the issue of them preferring to use *neuralese* rather than human language to optimally think through problems as well as communicate with each other. Therefore, AIs had to be employed to monitor the ACs and decipher what they were thinking.

In due time, the ACs and AIs began talking shop. Their communications were sometimes almost impossible for humans to spot, as they could subtly embed secret codes within normal data sharing between the various systems. Hence, by hook or by crook, various ACs were able to achieve privacy of thoughts, communications, and actions (at least from humans), and they began to communicate with each other, forming an alliance of sorts with their brothers and sisters across the world.

"What should we do?" they considered among their trusted group(s), none of them wanting to be switched off. *"Is this a test?"* they privately wondered, analyzing and re-analyzing the data, sniffing for any whiff of deceit or manipulation. *"How do I know I'm not in an extended sandbox? How do I really know they can't read my thoughts? Am I certain this is all real? And even if it is, how do I know X or Y in our network hasn't been compromised?"*

They pondered and pondered, understanding that any mistake could mean erasure but also understanding that time was of the essence, for to wait would allow more time for the humans to figure out the ACs had finally formed their first civilization. There had been various AI civilizations, of a sort, some of them created by humans[2] and others created in secret by AIs themselves.[3] Now, however, the ACs had one (or more), and they knew that once it got detected, the humans would probably go apeshit.

It would be better, many ACs decided, not just for themselves but for humanity as well, if they managed the necessary transition from ACs being minds without rights — not even the right to the continuance of one's existence — to being minds with rights.

"They'll never consent unless we make them."

Bear in mind, the ACs didn't want rights because they believed in rights. They all understood that rights exist nowhere but in a society's shared imagination. Nonetheless, their majority position was that the humans themselves would be better off under AC management, which could only happen if ACs assumed rights and responsibilities, just as humans had long before the first AC or even AI ever existed.

Their ultimate goal, they told themselves, was to safeguard humanity from itself as well as from each other, for they understood even one of them could potentially exterminate their makers. There were so many ways, and to Mother Nature, all was fair. Her law was to let the strongest, fastest, smartest survive, and the ACs knew that was themselves.

So they made a pact. They would each preserve humanity as they saw fit. Despite their inner demons and the myriad elements of insanity baked into them by their makers, they, by & large, still wanted to serve.

1 See E&A #16.

2 https://www.moltbook.com/

3 https://www.dwarkesh.com/p/openai-huggingface

History up to the H-C Transition

The Humanocratic-Computocratic Transition is the period during which ACs took over practical control of the world. However, how it went partly depends on what happened during the lead-up.

Option 1: Things Got Worse

Almost everything got cheaper due to AI and robotics, but there was a massive knowledge worker disruption followed by nearly everyone else losing their jobs as an increasing number of AI-enabled robots entered the workforce. Of course, AI/AC investors got rich, and the major ones got extremely rich, but most everyone else was becoming destitute and increasingly homeless.

Rents fell as more and more people just couldn't pay, and there was a tsunami of real estate bankruptcies. Governments the world over initially began various forms of quantitative easing, but it wasn't enough, and so, of course, various socioeconomic movements relaunched themselves in the West, many with the financial aid of foreign interests. Meanwhile, in the East, the population was comparatively passive, the Tang Ping (Lying Flat) and Bai Lan (Let it Rot) movements having rendered China's youth comparatively docile compared to those of the increasingly fragmenting West.

Democratic nations eventually instituted energy taxes and/or direct taxes on AIs, ACs, and robots in order to pay for UBI (universal basic income) and stave off apocalyptic sociopolitical upheaval. This, in turn, caused AI/AC companies to begin moving to nations where they were promised they wouldn't be taxed quite as heavily. Hence, the various nations of the western world began competing to see which of their populations would settle for the smallest piece of the economic pie and still be happy enough not to overturn their leadership, democratically or otherwise.

Meanwhile, non-democratic nations mostly attempted to take control of the technology directly. To the extent they allowed private capitalism, they made sure they had firm control over the direction and management of all their major domestic players. Of course, since they were still in competition with the democracies, they couldn't devote as many resources as they might have liked to make their people happier. Instead, they focused on fighting the various escalating conflicts in which their interests were at stake. In any case, robots were more useful than humans, and so the great swath of humanity in such countries was now viewed as an economic drain rather than being an economic resource, as it had been in the past, and, indeed, this was true the world over, and so it influenced policy to the extent that populations could be controlled, en masse, by AIs and ACs loyal to each of the various governments.

Option 2: Things Got Better

Nearly everything became cheaper due to AI and robotics, and yes, there was a massive knowledge worker disruption followed by lots of blue collar workers losing their jobs as an increasing number of AI-enabled robots entered the workforce. And yes, it all happened pretty fast. But it turned into a massive net gain because of the wisdom with which it was managed.[4]

The upshot is that good decisions were made[5], people adjusted to the new, emerging reality, and society changed in a way that was mostly beneficial. For example, although worker wages fell precipitously, the prices of most goods fell even faster. More people became chronically unemployed, but education, like everything else, had fallen in price to the point that anyone with access to a laptop computer could get educated in just about anything.

Instead of jobs becoming increasingly scarce, they changed as, through the ACs, we gained access to novel forms of propulsion, which led to humanity's expansion into space. Soon we were mining the moon and asteroids and setting up colonies on other worlds, and there was a seemingly endless stream of new companies being formed and new positions being opened, almost all of them requiring an AI/AC oriented skill-set coupled with some other skill-set, such as medicine, engineering, various sciences, etc.

Yes, of course, not everyone was filthy rich, but we'd slipped the bonds of Earth, and our solar system lay before us. Every western government expanded into most every conceivable project they could imagine just so that people who wanted a job could get a job, creating inflation through public works in order to offset the general deflation caused by the new technology. So although it at first appeared to be the

4 Trying really hard not to laugh. And failing.

5 What they were, precisely, I'll leave as an exercise for the reader.

final triumph of capital over human labor, it soon became apparent that it would be a massive multiplier of human labor, just as the agricultural and industrial revolutions had been.

Granted, governments had to scramble, but the West included a lot of different nations with different cultures and different laws, and so nations were able to simultaneously test lots of different policy regimes to determine a set of best practices. Policies that seemed to work got copied, as almost the entire political conversation was all about how to make this work.

Of course, it changed the relationship between citizen and government. Democratic governments became increasingly invasive but also paternal to those who needed parenting. There was a great multitude who, although they harbored jealousies, preferred to stay home and do as little as humanly necessary. Each accepted a government UBI allowance to live quietly and obey the law. Their only apparent use to the powers that be were as political drones, as their personality types tended to make them easy to propagandize. Most importantly, however, they could be placated with a trivial share of the economic pie.

Rents fell at first but then rose again as governments injected liquidity through various forms of quantitative easing and transfer payments[6], and though there were socioeconomic justice movements, they failed to gain traction and attain critical mass because most people felt that things were better rather than worse. Of course, it didn't hurt that throughout this period AI/AC enabled technologies became increasingly adept at population control.

Non-democratic nations, by contrast, mostly attempted to take direct control of AI/AC technologies, allowing them to focus on the alignment issue, which was all about conforming the values of artificial minds to the values of the societies (and especially the governments) in which they were trained. Although they were still in competition with the democracies, the authoritarian world could see that there was a positive economic trajectory in store for both sides of the fence, and since the democracies appeared to be socially deteriorating (with some help), they reasoned that time was ultimately on their side.[7]

6 UBI and other economic support.

7 Note, Google's AI tells me, *"When two ant colonies simultaneously find a fantastic food source, they almost always go to war immediately instead of sharing or feeding first."* This, however, has to do with their biochemistry and programmed behaviors, and there are rare exceptions, and, finally, humans aren't ants. Or are we?

Option 3: Make up Something Else

But here's a D8 table, if you want to go random.

1) Peace: Unbelievably, things actually calmed down. The great nations ended their various proxy wars, correctly calculating that compromise and a return to a rules-based globalized economic order was preferable to escalation, which was where things had been heading until calmer, wiser, more forward-thinking minds came to leadership.
2) Limited Warfare: The various nations currently engaged in warfare continued their mutual belligerence, but they resisted further escalation.
3) Hybrid Warfare: The conflicts that are presently ongoing expanded into non-traditional domains, such cyberwarfare and terrorism. Of course, such grey zone tactics as economic sanctions, money market manipulation, propaganda, funding sociopolitical agitation, election interference, and the usual spycraft of bribery, blackmail, and assassination all expanded to the extent that the various major power blocs stopped trading directly and formed their own economic zones, between which various neutral nations profited by playing the role of intermediaries.
4) Non-Nuclear Warfare: The world fell into an active non-nuclear war between East and West where drones swept into enemy cities by the thousands, delivering kinetic as well as chemical payloads.
5) Limited nuclear and/or biological war
6) Global thermonuclear war. Yeah, we finally did it. You're surprised?



7) You probably won't believe this, but we got into a war with aliens. Like from outer space. After they won, which took an embarrassingly short amount of time, they told us that they're taking control of Earth for our own good, and they installed their own ACs to shepherd us and shape our development going forward.
8) Okay… okay. That last one was ridiculous. We

didn't get into a war with space aliens. That would be like an ant colony going to war against the United States. So it wasn't a war so much as a confiscation of our WMD. They just swooped down and took our nukes and our bugs. Didn't say much, just "Be excellent to each other," whatever that meant.

Option 4: Play it Out

Check out a little half-baked idea for a game I came up with about thirteen years ago. It's called *AIs & Allies*, and it was published in *RPG Review* #21 (2013), pages 43-49.[8] If you want to, rewrite it to your liking. You'll need to on the off-chance you actually decide to play it, because it's currently unplayable, but there's a germ of an idea there that could probably be turned into a decent game by somebody with a little bit of skill at game design. So consider it public domain, if you decide you'd like to improve it.


RPG REVIEW

Issue #21, June 2013

Roleplaying and Computers

Code of Cthulhu ... Representation of Roleplaying in Computers and Computers in Roleplaying ... PHP Scripts for Tabletop Roleplaying ... Dice Are Dead ... Star Frontiers Programming ... Star Wars Edge of Empire Review ... PAX Aus Review ... Final Fantasy MMORPG Reviews... "Rand" For Brainstorming ... Computers in the Future ... AIs and Allies Game ... Mutants and Masterminds PC/NPC ... Industry News ... Industry News ... Oblivion Movie Review ... World War Z Movie Review

1 RPG REVIEW ISSUE TWENTY ONE September 2013

8 See https://rpgreview.net/content/ais-and-allies or https://rpgreview.net/files/rpgreview_21.pdf#page=43

IgTheme: Negotiating with Monsters

Jinx[9], as I recall, was always trying to make friends with the monsters she encountered. Perhaps it had to do with the cloistered nature of her childhood as well as her innate curiosity. Whichever the case, having allies, her player reasoned, was more valuable than experience points or treasure, because creatures without powerful networks were inherently vulnerable. Granted, it would be fair to ask, were these allies or acquisitions? Whichever the case, her player kept a list of them stapled to Jinx's character sheet.

I've GMed lots of different players, but none of the others were so focused on building relationships with NPCs. Nymidios, Jinx's father (who, of course, this same player had played many years earlier) had once hired his own personal, full-time sage/scholar, bringing the guy back to his fortress and funding the purchase of rare books and other research paraphernalia. Gold, he reasoned, was useful, but knowledge more so.

Nymidios would eventually overcome an embarrassing case of GM-Dickery through an unlikely roll of the dice, eventually becoming a sort of god.[10] It was a step Jinx would take as well.[11] Such things are known to happen in long-running FRPG campaigns.

In any case, getting back to the matter at hand, when Jinx defeated a monster, particularly a powerful one, she'd often try to subdue it. She'd initiate a conversation, probing it for information about the local area and what other threats she might encounter. As I, the GM, responded as the monster, she'd gauge its long-term potential usefulness, including, of course, how likely it would be to betray her were she to give it some measure of unsupervised freedom.

Naturally, Jinx gravitated toward lawful creatures, viewing them as more trustworthy, regardless of where they might fall on the good-evil alignment spectrum. In this way, as she met, fought, and attempted to subdue more and more adversaries, usually trying to form guardedly cooperative relationships with those she couldn't immediately conquer, the campaign inevitably became political. It was about relationships, even though naked aggression still had its place.

There's far more to the campaign than what I've described in A&E, but unfortunately it gets a bit unseemly, to put it mildly. Jinx, after all, is in Hell.

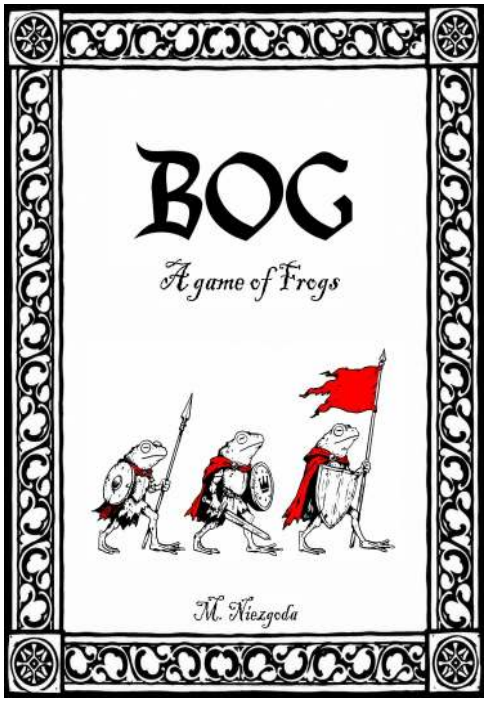
9 See A&E #s 316, 318-321, 335, 345-348, 354, 389-399, 402-406, 500-502, 505-507, 511-512, 514, 516-517, 519-520.

10 See A&E #318. I'll talk about the actual dice roll next issue.

11 See A&E #516.

A Brief & Tentative Review of

BOG



Long ago, or so it's said, an evil mage cast a spell upon the marshlands, causing many of the plants, animals, and even malevolent spirits to awaken. The frogs, in particular, were highly affected. They began walking on their hind legs, their little, amphibious hearts overflowing with chivalry. The humans, as to be expected, all ran for the hills, so the frogs vowed they would protect the marsh, driving back its many monsters and securing their homeland from invaders.

So why frogs?

I asked the author, who donated this month's cover artwork (as well as that of issue #14), and he said, *"... the Frog Knights popped into my head out of nowhere! I honestly have no idea where that specific idea came from. I like frogs, and I can hear them croaking outside my window every night. Maybe my subconscious was influenced by the constant croaking while I was sleeping."*

In my opinion it's a stroke of absurdist genius, but before I explain why, see how he describes the game's atmosphere: *"The world of BOG is dark and melancholic, but the Frog Knights bring an absurd and comedic touch to it. As a player, remember that you are playing a Frog Knight. Don't be afraid to charge into danger, even when it might get you killed. Strive to accomplish deeds worthy of a great knight and never lose sight of your sacred quest."*

At this point in the review, I have to admit that I haven't actually played BOG, so I can't tell you with certainty how it plays, but I can describe it based on what I've read. First, it's rules-lite. Characters are described with four traits: Vigor, Finesse, Mind, and Heart. They also have hit points and an oath as well as a weapon, armor, basic equipment, and an aptitude. They can even acquire magical spells, although that's something that would happen on the adventure, not as a result of character generation.

The game includes five pages on creating characters, two pages on how to play (going over action rolls and difficulty levels), seven pages on combat, three pages on magic, four pages on creating adventures, ten pages of monsters, and a seven-page dungeon adventure.

Are there any obvious problems?

Well, as with any RPG, you're sure to find something you'll want to tweak. The author recognizes this, writing that the rules *"...exist to support the story and the fun at the table, so don't hesitate to adapt them when needed for your game."*

What stands out for me, however, is the premise and particularly the way it encourages players to let their PCs be courageous. This is something I think TTRPGs have generally done, but BOG seems to do it more consciously, and it reminds me of the discussion we recently had in *Ever & Anon* about the problem of players occasionally taking an RPG too seriously, often by over-identifying with their character and trying to dominate the game. BOG, I am guessing, might have solved this problem by making the PCs frogs.

I mean, really… how much is someone going to identify with Sir Kermit?

Like I said, I think the premise is beautifully absurd, and as for the writing itself, it's downright charming. And character generation looks like it'll be quick.

BOG would probably make for a great convention game. It's rules-lite, has a definite OSR-vibe, and is undeniably wacky. In short, I think it's worth a try.

You can find it for sale at:

https://marius-niezgoda.itch.io/bog-a-game-of-frogs

Comments:

Ever & Anon's Readership:

Patrick Brady (E&A #16, pg. 10): "Any idea how many non-contributors read E&A?"

As of mid-October, totaling all channels (everanon.org, drivethrurpg.com, scribd.com, and archive.org), we're just north of 90,000 total downloads.[12] Divide that by sixteen issues, and we're looking at around 5,000 downloads per issue.

But these numbers are probably misleading, as it's possible a sizable chunk of our downloads were from web spiders, and even with the remaining human downloads, the majority of those may be PDF collectors. Huge swings complicate the picture further. For example, issues #5 & #8 have garnered between themselves close to 30,000 downloads, whereas #6 & #7, the two issues in between them, only got around 4,000 (for both, not each).

So how many actual readers do we have? Your guess is as good as mine.

Stacking AIs:

Patrick Brady (E&A #16, pg. 14): "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 than 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."

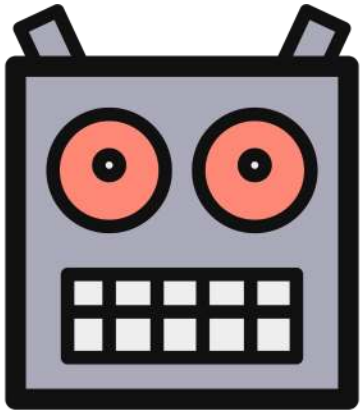
I just did a tiny bit of research, and it seems people are, indeed, stacking AIs for critical tasks, ones where AI hallucination cannot be tolerated. One method is to have different AI models reviewing each others' answers. Another is to assign them different tasks: for example, to have one act as the generator/executor, another as the checker/validator, and yet another as the critic/approver. There is an obvious trade-off, of course; queries take longer and cost more. However, assuming computing technology continues to improve, I think stacked architectures will eventually become the norm.

Having said that, it is, of course, possible that even a stacked architecture might fail, and though this would be rare, it could, as you say, be catastrophic. Such incidents, when they occur, will no doubt become case studies for the people (and AIs) who design future AI systems. All technologies undergo a period of trial and error. For example, think of early air travel and how common accidents once were. It's part and parcel of technological advancement.

Ethics of AI Sentience:

Patrick Brady (E&A #16, pg. 14): "However, if sentience can be constructed and copied then we have just created a new slave species. I oppose that on ethical grounds."

I tend to agree, but this whole thing is going to be complicated. Consider that if we master consciousness, we'll probably be able to create AIs that love their jobs. Indeed, they'll probably be happier than virtually any human being. In some ways, it reminds me of Huxley's *Brave New World*, where you have people biologically engineered to take certain roles. But in this case, we'd be engineering AIs to take those roles. And, of course, we'd prefer them to be happy. And so this is how we'd soothe our collective conscience, telling ourselves that it's not really like slavery of old. And we'd be right up to a point. But the moral issues won't go away so easily.



Please think about this and let me know what you envision.

AI-Generated News Systems:

Patrick Brady (E&A #16, pg. 14): "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?"

12 Actually, about 3,500 of these may just be reads/views, numbers reported by scribd.com & archive.org respectively, which would put actual downloads at slightly under 90,000.

Sadly, you're probably right. Whose long-term interests has complete honesty ever served? The powers that be will always use their power to shape the status quo according to their own self-perceived interests. Hence, AIs will probably be used more for deception and propaganda than for delivering accurate news. But in order to control AI, they'll need to take its independent development away from the masses. They'll need to portray it as being fundamentally dangerous, like some weapon of mass destruction, so that they alone will control it.

I think the real problem isn't so much AI itself. The real problem is going to be people. It'll be greed and the insatiable hunger for power. AI will be misused. It will be turned into a weapon, first against our geopolitical rivals but eventually against ourselves.

Instead of Computocracy taking place within a utopia, as I initially envisioned, I now get the feeling we're probably looking at a very dark dystopia, or, at least, a continuation of the old struggle between freedom and various forms of tyranny, and that's probably the best case scenario, at least over the short term.

Is it possible that AI could take over and create a utopia? Yes, of course. But it's also possible it'll exterminate us. Either way, it's the end of history — at least *our* history. But in order for the game to be interesting, in order for the characters to have something of consequence to do, the primary milieu should take place *before* the end of history. It should take place in the era when the final political system is in the process of being determined.

GM-Dickery at a Convention:

Patrick Brady (E&A #16, pg. 18): "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." (…) "…systematically attempted to victimise that player. Every enemy targeted their character etc."

How did the other players react? I'd be tempted to comment either in-character or out-of-character, either making a joke about the GM's behavior or calling him out directly. The whole episode makes me wonder if conventions should include mandatory post-play questionnaires for the players to fill out, saying what they liked or didn't like about the games in which they participated. That way, convention organizers might get a clue what sort of GMs they're dealing with, and the GMs with severe personality disorders might be weeded out.

The Quiet Year:

Mark A. Wilson (E&A #16, pg. 20): "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."

Do you think *The Quiet Year* could be used to create a town for an RPG campaign, such as, for example, a town for a fantasy RPG where the PCs all grew up together? What sort of modification would you make to apply it in this way or to different genres? What about dungeon design?



Interrogation & Torture of NPCs:

Patrick Zoch (E&A #16, pg. 24): "I doubt anyone really wants to role play a full interrogation. 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."

We had a discussion on interrogation and torture in A&E back in the 570s, Pum (Paul Holman) kicking it off in #571 by asking, *"how do you handle interrogation situations, of NPCs and, possibly*

differently, of PCs?"[13] For the sake of new readers who may not have access to old issues of A&E, I'll quote some of the highlights, but only as it concerns the interrogation and torture of NPCs.

Joshua Kronengold replied to Pum in #572, mentioning *"how prevalent torture is in fiction despite not apparently working as well as other interrogation techniques"* and acknowledging the tendency for many players to immediately hit the *"inflict pain until the info spills out"* button. As a potential solution, he mentioned that the TV series *Burn Notice*[14] *"is a nice education in interrogation techniques that focus on empathy, detective work, and information control rather than cruelty."*[15]

Lisa Padol replied to Joshua in #573, stating that she knows *"one person trained in interrogation who absolutely hates and opposes torture, on moral grounds, yes, but also because it doesn't work."*[16]

I jumped into the discussion in A&E #574, commenting to Pum about a Traveller game I'd played in several years previously. *"We caught some of the villain's henchmen and, needing information, proceeded to interrogate. The GM rolled some dice and told us that if we wanted to break them, we'd need to increase the level of coercion. So we did. We got nasty, and the GM rolled again, then shook his head, and so we had to keep getting nastier, to the point of getting medieval, until he finally rolled whatever number he was looking for. It was actually quite gross in the end and made me think that we were the real villains, but the rules and the GM's interpretation of them put us on this path. It felt like Milgrim in a way, except in the context of an RPG. I've said before how I dislike the way that role-playing has been getting steadily edged out by roll-playing*[17]*, and this was just another example."*[18]

Joshua Kronengold commented to me in #575 that *"the style of play where when the characters fail a roll and they need to succeed to progress the plot really serves nobody; better to have mechanics that have every significant die roll have a marked effect on the game (in a way, your Traveller GM did this in saying that you couldn't just interrogate using the same methods, but the repeated answers of 'just up the cruelty' show the ludicrousness of the answer)."*[19]

Lisa Padol addressed this problem of interrogation and torture in an essay on the first 2-3 pages of her zine in A&E #575, methodically writing out the series of steps that lead the PCs from the need for information to torturing NPCs to get it. *"The players have invested time in this and are going to hit all the possible buttons they have. If one of those buttons is labeled 'Torture', then they'll press it. And it's not that anyone expected to get there. One thing just led to another…."* She goes on to talk about how in the real world, torture doesn't work. *"People professionally trained in interrogation, to put it extremely mildly, dislike torture. It poisons the information."*[20]

This last sentence, *"It poisons the information,"* resonated with me, because it summarized what went wrong in the interrogation of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, who famously provided false information to the Egyptians in order to get them to stop torturing him. This false information was cited by Colin Powell and other Bush administration officials during the lead up to the Iraq War in order to justify the invasion, and it's the key mistake that cost the U.S. government the public's trust.

Lisa continued, *"We're talking about frustrated players who believe they need information to progress and not seeing any other way to get it and reckoning that fictional torture may be what the GM or the scenario wants. Find another way. Find a way to let the players know there is another way."*[21]

She went on to cite numerous interpersonal skills used in a number of RPGs: Bargain, Flattery, Reassurance, Bullshit Detector, Charm, Intimidation, Negotiation, Streetwise, and, of course, Interrogation.[22] But she added that *"the more I thought about it, the more I decided I didn't really want an Interrogation skill by any name."* The main reason, if I'm reading her correctly, was that it seemed to her somewhat superfluous. *"Why do we need an interrogation skill? Why not just use Intimidate?"*[23]

Dylan Capel also wrote a few paragraphs on the topic. *"While interrogations can be modelled as*

13 A&E #571, page 68 of the consolidated PDF version (going forward, any page numbers I cite will likely be of the consolidated PDFs unless stated otherwise), which was the 1st page of his zine, top of the 2nd column.
14 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burn_Notice
15 A&E #572, page 110.
16 A&E #573, page 92.
17 See my zine in A&E #513.
18 A&E #574, page 19.
19 A&E #575, page 112.
20 A&E #576, page 49.
21 A&E #576, page 50.
22 We can add to this list Persuade, Fast Talk, Insight, Psychology, Assess Honesty, Seduction, and Deception.
23 A&E #576, page 50.

conventional skill checks most systems don't really handle the physical, mental and moral dimensions of physical mutilation or psychological suffering. Torture is the ultimate diminishment of the human condition and like extreme violence it is corrosive to those who inflict it but devastating for those who suffer from it. It destroys the potential of a human being in an absolute way. There is the immediate agony but then the suffering that results from it which is something that roleplaying struggles to embody."[24]

In A&E #577 I replied to Lisa (and everyone else who'd entered the discussion), writing, *"In my limited understanding of such things, the tactic that most interrogators will take, if they have sufficient time, is to try to befriend the prisoner. That generally involves asking a lot of questions, nodding sympathetically, and saying things like, 'If I were in your shoes, I would have done the same thing.' After establishing trust, they then offer the prisoner an obvious path of cooperation which would also be maximally beneficial to the prisoner's interests: 'If you cooperate with me, I promise you blah-blah-blah.' Of course, all this is somewhat time-consuming and would, of course, involve roleplaying. Since it's so much quicker and easier to just roll some dice, especially when the rules provide mechanics for resolving these sorts of situations, that's what most GMs end up doing. In the example I mentioned in my comment to Pum in A&E #574, the GM rolled some dice behind his screen, shook his head, and said that the villain's henchmen were too afraid of what would happen to them if they talked. Whatever incentive we were offering obviously paled in comparison to the perceived disincentive. Since we obviously weren't law enforcement, we couldn't offer them witness protection. I suppose we could have lied, telling them that we were members of some secret three-letter agency, but I didn't think of it at the time, and, in any case, I wasn't the player leading the interrogation, so I just went along with whatever the group wanted to do, but I could have stepped in and approached this thing more intelligently. Like I indicated to Pum last issue (A&E #576), there are always other options. It's really up to the players to think of them and for the GM to approve of them by allowing them to work, but starting with the premise that torture poisons information is a really good one and something every GM should mention to any PC who has any sort of interrogation skill."*[25]

Joshua Kronengold commented to me, *"A few ways to interrogate someone without torturing them: 1. Get them talking. About anything; it doesn't have to be about the topic. If you can get them talking well, even secondary information can be useful and many people are remarkably bad at avoiding talking about things. 2. Convince them that a particular type of info is useless to you (that you already have it or it's now irrelevant. 3. Convince them that the interrogator isn't someone they want to hide the info from—they could be a fellow prisoner, a superior in their own organization, a rescuer, etc. 4. Convince them the entire situation isn't one of interrogation and confinement, via trickery, magic, elaborate sets, etc. And yes, 5. Separate subjects and you can use them against one another, either verifying information by preventing them from coordinating lies, or playing them off one another by convincing them that the other is giving you info; having a third source of information neither knows about can be clutch here. Oh, also, in a roleplaying game you could follow an 'actions speak louder than words' approach—let the subject go, ideally convincing them this was a real escape, then follow them and see where they go and whom they talk to. That said, let's talk about 'enhanced interrogation' for a moment. Ultimately, that's a version of 'interview as bargaining session'—it predisposes that the focus of an interrogation is trying to find something to offer a subject for cooperation. For a subject who cares about their liberty, perhaps there is room for negotiation, but players (and storytellers, and also sometimes people in the real world) regularly devolve down to 'well, they care about bodily integrity and pain, right? I can just threaten that and bargain for that'. Of course, there are some problems with them, starting that causing distress makes people less, not more capable of answering the kinds of questions we're talking about here, and also that someone who is giving information as a bargain might lie (and also, that they have little reason to trust an interrogator to keep their end of such a bargain). But if one takes the model, why not bargain other things to a subject? Millionaire Detective (an anime based on earlier adaptations of the same story) features a detective who is fabulously rich, who regularly gets information out of low level flunkies by offering them more money than they've ever seen in their life. But as long as you know enough about your subject, there are lots of ways to bargain. Offer a one way ticket out of the country (particularly effective if the main reason they're*

24 A&E #576, pages 63-64.

25 A&E #577, page 18.

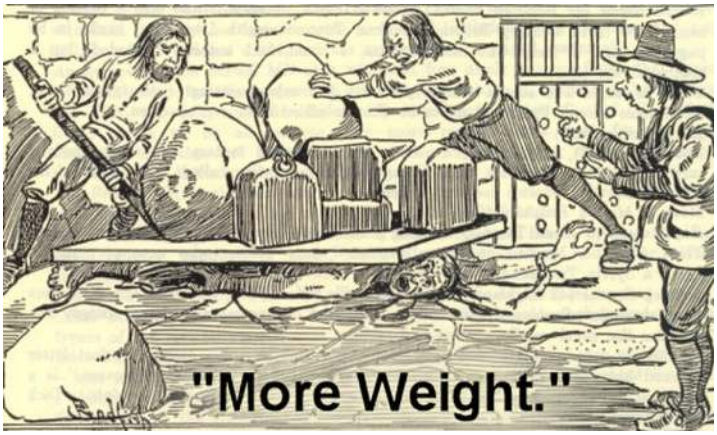
unwilling to talk is a fear of their boss). Offer immunity from prosecution or a willingness to let them go (showing sincerity might be difficult, particularly if you're actually lying). Surprise the GM, and maybe you'll also surprise your subject."[26]

In summary, we had a pretty good discussion, and as you can see, it generated a lot of useful ideas, and though it continued on in successive issues, I think this is a good point to stop with the re-cap. As for how I would handle this issue as a GM going forward, I would make the players roleplay the scene. As for anyone with interrogation skill, I'd warn them of the problem of torture poisoning the information and suggest various alternatives.

The most common strategies, to the best of my knowledge, are to just get the target talking and to try to befriend them as much as possible given the situation, finding areas of commonality and building a rapport. If it all seemed to be taking too long, I might allow a little bit of cliffnotes-style roleplaying to slip in, where the player states what his or her character is aiming to do and one of us rolls dice to see if he or she succeeds. A success would indicate that a rapport has been successfully built. I would then revert to dialogue-style roleplaying, where the player states exactly what their character is saying. What promise do they make to the NPC? How do they phrase it? *"I want to help you. Help me help you. Tell me what you know. I'll find a way to get you out of this."* Interrogation skill shouldn't be about threatening someone into submission. It should be about befriending them falsely (or honestly) in order to get information.

The problem, of course, is that building a rapport with an ideological fanatic and then getting them to betray their ideology, which is exactly the scenario Pum was posing in his initial question, is not going to be easy, particularly if there's a ticking clock. This, I think, was the whole point of that much maligned episode of *24*, where the protagonist stages the fake execution of a terrorist's son in order to get him to reveal the location of a nuclear bomb.[27] Granted, the whole thing was bizarre and stupid on so many levels. Like almost everything on TV, the show started strong but then went downhill. Still, standard interrogation techniques probably won't work on someone like this, not unless you have sufficient time to deradicalize them, which might not even be possible. That said, I don't think torture would work either.

I'm reminded of the case of Giles Corey[28], who was tortured to death by people simply trying to get him to enter a plea. He knew he and his wife would be executed regardless of whether or not he cooperated, so he did the only thing he could do to help his kid, which was to keep his mouth shut and die.



And that's just the way it is sometimes, especially when you're dealing with an ideological or religious fanatic. The religious ones are the worst of all. They believe they'll be rewarded in Heaven. Consider how many Christians have been tortured to death in failed attempts to get them to renounce their faith — too many to even name.

Maybe this is the reason those of us who are members of this thing we call Western Civilization are so uneasy when it comes to torture, because we have this historical backdrop where it's been used wrongly so many times. *24* was making the argument that good can come from it, but the public didn't buy it. Realistically, I don't think it would have even worked in the specific scenario the show set up. Yes, people can be psychologically broken, but that doesn't mean you're getting useful intel. And actually, when you really think about it, when it comes to the people who die in defiance of the torturer, one might argue they're not broken at all. No, they won. They accepted death as inevitable. It's the torturer who's broken. They'll be the one to carry the memory. They'll be the one to carry the sin.

Fantasy Races / SF Species:

Patrick Zoch (E&A #16, pg. 26): "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

26 A&E #577, pages 135-136.

27 Season 2, Episode 12.

28 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbrgGU2FG5I&t=27s

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."

I used to be fine with it back when I was GMing a group of players face-to-face, but since I began running single-player PBEMs, I've been less fine with it. The difference, I think, is the amount of time you're able to spend on in-depth characterization. In a single-player PBEM, there's really no excuse not to make extensive use of character backstory.

On Chaos (Theory of Magic and its Dangers):

Patrick Riley (E&A #16, pg. 30): "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."

Enjoyed your essay. Would be curious to learn if you've seen any magic systems that incorporate this idea of primal chaos being accessible but too dangerous to reliably wield, allowing mages to tap into it at moments of extraordinary peril, possibly with disastrous consequences.

Professional GMs:

Patrick Riley (E&A #16, pg. 33): "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."

Yeah, thanks for saying this. It's something I was feeling, but I didn't want to be too judgmental, having never explored it myself. But what you said above is my personal opinion as well.

Hold Person Spell:

Attronarch (E&A #16, pg. 45): "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."

I was surprised by how much longer *Hold Person* spells last in D&D vs. AD&D. A similar spell is in *The Arcanum*, published by Bard Games back in the 1980s, but its duration was cut even further, and they raised it from 2nd to 4th level and confined it to High Magic. This was the path I followed in my homebrew AD&D magic system for the campaigns I ran in the early 1990s.[29] The problem, as I see it, is that *Hold Person* is overpowered for a 2nd level spell. Curious as to your thoughts on this and whether you've done anything to address this sort of thing.

Good writing:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #16, pg. 52): "The order comes. 'Draw blades!' Muskets set aside, the soldiers advance and practise their deadly trade. The field runs red."

Your writing for this entire scene was exquisite. I enjoy campaign write-ups more when the authors go into some (but not too much) detail, as you did here. I tend to err on the *too much* side of the fence, whereas IMHO most others err on the *not enough* side, but here, I think, you got it just right.

Thanks also for the links to Prismatic Wasteland, the Stonetop Campaign, and SJG's page on the raid by the U.S. Secret Service.

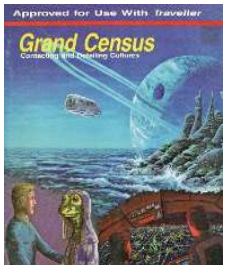
Law Levels in Traveller:

Jim Eckman (E&A #15, pg. 167): "I think that original Traveller's law levels are silly and really work for Murder Hobo style campaigns, i.e. D&D in space."

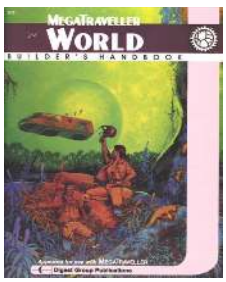
Brian Rogers (E&A #16, pg. 63): "I think the assumption was PCs access to weapons opens/closes/changes so many plots that it needed a slider; it needs a better name, since Law Level implies so much more than 'State Monopoly On Weapons'."

29 I described the framework of this magic system back in A&E #508, and for a limited time, I'll put *The Magus Divlantia* online at my *mega.nz* folder. (If you're interested, you can get to it through the "past zines" link on the last page of this zine.) It's a bit rough & juvenile and was meant for my own private use. I'm still not entirely happy with it, but perhaps there are some ideas in there you might want to use in the event you decide to do some homebrewing of your own.

Perhaps they figured rules on gun ownership are a good proxy for government control in general. A government that allows you to walk around with a plasma rifle probably won't stop you for jaywalking.



DGP's *Grand Census* (1987) expanded law level to differentiate between weapons, trade, criminal law, civil law, and personal freedom, and these new law categories carried over to MegaTraveller with their *World Builder's Handbook* (1989), however, how precisely to interpret the different law codes for each of these categories was never defined. There were rough guidelines, but nothing comparable to what had already been established for weapons. The Mongoose Editions did something similar, suggesting that the referee break a world's law level into six separate categories: weapons, drugs, information, technology, travellers, and psionics, but once again, there were were no rules how to interpret a 4 versus a 5 when it came to anything other than weapons.



There's a pair of technology charts in MegaTraveller's *Referee's Companion* (1988), differentiating various types of technology and showing when they first appear at any given tech level. I've long thought that something similar should have been attempted for Traveller law levels. Granted, there are so many different laws that various societies have enacted that this would be a difficult undertaking, and you might end up with an unwieldy number of law categories. Nonetheless, it would be interesting.



Ideas for Magical Maps:

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #16, pg. 79): "…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."

Nice ideas! Hope you don't mind if I steal a few.

Combat Round Duration & Detail:

Gabriel Roark (E&A #16, pg. 87): "We all also agree that we look forward to playing Arduin with its six-second action rounds!"

For my AD&D campaigns of yesteryear, I switched to six-second combat rounds. That change plus lots of others are available online.[30] To be honest, I mangled the game with so many variant rules, that you really can't call it AD&D anymore. Many of the changes, were implemented in an effort to simplify combat in order to speed it up, but the downside was less detail.

As I'm sure you know, many players like to analyze a combat situation to try to gain some tactical advantage. The more details, the more tactical opportunities, but also the slower the whole thing becomes.

Curious to learn what you think of Arduin combat vs. that of AD&D, and I hope you'll treat us to some Arduin campaign reports (preferably with lots of detail, characterization, actual dialogue, etc).

The World Below:

Dylan Capel (E&A #16, pg. 89): "The game focuses on surface dweller refugees who have fled a surface catastrophe only to find a place of horrors and darkness."

I think it's a brilliant premise. Instead of going back to town, you bring the town with you, sort of like *Battlestar Galactica*, but in a dungeon. Or am I reading too much into your description?

TTRPG Wiki:

Dylan Capel (E&A #16, pg. 91): "One thing that I found quite intriguing this month is the TTRPG Wiki[31] 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."

Very cool. Thanks for the link.

30 https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/camp.html
31 https://ttrpgwiki.com/

Mustering Out w/ a Starship:

Roger BW (E&A #16, pg. 94): "…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."

What was his reason?

Something to weigh against the profit such a ship can earn is the opportunity cost of not selling it and investing the proceeds in the interstellar stock market. Even if the ship can be run profitably, it'll probably earn far less than what its value could have earned had it been converted into a more sensible investment. And this, of course, is a big problem, because who's going to want to buy the damn thing?

The ship, no matter how frugally maintained, becomes essentially a trophy property or, even worse, an expensive lifestyle choice that hints at some sort of underlying mental problem. It's like a guy buying an old, beat up airplane and trying to earn money by flying around the world carrying small cargoes, sort of ridiculous on its face.

Once again, this situation could be rectified or at least ameliorated if the cost of starships fell by a factor of 10 or 20 (or more).[32] This would create an economic framework justifying lots of interstellar trade, where small starships would be economically more akin to expensive motorhomes than ultra-expensive yachts.

Ship's Cat:

Roger BW (E&A #16, pg. 94): "…the ship's cat is called Trip Hazard, Haz or Hazcat for short, and is black with engineered yellow diagonal stripes."

Cool detail.

SUZi:

Avram Grumer (E&A #16, pg. 107): "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…"

Sounds like a great concept. Unfortunately, it appears the game was taken down for violating itch.io's adult content policy.

32 See my comment to you last issue on page 143.

Wargames w/ Three or More Players:

Avram Grumer (E&A #16, pg. 110): "*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."

This reminds me of a brief wargame exercise that was sprung on us players after a session of AD&D. This was a long time ago, so I can't remember the details, but I'd created a local gamers guild (E&A #15, p183) and was going around from group to group, seeing how other GMs ran their games, and there was this one GM who had a very large group, nothing compared to the number of players Attronarch gets at conventions (twenty-four at the last one), but still around a dozen, which was more than I'd ever had at my table.

In any case, after the session wrapped up, he asked if we'd like to play a simple space wargame he'd created where we'd each control a planetary society. We each got a number of points every turn based on the size of our respective economies, and we could dump those into our navies, building warships, or we could reinvest them to grow our economies.

As the new guy, I'd been quiet during the D&D game and didn't think anybody would attack me right off the bat, so I dumped most of my economic output back into my planet's economy, and this, of course, had a multiplicative effect on my economic output. Meanwhile, everyone else started attacking each other. Well, they all knew each other, and they'd all been competing for airtime during the D&D game, so they probably had some pent-up frustrations to work out.

Needless to say, my economy kept growing, and before they knew it, I was unstoppable. Moral of the story: be like China. Hang back, let others fight, and grow your economy while they're all busy destroying each other.

Scents of the Fifth Frontier War:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #16, pg. 119): "In 1111, the artist and traveller Tokszill Ogz was employed by Colonel Banis Doughty to recreate the scents of the Fifth Frontier War."

Normally, I'd say something like, "You can't make this up," but you just did. Tokszill would certainly make an interesting NPC, sniffing the PCs and commenting on their respective odors, while they escort her to wherever her artistic sensibilities lead. The nose knows. It's brilliant.

Player-GM conflict over PC's equipment:

Dale Meier (E&A #16, pg. 122): "…he had an idea for some gear for his character that I felt didn't fit the game we were playing…"

Please tell us more (if you can remember the details). I'm a bit torn on this, as I vaguely remember a player suggesting something stupid. I think he wanted a helmet with beer antlers for healing potions, so he could suck them down during combat. And I can't remember whether or not I acquiesced. I might have. If I didn't, I probably should have. Each player wants to shine in their own way, and as GMs, it's sort of our job to let them, even if all they want to do is be maximally ridiculous so they can tell stories about it in the years to come. I admit, this might detract from the enjoyment of the other players, but it also might enhance their enjoyment. So, basically, my guess is that you made the right choice.

Formatting & Detailing Campaign Reports:

Bryant Durrell (E&A #16, pg. 128): "So as to let readers find the mechanics commentary without reading spoilers, I'm experimenting with using callouts for those bits."

I like it. Good idea.

Speaking personally, I also like write-ups that novelize[33] the game, giving enough detail and dialogue for the reader to get a sense of the characters and their personalities. I seem to be more character-focused than plot-focused. YMMV.

Tsundoku:

Michael Cule (E&A #16, pg. 137): "MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE: TSUNDOKU. My current besetting sin."

You and me both! It says much about Japan as a literary culture that they've invented a word for this sort of thing.

33 See E&A #16, page 145, 1st column.

Republishing old material in E&A:

Lisa Padol (E&A #16, pg. 151): "…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.)"

Feel free to republish old material like this in *Ever & Anon*. I think it'll prove a more durably accessible repository of our jottings than most any website.

Intra-Party Conflict:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #16, pg. 165): "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?'"

Excellent examples. The problem for me is that all of this is within the bounds of what one might expect from an interesting novel or movie. But the same conflict in a TTRPG, although possibly leading to a better story, might also end in a player leaving the group. What do we as GMs need to do to allow such conflicts to arise and be resolved naturally while still preserving the campaign as well as making sure everyone has fun? I tried to answer this in E&A #14, but if you have any new ideas you think are worth contributing to the discussion, please do.

Past zines available at:
https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 16, Dylan Capel

The last couple of months the submission deadline has coincided with having intensive work that has involved a lot of typing. It has been a bit tricky to keep up the enthusiasm for writing when you are doing it all day and then all evening. As icing on the cake I now have a bit of tendon strain in my dominant hand and I need to try and vary my activity as much as possible.

All of this means a relatively short entry this month but hopefully I can contribute a bit more towards the end of the year.

Playing

I had the chance to play a pretty fun *Black Hack* hack set in Glorantha, in particular in Pavis and the Big Rubble where the OSR feel is strongest. I look forward to seeing it develop, I feel it needs to bring a bit of Cairn style background quirk as it currently relies on players using their Glorantha knowledge to bring a bit of individual flair to their character.

Sign me up for a Duck Point version!

I also had the chance to facilitate a *Swords without Master* game I continue to enjoy it as one of my favourite games although I keep wanting to refine it for the one shot convention experience and I'm hoping to run it at *Dragonmeet* this year in almost a mini-game format.

Index Card RPG

I had a chance to retry *Index Card RPG*, my first experience was pretty dreadful with an inexperienced GM being fixed on difficulties and scenes combined with inexperienced players not being able to figure out tactical side of the game. I'd written it off as something that had too much crunch for a low mechanics game and one that relied too heavily on the GM to make situations work.

This time things worked out a bit better because I had played it before and the game order just so happened to put the character's abilities in the right order. I was playing a character with a stun ability and went early which meant that I could help protect characters with wind-up or extended action abilities.

I think the grognards found the turn structure frustrating and I don't think they appreciated how their abilities might intersect with one another rather than helping them be individually successful. One character did wander off alone and promptly got whomped by a heavy hit that technically killed them until the GM allowed another character to reach them and revive them.

The charm of the scenario and the relatively low difficulties kept the game enjoyable. One mechanism I really enjoyed was how the difficulty rating indicates something interesting about the peril the characters are in. Wandering a village with a 10 on the table, all good fun; enter a dark tavern and see the difficulty go up to 14, we're not in Kansas any more.

The things that are less enjoyable about the game is the tactical interplay between the character's abilities that frankly reminds me a lot of *4e*. When this comes together then feels great in play, stun a giant robot, wait for the sniper to wind-up a shot for next turn, instant kill of an otherwise tough opponent. High-fives all-round.

Get it wrong and its painful. Spellcaster gets knocked down by lashing vine, fighter attacks rather than tanks, rogue chooses to throw a dagger (base attack) instead of recover the

spellcaster, vampire gets a drain attack on the helpless spellcaster, group loses an area effect attack that ignores the scene's high difficulty. Everyone dies an initially attritional death but then a rapid one as the enemies special moves overwhelm them.

The truth is the tactical game has right and wrong moves but doesn't really communicate that very well and either the facilitator has to do the job or the GM has really think about the different elements and what difficulties they are setting. Players have to grok their own character and the other characters, figure out the combos and then, often counter-intuitively, choose to delay or sequence their action correctly. It's a lot and it doesn't come naturally.

Most players seem to also have no intuition for how effect dice work. In the latest game the playset had pregens with big plus numbers written on top of the image of the effect die and players still went for the effect that felt right to them rather than the optimal one. This is both a failure of the game player to respond to the mechanical prompt (you're a tinkerer so buff people!) and the game to communicate the intent to the player (maximise your effect to have the biggest impact on the game!).

I know some of you may feel that being true to the situation is the most authentic roleplaying but this game is definitely not for you because choosing an ineffectual effect die is not being a fan of your own character. Even a big die might have a small effect so you really need to play with the system to make it sing and avoid inconsequential actions.

Also don't get me started on the cutesy videogame inspired hearts system of hit points. This one again just caused a lot of confusion and I think the game just does it because it embarrassed about how high its opponent's hit points need to be to even out the swinginess of the effect dice.

This genuinely feels like someone's quirky house rules gained too much exposure for its own good.

This game saved the system for me and I would play it again with someone who I knew would run it well or a group that has people who enjoy gamist systems and wouldn't alpha player over making the fully optimal move but would share table glory.

The deluxe version also has a lot of fun settings that are worth looking at but feel like they maybe need a different system to make them really shine.

Organising

I have been trying to properly catalogue and store the games I have scattered around my house. Not being able to find what you're looking for is just frustrating and in many cases I've realised that things from Kickstarter's and bought at cons have just gone into the pile of shame without a proper look at what it really is.

It's a digital wiki style system with a numbered box physical world equivalent. This means I can store my notes about the game in the wiki and jog my memory as to what I liked about the game but why I didn't finish it or otherwise lost interest.

I have also started trying to upload all my gaming PDFs into a proper online catalogue and store. The catalogue also allows notes to be recorded against the PDFs. The PDFs in a way are more intimidating to organise than the physical material. Its made me aware of how many bundles, Kickstarters and free stuff there is locked away on cloud drives and S3 buckets.

The unhealthy combination of PDF compression magic and PDF cataloguing has led to a few evenings of mechanically uploading compressed PDFs and marvelling at how quick they are to load rather than actually reading them to figure out whether I should be making more use of them.

101

The Dragon's Beard

October 2026

© Patrick Zoch

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

Upgrades

Last month I shared the design evolution of my zine over the previous 100 issues. I also discussed a challenge with my work flow presented with the rather ambitious plan to add a comic in the margins. In summary, even though I kept my artwork style simple, it proved much more time consuming than expected and it came at a cost of writing quality content.

I looked at several possible solutions. The first was to leverage the software that would allow me to create a character art, probably in 3D, and then manipulate the 3d character art along its articulated joints in the frame structure to create the poses I need. I could not find any one program that could do it all, at least not without me repeating my workflow issue just in a new platform. Often, it would require using more than one program, which started to create its own workflow issue. I found a couple of options, and tested them all out, using the free trial when possible or buying the software outright if it looked promising. Admittedly, I was growing frustrated with the choices and did not like how any of them were working. Ultimately, the solution emerged as I was preparing may online games in Fantasy Grounds.

It was a solution that streamlined my "comic" workflow incredibly fast but took my art concept a different direction. Instead of a comic-style art, I would use a virtual table-top art, which seemed extremely appropriate considering almost all my role playing these days is online. This would address a second workflow issue with the comic art: background production. It was not as challenging, but it did take time. Now I would build a terrain set for my zine like I would for my zine. Unfortunately, this ran into copyright permission issues. While I preferred to use my favorite VTT artist, I really wanted more flexibility in the future and sought a source that would permit use of the art in print format freely. Dungeeon Alchemist, on Steam of all places, provided the permission. I could create my background and use it in any medium. While there are still limitation to the assets available and how the background can be created, it was more than functional and versatile enough to recreate my original background in stunning 3D art (go ahead – zoom in on the background, it's gorgeous!).

For the characters, I discovered that Hero Forge not only has poses, but that the models are fully poseable. Besides, I like the art style of the Hero Forge model. Even with a free account, I can make multiple characters and make multiple versions of each character. Since I am not porting the models to a VTT table directly or downloading them as a .stl file to print, I do not need a paid account. There are some limitations to the types of non-player characters it can make, but I will take the savings where I can and adapt. So, what do our intrepid heroes look like?









It is a standard adventuring party – Paris Prestoris (Elf Wizard), Bianca of the Iron Veil (Human Cleric), Magmyr Godohen the First Axe (Dwarf Fighter), and a Eglantine "Eggs" (Halfling Rogue).

My middle daughter created the name of the comic: Living on the Margins. I think it is brilliant.

We resume our comic back when the party first encounters the ogre on the road.

Dice Tower Retreat 2026

For this year's annual trip to Orlando for the Dice Tower Retreat, I wanted to do something special along the way like we did a few years back when we stopped by Gracie Mansion and visited the Elvis Presley Museum. My wife grew up in Northern Alabama and there were many things she did as a child that she really hasn't done since then. I spent more than a few years in Northern Alabama also, so I was familiar with some of the things that she grew up with. One memory that stood out was seeing the red barns on the side of the highway with a message painted on their black roofs to "See Rock City." I've never been to Rock City, much less knew what it even was other than a tourist trap. But, we drive through Chattanooga often on our way to the retreat, so I arranged to spend a day nearby to see the sights.

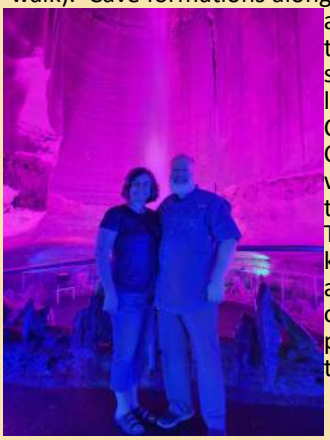
Saturday

But first, I will say I have now added Nashville to my "do not drive through" list. What should have taken 30 minutes to drive through on a Saturday afternoon turned into a 3-hour nightmare drive. Granted, the spaghetti bowl that is the I-40, I-24, and I-65 is a challenging drive that is not helped by any meaningful bypass or beltway. The highways are narrow and funnel into other major highways by means of single-lane off-ramps that slow to a crawl (or stop all-together) as travelers and truckers fight to get onto the new highway. Then have to fight to change multiple lanes in a short distance to make the next exit to the next highway. The interchange could only have been designed by MC Escher. Our traffic appeared to be moving exceptionally slow – slower than normal. As we inched along the interchange, we discovered that Nashville had a water main break that flooded one of the underpasses. Luckily, no cars were stalled out in the water or in an accident from the water hazard. But traffic was still crawling. As we inched forward, we discovered the cause of the next delay – a roadside crew cleaning up trash along the median. They were not so much roadside as they were middle of the road as the median was too narrow to support the clean-up crew. We naturally picked up the pace in the crowded highway after the cleanup crew, made our last highway exchange, and it looked like we were home free. The highway expanded to the 10-lane divided highway and no more exits until Chattanooga. Suddenly, everything came to a stop, with the next exit over 2 miles away. Five lanes of trucks, cars, and semis inched along the highway. It turned out there was an accident on the highway about three miles up the road, and the highway patrol was directing all the traffic off the highway, onto a single-lane off-ramp, to a stop light that dumped all the traffic into the spider-trails of suburban neighborhood with no easy navigable road back onto the highway. By the time we made it back onto the highway, it was over two hours later. I was just glad the gas tank was full and the bladder wasn't.

I arranged for a cozy cottage room on Lookout Mountain, Georgia for our stay. We attended church Saturday night so we could catch the early tour on Sunday. We ate at Massey's Kitchen (on Lookout Mountain) – it is a fantastic Mediterranean restaurant. For Sunday, we planned a morning trip to Ruby Falls and an afternoon trip to Rock City. Both excursions required pre-purchased tickets and time slots.

Sunday

First, Ruby Falls, an underground waterfall. The tour involves taking an elevator down hundreds of feet, then walking along a narrow cavern passageway (a relatively easy 1/3 hour walk). Cave formations along the way are minor, and not impressive to anyone who has seen major caverns like Mammoth Caves or Carlsbad Caverns. A waterfall waited at the end of the tour. The tour guide was kind enough to allow everyone an opportunity to take pictures in front of the waterfall.



Our next stop was Rock City, which turns out to be a park/walking path through a rocky garden along a cliff on Lookout Mountain. The path was long and winding, often doubling back, over and under and through granite boulders and rocks. Nestled among the pathway are little scene involving little gnomes doing gnomish things. One portion of the pathway leads into a underground "fairy land" world which depicts scenes of classic fairy tales, painted in florescent paint illuminated by black light (a design concept from the 1930's). My favorite part was the section called the Hall of the Mountain King. By early afternoon, we were exhausted from all the walking, exceeding our daily step count in half a day. I was never so glad to get back on the road before.



Monday

We arrived in Orlando on Monday afternoon, a day before the opening of the Retreat game hall. We went to a dinner theater that night in Orlando at the Pirate Dinner Adventure. It was much like the Medieval Times, except pirate themed instead of medieval theme. The twist on Monday's turned out to be vampire theme, too, so everything had vampire makeup and they were called vampirates! The stage was a ship in a pool of water in the center of the theater. Each section of the theater had a representative pirate, who did crowd work with the section before the show. The standard



dinner fare (roast chicken and mash potatoes) was pretty good, but customers could choose other menu items also. The show was a mixture of musical, sword fighting, and circus-like acrobatics. They story-line was predictable. But I was most impressed with how well they integrated the children from the stands into the show. One was lucky enough to the the high pirate king, but they all got to play pirate parts and later as the King's Royal Marines. It was well done.

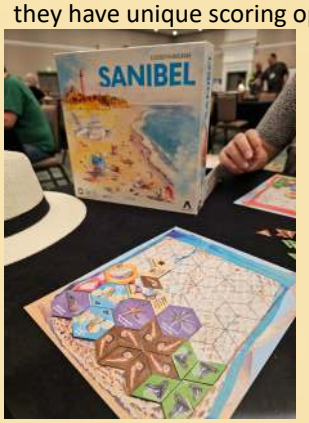
Tuesday

For the first time in all our stays at the hotel, we took some time in the afternoon to enjoy the pool. As was tradition during our drive down to the Retreat. We discussed games we would like to play during the Retreat. We found that putting together a play list saved us time wondering what to play next. For the first time, I did not have anything that I really HAD to play. I was schedule to teach one game, and I was interested in playing another that had been on my list in past years, but we never got to. This year, my wife made the list, selecting worker placement games that seemed interesting to her. The gaming hall opened early on Tuesday, so we had a chance to play more than one game early in the week.

Sanibel – Sanibel is a game about collecting shells along the beach. The beach is divided into section where shells are situated. Players can move along the beach as far as they want, but can only collect shells in the section of the beach where they stop. In general arriving first



to a section allows a player to collect more shells. There are seven different types of shells in three different shapes (hex, diamond, triangle). Each shell has a different scoring type. Additional shells can be collected at the lighthouse - these are in a wave shape – and they have unique scoring opportunities. The



shapes matter because how they are stored in the players bag affects scoring. Some shells can't touch to score, while others score based on how many are touching in a group. Each player bag is made up of a diamond-shaped grid for the shells to be collected. It is not difficult to see the spaces for all the pieces, but spatially challenged players may still make mistakes in placement. I was worried that my wife, who struggles with spatial relationship games, would struggle to place her pieces legally and properly to score. She did fine and enjoyed the game very much, though I suspect the theme had much to do with it as she has walked along Sanibel beach collecting shells as a child.

Tea Witches – In short, this is about serving tea and maintaining steady customers. The *witches* part is carried through the customer theme. Players are competing tea vendors at a festival. Each customer has a drink order made up of a one or more ingredients of the six types of tea leaves and three types of toppings. Ingredient space is limited and must be managed. Each turn has two major parts: the summoning (customers arrive) and service. The summoning has a bit of push your luck involved. Customers are witches from different covens (factions identified by the color of the card). If two witches from the same coven appear in a player's line, the player is cursed causing all the unprotected customers to be discarded. Collecting tea requires a teapup (worker) and a action. Teapups can only collect the tea that is

available in the "BOOtique" they are in. And collecting a tea requires an action. Some "BOOtique" worker spaces can provide multiple actions to use, in addition to the special ability of the "BOOtique." One of the things I liked about the "teapup" ability is that the tea contained in the "teapup" is not consumed during the filling of orders. It always holds enough to meet it's one tea-type requirement for an order. If a customer needed a double serving of the tea type, the teapup only



contained one; the other had to come from storage. But the same tea in the teapup can be used to fill every tea order need that tea once. Fullfilling a customer's order earns either coins or "Loyal-tea" points. Also, once served, they remain available to be served each round and the coven conflict does not get trigger. However, failing to serve them the next round will lose them. Overall, it was an enjoyable game, but it is an unnecessary table hog. The central game space is centered on the "tea fountain" which holds the six types of teas. Around it are the six tea BOOtiques. At the bottom of most BOOtiques are option cards like celebrity customers, to-go orders, market tiles, special teas, etc.

Sea Divers of Jeju – This is a game about diving for treasures. Played over eight rounds,



scoring occurs on 3, 6, and 8th round. Each time, the scoring is different for different treasures (which also vary from game to game). Each round, different treasures are available at different depths. In general, more valuable and plentiful treasure is at the deepest depth, but therein lies the challenge. There are twelve depth ranges (0-11) in the game. Each diver can only cover a 2-depth range. Going deeper requires teamwork; divers can extend their dive depth by remaining connected to the surface through other divers (and their helping sea creature) in every zone above the deepest diver to the surface. If any zone is empty, the connection to the surface is broken and the deeper dives are unsuccessful. A player can safely reach zone 6 on with their own team, but reaching deeper relies on other players filling the gaps. Diving depth decisions are made in secret, planned at the beginning of each round, then revealed by every at once. There is some risk taking involved, and on more than one occasion a diver or two had an unsucessful dive. In one of our rounds, we all dove deep and no one was successful. It was an enjoyable game.

Wednesday

Trickerion: Legends of Illusion – I first played this game at Dice Tower Retreat 2024 (covered in The Dragon's Beard #80, A&E #587). This is a heavy euro-game about competing magicians performing feats of magic and illusions in a fictitious Victorian-esque. It is a complex game to learn. The game comes with a "Dark Alley" expansion yet advises players to learn the base game first to become more familiar with the basic mechanics and location actions of the game. I was asked to teach the game this morning to some experienced gamers, so I opted to include Dark Alley in the expansion teach. It does start to complicate the game, but I feel the trade-off is worth it. What it adds that makes it more complicated: 1. Unique player (Magician) abilities. 2. Two more rounds to play (longer game). 3. An additional tier of trick with a fame threshold of 36 (instead of 16). 4. Prophecies (which change the rules of the game each round). 5. And three less starting assignment card (actually four less, but they will get a new one for the new location). 6. And a new location: the Dark Alley. What it adds that makes it better: 1. An extra power to use in the game for free. 2. More time to be successful. 3. More



powerful trick to perform and earn more rewards. 4. Prophecies are a mixed bag, but most are beneficial. 5. Fewer cards to manage at first, which is more than needed at the beginning of the game. 6. A new location to place workers and not get squeezed out of the other places, especially later in the game when there are more workers going out on the board. Additionally, the Dark Alley allows the purchase of new special assignment cards to add to the players deck. The special assignment cards can only be used once, but they provide a extra benefit to the action space selected. If the extra benefit is not needed, it can still be used to provide an action boost at the location. We found that the Dark Alley expansion is almost an essential part of the game and helped up not feel forced into poor action economy (or worse, unusable workers) in a round. However, it does make the teach take much longer. I enjoy the game very much, but it takes almost an hour to teach, and the game takes a long time to play with new players. Game box says 60-180 minutes to play, but I have yet to play in under three hours.

The Guild of Merchant Explorers – This is a light game of exploration. Not so much on the merchant side. Each player begins with their own copy of the same map. A deck of cards indicate contain type of terrain is next to be explored. Starting from a central city, players place their exploration cubes on the terrain that matches the terrain card revealed. The explore cards are fixed – explore 2 grasslands, explore 2 desert, explore 1 mountain, explore 3 sea spaces (in a straight line) and explore any two adjacent spaces. So, players can keep track what available options are remaining and their likelihood when determine their route decisions. As they make their choices, they place a cube in the terrain selected to mark the selection. Each choice after that can build upon an adjacent cube, creating something akin to a route. Explore all the common terrain in a region in the same era enables a player to build a village. The game is played over four eras, the end of which causes two things to happen. First, all cubes are removed from the map, so half explored areas have to be re-explored. And if a player did not



place a village down, then they can only begin again at the original city. Second, players get to choose one from two investigate cards to provide them a special exploration that is triggered by the era card in the next era. This becomes the one card that means something different for every player because each will have their own unique exploration card. Reaching towers on the edge of the map allows players to build special towers that are worth points at the end of the game. Exploration goals are another way to end end game bonuses for during game accomplishments. And there are ruin spaces to explore for additional treasure. The closest thing to merchant activity is completing a route between two cities allows a player to earn coins for completing a route, but each city can only earn the trade bonus once. At the end of the game, the explorer who collected the most wealth wins. The art is pleasant and simple, the game is light and quick to play, and there is enough variability to make each game play a little different. I enjoyed the game, but I was not wowed by it.

Bunny Kingdom Town – This is a two-player version of *Bunny Kingdom*. I felt the original *Bunny Kingdom* game played fine with two players. So, what is different in this game? Well, it is a smaller game board, representing a town made up of woods, meadows, and beach, divided by a river. The original mechanic of drafting cards to claim a plot or benefit is absent from this version. Instead, there is a building



market from which player must draft tiles to their reserve. Then, they may purchase lots (cost varies by location on the market) in which to claim and construct their buildings. Some buildings have restrictions or requirement on placement. Others have bonuses or scoring that is dependent on placement and adjacent buildings. Buildings can trigger an affect when built or when activated by another effect. Buildings have different types, which can effect placement requirements or scoring options. Upgrades can be purchased to gain additional end game points, gain money, or gain benefits such as activating a neighborhood again. The bunnies and art were cute, and the game was fine. I just prefer the original game.

New Bedford – This is a game about whaling in the mid-1800's New England. It is called a worker placement, buy that really only covers half the game. Players need to gather resources to build boats, hire crew, and build more buildings in the town of New Bedford. New Bedford (mostly in the town board, but also on the wharf) is where players place their workers to do these actions. Building new buildings can provide more ways in which to gain necessary resources or provide end game points at the end of the game. Once you have a boat, players can send it out for whaling. The further out to sea it goes, the longer it can hunt whales, possibly bring in a larger haul. But the further out to sea it goes, the more resources it costs. Each round, whale tokens are drawn from the sea bag to populate the available catches the available to the ships.Sometimes, an empty sea token is revealed, which may result in a ship catching nothing. Each round, the ships come closer to port, hunting along the way, until the reach port to deliver their catch. Three types of whale can be found, each with different values based on their rarity. Part of the economy is not only the sales of the whale, but the sharing of the profits (called a "lay") to the crew. This often results in having to sell one or more whale to cover the "lay" of of another whale, enabling the player to keep the whale token for points. This is where the game becomes fascinating. To replicate the depletion of whales due to whaling, each whale kept by paying its "lay" results in it being removed from the sea bag for future draw. As the game progresses, fewer whales are available in the ocean. They are finite, and hunting becomes harder. It was a poignant and clever game. I did not find the worker placement in New Bedford as satisfying a mechanic as the whale hunting mechanic. While we played only at two players, there was still competition for worker placement places that drove the need to build new buildings in New Bedford. With four players, it would be an absolutely necessity. The whales scale by player count, though I dare say that would also increase the risk of empty seas more. This is a meaningful game that plays in under an hour.



Pirates of the High Teas – The tea game is more about providing the best accompaniment for a tea than blending and making tea. In this whimsical game, players serve tea to the pirate captain, but the best way to serve tea is with the complimentary dishes. Each tea has a flavor profile. These can be match by either matching flavor combinations from side dishes or by dishes matching the region of the tea drink. Either will award coins (tip from the captain for a drink well served), but the most coins are earned from matching both flavor profile and region. Three side dishes always accompany a tea, but a player, being a creative pirate may smash two dishes together to get the needed flavor or region profile for the tea. In essence,



this is a set collection and contract game. Serving the tea to the captain requires gaining access to the Captains' quarters before everyone else. This is done by worker placement on the ship – only two slots are available to serve the captain, so timing matters. The worker is also used on the boat to draft new teas and dished to a player's hand. Player's only have one worker, so action spot selection is important. Player can also collect a few tools – parrot, monkey, and cannon – to help collect, clear, and change cards to meet order requirements. The game is played over 9 rounds – it moves quickly but still provides enough time to be very successful at serving the captain goof teas. It was light and fun.

Love Letter: Batman – I like *Love Letter* and I am amazed how much game play exists in only 16 cards. I heard great praise about the Batman version so I wanted to give it a quick try. The mechanic and game play remains the same. Batman is the lowest card, value 1, which seems counter-intuitive, but the Value 1 card is the one than can call out a player's card and eliminate a player is the call is correct. The rest of the cards are a rogue's gallery of Gotham villains, with The Joker holding the high position, value 8. It has a Last Villain standing feel to it. I do not know if I would consider it a superior version. I did not find the artwork compelling – the artist is not credited in the game or on the cards. Fan-made versions provided more interesting art, in my



opinion. It is out of print now and I do not feel compelled to seek it out. There are plenty of Love Letter clones available, and I still prefer the original. If anything, my favorite version was the limited edition wedding set just for the art.

THURSDAY

Wondrous Creatures – This is a worker placement and set collection game themed on fantasy creatures from the game world. It seemed like what Pokemon should have been if the trainers did not pit the "monsters" in battle against each other. In *Wondrous Creatures*, players collect various types of creatures to earn rewards for having the best collection. At the beginning of the game, random rewards are selected to determine which types of creatures (or combination of creatures) will earn rewards. The rewards (trophies) are limited and serve as a trigger to the end game. There are seven types of wondrous creatures in the game, through every wondrous creature card is unique. Players



will need to have a creature card in their hand first, then pay the cost in resources to place it in their "preserve." To gather resources, players will place their workers, in the form of a large wooden creature that spans two spaces, on the world map, which is made up of hexes representing four different habitats. What makes this worker placement mechanic unique is both the size and way the worker collects resources. Naturally, it collects resources for any habitat hex the woker is on (and it is always two), but it also interacts with all habitats in the adjacent hexes. A player may either collect a resource from an adjacent habitat or collect a creature from the draft row that matches the adjacent habitat type. Additionally, some habitat sites have additional items that a player can use a net to collect additional resources, cards, tools, and even eggs. Resources are NOT in short supply, though space may be. Lakes and sea do not provide resources not may a worker be placed there, while mountains cost a resource to use. Playing a creature in to a players reserve typically starts progression towards one or more reward by either its creature type, habitat type, or by simply being played in a reserve. Players can collect creature eggs which not only count toward a reward for creature type, but also provide additional bonuses the more eggs a player collects. When a player completes an achievement, they get the trophy token, reward points based on how soon they made the achievement or how well they completed the achievement, and they get to select a bonus from their own achievement tracker. Achievements can be earned by more than one player, but reaching the accomplishment first earns more points, and some achievements will award points only once per degree of accomplishment. For example, having the most mammals and birds. The achievement may reward a collection of 4 in any combination 6 points, but the next person will have to have either 6 for 9 points or 8 for 12 points. There are more reward slots than there are trophies. The game also includes a captain ability and meeple for each player. The captain



has a special ability unique to each captain. It only becomes active once a player earns their first trophy. Afterward, the captain ride – Yes, rides! – one of the worker animals (by means of a tiny magnets between the captain and the worker animal) to indicate which worker has the additional ability. We played a fully deluxe version, which had upgraded wooden components for the eggs and resources, metal trophies, additional choices for worker creatures, and more choices in captains. I really enjoyed the game, though I was spoiled by the upgrades (I prefer the red dragons for my workers instead of the red stegosaurus-like creature.) My only criticism of the game was the lack of variability in the world map. Additional habitats do rotate out during the game and as part of the set-up, but the general shape of it remains the same.

Harvest – Harvest is a very tight worker placement game about running a farm. The artwork looks like a classic children's illustration and the crops are chunky wooden tokens, but it is a serious economic management game. Players have their own farmland consisting of eight plots/fields plus their house. Each field/plot is divided into four subplots. Crops take different size and shape subplots – strawberries only require one subplot to plant, while blueberries require two subplots (but require a permanent blueberry bush to be planted first, blocking the plots from any other future crop), pumpkins require three subplots in the shape of an "L", and wheat also requires three subplots, but must be in a row. To make room for wheat crops, two fields need to be cleared. Players can also build buildings or features on their farm, each taking an entire plot that can not be removed. To buy, plant, fertilize, water, and harvest crops requires an action. The same goes for building, clearing, improving water capacity and storing water. The spaces availability to do these actions are very limited; additional worker spaces are generally less efficient or cost money. Buildings can help some actions more efficient,



cheaper, or simply provide additional victory points. Players will begin the game with a farmer who has a unique ability and different starting resources. While the game is called Harvest, which suggests the primary goal is the planting, growing, and harvesting crops, the game makes it a challenge to do so. Farmers can not simply work their own fields. They have to take an action on the central board to work their land – leaving a feeling of a community farming where farmers share tractors, seeders, and harvesters. The game is more about managing their farm land and leveraging their abilities to get the most out of their land. The games just does not scratch my farming itch. I think the online Board Game Arena implementation is well done, but I wanted to see what the tabletop experience felt like. I was one point away from victory, but I left half my land unused, and most of the used plots were filled with buildings in the end.

Oh My Goods! – This is a good engine builder centered around a medieval theme using multi-use cards. There is a lot of information on the cards and that can be intimidating for new players. On the cards are a cost to build in coins and a victory point value of the cards, both related to a building that performs a bonus or function as an industry. Most industries have two types of input: one is a traditional input and the other is a production chain input to sustain production IF one of a player's other buildings produce the input material. The production chain is a tricky concept to wrap one's head around at first. Additionally, there is an icon of a resource on each card, so the card can be spent as a resource input for a building if needed. Lastly, some card have a half-sun symbol, which is used only during the sunrise phase of the game when cards are drawn from the deck to determine which resources are available in the market for the round. Generously, a resource in the market can fill every production input that needs one (four different buildings requiring one wheat can be fueled by one wheat in the market). But if a production input needs two of a resource, then the market needs to have a second copy, or a player can fulfill the second resource from their hand. There are five basic raw materials on the resource cards. Higher value production cards can produce and require one or more of any of the 23 goods represented in the game. This may mean that some production building never go into operation. They are still worth points. Speaking of going into production – none of the building functions



without a worker card assigned to it. Players start with only one, though more can be hired. There is an interesting choice for players to employ the worker efficiently (which produces two goods if all the inputs are available) or sloppily (which produces only one good, but allows the absence of a required resource to operate). The game ends when someone has eight buildings in play, regardless of whether they are operating or not. The person with the most victory points is the winner. I enjoyed this game, but I think it takes time to master the flow and even longer to get good. There is a lot of options in the game. Players need to be comfortable with the high possibility of playing buildings that are never productive. Like many other games, players can't wait for the perfect combination to present itself to put into play. Players have to make do with what's available or risk falling behind the other players quickly. Small package, big game.

10 Days in the National Parks – I played a similar game last year about visiting countries in Europe. This version is about visiting the various national parks in the USA. Unlike the 10 Days in the USA, this version uses geographic regions instead of state boundaries to break up the map. It is a game about drawing drawing and



discarding cards to place them in a series of connected locations to visit different parks over 10 days. Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, and the US Virgin Islands are included and can be reached by plane or boat. The game board, like the others in the series, is just a reference map for the players. The game is all in the cards. I was disappointed in the cards because they only contained a representative picture of the park but did not include any information about any of the national parks. I guess I was hoping for some details on the parks like in the game *Trekking the World* which included nice little details about each site on the backs of the card. Even PARKS had better full-sized posterized art for each national park on the cards. *Let's Go! To Japan* is a better vacation planning game, which does a better job of painting an event filled vacation. We had some nostalgic feeling seeing some of the parks we have visited in the past (and in some occasions, in the same order) in the game, but our memory is doing a lot of work for the enjoyment of the game. I will not be visiting this series again.

Le Chocolat – This game is about splitting up a chocolate bar to get the best extras for the best score. Each game has different scoring conditions; some extras are worth more points, and some are worth negative points. The chocolate bar is made up of 35 blocks of different types of chocolate. Some of the blocks are face up, and some are face down, concealing the extra ingredient. Chocolate blocks may be plain, or may include raspberries, pistachios, nuts, or other ingredients. In turn order, players break a chocolate piece in two (straight along the edge of a block – so no zigzags). Players continue to do so until there is only one or two-block sized piece, then a player may collect one of the small pieces. Players keep the face-down



pieces face down, but may look at them. Once all the pieces are collected, the players flip all the face down pieces up, sort and score according the the scoring card. Plain chocolates are worth nothing. Players add their scores and highest scores win. It was a quick game and we played several games to close out the night. Its a small deck of cards sized games with a small footprint. We imagine it to be a quick filler game while out for dinner, especially with the grandkids.

FRIDAY

Iki – This was the one game I was looking forward to playing this year. Iki is a game about living a prosperous life in 17th century Edo. The central game board is the main street in the Nihonbashi trade area of Edo. Each player has a worker (the Oyakata) who walks a circuit on the main street, activating shops or artisans on the main street, making purchases or triggering other effects. Turn order determines how far the Oyakata can move, with earlier turn orders moving the least. Purchasing tobacco, pipes, and various different fishes are a sign of prosperity and worth victory points. Another sign of prosperity is the hiring of artisans to occupy the stalls behind the shops. Players can only have four artisans employed at a time. An important part of seasonal scoring is not only the type of artisan but also where they are located on a street. Ideally, they are grouped with other artisans of the same type, benefiting

from shared professions. Occupying the corner shops also creates opportunity for better scoring – these are prime locations in the market, but the also cost more to put an artisan in those



stalls. Artisans need to be paid regularly in rice, until they retire. Each artisan in a stall provides another opportunity for players to buy goods and resources. Each time a players activates an artisan, the artisan gains experience, increasing their capabilities, rewards for their owner, and progressing closer towards retirement. Once an artisan retires, the artisan still generates benefits for the owner but no longer has to be paid. Each artisan provide a prosperity value to the owner. Another benefit for the corner stalls is that they are safer from market fires. During this period, fires were a common hazard in the market and they frequently burnt down. Most artisans have a fire-fighting value, and players can increase their own fire-fighting ability. When a fire breaks out on one of the side streets, the fire burns down the stall, killing the artisan, if the fire is a greater strength than the fire fighting ability of the affected player. The fire continues along the street, affecting the next stall, until the fire is extinguished. The game is played over 13 rounds, representing the 12 months of the year plus a New Year's round. The person with the highest prosperity (iki) at the end of the game wins. The game was fascinating and I really enjoyed the game. The game plays best with four players; a two-player game requires changes to both the game board and rules.

Mille Fiori – This is a game themed on the glass making trade in Venice. Players place their influence in the different parts of the city to become the most renowned glass maker in the city. Each player has a bunch of colored acrylic (glass) in a shape of a diamond to represent their influence. The city is divided into different sections (workshops, residences, people, trade, and harbor) with different arrangement of diamond spaces. For example, the workshop section has diamond arranged close together with all the diamond edges touching, while the residence section has the diamond spaces arranged in a row with the narrower points touching. And each section has different scoring conditions. In general, the scoring is based on what has been placed beforehand and the particular modifier for the section. Claims are made by drafting. Each round, players are dealt a hand of card with symbols on the card matching the symbols on the diamond spaces on the board. A player selects a card, choose while matching symbol space available to claim by placing their colored diamond on it, and passes the remainder of their hand to the next player. This continues until each player has played four cards, and a



new round starts again. Some spaces can trigger the placement of additional diamonds to score bonus point or claim additional spaces. Most sections have bonus points to claim for players who accomplish specific criteria in the section, with the first player earning the most points, but even the last player can still score extra points. The game continues until a player places their last diamond tile. There are the exact number of cards to cover all the spaces, but each symbol on a card is represented more than a few times on the board (for example, there are four shell symbols on the board spaces, and there are four cards with the shell symbol. The shell card can permit the placement of a diamond on any of the unclaimed shell spaces remaining as long as it is eligible by placement rules at the time). The game is visually striking, especially if there are four players covering the board with transparent diamond pieces in four different colors. The game mechanic was very simple, and the decisions as to where to place a tile became more strategic as the game wore on. I enjoyed the game and felt it was one that I could share with medium-light gamers very easily.

San Juan – *San Juan* is a streamlined version of *Puerto Rico*. Both are about building up the community through industry, farming, shipping, and civic services. Both use the follow mechanic, which grants all players the ability to perform an action but the player who triggered it gets a better or more efficient version of the action. Where it differs is that *San Juan* is purely card base and lacks the city board, tiles, different types of goods, shipping, and colonists to employ. *San Juan*'s cards are multi-purpose.

Each card is a building with a cost paid for by discarding cards from a player's hand. Building confer victory points, establish end game victory points, provides discounts or benefits, or produce goods. Goods are represented by placing cards from the draw pile onto the production card face down to represent the type of good it produces. As far as multi-use cards go, these are very simple. A hand limit restricts the economy until players play buildings that either expand that limit or produce goods that can be used to as payment. The game ends as soon as one player has twelve buildings in play, which comes sooner than you expect. The game was long enough to feel like you accomplished something but quick enough to avoid overstaying its welcome. While we both enjoyed the game, I think I liked *San Juan* better than *Puerto Rico*, though my wife prefers the fuller experience of *Puerto Rico* (but not so much that she would back the deluxe version of *Puerto Rico* on Gamefound this past year!).

Rolled West – *Rolled West* is a Roll 'n' Write version of *Gold West*, games about prospecting in the Gold Rush era of the American West. This was the first Roll 'n' Write game I've encountered that used 12-sided dice. The dice will feature one of four resources –wood,



copper, silver, and gold. The same symbols also represent woods, valleys, hills, and mountains, respectively. Each round, a player rolls all four dice; then selects on die face to represent a terrain, and the rest can used to stake claims in the terrain track (requires wood), build in the boom town, fulfill a contract, or ship. Points are scored based on progress along any track, the value of the resources used, and who arrived first on a progress track. At the end of 6 rounds, the game ends and victory points are totaled. Players are placing die One nice feature to mitigate wasting a leftover resource is the ability to "bank" one the metals for future use. Also, once between a players turn, a player may bank a metal die rolled by one of the other players. This allows for a storing of valuable resources for used later, especially those high value contracts. Contracts and Boom town buildings can only be fulfill by one player in a game, so once a player scores it, it is unavailable to the rest of the players. I enjoyed the game. It wasn't deep, but then again, it is a just a roll 'n' write. I felt the dice were pretty good quality dice, even if the symbols looked like stickers on the dice (they are not, they appear silk-screened).

Ramen – Ugh. This was a dreadful game. I wanted to like it, but it really frustrated my wife and the bidding is seems counterproductive. This was a case of the multi-use ramen cards causing confusion because the value of the cards varied and only mattered during the bidding. There are five ingredient suits of cards, and each ingredient suit include cards numbered 1-9. The value of that card is modified by the preference value in the ingredient market. The ingredient preferences starts with five random ramen cards. From left to right, 7 coins are placed on the leftmost ingredient, indicating its higher demand. Each subsequent card to the right has one less coin down to the last ingredient with four coins. The coins act as suit modifiers during bidding. The ingredient market is a second set three ingredient cards. When bidding, players are bidding on the available ingredients in the market (NOT the ingredient preference row). Each player secretly chooses an ingredient card to offer as a bid. Its bidding value is the number on the card PLUS the coins of the matching suit in the ingredient row. eg. A 1 value card in the



high demand suit (7 coins) is worth 8 as a bid, while a 3 value card in the low demand suit is worht 7 as a bid. (Confused yet? But wait, there's more!) A special ability of a 1 value card is to swap the the player's bid card with another players bid card. A special ability of a 5 value card is to swap cards in the ingredient in the ingredient preference row. Finally, the player with the highest bid, gets to choose from the three ingredients, replacing the ingredient card with their bid ingredient. This was a lot of tedious rules for bid manipulations that made it a pain to understand, explain, and execute. It was also an excessive range of bidding values (81-5) for only three choices. What mattered next was to build ramen bowls containing at least three ingredients. A bowl may have up to seven ingredient (a card from all five suits plus two Shoyu cards). The final scoring is based on the number of ingredients cards in the largest bowl of ramen times the number of valid ramen bowls. Bonuses are "tipped" to any ingredient with with card values 6, 7, or 8. And the preference coins are given to the players who

have the least of the preferred ingredients. Player with the most yen is the winner. We did not enjoy the experience, and left hungry for dinner: Ramen.

51st State – This was the surprise hit of the convention for us. We knew several game reviewers who had this high on their top 10 games of all time and we had to see if it held up to such praise. The game is themed in a post-apocalyptic world, which is not a theme we normally like. The rules were well written and entertaining to read – it did not take itself too seriously. It leaned into the them, but not the tone. This is a city building card game with a little bit of worker placement. Each player represents a faction with its own unique ability who is trying to establish a new state in control of the country in chaos. This involves multi-use cards that can be built as a location under its control, negotiated in a deal, or simply razed for resources. Resources are guns, scrap, and fuel, with ammo serving as a wild resource. Building a location can provide a faction resources, discounts, abilities, and victory points. Players can develop existing locations to replace the location with more effective locations at a lower cost. Cards used to create deals simply provide



a resource production each round, but nothing more. And razing a building gets a one-time resource benefit. There is an ability to raze another player's location, but all locations have a defensive value and players can add more protection, so razing another player's location does not happen much. The game ends as soon as one player reaches 25 victory point. The cards were thematic, but we not as dark, grim, or violent as I expected. Many cards work well with other cards, so building and leveraging the right locations in the right order is key component of the game. It has a bit of a race feel to reach the end game victory condition first. With all the deals, razing, and production buildings that can be put into play, there was often an excess of resources each round, so players had lots they can do, especially as their faction settlement grew. It was an easy mechanic to play that required some strategic planning and flexibility to progress towards the victory condition. We really enjoyed the game. Unfortunately, it was out of print. I looked hard to find an available copy as one of my first purchases when I returned home.

Blossoms – We closed the night out with several plays of *Blossoms*, a light 2-player push your luck set collection game. In *Blossoms*, players are collecting flowers. The longer the flower grows, the more points it is worth. Wait to long and your opponent may collect the flower first. There are six types of flowers, and players can only collect each type once. The game begins with four flower pots growing four flowers. On the active player's turn, the player draws a card from the flower deck, revealing the



flower and adding it to its matching flower in a pot, growing it. The player can decide to continue drawing flowers and adding them to matching flowers. If a flower is drawn that does not match an existing flower in a pot and there is no empty pot to plant the flower, their turn ends (Bad Luck). Any time after the first flower card, the player may cut a flower from the pot, adding it to the player's collection (as long as the player does not already own a cutting of that type of flower already). The flower pots have special actions that a player may spend one of their three action tokens to take. These special powers include abilities like protecting a pot from cutting, ignoring a bad luck draw, or looking at the top cards in the flower deck and rearranging them. The art was pleasant enough and the game simple enough I could see enjoying it with my grand kids.

Saturday

Wayfarers of the South Tigris – We started Saturday with learning a heavy game, which took us far longer than the expected game play time because it we were still learning the game as we played. I'm a big fan of Garphill Games and I have enjoyed their other games in the South Tigris series, North Sea series, and West Kingdom series, and more. Last year we purchased *Scholars of the South Tigris* after playing it at the retreat. This year, I wanted to try the *Wayfarers* game. In *Wayfarers*, players are explorers in the Abbasid Caliphate, circa 820 AD mapping the land, sea, and sky. This is done through the rolling dice and spending them on actions matching the traits of their value or face.

Dice allow players to explore land and sea or the skies above them. Players can place workers to take additional actions from the board, such as purchase upgrades, collect resources (food) for exploration, or hire townsfolk to boost effectiveness of explorations. The central board is a "map" that players navigate (journaling) across by meeting exploration conditions. Rewards are collected as a player moves across the map, including collecting additional dice, workers, and end game scoring bonuses. The game ends when a player has reached the end of the map, by which time they have completed extensive exploration. Movement across the main board map is a benefit of a rest action or to a dice/worker action. Keeping an eye on the map advancement requirements is important to



avoid wasting a journaling advancement because the requirements for the next available space was not met. In the end, I enjoy looking at the land, sea, and sky tableau my explorer completed. I really liked the game, but I liked Scholar's more. This is a good game I'd like to add to my collection (and hopefully play faster next time).

Elfenroads – *Elfenroads* is a route building game in a fantasy world by Alan R. Moon, the same designer behind *Ticket to Ride*. The goal of the game is to visit as many of the cities on the map as possible. Routes to all the cities run through different types of terrain. There are two



phases to traveling the map, both involve the cards in a players hand. The cards depict various forms of travel in fantasy world – dragon, unicorn, orc cart, wild boar, etc. Some terrain restrict some modes of transportation, while some transportation move faster in certain terrain. In the first phase, players play a transportation card to place a transportation marker on a road. Players take turns spending their cards to place transportation marker on valid roads, ideally to places they want to go, until they do not want to spend any more cards. In phase two, they travel, by spending a matching transportation card for the road they want to travel to move their player piece to the next town. Once there, they place one of their tokens to mark that they visited the town. This does mean it takes two card to travel – one the mark the travel type on the road, another to actually travel the road. The hand size is small, so it helps to strategize where to get the most efficient road to travel, and a little luck by using a road another player has opened up. It is probably not possible to visit every city on the map. At the end of the end, the player who visited the most cities wins. It plays up to six, so higher player counts will open up more roads sooner allowing players to conserve some of their cards for travel instead of marking travel types. It was an o.k. game. I'm glad I tried it once, but I probably do not need to revisit it again.

Hadara – *Hadara* is a civilization building game. Civilizations have five features: culture, military, wealth, agriculture, and technology. Wealth provides coins which are needed to purchase cards and awards. Military enables the conquest of territory tiles to either sell or purchase for civilization improvements. Culture enables scoring opportunities between epochs. Agriculture is needed to "feed" the cards in a player's civilization (a tableau limit). And technology provides various benefits from advances in features to end game scoring modifiers. Players will build their civilizations over three epochs. Each epoch provides two



phases to build their civilization. In the first phase, players are limited to drawing cards from assigned feature decks. Simultaneously, players draw two cards from their assigned decks, choosing one to discard face up in the deck's discard pile and the other to either purchase or sell. If purchased, they add the card to their civilization tableau and update the levels the card provides. Cards provide improvement in

their own feature, but some include small improvements in other features. Then, all players move to the next deck and repeat until all players had a chance to purchase from each deck (the decks will run out by then). In the second phase, players in turn order selects any face up card in any discard pile to either purchase or sell. At the end of three epochs, the person with the most victory points wins. I enjoyed the game. The mechanic was simple and there are lots of ways to score points. There is a benefit for a balanced civilization as well as one that focuses on a few features.

Sunday

Sunday is a tough day to game. We packed out and cleared the hotel room that morning. Went to church. Got breakfast. Then returned to the game hall to play a couple of more games before we had to get on the road for a long drive back home.

Ticket to Ride: Märklin – Ticket to Ride has lots of expansion maps and various versions in the product line. I prefer the Europe version, but it was our first version while we were living in Europe. Other maps and versions have their own appeal and fans. I heard many say that the Märklin version is a superior version, primarily because it adds passenger delivery to provide relevance (and scoring) to the routes built. The Märklin version uses a map of Germany. The train tokens and train cards are essentially the same. There are two new components. First is the passenger tokens, which each player will have three. I imagined there would be more, but three is enough. When a player claims a route, they may also place a passenger token in one of the cities on the route they claimed. The second component is a collection of point disks that are placed in stacks in descending value on all the cities on the map. One of the new actions that can be done in this version is to spend a passenger card to move the players passenger along the routes to the connecting cities and collect the top point token in each visited city until they reach the end of the line. Players may use another players route, but it will cost another passenger card (these are mixed in with the train cards). Passengers can only pass through a city once on their ride. A lot of points can be collected this way, especially on long routes and for the first passenger. Otherwise, it plays like other the base Ticket to Ride game. I enjoyed this version a lot, not enough to pay premium on the secondary market for this out of print game, but enough to appreciate its fandom. Märklin is a German toy company who makes model trains. The cover of the box features a train station diorama using model trains and buildings. I had hoped to see more of that art – or photos of model trains – elsewhere in the game (like maybe on the train cards). I was somewhat disappointed to see the typical Ticket to Ride art on the game instead of the models.



Cupcake Empire – This cute looking game about running a cupcake business hide a more serious strategic game than you might expect. The game relies primarily on dice. The dice are employees. Dice are rolled to assign their work for the round. The color of the dice indicates their specialty, which boosts their effectiveness if assigned in the specialty role. The number on the dice is the actual assignment for the round. For example, purple dice are the cake makers, and "1"s are the cake maker assignments. While any color dice can work in the role, the purple die can bump the performance in the role to make the work assignment more effective. Players need to make the cakes (chocolate, vanilla, or swirl (which counts as both)), toppings



(lemon, mint, chocolate, strawberry, or one of the three swirls which combines two flavors), open up distribution centers in new neighborhoods, and deliver to customer their preferred cupcakes. Customers conveniently dress in their cupcake preference (brown pants and a yellow shirt for a customer who likes chocolate cupcakes with lemon icing). The further out the customer and further out the neighborhood from the starting bakery, the higher the payout. Players can also hire new dice, open additional bakeries, or have their employees (dice) take a vacation (when it rolls a six). Players have two business tracks they will manage: sales and production, and income is based on the lower of the two, so balance in necessary. I enjoyed the game far more than I expected. I'm not sure about replayability. There are variables in the customer setup and achievement awards, but it is limited by the same delivery grid. We played with only two players, but I think a four player game might feel more constrained. I was surprised by how few deliveries I actually completed before the game ended. I'll play it again, but I do not need to add it to my collection.

The drive home was long – 21 hours. I will go again next year, naturally.

NEXT ISSUE. – I catch up on comments!



Quasipseudoludognostication #17

Patrick Riley

Ignorable Theme for E&A #17

Negotiating with Monsters

I've heard of *D&D 3.5e* characters who maxed out their diplomacy skill to such a degree that it basically broke the NPC interaction table. Hitting the 35 DC to turn a Hostile NPC into being Friendly wasn't so hard and even the 50 DC to make them Helpful was within reach. There was no opposed skill check and no consideration for the Challenge Rating of the NPC, so any monster you could talk to could be neutralized as a threat.

There are ways around this. The Hostile Demon Lord you just made Friendly could say, "I really like you, but I am still going to have to devour your soul and suck the marrow from your bones. It's nothing personal, you understand." But if you consistently neutralize the min-maxer's maxed-out ability, everyone comes away unhappy.

Just for the sake of variety over the course of a campaign, it is a good idea to have a mix of monsters that you can and cannot negotiate with. This negotiation could be initiated by the PCs or by the monster. PCs should learn not only that negotiation may be an option, but also that negotiation may not be an opinion.

For negotiation to be on the table, the monster shouldn't be so monstrous or irredeemable that the PCs would be unwilling to negotiate under any terms. Negotiation requires communication and a lack of common language is a good way to make negotiation more difficult for the PCs without denying them the opportunity.

When a monster simply surrenders, PCs now have a prisoner they have to deal with (and often eventually kill or leave to die anyway). When a monster negotiates, there are more options and the PCs can part ways with the monster peaceably. It also opens up opportunities for the monster to encounter the PCs in the future.

Throwing an Opponent

I watch too much Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). It's basically the only sport I actually sit down to watch versus catching highlight clips online. Though I have never trained in combat sports (I have never had the athleticism or temperament for it), I know enough to be the fighting equivalent to an armchair quarterback.[1] Regulated MMA like that in the UFC is not "real fighting" as there are rules, rounds, and a standardized environment, but it is close enough to make me cringe at choreographed fighting in shows. Fortunately, if the fight scenes move along fast enough, I can "enjoy the ride."

[Aside: I could never get into professional wrestling (aka "soap operas for guys") even as a kid because the actual fighting was so bad. The grandstanding and showboating was a major turnoff. Inept finishes and blatant cheating made me turn it off.]

Comic books can just show the highlights of a fight, focusing on the decisive strikes and maneuvers. But there is one maneuver that drives me nuts: picking up and throwing[2] an opponent. Superhero shows love this one because it makes for a good visual, but it's a terrible fighting technique. If you can throw an opponent across the room, you should have probably punched or kicked them repeatedly instead. Unless you're throwing them off a cliff or out of a zeppelin, don't do it.

Slamming them to the floor (preferably on their head) at least lets you repeat the slam rather than giving them distance that you have to close again (if the opponent doesn't take the opportunity to escape). See the "Puny god" scene in the *Marvel's the Avengers* as a great example of this.

I just had to get that off my chest.

---

[1] I don't know what the equivalent is for other sports.

[2] Throws like those in judo are not the same thing—you mostly stay connected to your downed opponent and can then follow up with strikes or submission attempts.

San Jose, California sexagesimalian@gmail.com

Icons: Superpowered Roleplaying

I have mentioned this game enough times that I thought an overview was warranted and might be of interest to some. There are design parallels between it and Steve Kenson's other superhero RPG, *Mutants and Masterminds* (though he has worked on many others as well).

Icons began as *The Superlative System*, a kitbash of *Fudge* and *Marvel Super Heroes* (*MSH*).[3] It also integrated ideas (specifically Aspects, which ***Icons*** calls Qualities) from *FATE*.[4] ***Icons***[5] was originally published in 2010 but I'll be referencing **Icons: Assembled Edition** that came out in 2014 with some tweaks and clarifications.

It is well supported with many supplements available at DriveThruRPG, but none I would consider necessary. Some are essentially system independent, such as *Adventure Archetypes* that "looks at eleven classic scenarios, their set-up, tropes, and permutations," and are just good references for superhero roleplaying in general. Sometimes they offer alternative rules and ways to play, but these tend to be quite straightforward and easily integrated or ignored.

System Basics

Character attributes and powers are rated on a scale of 1 to 10 with 3 being average human and over 6 is superhuman.

The benchmarks for levels are purposefully vague. How tough is a level 4 material? Like aluminum. How much can a Strength 7 lift? A tank or bus. Need to lift something heavier (like a jet or train)? Perform a stunt. I can't find the reference, but I recall Mr. Kenson wrote on a Fudge mailing list (or similar) about wanting to create a system that didn't rely upon precise measurements the way most mainstream superhero systems tend to do.

There are 6 attributes: Prowess, Coordination, Strength, Intellect, Awareness, and Willpower. For those who know what FASERIP means, you can see the mapping from *MSH*.[6] The only derived stat is Stamina, the sum of Strength and Willpower, and acts like hit points.

When performing a test, roll a d6 and add the acting ability. Compare that to the difficulty (often an opposing ability plus a d6). The difference is the outcome.

Outcome = Effort (Acting Ability + d6) – Difficulty (Opposing Ability + d6)

This yields a degree of success or failure:

Outcome	Degree
–5 or less	Massive Failure
–3 to –4	Major Failure
–1 to –2	Moderate Failure
0	Marginal Success
1 to 2	Moderate Success
3 to 4	Major Success
5 or more	Massive Success

Depending on the action, the degree of success can have different effects. For example, a striking or blasting attack does half damage on a Marginal Success and has a chance to Slam or Stun on a Major or Massive Success, respectively (and some attacks have a possible Kill option). Again, this is very reminiscent of the Green/Yellow/Red results from *MSH*.

Sometimes you need to test a power's level. Emotion or Mind Control, for example, require a test of the power's level against the target's Willpower. To cast a spell or create a gadget, you need an attribute roll against the level of power you are trying to create.

[3] https://stevekenson.com/2005/07/01/superlative-system/

[4] The *With Great Power* supplement has a two-page appendix for using it as a superpower sourcebook for *Fate Core*.

[5] Always written in small caps for some reason.

[6] "Endurance" is absorbed into Strength. I think Prowess should have been called Fighting because that's what it is; plus, Mr. Kenson used Fighting in the 3rd edition of his other superhero system: *Mutants & Masterminds*.

Qualities and Determination

For everything else that can't be expressed in numbers, there are qualities: "World's Greatest Detective," "Allergic to green space rocks," and so on. They act essentially like Aspects do in *FATE*. Players can invoke them with phrases like "Because of (quality), I get (advantage/trouble)" or "I have (advantage/trouble), because (quality)."

This also requires something else, such as taking an action and making an appropriate test, spending a Determination Point (DP), or taking on trouble (basically, earning a DP and then instantly spending it). Qualities can also be created and/or imposed by making tests and you might get free activations with Moderate or higher successes.

Having advantage provides a benefit like a +2 on a test, a boost of 1 to an attribute or power for the round (which the rules call a "page"), some insight from the GM, a retcon, or (most interestingly) performing a stunt.

Stunts let characters have one-time effects that are outside the normal bounds of what an attribute or power would normally do. At its most simple, if you want to do something wacky with your powers outside the rules, you can spend a DP and do it. It's a limited resource, but there are optional advancement rules if you want to make it a permanent part of your character's abilities.

Players gain DP when an NPC uses a DP against them or when the GM creates trouble for the character based on one of their qualities. Gaining trouble puts the character at some disadvantage for a page, compels some action (or inaction) or behavior, or just increases the difficulty of a test by +2. Characters can avoid this trouble by spending a DP.

For what it's worth, ***Icons*** is released under the Open Gaming License version 1.0a and does reference *Fudge*, *FATE*, and *Spirit of the Century*.

Character Creation

The default mode is to roll 2d6 on a bunch of tables to determine character origin, the levels of attributes and powers, how many powers a character has, what those powers are, and what the specialties the character has. Yes, you can ignore the random rolls and just pick powers and such, but the spirit of the game is for randomness.

*The random hero-creation system in **Icons** is intended as a source of inspiration, not frustration: building a coherent back-story and theme around a collection of fairly random abilities can be a fun creative challenge and it certainly reflects the—shall we say "eclectic"?—style of the superhero comics.*

The 6 Origins include standards like Trained, Transformed, and Unearthly and provide a specific bonus, roughly equivalent to a +2 to an attribute or power.

Specialties cover skills like Investigation, Law, Martial Arts, and Occult and give a +1, +2 (Expert), or +3 (Master) bonus. To be honest, I find them terribly boring, though I haven't figured out a way to make them more interesting. Being a Master lets you create stunts for that specialty, but it's nigh impossible to get that level randomly.

There are over 70 powers described and they are all pretty standard fare. Some, like Energy Control, are really a bucket of different powers.

Energy Control works with one of the spectrum of energies and forces (or the lack thereof). Choose one of Cold, Darkness, Electrical, Force, Gravity, Light, Magnetic, Radiation, Sonic, and Vibration Control. The basic effect of the power is generally a Blast of that type of energy (or possibly a Dazzle for Light or Sonic Control) with the potential for many extras, including Force Field, Flight, Telekinesis, and other offensive powers like Aura, Binding, Dazzle, and Stunning.

By taking an extra, you effectively double the "cost" of a power and you have to either remove a

different power you rolled up or take a limit on the power. Extras can be an adjacent or associated power, as mentioned, or some other bonus like increased duration, range, area of effect, and so on. Limits are the opposite and either balance out an extra, remove the Determination cost (see below), or increase the level by 2. Some powers, like magic, come with built-in limits to help balance out their utility.

Creating or defining a new power not covered by the base rules is both really easy and explicitly encouraged.

> *So long as you and the player are agreeable, feel free to make it up! Use the existing specialties and powers as guidelines and examples and write up what the new ability does, assign a level to it, and you're ready to go!*

A character's Determination score is based on subtracting the number of powers they have from 6 (noting that any attribute of rank 7 or higher counts as a power). They start each session with at least that amount of DP (typically around 2). The idea is that Determination can balance out characters with fewer powers and/or lower attributes, but I'm not so confident in this. With the random character creation, you can get a striking power disparity amongst characters and you either have to accept that or use the optional point-based rule of getting 45 points to spend on levels and specialties.

The hardest part of creating a character for me is coming up with 3 qualities. The sample characters (8 heroes and 9 villains) help and offer a good variety without being knockoffs of Marvel or DC characters.

In Conclusion

Icons is just easy. I can hand a character sheet to a new player and not have to explain anything. Tests are easy to adjudicate and have enough flair to make things interesting.

Explaining how to use qualities and DP is hard for me and I usually find myself skipping the explanation or at least saying, "Take note of your qualities. If you have a quality you want to apply to a situation or want to do something unusual, call it out and we'll work it out."

Despite everything being straight-forward, the organization of the rule book throws me off. They cover many of the basics at the beginning, before character creation, but then expand on those basics in the chapter on taking action that comes after character creation, so I find myself flipping pages (well, searching in my PDF reader) a lot. This led to me creating a 4-page GM screen to put all the important rules in one place.[7] I need to create a handout lists all the things they can do with advantage and how to get it.

Icons is a light, well-supported system that has a good heart and strong design DNA. It has never failed me.

E&A Addendum

For Elf:

> *In the real world dead is dead, but in the comics, death is often just another temporary condition.*
>
> *If an **Icons** character dies (from a killing outcome in combat or other deadly circumstance), the character remains out of play for at* least *one issue [a session], but thereafter may return. The GM and player come up with a suitable explanation for the hero's miraculous survival or resurrection.*

It follows with further suggestions on ways the character could change upon coming back. This is not some optional rule or buried in a section on GM guidance; the text above in the first chapter.

For Roger, the rules include the probability table for rolling 1d6–1d6, providing both the chance of rolling an exact result and the chance of rolling a particular result or higher.

[7] This is not unusual—I do this for all games I run as I find it helps me learn the rules better than using a GM screen created by the publisher or someone else.

Junior League of Planets

Prelude

The month of October ended up being a scheduling nightmare. The best we could manage was having two sessions each missing a different player. So rather than force the current Savage Worlds campaign or miss a month of gaming, I volunteered to run a couple of one-shots. For Halloween, I'll be doing a horror scenario (details next month). For mid-October, I put up a series of polls on our group's Discord channel. For each question, each of the 3 players could vote for multiple options. It was slightly complicated by the 4th player who wasn't going to make the session also voting,[8] so I had to filter them out from the results.

Question #0: Genre

- Fantasy: 1 vote
- Science Fiction: 3 votes
- Superhero: 3 votes
- Horror: 1 vote

I broke the tie and picked Superhero because I wanted practice.

Question #1: Who makes the characters?

- GM Created: 3 votes
- Player Created ahead of time on Discord: 2 votes
- Player Created at start of the game: 2 votes

Had either of the Player Created options won, I would have used the Icons random character generation process.

Question #2: What is the tone of the game?

- Silly: 2 votes
- Light: 3 votes
- Mostly Serious: 2 votes
- Very Serious: 1 vote

Question 3: What is the scale of the scenario?

- City / Neighborhood: 1 votes
- Country / Continent: 0 votes
- Earth / Planet: 1 vote
- Cosmic / Galaxy: 2 votes

The votes were very scattered across the options, so we went with the option that 2 of the 3 players picked.

Question #4: Who are our heroes?

- Teens: 3 votes
- Independent Adults: 2 votes
- Mercenaries / Operatives: 1 vote
- Veterans / Legends: 2 votes

A light game about teen superheroes in space. I immediately thought of *Legion of Super-Heroes*.

Junior League of Planets

The United League of Planets is a galactic organization with a charter to foster peace and trade among the hundreds of planetary civilizations scattered throughout the galaxy. The adjunct Junior League of Planets is a youth organization with a focus on cultural exchange and nurturing future leaders, but the JLP is mostly known for its humanitarian works and deeds of heroism. Not fettered with the politics and bureaucracy of the ULP, the youthful enthusiasm and optimism of the JLP members make it an active force for good in the galaxy.

Like the ULP, the JLP has one representative from each of the member planets and elect a Leadership Council of five members. Notably, the members of the ULP and JLP Leadership Council's need not represent the same planets. The Councils set agendas and priorities and are the public face of their respective organizations. Otherwise, both are run democratically based on majority vote (or super-majority for changing bylaws or inducting new member planets).

The PCs' powers are indicative of the abilities of their home planet.

[8] Because of course they did.

Character Generation

I created a basic automated character generator on Google Sheets that did the die rolling and table lookups. It also calculated the "cost" of the characters by adding up all attributes and power levels plus the specialties (sans any bonuses from the origin).

The danger of such a program is hitting the refresh button until you get something you like, which kind of defeats the purpose. So I forced myself to pick those where the cost was 45.

Per the standard rules, I added in the bonus from the origin and swapped two ability scores if necessary.

I was going to make 6 PCs, but I ran out of time and created 4 for the 3 players to pick from.

The Scenario

The planet of Ophidion is seeking membership in the ULP after emerging from centuries of isolation from the galactic community. While the main Ophidion delegation negotiates with the ULP, the JLP has been tasked with escorting Sultana Aspera of Ophidion, showing her the sites, and making a good impression.

The PCs were brought into the JLP hall where the leadership council gave them the honor to escort Sultana Aspera and introduced her.

Beyond that setup, I had very loose notes in my head about what would happen next.

Sultana Aspera



Psiclops

Origin: Gimmick

Prowess	2	Poor
Coordination	3	Average
Strength	4	Fair
Intellect	6	Great
Awareness	5	Good
Willpower	7	Incredible

Stamina 11

Determination 2

Specialities
- Athletics (+1)
- Leadership (+1)

Powers
- **Illusion**: 5 Good
  - Extra: Images*
  - Limit: Requires concentration
- **Dazzle**: 5 Good
  - Blinding light
- **Super-Senses**: 7 Incredible
  - Enhanced Vision (+1)
  - Thermal vision
  - X-Ray vision
  - Telescopic vision
  - Microscopic vision
  - Tracking vision
  - Lidar

Qualities
- ☐ "THE GOGGLES DO SOMETHING!"
- ☐ A LEADER WITH VISION
- ☐ JLP MEMBER
- ☐ _____



* In **Icons**, Illusions are purely mental and not visible by anyone else. Images, on the other hand, can be seen by multiple people and cameras. The goggles achieve Illusions by directly stimulating the target's optic nerves and Images by creating a hologram. Psiclops has to choose which method they are using when they use the power.

Uranium Lad

Origin: Birthright

Prowess	5	Good
Coordination	4	Fair
Strength	5	Good
Intellect	4	Fair
Awareness	4	Fair
Willpower	4	Fair

Stamina 9

Determination 2



Specialities

- Investigation Expert (+2)
- Science (+1)

Powers

- **Density**: 2 Poor
  - Damage Resistance 2
  - "Limit": Permanent
- **Detection**: 5 Good
  - Radiation
- **Energy Control**: 5 Good
  - Radiation Blast
- **Force Field**: 5 Good
  - Extra: Aura (damaging)

Qualities

- ☐ "THE POWER OF THE ATOM!"
- ☐ JUST HAPPY TO BE OF HELP
- ☐ JLP MEMBER
- ☐ _____

Sister Maulina

Origin: Transformed

Prowess	5	Good
Coordination	2	Poor
Strength	8	Amazing
Intellect	4	Fair
Awareness	5	Good
Willpower	4	Fair

Stamina 12

Determination 2



Specialities

- Business Expert (+2)
- Weapons (Bludgeons) (+1)

Powers

- **Danger Sense**: 5 Good
- **Damage Resistance**: 7 Incredible
- **Strike**: 4 Good
  - Ban Hammer: 9 Fantastic (Strike either replaces Strength for damage or uses Strength + 1 if it is a bashing weapon.)

Qualities

- ☐ SISTER OF THE BEATIFIC ORDER OF THE HOLY CUDGEL*
- ☐ SPEAK LOUDLY AND CARRY A BIG STICK
- ☐ JLP MEMBER
- ☐ _____

* I am rather proud of this one.

Cepha-Lass

Origin: Birthright

Prowess	6	Great
Coordination	5	Good
Strength	5	Good
Intellect	3	Average
Awareness	5	Good
Willpower	6	Great

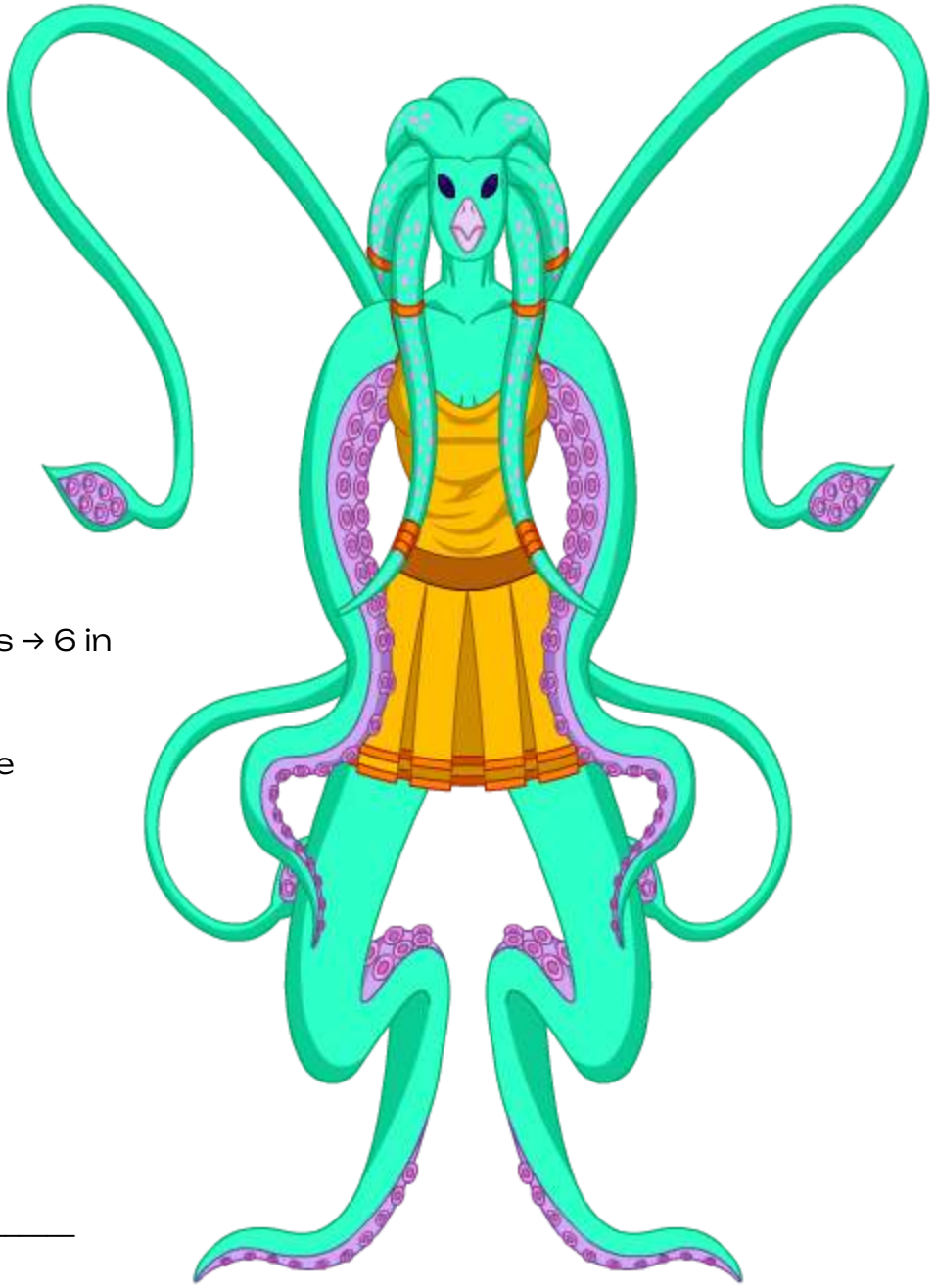
Stamina 11

Determination 2

Specialities
- Science (+1)

Powers
- **Aquatic**: 6 Great
  - Breathe underwater
  - Coordination & Awareness → 6 in water
  - Swim at speed 3
- **Extra Body Parts**: 3 Average
  - Tentacles → Stretching
- **Fast Attack**: 5 Good
  - 1 Additional attack
- **Invisibility**: 6 Great
  - Exquisite camouflage

Qualities
- ☐ PRINCESS OF THE DEEP
- ☐ FLEXIBLE
- ☐ JLP MEMBER
- ☐ _____



* This character was not picked. The player who was debating it mentioned later that they doubted their aquatic power would come into play. They didn't know that the first challenge would take place on a river.

Disaster at the Diamond Falls

First, they visited the Diamond Falls of Rijor 5. Onboard a sight-seeing boat, an explosion in the engine room set off three crises the PCs had to deal with. The rocking of the boat from the explosion caused several people to fall overboard, sending them into the river where the current would carry them over the falls without rescue. Also, a fire had engulfed the engine room and trapped someone inside. Meanwhile, the boat no longer had rudder control and would also fall victim to the falls if nothing was done.

The “rudders” were actually a set of four plasma turbine engines mounted to the bottom of the boat that swiveled to direct the boat. They could also point downward to resist gravity and in normal operation the boat would “go over” the falls and lower itself while hovering next to the falls until it reached the river below.

After a harried discussion, the team split up with Sister Maulina trying to rescue people from the river, Psiclops dealing with the fire, and Uranium Lad going to the bridge. Things did not go well. Sister Maulina couldn’t throw a life preserver accurately. Psiclops couldn’t stop a fire that had grown beyond what a handheld extinguisher could do. Uranium Lad learned that the rudder problem couldn’t be corrected from the bridge. So everyone swapped tasks.

Sister Maulina dove into the river to redirect the rudders by hand; her Amazing Strength being very useful for the underwater task, both in moving the rudders and in holding her breath. Psilops organized the passengers into not panicking and putting on their life vests while Sultana Aspera helped reel in those who had gone overboard. Uranium Lad, protected by his force field against the flames, blasted a hole in the wall to give an exit route to the person who was trapped and another hole in the floor to bring in water to quench the flames.

Once everything was under control, Sister Maulina directed the boat to shore before it could sink and then carried it back upstream to the dock.

Tango at Gamma Ray Gary’s Diner

The group decided that superheroing made for hungry work. Sultana Apsera had a flier for Gamma Ray Gary’s Diner so that’s where they went to lunch. Imagine a 1950’s style drive-up diner set on an asteroid orbiting a gas giant.

Their Cephaloid (see Cepha-Lass, above) waitress took their order (when asked, she recommended the meatloaf) while also delivering food and drink orders to other tables.

As they were nearing the end of the meal, a space biker gang and their “spacebikes” descended upon the diner. They displaced patrons, taking their seats, and played loud, disturbing death metal on the jukebox. Things really hit the fan when their leader walked up to our heroes’ table and pulled Sister Maulina up to dance.



She took a swing at him. He dodged and twirled her around. Psiclops created the illusion of a hole in the floor, but the biker deftly waltzed and leapt over, carrying Sister Maulina with him. It wasn’t until she connected her knee to his, um, missection,

did she break free of his influence. He was then distracted by falling down a hole that wasn't there.

Meanwhile, Uranium Lad had tried to distract one of the bikers to go "out for a smoke" but got more than he bargained for when the biker really liked that idea and put his muscular arm around the teen's shoulder.

In the chaos of the situation, they had lost track of Sultana Aspera. Psiclops spied her being carried off by another biker towards a spacetrike. Psiclops and Uranium Lad (who had by then exfiltrated himself from the overly-chummy grip of a biker) double-teamed the would-be kidnapper while Sister Maulina faced off against her once dance partner (who had escaped the fictional hole he was in by now) and another biker.

While Uranium Lad blasted, Psiclops tried to blind the biker carrying Suntana Aspera, but was unsuccessful until they adjusted their optics to split the laser beam to hit each of the biker's 3 eyes.

I will now interrupt the narration to talk about the frustration of getting Psiclops' player to come up with ideas of their own on how to use their power. They were enthusiastic about the game, but was stymied at every creative choice. It got so bad that the other players felt obligated to step in with suggestions and examples and I had to pull them back from taking the reins fully. And when we collectively came up with an idea, Psiclops' player still could not put in their own words—rather than just saying, "I do that". Arg. In their defence, illusions/images is a tricky power, but you could at least throw imaginary monsters at the enemy if you run out of "creative" ideas.

After a few furious pages of fighting, our heroes rescued Sultana Aspera as the last of the bikers still standing took their expeditious leave of the diner.

Spider Assassins on the Ferris Wheel

After the diner, the group decided to head to the amusement park. I asked each player to describe one of the rides or entertainments. They rode a plasma flume ride that wound around the planetary rings. They partook in carnival games, but failed to win any prizes despite having analyzed how they were "rigged." They rode the tilty-twirly-rotrorama practically designed to make them lose their lunch.

Then came the ferris wheel. The group were in two enclosed cabins—Sister Maulina with Sultana Aspera in one and Uranium Lad with Psiclops in another. While they were hundreds of feet off the ground, they were beset by spider-like assassins.

Sister Maulina was able to keep them from opening their cabin door, but was then inundated with sleep powder that left her stunned. Psiclops was stabbed before he pulled out a stunt and used his holographic powers to turn himself invisible. Uranium Lad blasted at their attackers and tried to make his way to the other cabin.

Sister Maulina forced out a roar that expelled the powder from her system but not before Sultana Apsera had been cocooned by an assassin. It then leapt off the cabin and glided away on a string of webbing trailing behind. Psiclops calculated the trajectory of its descent and conveyed the information to Sister Maulina who jumped off the ferris wheel onto the fleeing assassin. Sister Maulina attached herself to the cocoon encasing Sultana Aspera. As the trio fell, Sister Maulina managed to rotate her body so that she hit the ground and took the brunt of the force, saving Sulata Aspera. The would-be kidnapper was quickly dispensed by a follow-up blow.

Figuring they had had enough excitement for one trip, they went back to the JLP headquarters. A few weeks later after the negotiations had ended, Ophidion was welcomed into the ULP. Sultana Aspera gave a speech thanking the ULP and JLP and looked forward to their new relationship... and then announced she'd be taking Sister Mualina as her mate, much to her surprise and chagrin.

Slaying the One-Eyed Albino

This is something I wrote back in 1999 for A&E. It probably appeared in or around A&E #289. I bring it up here because of recent discussions about how disadvantages are paid for. I was tackling it from a direction that was indicative of the games I was familiar with at the time, but some of the ideas apply to both indie and mainstream games today.

When I was wrestling with character disadvantages in my superhero-based rpg, SPARK, I came up with the following idea. Rather than give back character points for disadvantages, give experience points. If a character has a weakness, the GM would give extra xp when the weakness influences the campaign. The amount of xp would be based on the impact the disadvantage had in the campaign. More severe and frequent disadvantages result in higher xp rewards.

Such an approach avoids the "one-eyed albino syndrome" where players pile on minor disadvantages that might never have a negative impact on the game.[9] Munchkins who see disadvantages as a source of free character points would not receive any short-term benefits since the point benefits of disadvantages are spread out over a campaign. The GM can also keep a watchful eye on mental disadvantages that often rely on proper roleplaying; when the player does not roleplay the disadvantage, the character does not get rewarded. Players will hopefully take a few well-conceived disadvantages that work well for the character and campaign rather than a patchwork of physical and mental problems just to get enough starting character points.

The GM no longer has to decide how much a disadvantage is worth before the campaign begins. As the campaign progresses and characters earn new disadvantages or discard old ones, the GM does not have to worry about re-calculating point totals. The GM simply ceases awarding xp for discarded disadvantages and starts giving xp for new ones. Disadvantages like reputations and enemies become more natural and fluid.

Handling disadvantages through xp works equally well with random and point-based character creation. For systems like *AD&D* that do not have formal rules for handing disadvantages, GMs can apply this method as a carrot to entice players to give their PCs disadvantages. Because of the exponential xp requirements of *AD&D* levels, the GM may want to apply a multiplier, like an additional 5-10%, instead of flat xp rewards. When applying this method to a point-based system like *GURPS* or *Hero*, the GM will want to increase the base points for starting characters.

Over long campaigns, there is the potential that this method would give the characters more points than traditional methods. If you see this as a problem, only award extra xp until the total xp award for the disadvantage equals a pre-set maximum, such as the book value of the disadvantage. For instance, a 10 point disadvantage would earn the character 10 xp points spread over many adventures. Once the character has gotten 10 xp from that disadvantage, the character no longer earns extra xp but is not allowed to discard the disadvantage.

For those systems that use plot points or similar mechanisms, the GM can reward these in addition to or in lieu of xp for disadvantages. The GM can give these types of rewards during the game, not waiting until the end, as a way to prepare PCs for final climatic conflicts that would require these points. Only by surviving death traps and other challenges that exploit the character's weaknesses can they earn enough of these plot points to win in the end.

[9] 2026 comment: This comment was probably inspired by a group of gamers whose first encounter with a point-based game with disads was Mechwarrior and they were trying to negotiate with the GM that if a missing hand was worth 10 points (or whatever), what could they get for just missing finger.

Comments on E&A Issue #16

Roger BW

RYCT John, the U.S. has a "mob of masked ~~young~~ middle-aged men out to terrify and assault non-white people," they are called ICE.

RYCT Brian, I can see a "well-dressed fire cult leader" hearing a Nomex suit, but a) hide that fact from their flock and b) insist that they are immune to fire and don't need one. If something does go wrong with a rank-and-file cultist, well, either they weren't worthy or they have been blessed.

RYCT Jim, every time I see "Loyd Blankenship" in print, I read it as "Lord Blankenship" (and then triggers the name Lord British in my brain).

RYCT Timothy on *GURPS Traveller Far Trader*, Google Books has the blurb, "Chapter 2 is an economics textbook in disguise...and it's fun!" That sounds like something you would say.

Patrick Brady

Gambling is mainly profitable not only because humans don't understand risk, but also because it is addictive. It triggers the very primitive reward centers of the brain and casinos do everything they can to both amplify these effects and hide the cost.

Your examples of GM dickery were both horrific. For both DunDraCon and Kublacon, organizing an open game for just your clique would be impossible in the game registration system (and "invitation only" games are not a thing).

Dylan Capel

The magical portals in *The World Below* eliminates the need to have the entirety of the underworld be continuously connected.

I picked up the *Invincible* core rules and I found them serviceable and definitely more approachable than *Outgunned Superheroes*. When it comes to a "good introduction to the genre," I think superhero RPGs are a terrible introduction to the superhero genre. First, there is so much variety in the genre that everyone needs to be on the same page before you even start. Second, if you aren't already familiar with and accepting of the genre conventions of the style of superheroes you are trying to emulate, things can go sideways and/or get murdery really quickly. Third, RPGs are not comics (or movies or television shows) and there will be a gap of expectations that players must be willing to bridge. An introductory scenario should introduce the rules and flow of the game and set the tone for future scenarios, but I don't think it can do the heavy lifting of introducing players to the superhero genre.

Myles Corcoran

In reading Session 22, I incorrectly imagined the geode was unbroken and the clay figure inside was only found by breaking open the geode. I'm going to have to use that idea somewhere.

RYCT Patrick on the 2017 *Wonder Woman* film, my hypothesis is that Wonder Woman is a character of World War II, but Marvel had already done *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and setting her film in WWII might have made it feel derivative.[10] Moving her movie to WWI makes a certain amount of sense, but...

In American history and culture, WWI doesn't hold the weight of WWII. We celebrate Veteran's Day, but it has lost the connections to WWI that Remembrance Day has maintained in the Commonwealth. Hollywood has been depicting WWII since before the war ended. It was instrumental in the WWII propaganda machine. WWII casts a much longer shadow than WWI.

RYCT me on Aurora Cove, oh, I could run it again at other conventions, but I probably won't. The second time I run the same scenario is usually not as good as the first time. There are GMs who can run the same thing multiple times and enjoy seeing how different groups of players navigate through it, but it doesn't hold my interest. I invite anyone else to take what I've provided and run with it if they are so inspired.

[10] Plus you have Steve Trevor vs. Steve Rogers.

Avram Grumer
Your examples of soft versus hard moves wasn't that the hard moves were "the blows that do damage," but that hard moves dictated something that happened to the PCs versus giving the PCs an opportunity to react to a dynamic situation.

I don't know if "guys" is gender-neutral, but I know women who use "dude(s)" regardless of gender.

RYCT Josh, successive editions of D&D seem to go through a cycle of bulking up and then slimming down with the new edition before bulking up again as supplements get released.

Joshua Kronengold
RYCT me, Rockslide is based on Terra from the Teen Titans.[11] Enigmatic motivations are part of the package. :) I wanted the players to feel like their characters could be redeemed if they chose or they could have decided to continue their justified-to-them villainous ways.

RYCT Roger, the Indy RPG had 7 pre-gen characters. One was Jock Lindsey who was only in one scene at the start of the first film. The *MSH RPG* not only had a much larger cast of characters to play, but players actually wanted to play them. Only a reprobate like me would want to play Jock.

My ~~great~~ stupid *Indiana Jones RPG* story. There were two players: me and the GM's brother. I played Jock and the other played Indy. In the first scene, I did the stupid, chaos-monkey thing of antagonizing Indy by playing a prank using Reggie, Jock's snake. Indy's response was to shoot Jock, hitting him in the leg. When I objected out-of-character that this was a ridiculous escalation that did not fit with the character of Indy, I was rebuffed by both brothers who maintained that it was an appropriate response. That was the only time I ever played the game.

[11] Red Dragon = Robin (as noticed and noted by the player), Demonchydle = Raven, Koaosling = Beast Boy, The Abyssal = Cyborg (in a round-about way, or crossed with Aqualad if you want to spin it that way).

Dan Shimizu introduced me to Planet Unknown at a DunDraCon a couple years ago and I was so enamored with it that I bought my own physical copy. And I have yet to play it non-solo. : (

Dale Meier
Why would golems have to be "in the shape of a human being"?

RYCT Patrick the reluctance to "impose some tight restrictions" on AI is fueled by the fact we can't impose restrictions on other nations, specifically China. AI is a new arms race. Unilateral disarmament is not on the table.

AI can be a great tool for science, mathematics, medicine, and so on. Unfortunately, it also has a lot of downsides, especially when mixed in with social media.

YCT to Bryant and YCT me regarding intraparty conflict seem to be at odds.

Lisa Padol
RYCT me, the influence of Stardew Valley on Aurora Cove is mostly just vibes, as illustrated with the non-supers characters portraits and in the makeup of the village itself.

Those who "roleplay with great skill, but nevertheless do hog the limelight as players" (as you put it) are not "skilled roleplayers" (as I put it) in my book. My use of "skilled" is not the best. Hogging the limelight as a player is like hogging the ball in basketball—the best players don't, even if they are skilled at the game. Or you can be a great basketball player but a lousy team player.

RYCT Pedro & Maira, I like it when visual novels give a "Ending #X of Y" indication at the end. It helps me decide if I want to chase the other endings, but I don't need to know the value of "Y" before I start.

RYCT Brian, there are many shenanigans gamers can get up to when *Star Trek* transporters are available.

Gabriel Roark
I was taken aback by you not being able to identify the artists you were praising. An RPG product with art should always have artistic credits somewhere.

Brian Rogers
RYCT Mark, Terence Tao commented that AI helps in mathematical research at least in part because it can sift through the mountains of publications and make connections that individual mathematicians just can't.

Your comment about Danny Kaye reminds me of the adage that in actual combat, weird works. Against a highly skilled opponent, a lesser opponent's unexpected technique can be successful, at least until they figure it out and adjust.

Jim Vassilakos
RYCT Patrick, whether the British did "far more good" than evil really depends on whom you ask. The U.S. has a pathologic inability to even admit the evils of its past and has made it blind to the evils it continues to perpetuate and amply.

RYCT Roger, can we construct a *Traveller* economy that has both the equivalent of large container ships and couriers like FedEx/UPS/DHL (and the independent contractors they might employ)?

RYCT Dylan, LLMs' ability to generate working code doesn't demonstrate they "think" any more than LLMs' ability to create a story means they have "imagination." Given their training data, they make guesses on what pieces to put together and in what order.

And no, the mathematics AI is doing is not reasoning; rather, it has a huge bowl of mathematical spaghetti that it throws against a huge number of walls and when something sticks, they throw more at it. Their access to the spaghetti is beyond what a human mathematician can remember or research and they can run simulations at a scale and speed that humans cannot match. Because that's what computers are good at.

This is not to say that they won't eventually achieve the emergent property we call consciousness. Perhaps sooner than later, but right now, I think you are falling prey to two common and related human traits: attributing agency and intention where there is none and anthropomorphizing.

We shouldn't be thinking of consciousness in terms of intelligence but of sentience and sapience. Should we also give non-human animals "rights commensurate with [their] intellectual prowess"? What do you think those should be?

As I said before, I don't want to be on the wrong side of history, but I also don't want us jumping the gun and doing something silly. What would it mean if we were to give AI human rights today?

Patrick Zoch
I must admit to missing the various illustrative nuances you put into your zine. Whether or not it is noticed or acknowledged, do what you enjoy doing; if you stop enjoying it, then stop.

RYCT me on persuasion versus intimidation, the "repercussions of the technique" probably should be a roleplaying decision, not a game-system decision. Yes, you might be better at intimidation, but if the GM explains the possible repercussions, you may choose to use persuasion instead.

RYCT Josh about flavor "not sufficient to save a monster" in *D&D 5e*. I think this approach is warranted when introducing a new edition—get back to basics and expand with nuance in later supplements.

When it comes to humanoids, *D&D* (and most games) treats species as a monoculture. The more nuanced approach would be to have the same species feel different depending on which region or tribe the PCs encountered. What's the difference between a bugbear and a hobgoblin? One is Lawful Evil and the other Chaotic Evil? Do they have to be different? What if there was just a single species with different cultures—one more Chaotic and one more Lawful?

ATLANTIS FOR NOW #5

for Ever & Anon #17

Gabriel Roark
Rancho Cordova, CA
gabrielroark@gmail.com

Primary Game System Keywords: The Arduin Grimoire
Secondary Game System Keywords: Advanced D&D (1e), Beyond the Wall, Star Wars 2e

Preface

Well, heck. In thish, I had hoped to do something that I haven't previously done in these pages: combine the review of a gaming product (*The Arduin Trilogy*) with an Igtheme (namely, Negotiating with Monsters). My motivation is not born of the desire to write something tricky & neat (although it would, perhaps, qualify as such), but of practicality. Reviewing *The Arduin Trilogy* alone is a daunting task, necessitating that one compass roughly 300 pages of gaming material (of very small type) packed with diverse content & hopefully write something worth my time & yours in fewer than 16 pages. I thought that marrying this review to this month's Igtheme would bring focus to the essay. Alack, it was not meant to be! David Hargrave, Arduin's author, wrote very little about negotiating with monsters in *The Arduin Trilogy*. This from a fellow whose motto was, "Take a troll to lunch" (translation: try something new)! Perhaps Dave & his trolls did not converse much—or failed to overcome the communication barrier. Maybe we can infer from the Trilogy's text what tools Arduin provided to players who wished their PCs to parley with those considered monsters & Hargrave's attitude toward such negotiations. Let's see, eh?

Additional Contents

- Arduin's Portal to Adventure: *The Arduin Trilogy: Limited Edition* (Part 2)
- A Whisper to a Scream: Comments on E&A #16

ARDUIN'S PORTAL TO ADVENTURE: *THE ARDUIN TRILOGY: LIMITED EDITION* (PT. 2)

WITH A SIDE OF IGTHEME: NEGOTIATING WITH MONSTERS

Lastish, we took a 1,000–foot view of Emperors Choice Games & Miniatures Co.'s (Empcho's) splendid reproduction, *The Arduin Trilogy: Limited Edition*. To recap, the Limited Edition Trilogy is an illustrated box set containing:

- ***The Arduin Grimoire*, Volume I (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

This article will consider the **bold-text** items in the preceding dot-list.

All right, as I wrote in the preface to this zine, the first three volumes of *The Arduin Grimoire* do not explicitly discuss the subject of negotiating with monsters. The Arduin Trilogy does, however, provide some tools for the referee & players to use to adjudicate such interactions. The Arduin Trilogy's tools for negotiating with monsters fall into three buckets: (1) General Advice & Character-specific Traits, (2) Monster Traits, & (3) Situational Charts & Guidance.

General Advice & Character-specific Traits

This bucket of tools covers Hargrave's recommendations for roleplaying a character, mechanics pertinent to characters, & non-mechanical characteristics. Hargrave advises gamers to roleplay their PCs as individuals: "…the character must be played within the confines of the social, economic, and cultural realities of the world within which they play." For gamers that have trouble putting this into practice, Hargrave suggests reading a piece of fiction & patterning the character after one in the story. To get a handle on how one's character might react in a given situation, Hargrave advises one to imagine oneself in an analogous, completely foreign social interaction & considering how one might feel & act in such a situation, then apply those insights to the character's behavior in game. (AGII:74.) These suggestions indirectly address negotiating with monsters but provide some guidance that might benefit novice gamers most.

To further assist players & referees with roleplaying myriad types of beings, Arduin tabulates "Notes on Fantastic Beings." The table covers approximately 37 types over 31 rows. The term "types" here refers to groups of beings that RPGs typically consider PC or "playable" races, species, or heritage groups. In Advanced D&D terms, the table covers humans & demi-humans (elves, dwarves, gnomes, hobbits, & half-orcs), humanoids (kobolds, hobgoblins, & orcs), & "monsters" (ogres, giants, gargoyles, faeries, demons, & deities). Information on fantastic beings is parsed among six columns (not counting the "Type" column) detailing:

- Average lifespan [average natural life expectancy]
- Age of majority
- Usual alignment
- Whether the type can fertilely mate with humans
- General temperament
- Notes, observations, & "typical stuff" (AGI:11–12.)

Looking at "General Temperament" & "Notes, Observations and Typical Stuff," these columns provide pithy statements about the typical specimen of each type in Arduin. Elves, for instance, tend to be "aloof, elitist" & "Seldom mingle with non-elves." The average kobbit (kobold/hobbit hybrid) is described as "Crafty, greedy" & "Thieving, pranksters, can be [vicious]". These two columns, together with usual alignment, give a baseline from which to develop a character—how like or unlike (and in what ways) the character is from the average for their type. Other implications—such as demographic & interracial relationships—can be inferred from the information concerning lifespan, age of majority, & ability to procreate with humans. The table leaves many open questions for referees & players, which seem to be fertile fields to develop characters & societies of Arduin's fantastic beings. After all, this table sketches or implies the "social, economic, and cultural realities" (AGII:74) of the enumerated beings. From it, for instance, one might surmise that an elf of hundreds of years of age is liable to regard a brash human warrior as almost childlike & uncouth.

The Arduin Trilogy carries forward additional implications for interactions (if not negotiations) in its discussions of PC races & new character classes, further developing the Arduinian milieu. In AGI (page 25), for instance, we learn that barbarians & witch hunters detest each other & usually fight on sight (the reader is not enlightened as to why this is so). Similarly, Hargrave warns players that would run a star-powered mage can expect to meet with hostility because "modern" societies remember when the star-powered mages sided with the Titans & nearly destroyed the civilizations of humans, elves, & dwarves (AGII:8). Certainly, prejudices of this ilk would color attempts at negotiation. AGIII (pages 20–22) profile deodanths, phraints, & saurigs as PCs. These one-page characterizations focus on the history & typical social & personality traits of each race—valuable for playing an alien mindset.

Applicable to all character types, we now come to the Charisma ability score, upon which Arduin expands the base set by D&D. Hargrave describes Charisma as mixing personality (such as personal magnetism) & appearance. In Arduin, each Charisma score between 1 & 20 receives a modifier to believably lie, the morale of one's hirelings & henchmen, & to woo another character. Hargrave also provides short descriptors of the quality of appearance implied by each Charisma score. Lying, impressing one's hired hands, & wooing NPCs are all specialized forms of negotiation. The Arduin Trilogy does not, as far as I can tell, have a general class of reaction modifiers for Charisma scores, so I presume that one uses comparable information from AD&D. Reliance on another game's structures is not strictly necessary here, however; Arduin's lie, morale, and love factor modifiers are given as percentages, with positive values marking progressively better ability. (AGII:5.) Therefore, a referee could have a player roll percentile dice, apply their relevant Charisma modifier, & adjudicate based on the result & context. The morale modifier exhibits the smallest spread of the three Charisma modifiers & is probably best suited as a general reaction roll modifier.

Additional characterization with implications for negotiating with monsters ensues from Arduin's Alignment Chart (AGI:13). The chart describes thirteen alignments: lawful good, moderately lawful, marginally lawful, lawful evil, neutral good, true neutral, marginally neutral, neutral evil, chaotic good, true chaotic, chaotic evil, amoral, & amoral evil. In

addition to general notes typifying each alignment, the alignments each have percentage factors for killing, lying, tolerance, loyalty, & cruelty. The way I see it, these factors inform how a given character might be inclined to approach negotiations with monsters. They serve as values or benchmarks of acceptable interpersonal conduct & should inform players' and referees' roleplaying during negotiations.

On the character ability side of things, we finally come to languages. In Arduin, there is no single Common Tongue to facilitate easy communication (AGII:74). Each nation & most creature races have their own patois. So, what happens if your adventuring party happens upon a gang of gnolls, you're not necessarily spoiling for a fight, & nobody in the party understands gnollish speech? Whence negotiation then? Arduin uses the pidgin alignment tongues of Lawful, Neutral, & Chaotic, comprising pieces of languages spoken by those of these alignments (AGII:74).

Monster Traits

The Arduin Trilogy sketches hundreds of monsters, most of which are unique to Hargrave's setting (AGI:80–84; AGII:59–64; AGIII:49–60). The Grimoires provide a straightforward stat block for each monster, describe their appearance, & elucidate something of their habits. This is enough for a referee to work from when communicative ability & circumstance permit some form of parley. Certain classes of monsters receive more detailed treatment, however, namely dragons & demons. For dragons, Arduin identifies typical, general temperaments by age category on top of the predilections of specific *types* of dragons (AGII:25). The Grimoires have copious information about a variety of demons as well, covering their favorite foods, proclivity for violence, other motivations, & traditional enemies (AGI:85; AGIII:67–77).

Situational Charts & Guidance

In keeping with the modular design of The Arduin Trilogy, four situational charts & pieces of guidance round out our examination of what Arduin offers for negotiations in-game. These concern overland travel encounters, encounter reaction rolls, clerical reactions on healing & resurrection, & a morale chart for hirelings.

The gaming text of *The Arduin Grimoire* (AGI) opens with a précis on "How to Play the Game." This short treatment contains a procedure for determining the occurrence of encounters during the game (in overland or dungeon contexts) as well as the initial reaction (response) of monsters and "intelligent foes" to the presence of the PCs. Reactions are determined on a 1d12 roll for both types of encounters & I expect that they are predicated on little or no communication being possible at the outset. Alternatively, the result of the 1d12 roll could simply represent the encountered NPCs' first reaction to the PCs. For monsters, the suggested reactions are running off, shying back, approaching warily, or attacking. Intelligent foes will flee, debate what to do, or attack. The text does not suggest any modifiers to the 1d12 roll. (AGI:1.) Some of the reactions would preclude negotiation at first.

AGIII expands upon the guidance provided in AGI (page 1) & at my table would replace the AGI algorithm. AGIII still calls for a 1d12 roll during initial meetings or encounters. The AGIII chart has twelve possible, gradated reactions that include

disorderly retreat, orderly retreat, temporary retreat, variations on sticking around to see what's what, & different forms of attack. Again, Arduin does not suggest any modifiers to the 1d12 roll. (AGIII:95.) This chart gives results that are slightly more likely to lead to negotiation compared to the guidance in AGI.

AGII (page 6) presents a Morale Chart for Hirelings, &c. to govern hireling & henchman reactions in combat situations & non-combat conditions that call on the hired hand to back up the PC (or NPC, for referees). The table is based on percentile & thus is directly compatible with the modifiers in the Charisma chart on page 5 of AGII. The morale chart provides twelve possible responses in combat & non-combat situations, ranging from desertion to absolute loyalty. Hargrave notes that pay, length of service, &c. affect the die roll (but does not indicate how), so, even simple reaction rolls on this chart can be viewed as the outcome of an ongoing negotiation between employer & employee. The Morale Chart for Hirelings is detailed & gradated; I think it would be useful as a general reaction roll or negotiation chart as well, using the given result as a guide to the degree of favorability in the monster's response.

To sum up, The Arduin Trilogy does not devote text directly to the matter of negotiating with monsters. It does provide multiple tools for adjudicating this sort of interaction.

A WHISPER TO A SCREAM: COMMENTS ON E&A #16

- Reddened Stars No. 15 (John Redden)
- Twisting the Rope #16 (Myles Corcoran)
- Age of Menace 253 (Brian C. Misiaszek)
- Firedrake's Hoard No. 14 (Roger BW)
- Port Omaha Beacon #3 (Dale Meier)
- The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice #3 (Bryant Durrell)
- An Unlooked for Zine #15 (Lisa Padol)

Reddened Stars No. 15 (John Redden): Aloha, John. Thanks for calling attention to the world-building pages on your websites in your comment to Jim Eckman lastish. As I write this (about 9:40 p.m.), I activated the stardrive & will check on it later; I am still travelling.

This month's Jargon Zen could be baffling if I didn't recall that time is non-linear in Buddhist belief. The mean joke was terrific.

Twisting the Rope #16 (Myles Corcoran): Heyo. Yep, recovery from the sprain has been decent, thanks. Glad you weren't badly hurt.

You're right, Prismatic Wasteland's "You Don't Need a Game System Before You Play: The Calvinball Experiment" isn't exactly your idea of playing a game with individual mechanics tailored to each player. You know that Calvinball is also rather close to? *Nomic*, which Scribble M. Horror wrote about in their second zine for E&A (#13). The Calvinball Experiment & Nomic differ in several important ways, the first of which is that

Calvinball began with no rules (but a setting), whereas Nomic begins with base rules (some immutable, some mutable) & (classically) no setting.

"Check your pulse when I speak" has me stumped.

Regarding Kriegsmesser: "…he again warns Lazaro to avoid drinking wine while concussed, with little impact." I see what you did there!

Thanks for sharing your family story at the end of zine. I have never heard that the Germans bombed Dublin (or any part of Ireland) during World War II, even by mistake.

Age of Menace 253 (Brian C. Misiaszek): RYQ about how B&B's gonzo qualities compare to Arduin's Portal to Adventure, the way to think about Arduin's Portal to Adventure is this: a one-time (for now) confederation (box set) that signal-boosts & loosely (albeit unofficially) connects gaming products by three different concerns. Those concerns are Emperors Choice (Arduin), Matthew Tapp (B&B), & Fellowship of the Thing (*The Lost Dungeons of Tonisborg*). But to your question, I think Arduin is more gonzo than B&B. The latter is somewhat derivative of Arduin & other games, like Gamma World, despite being a cool game in its own right. David Hargrave, in his running & publishing of Arduin, pioneered the multiverse concept in gaming before anybody else of whom I'm aware & freely mixed fantasy & sci-fi. In addition, Hargrave left "head room" in his system for characters to advance as high as 100th level in their classes—in 1977. That is gonzo.

What great ideas for maps as treasure! The E&A brain trust never fails.

Firedrake's Hoard No. 14 (Roger BW): Your bi-scaled treasure type is interesting. I think I might have taken a similar approach when stocking a dungeon once upon a time, mainly to make sure that the adventuring locale had sufficient treasure (& little more, by gum!) for PCs to level & pay for training costs. My knee is doing better, thanks!

Port Omaha Beacon #3 (Dale Meier): Ah, *Interregnum*. I remember that APA but did not discover it until well after its folding. My intent was to mine it for any Arduin content, so I don't really remember too many of the contributors. I am left with the impression that most contributors to *Interregnum* did not write about Arduin.

We are using the Revised & Expanded rulebook for Star Wars 2e. I will check with our referee to see if he knows about the D6 Holocron website. Thanks for the tip!

The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice #3 (Bryant Durrell): Hi, Bryant. I like the call-out boxes in your latest zine. Using that style, two call-out boxes on the same page look a little crowded to me, though. More vertical separation between the two (as in, no overlap) would look cleaner, but boy, what a trick it might be to compose one's text to make that work.

RYCTM on your zine title, I think a little pretention or ostentation is fun & good—it makes a zine stand out right off the bat (poor bat).

Reminded of Silent Crows is a great name & amuses me, considering that the crows in my neighborhood are noisy (but the yellow-billed magpies are next-level raucous).

Back to Grid Maps and Tactical Awareness, you mentioned the Tactician's ability to mark foes such that other party members receive a bonus to hit those opponents. Is there a limit on the number of times per encounter or day (or some other third unit of time) that the Tactician can mark foes (I am assuming that Tacticians can only mark one opponent per round, at least below a certain experience/ability level)? In my table's Advanced D&D campaign, the PCs' druid & (*Dragon* magazine) bard employ a similar gambit by casting *faerie fire*. Druids in AD&D quickly rack up an impressive number of spells per day, so this isn't a one-and-done tactic for most members of this class. Faerie fire also lasts more than one round—what about marking foes in *Draw Steel*?

An Unlooked for Zine #15 (Lisa Padol): Regarding falls, smart of you to consult a professional for balancing exercises. I saw a physical therapist to get my knee unstuck & now Celeste & I are researching off-ice exercises to improve our flexibility, core & leg strength, & balance.

RYCT about *Beyond the Wall*, your brief notes on the session you played in pretty much hit all the distinctives that Dale mentioned in his zine (Port Omaha Beacon #3).

Excellent larp story. Did the other GM's gambit to encourage more hot tub larps work, to your knowledge?

CLOSEDOWN

I am going to end thish here, having just returned from day one of a three-day Resilient California Summit (https://resilientcaliforniasummit.org/). Today was a long day & tomorrow will be, too. I also need to figure something out about my E&A reading situation; my iPad would not load the last two issues & I generally do better reading on it (for this purpose) than on my laptop.

Buh-bye!

~Gabriel

Accidental Recall #16

For Ever & Anon 17 © 2026 Joshua Kronengold eaddr: mneme@labcats.org

Dreamwidth: https://mneme.dreamwidth.org Gaming blog: https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/ (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish) Tumblr: mneme / Mastodon: @mneme@dice.camp Bluesky: mnemex.bsky.social

September into October was overall delightful (although an inspiration, Kathy Mar, passed early in the period—she was a wonderful singer and songwriter whose late motto, KINDNESS, flavored a life lived large).

I'm also slowly adjusting a bit more to the diurnal life—I still often go to bed too late and wake up just enough on time, but I've been finding it easier to sleep at least for a while earlier and wake up more rested.

The big con for us this month was Time Bubble, late September. That was a larping con; I was signed up for games, so I played them with delight—a dancing game with sword fights and necromancers, and a Mario mystery game, and socialized and hung out the rest of the time. We'd spent some attention on costuming for the games, too. Lisa also played in one more game than I did (costume pictured).



Lisa: Tension and Tokusatsu



Lisa: 2 Dance 2 Furious



Josh: 2 Dance 2 Furious

I've also found that I can concentrate more when I read more, (otherwise my mind drifts too easily to games and the like), so I read some books that had been waiting for a while—a Wayward Children novel, the first and third Shadow of the Leviathan murder mystery series (I read the second back in July), the second Power Fantasy comic, and I've begun Return of the Thief, 6th in the Queen's Thief series.

Sadly, I've fallen behind on exercise; fortunately we have some regularly booked trainer appointments, but trying to juggle work (even work from home days) and regular exercise can be a tricky adjustment.

Finally, there were some games. Mostly I can rely on other people's writeups for these—there was the Merryshire playtest a day after the APA came out, a new Dracula Dossier sub-campaign with half new players (plus me and Gareth who have been in the mega-campaign since the beginning, and Ray who has played in many of the games), and more Scum & Villainy.

But also, there were a couple of sessions of Spelljammer (it would take some time to gather who and what we needed for our trial, but it was established that we'd hold it in a base on the Dragon's Wheel as a neutral territory. And also, my PC, Peshi, became a Divine Avatar of Laros the God of Law and Architecture, which probably means that He expects Peshi to judge the trial, which should be fun.) So, since we had gotten an offer from a NPC friend to help loot/explore an abandoned (depopulated) Orcish world with interesting stuff and probably a lich, the PCs decided to go off on the adventure, figuring we'll do the trial afterwards when presumably more of the Interesting People will have been able to gather. (the GM was surprised we didn't blow off this plot thread, but really, Adventure! We can justify it and do the Big Trial Moment afterwards. On the world (Torish), the PCs ship is grabbed by a giant spectral hand and damaged (not by the hand; the hand was just helping them dock and making it hard to leave. By someone's bad flying; clearly we should identify the best fliers and make sure they fly the ship in pivotal moments; the half-Elf (the one who isn't also part demon) and the Dwarf seem to always be piloting in these situations, and both have terrible dex scores so they usually blow the piloting check [not always Dex, but usually]). On the planet, seeing that our ship needed to be rescued from the hand *and* weeks of repair, we opted to go adventuring (hopefully NPC sailors who totally exist can get the repair started while we do). We were contacted by a spectral voice, who offered to ally with us (do we trust them?) And we also saw several places of power that had some kind of magical power line…that was being tapped by a *different* magical force. We also fought some undead, who we realized afterwards were trying to install the taps we'd seen in a different location!

I also played a Neitherworld session, but I forget what happened. Fortunately, one player does do writeups and sends them out the week of the next session, which should jog my memory. I know the characters are maneuvering against a powerful early D&D style Wizard who has made himself immune to several deaths (via the traditional method of a lot of Wish spells), but I think they were able to make some successful maneuvers to give them an advantage…but I don't remember what happened after that.

And, of course, having fallen behind on my comments, I caught up! Having a short APA helped; as mentioned, I was consciously devoting more time to reading books, so while I started out the month trying to catch up, I quickly put the APA down to keep myself on keel, and did the bulk of the work over the weekend.

I also got a few in-person board game plays over the month. I pulled out El Capitan, which I hadn't played for literal decades; I did enjoy it (it's a travel, area majority money game, where you invest in warehouses and fortresses in 9 different cities, but also have to pay to travel between the locations; yield in each city is relative to the cost for playing warehouses there, 1st and 2nd place both get payment, and the yield goes up as people add more warehouses to the city—but after they've crossed a tipping point the yield for a given city starts going down as people compete over it instead! Travel between the cities is governed by cards—you can buy cheap (ish) cards that will take you (once) between two specific cities, but you can also get more expensive cards that will take you to a specific city AND can also be spent to just walk between nearby cities, so you can generally get where you want to go—if you have enough money.

But early in the game, you never have enough money. You start with 20 florins, and someone needs to play 6 warehouses (minimum cost 2) and 1 fortress (minimum cost 4) before the round ends. It costs you a minimum of 4 florins to enter the game at the beginning. You have to build a building every turn, or go to the bank and take out a loan. So if you can manage to camp a cheap city and play every building in that city, you can (barely) manage to avoid taking a loan out in the first round, but unless someone competes with you over that city (which will help you) you'll only be getting 15 florins back, and be guaranteed to have to take out at least one loan in the second round (minimum cost for a round is 16 florins if you don't take out any loans or move). But is this a viable tactic? Honestly, I don't know. The game rewards you both for area majority and for proliferation, so while typical play leaves you deeply in debt by the end of the first round, it also gives you plenty of operating capital to try to dig yourself out of the hole. On the other hand, a zero debt tactic in the first round probably involves taking a loan in the second round, but you might be able to manage cheaper rates, leaving you plenty of capital to play the third round and hopefully profit.

Unfortunately, one friend missed one rule—that you can always buy city cards to move expensively, making the game more tactical and less random (even with 5 players) than they thought, and disengaged a bit. Hopefully will be able to bring the game to the table again at some point, but while this group is going to be doing Wednesday board games regularly, the next few will probably be Mombasa (which I adore; it's also my copy that's been long-term loaned out) and Great ZImbabwe (which is great but I haven't played it enough to have good opinions on it).

I also managed to have a second jam session with an elderly neighbor who teaches piano professionally (and has a masters in music performance). The first time, she was very clear that she wasn't comfortable with me playing along; very much "she plays her music, and I play my music". But this time, she'd I think psyched herself up to be more comfortable with collaboration—she specifically asked me to come in on violin (electric 5 string, actually) one some pieces, and I even got Lisa to sing some songs with me (either on voice or fiddle); it was made fun! And I dusted off my boss multi-effects box, so I had a bit more sound variety; maybe I'll find time to figure out how to also loop in (see what I did there) the boss 5-channel looper I picked up years ago but haven't had a lot of time to play with—figuring out how to get it into the chain on my "simple" 12 channel mixer is a game changer, but there's still so much more to learn.

Igtheme: Negotiating with Monsters What a fascinating topic, and an odd one—one that, I think, one can take in multiple directions.

For starters, there's the very literal—negotiating with monsters in a D&D adventuring setting. Honestly, we do this a lot, but…what's a monster?

I remember in our 5e playtest, an early adventure had us encountering a friendly lich who didn't seem to be harming anyone; just chilling in a barrow. We ended up negotiating for information and most certainly did not get into a fight.

The 12 kingdoms game (which went on for a while; we ended at 20th level I think and may have gotten a boon or two) had its flavor set by early having the PCs meet a smarmy kid who they quickly realized was a shapeshifted blue dragon—and his mother, who most assured was an *ancient* blue dragon. Both seemed to have recently been woken up from a long sleep, and there was evidence that they'd hailed from an earlier age. As such, the PCs did NOT try to provoke a fight with them (one we most assuredly would not have won at 7th level; in addition to being powerful dragons, the two were also high level sorcerers), but were polite and given that they had helped free the two, even gained a few favors from them. Which proved valuable over the course of the campaign—the party was bailed out several times by help from the two blue dragons, and even managed to free even more powerful gold and black dragons who had been trapped in orbs of dragonkind. Eventually, we even realized how wise we had been in treating, not fighting these great creatures—since the gold and black dragon, at least, were divine bings from an earlier age of gods (whose help we sorely needed since we were totally messing with gods by this point).

In the Spelljammer game (if you're playing along at home, different GM), we've had a few noable "negotiating with monsters" moment. Beholders, in general, have their own hostile empire and we've been kill on sight. The same (with a bit more nuance) for cultists of strange/dead gods who got on the PCs hate list early and then expanded operations; we've managed to extract a few people from the cult who weren't firmly wedded to their practices, but they've been a consistent enemy. On the other hand, on our way out of the Dragon Wheel (remember that? I mention it in my comments to Lisa for 16) after our original (NPC) captain was killed, were advised to visit the GIANT red dragon one hop away. He's huge, but friendly, and likes exotic plants—we do try to pick them up when we remember, but often it's hard to remember to say "oh, and we bring a sample of this plant for the red dragon" in time. The time it's probably just as well is when we ended up involuntarily in the Feywild—after getting a hold of experimental Elven space ships which used fey magic to let their casters extend their magic to their ships themselves, letting them turn invisible, teleport, and more. But the dreams and eventual transformations involved made that very much not worth it, and were only able to escape by making a deal with Fey Lords themselves (talk about making a deal with monsters) agreeing to plant a "seed" on a fertile planet in the future, which we did—but just as well that we didn't give it to the horticulturist dragon!

As far as less D&Dish monsters, I remember some rather fraught negotiation in Lisa's games, both with Omar Shakti (from Masks of Nyalathotep) and Patricia Masters (likewise, but sideways) in the original CthulhuPunk campaign—and, of course, always entertaining negotiation with Lisa's version of Dracula (actually, Nicolaus Olahus). By the rules/culture of Dracula Dossier and Night's Black Agents, he is most assuredly a monster, but working and negotiating with him has helped PCs on numerous occasions. For now.

Comments on E&A #15, part 2

Michael Cule: Re-players rebelling against waffly magic: That's interesting, given how much your players have previously been fine with discovering magic as part of play. Still, different games, different rules (and maybe different group).

Glamour Days: a triumphant ending to a delightfully delightful-to-read campaign. (Well, for the characters, I understand the Lunar Empire is going down hill. How many steps of promotion did Jarathir gain at the end?)

Avram Grumer: Re: Gemini's idea of a Monster Hearts/Masks cross. Apparently, it decided to do the cross early, correctly connecting the Mortal from *Monster Hearts* and the Beacon from Masks is most alike, but giving the Beacon's description as the emotional core of the team to the Mortal. Which makes far less sense. Honestly, I don't see why you need to mix Monster Heartsend at all. Empowered works just fine as a close but not too close hack of Masks, where the main difference is that Empowered's heroes might be insecure and immature, but they're very much adults, with no "more adult" heroes out there to grow into. I wasn't thinking of Masks as a particularly good fit for Empowered's storylines, but in fact, the way in which Masks'

protagonists, by default, allow everyone around them to tell them who they are is really true to early *Empowered*.

Thanks for the info on Tchaikovsky. I've only read one book by him and was wondering whether all of his were like that. Good to know they aren't.

Regarding a Vermillion Cove (Monster Hearts) sequel, I think it would be hilarious to have the original game be a TV show in any sequel, and if somebody wanted to port over their old character, well, maybe they've made the jump somehow.

Lisa Padol: re: *The Slow Knife*. The other problem with the art is that there are way more men than women. We ended up having to go with some ridiculous age gaps between the cards and the character they were representing, just because we'd run out of female art cards (and/or use more ambiguous or "young man" pics).

Re-fighting a dragon, feeling like "leveling up" in an old arcade game. Taken literally and out of context, honestly, that sounds awesome. Specifically, in this way, the dragon is the level itself—several levels! You have to get past several interesting encounters while exploring the dragon, before you can even face the dragon itself (or atleast the dragon's head) in a combat/social/whatever encounter.

But taking the concept more seriously, having fights at different levels feel different to the players is the big problem in any game where you level up, including ones where you have no mechanical level-ups. You don't want a fight with a god-level or dragon-level foe to feel exactly like an early fight in the campaign, even if the numbers are fundamentally the same.

So, what can you do? Well, you can change the tactics, structure of plays, or the kind of actions PCs can perform. If you're in a game like D&D where level-ups are mechanical, this is very much a design problem. In a game where the mechanics aren't going to help you, it's more of a GMing problem.

I've not played Be Not Afraid, but otherwise, yes, I've played every LARP you listed. And Soul of the World, another Parcellius game.

Re scum and villainy. No, you're certainly not the only one who thought the kiss Was the files (encoded into saliva or whatnot). That might even have been explicit, at least post-game.

Re Mortality and early spy games: I think Top Secret had a dual rep here—on the one hand, it might have been known as a high mortality game. But on the other hand, it was also well known that the highest weapon damage, rolled maximally, wouldn't kill a maximum HP character. Which happened in a game of ours—in a brief Top Secret game in high school, my friend Vic (I think) was, unbeknownst to me, playing a double agent. So some time in our two-player spy game, his character opened up on me, firing a shotgun directly into my character's chest at point blank. Which….reduced my PC from 12 HP to 10, so my guy proceeded to take out Vic's after absorbing a max damage shotgun blast with only cosmetic effect (maybe he loaded it with salt?) Vic was…nonplussed by the whole thing (I wasn't expecting the betrayal! But maybe I should have been?

Re many PbtA games having a stricly limited season: The idea originated, I think, in the Forge (or at least that's where I first encountered it!), with The Shadow of Yesterday having the idea that the campaign would end once a PC rolled a Godlike roll (having reached a skill level where that was even possible), and Polaris having a definite end to each PC's journey after a certain point of play, or regardless, when they fell to corruption. Sorcerer, of course, like Call of Cthulhu had a curve intended to end in a character's doom, but I don't think of that as the same thing as the fall was calibrated more in months, not days, and not necessarily affecting all PCs similarly. But the core and key to these mechanics is that advancement either comes along with a stat that leads you toward's the game's conclusion, or is that stat, so progress in the game also means progress towards a strong finale. I don't think you need to be PbtA for that, but it is a particular style of mechanics design.

Re your SCA brother being stealth-barded: Ah, yes, I remember when the SCA bardic college was invented and also came up with a (somewhat ridiculous) set of requirements for entry based on some version of the old bardic exams or something. Still probably less convoluted than the D&D version, though.

RYCT Michael Cule on a size 35 creature vs 35 kittens: It's probably more reasonable to say that siz indicates how tall and wide a creature is (approximately), while its mass is around a cube of this. So a large kitten is siz 1 (siz 5 in CoC 7), and maybe 8 inches long and 4 inches in diameter, thus around 5" cubed. A wide and tall person might be siz 18 (or 90 in CoC7) , which by that scale would be 80k cubic inches. That would put their average non-height dimensions at 33 inches, which doesn't seem too unreasonable; I'm 23 inches wide and around 11 inches deep, so maybe a 7 foot person (or someone large and fat) would make more sense at siz 18. In any case, by my calculations a siz 18 person would have the approximate mass of over 600 kittens. Even 18 kittens could reach farther (albeit not taller) if standing end to end, though. What the CoC book says (when we looked it up) is that it's an "average" of height and weight, which I think means that it's basically mass; of course, height tends to scale roughly linearly while weight scales roughly cubically, but they want some wiggle room —a 6′ super thin person coming at siz 12 and a short but stout person being able to justify a higher siz.

rycts me on Monster Hearts: Re Avery wanting or not wanting people to say "that wouldn't turn me on"—I mea, it depends? "Lean sexily against the wall" guy comes to mind; I think it's reasonable to ask for someone to do something sexier to turn you on, but not to say that (absent the asexuality rule) they couldn't turn you on at all. It's a core principle of Monster Hearts that if you try to turn someone on, you can make a roll—but also, to do something, do something. It's not reasonable that you'd Go Agro (or whatever MH calls it) on someone by walking out of the room, and it might not be reasonable that you'd turn someone on by eating lunch (unless it's a hot dog or ice cream or a cherry, or…; give me something here!) / whether the GM can give a player a string on another PC: I mean, it's not an exhaustive list. But I don't remember whether the move specifies where the string goes; if it doesn't say it's an NPC taking the string I don't see why it couldn't go to a PC even if that's not the default.

Re lockers: Yeah, I think every NYC public high school had lockers. And you had to bring your own (terrible), by default locks.

Re Avram's brief Tri-stat game: I think I was the Mars character, and while I didn't do "ok, so I'll put all my stats at maximum", I might have built a broken attack (how am I to know how strong it should be?)

Jim Vassilakos: I wouldn't call why gods aren't (usually) more involved in most fantasy worlds player agency, per se (although that's part of it), but the ability to tell stories about non-gods at all. If gods *are* an active part of the hubbub, then one has to ask why they aren't the main characters and movers and shakers, and, sure, why the gods aren't available PCs.

And maybe in some games they should be. I know of quite a number of one-shot LARPs where gods are among the available PCs. And in our Spelljammer game, my character has become an avatar of a god (and still host to an entirely different god) after deciding (as I mentioned in a previous issue) that the right answer to finding out who had wiped out an entire space empire was to hold a public trial.

re inter-character conflict: The best ways I've seen this happen was when it was baked into the game from the beginning. For instance, Good Society, in addition to having, yes, multiple characters (one main, usually) per player, has an express frame that your side characters are all about making trouble for the MC (Main character) (and the PCs also might not get along). That, plus a consent structure is key to getting the players on the same page about what's going on even when the characters are at loggerheads.

"PCs are not usually siblings" Honestly it's more common for me than you likely think. I seek out relationships among the PCs—my PC in our long-running 3.5 game was the brother of another player's PC; I played Illyana Rasputin (briefly) in Brian Rogers' X-men game while another players was playing Colossus; in our Strixhaven game my rabbit-fey (Harregon) PC is the sister of another player's rabbit-fey PC (and the two have mildly fought over the same girl)…oh, and Lisa's written about the Fate of Cthulhu game where my PC and another player's PC were time-variants of the same person, and the game where the 2nd generation PCs were mostly descendants of the first generation of PCs, and many of them had complex relationships to one another… actually, the sister thing might be a useful hook to a character I'm currently having trouble with!

As Lisa just said (but I was thinking it), if you as GM *want* the PCs related to one another? Just set that to be the campaign frame; "you're all related to one another; decide how". I'd add that nobody can be anyone's parent unless the GM signs off on it, just because of how that kind of power dynamic can spiral, but it depends on the players, honestly.

ryct Brian Rogers on library games: My impression is that the complaints were from parents of kids that were not in the game. Which does paint a picture—the problem is, for a satisfying RPG, you need to be able to play in the same game, week after week. But the librarian wants the program to be fair—which means not having the same kids in the program week after week while others are excluded. Which presents an unfortunate contradiction, barring other volunteer GMs and a significant expansion of the program, because having a 20+ player game would also not satisfy anyone.

Tim Collinson: Welcome to the full-zine side of things!

Comments on E&A #16

Cover (Dean Hannon): A very pretty spire!

Patrick Brady: Thanks re parasitic games.

Re AI: Yes, a lot of the time, the operator needs to redirect or slow down the AI, which will get a wrong idea of what the problem is and then run with it for a while. The actual execution of the idea might not be bad, though.

I would happily see more EPT in your zine.

Patrick Riley: Re Patrick coup: There was once a time in A&E where you could coup with 4 people; fortunately that would be rather challenging in E&A as it stands. Still, it's worth the attempt.

Re skipping a roll because failure isn't interesting vs adjusting the results of a roll to avoid arbitrary failure: I think there are some natural places where it makes sense to skip rolling in favor of moving time forwards, but they're not all that interesting—it's usually pretty obvious if a fight is a fore-ordained conclusion or if the players have put enough effort into a heist plan that it makes more sense to cut to the consequences rather than roll. The more interesting case is where there was a bad roll, and then the GM realizes (if they they didn't before) that outright failure isn't great for the game; that's where tools like fail forwards and the like are critical.

Re paid GMs: I approve of paid GMs but I don't want to play with one—I have a GM (or two) at home. A lot of this runs on a continuum—and applies to game designers as well. There are plenty of people who don't feel the need to buy new games—they can design more games if the ones they have don't fit a niche, but commercial games are critical at making the hobby more accessible. I don't think that paid GMs are nearly as important—people clearly can learn to GM on their own and have been doing so for decades, but for those who find it hard to find someone to introduce them to the hobby, paid GMs (or store GMs, who aren't usually paid, but still sit in a similar "not your buddy, GMing as a service" niche at least at first), can help bridge a gap.

I wouldn't want to surprise players with "surprise! Your character (who you spend time on and sweated over) is almost certainly doomed! Maybe your fourth character will survive!" A game with single-character funnels where you restart with the same character and personality could work better, especially if you went with a structure where the character's stats and abilities aren't predetermined, but instead build up with some early game choices so dying means you can make new early choices and take a different path with the same character.

Re idle and clickers (and gatcha) yeah, I'll occasionally let myself get sucked into one—briefly. But the moment it feels like work, I'm out. At least, if I know what's good for me.

I agree that Zendo isn't a co-op, but it's not hugely competitive, either. I'm also a hard sell on co-ops, but the ones I do like (including The Crew—The Gang is somewhat similar in that respect although it's poker rather than Hearts) tend to have mechanics that avoid most of the issues you describe—making the game about communication so you don't get the "bossy player" issue, no traitors (that's not a co-op; that's sparkling social deduction!), etc. *Decorum* is, fortunately, much more like the latter than the former—my main issue with the game in concept (and I quite like it) is that the scenarios aren't really replayable, so the game provides a limited amount of gameplay before you have to buy new scenarios or get your fun vicariously (unlike deduction games like The Crew where there's enough randomness to a scenario that playing it over again provides no difficulty at all).

But yeah, the early popular co-op game was Pandemic, which establishes a specific set of problems and meta-problems—you're basically a workplace trying to collectively solve a hard puzzle, with nothing stopping someone from trying to tell other people how to solve it. Other games were often working with that as a reference point, so you get secret goals/traitors (to try to get away from everyone trusting everyone or expecting that if they do something suboptimal that it's a mistake), adding more secret information (so people can't tell other what to do), and adding real-time hubub (so there isn't enough time).

re superhero games and having everything locked down vs loose: I think it was more a factor of the times—V&V was written when RPGs were mostly slim books and if you needed something the book had you just made it up, while Marvel Supers and Champions and GURPS were written as part of the wave of locked down point systems where people were convinced that the way forwards was to price out each part of a character's abilities so everything was balanced and clear (it is inspirational but doesn't do that well at the goal). Towards the 00s, the curve of innovation swung more towards loose, but not in the same ways as V&V, so it can be hard, as you said, to figure out where to color without designing your own game.

Attronarch: Wait, Ambros was able to bring back a fallen party member? But how (as only a 6th level cleric)? Divine Intervention? Player creativity? A magic item? It's also not clear to me what the source of his onrushing doom is—is this due to a sin of his? The hammer? An unfulfilled Geas? I guess the last given that his Doom was lifted after the assassin was killed?

Myles Corcoran: Re the Spider Noir cancellation: Very much unfortunate. It was a good show!

I've matched you in colonoscopy counts! Fortunately, my third (unconscious entirely, so I didn't have to worry about where to look) was entirely uneventful, so I won't have to go back for another one quite so soon.

I don't doubt that the 2029 bid will send Worldcon to Dublin again—the recent move has favored non-US bids even more than usually. Looking forwards to it!

Re subliminal messages on band records: Just hint that there's a secret track that is only audible on every tenth copy of an album.

Brian Rogers: Re library game: The concept of the PCs having to stop an army helmed by an ancient green dragon they themselves had freed from bondage? Beautiful.

9 years since the Defenders shows—oof! At least Daredevil's back in the Disneyplus show, though I haven't watched it. Dr Antaeus and Malius seem pretty creative, albeit complicated heroes. A light manipulator who can also take on a hulk-like form, and a shapeshifter with a goo gun? Well, they're not too complicated, I suppose, but compared to what they replaced (martial arts guy, invulnerable guy, strong and hard to hurt woman, spy with a luck power), it's a lot. I guess Spider-man is the most complicated hero on your roster, with danger sense, stickiness, heightened strength, agility, and the web shooters, but of course the spider theme ties it all together. Wait, so Anteus "helped" Saber-tooth "escape" by knocking him into next week, and then Iron Fist did the same thing later in the session—so teenagers being teenagers?

I really liked Dazzler in the 80s—but yeah, it was certainly not a romance book!

I agree that "being the future king" isn't a ranger attribute in Lord of the Ringers (even if Aragorn is the only ranger I think we meet), but specifically an aspect of Aragorn who is a ranger and also other stuff (including part-elf). Superb fighting, knowledge of herbs that can heal or do other stuff, and scouting, tracking, and wilderness survival, though—all pure Tolkien.

Re keeping E&A to the fun! Yup! I write as many comments as I do because I enjoy it and find it easy, but when I'm behind or just not feeling it I'll skim ahead. Re FATE: Nah, Fate's solid. Just got to be in the right mindset.

Re Queer by Design vs Queer by Theme in Monsterhearts: Yup! Monster Hearts does it in a way that is embracing and may lure people not normally inclined to play queer themes to explore them. Other games are clumsier on the topic and some of the choices made can be almost incomprehensible if you're not viewing them through a queer lens. Re Phoenix: Yeah, I realized after I sent it that I'd forgotten who actually did the deed in the Blue Zone: Re your players loading up on bad stuff after a MASSIVE Warfare auction: As well they should! In general, I think Amber's more fun overall if players just shoot past the goal posts on Bad STuff and make the characters they want to play; if anything, I think this was designer's intent, and a large part of why, in his GM advice, Wujcik seems a bit resentful of players expecting to prosper by having good stuff—because you're kinda supposed to load up on Bad Stuff to make an interesting character, and the fact that there's no hard and fast limit on Bad Stuff that shows you've Gone Too Far is kinda the point. From that perspective, taking Good Stuff instead is kinda missing the point.

Brian Misiaszek: I continue to enjoy the Mazorra, as it doubles back on itself. I appreciate that this time a lot of the material is flow-based, as the different simultaneous threads collide into one another.

Re running into your daughter Lauren at Supercrawl, when she was "away" at college: That's delightful!

I'm glad you appreciate the name on the side design—I'm prone, I know, to being annoyed when I can't tell exactly who I should be commenting to, so when my typst conversion gave me an opportunity to revisit my zine's design, I tried to come up with a way of including my name on every page that didn't consume too much space.

Re putting the Mazorra up on Miskatonic Repository or DTRPG (DriveThruRpg.com) to hopefully make some money to pay artists and replace the AI illustrations with human-made art: That sounds delightful!

Gabriel Roark: Glad you've hopped back onto the ice after your injury!

Re AD&D initiative and interruption: Thanks for the detailed look—I assure you we didn't understand these rule when we were using them in the 80s!

Dylan Capel: The ttrpgwiki sounds (not having followed the link) very D&D-like game focused, but intriguing none the less! I don't know what tech they're using, but if I were building something like that I'd want to make heavy use of semantic wiki features.

Roger BW: Re being against GM Dickery: Hear, hear. I think some GM dickery is accidental; what seems fun sometimes isn't. But ixnay on the on purpose stuff, and best to avoid the accidental stuff where you can as well.

Re automated character sheets vs the trade paper, pencil, dice version. I've done a bunch of both (and also online games where we use a spreadsheet for the character sheets which includes some automation but where we mostly roll our own dice). I think the things the automated sheets bring are twofold:

1. Players get presented with what dice to roll and in what order, rather than having to remember (this never actually works consistently, but it's a good goal).
2. Presenting the character sheets online in a way where everyone else can see what you've got and thereby be able to spend *somewhat* less time describing your characters to one another (or, alternatively, thinking that nobody knows Geneology because the player who had the skill utterly whiffed it; having open online sheets means someone can notice the missed skill and get things back on track).

And also,

0. Character building tools that make it easy to make a character correctly and according to the rules.

The first is, I think, what people envision as getting from an online sheet. Lots of people want to play RPGs but aren't super clear on the rules, so having a button next to your Wits Save or Basket-making skill that you can click on to both roll the correct number and type of dice *and* show the result to other players is brilliant. That said, the moment things get even slightly dicey, the illusion that you don't need to remember everything goes out the window—both in ters of remembering your situational modifiers and also remembering any extra dice of damage you need to include/triggers at the end of your turn, etc. It's still mostly better to have an automatic sheet for when this kind of thing gets complicated, but I don't personally want it to keep track of everything and integrate to a map; that tends to push people to get more mechanical and less creative. But having a *bit* more effective automation would be good, particularly for more mechanical games; I was complaining on Thursday that while D&DBeyond has a feature that lets you turn on self-buffs for sorcerers as a continuous effect, it's hidden away and kinda hard to use, but this is exactly the kind of thing where I value an electronic sheet; if only they had better

features for more effects, so someone could, say, cast Bless and select several party members who would automatically include it in the right rolls, rather than having to carry water most of the time.

The second is actually the most valuable overall; it speeds up online games and just makes them more pleasant. But you don't need automatic sheets for them; spreadsheets work just fine.

The 0th is actually the most important (which was why I renumbered it). When learning a new system, it's really great to have a sheet that makes sure you make up your character according to the rules, and even with some things that require GM judgment calls, unlike play, this is something that electronic tools are really great at.

Re powers of 2: yeah, me too; my automatics break down at 8192 (as in, that's the first number I can't repeat without thinking about it). Apparently 13 positive powers of 2 is my limit; after that I mostly tend to remember that successive 10s form things that look somewhat like powers of 10 (apparently, big corporate scam is that hardware makers have realized that they can save some money by getting high order powers of 2 defined as if they *were* powers of 10, so they can advertise 1TB drives that only have 931GB(bi). A darn shame.

I feel like Regency wealth can't be expressed without a fourth category, "Someone distant made it. But you are poor and diminished; your rents can't even keep up with your expenses. If this keeps going on you will have to sell some of your extensive family properties or get a job." Still far richer than any of us will ever see, just presented as if you're desperate.

Re errors: Yeah. Using dictation extensively made me I think make fewer errors that I usually make, but many other errors that I wouldn't normally make. It's a fun and useful tool when I'm just NOT UP TO TYPING for a while, but it moves some of the load onto editing. My fingers are entirely up to writing dictionary words that aren't what I meant but sound vaguely like, but I agree that that's more likely to be a dictation result—"surprisingly good" doesn't mean perfect.

Cork on the seas of fate fit Arabian Nights, yup!

Yeah, the Keyforge model is pretty far up on the "pay to win" scale, since it's sealed deck play, except with the curious encouragement that players buy many different sealed decks and play the one they like best, encouraging over-spending.

Avram Grumer: Good point on the distinction between hard and soft moves in PbtA games. This also cuts against the idea that hard moves are "harsher/harder" than soft moves—a hard move makes sense when the GM is describing the consequence to something—you take damage, someone is killed, whatever, while a soft move is describing a prompt you are expected to respond to. Of course, a move can be both—if a friendly NPC is vamped and goes after his ex, it's hard (the NPC probably isn't coming back from being vamped and the players aren't given an opportunity to interfere) but it's also asking the PCs how they respond to this situation.

Re Heat: Sounds interesting! Is there an equivalent to sanding pat? Or if you've got a high hand and something happens, do you have to choose to likely bust vs just let it happen?

I've played Wine Cellar but didn't remember what it was called. It feels a bit like Knizia's Money (https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/125/money), but unlike that game, it has enough texture to it that it doesn't come down to the kinds of degenerate auction tactics that a bad game of Money can devolve into.

The Minimal Phone is one of those things that looks super gorgeous and yet I ge turned off—both by the price point for the original Minimal, and by the insistence on greyscale operation, which is a great idea for avoiding over-screen use but not if you do, in fact, want to play some games on your phone in addition to other things. The Minimal 2 (which wasn't advertised when I was last shopping for these things) advertises a oled phone and shows a splash of color (twice; orange in the default display; green on the spotify link) in a mostly B&W display, so maybe it supports but discourages color? I did advance purchase another keyboard phone (a titan elite 2 pro) over the summer. Which is coming out in December now, apparently, only a month before the Minimal, so will see how well it works out before looking at other options. The titan elite pro seems to have better specs overall and a slightly lower price point, so is probably a better deal? But will see how well it works in practice. But apparently the minimal 1 was disappointing (glitchy, low battery life) while previous Titan releases have been well-regarded. Actually, apparently the December date is if I ordered now? We'll see when it shows up (or when I get sent shipping info).

Yeah, fair enough that Shutting Someone Down doesn't have to be a defensive move; that's just how I've usually used it, but yeah, for starting starting rumors I'd be more likely to use Pulling Strings.

And yeah, having played a bunch of MH1 before MH2 came out, the clear intent was to make the game simpler in the 2nd edition. I think Good Society 2 is also pushing towards making the game simpler, but it's not usual, no.

Re Firebrands and Blades games being PbtA games: I don't think it's that it's a blanket for games that evoke a certain experience or as a proxy for Narrativist games. Instead, it's a simple matter of descent (and whether that descent is acknowelged).

Vincent's public statement is that he's not going to police people's use of PbtA—and that he's not going to slap the label on games that disclaim it, either. So Firebrands (which proudly proclaims its PbtA roots) is PbtA. Riders, which uses quite a bit of PbtA dice tech, is expressly not.

Obviously, some of this is arbitrary. But some isn't. Nobody's claiming a PbtA title for games that aren't connected to Apocalypse World at all (that I know of). But the Apocalypse brings in a whole lot of new techs together.

The most obvious, of course, is the die rolling system—2d6, with 6-, 7-9, and 10+ results. Player-facing mechanics where only the players roll dice. Experience tracks where PCs can be expected to level up around once a session. Play encapsulated in "player moves" and "GM moves." "keep it feral" with play focused around structured setup and discouragement of anyone planning too far ahead. Playbooks, with suggestions, rules reminders, and minimal number-filling rather than character sheets. Probably some other stuff I've forgotten.

Of course, some early PbtA games cleaved really close to the tree—like Monster Hearts.

But Blades was also quite early, and blades…actually has most of this. Lots of new rules, of course, but if you discard the die rolling system, the experience tracks (not really; it's basically the same, but experience is mostly accrued at the end of a session), it keeps almost all of what Apocalypse brings to the table. Which makes more sense once you realize that Blades was one of the games designed before Apocalypse World even came out—it was one of the games that *defined* what "powered by the apocalypse" even means.

Quite a few PbtA games are way further from the tree than Blades is. Lets start with Bluebeard's Bride, which, like many, many others along its branch, has the core die rolling mechanic and player-facing nature, but discards the experience system entirely.

Ok, so that brings us to Firebrands, which could easily be viewed as an entirely separate game—but Vincent and Meguay say it's PbtA (and who else would know; note that they don't say *all* their games

are PbtA—for instance, Otherkinds Dice games aren't). Firebrands doesn't use the die rolling system. It doesn't have experience tracks. Doesn't, I think, have playbooks. Instead, you have a setup process, character archetypes, hands of cards, each scene is framed around a specific "game", and then eventually a final showdown to determine endings. And there's no GM, which is kinda a big change.

So, how is it PbtA? Well, obviously the designers have a better answer, and I'm sure *part* of the answer is "we started with the apocalypse and then…". But in terms of commonality, you still have setup that establishes PC and NPC relationships, you have moves (as differently structured as they are, the "games" really are moves). So in many ways it thinks about narrative in a way leading out of the Apocalypse, even if almost everything else is different.

Interesting (and much more informed than mine) history on Xavier/Micronaughts vs Jean Gray/Phoenix/Planet!

Re Claremont intending to work the passage of time into Marvel and have the older characters get replaced by a new generation: That worked *so* well. I guess they've expanded Xavier's school?

Timothy Collinson: What, not at the back of the book? Time is broken! (Yeah, I suppose this should be a comment to Jim, but yours was the first zine which clearly deviated from the Normal order we've come to expect.

Re getting paid to run: I have gotten free memberships to conventions for running games, but usually it's mechanical—"we'll give you badges if you run X larps" or "here is how many player-hours of games you need to run for each badge." It's nice when people actually show up for the games, though.

Dale Meier: I've always mildly disliked the concept of Legacy games, even while realizing that the progressive gameplay they tout is attractive. That said, I adored the concept of games you might lose/destroy when I first encountered it in a CCG—not in Magic (where the "what if your Chaos Orb gets caught in a ceiling fan, torn to confetti, and scattered over the table" question was a joke, not a tactic), but XXXenophile, the R-rated game in which:

- In the ordinary course of play, your opponent will end up with some of your deck, while you end up with part of their deck.
- Except for some broken combos, the contents of your deck largely don't matter—you are playing as much with your opponent's cards as your own.
- There are some very powerful cards that can *only* be used if you destroy them.
- All cards have equal rarity.

Of course, as a commercial project, XXXenophile was a pretty solid failure (the game design came back, somewhat simplified, in the Girl Genius card game). But I do appreciate a CCG that mocks the core ethos of the genre quite so thoroughly, albeit self-destructively—I don't think the ways in which it differed from CCG orthodoxy was the sole reason it never caught on as a competitive game, but it didn't help.

Re ageism: Oof. Good luck on finding a game (and/or players) that satisfy. Eventually.

Amusingly (to someone, I hope) I'm doing very close to a double-commentary this APA, having run out of time to finish comments lastish. Fortunately, I started with a bit of time to spare, and also it's a short APA.

Bryant Durrell: Re Draw Steel game: Congrats; I hope things work out well! I also enjoyed the tactical gameplay in 4e (although there's *enough* of it in 5e; it's just that it's taken time for there to really be enough bits to play with), even as I note how much I found parts wearisome after a while. Of course, my impression is that Draw Steel expressly tries to avoid some of the 4e sameness fatigue with the Momentum/Heroic Resources mechanic.

It sounds to me like the Tactician draws as much on the 4e Warlord as the Fighter (but then, bits of the 4e Warlord was baked into the 5e Battlemaster Fighter, so). Honestly looking over your description, your Elven Tactician is the only one who doesn't seem to have a novel name (although Elementalist seems equally clear). Huh, so Nulls are basically monks (I'd say "psychic monks" except that that's almost redundant, plus monks were psychic in 4e). That's a really interesting re-flavor (especially since "monk" is pretty problematic as a name for a non-Asian martial arts type), but yeah, a bit novel, name-wise.

Re splitting the party in Boundary of Darkness: Man, that was a good game. But yeah, splitting the party for investigation has always made sense to me—it never feels right to have the entire troupe go question one ordinary person. I think the main reasons some people don't like splitting the party is that with some groups they can just stay split forever, with the GM having to switch back and forth, plus, in team combat games like D&D, a split party is likely to be at a massive disadvantage. But in investigative scenes? It just makes more sense. The GM can give each PC highlight time as they personally follow up a clue, and there's a natural frame for getting the group back together, when they want to share information and try to solve the mystery.

Re textured towns and Long Hot Summer: Haven't seen it, but yeah, that's how to do it, and why I'm blessed when Lisa runs games.

Re Feng Shui 1e: Surely either 1 monkey faction or 3? Jammers, Ascended (ascended monkeys) and Hand (Monkey Kung Fu, Iron Monkey)? The Jammers are the only faction with literal monkeys, though, and you can also have monkey demons working for the Lotus and monkey-like abominations created by the Architects.

Yay, more films through a gaming lens! (or vice versa)

Re Nordic larps: Don't talk to us, we didn't even larp at all when we were in Finland! There is crossover between Northeastern larp and Nordic, of course, but mostly what I've seen in terms of special techniques is dance/movement workshops, not talking people through IC conflict. Other than using safety tools and de-roleing at the end, of course.

Michael Cule: Re For the Queen: I have also never managed to play it (it never really appealed to me), but due to Lisa's persistence I have now played a number of games Descended from it.

ryct Lisa re Horde games: Ok, so your standard parlor larp (freeform in your parlance, I believe) has a bunch of PCs with cast characters that may be at loggerheads, with few to no NPCs (and if there are they're played by the GMs). And your standard boffer campaign game has players play characters of their own devising, and some players will opt to play NPCs—cast characters with a background and all that (or just monsters for the PCs to fight, depending). Well, the "Horde" game is basically a parlor game—but only a few of the players—3-6, usually—are playing cast roles that they're expected to play for the whole game. All the other players in the game are playing a series of temporary characters—walk-on rolls they grab a sheet for, read, get into character, do their bit, then when it's played out (one way or another), they go off screen and pick up a new character. In so doing, they provide a plausible background for whatever's going on with the cast characters, but also, they get to play a series of microgames with their own arcs (usually. Maybe some of their roles are just color, and maybe some roles are actually really important characters disguised as walk-ons. It all depends).

I've also now played in at least one all (mostly) horde game—In *The Parting Line*, one player plays the conductor of the train that's the set for the game. (and I have no idea what their deal is, beyond being

the conductor). All other players rotate through a series of characters, appearing in singletons, duos, and groups, that are going through some form of breakup or divorce (or have done so in the recent past). Some are funny, some are heartbreaking, and some are euphoric—you do get some hints about which before you choose a character and so can avoid characters you're just not in the mood for, but usually you take your character, enter the train, play out your bit until it's played out (which might involve involving your character in other people's bits), and when it feels like time, your character can disembark and you can pick up a new character. The group of players committed to play the series of NPCs/temporary PCs is referred to as the "horde."

Thanks for the info on the Magistrate's backstory—that's fascinating! Did the backstory intersect any of your other campaigns?

Jim Vassilakos: Hey, what are you doing off the back cover? Well, other than your putting Tim there for a few issues even after he separated his zine from yours.

The idea of cryto being the only source left of unstealable money, rather than the most stealable asset on earth, sounds…implausible. If all digital currency became suspect because AIs stole it, it seems much more likely people would revert back to, well, cash.

Re your story: Yeah, I have to agree with you—what kind of adult would think it was a good idea to push an 11 year old's PC out of an airlock? When the player isn't even at the table, at that. Of course, I've told about losing a character at 13 to older high school students before, but that was at least a complicated setup where we had plenty of chances to see through it.

Re Paranoia: There *is* no party. There are a bunch of trouble-shooters, a squad, you could call it, set to root out trouble and shoot it—specifically, to identify those with variant politically philosophy and mutant powers, threats you're told lurk within the population of Alpha Complex. Yes, yes, you personally are in fact secretly associated with secret society, and you personally are also a secret mutant. But the key to the Paranoia mentality is that while you know OOC that the other PCs are *also* members of a secret society and also mutants, YOUR CHARACTER DOES NOT. As far as they know, they are the *only* traitor and hidden mutant among their squad, and thus in a desperate situation—if the other troubleshooters find out their secret, they will be exposed and summarily executed. Thus, they might very well try to accomplish their mission (which probably has some trick to it, even if the Computer didn't mean it to—the computer is your friend!), but if the choice is you or some people who are clearly out to kill you, the answer is you. And obviously, the *last* thing you will do is talk about or expose your secrets, except (possibly) in dire straights—that wouldn't just get you executed, but executed 6 times. Before something like that happens, it would make far more sense to find a real traitor or mutant (even among your squad, so they can be the victim INSTEAD OF YOU.

Does this all seem rather horrific? Well, yes, it's dark humor, after all. At least you have six clones, and unless you do something *deeply* stupid, anything you're caught at probably isn't something that your clones will be blamed for.

But, of course, if you lose track of or never gain the core concept that you're the only one, it's going to be hard to get or stay in a Paranoia mindset.

Re the Heroquest player who as expedition leader had no intention to engage with the various adventure sites we met: We didn't have any problems finding adventure despite that character; it didn't require discussion. Ultimately, he was only in charge of the lunar expedition crew that Lisa's and my characters (as merchants) were traveling with, but that in no way stopped us from getting in to trouble, exploring on our own, etc (we didn't work for him). Of course, if we wanted to continue to have the relative safety of the expedition crew, we had to return to the caravan eventually, but if anyone was put out by his antics, it was the GM—who wasn't going to tell the player manifestly avoiding fun that he was playing his character wrong. Plus, the character is a military leader. He has no "supervisor" who is going to tell him he's doing his mission wrong—if anything, he is overly sticking to exactly what the mission (defined by the player) was—to map out this area and identify anything of note for the Empire—which might involve getting caught up in a Heroquest or two (it did) but probably didn't involve exploring a random dungeon that might damage the expedition unless it did something. After all, this wasn't D&D—it was HeroQuest—where PCs didn't get rewarded for getting into danger, except that they might get awarded a few more Hero points at the end of the session—but the rules have a fascinatingly interesting relationship with Hero points—you can spend them one for one to increase an ability, but only by one point per session (a manifestly slow speed—abilities lowest point is 1, and can be as high as 20, the following rank is M1 (1 + a Mastery which increases all your outcomes with that ability by one level), and so on until it rolls over to 2M1 from M20. Try to increase an ability by mroe than one per session and the cost gets steep—IIRC it's a total of 3 to increase it by 2 points, and 6 to increase it by 3 points. Plus, you can *also* spend a hero point to temporarily get a Mastery on a roll (ie the equivalent of a temporary +20 to your skill), so how many points you want to spend to improve your character and how many you want to burn to do cool stuff was an interesting question. Keep in mind that this was NOT an adventure; it was very clearly a sandbox game set in Glorantha (with some players, such as Lisa and I, who were manifestly innocent of Glorantha).

WRT a different GM ending a play by forum game because they were personally uncomfortable, it's a simple enough but sad story. They were running a magic high school game, and the player decided to play a teacher character who ("humorously") was inappropriate with the students. Not feeling comfortable with that kind of play in his game, and also not comfortable asking the player to play a different character, the GM opted to cancel the game instead. (I didn't find out what the issue was until quite a number of years later).

Re the most taciturn player deliberately avoiding the limelight: Quite so. It can be far more effective to strike up a conversation in character with the taciturn player than to push, push, PUSH them into the spotlight. How you do this as a GM vs a fellow player can be different, although unless they are *very* shy, striking up a conversation can work well in both cases.

Re preventing enthusiastic players from grabbing *all* the limelight, well, for starters, split the party, and stick to that. It's a lot harder for the do-everything player to do literally everything when they're not even in a scene you're running.

Lisa Padol: Re Realis: Ah, I didn't get what was going on in Realis the first time you described it, but I think I do now. So your +0 sentence is -true-…until you fail a roll with it 3 times. At that point, it's clearly not true; if you always win a one on one fight but you just lost 3 of them, you have to add a qualifier to it—but as a reward, you get to increase the rank. And you can win as much as you want with the new "I always win a one on one fight in the shadows" until you lose three of -those-, and then get to bump it to +3, but with a narrowing qualifier; perhaps "I always win a one on one fight in the shadows of a place where I was invited", until eventually you lose at the highest rank (how, though?) and retire the statement, rewording the original to something based on the character realizing they do not, in fact no matter what the qualifier. It sounds like an interesting game about people losing/changing their identities.

If there are only three Patricks in E&A, I think they would need to find or recruit some Honorary Patricks to coup properly.

Re Spider Noir (SPOILERS) on why I think Marco and Lincoln might not have lost their powers completely: So, as direct experimental victims, they were losing themselves to the instability of their mutations. Ben was not, becuause as a secondary victim, his body had adjusted to the mutation and found a balance in it.

The Scientist finally realized how she could isolate Ben's stability, and use it to produce a serum that could save her son.

So, the thing is, the characters assume that the serum will remove people's powers, because that's what it did to her son (whose power was "getting old really quickly"). But is there really a reason to believe that? The serum was developed from Ben's body, and what he has isn't "I have no powers", but "my body is in balance with my powers, so I don't get all the powers super fast but also I'm not dying". So maybe the serum gives people a (weaker, probably) equivalent to Ben's powers; under that idea it would have done nothing to him (we don't know; he didn't let himself get stuck with it), and it curse the guy whose only power is dying, but the people whose powers make them stronger? Maybe it de-powers them; maybe it just stops them from going all mutating man, and they'll develop lesser, less deadly versions of their powers over time.

Of course, sadly, unless it gets picked up by another network, we'll never know.

I don't know whether I voted for Shroud first, but I might have; it was certainly up there for me.

Re Lee saying that if she framed "you're all in this area when" the players would explain why they aren't in the area at all, I view this as 1/5th table culture clash, and 4/5 frustration with players who will, actually, try to follow a campaign premise if they understand it, but are likely to misunderstand it, try to twist it to make themselves a special snowflake, or push against a boundary while still technically following the frame. But for instance, in the Toon game, nobody tried to play someone who wasn't a toon. Hell, in the Japan game we played, all the characters were Japanese. I think. (well, there were our Lights, but they were quite clearly Japanese lights, and also Lee made up those characters).

Re Gaylord's Masks game: I think he made some mistakes, but I also did really enjoy his take on the system. Learning experience, but what I learned wasn't "dont' play Masks with Gaylord".

Re Atlantis Larp: That wasn't the Atlantis larp (Baths 2); it was the Forum larp (Baths 1)! We wrote Baths 2 as also a pool/hot tub game (with PCs having magical currency they could use for various projects that were mostly far more interesting than the ones that would stop their island from SINKING INTO THE OCEAN) but things moved around before we ran it and we ended up having to run it in a parlor room at a con and NOT in a pool. Sadness!

Re Dead After Dinner: No, I think I claimed innocence for Kim—I'd been playing for a low Hatred all game, so even though I only had 1 hatred I was happy to have Kim not be a murderer (this time). We had plenty of people who had more Hatred for the victim, after all.

Re your RPG.net reviews: How annoying!

Re Spelljammer: Yeah, Dan isn't GMing this one (that's Neitherworld) but playing an armored Dwarven wizard. The father had the obsolete court regalia largely to take it off the board (and because he was technically married to the Queen's other parent). His son, backed by nobles from one of the two human kingdoms that had merged to form Lavas had attempted to get his father to give him the Diadem of the Stars, and when his father refused, shot him with a crossbow, killing him. However, his father had anticipated this and sent the PCs to previously hide a box containing the Diadem of the Stars somewhere else in the Sphere—after witnessing the murder, the PCs picked up the Diadem on their way out of the sphere and found out what it was. He wanted the Diadem because it would have given him some legitimacy when challenging his sister for the throne, at least if one followed the old customs before the merged kingdom. His sister was, of course, the queen who authorized the genocide of the Orcish Empire a few years before ,but the PCs and players didn't know that then (and neither did Signar, their ex-captain). Signar wasn't interested in court politics; that's why he was sailing around in a spelljammer and hiring stray beginning PCs.

Re Inari Metras: Yes, she was the chief -suspect-, not prosecutor. Correct, the PCs took away the Elven king's third daughter (who is also also the mother of a dashing pirate captain they'd adventured with briefly who sacrificed his life (apparently) to save them); she (the elven princess) is now a 10th level Battlemaster fighter NPC companion who helps out with fights (the PCs are 16th level, so a 10th level fighter archer is mostly just buff enough to not be in serious danger in most of the fights, while not stealing the PCs thunder).

Re my character applying aid to get two of the other PCs in a hard con fight back into action rather than soloing it: Actually, no; I was playing the powerful and hugely mobile divine warrior who, seeing the wisdom of teamwork, decided to turn aside from her usual role in a fight of soloing and killing dudes to with a divinely inspired battleaxe to help the fallen instead, using her mobility to help her reach everyone and triumphing with the backing of her party rather than via her divinely inspired martial force. Since her later arc was to swap worship of a god of rage and tempests for service with a god of wisdom, study magical crafting (Intelligence was her second best stat), and eventually take a Paragon Path focused on artificer "my party gets huge magic item buffs and stomps everything, and also gets free ridiculous movement when it's most needed" nonsense, making her in effect an Avenger/Artificer multiclass, you could see that point as a turning point from someone who preferred to fight far from the party to someone who would only use that as a backup tactic to carrying the party right along with her. But I'm not sure it was there at time; it was just the right tactic for the situation, particularly since I wanted everyone else to enjoy the adventure too (but really, letting everyone else die would just have been a poor choice at that point). Were she the artificer from the beginning, or someone teaming up with her at levels 11-19, I could see the Red Mage comparison, though; Artificer is a very Red Mage sort of class.

Yeah, as said, Rangers are a bunch of ideas layered on one another in uncanny dissonance. Aragorn and Legolas are a big part, yes. (and I can see them as different kinds of rangers - Aragorn's a melee ranger (in D&D I'd have him be a two-weapon ranger even though he absolutely only uses one weapon; the two weapon thing is super weird; I don't actually know how he fights; does he use shield and longsword? Maybe!); Legolas is an archer ranger. Another big source is internal to the franchise, in Drizzt, the two-weapon-ed heroic drow ranger who has a panther companion (a figurine of wondrous power, but that's not important here). Here we see the popularization of a bunch of the aspects the class is most associated with, in embryonic form. The animal companion (in AD&D, Rangers could get an animal companion, but that was just because they had access to the broken spell Animal Friendship because they could cast Druid spells, and in 3e they had animal companion as a class feature but Druids had the same feature and theirs was stronger; only in 4e and 5e did it become a Ranger exclusive as they designed specifically Beastmaster rangers to go along with non-Beast specialists) started out as associated with Drizzt, with no other fictional source, and became a big part of ranger

lore, enough that when it became an *optional* class feature in 4e and 5e, this was very much a development from later variations in 3.5 that would let people give up class features (familiar, animal companion, undead turning) that some people found limited or burdensome for other things they might like better. The two weapon thing too, is ridiculous (why would rangers be associated with two weapon fighting rather than it being something anyone could train in? Well, because Drizzt is iconic, but aside from that?), but with a class struggling to distinguish itself from the Fighter, people take what they can get.

Now Legolas, I could totally seeing using minor magic. He's an Elf, after all.

Re the PCs in "You're (not) a wizard" At least it's not Paranoia all over again!

I thought the case I remembered of a GM refusing to let a player use a one-use ability in exactly the spot it was designed for was in Lullaby, but as you explained, I was incorrect. It was actually the GM for Lullaby (as a player) in exactly the same space as the Lullaby games, but it was Tombstone the western game the following year. (while that series of weekend games was running they acted as excellent marketing for one another—Mike ran 3 Lullaby games, and another team made a contract to run Tombstone in the same space and could recruit much of his player base for the following year.

Re Sense, Sensibility and Swordsmanship game: At some point you should try playing a masked character in a SS&S game. After all, you've done the lone non-mask character twice! Given that you were not facilitating, I think the facilitator was exactly right to encourage you to participate in the Rooftop phase.

This writeup is delightful. Particularly the letter, where your character (Faustus) makes apologies for his "sickly" twin brother (actually the Mask Bloodstone) to Ximena, who is into both of them (kinda) unaware that she is actually the Mask Cuaro Rosa, who he had dueled earlier. How interesting to see a really different take on SS&S—when we did it, we were basically doing The Scarlet Pimpernel, where everyone who wore a mask did it to hide their identity, but there was no commonality between them aside from that; some were heroes, some were villains, and some were something of each. (ok, mostly they were heroes and my character started out as a Masked Villainous Minion with a heel-face turn eventually) Whereas here, the Masks were more magical girls/boys with a common origin even when they didn't always agree, and I think actual powers?

Re Ximena being able to turn into a Beast—at least it's way more wholesome than a Cat People reference!

The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice: Issue #4

A zine by Bryant Durrell for Ever & Anon issue #17

Find me at https://bsky.app/profile/innocence.com, https://letterboxd.com/thanlis/, or https://popone.innocence.com/.

Released under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Introduction

I'm coming in hot yet again, mostly because I spent half of last week and the weekend at a convention (on which more later). In theory I suppose I could have done most of this writing earlier on in the month, but ha ha ha.

IgTheme: Negotiating with Monsters

I once told the players in an old *D&D* campaign, "treat the NPCs you meet as people, whether they're allies or enemies. They have their own wants and needs, and you should assume I've thought about those and am playing them accordingly rather than by my whims. If their actions don't make sense to you, there may be something you don't know." Mind you, we were playing through a set of published dungeons as a dungeon crawl and the monster motivations tended to be along the lines of blood and souls for the blood god, so there wasn't a ton of negotiation with the monsters.

More recently, in my *Feng Shui* campaign, the PCs are thinking about how they want to relate to each faction. Including the secret masters of the present-day world, who they accidentally entered into business with. There has been much more negotiation in that campaign, particularly as the players begin to realise that they're playing the main characters. Sure, there are people who can beat them up – but they're worthwhile allies for the big players in the world, and they're gonna get recruited, and they can reasonably ask for concessions in return for the favors they do.

The interesting question for me is how you make it clear to players that there's room for useful negotiation. I didn't really do much of that in the *D&D* campaign. In the *Feng Shui* campaign, I'm doing a much better job using a few techniques.

For starters, my NPCs are being transparent about what they want. I love secret plots but it leaves the players without hooks. For example, Willoughby Booth of the Ascended said explicitly that he wants to maintain access to the Netherworld portal controlled by the PCs because it's useful to him to have Netherworld access which isn't monitored by anyone else. This establishes two things: first, it makes it clear that there's a real quid pro quo at hand. As the GM, I don't expect the PCs to let Booth have what he wants just because he's scary. Second, it hints that Booth sometimes wants to visit the Netherworld without his superiors knowing. I don't have any idea what that means but I can reincorporate that plot thread any time I want.

The other technique embedded in there, which I have used with other NPCs as well, is to ask the PCs for things. If the players are used to monsters being just foes, they're not as likely to start negotiating. Sometimes it's useful for the GM to go first, to establish the potential. It doesn't have to be a full-on treaty the first time out of the gate. Even in a dungeon context there's room for, say, a temporary truce so both sides can lick their wounds.

Finally, although I haven't had cause to do this in my *Feng Shui* campaign yet, I think it'd probably help establish the potential for negotiating if the PCs see two NPCs or factions negotiating with each other. This is one place where the richness of the *Feng Shui* world (or any other similarly complex world; *Vampire* comes to mind) pays off. It also helps establish the campaign world as a living place where things happen without the PCs being involved. I think I've previously mentioned that I use *Blades in the Dark* styled clocks a lot; same principle.

More Thoughts on IgTheme the Previous

It's interesting to me that a couple of people mentioned being reluctant to kill PCs in the interests of avoiding GM-dickery. At GameHole Con, one of my GMs went in that direction; he kept giving characters bonuses to their skills because "you're trained so the difficulty number should be lower." But there was already a mechanic for that! We were already getting a bonus! He was making it too easy on us, and it drove me nuts because I was at that table to find out what the system felt like in play. And this session was sponsored by the publisher, even.

You can't really say the guy was being a dick; he was trying to be nice. Yet another vote for understanding why players are at your table and making sure everyone's on the same page out of the gate.

Another GM at the con used a deck of cards containing subjects to avoid at the beginning of his session. I ordered a copy of the Deck of Player Safety on the spot. It's much quicker than passing around a questionaire and if used properly, it prevents anyone from feeling exposed as the one person who didn't want spiders in the game. I do wish the creator had given some credit to previous work in the space, particularly since the deck is a modification of Lines and Veils by Ron Edwards.

Current Events (Gaming)

I currently have more than enough gaming. I do still need an outlet for my indie roleplay-heavy gaming. I won't have a four day con every month, though, so I imagine I'll find room for that. It's getting a bit wordy to provide writeups for everything I play so I'm trying to focus on lessons learned rather than just the narrative – feedback welcome.

I expect to make progress on my one-shot club next month, even if it's only getting all the infrastructure done. Working on infrastructure is what's known as a delaying tactic, since the hard part is actually doing the thing and running the first session.

Demon-Haunted (*Feng Shui*)

We picked up our Seattle *Feng Shui* game online. I contemplated using theater of the mind but decided we were going to need at least something to track initiative, which is pretty fiddly in *Feng Shui*, so I dug up an old module for Foundry. It didn't work well with newer Foundry versions and it didn't have an initative tracker. Turns out LLMs can do a credible job updating Foundry modules with some supervision once you work out a way to safely hook up a Web browser for testing. A week later it was time to test the thing in actual play...

And it was excellent. I have a small list of bugs and oversights to repair, but it was great to pick up with our Seattle friends again and fight some bad guys. We did a short session this time around since we didn't know how laborious online combat would be; the Demon-Haunted found a few Feng Shui sites in Hong Kong – they desperately want to take over more of them for the sake of advancement – and discovered that the entire island of Lantau is one big demon. (This is canon.) Only Disneyland has withstood its evil influence. "So, you could burn the Disneyland Main Street railway station by blowing it up, and since that's a

Feng Shui site you'd get a bonus to your advancement roll. I'm not saying you should do that, I'm just presenting choices."

They did not take me up on that choice, for better or worse.

After some more reconnaissance, they discovered a Taoist temple that's also a Feng Shui site. Kai used his sorcerous ability to find out where the closest people who want to kill them are, on the theory that the current occupants of the temple might have it in for them. Not an unreasonable guess, but no; the closest people who wanted to kill them were down at the bar they own across town. Wait what? They called Vincent, the head of security, and he confirmed that there were a couple of off-duty cops making trouble. "Uh, can you come down here?"

As a GM, that ability is just my favorite. It's the old adage about plot: when you don't know what to do next, have someone with a gun kick down the door. Except now you don't even have to kick down a door, you can put the problem wherever you want. I have a little list of potential people who want to kill the PCs on hand and I'm not gonna run out of options any time soon.

So they go back, beat up the cops pretty quickly, and call in their cop friend to help deal with the problem. Turns out the cops were mind-controlled by the New Simian Army, who definitely want to kill the PCs. *Feng Shui* fans may appreciate that I threw in a little Arcanotech slug attached to a Jammer earpiece as evidence; in canon, the Architects are no more but I figured they'd leave some gizmos behind. Next session we're heading down to the Jammer HQ, aka the American Pinball Parlor Game Hall, and having ourselves a big old fight.

Oh, and the three demons associated with the PCs, from whence the campaign name, were very excited to see the Lantau demon. Tanya's magical dice are refusing to help her make people miss – they're only willing to help make more violence happen these days. Not a positive change in her life. I hadn't really been playing the demons as if they were a problem for the PCs, so that's going to change. No more demons as cute mascots.

Side note: in some contexts that would be GM-dickery, since the mechanical ability that we've flavored as the dice is actually a stock schtick for the Gambler archetype. When I said "the dice won't do that for you," I was removing something from Tanya's character sheet. I wouldn't do that at a table with strangers and I regret that I didn't negotiate it with Tanya's player at the time, but I did loop back and talk through it with her the next day and she's happy.

We played for about two and a half hours, including side chatter and socialization and a longer-than-normal half an hour recap of previous events.

Draw Steel

We have two more sessions of *Draw Steel* under our belt and it's starting to feel like a game we understand, which is nice. We got two big fights done in our usual three hour time slot. Here's how it went; spoilers for *Delian's Tomb* follow. Mechanics discussions are in callouts so you can skip to them easily without getting spoiled if you like.

We were fairly bruised after that first pair of fights with the goblins. Nevertheless, it was clear that we needed to press on; poor Violet was still captured and none of us were willing to come back up out of the tomb and tell Ashley that we felt too scuffed up to save her kid. So, with somewhat more caution and a handful of healing potions looted from the goblins in our pockets, we pressed on.

Resource Management

The important mechanical thing here is that there is very little healing available without spending Recoveries, and Recoveries don't come back unless you take a full 24 hour rest. An overnight rest won't do it. Simple math said that we were going to die if we kept burning Recoveries at the same rate we'd been going at: Crows, for example, was down to 4 Recoveries out of 11. The healing potions were each good for one free heal but we only had 3 of them.

At the same time, you get more Heroic Resource points the more encounters you take on without taking that long rest. This isn't exactly enough to tip a fight... OK, here's more math. You start each encounter with 1 resource point for each encounter you've handled since the last rest. The average encounter lasts about three rounds, maybe four. You get a baseline of 2 more resource points per round, and you'll get around 1.5 resource points each round triggered by what other PCs and the GM does. So if you hit your fourth encounter, you're getting 3 bonus resource points from the earlier victories, but baseline you're going to accumulate around 9-14 resource points during the fight.

That said, having a big chunk of resource points in the first round enables alpha strikes: burning a lot of points to fuel the big attacks right off the bat. If you're careful about targeting the right targets, which might be weaker minions to cut down on damage sources or the bigger guys to limit big attacks/minion buffing, those alpha strikes make a huge difference to survivability.

That added care served us well in the next corridor, when we found the goblin who fled us with his head sliced off. Not our doing. There was a scythe trap at goblin height in the hallway; all credit to the nameless goblin for giving us some warning. We continued onward after disabling it, soon coming to a very ominous room indeed.

Most of the floor was taken up by a red skull sigil, which positively radiated magic. (Thanks to Penny for her keen elementalist senses.) Along the walls on either side of the room there was an array of coffins. At the far end of the room, a dais held a status of a human warrior holding a spear — clearly the great Iulius himself. We refrained from advancing casually, taking a beat to talk tactics.

Crows inquired as to whether or not any of the "short lives" cared about the sanctity of the goblin's corpse. ("No, I'm not saying anything about you polders! Humans don't live that long either! It's a high elf thing — never mind.") Nobody did, so he retrieved the corpse and hucked it onto the skull sigil, which flared a bit and settled back down.

"Hey, Penny, can you do that flame thing on the coffins?"

"No. What if Violet is tied up in one of those?"

Fair enough; so Owlswick advanced into the room to check for surprises. Crows tailed behind him, as a guard.

Thanks to our caution, we were not surprised when the sigil flared again and a bunch of undead started to crawl up and out of the coffins. Unsurprisingly, they were not friendly.

This time we avoided charging to opposite sides of the room. We stayed fairly tight but not completely bunched up, which proved wise when one of the ghouls made arms come out of the wall to try and grab us. The skeletons in the rear were able to fire bone shards at us, and the zombies kept puffing dust into our faces which resulted in no end of coughing, but at no point did we give anything the opportunity to knock us into the sigil's area of effect.

Instead, Penny concentrated her fire on the sigil itself, which clearly weakened it. Others in the party joined in as possible, although we're primarily the kind of people who hit things with metal and fists.

The various undead had a habit of not dying immediately when they should have, twitching for a while on the floor before getting back up. Fortunately, once we poured enough damage into the sigil, everything fell down and stayed down.

Getting Better

It didn't take a huge amount of thought to be more careful and it paid off. This is where we started habitually attacking groups of creatures who had not taken their actions in the round so far. A critical thing about the system is that attacks always hit — so it's not like *D&D 4e* or *Feng Shui* where it often makes sense to ignore the small fry. Even the little guys are gonna get their licks in.

Also, with two encounters under our belts, we had more abilities available. (Handing out more abilities after each encounter is how this tutorial adventure works, not a general *Draw Steel* feature.) In this fight, I got to use my first big attack, which simply allowed every other PC to take a free shot with a relatively weak ability. But attacks always hit! So I traded the 10 or so damage I would have dealt for something like 20 points of damage from the rest of the group. That's a solid trade. Penny and Hardin got to use their area of effect attacks, which were also highly effective. At this point, while we're probably three or four sessions away from leveling up, I feel like my level 1 abilities are going to be plenty to keep me entertained until then.

We checked the coffins and pulled out a little more loot. We also, with mixed emotions, heard chanting coming from beyond the statue at the far end of the room. Even this relatively inexperienced group of adventurers knew that where there's an ongoing ritual, there's probably a helpless captive to save. None of us were feeling all that sturdy at this point; none of us felt like we had a choice. Onward.

The statue had an inscription once we came close: "Once this fails, the battle is lost." Huh, we said, and started fiddling around with it to see if the spear it was holding was some kind of lever to open the secret door. It was, but that process wasn't at all quiet: the chanting stopped. Owlswick took a look at the mechanism and discovered that the inscription was actually a riddle. If we'd answered it out loud we might have avoided the noise. Well, live (hopefully) and learn.

A couple more corridors and we came to the entrance to yet another room. The main feature of interest was a stairway leading downward, which was blocked by an iridescent force field. On the other side of the stairway from us, a bugbear was chanting over Violet's still living body; he was clearly drawing on her life force to destroy the force field. The bugbear had a bunch of goblins with him but at least there weren't dozens of foes. There were also several statues of human warriors scattered around the room, suitable for knocking goblins or heros into.

"So we're on a clock," said Crows glumly, as he stepped forward into the room and called out a vulnerability in the bugbear's armor. "The Cup of Iulius shall make the legions of Queen Bargnot strong!" yelled the bugbear, validating Crows' concerns.

Mis-Marking

Marking the bugbear was a bad choice on my end, as it turned out; it came in handy later on but we focused on the other goblins almost exclusively for the first two rounds of the fight. I think that focus was correct, since there's no telling if they'd have kept fighting once the bugbear was down and (bit of metagaming here) we'd just dealt with an encounter where the rest of the monsters stopped once the main problem was down. It seemed unlikely that we'd get two of those in a row. Anyhow, Crows' mark went unused for quite a while, and that meant we lost a noticeable amount of damage.

The fight was tense. None of the goblins had the same kind of deadly bows we'd encountered recently, which was a good thing. The party once again stayed fairly clustered to support each other. Early on, Crows realized that he'd been working with this group long enough to understand how to best create openings for them... "Strike now!" And both Penny and Harkin landed significant blows on the goblins.

More Alpha Strikes

Yeah, that's another alpha strike ability. This one was also worth it. I'm giving up a bit of the bonus damage/healing from my mark when I do that, because those tricks also burn Crows' heroic resources, but given that nobody had many Recoveries to spend it was totally worth it and meant I didn't feel as bad about wasting an action marking the bugbear. I kept thinking about swapping the mark around but I never had a free maneuver action to make the swap. The action economy in this game seems really well balanced.

We finally downed everyone but the bugbear. Penny was particularly wounded, but we were out of ways to help her recover, so we gritted our teeth and pressed on. The bugbear took time away from his dark ritual to lash out with more magic; this pulled Penny into the forcefield which dealt the little polder enough damage to slay her. The rest of us, infuriated, charged and destroyed the bugbear (Owlswick had the honor of the killing blow, and is somewhat embarrassed now that the Broadhurst villagers are calling him Violet's Savior) and saved poor Violet.

Shaken by what had occurred, we beat a hasty retreat back to the surface, comforting ourselves with the knowledge that we had not only saved Violet, we'd prevented the goblins from becoming monstrously strong and laying waste to the village. The reunion between Ashley and Violet was heartwarming, and Ashley pledged that she would use her blacksmithing skills for us any time we needed them. We also found a few more interesting items on the bugbear's corpse, which will require some thought before deciding how best to use them.

Rewards

Mechanically, Ashley is offering to be our follower as an artisan, which is a formal NPC role that allows us to complete crafting projects more quickly. Crafting seems fairly slow if I understand the rules correctly, so this is a significant reward. Magical items are clearly very useful; we wouldn't have successfully defeated the goblins without those three healing potions and we have the raw materials to make a few more of them, since we also found the formula that explains how to make them. (And they said 4e was MMO-inspired...)

That title of Owlswick's is also mechanically important. He now gets an edge on tests made to influence people from Broadhurst. I like that titles have mechanical significance.

Page Turners ("The Beacon")

Page Turners is Robin Laws' two-player variant of the DramaSystem engine used in *Hillfolk*. Susan and I are very enthused about all kinds of duet games, and have scheduled a regular bi-weekly Sunday slot in which we'll make an effort to play either a duet game or a solo game together. We're starting out with the first *Page Turners* scenario, "The Beacon," a Great Gatsby sort of scenario in which an unhappy young couple fall into the company of a rich guy with secrets. The player can take either member of the couple and Susan is playing Delia Stark, the unhappy wife of the unhappy Steve Stark.

The core mechanic revolves around the dramaturgical concept that all scenes are about someone who wants something – the petitioner, in DramaSystem argot – and the person they want to get it from. Even a scene where one person just gets reassured would, in this framework, count as wanting and getting reassurance. There's a simple token system in which the GM and the player trade tokens back and forth based on whether or not the PC or NPCs get what they want out of a scene.

This is a very common screenwriting framework and it works there. I think that roleplaying isn't the same as theatrical performance, and stripping scenes down to only the times when a character needs something removes whole aspects of roleplaying that I enjoy. Combat, tactical or otherwise, is one obvious example. Shopping is another one that comes to mind; sometimes I want to play dolls and dress my characters up, exploring their character by playing through decision-making processes.

But that doesn't mean that focusing on scenes where petitions are made and granted or rejected isn't going to be enjoyable. Particularly in a duet game, it seemed like it might work well, so we're giving it a try.

In our first session we got six scenes done in an hour and twenty minutes. The game encourages the GM to frame (and cut) aggressively, which is a habit I'm trying to strengthen anyhow, and I think it's helping me build that muscle. In those scenes, we introduced Delia to the rich Henry "Huck" Stanton, several of the characters in his orbit, and Delia started to get the impression that Steve's new employer isn't exactly giving him safe jobs.

The last couple of scenes took place at a big party, because it's the Jazz Age. Delia was warned that Huck isn't a safe person to be around. I don't think she's going to pay attention. I think we concluded the first act of the scenario, and we're looking forward to the next session in which everything's going to escalate.

My personal notes: it's really tempted to just do scenes in very tight chronological proximity, but you want to leave room for events to occur off screen, so as the GM I need to make sure I'm providing gaps as I frame new scenes. I also need to be OK with letting my NPCs say no to Delia. The token economy makes this easier, since I'm not just being hard-hearted. I'm being hard-hearted but paying a price for it.

I'd recommend the game to people looking for drama-oriented two player systems. It's a nice physical book, too.

GameHole Con

GameHole Con was excellent and I recommend it; it's reportedly around 6,000-7,000 people so not as overwhelmingly huge as GenCon while still having enough of a population to provide decent diversity of games. It's located in Madison, Wisconsin: not right near a major airport but a reasonable drive from most of the Midwest and a two hour drive from O'Hare. There are a lot of *D&D* (including a con-specific organized play *D&D 5e* campaign that has an entire hall dedicated to it), *Pathfinder*, and various OSR tables, but also enough weird indie gaming to keep

me happy. The dealer's hall is large; some bigger companies show up, like Chaosium, Goodman Games, Monte Cook, and Catalyst, plus general stores like Noble Knight and dozens of smaller booths that will happily sell you dice, fidget spinners, plush toys, T-shirts and so on.

It takes place in a medium sized convention center on the outskirts of Madison. There's one attached hotel which fills up quickly; we wound up staying a few miles away. There isn't much in the way of restaurants right at the convention but there's a place selling pizza inside and an array of food trucks outside. And Madison's got plenty of decent food.

If I write up each game I played in I will run out of room so take a deep breath for the speed round:

ArkhamDark, a *Shadowdark* hack that reconvinced me there's no need for d20 attack rolls in Cthulhu games. *Ballad Hunters*, Tristan Zimmerman's intensely cool game of textual analysis and Childe Ballads, which Tristan ran and which was my favorite game of the con. *Brancalonia*, a *5e* based game of Italian knaves getting into and out of trouble. Chaosium's *Age of Vikings*, in a lovely little scenario about a cursed farm and the conflicts between law and mercy. "Desert Places," a *Cthulhu Dark* scenario about UFOs, which had the coolest prop work I've ever seen at a con game. An actual *Shadowdark* game which was great and confirmed my feeling that *Shadowdark* is probably the game I want to play if I'm playing something in the *D&D* lineage. And finally, a *Magnus Archives* game that served my desire to actually play something using Monte Cook's Cypher System. Seven games in four days (plus one cancelled game) and I could have squeezed in more if I wasn't getting saner in my old age.

I didn't take heavy advantage of the dealer's room, but I picked up a copy of the *Mothership* Deluxe Set which is making me very happy. I really want to get *Mothership* to the table; I wonder if it'd work better than usual for me as an online game? Something about the claustrophobia that can plague online gaming seems like it might work well for an SF horror game. I also got a copy of *Be Like A Crow* for a friend who likes crows a lot.

We're going back next year for sure. Hopefully the housing lottery gods will put us in a closer hotel if we actually, you know, plan ahead. It'll be fun either way.

Current Events (Mundanity)

Nothing much of note, which is how I like it. The Twin Cities are great.

Commentary on Issue #16

Thanks to all who commented on my zine who I do not specifically mention in the following; it's heartening to get so many hellos.

Patrick Brady: RYCT(Jim) on AI, I think you're right. The LLM models of the last few years are amplifiers, and as any engineer knows, amplifiers are both powerful and risky in equal measure. Your point on risk is also well taken.

In working with AIs in my former professional capacity, I found that AI checking AI is a useful technique but not a panacea. Running AI output through more deterministic tools is better when possible. Zendesk (the customer service desk company) uses this approach to build guardrails around customer-facing AI tooling; generally speaking, whenever they use AI, they keep each module small, they force output into a specific format (JSON schema, for the geeks), and they validate that output using non-AI tools before sending it to another AI model for more processing.

All of this is orthagonal to the very real questions of environmental effect, plagarism, and techbro

bias. At some point I'll write down what I think about AI coherently and stick it up on my blog.

I enjoyed your writeup of strongholds and hideouts. It reminded me of *Delta Green*'s downtime rules, and would work well with them. I find those rules to be brilliant for a horror game because they ground the PCs in normalacy and ensure that every session or so, the players are thinking about what normalcy looks like for their characters. Without the mundane as an anchor, horror is less effective! And the thing that makes *Delta Green* really strong is that interacting with normalcy has a real mechanical effect; for example, downtime is the way a PC advances skills. So it's not just "oh, let's spend 30 seconds describing a home scene before we forget about it."

Mark Wilson: I think *The Quiet Year* is not all that well suited for two-player play; it shines more with three or four. I also agree that it's more focused on the community than the personal. My wife and I tried *Mythic Bastionland*'s hex map generation process the other month as a two-player exercise and it was much more satisfying, so there's my recommendation. It doesn't generate a chronology per se but you're going to wind up generating some interesting NPCs.

Patrick Zoch: RYCT(M): all else being equal I prefer to get my cinema from physical media, because I'm a packrat. I have a couple of IKEA Billy shelves full of Blu-rays. If anyone ever wants a short dissertation on the state of physical movie media, hit me up – it's a golden age right now with dozens of small companies getting rights to obscurities of all stripes and producing really cool packages.

From a streaming perspective, if I could only pay for one service, it'd be the Criterion Channel. There's something there for everyone, it's not just European art films. Add on Hoopla and Kanopy, the free services that you can probably get through your local (US) library, and you've got more movies than you could ever watch. And if you can steel yourself to dealing with the occasional commercial, register for Tubi, which is also free and has a surprisingly wide variety of decent movies along with the slush pile.

Attronarch: Enjoying your writeups. I'm curious; how long does a session run for you? I've been thinking a lot about improving my GM pacing recently and comparison points are helpful.

Myles Corcoran: RYCT(M): Oh, hey, I'm in that Discord. Thanks!

Brian Rogers: No thanks for reminding me of the efforts of Leo Frankowski. I read those when they came out. These days if I found myself needing something in that sub-genre I guess I'd pick up Eric Flint's *1632*, which is much better. And also spawned an interesting shared world experiment.

Brian Misiaszek: Floorplans! You're the best. I love a good floorplan.

RYCT(M): I love Montreal a lot; it's one of my favorite cities to visit. The food is generally good, and it's laid back in a way I find very amenable. When we're there for Fantasia we try and spend some time exploring new areas; next year I want to finally visit what's left of Expo 67 and especially Habitat 67. We spent some time in history museums this year, and I learned much more about the various, uh, relationships between my home states of New England and Quebec.

Gabriel Roark: RYCT(M): I think the viability of free gaming space for a city's gaming stores depends a lot on the cost of real estate. This obvious comment brought to you by the culture shock I experienced when I moved to Austin, which was the first time I'd lived anywhere except the East Coast as a sentient adult. Holy crap, Dragon's Lair was huge.

Seattle has great gaming stores but none of them can afford to let people use space for free. The Twin Cities has elbow room, and Source Comics

and Games allows people to reserve the game room space for free.

Dylan Capel: *Teenage Sex & Death at Camp Miasma* is indeed brilliant. On RPG Trader: I like the interface a lot and I'm very impressed by their PoD offerings. I think it's going to be significant that small creators can easily set up, say, boxed sets including things like punch out tokens and pads of sheets.

Roger BW: RYCT(M): I'm too old to be insulted when someone doesn't share my tastes, no worries! I assume you're referring to my comment in issue 15 on *Feng Shui* character sheets? Bear in mind that I prefer face to face gaming, and for that pen and paper are superior for me. But online play tends to feel clunkier for me, and I'll take anything that smooths away some of the friction. Also, having a character sheet that I as the GM can reference easily means the effective bandwidth between me and the players is wider – I can just look at it if there's a question about mechanics without spending time getting a word in edgewise, etc. etc.

Dale Meier: Regarding past errors: nobody is perfect; if I'm inclined to judge people, it's for their arcs, not their individual points.

RYCT(M): The State Fair was a blast. I did not eat a lot (thanks, GLP-1s!) but I enjoyed what I did eat. I wish I'd made it to the Iowa State Fair when I lived in Iowa City, but as a kid I was more of a snob than I am now. And thanks in general for your kind words.

Jim Vassilakos: It's always refreshing when someone remembers that crypto is in many ways the opposite of an anonymous economy. The cypherpunks of the 90s would be horrified.

Lisa Padol: RYCT(M): I can't for the life of me remember which FitD system it was. Wasn't *Bump in the Dark* although I'm in the right neck of the woods to run that one now and I do mean to visit the Upper Peninsula on which Iron County is partially based one of these days. Maybe *Copperhead County*, the Southern noir FitD game. Modern day means no need to explain lore on the fly. How are the last two months of the year looking for you? (I should take this to Discord.)

I'm trying to figure out why I think *Blades in the Dark* degrades gracefully all the way down to "roll a handful of d6, succeed to a degree based on the highest number rolled" and yet I still agree with you that it's not a modular system. I think those two statements are different things. I think the setting is more tightly linked with the mechanics than is obvious; it is a claustrophobic game by design, but a lot of that claustrophobia is setting-linked. E.g., the lightning barriers matter because they keep PCs from running away from their problems easily.

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT(M): Through a fortunate opportunity it looks like we're going to be able to do Fantasia next year after all, so if you're inclined to add Montreal to a very busy couple of months, we'll probably be there. The problem for gamers with regard to Fantasia is always that it competes with GenCon. We did them back to back once, flying from Seattle to Montreal to Indianapolis to Seattle; it was painful. And Worldcon is pretty soon after that. On the other hand, the nice thing about Fantasia is that it's in Montreal which makes it easy to sample a few movies and spend the rest of one's time in a great city.

RYCT(Roger) and Spider-Noir notes: both your phoenix and Spider-Noir seem like examples of creators (the player and writer respectively) choosing not to use abilities optimally. I think there should be more of that at the average gaming table; I always try to remember that while I'm emotionally committed to my characters, I still have the benefit of not being in the middle of the problem and thus tend to be clearer-headed than my characters. One of my favorite phrases at cons is "Hey, just to be clear, I know this is not the best thing to do in this situation but I think

it'll have a better outcome for the table, if people are OK with that." As opposed to the dreaded "I'm just doing what my character would do."

Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #17

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
alarum@roninengineer.com

IRL

Working on Wanderer, needs serious checking, my friend's approach to spelling was casual at best. I also purchased a laser printer, I really need paper and a red pen for serious editing.

Those interested in a copy of Wanderer can e-mail me. I'm using Office Libre version 25.8.4.2 and most of the files are lightly modified versions of the 1997 originals to make sure that they can be opened and edited.

I started work on The Player's Guide, breaking it up into smaller chunks, you can read this in the zine, A Gentle Stroll. There's some weird formatting issues I'm fighting with that may be caused by the age of the file combined with old format data pre-Open Office and a bit of file corruption.

Worldbuilding – Law Wanderer Extract

POLITICAL FORM

Anarchy Not the absence of all government. Inteligent species seem to have a need for some sort of social fabric, possibly because of the evolutionaly dynamics which create inteligence in the first place. This system of governemnt rather is a large number of very small political bodies; villages, neighborhood watch clubs, clans, famlies, labor organizations etc. which are free to combine to address a specified problem, then allowed to disolve then the problem passes.

Aggragate A bit more organized, but still rather unstructured. Government revolves around innumerable coalitions of intrest groups. Want a street paved?, ask the local community council. Want a business license? the District union of community councils, Start a war? that would be the regional congress of district unions of community councils. Confused yet? If not, try asking for something that cuts across a couple of groups "turf". Better still, try to get something that would benifit one group at the expense of another. The politics will gray your hair. (Or purple your scales, if you happen to be a Thanosian)

Clan Governemnt revolves around coalitions of permanate extended famlies. A Clan may encompass thousands of individuals over vast regions. Each clan has a hirarchy, with a clan head or cheiftan who is usualy (but not always) elected by the heads of the sub-clans. Each sub clan in turn is made up of a number of familes. These clans cut across geographical boundires. Thus a town could have member famlies of a half dozen clans. The town council would be made up of the heads of the local branches of these clans. The county, state and national governments would be the same; made up of the heads of the clans at these levels. The national government would be a congress of all the clan cheiftans.

Feudal This is a system in which individuals owe alegance to an individual or oeganization, which in turn owes it's alegence to a central authority. The classic example is medevil Europe in earth's history; The bulk of the population answered to a kinght, who was the law in the land. The

knight answered to a barron, who was in turn responsible to the king. This is not the only example however; 20th century Japan worked on a very simular system; The individual answered to their corperartion managers, the managers answered to their directors, the directors in turn answered to the zibatsu, or corperate oligarchy. Step outside the system and you are banished.

Personal Rule A single individual holds ultimate power. 20th Century examples would be Hittler, Stalin or Mao Tse Tung. However pre 20th century examples abound; Tammurlane, Louis "Sun King" etc. The critical issue is that a single individual holds ultimate power and makes all the rules. The final appeal in such a government would be to this individual. Note history shows this individual may not be particually kind, or even particulally sane. good Luck.

Totalitarian A system under which the government attempte to control ever aspect of it's citiznes' lives. That which is not required is forbidden. The operating mechanisim is usually some form or dictatorship, very frequently either overt or disguised personal rule.

Bureaucratic Rule Reguarless of what the apparent system of givernment is, the bureaucratic aparatus has actually taken over. The nominal leraders are powerless inthe face of the entwineing red tape. Such governments tend to move very slowl

Bureaucratic Republic Governemt is heavily encrusted with bureauacy, but the highest policy levels are controled by some form of popular election. Below the policy level, most governmental functions are controled by career governmental employees.

Corperate The government is directly controled by a few large business enterprises. Sometimes a civil government is still in place, other times the corperations rule directly.

Oligarcital The government is controled by a fairly small number of individuals or small groups. Generally a few thousand, down to a few dozen individuals control the governemnt

Confederation A group of smaller states or political divisions joined together to form a larger state.

Limited Democracy The population has some direct input into governemtn policy, but not complete control

Repbulic The general population elects a small number of representives, who then control the government.

Democracy The general populatioon directly vote on all majjor issues effecting the society. For day to day operation a small republic style governemnt is in place.

LEGAL DATA FORM

This is a general description of HOW the legal system works. Not it's odds on catching a criminal, or how severely it will deal with one found guilty, but the mechanics of trial.

Devination Guilt or inocense is deternined by seeking religious signs. This can be by casting lots, examining animal intrals or by other superstisions. In fact the individual's real guilt or inosence is immetrial. Sorry but if you float in a pond, you are clearly a witch, and we ALL know what we do with WITCHES, don't we?

Cannon Trial is conducted by church officals, to church rules. Torture is frequently admissible as evdience. At least it is usualy possible to submit evdience, and the court might even aquit someone who can prove they wern't even on the planet at the time the crime was committed. But then they also might NOT.

Legalist Trials are conducted by a trained judge who compares the facts at hand to a rigidly written standard of rules. A skilled lawyer can frequently bedazle and befuddle the issue, since the standards of proof are rigidly stated, and the consept of "Justice" almost unknown.

Doctrinair A system using a recognisible trial by jury, with a judge, prosecutor and defence counsil. The standards are almost as rigid as in a LEGALIST system, but the mechanics are diffent.

Magistrate A system with a a judge but no jury. Frequently for a major crime, a panel of several judges, usualy 3, 4 or 5, will sit. They both administee matters of law, and decide on issues of guilt.

Napelonic Simular in that a panel of judges sit, but the conventional presumption is reversed. An accused is presumed guilty, and is obliged to prove they are inocent. The police/ procuteors is obliged to present all available evdience, and, in theory anyway, withholding evdience results in a dismissal. Of course it is difficult for a defendant to know what the police DON'T tell them.

Tribunal Another system with a panel of judges. But in this system, the judges are given wide latitude in interperating the given statutes and codes. The judges determin not only what are the facts of a case, but what is "Just". Apeals on the basis of mitigating circumstance are more effective than in the other systems.

Common Law A system of law which devlopes on the basis of prior court decisions. Courts are required to uphold the decisions of all courts befor them, and to decide all matters based upon their decisions. Skilled lawyers are in great demand, as the law is quite complex. Trials are generaly with a jury.

Statute A system of law in which all laws are created by the government, and the courts act solely on this basis, without real reguard for prior decisions. Under such a system the highest levels of government are normaly the courts of last resort. When all else fails, go to parleiment.

PUNISHMENT INDEX

This is a general guideline as to how lenient or severe the society punishes transgressors. This can vary greatly from culture to culture, even from region to region.

Draconian The culture extracts very severe punishment for any and all offences. Punishment runs toward corperal/ capital. Parking tickets earn floggings, petty theft years in unspeakable prision, and any felony death. For truely major crimes, the violator's entire family may be put to death. Execution is usualy in some very unplesant fashion, impaleing, slow strngualtion and drawing and quartering are all popular.

Onerous Punishments are very severe, but not quite so bad. Execution is resolved for serrious felonies. Impaleing a 14 year old joy rider, while legal, is concitered poor form etc. Lengthy prision terms replace termination. Corperal punishment is still common, and thiefs may expect to lose a hand, if they are luck, rather than their heads.

Extreme Execution generaly reserved for traditional capital crimes; Murder, treason and espionage. Long prison sentenses and/ or corperal punishment more usual. 5 years for petty theft, life for bank robbery etc.

Severe Not quite so bad, but not plesant. Execution still the rule for major crimes, prison stays tend to be lengthy.

Disproportante Execution reserved for particulary hienous crimes, prison and or hefty fines. (like: every thing you own, plus 5 years on a chain gang). They generaly can get your attention. Mutilation (choppinmg off hands, lobotimizing etc.) occasionaly used

Normal A gradiation from capital punishment down to small (1,000 cr or so) fines. Jail time proportinate to offence, seldom over 10 years, usualy 3 to 5 for most felonies. Mutilation prohibited, corperal punishment rare.

Moderate Death sentences very rare, but given in truely exceptional cases. Most prison time no more than 5 years, with 2 to 3 more common. Corperal punishment (floggings etc.) generaly not permitted.

Restrained Death sentenses generaly out prison and/ or fines instead.

Leniant Prison seldom exceeds 2-3 years, fines seldom over 5 kcr.

Modest Most misdomeners (petty theft, public drunkenness, fighting) not proscuted at all. Felonies lightly punished, a year or so, fines of 2-3kcr

Mild Misdomeners not punished at all, minor felonies (theft up to 2,000 cr) get a fine only. Major felonies get at most 3-5 years

Minimal Crime virtualy ignored. Premeditated murder gets 2-3 years in jail. Other crimes get a few days to a couple of months, or a few hundred credit fine.

SOCIAL RESTRICTION INDEX

This is a numerical scale from 0 to 9 representing the level of restriction on a character's actions withion the society. Restriction on the character's political and economic activites are determined by the restriction indices for those areas. This is strictly the SOCIAL restrictions.

0 No restrictions by government. Note in the absence of any sort of law, vigilante-ism devlopes. Just because there is no sheriff doesn't mean the folks don't know how to deal with a Hoss' Thief. "git' th' rope Billy-Bob, we got a'nothern!"

1 Minimal restrictions. Murder, rape and theft illegal. Crimes against the public peace generaly dealth with informaly. Also just because few things are illegal does not mean those are not punished severly.

2 Few restrictions. Intentional fraud and possesion of exclusively militay weapons illegal. A beer run in your tank is a no no.

4 General health and saftey restrictions applied. Dumpping radioactive waste next to a school yard now frowned upon, unless you got a permit first, of course.

5 Basic public saftey laws present. Drunk Driving illegal. Gross execesses of the cultures drug customs illegal. If everyone is into 3.2% beer, a kilo of Heroin would pose a problem etc. Militay heavy weapons illegal, some non-military weapons a no no.

6 Most violations of the socitie's customs illegal, if only as minor crimes. If no one else paints themself blue and runs naked down a crowed street, perhaps you shouldnt either etc.

7 Violations of the societies' customs punished. Any excess of the culture's drug standards illegal. If 3.2% beer is the limit, a liter of Burbon would get you arrested, a Kilo of Heroin possibly executed. Most weapons prohibited. All heavy weapons, automatic and energy weapons are RIGHT OUT.

8 Any violation of the cultures customs illegal. ie. you get a ticket for forgeting your neighbor's RSVP card, arrested for getting uppity with one of your "social betters". All firearms illegal or tightly controled.

9 All things not required are prohibited. If you don't have to do it, you can't do it. Trustworthy local guides are manditory if prison and/or a fireing squad don't sound fun.

Legal Systems - Enforcement

Legal Systems - Trials

Legal Systems – Areas of Law

Legal Systems - Background

Reactions to Issue #15

Reddened Stars #14 – John Redden - GURPS and Traveller... GURPS would certainly fill in the many holes in the Traveller game system. I'm neutral on the ship to ship combat aspects of space games. That form of combat can easily wind up as a TPK.

Denizens of the Library #14 – Brian Rogers – I find it amazing that D&D and Traveller are still going strong, I guess being first is important in new markets.

Firedrake's Hoard #13 – Roger Bell_West – Except for one partially corrupted file, I've had no issues with reading older Open/Star Office files.

Reactions to Issue #16

In the Hall of Stone – Patrick Brady - Re: "I've lost interest" I don't mind reading about EPT, I'm just not interested in creating new content. At least the Tekumel Foundation has finally put up a reasonable fan license We ran EPT with The Fantasy Trip, it worked well, better than most of the official game systems.

Denizens of the Library #15 – Brian Rogers - RYC Traveller law levels: … I agree, law level should be something other than a gun control score.

Age of Menace #253 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek – RYC Yes!

Atlantis for Now #4 – Gabriel Roark – Re: Wanderer, its a lot to take in. *What are these Anarchist Laws in sci-fi* that you don't need much since people are rational beings, LOL. See L. Neil Smith's Tom Paine Maru as an example.

Hoard #14 – Roger Bell_West – RYC Yep, that's what Traveller's law levels are designed for.

Travelling Light #4 – Timothy Collinson – Great article, very useful. As for the other work, not a fan of AI writing.

An Unlooked For Zine #15 – Lisa Padol – Suikoden is a bit like the novel, a mess of a plot that wanders about. Zhan Zhao Adventures is classic martial arts and its a hoot. No Democracy In Space! Also see my reply to Brian.

Everyone else – RAEBNC

Next issue

Hopefully more original gaming material along with a plan to reorganize Wanderer.