

EVER & Anon

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Contributor Guidelines:

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

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

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

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

Issue #16 – September 21st: GM-Dickery

Issue #17 – October 21st: Negotiating with Monsters

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

Issue #19 – December 21st: Player-Dickery

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

Ever & Anon

Issue #14 (ver. 1) – August 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme: *Intraparty Conflict*

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

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

Back to Brazilian Gamebooks – part X: *A Coroa de Ghanor* (2024)
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Maira Zucolotto
<maira_zuc@hotmail.com>

A Coroa de Ghanor (2024) – “The Crown of Ghanor”, in free translation – a gamebook co-authored by three writers, set out to show that the legacy gamebook genre would not end with *O Enigma do Sol Oculto* (2022). This type of book is similar to a standard gamebook, but certain decisions are permanent and affect the reader-player’s future experiences. In a legacy gamebook with four missions to complete, for example, if the reader-player completes only one of them and fails or dies during the adventure, the next adventurer they control will not need to explore certain specific parts that have already been covered, thus benefiting from the ‘legacy’ passed down from one adventurer to the next. For this reason, alongside these gamebooks, the reader-player has a sheet of stickers to place over certain familiar references (which alter or shorten the narrative), accumulate bonuses, and may even tear out entire pages of the gamebook, so as to never again access a particular part of the story.

Guilherme dei Svaldi, managing director of Jambô (still the largest publisher specialising in role-playing games in Brazil), was already a well-known author for the first gamebook in the *Tormenta!* series: *Ataque a Khalifor* (2015), as well as several rulebooks for the *Tormenta* role-playing game. Lucas Borne was another well-known figure, having authored the third gamebook in the series, *O Labirinto de Tapista* (2018), and the fourth, *Deus da Guerra* (2022) – co-authored with Marcelo Cassaro – as well as other novels and atlases set in the *Tormenta* universe. Joining them is Leonel Caldela, translator of several new editions of *Fighting Fantasy* titles and a well-known author for his voluminous novels in the *Tormenta* and *A Lenda de Ruff Ghanor* trilogies, as well as standalone titles.

The protagonist is a man seeking to become king of Ghanor, a realm currently without leadership since the Ghanor lineage came to an end with Ruff’s death. To prove he is worthy of being a monarch, the protagonist must master the five virtues required to rule, before claiming the title of majesty whilst facing dangerous final challenges.

The professionalism and extensive experience of these three authors are reflected in the complexity and maturity of the work, which extends from the rules system to the narrative. Attributes such as strength, dexterity, hit points, mana points, skills/powers, equipment and money make the character sheet more akin to a tabletop RPG than a gamebook. Pre-made characters can be found at the start of the gamebook, but the reader-player, of course, can create their own, choosing to play as a druid or a giant, to name but a few.

Unlike other gamebooks, in *A Coroa de Ghanor* monsters are divided into three categories: humanoid, beast or spirit, indicated by symbols at the time of the encounter. Some items (mainly magical ones) may grant bonuses depending on the type of enemy, whilst others do not.

The narrative is extensive (1,000 references), but it never becomes tedious. Packed with side quests in a vast world to explore, the reader-player may come across interesting intertextual references, such as the old bridge keeper from the Monty Python film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and a palace reminiscent of a milder version of the book *120 Days of Sodom* (1785). Some side quests grant bonuses, whilst others are more crucial to achieving a happy ending. Perhaps the most “shocking” aspect is the consequence of encounters with certain NPCs throughout the narrative, which can directly influence the ending: if the crown of Ghanor is secured, the hero can rule the kingdom alone, married to a woman, married to a man, or married

to both (the famous “threesome”). Historically aimed at a male audience, offering endings featuring more modern relationships is the first step towards including a wider audience.

It is in the adventure sequences that the reader-player encounters the greatest boldness: in some side quests, there is the option to abandon the mission and settle for something less ambitious – such as leading a group, a settlement or a small village – and LGBTQIAPN+ marriages are always a possibility. In moments of moral ambiguity, the hero must think carefully, such as when they need to join a band of looters in order to seek out a mysterious golden idol. Another choice is made towards the end of the adventure, after mastering the five virtues, where the protagonist decides how to lead a band of renegades and chooses between forming alliances or waging war against other groups, always bearing in mind the initial objective of their adventure: the crown.

The elements borrowed from the legacy mechanics of the gamebook *O Enigma do Sol Oculto* were the “Treasure Room” (a page at the start of the gamebook where the reader-player sticks stickers representing their achievements, which also functions as an “achievements” section”) and the “Cemetery”, where the dead adventurers of the reader-player who failed lie (there’s plenty of room for them there!), as well as the stickers that alter certain references forever. The most coveted sticker, of course, is Ghanor’s crown itself.

Due to its great complexity and boldness, a novice player-reader might feel discouraged. For those looking for something beyond the standard *Fighting Fantasy* experience, however, this legacy gamebook could be quite a novelty.

COMMENTS #13

JOHN REDDEN: 100% correct, John! Collecting items is always useful, whether in the short or long term. The best example is in the gamebook reviewed above: there’s an opportunity to buy a “bag full of dirt” in *A Coroa de Ghanor*. The item seems obviously useless, but at a certain point in the adventure it’s used to dirty the hero and serve as camouflage against spirits (or some other monster – I confess I can’t remember).

ERICA L. FRANK: Unfortunately, this complaint about the interface isn’t uncommon 😞

GABRIEL ROARK: Thanks for your kind words, Gabriel! As long as we have interactive books and the desire & time to write reviews, we’ll certainly keep doing so 😊

LISA PADOL: Thanks for the correction. We believe it’s a case of the character’s ‘delusions of grandeur’. / The idea of including a map with the book is brilliant, but it always means extra costs for publishers. Even the colourful maps in *Fighting Fantasy* were always printed in black and white here to keep the gamebook cheaper, which is a shame.

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: The third option leads to a brief moment of reflection, almost steering the reader-player towards one of the other two, as if it were a chance to think things through if they’re confused. Sometimes, the third choice can lead to an abrupt ending as well.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: These examples from “The Arabian Nights” are very interesting. Thank you for sharing them 😊

PORT OMAHA BEACON

Issue #1, Vol 1 - August 2026 - © 2026 Dale Meier - sylvrephire@gmail.com

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Greetings from the Midlands, specifically the gaming wasteland known as Omaha, NE. I'm Dale Meier, a 40-year veteran of the hobby with 36 years behind the GM screen (off-and-on). My intro to the hobby was a second-hand Moldvay Basic D&D set (minus the d8). Living in the boonies of northwest Iowa in the 1980s, I was the only gamer in my entire school (hurrah for the satanic panic). Being 12, I wasn't quite sure what to make of the game, so I wrote to TSR and asked for a copy of the newer player's manual and a new d8. After going through the solo adventures in the player's manual, I had a better idea of how things worked in the game.

A year later (1987), West End Games released *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, and I stepped into a wider world. I didn't GM my first games until my first Christmas break from college. A couple of my high school classmates came over and I ran *Toon* ("The Toon Olympics," to be specific) and a three-way brawl in second edition *Battletech*. As the years passed, I added more games to my stable and repertoire – *Pendragon*, *Savage Worlds*, *Star Trek* (various editions), etc. During my college and early career years, I was also part of the APA *Interregnum*, writing *Tales From The Electric Underground* (TFTEU) and *The Chrome Libram*. I confess I am pleased to see fellow *Interregnum* alums Jim Vassilakos and George Phillies among the writers here.

Like any other gamer, a lot of my campaigns fizzled out for one reason or another. It wasn't until the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that I actually ran a short homebrew campaign from start to finish (a 7th edition *Call of Cthulhu* campaign inspired by "Stranger Things" and the BBC kids miniseries "The Children of Stone," in case you're wondering). Since then, I've tried to hold to the tenets "keep it simple" and "life is hard, play short." Sadly, my imagination often disagrees and starts leading me down convoluted plots and rabbit holes.

The title of this 'zine is linked to a location I conceived for science fiction gaming. I had once heard



Dungeons, dragons, and the Force: the gateway that brought me into the hobby.

Omaha referred to (erroneously) as the "Gateway to the West," despite St. Louis, MO, actually holding that historic title. Port Omaha was originally conceived for *Battletech*, but I think I'm going to redevelop the idea for *Traveller* here in the pages of my 'zine.

Overall, I'm very happy to be a part of the APA community again, both as a writer and a graphic designer. It's been a while, so I may not be up on any of the abbreviations used (although I remember RAEBNC). I look forward to exercising my graphic design and writing skills once again.

The Best of Frenemies (or, With Enemies Like These...)

Intraparty conflict. Woof. There's a lot of baggage that comes with this subject and a lot of solutions have been posited by various RPG bloggers. Rather than wading into the causes and consequences of this pitfall, I'm going to lay out my own thoughts and how I handle it.

I don't see intraparty conflict as totally inimical to a good game. Rivalries, like the one enjoyed by Legolas and Gimli in the *Lord of the Rings* movies, is a good example of this. The characters in K.B. Wagers' NeoG book series are another excellent example of positive rivalries. The Near Earth Orbit

Guard (NeoG) teams in the books regularly talk good-natured trash back and forth between themselves as well as members of other military branches with regard to a martial olympiad known as the “Boarding Games.” Rivalries between PCs can definitely drive a story and help the characters to resolve their differences in constructive ways. Unfortunately, it's the horror stories we usually hear about.

As a GM, I prefer to have players and their characters resolve their differences diplomatically and constructively. Debate, compromise/finding common ground, and cooperation are just a few solutions that come to mind. Overall, I lay out the rules in Session Zero to try to nip things in the bud.

It doesn't always work, however. Some conflicts run on both sides of the player-character divide. I've had the misfortune of having a player who didn't fit and caused some consternation for players and GM alike in two separate games.

The first was a TNG-era *Star Trek Adventures* game run by a friend of mine. The problem player wanted to play the captain, something which is complicated at best, a bad idea at worst for any *Star Trek* RPG. He was not suited for the big chair.

His character openly discussed our mission with a Romulan (yes, you're reading it right, a **ROMULAN**) shopkeeper on the promenade of the station our ship was assigned to. When we confronted a pirate ship attacking a Denobulan medical ship, he hesitated to make a command decision, forcing his Orion first officer (my character) to make the decision to board the Denobulan ship. Finally, when we tried to infiltrate an enemy camp held by the SNW version of the Gorn, he went beyond “Full Kirk” by setting his phaser to kill and blasting a guard. We quickly found ourselves in a tight situation and had to run.

The second incident was a bit more severe. I have a persistent heroic streak running through my GM side. Even if the game is grim and gritty, I look for the characters to be heroic, showing that they can rise above the level society has sunk to. In this case, the heroes were trying to save their home, a ramshackle apartment building in a zone coveted by a megacorporation.

The PCs were effectively the cyberpunk version of the neighborhood watch (I was running *Cyberpunk 2020*). The group came across some local gangers causing trouble at a neighborhood deli and moved to intervene. The problem player decided he was going to be extra edgy and took one of the gangers into the

walk-in refrigerator. What followed was not pretty. I was so uncomfortable that I ended the session and the game. I haven't gamed with him since.

That's the long and short of it for me, both as a player and GM, painful as it might be. My solution might not be the best in some people's estimation, but I'd rather play it straight and head problems off at the pass as best I can.

COMMENTARY

In the Hall of Stone – Regarding the spider spirit conundrum, I think you are *slightly* overthinking it in that you are concerned about what people *outside* of your group are going to think. I know I had the same concern with my successful *Call of Cthulhu* 7e campaign, “The Great (Old Ones) Outdoors.” I researched indigenous spirit stones for the campaign background and was concerned about the same issues. However, I got around that in three ways:

- I reminded myself that I was not going to be putting it out there for public consumption either for profit or free. Only my players were going to see it. Fortunately, none of my players were anthropologists or indigenous individuals, so there were no worries about cultural appropriation or disrespect.
- I made sure to use reliable research sources – indigenous lore pages written by indigenous individuals, papers written by certified anthropologists, etc.
- I tried not to be too hard on myself. Almost everybody is their own worst critic, I know I am.

I know my advice is probably cold comfort, but there's only so much we can do. The best we can do is draw knowledge from reliable, respected (and respectful) sources, use the information with care and discretion, and know our audience/players. Good players will understand you're not perfect and hopefully help you to make things better either for the remainder of the game or the next game.

The Strauss sound like an interesting species. You mentioned you use a point-build system for the game they're in. Are you using Palladium's TMNT or another system? Re: “Letters From Vindolandia,” I feel the same way. I've come a long way from my Gen X conservative upbringing in the whitebread boonies of northwestern Iowa, but I also know I have a long way to go, as does just about everybody else in America in one way or another. All we can do is pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, try to learn from history.

Quasipseudoludognostication #13 – Your article regarding fantasy species in the City was quite interesting. I enjoy it when designers go beyond the standard fantasy tropes in defining the cultures of the species in their settings. The first time I ever ran across that was of course, *Shadowrun*, and later *Earthdawn*, though *RuneQuest* did it first with the Uz (trolls) and other humanoid species. Re: Kublacon 2026, it sounds like a couple of your gamemasters ill-prepared and inexperienced. Everybody has to start somewhere, but it does pay to be prepared when you're running a game. With regard to running published scenarios, it does have its pros and cons. Homebrew scenarios are usually a good thing, but not always practical when you have a busy life. The biggest con, however, is length. Some published scenarios go way beyond the four-hour slot limit and may not be pruneable. I always look for scenarios published in magazines, such as *White Dwarf*, *Challenge*, *Dungeon*, or *Dragon* as those are usually short enough, but then again, I'm an old grognard and roll that way. Your Aurora Cove game is cute. I like the 8-bit RPG look of the material.

Twisting the Rope #13 – I enjoyed reading about your *Mausritter* game; I've thought about running something similar by mixing *Woodland Warriors* with *Beyond The Wall* for a *Redwall*-style campaign. I too was saddened to hear about Anthony Head's passing. He was brilliant as Giles in “Buffy,” but also excellent in “The Invisibles,” a British series revolving around a small crew of “retired” thieves. The wife of Head's character was played by Jenny Agutter of “Logan's Run” and “Call The Midwife” fame. It seems we're losing a lot of greats as of late. Hearing of John Blanche, tragically, allowed me to attach a name and face to a lot of iconic *Warhammer* and *40K* artwork I've seen over the years. The same for Emmanuel's passing.

Firedrake's Hoard #11 – Bridge Command sounds a lot like the [Artemis simulator](#) that's made the convention rounds here in the U.S., but looks a *lot* slicker. The MICE philosophy is definitely something to keep in mind for any game which involves espionage, regardless of genre. Your *GT: Pirates of Drinax* game and character sound interesting. It sounds like Ruersaegn is definitely on his way to becoming a good, if not great, leader. I don't know what your gaming library is like, but if you can find a good, cheap copy, the old Digest Group Publications book on the Vargr (*Vargr & Vilani*) has a lot of good material on Vargr thinking and cultural wisdom. Your notes on dragons are reminiscent of the explanation of dragon physiology in “Flight of Dragons”; unfortunately, I don't recall anything being said about dragon psychology in the animated movie or book. I

was so curious, I went as far as looking up the book on Amazon. The price was unsurprisingly well out of my range. I took a look at your website and looking at the battlemech writeups took me back to the early- to mid-90s when [rec.games.mecha](#) first popped up on Usenet. It was pretty common to see people posting their homebrew designs, house rules, and questions there. Is *The Path of Cunning* the successor to *All of the Above*? Just curious – while I'm not a diehard GURPS enthusiast, I do own a number of the books, including GURPS *Traveller* books, in both hardcopy and PDF format. I've found GURPS supplements to be relatively well-researched and written.

Ronin Engineer – Having read about your stability issue with *LibreOffice* and done some research about *OpenOffice* becoming abandonware, it looks like I have another switch to make. Is converting over to *LibreOffice* fairly painless or will there be conversion issues between the two. I know *LibreOffice* forked away from *OpenOffice*, but that doesn't necessarily mean the transition from one platform to another, similar platform is easy. That said, I'm working to re-learn what I forgot from my college days with regard to document layout on the computer. I used to be well-versed in *PageMaker* and its successors/competitors during my short past life as a journalist. *Affinity Publisher* and *Affinity Photo* have made things easier for me now that I've officially broken away from Adobe. My only gripe is now I have to learn a new PDF builder. At least my wallet is happier for it.

Atlantis for Now #1 – The origin story for your 'zine's title is adorable! Having kids does add a sense of whimsy to a person's life, especially if one or both parents are gamers. I was a foster parent for only a short time (a year, and my foster daughter just celebrated her 21st birthday), but I remember the playdates involving my foster daughter and the daughter of my wife's best friend from her school days. Lots of imaginative games, stories, and hijinks ensued in that short time. They're still relatively good friends today. *Arduin*, unfortunately, caught a very bad rap in the 1980s thanks to the satanic panic. At the time, when I was starting in the hobby, I looked at the cherry-picked evidence presented and judged it as someone's attempt at being what is called an “edgelord” in today's parlance. Having looked at some of the material I've come across, I can honestly say I misjudged it all. Still, despite my reconsidering *Arduin*, Hargrave's system seems a bit more complicated to me than necessary. Of course, I'm sure some would say the same about my own house rules (both abandoned and in use). I'm somewhat curious regarding *Barrows & Borderlands*, but my current budget isn't allowing for such exploration. Perhaps my

next paycheck will allow for it.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #11 – RPG Trader sounds and looks to be a nice alternative to DriveThru RPG. I've already found some titles there I'm interested in.

The Dragon's Beard #97 – I agree that the new *Night Court* was not as good as the original. Dan's switch from prosecutor to public defender was interesting. I also loved the little *Star Trek III* easter egg drop ("Some call me... Maltz..."), and the return of Marsha Warfield's Roz and Brent Spiner's Bob Wheeler, but the original cast had some excellent chemistry. I think in some ways they were trying too hard; in other ways, I know that quite a bit of the humor that made the original what it was just wouldn't fly today. Your online game with your grandkids and daughter sounds sweet. I know I've had some issues with online platforms as well. It's been ages since I moved away from coding; I've tried *Roll20* and a couple of others with limited success. *Discord* has been OK, but my aging (yet new to me) laptop is having trouble keeping up with it.

An Unlooked For Zine #12 – Reading real books. I do miss that in some ways. However, as I mentioned in our discussion of your sale list, storage is a problem in my home. I'm a bit of a book dragon, but to solve the issue, I've moved to PDFs for gaming and audiobooks for regular books. I've just recently finished K.B. Wagers' *And The Mighty Shall Fall*, the latest in her NeoG series. I've also been working through J.N. Chaney's *Backyard Starship* and *The Last Hunter* series. I was waiting with bated breath for Jim Hunter's latest *Dresden Files* installment, but I need to go through the preceding book and then start the new one over again. Currently I'm listening to Mary Robinette Kowal's *The Spare Man* (think of the old *Thin Man* black and white comedies crossed with *Traveller*).

Age of Menace #250 – Your *Pulp Cthulhu* scenario is interesting. I need to go back and read the first nine parts before I can really comment, however. Once I've done that, I should be able to make more educated comments on it. I do confess I haven't run *Call of*

Cthulhu in any way shape or form after my one completed homebrew campaign, so I may need to go through my rulebooks as well to refresh my memory.

Aragarth's Musings – I can commiserate with regard to not having a regular face-to-face gaming group. I'm not quite sure what's going on, but this has been the longest dry spell I've had since my 20s. *Savage Worlds* is another of my favorites, but right now I'm focused on Mongoose Publishing's *Traveller 2e*.

Accidental Recall #12 – Like you, I detest the "pay to win" model that has come to dominate computer/video game design. I'm not even a console gamer (today's console controllers have too many buttons and joysticks for my taste – I grew up with the old Atari 2600 and 8-bit Nintendo) and I have a hard hate on for loot boxes, "skins," and all the other DLC for profit crap the industry shovels out. While I'm not a fan of D&D 5e, it saddens me to see Hasbro transforming the game into a "pay to win" grift.

Computocracy: Character Options, Pt 1 – Thanks for making your past zines available for reference. You've got some intriguing ideas for *Traveller*. I'm definitely going to do some further reading when I can. I sympathize with your feelings on TTRPGs and the state of gaming. Around here everybody seems to be addicted to casual play or Adventurers League and Pathfinder Society. As a GM, I look at roleplaying as group storytelling, but around here, it just doesn't seem to register. I also agree with the idea of smaller groups. If you get too big a group, somebody's left sitting there twiddling their thumbs. Hopefully we can both find our groups and hit our strides again in the hobby.

Travelling Light #1 – Okay, now I'm convinced *Ever & Anon* is the right place for me. Having found so many *Traveller* fans in one place is a good thing in my book. I'm in the process of putting together several *Traveller* events for a local convention in October, so hopefully I'll be able to introduce some players to the game and help them take a step into a wider universe.

All others, RAE(BNC)

COLOPHON

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In the Hall of Stone

By Patrick Brady. London, England. May 2026. The following is copyright P Brady (2026).

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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 it for reasons of nostalgia.

Question: Formatting? Please assume that I haven't written zines regularly for over a quarter century (because I haven't 😊). Any helpful suggestions on formatting, layout, format and all that stuff? Good suggestions for copyright free graphics? Any layout advice?

Comments from the last edition

Cover Art for the July edition. I thought John Elliott's artwork is excellent.

Mike Cule.

Re: Empire of the Petal Throne. The lore threshold for EPT is ridiculously high and is one reason it was never as popular as other games. The background with no riding animals, almost no iron, little metal and nonhumans that aren't even bilaterally symmetrical! Yeah, it's not a natural drop in game! I do still run EPT games as one-offs. Not frequently but say, annually. One year, expecting the usual suspects (EPT is a bit like running **Traveller**, there is a good chance I've known any player in my game for more than two decades). I actually got a group of 15 year olds who were astonishingly good.

Re: Nightwatch/Daywatch. The Daywatch campaign was inspired by the Nightwatch/Daywatch series of novels by Sergei Lukyanenko, there are 6 novels and two movies. Originally in Russian but available in translation. I liked them because they are distinctive in the urban fantasy genre:

- The setting is less "tragically hip" than most urban fantasy. The stories are initially based around Moscow

Nightwatch (mainly) a supernatural enforcement organisation who are also the Moscow Light and Power company. They aren't *pretending* to be Moscow L&P, that is how they fund their operation. In my campaign the characters are British civil servants, somewhere between the Folly, the Laundry and Troll Hunter 😊

- This is *not* about protecting humanity from the supernatural. The Watches are organisations of supernatural creatures (the "Others") who work to stop humanity knowing they exist and police other such creatures. This is partly because divination shows that revelation would cause the Final War. Divination is like radar, it is easy to pick up big things in the future (like an apocalypse war) but harder to get fine detail. The game play in our campaign is dealing with everything that goes "under the radar".

Lisa Padol.

Lisa, I'm amazed at the quality of your zines sustained over so many years. I remember enjoying your work many years ago.

It is weird to be back, but really good. I thought this door had closed. I'm glad to see that you and others have kept it open. If **Jim Vassilakos** hadn't contacted me I would have missed out. So I intend to blame Jim for all of my idiot meanderings in these pages 😊.

Re: Nightwatch. If you like urban fantasy, there are six novels in the series. Nightwatch is a particular taste. It's unsweetened, not every element is successful and lore consistency is imperfect across all six novels (I can clarify that if you wish). But I enjoyed them and thought *"I could run this as a campaign!"* and have done so for a long time.

In terms of system, I wrote my own. That wasn't just me being wilfully creative, the world-build seemed to deserve some specific mechanics. For example:

- There is no such thing as luck. What humans call randomness is a by-product of Hexing - a common ability of supernatural creatures that messes with probability and which persists in the environment. In this world major "accidents" from plane crashes to extreme weather are just byproducts of this. Humans just can't see it.

The game effect of this is that the mechanics are largely diceless unless the player actively decides to introduce dice. This is a threshold task resolution and the player has the option of adding dice. But doing that increases the risk of something going sideways and is the only way to produce a "critical fail" in this system. Chance is a choice.

- All supernatural abilities depend on the use of "Power" but although they can store it, no supernatural creature can *make* Power. It is generated only by human emotion and is inseparable from it. If you gather Power from a human, you change their emotional state because you are "eating" their emotions. That is why supernatural creatures historically wanted to generate strong emotional responses from humans (appearing as terrifying monster or holy visitations), they wanted to feed on the emotions they caused. This has had an effect on human history for example, in an urban area, the presence of Dark Others (who are only able to feed on negative emotions) makes those neighbourhoods less unpleasant for the humans in those places (because the Dark Ones eat their negative emotions).

The game effect is that you don't automatically get the major game resource back, you have to find humans emoting and feed from them. The more emotional the better. The mechanics for this are not as smooth as I would like, but the concept is a long way from D&D's "long rest".

- The major factions were going to resolve their differences violently back in the medieval period, but widespread divination shows that this leads to mutually assured destruction. So conflicts are frozen into a cold war, with the Watches more or less policing it. The supernatural economy is based on buying the right to use their abilities on humans. So this is messy, bureaucratic and only exists because the alternative is apocalyptic.

The game effect is that you can buy the right to hunt humans or doing a bunch of other things. The job of the Watch is to stop people from hunting humans *without a permit*.

If this sounds like your sort of thing then I'd recommend it. I am also very much up for discussion of the genre and modelling it in an RPG. I do not claim to have a definitive model and I'd be interested in your opinion.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek.

Thank you! I very much enjoyed your zine! I appreciate the welcome! It is weird to be back after all these years. If I remember correctly, the last time we exchanged comments, I was sending you good wishes because you had to reduce your A&E involvement – as you were studying with the aim of going to medical school? I gather that worked out for you? 😊

Re: Empire of the Petal Throne. Writing the Empire of the Petal Throne RPG of 2005 was quite an adventure is why I have not since and probably will never again involve myself in commercial RPG work. The authors of the 2005 rules were Joe Saul, Edwin Voskamp and myself. We remain good friends and still game together (when the Atlantic Ocean allows). But commercial publishing... 😊

I just checked on ebay and a used copy of EPT is going for £125.00 (around \$165 US or \$234 Canadian). That is nuts!

Yes, I wrote the GenCon scenario that Joe ran. I'm glad you had a good time playing it!

Re: Historical games with real characters. I think it makes a difference knowing you are playing a real person. I guess it depends on the player but one of the things I do is have a printed section on what happened to the real person after the game ends, because people usually want to know how "their character" fared not just in terms of the mission, but

how the rest of their life went. It's immersive. The fact that someone survived the war and went on to have two daughters and a grocer's shop in Camden can be more meaningful than any amount of gold pieces or experience for a fictional character. One of the strongest responses was from the player of a character (a real person) who I discovered had always wanted to be an artist, but was by circumstances a soldier. I found photos of the art the character went on to produce after the war and until his eventual death at 92 years and put it in the "after the war" handout. The player felt that getting that guy through the mission so he could live too become that artist, make that art and have that life, felt important and satisfying.

As a referee, it is interesting to me to do the research necessary to find the events and research the characters. I'm fortunate to have the contacts to be able to gain consent where needed.

I've found real people that I couldn't invent!

Re: Mazorra. Thank you. I started making initial notes for feedback and then I read **Lisa Padol's** analysis. So, *what she said!* I respect your meticulous and detailed work. I've seen professionally published work of much lower quality that the material that appears in your zine.

Myles Corcoran. Thank you. I enjoyed your zine. Mind blown by the map making.

RYCT ELF. Yes, agreed, the teamwork aspects of the superhero genre are an important element. I particularly like your emphasise on genre understanding vs rule mechanics.

RYCT. Avram Grumer. "Erick Wujick futzed up James Wallis's attempt at a diceless Bugtown game." You know I was a player and the referee for the Bugtown playtest? James gave us all nice printed playtester t-shirts,

that we never wore. So I have *hundreds* of play hours in Bugtown and must have refereed half that, maybe more. I may have been the last person to have a copy of those rules.

I have great respect for Erick's creativity as a game designer and James Wallis was a friend who played in various games that I was in or refereed over a number of years. This would be back in the eighties? We had a regular weekly game over at James's flat in Clapham. I generally refereed, I do remember that Bugtown was a lot of fun. It was an influence on my designs that continues to this day.

RYCT. Brian Misaszek. RAE. Five go mad in Dorset 😊

"the crimes of the powerful have lost their shock value. I'm just sad and angry at the state of the world." I feel that.

Joshua Kronengold. I wish you the best of luck with the job hunt and hope that all goes well for you.

I kept reading A&E after my capacity to produce regular 'zines ended so I read and enjoyed your work in the past. It is good to see that you continue to write.

I have an awful suspicion that I may have been one of the last people in the world still sending gestetner stencils across the Atlantic! Of course, this may have been an elaborate practical joke by Lee Gold! 😊

Re; Games that are bad for you. Like you, I am a lifelong and lifestyle gamer as well as being an early adopter of RPGs. As we both contributed to A&E and now E&A, we are probably at one end of the distribution for "likes games" stat. However, I seem to lack whatever it is that makes gambling enjoyable. I do not like gambling in quite a deep sense, I have been around it much of my life, even

visited casinos (we have a bunch in London) and they did nothing for me. However, I have also spent/wasted a lot of time grinding in games from Skyrim to Valheim which I considered to be a rational but very tedious choice. Admittedly my play through of Fallout 4 was to reach level 100 and build all possible settlements without ever progressing the main quest or visiting the city. But that was a somewhat exotic roleplaying choice. I have family members who have played games that require "dailies" and I consider that kind of mechanic unhelpful. Especially when the games are aimed at kids. I like your idea of abusive game mechanics.

Jim Vassilakos. Re: Aristotle and Gods.

It says something about Greeks! 😊

Matt Stevens. Thank you. I enjoyed your piece on Race in games.

The Empire of the Petal Throne (first published in 1975 by TSR Games) is a fantasy background in which none of the humans are white. Humans in that world have different racial identities, but none of them are pale-skinned.

I read the Kalevala a few years back and developed an interest in the Rune Singer tradition, the source from which Elias Lonnrot stitched together the Kalevala as we have it now. Unfortunately my Finnish is awful, so I have to rely mostly on English. But there are people continuing the oral folk tradition in modern Finland. I don't think we have a modern equivalent of Larin Paraske who could apparently recite, from memory, over 32,000 separate songs, but practitioners looking to keep the tradition alive. What has been lost is the pre-Christian religious and magical understanding of the activity. One of the aspects that interested me most was that the early Rune Singers did *not* see themselves

as reporting historical events. In that sense, despite superficial similarities, very different from common understandings of the European bardic tradition. This original strand of Rune Singers (not in the modern folk recreationists), believed themselves to be singing reality into being. So the stories they sang were always happening in an eternal now. Any mistakes in the recitation could risk changing reality itself, if you changed the song, what happened actually changed, with ripples spreading out from the singer. That is one reason that they were not written down until that understanding died away in the face of Christianisation, they were magic songs and they had to be sung. So I suggest that the sacredness of the songs had to decline to a point where people were willing to participate in having them written down.

The Kalevala was only possible when people no longer believed in it.

I'm not taking this to any particular conclusion but I found their idea of creation being sung into being, an interesting way of seeing the world.

Re: Ancient Greece. Aristotle seems to see *most* stories of the Gods as we now might see modern click bait online articles about celebrities. Just dubious attempts to get engagement.

Although this was a polytheistic culture, religious choice was complex rather than free. So the Spartans *should* worship their river goddess, but it would be ludicrous for an Athenian to worship that same goddess. It's a "*there are rules*" model rather than a gaining of wisdom. What you *do* is far more important than what you *understand*. Your job, as an ancient Greek, is to keep the wheel turning. There is even a version in which we model his views in an atheistic universe (to be clear, Aristotle never doubts the objective existence

of the Gods) because religious activity is a way of demonstrating reliability. So, in one sense, appropriate religiosity reassured everyone that you were reliable in commerce and politics and could be seen as worthwhile on that basis alone.

RYCT Patrick Riley: "*I'm almost certain this is a financial bubble, propped up by VC, and AI is being pushed on us by unimaginative, soulless ghoul*s" Thank you for putting it so well!

Patrick Riley. Thank you for the Con report. I run games at Cons sometimes and have been doing it for so long that I'm concerned that my skills are actually degrading from familiarity. In other words, that I may be getting *worse* at refereeing in that format because of repetition.

Salvage Union sounds interesting.

Re: Aristotle. That is a good point. He was a man of his time and we stand on the shoulders of giants. Aristotle may be one of the most brilliant minds I've ever read, but he didn't have the thousands of years of scholarship and science that came after he died, and which we benefit from. I am not familiar with William Lane Craig and from your description, won't be seeking him out!

Brian Rogers.

Thank you for the welcome! I enjoy your stating up exercises. I had never heard of Spider Queen before but I am glad to have found out more.

Erica L Frank (ELF).

I knew Phil Barker as a voice on the 'phone for several decades but was shocked and horrified when I discovered (later than most) some of his political views. It is weird to me that you can interact with someone for such a

long time and not know this about them. I tend to see most of the TTRPG community as tending “liberal” in the USAn sense (rather than the British or Australian use of the term). There is obviously a distribution, as there should be in an open society. However, as I have periodically joked to my USAn friends, knowing them has given me a very distorted view of the modern USA.

In terms of the ideological effect on Barker’s world build. As a referee I found it useful to have spent time in the Middle East and India when interpreting a lot of his descriptions of his world. You can see his life experiences as a traveller and academic linguist. Hearing of some of his politics views came as a surprise to me. I was asked by my gaming group to run EPT back in the eighties and I did it by having all of the players be in the Hall of Stone Clan (hence the name of my zine). So everyone was in the same Clan which gave them an automatic reason to have some degree of loyalty to each other and related objectives. That was my version of the world, a common and mutually supportive background.

However, yes, EPT is now even more dead than it was when I started running it 😊

I accept that there are a lot of great games with novel backgrounds now, I am often excited to see new and cool stuff that people are doing. By the way I am always interested in your news about bundles.

However, there is an edge to EPT which I continue to appreciate. It still remains one of the more extreme world builds that I know of in TTRPG. For example, I like the fact that metal is a hard counter to magic. I once had a player faced with a high level magician throw a bag of metal coins at him as a last ditch action. He made some good dice rolls, magician faces automatic spell backfire from metal contact, rolls badly and *explodes!*

I prefer that to the D&D model of superhero Wizards. I also like the courage of deciding there are no riding animals (there are none available in EPT). That can make a twisted ankle a potentially fatal injury and makes things like wilderness travel much more threatening.

Obviously mileage varies.

Dylan Capel.

Re: White Supremacy. Agreed. Sad to see. But I do think these are being encouraged / financed by malign forces which can be opposed. Resistance is never futile 😊

Roger Bell West. Thank you! That is a good idea, I shall add the Civil Nuclear Constabulary (CNC) to the library of available secondments for players. I currently use the AWE Tactical Support Group (please see below). My apologies for the following, overly long response to your helpful suggestion.

But first! A Margaret Rutherford meme!

Everyone talks about Tom Cruise doing all his own stunts, but no one talks about Margaret Rutherford taking fencing lessons so she could do every shot of the sword fight at the end of *Murder Ahoy* herself without a stunt double. Also, she was 72.



To explain myself a bit more, In *Daywatch* all of the characters start as supernatural creatures recruited for the (fictional) Department of Special Security SO13. This is a shadowy security department in the untidy ecosystem of British law enforcement,

security and intelligence. I do not use a conventional experience system instead Characters use their quarterly appraisal to apply for training and secondment opportunities. I do this to maintain immersion. It is in no sense fair or objective, just like real appraisal systems 😊.

There is a library of real and fictional organisations, each of which offers its own things to offer. That is how characters advance their skills. Most of the available organisations are real, but I have developed some fictional ones that I think fit the universe. Getting a positive appraisal works the way it does in real life (in my experience), it can be success, but it is also following policy.

For example, one player (a powerful Witch) was scrupulous in not just using minimum force and prioritizing the protection of the public but also understood it was important to be seen to do so. They used a Taser despite having much more effective options as using the Taser is in the organisations policy etc. It was a textbook example of someone working to the guidelines as published and a beautiful piece of roleplaying by the player. It was like she had eaten the HR manual for interaction with the public. So the Witch aced their next appraisal which they used to ask for and get a Secondment to Special Operations 7 of the Metropolitan Police, The Specialist Crimes Directorate. Which led to them developing their undercover and driving skills to a high level.

So as referee I make the organisational policy clear and the appraisal system matches apparent performance to those criteria. Gaining additional skills or abilities is linked to training and takes time. Please see below for my entry on the A.W.E Tactical Support Group which is my nearest equivalent to the Civil Nuclear Constabulary.

For everyone else, RAEBNC!

The Tactical Support Group

In my Daywatch campaign I prefer named training courses and secondments rather than by generic “experience”. This keeps character advancement in character. Secondment to an organisation is available for any character who does well in their appraisal and meets the pre-requisites. What follows overleaf is an example of one of the sources of character development in Daywatch. The AWE Tactical Support Group. Despite the fact that “A.W.E.” sounds like SHIELD, SAVE or UNTIL 😊, this is a real law enforcement organisation. Their website is <https://www.awe.co.uk/>.

Their Tactical Support Group is an elite law enforcement unit and just one of the many opportunities available to Daywatch officers looking to improve their skills.

Example: Agents of A.W.E. : The Tactical Support Group

Atomic Weapons Establishment: Tactical Support Group (AWE:TSG).

The TSG are a real civilian law enforcement organisation with paramilitary aspects. AWE are responsible for protecting and investigating “defence critical materials” in the UK. Originally tasked with protecting the production and movement of the UK’s nuclear deterrent, their remit has expanded over the decades and they can now be expected to protect *anything* required for the defence of the realm. This includes some electronics, types of fuel and missile components and the factories that make them, as well as nuclear material. The TSG are most often seen in public as the guards on convoys moving munitions around the UK. So if you live near a naval base or frequently use motorway services, you may sometimes see an AWE convoy. The TSG recruit mainly from the UK military and the culture is influenced by army enlisted veterans. They are based at the AWE facility at Aldermaston (not far from Reading, England).



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Why do I want a secondment with AWE:TSG?

As guideline, your secondment to AWE has the following benefits.

- (1) **Awesomeness.** i.e. pass the AWE training course. This gives you the core skills for TSG which includes an introduction to their weapon set, training in CBRN and a information about key defence sites, convoy protection etc. You get to know both the people and the environment, which may give you useful contacts.



You will pass qualification with the Utility Weapon (the Heckler and Koch MP7-SF) and the L119A2 Carbine. The AWE doctrine teaches you to always use an optic and make deliberate single shots. So the shooting style of the AWE is highly precise and any “spray and pray” is treated as a disciplinary offence.

Subskills. Range time (MP7) 1, Range time (Colt Canada C8) 1, Shooting Stance: Weaver +1, Shooting Style (AWE) 1, Room Clearance 1, Armour 1, Optics 1, CBRN 1.

- (2) **Weapons Qualification.** The AWE TSG have access to some cool hardware. In particular, they are issued with a unique variant of the Heckler and Koch MP7 which they carry instead of a handgun. This is objectively a better weapon than the Glock 19 issued by Daywatch. To be allowed to carry one on your return to Daywatch you would need to have qualified, which is not something Daywatch supports. So, if you want an MP7 in Daywatch, a secondment with AWE is a pre-requisite.

Game mechanics

A secondment to AWE:TSG is for 4 months.

Pre-requisites: *The Awe are an elite group and getting a secondment with them counts as Difficult. There is also a selection shoot which requires Range Time (any modern firearm) 2+, Weaver Stance 1+ to pass. This selection process means that the applicant cannot have any Firearms Disabilities.*

Cost = 20 per secondment. You can have multiple secondments to AWE.

Skill maintenance Skill maintenance will require hours equal to (5*Advancement) every year. So, if you have invested 20 advancement you will need to spend 100 hours each year (a couple of hours each week) refreshing your skills to avoid losing ability.

Hardware. The Tactical Support Group (TSG) carry an unusual weapon set.

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The Utility Weapon.

TSG are not issued a conventional pistol, they all carry this instead. A unique variant of the Heckler and Koch MP7 personal defence weapon made by H&K exclusively for the UK government (the M7-SF). It is single-shot only and uses a 4.6*30mm round that can penetrate body armour (up to NIJ Level III). In the TSG configuration it is always used with optics, and is fitted with an Aimpoint CompM4 red dot and the Insight Technology ISM-V laser sight.



<game mechanics deleted for brevity>

The L119A2 Carbine.

This is the UK variant of the Colt Canada C8. TSG use a 10 inch barrel CQB version and the 15.7 inch barrel standard version. The TSG issue have the “custom integrated upper receiver”, a Geissele trigger and custom handgrips to further improve accuracy. The base model is renowned for its reliability and the TSG use folding bipods and the Trijicon ACOG TA01NSN 4x32 scope. The CQB model (10 inch barrel) is optimised for very short range engagements.

<game mechanics deleted for brevity>

The L129A2 Sharpshooter Rifle

L129A2 is a Designated Marksman rifle chambered in 6.5mm Creedmore. and has an 18 inch barrel, a Leupold Mk5 scope, an Envision Technology ballistic calculator and a Pixels-on-Target thermal sight. For when you need to reach out and touch someone 800 yards away.

<game mechanics deleted for brevity>



Extras

The base secondment gives you a range of skills and experience. It is a Background and subsequent secondments can cause this to stack (sub skills have a diminishing return, so the stack is not linear). However, some people will put more into their secondment than just the basic.

If you had a good appraisal and want to expend more advancement, a secondment to the TSG makes the following available.



(a) Relationships

Friend: Luke Stanton. Luke is a former Marine, an experienced TSG officer and a Material Recovery Tech. His wife, Beverley works in the AWE admin office. You worked extensively with Luke and found you shared a similar sense of humour, starting a professional friendship that led to attending the family barbecue. You visit when you are in the area. Cost=3pts

Good reputation with AWE. You are perceived as a good sort, competent, easy to work with etc. People will tend to remember you positively. It's a highly local, but good reputation. Cost=6pts

(b) Permits

A Permit to carry means a weapon has been issued to you long-term and you can take it back to SO13. The calibres used by TSG (4.6mm and 6.5mm) will impose a small ongoing cost (because SO13 is standardised on 9*19mm)

Permit to carry: Utility Weapon. Cost=5pts

Permit to carry: L119A2 Carbine. Cost=7pts.

Permit to carry: L129A2 Sharpshooter Rifle. Pre-requisite: must have the SRO role. Cost=10pts.

(c) Roles

Material Recovery Technician (MRT). A combination of explosive ordnance disposal (bomb disposal) and HAZMAT technician. This skill set could have wider applications for a character interested in arcane experimentation on their return to Daywatch. Subskills. EOD 3, Hazmat 3, CBRN +1, Medic 1, Electronics 1, Mechanics 1. Time +2 months. Cost=10pts.

Convoy Protection Officer (CPO). Their role is to guard weapons movements, to the navy in port, air bases etc. This includes advanced driving, HGV and related vehicle skills. Their combination of driving and firearms skills are very useful for service with Daywatch. Time+3 months. Cost=20pts. Subskills. Range Time (Utility Weapon) +2, Driver +2, Intervention Driver 2. Mechanics 1.

Specialist Rifle Officer (SRO). Most civilians will see them as "Snipers". These are the designated marksmen of AWE and training is equivalent to Grade 3 Specialist Rifle Officer in the UK firearms training framework (see separate framework doc for details). Time +6 months. Cost=30pts.

Igtheme: Intraparty conflict.

I find this difficult to discuss, not because I haven't encountered it but because I have not always dealt with it as well as I would have liked. IMHO Intraparty conflict is a game and a campaign killer. I don't claim to have any formula for dealing with it, but I can throw in some I have encountered.

Some sources of intra-party conflict

- (a) **The murder hobo rhumba.** I have met players who always play characters just waiting for their next opportunity to kill and want to fast forward through the roleplay. Some people play these games for maximum body count, many don't. This is when somebody is given to "*murder hobo*" type behaviour which aggravates the others, it leads to intra-party conflict.
- (b) **Metagaming.** Some players insist on using information their character could not know, to their advantage. I've seen people happily listening to events happening miles away from their character of which they could know nothing, and then use it to inform their own actions, to the detriment of other players, so "*if you are busy doing x then I can do y because of it*". This can lead to irritation and can break immersion in the game.
- (c) **Campaign expectations.** Sometimes players want radically different things: some want to build a good life for their character, others want maximum drama, others want a reset to normal weekly episode adventure, some don't feel they are doing anything unless they are rolling dice, others who want *all* the downtime / blue book roleplay. In a campaign, These can be hard to equally support. Communication is my only suggestion.
- (d) **Real world issues.** People bring very real issues to the game table. That can be politics, history etc. Sometimes these are legitimate concerns, sometimes they are an excuse for aggression. For example: The couple who voted for Brexit and still defend it vocally sitting at the same table as the permanent resident from the Eurozone whose life has been made worse by that referendum? That isn't a recipe for harmony at the table!
- (e) **Referee bias.** As someone who often referees I sympathise with *anyone* trying to run a TTRPG. It can be a thankless task. However, I have seen some tremendously toxic refereeing over the years. That varies from the "GM's friend" bias problem (whatever the "friend" does automatically works, everyone else had a harder time) to games where the referee took against a player. I saw this in a modern Call of Cthulhu game at a US convention, the referee was clearly in a bad mood and decided to take against the last player to arrive. His attempt at bullying this guy was appalling, it led to a lot of conflict and split the table into GM loyalists and rebels.
- (f) **Misogyny.** As a man, for a long time I didn't really understand how common this is. That's an admission not an excuse. As a player and as a referee, I've seen men behaving badly in ways that ranges from the embarrassing to the criminal. At the lower end it is men either talking over or completely ignoring women at the table. I have seen people behave as if a woman player hasn't just said something, then adopt what they said as their own idea. I've also witnessed sexual harassments and even sexual assaults at gaming conventions. This also lead to arguments about "*how serious was it*" in the aftermath, which lead to a response of "*how would you react if a man did that to you?*", which becomes a whole thing. To be clear, I do not blame the victims of this *bs*. I do accept that I didn't understand it was a pattern for a long time.

Jim Vassilakos you raise some good points about the long term effects of AI. I may be completely wrong, but the following are some thoughts on the matter:

AI causes critical fails

My observation is that AI has many uses, but a problem I seldom hear discussed is that it also amplifies failures. So, when it fails, it causes worse failures than would happen if AI had not been used. My evidence and development of argument, follows:

1. The death of the essay.

AI is unlike classic plagiarism it is hard/impossible to *prove* for disciplinary purposes in the UK. This instantly makes most coursework obsolete. But not for the reasons you may think.

To explain, I'll use an example of a class assessed by a long essay. Five set questions and one which the students could negotiate with the tutor (a "*build your own question*" option that that allows an enthusiastic student to do something special).

The effects of widespread LLM use are:

- Students stopped engaging with the "*build your own question*" option. It is less easy for AI to support these compared to commonplace/"standard" questions. Shareable prompt engineering gets better results with less work. Individuality stops being a good strategy.
- The average mark does not significantly increase with AI use (it is not a simple + modifier). In fact, the low end of those essays get considerably *worse*. This is the crucial point.

The amplified failures are what we need to understand. So students who would previously have submitted weak passes or marginal fails now submitted essays that looked good only to someone who didn't know much about the field. They started showing *extreme* problems.

For example: a reference list full of people, papers and journals which do not exist. None of them!

So whereas the bottom grade may be 40% before AI, with the use of AI the *worst* essays are now more like 20% grades. This is *an extreme failure mode that did not exist* before AI. Failure is amplified, turning normal failures into "Critical Fails" at an enhanced rate.

It reminds me of the Dunning Kruger effect, those who know little can't estimate how much they don't know. Human feedback stops being effective and the AI disconnects from reality.

The problem of AI was *not* that suddenly everyone produced brilliant essays, it reduced the workload of most students but the bottom ten percent of students produced essays that were *much* worse than before the AI era. Those who failed, critically failed.

This is why many educators will never set an essay again. It's not because it is made it too easy, it is because AI makes the chance of a "critical failure" *much* higher, and these are harder to recover.

2. The problem of Vitamin Z deficiency.

This example is used with permission. A colleague of mine gave their undergraduate students a task to produce a quick report on the problem of Vitamin Z deficiency. To be clear, these were not medical, nursing or health-related students but the topic was to teach research and critical thinking skills. The exercise was formative (it would not contribute to their final grade). It was intended to help scaffold them towards improvements when they did the real assessment later in the semester. Most of the class completed the task using AI, they met the assessment criteria well, several included proposals for how this problem could be addressed and descriptions of previous successful projects that managed it.

The most serious problem (of course) is that Vitamin Z does not exist.

Out of the class, only two students responded by pointing out that Vitamin Z does not exist.

The rest used AI to describe it and propose methods to deal with it. All included references. We always require references. They were properly formatted, extensive and fake.

But the formatting was lovely.

AI will produce solutions to problems that do not exist and make those solutions look convincing.

This is a fail state which was not possible before AI.

When my colleague explained the problem, several students struggled to accept it because AI had provided an answer, there was an answer. This is not the Kobayashi Moru, this is the Matrix.

Obviously, the whole point of the exercise was to bring home to the students that they could not use AI to replace their own critical thinking. How successful it was remains to be seen.

3. On the validity of Ogres.

I used to teach Research Methods to undergrads, many students confuse Reliability and Validity.

So when explaining the difference, I would use a Gray Ogre card from Magic: The Gathering (the picture here is an Ogre from “Puss in Boots” from Wikimedia commons).

I would explain it was that a large number of people could tell me the characteristics of this Ogre, those people would tend to agree with each other, so the Ogre was highly *Reliable*. But when does that consensus make the Ogre real? The obvious answer is that no amount of consensus causes an Ogre to pop into existence. The Ogre can be *reliably* described but is not *valid*, it is “fiction”.

What we are seeing with AI is that it *poisons validity testing* because it fakes evidence so well.

Now, my undergrads could show me an AI video of that Ogre walking down Richmond high street. It is imaginable that the quality of that video could be so good, that I could not from that alone, tell that it was a fake. It would be evidence. My knowledge that the video is fake, is a *priori* reasoning.

Evidence is in trouble.

My ability to tell that it is fake is a function of my lived experience. Something an AI does not have.

I happen to like the music of Johnny Cash, at a recent work demo, I had to listen to Cash’s voice singing a child’s song. It

was a fake, but I couldn’t evidence that. So, if someone makes a recording of a politician saying something appalling, how can I know if that is true?

This matters in a democracy because if you can’t believe the evidence of your own eyes or ears, how does a citizen make good decisions? The implications are more than economic.



4. Killing Patroclus: untethered feedback loops in the age of AI.

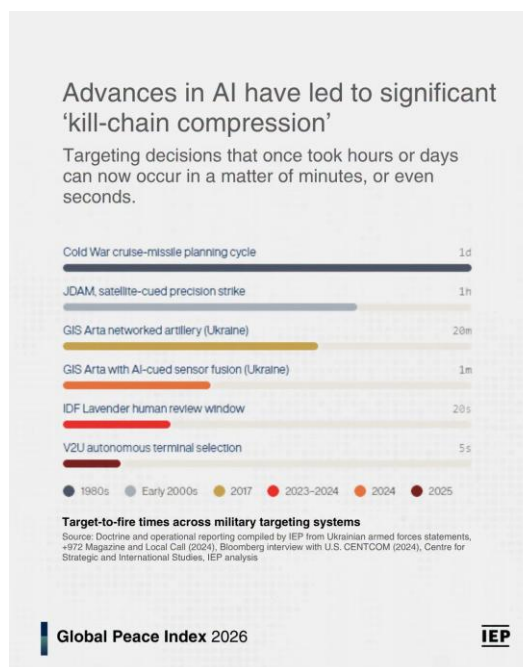
Stock trading has been automated for years, it has to be, humans sleep and trading is a 24/7 global business. If a commodity changes by a threshold value, millions of trades happen faster than an eyeblink. Humans may check the logs when they get into the office in the morning but by then, fortunes have been made and lost. That automated, high-frequency trading could amplify financial crashes and has created a new form of micro financial crash, the “Flash Crash”, a market event that happens so quickly that humans can barely perceive them. These events are often buried in the volume of global trading. They are critical failures of a market accelerated by AI.

They are tolerable only in a very large scale trading environment.

War is going the same way as automated trading. As humans are eased out of the decision loop we could see what another version of AI amplified failures described in my previous examples.

Let me walk you through an entirely fictional scenario:

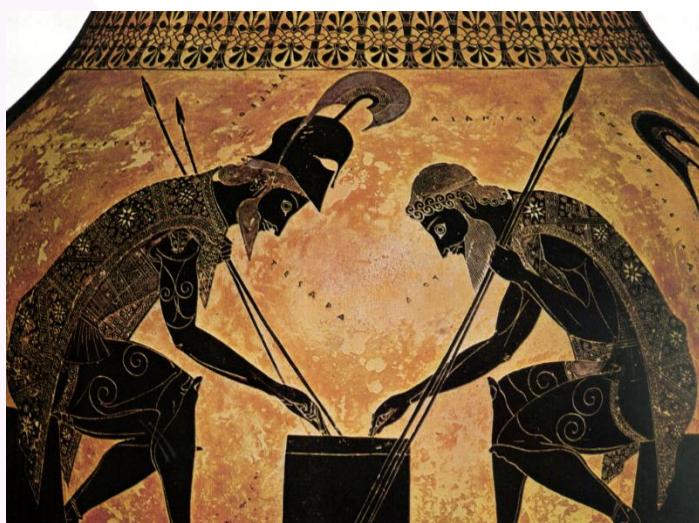
A war starts, one side uses AI to generate a list of priority targets. Initial target selection identifies 4000 targets to be struck in the first hours (using aircraft, missiles, drones etc.) and this is being updated in real-time. This is kill-chain compression. *If someone put a gun to your head, you couldn't keep up with it.* AI does this job “better” than any group of humans and generates a far larger number of targets, far more quickly. Humans are informed rather than consulted. But real-world data is almost by definition, imperfect. A big enough data set contains errors and omissions. Most but not all, of those targets are reliable and valid targets. Some of them will be worthless, chosen from out-dated information or incorrect identification. But some of them will be *worse than worthless*, they will be actively harmful to your objectives, classically in World War Two close air support sometimes hit river crossings that their own side needed to advance (“forty feet of bridge, I can get *almost* anywhere!”). That is not the fault of the AI, incorrect target identification is as old as war.



The oldest case I’ve heard of is when they killed Patroclus thinking he was Achilles. That wasn’t a worthless target, that was a catastrophic mistake. A critical failure. Hold that thought.

If you interrogate the AI you will get a plausible justification for each decision. The AI is relying on historical information to make probabilistic assertions. <place your view about probability here> Mine is that “*extremely probable*” is categorically different from “*certain*”. If you have *enough* targets, *some* of them are the wrong target. Finding out which, is the issue.

What AI gives you here is that video of the Ogre on Richmond High Street. It breaks your feedback loop with reality. It’s ability to generate extremely plausible but entirely fake evidence means you can’t touch grass, you don’t correct errors because you don’t get to see them as error.



You may have just killed Patroclus, but with AI, you have *evidence* of Achilles lying dead on the field.

Obviously that is a metaphor. Achilles represents a variable that you haven't adequately conceptualised. In that example, Achilles was never an available target because he wasn't even on the battlefield. Success in that task was impossible, just like solving the Vitamin Z crisis. The Trojans were acting in self-defence, but killing Patroclus led to their destruction. Obviously, Patroclus is my metaphor for an incorrect decision which leads to an error so bad it could actively damage your war aims. Perhaps, say, destroying a school full of little girls. Intent is irrelevant, this is all about outcomes. Actions that change the game. An AI has even less understanding of these "Patroclus type" errors than most humans.

5. When Achilles wore a red maple leaf.

With apologies to **Jim Vassilakos**, let me make this less Greek 😊. The following is derivative of the work of the historian Terry Copp

(<https://terrycopp.com/>) and the Allied war crimes investigator Howard Margolian. During the liberation of France in 1944, the Germans sent many of their best units specifically against the Canadian forces because they saw the Canadians as the weakest of the Allies. We could debate that, but it was their assessment at that time. The Germans hit the



Canadians with their best shot, they also used psychological warfare. So when the Germans captured Canadians they executed them. This was partly because the SS had become used to murdering prisoners and secondly as a conscious attempt to intimidate the "green" Canadians. The German way of war was of flexible advance, ebb and flow rather than trying to hold fixed positions. So if they couldn't hold a location, the SS would murder Canadian wounded, then fall back. I will argue that this is a real world example of a "Patroclus type" error in warfare.

When the Canadians retook those positions and realised what the Germans were doing, they became even more determined. Instead of being intimidated or terrified, they were now taking on and beating SS armoured formations. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that ordinary decent Canadians (or US, or British, or Irish, or *anyone*) would be outraged at encountering war crimes like that. Obviously realising that the Germans were going to murder prisoners reduced the surrender rate to nothing. If the enemy gives no quarter, why would anyone surrender?

My point transfers to the AI discussion because it's about the model being used by the Germans. The German's actions invalidated the model upon which their tactics were based. It was both evil *and* a Patroclus type error. German tactics changed the Canadians, it hardened them, made them less willing to give in. The Canadians would take more territory in those first days than either the US or UK troops. Of course the US forces were hampered by bloody OMAHA etc. But the fact remains, in those first days those "green" Canadians had better metrics than any other Allied force.

The Nazis always confused viciousness with strength. They made the sword that killed them.

My evidence is limited, mainly from education and finance, but clear:

Using AI may make normal task failure worse. Given a non-zero chance of failure this makes "Patroclus type" errors more likely in more areas, as AI use becomes widely integrated.

That's bad in an essay, worse in stock trading, but in war, it is murder.

Spoiler: JUNO holds.

Thank you and my apologies for the excessive amounts of metaphor in this month's 'zine!

I hope you have a good month! END.

Common Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA #10

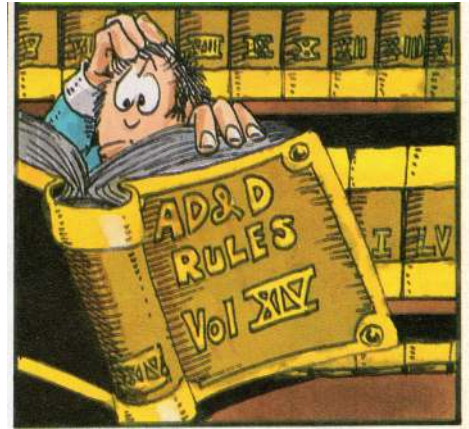
A CELEBRATION OF DOOOOM

BY MATT STEVENS

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ART BY PHIL FOGGIO



No art from me this month. Nothing but rip-offs!

I tried changing the format because I think the *East Anglia* title font is ugly, but my draft looked far too bland, like a bank's monthly newsletter. Maybe next issue. I'll add a little **color** in the meantime.

FRACTAL MECHANICS

Roger Bell-West's remarks about mechanical "resolution" or "grain size" in E&A #12 clarified many of my thoughts about rules, their complexity, and the designer's role in a game mastered RPG. As I said last issue, I'd push for a "fractal" approach, and I think it addresses many of these issues.

Under a "fractal" rules set, you have three ways to resolve any activity, and the GM can choose which one depending on time, player interest, or importance. These are

1. *GM Fiat*. The GM decides what happens and tells the PCs. "You fight them and there are a room of unconscious mooks on the floor."
2. *Low Resolution*. Outcomes are decided with with a small number of rolls. "[GM and players make combat rolls. GM compares the results.] You beat the mooks, but Larry suffers a flesh wound. Take 2 points, Larry."
3. *High Resolution*. A step-by-step resolution of events, one discreet action at a time. ("I strike him with my hammer." "He parries and counter-attacks.")

We're used to high-resolution for combat, and low-resolution for everything else, and that makes some sense, but it doesn't have to be that way. Games like *Over the Edge* experimented with low-res combat, for example, and many newer games have gone all-in with low-resolution for everything.

I would argue, though, that there can be a place for high-resolution, non-combat mechanics. **Patrick Zoch** pointed out interrogations. These are important, tense, and involve complicated tactical decisions, *all great opportunities for game play*. GMs could use some guidance on how to run such encounters. Now if your reaction is "I don't want rules for that shit!" there's good news: You don't have to use them! You can use the low-resolution mechanics, or just wing it.

One small advantage to this approach is that it makes game design interesting again. You don't have to work on a new dice pool system or a new set of ability scores, you can work on simulating and game-ifying situations that are relegated to a brief sentence or two in other games.

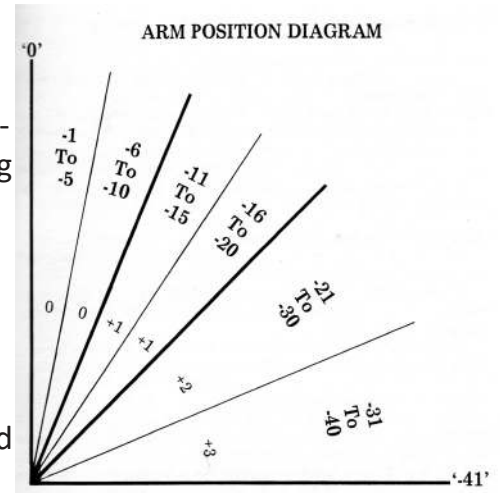
If you're looking for inspiration, you can turn to many old and obscure games of the past, which often covered topics current games leave out. Which brings me to a new, recurring feature for this zine...

WEIRD MECHANICS OF THE MONTH

R & R IN PIRATES & PLUNDER

Yaquinto published three RPGs in its short history: *Man, Myth & Magic* and *Pirates & Plunder* in 1982, and *Timeship* in 1983. None were *good*, but P&P might have been the best of the lot. Rules coverage was both its best and worst feature: It had no rules for sailing or ship-to-ship combat -- glaring omissions for a pirate game -- but it had 8 pages for "Quiet Interludes at Port Royal." These included:

- *Prostitution?* You can spend money to have "tea and crumpets" with a "lady." (Don't know how much of this is innuendo.) Price depends on the "lady's" appearance, her age, and the quality of her conversation, and the appearance and reputation of the pirate.
- *Arm Wrestling.* These rules are surprisingly elaborate. Both pirates make competitive Agility and Strength rolls, and move up or down on a tracker (shown on the right) based on the difference. It ends when one side goes over 40.
- *Target Throwing/Shooting.* Characters make standard attack rolls and compare these to a bulls-eye diagram to see how many points they score.
- *Drinking Games.* Competitors roll against a randomly rolled "Drinking" stat, with increasing penalties for each drink. Failing rolls lead to belching, drooling, falling over, or throwing up, all listed in detail.
- *Competitive Slapping.* (These have made a comeback IRL, BTW.) Both sides take turns, rolling Strength vs. other side's Constitution, taking damage until one competitor is knocked down and stays down.



None of these rules are especially well designed, and they're confusingly written, but hell, I give points for trying. Maybe worth looking into if you're reviving *En Garde!* and want to fill out those bawdy house visits.



REALM OF YOLMI REVIEW

I wrote this in LiveJournal on August 10, 2005. Now that **Scribble M. Horror** is giving us write-ups of the game, I thought it was a good time to reprint it.

The Realm of Yolmi, one of the rarest of RPGs, arrived in the mail yesterday. Truly an "alternative classic" in Bill Prozini's sense of the phrase, *Yolmi* is chock full of goofy ideas, amateurishly presented in a roughly 200-page spiral bound booklet. It has the nutty charm I look for in the RPGs of the 1970s.

The game is set in a "post-apocalypse" world. A giant space-cloud came and turned most of Earth's lifeforms into mutants. Earth's dictator, the master scientist Yolmi, created a formula to counter the

space-gas, and while it worked fine on him, it changed the “appearance and body chemistry” of everyone else who took it. So now Earth is covered with weird mutants and altered humans. Yolmi has invited Earth’s space colonists back to the mother planet. Player-characters are the descendants of the off-worlders who have returned to resettle the world.

The game system looks a lot like OD&D, with a few minor changes: Abilities are rolled on 3d8, not 3d6; to-hit rolls are made with percentile dice instead of 20-siders; and of course, it’s a “science fiction” setting so there’s no magic, no elves, etc., and every PC is human. There are three main classes: Soldier, “Fly-Catcher” and Scientist. Each has a corresponding prestige class: Cyborg for Soldier, Psychic for Fly-Catcher (split into two branches, “Om-Woong” and “Fly-Master”) and Robot-Maker for Scientist.

The setting, of course, is the fun part, particularly the monster descriptions:

- *Biale*: “Shaped like leaves. When they see anything man-like, a sabre blade emerges from their body and they attack. As they attack, they sing catchy little tunes that take the Adventurers’ minds off the attack and make them more vulnerable.”
- *Ki*: “These creatures spit caustic acid up to 20”. When asked what the substance is, they will laugh and say it is in the imagination. Only the most gauche of Adventurers will be fooled, however, because the substance smells strongly of sulfur.”
- *Reakles*: “These moth-brained, ostrich-like creatures are incredibly stupid. In fact, when attacked, they feel they must have been naughty; otherwise, why would they be attacked? Consequently, they kill themselves. If simply spoken to, they will break off their leg as ‘punishment.’”
- *Regik*: “These creatures used to be Used Car Salesmen. Any one they encounter will be subject to a long sales pitch and unless the prospect buys a totally useless car for over 6,000 rupnicks, the Regik will go mad, singing meaningless songs, and kick the prospect in the head.”
- *Walni*: “An 800 pound deadweight that perches in trees and other lofty areas and then drops on passerby... If the Walni misses, its fragile body smashes into a Walni-Bar. This rare sweet is worth 500r on the common market.”

The weirdest one of all:

- *Engsvalu*: “Very large creatures who, when they sense an Adventurer coming, will sit down and open their mouth. The inside of the mouth is identical to a tavern. The tongue is the bartender; the tonsils appear to be a juke box, etc. Once inside, the Engsvalu will close his jaws and the saliva will do damage to the Adventurer.”

Sadly, there isn’t much additional info on the game world, just two maps and a one-page legend. There’s a Regik used car lot hidden in the mountains, a Mafioso “bootlegging facility,” and my favorite, “Pleasureton.” (“A completely automated amusement park. Although in perfect working condition, the rides are programmed to kill.”) The Healthcity hospital gets a little more detail, including a Gambling Hall and a Storage Room (“T.J. [the only doctor] keeps his various surgical tools here -- chainsaws, axes, mauls and other delicate instruments”), but that’s it.

The last third of the book is devoted to Outer Space Adventures. This is odd, considering it costs 2 million rupnicks to get to a ship and there’s a 5% chance, the second you get on board, that you’ll turn into one of Yolmi’s zombie minions. But the author wanted to write an outer space game, so what the hell? How could anyone *not* love this game?

COMMENTS ON E&A # 13

Patrick Brady

Spider-Spirit Character Background: It's good to be respectful of other cultures, as you're trying to be, and I understand the dilemma. I just read an article which simultaneously condemned TSR for its Orientalist depictions of the Middle East *and* for not making an African setting for AD&D.¹ Personally, I'm more congenial to the second complaint, particularly because it was made by Black readers of *Dragon* magazine and not white academics. But I understand the incentives: Write about non-European myths and you could be *personally* attacked for your efforts; stick to European topics and we'll be *collectively* condemned for Eurocentrism, which is much easier to brush off.

But to focus on your point more narrowly: IIRC Spider refers to a singular figure in most African and Native American folklore, while in Japanese tales they're more a group. (Feel free to correct me!) Also, Japan is less sensitive about appropriation issues, if you're worried about them. So I'd say work from Japanese versions.

Michael Cule

"‘Your deity is a different name for my deity’ changes meaning depending on the power relationship between the two cultures." Very true, and I'm sure that's why Greek myths were adapted for Roman gods but (say) Canaanite myths were not. Also, some deities were more acceptable based on their appearances. I know that the Romans laughed at Anubis for having -- har har har -- a jackal head, while they had no problem with Isis, Osiris or other anthropomorphic Egyptian gods. Later they satirized the Jewish and Christian god(s) by showing them with donkey heads; one such image is the oldest surviving depiction of Jesus.

Sorry for getting your party affiliation wrong. Years ago, I took an online quiz and it told me I'd be an SNP voter, which was weird because I'm not Scottish and I hated *Braveheart* before doing so was cool. I don't want to be too hard on Jane Austen, I'm sure she was reasonably enlightened for her time, opposed the slave trade and so forth. (And as your WWII example suggests, the US has no right to lecture Britain on racism.) I only rebelled at the suggestion that Austen's world was color-blind.

Roger B-W

Thank you for the MICE summary. At some point I want to review SPI's *Dallas: The Television Role-playing Game* (1980), in which characters had 4 pairs of abilities: Persuasion, Coercion, Seduction, and Investigation, and the Resistance to each technique. All characters were pre-gens from the show, and there were no guidelines for creating new ones, but I'd like to figure out how to generate abilities based on traits like MICE.

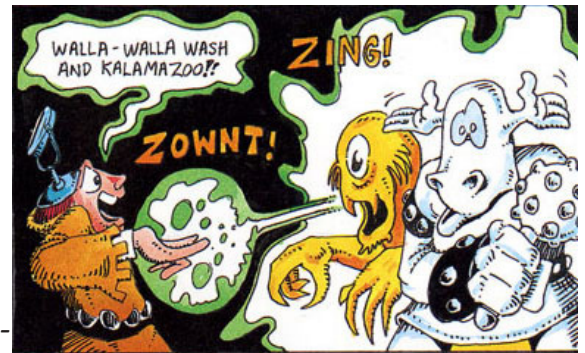
The Astarte example is an interesting one. Supposedly her earliest attestation was *Attart*, and she was a bit of a hunting goddess, which makes me wonder if she inspired Artemis before Aphrodite. (This is only my speculation, so take it with a huge grain of salt.) I also recall a Greco-Egyptian story which euhemerized Astarte as a Canaanite princess. This princess compared herself to Isis; Isis, a real goddess in this tale, came to Canaan and righteously smacked down Astarte for her insolence.

¹ "Odalisques, Orientals and Orcs: Racism and Racial Stereotyping in *Dungeons and Dragons*" by Chris Danielson, an unpublished paper presented at the PCA/ACA National Conference. I know it's *theoretically* possible to make a non-Orientalist depiction of the Middle East; *in practice*, though, I don't think you can escape those allegations against a determined critic.

Erika Frank

Thanks for the explainer on Comliness in *Champions*. Maybe it's *not* so bad that they dropped it from the system, despite what I wrote last issue.

"A lot of what I see these days is adventure-conquest: You must have dungeons. You must have Big Bad Evil monsters to slay. You must have hordes of goblins/orcs/ugly-vicious-biped-al-whatevers to serve as canon fodder for the BBEs." This is a shame, and I say that as someone who doesn't object to combat at all. Combat is fine, but dullness and a lack of imagination are not.



It's funny, I think they took the snotty critique of D&D in the 80s -- that it was nothing but a slaughter-fest for zit-faced munchkins, not a game for Real Roleplayers -- and embraced it as a virtue. (For the record I think those old critiques were wrong: *The Ysgarth Rule System* didn't promote roleplaying any better than D&D did, it was just more complex and pretentious.) It could also be a reaction to AD&D2, which introduced more interesting settings and stories to the game; its collapse in the 1990s led WotC to explicitly endorse a kicking-in-doors-and-killing-monsters emphasis.

Jim Eckman

Yeah, *Traveller* law-level doesn't tell you a hell of a lot, and the one thing it does tell us about -- weapon regulation -- *doesn't strongly correlate* with much else when looking at international data. I know that's a controversial statement, considering all the debate about gun control, but that's what I've found in my own research, and comparative criminologists seem to say the same thing.

Gabriel Roark

Hello to you too! I still have the text files for the A&E Author Index. Someone else helped me, because they cover the first 100 issues (which I never owned), but I don't remember who that was. Anyway, it ends with A&E #299, so you'll have to get the rest elsewhere. I'll post them online if there's interest.

I don't know if I'm a madman today, but I certainly was in my 30s. I remember playing *Risk* at Columbia's Games Club and saying "this is all wrong," since control of Australia and South America was the key to victory. So I went home, powered up Campaign Cartographer, got a world map, put a hex layer over it, and then colored each hex based on its climate. I wrote rules for travelling through unfamiliar climates, and printed out a map on poster-sized paper. Just an incredible amount of work, based on a single game of *Risk*! What was I thinking?

Really like the anecdote about your daughter Emma, Isis, and Atlantis. I often wonder how many parents keep records of their kids' stories, or how many kids do so on their own. No doubt psychiatrists have done studies on them and one can find summaries somewhere.

Scribble M. Horror

Welcome. Hold on... You not only OWN *Realm of Yolmi*, you actually **PLAY** it?! **Regularly**? How in the world have you managed that? This is like finding out someone's been running a 20-year *Creeks and Crawdads* campaign. I reprinted my old *Realm of Yolmi* review in this zine to make it clear why I find this so bizarre.

Avram Grumer

I actually have a copy of the *Mythic GM Emulator*. My quick impression is it's kind of half-baked, and too generic to be of much use, but I'm happy to hear a more in-depth take.

That's a good description of Austen. *Good Society* says it can be run in a world with gender equality, and I don't know how that could work, except as a "people wear costumes and use fancy language" simulator. (And since I don't care about costumes, and prefer simple to fancy language -- better "no problem" than "twas but a trifle!" -- that has little appeal to me.)

My take is that the SW Galactic Republic was barely a federation at all; it didn't even have an army before the Clone Wars. The UFP has Star Fleet at least, and while they say Star Fleet "isn't a military organization" each ship has the firepower to blow up whole systems so I call B.S.

Lisa Padol

Hit points in *Call of Cthulhu* and *D&D4*: Well these are very different situations. D&D4 encounters were meticulously balanced but the fights took too long. *Call of Cthulhu* fights were notoriously UN-balanced and PCs died quickly. *Pulp Cthulhu* changed encounter difficulty by doubling PC HP; I wanted to keep D&D PC-v-monster balance constant, so I reduced HP across the board. (Well, I *recommended* doing so; the campaign ended before I could put it into practice.)

Interrogations: In 2FT, I recommend *almost never* making rolls for clue-searching. At most, I say, you can call for a "credit roll," where *all* the PCs roll and the highest one (whatever that is) finds the clue. Even so I understand that a role-played interrogation could go badly unless the GM is very clear what he wants. I imagine a scene like this:

GM: "So you got the bookkeeper. What do you ask him?"

Player: "I wanna know President Bigg's next target."

GM: "He doesn't tell you."

Player: "I offer a deal."

GM: "He doesn't accept it."

Player: "I offer to protect him."

GM: "He laughs in your face."

Player: (Sighs) "Fine!! [I grab him by the ankles and dangle him out the window.](#)"

GM: (rolls) "He has a heart attack and dies. Good job, asshole."

GMs have to describe the suspect's attitude, at the very least, to give PCs clues on how to proceed. Nervous? Be reassuring. Arrogant? Play dumb. Non-responsive? Engage in small talk, maybe liquor him up. Otherwise *the GM* will be the one hanging out the window.

Brian Misziszek

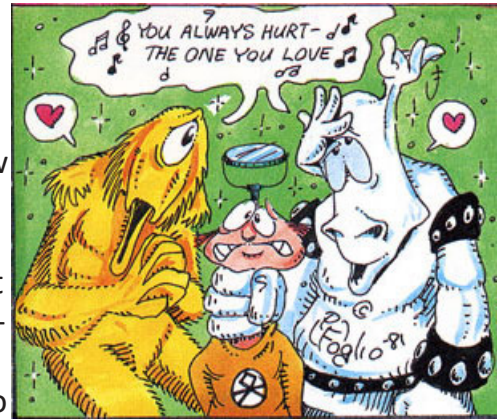
Your friend *fell* into a geyser?! I didn't know they were so common you could just stumble into one. *Superheroes and Pulp Heroes*: Have you tried *Two-Fisted Tales*? Don't worry, I'm a big boy and can handle rejection or criticism.

Peter Hildreth

Welcome back!! Stay a while.

Joshua Kronengold

Good Society: I guess this boils down to the age old question of how to deal with racism, sexism and homophobia in historical settings. My usual answer is that PCs are exceptional and can be of any sex, race or sexual orientation, and should be able to adventure without issue (unless they deliberately choose disadvantages that say otherwise); but society as a whole can be as sexist, racist and homophobic as the setting dictates.² I haven't heard a convincing objection to this approach.



D&D 4E: "Fights generally went 1-2 rounds, which felt about right." Really?! Maybe when fighting 1-HP minions, but otherwise... (Was Gaylord your DM, by any chance? He tends to run a very free-form game.) Also note that by cutting HP in half I was bringing them close to 3E and 5E ranges. I *do* agree that "after a while the fights felt too formulaic." Those endless pages of powers that more or less did the same things turned me off the system from the start.

Jim Vassilakos

Drifting Deities: First of all, I agree with Jackson Crawford that [gods should be seen more as personalities than jobs](#). This varies by pantheon, of course: Crawford was speaking about Norse gods, while Chinese gods literally *did* have jobs in the Celestial bureaucracy. The Chinese system was an outlier, though.

"[Deities] would likely see themselves as having a particular name and domain, and they would probably make these known to at least their clergy." I see most of them, diegetically, as having *sympathies* and *interests*. Sometimes they see humans in trouble, and they descend to Earth and give them spells, rituals or even practical advice. Most recipients then become the locus of a cult; whether it's a household cult, a secret society or a hierarchical priesthood is up to them. The more gods interact with humans, the more cults they found, and the more variety between them. (Some won't have any cults at all.) But "domains" are inferred by humans, rather than assigned to deities by higher-ups, based on what help they've provided in the past.

In this system there's no great difference between "divine" and "arcane" magic. Gods aren't directly supplying spells, they're teaching them to the cult founders. (They may intervene directly, but that's at their own discretion.) Conversely, most wizard spells *are* "divine" spells, gathered from eclectic sources.

² Admittedly, people often over-estimate how virulent these attitudes were. I remember a fascinating story about Magellan's voyage, in which he caught two men having sex. The crew told Magellan that this happened all the time, and urged leniency, but he had them hanged. To my surprise, this *ruined Magellan's* (posthumous) *reputation* at the Spanish court. They thought it was cruel and inhumane! And this was *Spain* in the 16th century...

Timothy Collinson

Thanks for your memories of Nigeria!

Traveller Leviathan: I'm glad you like the idea! I'd like to work on it, but I have this one hangup. [APOLOGIES FOR A LONG RANT]

When I create new world traits in *Traveller*, I want them to follow patterns in the real-world, relying largely on cross-national data.³ The real-world variable with the most predictive power, cross-nationally, is economic development. Overall, rich countries are happier, healthier, safer, less corrupt and more democratic than poor ones. So finding an estimate for economic development is critical.

Traveller 5E has a close analogue in a planet's Resource Units (RU) and ... It's awful. The RU formula is

$$RU = R * L * I * E$$

R is Resources (a straight 2d6 roll); L and I are Labor and Infrastructure, respectively, each roughly equal to the Population score; and E is Efficiency. Efficiency is 2d6-7, and yes, it can range from -5 to +5. Meaning that almost *half* of all worlds have *negative resource units*. Officially this means the worlds are "welfare states," dependents of some other power, but who these are is never specified.

Mongoose's *World Builder's Handbook* improves matters, but not as much as it needs to. There's a formula for Gross World Product (GWP) Per Capita, which is $(R+I) * TL * \text{Government and Sparport factors} * E * 100$ in Imperial credits; if E is negative, you divide by -E instead of multiplying. No world has a negative per-capita GWP, at least.

Even so, I can't get over this Efficiency variable, which is entirely defined by cultural traits, "legal, cultural, and social norms which may increase or reduce economic strength." (It first appeared in the 4E *Pocket Empires* supplement, where it was explicitly called "Culture.") I don't deny that these are critical, but when it comes to economic efficiency, they pale in importance to *technology*. A guy with a bulldozer and a bad attitude should beat a gun-ho worker with a shovel.

So to sum up [END RANT]: For my project, the most important variable in *Traveller* is computed in a completely nonsensical way. Should I ignore my misgivings and use it anyway? Or should I find a new way to compute GWP and work off of that, and risk it being non-canon? I don't know.

[SEE YOU NEXT MONTH, SPACE COWBOYS](#)

³ I know that planets in the Imperium won't be perfectly analogous to nations on Earth today, but I'd rather base my work on imperfect data than no data at all.

Ignorable Theme for E&A #14

Intraparty Conflict

Short answer: I don't like it. Next question.

Long answer: If your character attacks, insults, or abuses my character, I *will* take it personally. I will be hurt and I will be angry. It's an emotional flare that I don't have conscious control over. I may be out of my chair and half way toward the door before I'm consciously aware of it.

We can have in-character disagreements and debates, but once your character steals from or attacks my character, I'm out (unless one of them was being mind controlled or other mitigating detail that I know of at the time). The fantasy RPG trope of the party thief stealing from the party enrages me to no end. I will simply flat-out refuse to play with someone who decides this is a fun way to play a thief.

A couple of years ago, during a convention game, one of the PCs started verbally poking my PC. I shut that down in stern, no uncertain terms. The player said he wanted his and my PCs to be rivals, but I refused.

As a GM, I don't like watching conflict between PCs. Even if no one is taking it as personally as I do, it creates an atmosphere and table dynamic that I do not like.

League of Legally Distinct Heroes

The *Outgunned Superheroes* RPG is based on superhero movies rather than superhero comics. Per the author:

Superheroes is a game inspired by classic superhero movies, from the Spider-Man trilogy, to the crossovers of the MCU, all the way through Batman and X-Men.

All this is well and good. I appreciate when a game says, it is *this*, and not *that*. However, they might have gone too far with their inspiration.

The art, credited to the singular Daniela Giubellini, is great. It is consistent, vibrant, and really captures the tone they are going for. The female characters are not sexualized, though a high proportion of them have bare midriffs. The character designs are clearly modeled after MCU characters (with a couple of DC analogs thrown in). The problem is that they are too close to their inspiration. There's the not-Ironman in a red power suit and sporting a goatee. Not-Wolverine has 3 claws jetting out from the knuckles of each hand. The Flying Cape gadget would have been taken from Doctor Strange's closet. You can see more examples in the [quickstart](#) available on DriveThruRPG.

This extends to the flavor text as well. The Blaster role begins with "A resolute leader who shoots lasers from their eyes..." The Elemental is described as "A charming playboy surrounded by flames, a god with a stormy disposition, a frosty boy next door." The Charming Misfit trope is quoted as saying ""Let's solve this with a dance off. Come on, you and me" while the Super Soldier says, "Hey, language!".

The list of gadgets includes Portal Ring, Re-sizers ("a small metal disk that can be thrown somewhere or attached to an object, and it shrinks or enlarges a target"), and ~~Lasso~~ Whip of Truth. The pinnacle of this are The Eternity Shards, six "glistening gems of pure cosmic energy" that come in flavors of Change, Force, Mind, Space, Spirit, and Time. Cheekily, these are depicted as polyhedrons that look a lot like rpg dice.

I have only scratched the surface, but I wanted to give enough examples to ask, "Is it just me?" Is this too much? When does pastiche go too far? A wink and a nod is fine, I felt this went beyond that. Similarities and allusions are inevitable, but how close is too close? Here, I'd say it crossed an invisible line because I found it distracting rather than just amusing.

End of The Adventurers Guild

I have put my *D&D 5e (2024)* campaign on hiatus. I suspect it will be permanent.

My motivation has been flagging. I had hoped that Kublacon would reinvigorate me, but it did not. The campaign got to the point that I felt I was just going through the motions and one of the players had been growing increasingly disinterested in their character and *D&D* in general. This was the tipping point.

At first, they said they wanted to play something besides *D&D* rather than just make a new character, but then they backtracked a bit on that statement. I don't think they truly know what they want; I also suspect that there is unspoken frustration with the other players, not as people to hang out and game with, but as *D&D* players.

[Continued at the end of this zine.]

Aurora Cove

More stuff from the game I ran at Kublacon 2026.

Description

[As it appeared in the game listing.]

When ruthless outsiders disrupt the tranquility of this cozy, seaside village, its humble residents must uncover hidden secrets and unlock forgotten powers to protect their idyllic, peaceful home.

Rules light (based on Fudge). Roleplaying focused. Characters provided. Beginners welcome.

Resources

Portrait Creators:

<https://jazzybee.itch.io/sdvcharactercreator>

<https://factoryofheroes.com/> (results will be shown next month)

Soundtrack:

[I discovered these after I already had the name and used them as background and intro music.]

<https://homeworldmusic.bandcamp.com/album/home-world> (includes a track called Aurora Cove)

https://soundcloud.com/dan_of_van/aurora-cove

Map:

<https://icograms.com/> (see last issue)

I knew I wanted a map of the village, but I intentionally left it unlabeled so that the players could explore it and determine which building was which and who lived where. I tried to find something using pixel art, such as map assets for RPGMaker, but I also didn't want to pay anything. Fortunately, I stumbled upon this option which worked out well.

Lighthouse:

Based on the [Point Pinos Lighthouse](#)

System Notes

I chose to use *Icons Superpowered Roleplaying* because I could pass it off as a Fudge game. I didn't want the players to see their initial character sheets and guess at the big reveal. I highly suspected that I would get players who had played in *Icons* games I had run in the past. I was not wrong as 3 of my 6 players fell into that category.

I made two cosmetic tweaks to the system to help obscure the system. I renamed Prowess to Fighting because that's what Prowess is. I also renamed Determination to Grit because it sounds better.

Pregenerated PCs

The adventure was advertised for 6 players which is what I normally do for convention games. I ended up making 8 because I used the archetypes from *Icons Origins* and found 8 that I thought fit into Aurora Cove.

There were two variants of each of the 8 PCs based upon name and gender expression. Rather than print each one individually, I'm smushing them together into one to save space.

Ruby / Rudy Drake

Publican

You run the Aurora Cove pub (along with a couple assistants) and take pride in fostering a jovial, sociable atmosphere. Things rarely get rowdy, but when they do, you are quick to resolve the situation, diffuse the tension, and get everyone back on track of having a good time. You're also there to lend a sympathetic ear to anyone who just needs someone to truly hear them, not just listen and nod along.

Fighting	6	Great
Coordination	5	Good
Strength	4	Fair
Intellect	4	Fair
Awareness	5	Good
Willpower	5	Good

Stamina

Grit

9

2

□□□□□□□□

- Specialities

- Athletics +1
 - Bartending +1
 - Diplomacy +1
- Qualities

☐ Master of Ceremonies

☐ Peacemaker

☐ First to Know, Last to Tell



Camille/Cameron Waters

Angler



Obtensively, you run the bait and dive shop, but you spend most of your time fishing. You enjoy the rhythmic motion of the waves, the sounds of crashing waves and seagulls, the smell of seawater, and the taste of plank-smoked fish. You usually cast a couple of lines from the pier or a small boat. It has been a long while since you have been spearfishing—you think something dangerous may be lurking down there.

Fighting	4	Fair
Coordination	3	Average
Strength	3	Average
Intellect	6	Great
Awareness	3	Average
Willpower	4	Fair

Stamina

Grit

7

2

□□□□□□□

- Specialities

- Fishing +1
 - Oceanography +1
 - Swimming +1
- Qualities

☐ Travaille dur, rêve grand!

☐ Deeper Than You Think

☐ 🎵🎵Many Fish Bites of You Got Good Bait🎵🎵

Bertrude/Bertrand Chylde
Baker



Every day, you wake well before dawn and make your way to the bakery and turn on the ovens. There is something magically satisfying about taking very simple, basic ingredients: flour, water, salt, eggs, sugar, and so on, plus yeast to create something that brings warmth, comfort, and joy to people. Science meets artistry whether it is a simple baguette, buttery croissant, or a decadent cake.

Fighting	3	Average
Coordination	4	Fair
Strength	3	Average
Intellect	4	Fair
Awareness	5	Good
Willpower	6	Great

Stamina 9 □□□□□□□□
Grit 2

Specialties

- Baking +1
- Cake Art +1
- Chemistry +1

Qualities

- ☐ Early Riser
- ☐ Grandmama's Cookbook
- ☐ Warm Bread Warms the Heart

Ally/Allan Eastman
Courier

You don't have an official job, but you spend most of your days running errands for folks. This usually consists of either making deliveries or finding people if they are not at home. Anyone can reach you anywhere via the walkie-talkie you carry and its twin in the general store. You get bored if you sit still for too long and use your idle time painting murals on the communal buildings (plus houses if people ask) or doing card tricks if it is raining.

Fighting	5	Great
Coordination	5	Great
Strength	3	Fair
Intellect	4	Good
Awareness	4	Good
Willpower	3	Fair

Stamina 6

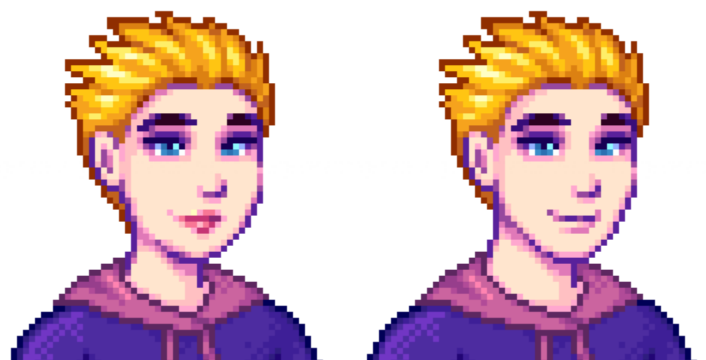
Grit 2

Specialities

- Geography +1
- Painting +1
- Sleight of Hand +1

Qualities

- ☐ Fast Friends
- ☐ Naturally Caffeinated
- ☐ The Hand is Quicker Than the Eye



Ulyssa/Ulysses Mars
Farmer



Pamela is the true farmer—you're more like a farm hand who took her hand in marriage. You have a simple, peaceful life of hard work. Long days in the field gives you appreciation for jovial nights at the pub and quiet evenings on the couch with your wife. Feeling earth between your fingers and nurturing your crops, and bringing your bounty to your community brings you great satisfaction and clarity of purpose.

Fighting	2	Poor
Coordination	5	Good
Strength	6	Great
Intellect	3	Fair
Awareness	4	Average
Willpower	6	Great

Stamina
Grit

12
2

□□□□□□□□□□

- Specialities**
 - Athletics +1
 - Farming +1
 - Music +1

Qualities
 - ☐ Pamela Acker: Wife
 - ☐ Quiet Strength
 - ☐ Old Soul

Simone/Simon Yetchz
Handiperson

You help ensure that not just the maintenance of the village, but that it operates at peak efficiency. From solar panels to plumbing, you love not only fixing things that get broken but making them better than they were before. Puzzling out a clever solution to an intractable problem is your jam. There is no shortage of projects that need to get done, even if you have to make up your own projects to tackle.

Fighting	3	Average
Coordination	5	Good
Strength	3	Average
Intellect	6	Great
Awareness	4	Fair
Willpower	5	Good

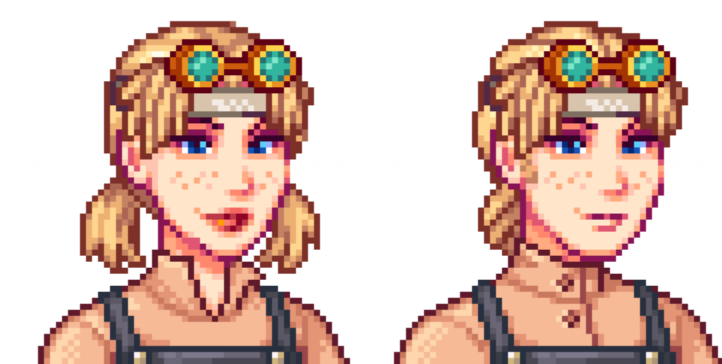
Stamina
Grit

8
2

□□□□□□□□

- Specialities**
 - DIY +1
 - Recycling +1
 - Technology +1

Qualities
 - ☐ Obsessive
 - ☐ Easily Distracted
 - ☐ Problem-Solver



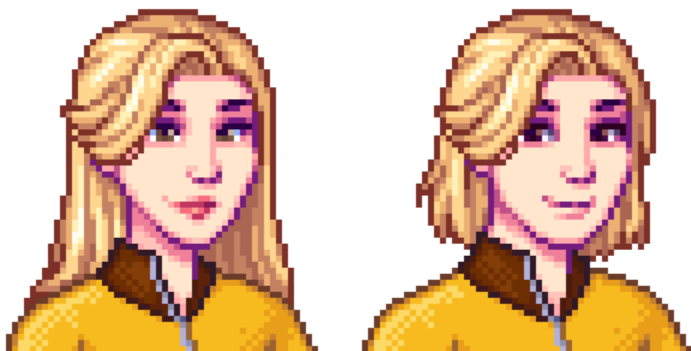
Theresa/Terence Rockford Miner

Mining in Aurora Cove is not what one would call lucrative, but the local geology is fascinating. The groundwater is rich in silica, making it ideal for opal protection—you’ve even found opalized shells. Making jewelry started as a way to maximize their resale value, but you enjoy it as a creative endeavor you can do outside a dark tunnel. Your non-opal related hobbies is to get to know your fellow villagers, the majority of whom are single (not that it *really* matters) and amicable (this *definitely* matters).

Fighting	3	Average
Coordination	4	Fair
Strength	6	Great
Intellect	3	Average
Awareness	4	Fair
Willpower	5	Good

Stamina	11	□□□□□□□□□□
Grit	2	

Specialities	Qualities
• Carousing +1	☐ Ooh, Shiny!
• Geology +1	☐ Flirtatious
• Jewelry Making +1	☐ Grounded



[The only roleplaying sidenote I gave to any player was to ask their player if they could do an Australian accent. The reason why will be revealed next month.]

Lola/Logan Garfield Hunter



There are no natural predators in Aurora Cove, so you fill a niche that a cougar or wolf pack would. You keep the deer and wild pig population in check (using a handcrafted spear) while providing food (and hides) for yourself and the village. You live in balance with nature on your own in the woods—separated but not wholly disconnected from the village. It is not that you dislike people or live like a hermit to avoid human contact, but they can be a bit much and you need to take a break from them, you know?

Fighting	5	Good
Coordination	4	Fair
Strength	3	Average
Intellect	4	Fair
Awareness	5	Good
Willpower	5	Good

Stamina	8	□□□□□□□□
Grit	2	

Specialities	Qualities
• Athletics +1	☐ Lone Wolf
• Spear Hunting +1	☐ Hates Wearing Shoes
• Stealth +1	☐ Humans are Animals Too

The Big Secret

Aurora Cove has a long history, first as a fishing village, then as a haven for bootleggers who expanded its natural sea caves, then as a covert listening station during the Cold War, and today as a unique superprison.¹

The supervillain Hive Mind is the most powerful psionic being in the world. It took a collective effort from the world's greatest superheroes to defeat and capture Hive Mind. They imprisoned Hive Mind in the bunker built under Aurora Cove, isolated from the outside world. Hive Mind's physical body is in stasis, but their psyche is still active.

The quasi-governmental Omega Agency (OA) that maintains Hive Mind's prison devised a means to manipulate Hive Mind's abilities to imprison other supervillains in a penitentiary codenamed Aurora Cove. Every resident of Aurora Cove is a prisoner—a supervillain whose exploits were so notorious, whose powers are so great or difficult to contain, and/or whose demeanor or nature is just too problematic that no ordinary superprison would do. Through psychic manipulation, they are given civilian identities and a new lifestyle that negates the need for prison walls and cell bars. The residents have no memory of their past and vague, false memories of their lives before coming to Aurora Cove. After a brief period of transition, the plasticity of the mind allowed them to simply accept that they were where they wanted to be. Desire or curiosity about leaving Aurora Cove is suppressed, but not completely eliminated. Sometimes shadows of memories of their former lives appear in dreams—the kind that quickly fade upon waking.

The bunker is fully automated as a safeguard against Hive Mind influencing any personnel. However, the systems receive manual inspection and maintenance every six months. A vertical shaft runs from inside the Aurora Cove lighthouse down

to the bunker. There is also an emergency escape tunnel that leads to an underwater cave where a small submarine (that holds 6) is docked. The bunker also holds the personal effects, including gadgets and gear, of the prisoners. The bunker and lighthouse are powered by comic book wonkery.

The scientists and tourists who visit Aurora Cove are actually technicians and observers who monitor and maintain the health of the prison and its residents. Myles Skyler, aka Captain Sky, traded his duty as one of the world's premier superheroes to act as the warden of Aurora Cove and failsafe. Should the psychic blocks fail and the prisoners regain their powers, his would as well and so he can act as a first line of defense. Plus, he really needed a well-deserved break from being a world-renown superhero.

Within the confines of Aurora Cove, a powerful psychic block prevents the use of superpowers—prisoners simply do not know that they have powers. Any resident who ventures near the borders of the prison experiences rising trepidation and anxiety until they turn back. Those who persist will eventually become dizzy and disoriented as their blood pressure drops and heartbeat slows (similar to vasovagal syncope) until they eventually pass out. The apiaries provide a key role in achieving this effect. The queen in each is actually a portion of Hive Mind's body and the bee colonies work as a distributed psychic network (as well as pollinators for the wildflowers and gardens).

A jamming shield prevents all incoming and outgoing communication signals from anywhere except the prison command center (which has a hard-wired communication cable that extends to a transmitter located outside the shield). It is this shield that gives rise to the village's auroras (though Aurora Cove was named from the naturally occurring bioluminescent waves). There is no surveillance equipment, such as cameras or microphones, within the village or the residents' homes. OA deemed that their presence, when

¹ After reading the description of Aurora Cove (see last issue), one of the players noted "I want to live here! Even if it is an alien zoo."

inevitably discovered, would prove too problematic.

Mail service and package delivery, all controlled by OA, is provided twice a week. Residents have access to newspapers and magazines, but OA curates them to remove any mention of superhumans or events that might trigger particular residents. That there are no children in Aurora Cove is an unmentioned anomaly. Another clue of its convoluted history is that the gravestones in the cemetery predate 1947.

Despite the mindgames, Aurora Cove is intended to be a humane, rehabilitative holding facility. It is hoped that by living a peaceful life, the prisoners' villainous tendencies will fade. In the meantime, they live happy, healthy lives at a fraction of the per-prisoner cost of maintaining a conventional superprison.

NPCs

OA Visitors

Evelyn Crane passes herself off as a bird watcher and nature photographer, but she is a psychologist sent to evaluate the health of Aurora Cove's residents. She has an inquisitive, patient, and disarming demeanor. As she takes up conversations with the various residents, they may become aware that she steers the conversation to get them to talk about themselves and gives little information about herself.



Elijah Sherman and **Maggie Sharpe** are tasked with measuring the health of the ecosystem including the waters of Aurora Cove. They will spend their time taking air, soil, and water samples as well as collecting plant, animal, and other specimens. Key areas they will visit are Shell Beach, the Forest, the Mine, and areas close to the fields and gardens. Their activities could be interpreted as them snooping



around the village, especially when they encroach close to residences.

Professor Angus Smee

The Professor is a brilliant but misguided scientist who created the android supervillain Magnetrix and was serving a prison sentence when OA recruited him. He was instrumental in creating the containment of Hive Mind and the Aurora Cove control center within the bunker. He was then imprisoned in Aurora Cove—an irony he anticipated and begrudgingly accepted since the challenge and thrill of working on the Aurora Cove project was too enticing. But before that, he designed the containment system used for the prisoners' gear. Unbeknownst to OA, he biometrically coded the units to the individual prisoners so that they could access them (if they ever entered the bunker). He also scrubbed and manipulated the email chain that would have had those devices stored and studied elsewhere.

The Professor's cottage is littered with reams of paper upon which has been scribbled mathematical formulae, diagrams, and notes about everything from particle physics to physiology to computer science. Searching through these papers reveals that The Professor is a genius and a bit mad. The walls have been painted in black paint and used as chalkboards. The coffee table has been set upright and many insects, mostly bees, have been pinned to it. A map of the village has been drawn on the ceiling. The fountain and the lighthouse have been circled and connected to three other points that correspond to the apiaries.

Magnetrix

The Professor's greatest creation was Magnetrix, a female-coded android with extraordinary powers of magnetism. She was designed for deep sea and deep space construction and rescue missions, but she had other ideas. She wants to harness the sustainable resources of the Earth, build a reliable space station, colonize the solar system, and eventually reach the stars.

Magnetrix disdains humanity and sees them as tools to be exploited—including The Professor.

She views biological processes and evolution as inefficient, though a necessary stepping stone to achieve artificial intelligences such as herself. In her mind, humans are too flawed to have such wide dominion over the planet and should submit to their superiors.

She has come to Aurora Cove under the misguided notion that the signal jamming is a natural phenomenon (because that's what any research on Aurora Cove would say) that can shield her activities from the outside world and thus is a fine place to set up a base of operations (once she subdues the local population).

She came to Aurora Cove by walking cross-country and passes herself off as **Ophelia Naidu**, a backcountry hiker. She carried a backpack with hiking and camping gear as part of her cover. She can mostly pass for human, though very close inspection will show that her skin and hair are synthetic. Her primary tell is that while she might pretend to eat and drink, she never actually consumes food.



The only two people in Aurora Cove that she recognizes are Captain Sky (she does not know his civilian name, Myles Skyler) and Professor Angus Smee. Once she spots them in Aurora Cove, she knows that there is something highly unusual about this village and is motivated to figure it out, even if it means razing the village (which, to be honest, she was going to do anyway to set up her base).

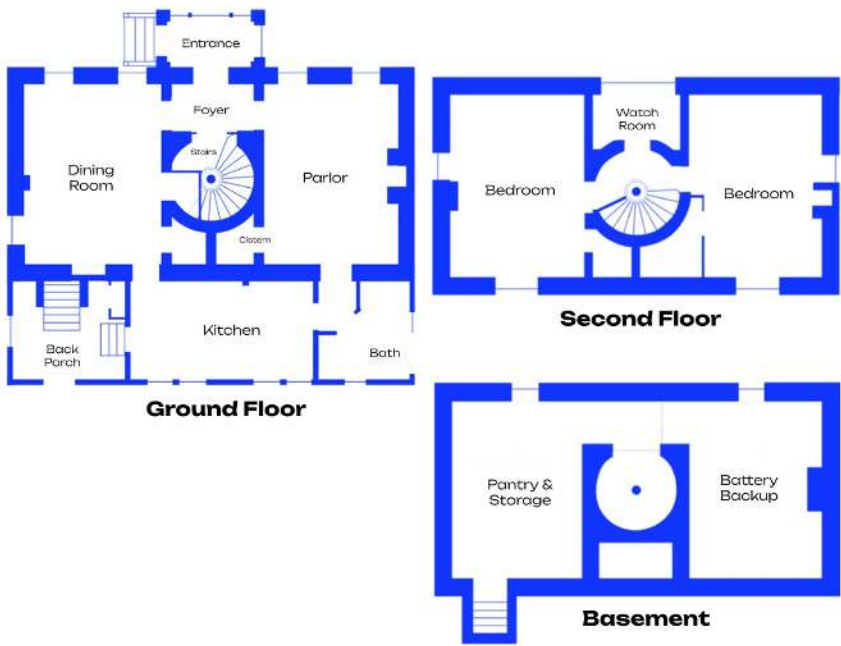
Magnetrix commands a couple dozen soldiers to help with the subdual and defense of Aurora Cove while she makes her base. There are also twice as many civilian construction workers to build the actual base. They wait in the surrounding countryside, hidden in the coastal hills well outside the shield and will arrive by helicopter and trucks (including semi trailers and heavy equipment) on Saturday morning.

[When the PCs' asked The Professor what Magnetrix's problem with him was, he responded with "I don't know. Maybe she didn't think I loved her enough."]

Aurora Cove Prisoner Roster

Name / Codename / Powers

- P. Acker / The Gardener / Plant Control
- J. Barber / Bookworm / Illusions
- B. Chylde / Demonchylde / Magic & Hellfire
- S. Cubic / Cutlass / Weaponmaster
- L. Cubic / Min-Max / Growth & Shrinking
- C. Dawson / Angelfyre / Life Drain & Healing
- R. Drake / Red Dragon / None
- A. Eastman / Speed Demon / Super-Speed
- L. Garfield / Kaosling / Transmutation into Animals
- S. Gordon / Harmonix / Sonic Powers
- U. Gordon / Harmonix / Sonic Powers
- U. Mars / Mercenary X / Immortality
- S. O'Riordan / Deathmask / Summoning
- T. Rockford / Rockslide / Earth Control
- R. Ross / Black Light / Shadow
- M. Skyler / Captain Sky / Paragon
- A. Smee / The Professor / Inventor
- A. Tudor / Thespian / Emotion Control
- G. Unabe / Reaver / Martial Artist
- C. Waters / The Abyssal / Battlesuit
- S. Yetchz / Gizmet / Gadgeteer



... and the list goes on.

The Bunker

There are two means of accessing the bunker: through a concealed and locked shaft in the lighthouse or through the undersea cave.

Lighthouse

The lighthouse has three floors plus a basement. The front entrance to the house faces the ocean. There is also a back porch in the corner of the house situated on top of the root cellar access door.

The Bunker

The ladder ends in a small room connected to a base concrete corridor. Harsh fluorescent lights buzz and flicker to life, triggered by an unseen motion sensor.

Central Intersection

This circular room has 4 doors marked by a single word:

- North: Inventory
- West: Control
- South: Lighthouse
- East: Submarine

The doors are controlled by a keypad lock. The passcode is 287672 (AURORA).

Control Room

The perimeter of this circular room is dominated by what appear to be industrial grade controls and computer terminals. There are three chairs on casters positioned at the terminals. The center of the room is occupied by a vertical circular tube sitting on a pedestal with its own set of controls. The tube has a milky translucent quality. Inside the tube, there appears to be a swirling mass of particles.

Psychic Shield

One of the displays shows a rough map of Aurora Cove overlaid with a complex, three-dimensional waveform.

The controls consist of three sinusoidal waves identified as Containment, Complacency, and Cognizance. The phases, frequencies, and amplitudes mix to create the psychic shield that keeps the prisoners in place. Someone at the controls can change the amplitude and phase of these to change the waveform over the village. By manipulating the values and observing the changes in the map, someone could deduce that the three apiaries act as nodes.

Hive Mind is creating these three influences. So long as Hive Mind is doing this, they are too occupied to break out of their containment. If the amplitudes are reduced significantly, Hive Mind's mind will be free. Disrupting the apiaries has the same effect as reducing the amplitude.

Jamming Shield

This is a very simple dial that goes from 0 to 10. The line at 7, where the dial is when the PCs discover it, has been marked with a red arrow in permanent marker drawn on the controls. Someone has also written "11" in blue ink clockwise from the 10 position.

Status Panel

The indicators on this panel can be boiled down into 4 different measurements. All indicators have a four-color rating from best to worst: Green, Yellow, Orange, Red. These correspond to quantitative numerical values, but those aren't important. The system maintains a 12-month rolling log of all system parameters.

- Shield Strength
 - The shield strength is mostly green with occasional drifts into the yellow.
- Shield Stability
 - On Thursday, the shield strength dropped to orange for a few seconds but recovered rapidly. This was due to Magnetrix probing the shield with her powers and the system compensating to bring it back into the green.
- Psychic Strength

- This indicator is solidly in the green and only shows signs of weakening close to yellow during winter months.
- Psychic Stability
 - It is currently fluctuating between orange and red. It was mostly green, bordering in yellow, but then spiked to orange starting Saturday morning, corresponding to the invasion.

Prisoner Zero

One section of the panel is focused on the medical vital signs of Prisoner Zero. There are also two switches that are locked and require a key to activate.

- Smoke
 - The switch has two positions: ON and OFF.
 - The switch is spring-loaded and only remains in the ON position if someone holds it there.
 - While activated, smoke is released into the containment vessel to render Hive Mind incapacitated. This will cause the vital signs to drop precipitously and reduce the psychic shield amplitudes to zero. This in turn will cause a splitting headache to those who had been under its influence, but this will eventually clear and they will be free of their psychic prison. When Hive Mind recovers, they too will be free.
- Containment Vessel
 - The switch has three positions: RAISE, HOLD, and LOWER.
 - The switch will automatically return to the HOLD position when the containment vessel is raised or lowered fully.

[As noted by one of the players, the smoke used in beekeeping does not work like an anesthetic. The smoke in this chamber has an explicit anesthetic effect.]

Computer System

Accessing the computer system and searching through its files, the following information can be gained:

- Listing of all prisoners with names, handles, and dossier (see handout).
- Prisoner 1 is Myles Skyler, admitted 6 years, 3 months ago.
- Prisoner 2 is Professor Angus Smee, admitted 6 years, 3 months ago.
- Prisoner 38 is The Abyssal. They are the most recent prisoner, admitted 11 months ago.
- All other prisoners have been here for d66+9 months.

Reading one's dossier completely breaks the influence of Hive Mind and they regain all their memories and identity.

Inventory Room

The room is stacked from floor to ceiling with locker doors that resemble large safety deposit boxes. About half of them distributed randomly have an LED glowing solid red.

There are a couple of rectangular tables of stainless steel in the middle of the room. A robotic arm hangs securely from the center of the ceiling.

A touchscreen control panel is embedded into the wall near the door. It is currently displaying the outline of a right hand. If a PC places their hand on the screen, their palm print will be scanned. The screen then displays their mug shot, name, and codename. One of the locker LEDs will turn green and the robotic arm will retrieve the box from the wall and place it on a table. [In the case of The Abyssal, several boxes are unlocked and retrieved.]

Inside each box is the PC's costume and gear (as listed on their character sheet). [In the case of Kaosling, the box is empty.]

Introduction

[I scripted the introduction of each PC, skipping over those not appearing in the game. Because the first act of the scenario is sandboxy and freeform, I wanted to get the players engaged as soon as possible. The following is in chronological order.]

The green aurora dances slowly across the sky above the village of Aurora Cove. It begins to fade as the sun slowly rises and brings its own light to the sky. Gentle waves lap against the shoreline. As the village stirs from its sleep this Thursday morning, smoke rises from the chimney of the bakery while fresh pastries are pulled from the oven.

Baker

You're facing the oven when the familiar and friendly chime of the front door bell alerts you to the arrival of a customer. You turn around to see George Stamos who has come to pick up his order of freshly baked croissants and fruit tarts for the bed and breakfast.

"Good morning," he says. While you box up his pastries, he says, *"Can you add in a couple more? We have four guests this morning rather than three. Someone new arrived late last night. Don't know yet what their deal is."*

Farmer

You're seated at the kitchen table slowly picking at your breakfast across from a second place setting. You hear the outer door open and close. Pamela comes up behind you and kisses you gently on the cheek. *"Mornin' sweetie."* She then walks around the table and sits down across from you. Before looking down at the food, she asks. *"What did you make for us this morning?"*

"I need to work at the greenhouse today. A bunch of folks need help, so I'm going to do a class, I guess? I walked the south field this morning. Saw some invasives poking their greedy little shoots out of the dirt. Can you take care of them for me?"

Hunter

You're six feet up on the nook of a tree, patiently waiting and watching for game. A squirrel starts coming down from their nest above your head. They didn't even notice you until they practically were right on top of you. They freaked out and scurried hastily away, jumping quickly to the ground and bounding off.

You follow it for a moment until your eye catches some other motion. A person—woman probably—walking slowly through the woods, binoculars around her neck, headphones on her ears, and a microphone—you guess—in her hand. She too spots the squirrel and follows its path backwards to the tree. Her eyes scan up the trunk until she is looking right at you. She pulls off her headphones and waves. Oh no, it looks like she might want to talk.

Miner

A stray ray of morning sun sneaks through the window curtains and lands annoyingly on your face. A body stirs in the bed beside you, their arm draped across your chest. *Describe this person. What is their name?*

Both of you open your eyes sleepily but are then startled fully awake by pounding at your front door. "..."

Courier

"Skyler to Eastman," the walkie talkie sitting in its charging cradle squawks. *"Can you pick up one of the trucks and take a couple of guests and their gear to the pier?"*

After acknowledging the request, you head to the general store. There, you see a couple of people with protective cases and what appears to be diving gear.

What do you talk about as you load up their gear and drive them down to the pier?

Angler

You are surrounded by darkness except floating before your eyes are strange green and amber symbols that you cannot read. Your breath is heavy

and your heartbeat quickens. There is a buzzing in your ears that grows stronger and louder. You begin to feel dizzy and disoriented. Which way is up? Where are your hands? There they are, but they're metal. You can't touch your face. Your stomach turns. Sweat drips into your eyes and your vision narrows. The buzzing! You scream.

...

You fling yourself out of bed. Your sweat-soaked blanket hits the floor. Your breathing is coming back to normal. The sky outside your window is growing lighter. It was just a dream and this is not the first time you've had it.

Shortly thereafter, you hear someone ringing the bell of the shop.

Handiperson

You are in your workshop starting to work on your latest project, "... " when a sensor monitoring the windmill power generation chirps an alarm. You put aside your work for now and make your way to the windmills. You find them spinning slowly, but steadily. Everything looks normal, but then you look down at the base of one of the pillars and you see a woman—an outsider—looking acquisitively at the battery bank.

As you approach, she asks, "*Do you know anything about this?*"

Publican

The pub does not open until lunchtime, so the morning is the time for checking on inventory, putting the tables and chairs back in place, and doing prep work in the tiny kitchen. But even before all that, you like to get in a morning workout including a jog around the village. The sun has fully risen but not quite chased away the lingering chill that comes from being right on the sea. The urgent cries of seagulls and angry caws of crows provide acoustic accompaniment to your run.

You end your circuit at the recreational area. You see The Professor sitting on one of the machines but instead of working his muscles, he's scribbling

in a notebook, pausing occasionally to stare off into space before returning to his writing.

If the publican does not initiate a conversation, The Professor will. He excitedly explains how much he is looking forward to this Friday's pub quiz. Furthermore, he's working on his own set of questions and ideas about how to mix up the format to make it more interesting.

Timeline

The following events will happen if the PCs do not do anything that might disrupt the timeline.

Outsider Arrivals

- Elijah Sherman and Maggie Sharpe arrived on Monday afternoon and have been spending much of their time on the outskirts and wilderness of Aurora Cove.
- Evelyn Crane came to Aurora Cove on Tuesday evening.
- Magnetrix (Ophelia Naidu) walked into town Wednesday night and booked into the Bed and Breakfast very late.

Thursday

Morning

Introduction (including a Nightmare for the Angler)

Afternoon

Hallucination: Farmer. While working in the fields, they find themselves in a killing field.

Ophelia sits at the cafe. While there, she people-watches and catches sight of The Professor. She confronts him which is observed from afar as a heated discussion, but no one overhears what they actually say.

Evelyn Crane visits another PC.

Evening

Hallucination: Publican. They are serving drinks at the pub and one of the clientele is Solomon O'Riordan. It was Red Dragon who brought Deathmask to justice and so the reason why Solomon is in Aurora Cove. In the hallucination, they see Solomon take on the visage of Deathmask

(a vodou-like skull mask) and the other patrons becoming zombies under Solomon's control and out for blood and/or brains.

Evelyn Crane visits another PC.

Night

Nightmare: Hunter. They are being hunted through the woods by an unseen foe.

Friday

Morning

Hunter wakes up naked in the woods.

Hallucination: Baker. They get a vision of the ovens as a hellscape of fire and brimstone. The tormented wails of the damned call out for mercy and salvation.

Evelyn Crane visits another PC.

The publican sees The Professor again at the same spot as yesterday and have a similar conversation. After the publican leaves, Ophelia captures The Professor and takes him to an unused home. She does not want to harm him (well, maybe a little), but she doesn't want him roaming free.

Afternoon

Hallucination: Miner. If in the cave, they imagine an earthquake and cave-in. If outside, they imagine an earthquake followed by a great spire rising into the sky.

Evelyn Crane visits another PC.

The scientists are caught taking soil samples too close to someone's home (or at the farm if nothing else seems appropriate).

Evening

Trivia Night at the Pub. The Professor does not make an appearance. Reactions range from relief ("Finally, we have a chance to win!") to concern ("I hope he's feeling okay.")

Evelyn Crane visits another PC.

Night

Nightmare: Courier. While working on a mural (have the player describe), the world speeds up and passes them by. The sun rises and falls, the sky changes from night to day and night again in an ever-accelerating cycle. The village weathers and decays around them until it is ruined.

Saturday

Morning

Establish where everyone is.

Invasion! Several flatbed and box trucks roll into Aurora Cove. They carry construction equipment, supplies, and many armed and armored soldiers. They secure the village square and gather the residents from the surrounding buildings. Myles confronts them, but Magnetrix quickly dispatches him, calling him, "Captain."

The scientists make their way to the mine to conduct a study.

At this point, the timeline is in the PCs' hands. The expectation is that they eventually make their way to the lighthouse and the bunker, discover their true identities, and then confront Magnetrix.

Aftermath

Afterwards, the PCs have to decide what to do with their lives. Do they stay in Aurora Cove? Do they undertake their previous lives as supervillains? Both? Do they start using their powers for good?

Despite what I wrote about this month's Ignorable Theme, there is definitely the possibility for intraparty conflict if the PCs disagree on what to do. Fortunately, this did not happen when I ran it.

Next month, I'll wrap up my Aurora Cove notes with the PCs' "real" character sheets.

Comments on E&A Issue #13

Roger BW

RYCT me, exploring abandoned spaceships is thematically similar to and the same type of activity as delving dungeons. You seem to like the former but not the latter and I'm just trying to understand why (unless I'm mistaken, of course).

I commented on *Outgunned Superheroes* on tekeli.li, but I haven't played it yet. I suspect that I'd run it once, have fun, but then not have a strong desire to keep running it or to use it as a go-to superhero system.

Patrick Brady

Is this Ok? I think you're over-thinking it. Would you think it wrong to perform West African music or cook Japanese food? IMO, people should not lock themselves off from other cultures for fear of appropriation. It's good to be mindful of the issues you raise so that you don't slide into caricature (or worse). The calculus changes for a commercial product and more care should be taken.

Dylan Capel

Trying to define "indie" for games, music, etc. is a bit of a trap because there is a spectrum. You can bring your own "indie" themes to "mainstream" games. RPGs are what you make of them, not what imagined gatekeepers (mainstream or indie) say "what gaming is and can be."

RYCT me, all character activity in an RPG involves some intersection between player skill (how to best use the game system) and character skill (as expressed through the game system). Social manipulation (interrogation, seduction, bargaining, etc.) brings this to the fore and in ways that highlight neurodivergence. We all have to find the balance that works best for us.

RYCT Brian, character progression can introduce new elements of gameplay through new character abilities. Fighting a dragon should feel different than fighting a goblin—its not just about bigger numbers. Plus, the context within the campaign should lead to stakes that are not just bigger, but

more meaningful and resonating to players and PCs alike.

Peter Hildreth

Good to see you again!

Scribble M. Horror

To me, *D&D* (or any RPG) is a game of make-believe. The rules add structure to facilitate that core activity. Make-believe without rules is freeform, so it is natural for folks to change RPG rules without requiring formal permission from the rules themselves. In contrast, boardgames² are about finding success within the constraints of the rules so changing the rules changes the core activity. Nomic takes it one step in the meta direction by being about the rules themselves.

Joshua Kronengold

Reading your description of Decorum brought Zendo to mind. Decorum sounds like a co-op, "GM-less" Zendo. Funny you should then bring up Zendo in the next paragraph. I've always wanted to play Zendo; Decorum sounds like one of the few co-op games I might like.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

I like the new header!

Lisa Padol

RYCT me, when it comes to matters of fighting, I run into Unicorn Problems. Many games force the players to choose between "be good at A or B, but not both" in the name of game balance, but there is usually a "or C or D or E..." that they can choose from rather than making it a binary choice. As you pointed out in *Trail of Cthulhu*, the trade-off is a player choice.

Your scenario examples prove my point about published scenarios. They included descriptions of NPCs, clues, locations, etc. These are exactly the things I want the scenario designer to provide. Having to pick who the guilty party or villain really provides flexibility without requiring that the GM do additional work (except to justify the choice they made and make it make sense in-game).

² Including card games, social deduction games, et al.

Brian Rogers

RYCT me, I never saw intelligence swords as a defining class differentiator for fighters, but magic swords definitely came in cooler varieties (defender, flaming, vorpal... at least in AD&D) than other weapons. My “why can’t this other class...” thoughts centered on the Thief class.

My exorcist question was mostly about how to handle the Div/0! error that popped up in my head. In a published game, I’d like to see an example where the Cleric faces 3 skeletons, 1 ghoul, and 7 poltergeists. With 4 levels or exorcism, I presume they can exorcise either the 3 skeletons or the ghoul and only 1 skeleton; in either case, all the poltergeists are gone.

Matt Stevens

The reason why “Hobbits/Halflings don’t seem like much of a fantasy race at all” is because they’re just rural English. : P

RYCT Josh, the roadblock I often run into is when the game system is supposedly supporting a particular type of play, but it only works if you are already familiar and comfortable with that type of play (and probably don’t really need a system to support it). The game designer’s expectations often don’t bridge the gap between the words on the page and my brain. Also, these systems sometimes come across to me as more “gamey” than so-called “gamist” or “simulationist” games.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Patrick, what does it say of the gods if the food offerings sit and rot in the temple?

RYCT Brian, I already have robots that wash dishes and clean clothes. They aren’t humanoid, but they don’t need to be. They are also more efficient (energy, water, and detergent) than a generalized robot would be. If I were to have a housekeeping robot, part of its task would be to use the current appliances, not replace them.

RYCT Dylan & Lisa, how did you remember I said that? I didn’t remember it. I’m sure you looked up the quote to get the exact working, but still! :)

End of The Adventurers Guild

[Continued from page 2.]

The campaign started because we couldn’t get players for something that wasn’t *D&D*. In this sense, the campaign did its job and there was no need to drag it out longer. We’ll see if absence will make our gaming hearts grow fonder and want to return to it.

As a palate cleanser, I ran a one-shot of [Dragon Slayers](#) in the same world. It was good to play something simple and with a very different mechanical approach from *D&D*. With that one session, we plumbed at least three-quarters of the mechanical depth of the game. I don’t feel the need to run it again, but I’m glad I did this once. Everyone was happy with the change of pace so it served its purpose.

One of the players will be running a fantasy campaign with *Savage Worlds*. Rather than an open-ended campaign, it will have a definite ending point. I’m looking forward to playing. I had burned out on running *Savage Worlds*, but making a character for this campaign has rekindled my fondness for it.

Part of what burned me out was all the frickin’ rule changes between the Original, Deluxe, Explorers, and Adventurers (*SWAdE*) Editions. *SWAdE* also had notable changes between printings. None of the changes are of the magnitude of editions of *D&D* (not even 2014 to 2024), but I could not trust my memory. Was I remembering the rule correctly or from an earlier edition? Plus, I already had 2 versions of the *Fantasy Companion* when they released the *SWAdE* version. I was done.

With this new campaign, I’m approaching it fresh and as a player rather than a GM, so that has helped immensely. I hope I have forgotten enough of the old rules that the current rules can stick. It’s a new system for two of the players and I’m looking forward to teaching them; this will also give me a fresh perspective on the rules.

The Arc of Probability Bends Towards Justice: Issue #1

A zine by [Bryant Durrell](#) for Ever & Anon issue #14

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or [https://popone.innocence.com/](#).

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Introduction

Hello!

The last time I published an APA zine it was 1993; I contributed to issues 209, 212, and 214 of A&E. Like so many others, this led to some freelance RPG writing, although my freelance career wasn't particularly illustrious. Looking back at the ToC for issue 209, I see Michael Cule there as well – nice to be sharing space with you again, sir.

In the time between now and then I have discovered a career in high tech, moved to half a dozen different cities, gotten married, played in a bunch of games, enjoyed Lisa Padol's *Fearful Symmetries* game, and quite recently retired. You can blame Lisa and of course Josh for my presence, since they mentioned *Ever & Anon* a few times and writing a monthly zine fits in well with my desire to get back to writing as a regular part of my life. I am no longer devoting any of my mind to managing large teams and keeping servers from crashing. We'll see how it goes.

As far as gaming goes: I am a RPG gamer, most of the time as a GM, which is my own fault. I will have more to say on that next month when we talk about forming gaming groups. I'm not much of a board gamer and while I like LARPs fine, I tend to think of LARPs as those cool Silicon/Intercon full weekend events that were just starting when I was a young fan in New England. This made me reluctant to commit the time. Another thing that may change now that I'm retired; I know the state of LARPing has changed a lot.

I enjoy most RPGs. In 2010 I played or ran 120 [Living Forgotten Realms](#) games; I like math and d20s and grid maps just fine. I also really dig weird experimental stuff, lightweight games about emotions and feelings, and so on. GUMSHOE is the system I've run and played the most in the last twenty years. I'm currently running *Feng Shui 2*. What I'm saying is give me the chance to play a role, compatible fellow players, and a set of mechanics that doesn't get in the way and I'm a happy gamer.

Other pursuits: well, I watch a lot of movies. A lot a lot.

This zine is laid out with [Typst](#) because I'm incapable of ignoring cool-looking tech toys. Expect the format to shift and alter a bit as I wrap my mind around the tool, and please forgive any awkward formatting.

Current Events (Gaming)

Kicking Butt in the Secret Wars

My FTF *Feng Shui* campaign is eight sessions in, running about once per month. It's a new gaming group that I put together to play *Delta Green* last year, with my wife and another couple we know in the area. *Delta Green* proved too depressing in the age of Trump, so I ran a one shot of my very favorite RPG ever and everyone said "Yeah, let's play that instead." None of the players were particularly familiar with the Secret War setting, which is a huge change from the group I used to play *Feng Shui* with back in the day: back then we'd all played *Shadowfist*, the CCG using

the same setting, and knew the lore deeply. I probably frontloaded too much of the factional complexity at the start, and encouraging the players to go to the other accessible time periods resulted in a bit of rootless feeling.

Before the last session, I quizzed the players until I got a vague idea of where the problem came from and encouraged them to return to 2026 Hong Kong, where we blasphemously had an entire session without any combat whatsoever. What kind of Hong Kong action movie is that? Everyone had a great time, however. The PCs are now aware that Willoughby Booth, the banker who helped them buy their bar/entrance to the Netherworld/place of power, is a servant of the Ascended, who rule the world with an iron fist. They are not in conflict with him just yet. I think they will be soon enough.

I also introduced clocks, as presented in *Blades in the Dark*. The players are mostly more used to dungeon crawling and are looking to me for direction more than I expected; the clocks provide a physical symbol of pressure and remind them that they need to take actions or other people will take action upon them. I think that'll help too. It's fun if occasionally frustrating learning how a new group thinks.

The second edition is pretty good. Character creation is a bit more constrained than the original – you don't really get to make any choices beyond name and backstory – which hasn't affected anyone's enjoyment. Combat is still clunkier than the state of the art in modern RPG design but it goes faster now and the other couple, who've mostly played *D&D*, picked it up quickly. I had a custom playmat made with the combat tracker on it, which has done wonders for keeping combat organized. If there's a picture of the playmat beneath this you'll know I figured out images in Typst.



The Secret History of England

Lisa wrapped up her online [Fearful Symmetries](#) game recently, which we had been playing for, what, a few years, Lisa? The setting is a pre-World War II England with a Cthuluid spin on the mythos of William Blake. It's weird playing *Trail of Cthulhu* in a campaign frame where PCs are encouraged to seek magickal power; when my burglar Stan declared proudly that we were probably the most powerful mages in Britain, I fully expected him to pay the price for his hubris. I'm sure he will at some point. We finished up with a great magickal working in London, using a World's Fair as cover for a large-scale ritual. I will leave the purpose of the ritual obscure to avoid spoilers for the campaign.

GMless Play is in the Cards

Susan and I also recently played [Zhenya's Wonder Tales](#) by Jason Morningstar with our old friends Brad and Gretchen. It's one of Bully Pulpit's GM-less card-based no-prep RPGs, with all the setup living on cards dealt out on the table. There's a strong component of secret information, and when I say secret I mean there are lots of details about your characters that you discover in the course of play. The primary card type is the Move card; each one says "when X happens..." on one side and you don't turn it over until that thing happens, at which point you read the possibilities and play accordingly.

The game comes with six scenarios, each of which should play out in an hour or so. I think they should be fairly replayable, since the choices players make during play matter as much as the dictates of the cards. Less recently, I really enjoyed Jason's game [Desperation](#), which shares similar design concepts. Both of those games are relevant to this month's theme, so more on them later.

Current Events (Mundanity)

My wife Susan and I are currently packing up to move from Seattle to St. Paul, because we miss snow or something. It's very exciting and a bit intimidating. Next issue's theme is incredibly relevant (and if you know anyone in the Twin Cities who's looking for two polite experienced gamers to fill out a group, let me know). We'll be there in time for the Minnesota State Fair, which is cool.

Right now, by which I mean when this issue comes out, we're in Montreal at the [Fantasia International Film Festival](#). This will be my sixth visit to this particular event, starting in 2004. I wish I'd gone more while I lived on the East Coast. It's the biggest genre film festival in North America, started 30 years ago by a bunch of Concordia University students who wanted to show their favorite Asian movies in theaters. These days, it covers everything from weird little indie horror movies to B-movie action flicks to avant-garde science fiction; I'm particularly looking forward to Jane Schoenbrun's *Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma*, Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *The Samurai and the Prisoner*, and *The Last Temptation of Becky*. Follow my Letterboxd (linked in header) for reviews and if there's interest I'll talk about what I saw through a gaming lens next month.

I did not see any of the World Cup games in Seattle in person. I only follow the sport tangentially, just enough so that I can have a rooting interest in the outcome and the Golden Boot winner. It was still a great atmosphere for our

city; the stadium is walkable from downtown, the light rail system held up well, and people were cheerful and optimistic for a bit of a change. Seattle's a weird city, not actually as progressive as you might think from the fact that we have a democratic socialist mayor and from the way the media covers us, so it's nice to see everyone more or less unified in a good mood. I'm sure we'll all be back to sniping at each other about crime rates now that it's all over.

IgTheme: Intraparty Conflict

I love it in theory. I don't tend to be a play to win kind of player, just as a matter of personal style. I like surprises and I like games that allow me to find out how my character reacts. Intraparty conflict is an often untapped source for that sort of play.

Parenthetically, one reason I love the concept is because I think this is a facet of the classic GM's burden problem. As a frequent GM, I am well aware of how much effort the traditional GM role is and how many of the things we tend to see as the GM's job could be picked up by players. Don't get me started on scheduling. Hosting is another one that I've seen players deliberately take off the GM's shoulders. On the indie scene, there are a lot of games which shift worldbuilding partially into the player realm. On the one hand, there's the trick of using GMless games like [Microscope](#) to build a world before starting more traditional play, along with Avery Alder's GMless [Belonging Outside Belonging](#) mechanics in which each player takes ownership of specific setting elements. More blended techniques include the distributed scenario procedure designed for *Blades '68*.

Returning to the actual point: if the group is interested in intraparty conflict, it can serve as a way to free the GM from the task of coming up with interesting conflict. This probably makes more sense in a more sandboxy game, so as to

avoid the potential issue of intraparty conflict competing for attention with the GM's scenario.

There are also degrees of conflict. If my burglar Stan from the *Fearful Symmetries* game I mentioned is trying to convince Doctor Thrupp into learning a thing or two about second story work, against his better instincts, that's conflict. Stan wants something that Doctor Thrupp doesn't want; one of them will get their way or they'll have to find a compromise.

That's a lot of ifs. As is usually the case, if anyone at the table wants to foreground intraparty conflict, I like to use something like Chris Chinn's [Same Page Tool](#). If you haven't looked at in a while, it's worth your time. One of the notable aspects is that it recognizes those degrees of conflict. On one end, there's "player characters are expected to work together; conflicts between them are mostly for show." On the other end, "player characters are expected to work against each other, alliances are temporary at best." Working through the discussion the tool enables is a good way to reduce discomfort arising from mismatched expectations. Truth be told, if a group doesn't like the idea of having this sort of conversation at the start of a campaign, it's probably a bad idea to adopt a playstyle that risks player conflict as a result of poor communication. You can't do intraparty conflict well if you aren't ready to talk about player/character separation.

In practice I'm not sure I've ever played a game where intraparty conflict was significant, excepting Jason Morningstar games like *Fiasco* and the two I mentioned earlier in this zine. In all of those, our attachment to individual characters was somewhat weak – it's not coincidental that they're all single session games – and everyone chewed on the conflict with gusto. Also in all those cases, the mechanics push the conflict. In *Desperation*, the cards literally narrate the conflict for you:

WARMTH

Well, I set a home on fire. It went up in a rush, like it had been waiting for me. I burned it down and someone died screaming in there and I felt warmth for the first time in months.

PUT THEM IN THE DEAD HOUSE AND SPEAK YOUR TRUTH.

Pretty much absolves the player of responsibility when the mechanics are being that blunt, huh?

As a counter example, I've played in one game which disappointed me (although the other players may have had fun) because of dynamics related to intraparty conflict. It was a *DramaSystem* campaign in which all the characters were from different regions of the world. *DramaSystem* is explicitly about intraparty relationships, with mechanics designed to handle that flavor of conflict. I built my character with that in mind, expecting that the focus of the game would shift from region to region as the campaign progressed, as the characters tugged on their own particular priorities.

Imagine my surprise when, very early on, one player announced that if the characters ever left the region we started in, which was also where their character was from, their character would become unplayable and the game would be ruined for them. That cut off entire aspects of conflict which I'd been counting on.

The lesson I've carried with me is that you should always be willing to talk about expectations. I should have said something at the time, too – it's not like it was too late just because we were a session or two in. It also reinforced the need for intraparty conflict mechanics to be even more

foundational, although I'm not sure how you'd do that in *DramaSystem*.

I don't need intraparty conflict to be happy, lest I've given that impression. I just think it's a valid arena for conflict, in situations where every else shares my interest.

Commentary on Issue 13

Patrick Brady: on cultural sensitivity, with the caveat that I'm an older white guy in America, here's what I think: at my own table, as long as I am confident that I'm doing research and trying to represent culture respectfully, and as long as everyone at the table is comfortable, the approach you're contemplating makes sense. I do a periodic mental pass to think about whether or not I've slipped into parody, myself. This is relevant for my *Feng Shui* game, which takes place in Hong Kong and China.

What's really key, come to think of it, is the ability to take feedback without getting defensive. As a human being I make mistakes and I've learned to accept that. If a new player sits down at my table and says "wow, you screwed that one up," it's not a commentary on my worth as a person. It's a chance to learn.

I like the STRAUSS. I once played a character who was a tine from Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* and it was all kinds of fun playing a competent character who was small.

Patrick Riley: Kublacon is doing a cruise now? Huh! I don't love cruises for the sake of cruising (I've done one, it was fine), but the idea of being on a boat for a convention is kind of fun. A lot like the retirement home I want to live in someday which is oriented towards gamers. I'm glad to hear Kublacon is still thriving; I remember it fondly from my time in the SF Bay Area. I'm sorry your *Swords of the Serpentine* session sucked, since I've found it to be a ton of fun with a good GM.

I liked Aurora Cove. What are you thinking about using it for?

Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira Zucolotto: just wanted to say I love the series on Brazilian interactive fiction. This kind of writeup is a treasure; I went back and read all three.

Michael Cule: "We can delude ourselves just as well as people without gnosis" is a great turn of phrase. I am going to have to steal it, if you don't mind.

Roger BW: MICE is handy. *Feng Shui 2* is a faction heavy game; I can use this as a lens to answer the question of why any given NPC might join the Ascended, or the Jammers, or the Guiding Hand, or so on. Would family connections/tradition slot in as Ideology?

Erica Frank (Elf): Game jams are another one of those writing projects I'm thinking about using as a spur to write more. Allow me to blurb my automated site, [Physical Game Jams](#). It scrapes the itch.io game jam listings, relying on text pattern matching to filter out physical game jams, erring on the side of assuming a jam is for video games. The pattern matching is imperfect but I think it's still useful.

Scribble M. Horror: D&D as a Nomic-style game is very clever. I think your core point makes sense, although there's less formalism to D&D's mutability. Still, as you say, those original three books did require rules changes to be written down. My next thought is that you could write a set of RPG mutable rules that were in fact more formal, with voting procedures that enable rules changes that don't require either the GM/referee's say so or loose consensus. And what sort of world would make sense for this? Perhaps that oddball Chameleon Eclectic game *Psychosis*, or the old surreal puzzle game *Sandman: Map of Halaal*.

Avram Grumer: Thanks for being a big part of the reason I'm using Typst! Your zine layout is very stylish.

I appreciate the detailed *Fiasco* (2nd edition) writeup. I have the box and haven't gotten it to the table yet; this was a helpful read for understanding the differences in the dynamic.

Joshua Kronengold: I usually have one or two free to play mobile gatcha games in my rotation. I don't spend money on them. Having put in a couple of years working on mobile games, I get some intellectual pleasure out of thinking about the patterns in play. I'm good at monitoring my habits. I think the question of protecting yourself in this regard is directly related to the question of protecting yourself in the current information space environment.

I'm not sure I've subjected you to my rant (available on request) about the impact of the printing press versus the impact of the Internet. The short form is that Gutenberg's invention was a significant contributor to a huge religious schism and it shouldn't be any surprise that the Internet, among other technological advances, has been likewise disruptive. I don't think humans are good at navigating the new methods of communication. The old markers for "this text is important" are useless. I expect the world to continue struggling with this long past my lifetime.

RYCT Matt Stevens: by the end of my time running D&D 4e I had started moving away from a rigid one room one combat model. I think I was inspired by [Sersa Victory's](#) 4e Fourth-core concepts. Once you start framing fights as running combats across multiple spaces, or introducing multiple waves of enemies, encounters started getting more interesting again. The system makes it much easier to get stuck in the formula, though.



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ISSUE #11 (E&A #14)

Origins was exhausting, demanding, and spectacular for me in a number of ways. I won't do a full recap here (and will respond next issue to a couple who asked about it in E&A #13), but for anyone interested, I posted a lengthy debrief on my BoardGameGeek blog:

<https://boardgamegeek.com/blog/11746/blogpost/187707/origins-the-messy-demanding-exhausting-fulfilling>

The short version is that I still have a lot of work to do, but have some promising leads with publishers on a handful of my games.

I also found the time to play in a mega-game at Origins, and have included the session report here in this issue, as I think it will be of interest to some of E&A's readers.

Belated IgTheme: Most Interesting Fantasy Race(s)

There are a couple parts to this question, and the more interesting angle to me is which I personally identify with. I have two answers that hold some weight.

I played a changeling in an Eberron-setting campaign once, and it struck me how interesting it was to play a character who inhabited other personas as often as their "real" persona. Indeed, per my backstory, I was hiding from some powerful people, and had taken on the persona of a recently-deceased teenage boy. Even the party (including out-of-character) didn't know that I was a shape-shifter for a long time.

So the character was a "mask" that my character was wearing, but the manifestation of that mask-character was also part of who my character really was. Fascinating stuff.

Identity and its various forms (we all wear "masks" of a sort in various areas of our lives) is interesting to me, as are forms of media that explore our relationship to identity. This is that exploration, codified into a race/species.

I've run a couple shape-shifter NPCs in addition to the lone PC I played (the latter of whom died, sadly, before his narrative arc could be concluded).

As for the other race I tend to instinctively identify with, it feels a little boring to name elves, but that's probably the truest answer. I'm sure a lot of interpretations of elves owe a debt to Tolkien, but the slightly detached, almost sadness that they carry, juxtaposed with an enthusiasm for nature and beauty, always seemed sort of heartbreakingly lovely.

I was a skinny, dexterous kid growing up, and so I think I also saw some of myself in the typical elfen portrayals, with their bonuses to agility and lithe builds. And then I fell into enjoying Ranger/Archer/Hunter classes in video games and RPGs growing up, and this connection was solidified.

Responses to E&A #12

Matt Stevens (Cowman Baloney Face)

Re: WoW mechanics in D&D, I actually made a whole video on the subject. You can view it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifNO9d7Urg>

Any writeup I'd give here would just be parroting my video, but I see paths to adapting enrage timers, debuffs that require "tank swaps," swapping damage and healing, WoW environmental effects as lair actions, and more.

Brian Rogers

Re: nefarious Gondians, indeed, though it's a rogue sect of Gondians that are being led astray by Asmodeus. The religion as a whole remains goodly in my version of the Realms.

Lisa Padol

Re: city design, and not doing as much work as I do...I frankly don't usually do that much work either. Video-making for an unknowable digital audience demands a little bit of extrapolating around what a GM *might* want to prep in a city setting that could be of use. I am not going through that whole process when I create one, just the parts that seem most relevant to the campaign at hand.

The Sandbox Settlements article you linked is an interesting one, and I suppose I do think of cities as both sandboxes (certainly) and dungeons (to a lesser extent), and so I want to create a true sandbox environment that's

more than illusory in its possibilities, since this keeps me on my toes as a GM as well.

Joshua Kronengold

Re: Critical Role & magic shop hijinks, oh yes, I didn't mean to imply they invented this trope. Merely popularized it.

Re: Rangers in 5e, I lack your depth of knowledge about past editions for every class, but I have a lot of experience with the ranger class both in D&D and elsewhere where they've suffered from an identity crisis (World of Warcraft (WoW), once upon a time). I wrote a much longer article on this for my website ([LINK](#)) but some highlights are below.

I do think that making them full casters would be less evocative of the archetypal cultural image of them. Aragorn was the unashamed genesis of the class, though some of what we think of when we imagine Aragorn has been absorbed into the fighter class. D&D's own figurehead of Drizzt paints this same problematic picture, of a melee specialist with limited, if any, spellcasting, though they nailed the animal companion with him. Dabble in some Legolas, though, and you start to work toward more modern conceptions. None of which involves spells. Spells are the vehicle through which they deliver a lot of mechanics, so ok, I don't mind them being half-casters. But full caster would ruin the flavor for me entirely, and I suspect others as well.

Tracking and navigating in the wilderness should be a strength of the class, but a lot of survival gameplay has been trivialized in 5e except at the lowest of levels. I'd personally buff the hell out of trap-based mitigation abilities (spells if you must), and would introduce a couple powerful navigational/tracking abilities that would have no peer among other classes (or buff existing ones). And no other skill stands out for them next to skill-based classes like Artificers, Rogues or Bards.

For a long time, WoW's BeastMaster sub-class was by far the most popular in the game (certainly for the class, and at times for the entire game), if not the most powerful, and it was because the build felt like a true tandem class between you and your animal companion/pet. Some builds would see the pet doing more damage and mitigation than the hunter (WoW's ranger). By comparison, the biggest complaints for 5e are about the same sub-class, but not in the "it needs to be more powerful" sense, but "it needs to feel cooler" sense. They've never figured this out, and I think it's out of a fear of not having the player be the focal point (but not realizing that they'd be in no danger of this in such a scenario). I have a homebrew sub-class I've

tinkered with for years for 5e wherein pets get an enormous buff, to the point where the ranger's job is more about battlefield control and maintenance, not as the primary focus.

I'd also be fine pushing sub-classes toward, respectively, melee, ranged, pet-as-damage-dealer, but this would require sub-class abilities to be more differentiated from one another and more powerful. You rightly mention this, or a variation of this idea. So they do a bit of all of this, and sub-classes help them lean toward one or the other, but for melee damage - hell, even ranged - there are other classes that do as much or more with reasonable builds.

None of that is about being more powerful, but rather being more evocative and differentiated. As mentioned, I played an archer ranger in (2014) 5e and it was fine. We're not a min-max-y group, but I may have been our top damage dealer. But that is the only sub-class that feels remotely "right" to me, and I am annoyed at the lack of other good options.

My American Revolution

Megagame Experience

[The World Turned Upside Down: An American Revolution Megagame](#) is an enormously ambitious game, in a style known as a megagame. I played in a session of it at Origins Game Fair.

It was among the best gaming experiences of my life. What follows is a messy session report.

The Basic Structure

The game held between 40-50 people, by my count. two sides: Colonial and British, and on the Colonial side, in each round (representing a year) you could choose one of three major roles: Lawmaker, Quartermaster, or General. These corresponded to broad theaters of governance and war, and you could only do one of them per round. Rounds lasted 30-45 minutes.

While players could swap roles each year, there was also some light incentives to specialize in one particular role for the entire game. And indeed, swapping in and out of general-ship, for instance, could lead to a lot of confusion for the armed forces. But other times, we needed more help in certain areas, so some players bounced back and forth between two roles. I spent the entire game as a Lawmaker, but I'll get to that in a moment.

"Control" or controllers refers to the multiple game-runners. They managed the game's various phases (orders

being given, dice being rolled for combat, laws going into effect, etc.), many of which sort of blended into one another, since the action was unceasing for the entire 4.5 hours.

The game was not a simulation but was a “what if” of historical events. The starting conditions were historical, but then the game could go in any (believable) direction we took it. Controllers tried to work with all of our actions, but within the restrictions of reality and the likeliest ways things would play out.

There was a Hearts & Minds track, basically Victory Points, that could be one possible end condition...either hit a particular threshold or have the most at the end of seven rounds. This was related to control over the map (thus the tactical wargame) but also influence and favor among each colony, which was affected by various factors. However, the Hearts & Minds track was not the only way the game could end.

Transforming Into My Role

Benjamin Franklin is a personal hero of mine. Or perhaps calling him a hero is a bit strong, but I have a fascination with him as an historical figure. He was brilliant, accomplished in numerous fields, and by all accounts was a far better human being than many of his peers that are revered in my country to this day. He was still flawed in some notable ways, but worthy of respect, both for his time and in general.

So when I idly mused before the game that maybe I’d get to play as Ben Franklin, it wasn’t a serious thought. I’d be assigned 1 in 60 possible historical people, at least 59 of which wouldn’t be him. I came into the room happy to accept whatever was given to me.

So when I arrived a bit early to check in, and they said “you’re a colonial delegate from the mid-Atlantic, choose a role from one of these five states...” and one of the states was Pennsylvania (PA), my eyes lit up and I knew a bit of magic had just occurred. I rifled through the stack of PA roles. He was the last one, sitting at the bottom, waiting for me.

My entire game changed in that moment, and I walked into the room with my new “Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania” name badge with renewed purpose.

I started working the room. The game hadn’t started, but I could greet everyone and chat with them. I knew no one would remember “Mark” (or really, even care about my real-life name) so I never used it. No one in the room knew me by anything but Ben Franklin. I broke this rule in the

game’s last hour with a few players I’d worked closely with, but this was long after we knew exactly who we were in-character. Otherwise, to them I was Franklin, with the unspoken promise that I would work tirelessly to make things happen for our cause. Even amongst social deception players, LARPers, and those with previous mega-game experience, I was possibly the most social person in the room for its duration (besides the controllers, who have the Herculean task of responding to approximately 5-10 questions or requests per minute for 5 hours).

I had a special character ability related to the Lawmaker role, as if there had been any doubt about my purpose anyway. I also had a possible Quartermaster (QM) bonus, but using my Lawmaker bonus removed the QM one as a possibility.

Another Franklin (William) was a delegate from New Jersey. We did a bit of pre-game internet digging, and he may have been my extra-marital son! In-person, he was a man about 15 years my elder and 6 inches taller than me, so this was some good fun for us. We worked together quite well during the game, and shook hands warmly at the end, congratulating one another. He was one of our best quartermasters and kept a lot of logistics humming along.

A Note on Scope, Scale and Perspective

What follows is a very me-centric telling of the game. You might be tempted to think that I was the central figure in the war and game as a whole, shaping all its events in sweeping ways.

This is not the case. Not even close.

I did quite a bit that I do think helped to shape our course. But the beauty of these games is that so much is happening, no single player can take in all of it.

The narrative below will hint at or discuss a few such items, ones that clearly dominated the entire games of numerous players and required all sorts of negotiations, stratagems and actions, but which had nothing to do with me, my actions, and I was only barely aware of them. Undoubtedly other sub-plots existed that I will never know about, not even in hints and whispers among the chatter during the game.

What’s more, I could tell you very generalized things about the tactical war that played out on the tables-long map of the colonies, but could tell you NONE of the details. My time was too preoccupied with governance, communication and coordination to even know a fraction of it. This was exactly as it should be.

I was also tempted to do this writeup in-character, but this would be a disservice to the experience. This was true roleplay in many senses, but the telling of it will be stronger if I frame it as Mark's experience, not Ben's.

Turn 1: Rallying the Coffers

The colonies lacked cohesion and resources relative to the British. As Lawmakers, we could only pass two laws per round, and there were many priorities.

I found a pre-made law (we could write our own, but stuck mainly to pre-gen stuff for the first few rounds) that reduced enlistment cost by one, in perpetuity, for every colony. This seemed wildly helpful to protecting our interests (we weren't formally at war yet), outnumbered as we were at the start and being bullied on the map.

I proposed and debated for it, and it passed...

...and then we had to pay for it. See, it was an expensive bill, albeit with long-term financial benefits. And so I had about five minutes to round up 20 money (the game's abstracted currency) to actually fund the bill.

Many colonies hadn't yet declared independence from England. Several colonies had their existing money earmarked for other purposes. There was perhaps only 30 money total available between all of the 13 colonies at this point, so I needed around 2/3 of ALL our cash reserves, even though the bill could (and did) repay that amount easily over the course of the game.

What followed was a negotiation and persuasion whirlwind, one that I'm not sure I would have succeeded at had I not already established a rapport with many people in the room. Getting to 20 was extremely difficult, but I just made it, counting it in from our American controller moments before he had to turn in our laws to be processed by the master controller.

Turn 3: Declaring Independence

I'm going to skip ahead a bit (and then skip around back and forth a bit later) since a linear telling of everything would be impossible.

The north had declared independence from England, but the mid-Atlantic (yes, including Pennsylvania) and the south hadn't yet. This was becoming an increasing issue, because our ability to garner foreign support and pass laws that affected all colonies was hindered mightily by the fact that we weren't actually in accord on our direction in this conflict.

We needed unity, and fast. Generals were expressing fear at the state of the war, but we were increasingly impotent to do more than we'd already done from a legislative standpoint.

I began working the room again, this time to broker a single, unified swing to declaring independence. I needed to talk to delegates from about nine states and convince each of them.

They had their reasons, of course, and didn't necessarily understand all the concerns we as lawmakers were seeing. The mid-Atlantic was trying to goad the British into a false sense of security, not realizing it was hindering their own side in oblique ways. They all agreed to declare independence...if the South did.

The south was trickier. Much of their land was British-occupied. They were considering negotiating with England for peace as a separate body, apart from the mid-Atlantic and northern states. This would have doomed the rest of us. Emotionally, they wanted independence, but weren't sure if it was feasible. They needed the assurance of the mid-Atlantic declaring, and certain other immediate actions, including the appointing of a Commander-in-Chief.

I gave as much of a promise as I could on all fronts, but the decisions were out of my control.

The moment came. All declared independence. We swiftly named a Commander-in-Chief, Patrick Henry from Virginia (he of "Give me liberty, or give me death!" fame, among other historical achievements). The gentleman playing him was an enormous find in the role. He volunteered for it (it was surprisingly tough finding someone who wanted to be Commander-in-Chief), but then became a rock-solid leader for the colonies.

Foreign Support

My diplomatic special ability as Franklin involved establishing relations with a foreign power.

To do this, I needed a Prestige Cube, which could be earned in a variety of ways and allowed for a variety of super-charged actions, as well as special asks of the controllers. Prestige cubes were tradeable, and I discovered this early on, as the first were just being earned in the game. I became a minor broker of cubes from this point onward, making sure unused cubes got into the most useful hands. To activate my personal power, I negotiated my way into one from an ally, but later on it was usually to send the cubes elsewhere.

Franklin's ties to the French are somewhat famous. To

boot, we had a French delegate in New York (Lafayette) who promised to be able to strengthen our ties to the French, and we believed we could entice them into the war against Britain.

So naturally, I made contact with the Bavarians. I can explain.

There was a pre-made law I'd spied that would help bring the French into the war, and Lafayette had his own special power related to them. I figured we'd be able to court them without my aid.

Hessian mercenaries were historically a large portion of British forces in the war. I wanted to undermine this. Master Control called me into a sidebar conversation, though, to explain the politics of what would later become Germany. The Hessians were extremely entrenched with England, and attempts to undermine this diplomatically could easily get me executed over in Europe. However, the Bavarians weren't as close with England, and could be entreated to some sort of alliance. I made my case and we formed an agreement.

They never entered the war formally, but sent money and food to PA for the remainder of the game each round. We had to keep a particularly naval area controlled for them to do so, but it was in the heart of our territory, and so we managed this.

I doubled down on my special action the next turn as well and invited them to send immigrants to enlist in the army, promising land in PA to the families of those who enlisted and devoting much of PA's existing food stores to help kickstart this effort.

A round (year) later, Master Control walked toward me with two dice (troops) in his hand, thrusting them upward above his head as he made eye contact with me. "The Bavarians have arrived!" he yelled. I cheered.

I have to imagine that this was a bewildering moment for most others in the area, who had zero context for what this meant, and many of whom never learned anything about this little sub-plot of mine. Regardless, some of our forces from that point onward were from our new Bavarian allies.

France never formally entered the war either; they similarly sent some aid through various channels, but ironically this alliance never quite manifested as I anticipated. Still, the Bavarian presence amused and pleased me.

The Assassination Attempt(s)

And now for something completely different. The action was halted because one of our delegates was the target of an assassination by a British player and one of our own colonialist players! But during the attempt, the colonialist who was supposedly there to assassinate another colonialist turned on the British assassin and tried to kill her as well.

I can't stress this enough: I have no idea what any of the context behind any of that was. Clearly a large plot had occurred, with numerous actions and communications. And I knew of none of it.

This was the biggest moment where I couldn't help but laugh, because I was recognizing that entire games' worth of intrigue was happening elsewhere in the same room that I was completely oblivious to. I still don't know the details behind the assassination, and never will. It's sort of what I imagine "The Bavarians have arrived!" was to some others.

The original target was killed, sadly. The counter-assassination attempt failed. That same counter-assassin later defected themselves and their colony (Connecticut) briefly from colonialist to British, even while the other 12 colonies remained independent. I have no idea if this was connected to the assassination, or something entirely different. Fascinating and wild stuff either way!

Dropping Balls

In another amusing moment, a guy I'd never met from my side (I thought I had met everyone!) came up to me. "Bro, what the hell are you doing?! You're dropping the ball on Pennsylvania!"

You see, I was PA's only player, which meant that if I took the Lawmaker role in each year, I couldn't take Quartermaster or General, and thus PA was under-represented in those areas. And so it largely sat inert on the map. We had passed some laws to allow quartermasters and generals to operate some outside their home areas, but without active management, PA was contributing far less than it could to logistical efforts on the map.

So despite all my efforts... I was also apparently hurting the war effort! I dutifully explained my predicament, only slightly angered by his insistence that I was not fulfilling my responsibilities to the cause.

I couldn't very well be in two places at once (or three!). However, I used this as an excuse to discuss with my son (whom I legitimized and promised to make part of my will and estate) how he and the other quartermasters might be

able to do something about this. He was a great help in this regard. I also need to talk about someone else at this point, whose presence informs some of the problems above.

The British Defector

A friendly teenage girl – I forget her in-character persona – had been sent by the British as a peaceful correspondent. Some noble lady or other of England, I believe. Connecticut welcomed her, but she had little to do, though we noticed she was sending letters back to the British. She did not hide this. This was early in the game.

A short time later, seeing the injustices put against us, she defected to the colonialist cause and became an official Connecticut representative. But Connecticut was flooded with delegates already, and I happened to make her acquaintance. She explained the predicament. Needing help with the logistics of Pennsylvania, I proposed a transfer from Connecticut, whereupon she could act as Quartermaster or General for PA. She, Connecticut, and the game's controllers agreed. Thus she sort of came under my wing in Pennsylvania, and I caught her up as quickly as I could.

Now, even at this point we all suspected her of being a spy who was working for the British, and that the colonial defection was a ruse. I did not make this offer of her being a PA delegate with my eyes closed. However, my logic was that if she could get something – anything – positive done for us on the map (which I had been unable to devote any attention to), I was fine with her continuing to send letters back to the British, which she was. I'd trade some tactical secrets if we could actually mobilize Pennsylvania. The war effort as I understood it desperately needed it.

I gave her some broad direction and a prestige cube to make certain things happen. A short time later we reconvened. The prestige cube had conveniently disappeared and none of the tasks I'd suggested were completed. She had some plausible-sounding excuses, but the truth was obvious. We had a full-on British agent (spy) in our midst. Lesson learned.

This also contributed to the previous section, and the very forward chap who was happy to tell me I was doing a poor job with PA. It turns out, a couple of the things I wanted to have happen in PA, didn't, and it was because of her undermining our efforts. So I was genuinely trying to address the issue he'd pointed out, but this particular development stymied those efforts.

At this point, I had a conversation with both my son and one of our more engaged Generals, the latter of whom was a furiously competitive woman who would suffer no fools

(nor spies) in the game, basically getting them to agree to babysit her. For a couple rounds thereafter, we did actually get a couple useful actions out of the British agent, because we made sure she had no opportunity to sabotage them.

I also personally oversaw a couple Pennsylvanian actions that didn't conflict with my Lawmaker role, contributing as much as possible to the Hearts & Minds track for PA, without her sneakily reducing the total.

I spoke with her afterward, and it was clear she thought she had duped us for longer than she really had. I didn't break the illusion by telling her the truth; she did indeed hinder us, so she fulfilled her role well. I simply took a gamble by giving her some power, hoping it wouldn't fully backfire and using the opportunity to discern her true affiliations. The gamble failed, but I had known it was a possibility. Ah well. If I'd had done this over again, I would have considered attempting to jail her for crimes against the colonies. It would have been a dramatic moment. But I thought of this too late.

We left (in real life) on excellent terms, and I congratulated her on a well-played game. I even ran into her the following day at the convention and we chatted some more, with her boyfriend listening on with bewildered amusement.

Lines of Communication and Forms of Emergence

For a brief period during the teach, I was worried that the game would be about optimizing one's colony board, generating resources onto the map, then min-maxing the war effort like a dutiful mechanical gamer.

I couldn't have been more wrong. If the sections above about my lobbying efforts aren't enough to convince you, I can provide an additional example...

In Turn 1 we passed the enlistment law and then...just sort of dispersed and tried to tell people about it. It was horribly disorganized, and some people missed the news as a result.

As the game progressed, streamlining communications became paramount, and channels for communication occurred organically, without mechanical oversight. At one point the lawmaking body appointed a liaison to the Commander-in-Chief (at his request) to create a single point of contact between us and the military. This was nowhere in the rules. We simply created it and agreed upon it because it needed to happen.

Theaters affected one another in oblique ways that we couldn't have predicted. Our Commander-in-Chief would

consult with us on laws to remove his primary struggles, and that of his generals and quartermasters. A chief quartermaster was named in some regions to assist in coordination efforts. An engine fell into place, but not a mechanical one. A human one.

We also struggled for the first couple rounds to actualize the entirety of our potential from our colony boards (which managed resource production) to the tactical/strategic map. What we needed, where, where it would move, for what purpose, how defended it was, were all considerations that most didn't take into account until about midway through the game. This was an enormous logistical task that took tons of communication and effort by many players.

The concept of emergence in games is both self-evident at times and also hard to pin down, because there are different types of possible emergence in games. But I tend to enjoy games with more overt examples of it. And the staggering amount of social, political, mechanical, intra-system and inter-system emergence in this game isn't something I can fully quantify. It's amazing, frankly. But back to the game.

Odds & Ends

In no particular order, and happening concurrently with much of the above:

At some point we became aware of native tribes aiding the British. I imagine the southern states knew sooner than the rest of us. This was an issue, since the Brit's main war push was from the south, and it's where we had the most trouble with them throughout the game.

To relieve some of this pressure, we as a Congress appointed an official ambassador to the tribes, naming a southern delegate, and shortly after, Georgia seceded part of their state to the Cherokee nation in exchange for non-aggression. I was not a part of these negotiations, and I believe other tribes remained British allies at least nominally through the rest of the game. So the efforts were not as successful as they could have been, but still helped.

Much of our other time was spent debating and passing laws aimed at providing governing infrastructure that would aid Generals and Quartermasters, who had certain restrictions imposed upon them due to lack of unified colony laws as opposed to individual colony laws. We were catching up throughout the game to provide unified direction and support.

Working Toward a Peace

The British had sent a couple official proclamations early in the game, related to lower taxation and such. But their offenses outweighed the offers.

Late in the game, they proclaimed that they'd welcome us into Parliament. But by this point the war had waged for some time, and we sensed perhaps we could win. Outrage was also high that only now did they offer this. Their offer was quickly declined.

However, Patrick Henry (our Commander-in-Chief) came to Congress with a request: we needed a counter peace proposal, or else we'd look like barbarians.

With a few guiding suggestions from Henry, I was asked to craft the proposal. None objected. A gentleman from one of the southern states sat down with me, we discussed things briefly, and I began to write. I'm sad that I don't remember his exact state or in-game persona, because while it was my pen that wrote the proposal and I did bring some individual ideas to its composition, at least half the document's contents sprang from his mind. He was of great assistance, and while nobody had asked him to be present for the writing alongside me, he clearly had a vision that my words helped bring to life.

We had a few main goals: one, gain our independence, be recognized as an independent commonwealth, and have this as the core tenant of the proposal. Two, cover as many major grievances as possible to avoid objections. And three, bake in some items to use as negotiations chips, so to speak, so that if our full proposal wasn't accepted, the compromise would still be acceptable to the colonies.

I am now long delinquent in mentioning the Marquis de Lafayette, whose efforts across various theaters were both spectacular and integral to our success. He and I became fast friends, both from Franklin's perspective and Mark's. This report is already long enough, but if I lengthened it, it would include a lot more of his excellent efforts. Here, at least, he gets his due.

With the proposal written, Paris agreed to host a peace summit and Lafayette was appointed to be our negotiator. He did a stunning job, arguing fiercely for us with the British negotiator. I was present in Paris, but only contributed a couple clarifying questions to ensure the proposal was properly understood.

We received...most of our asks. The chiefs concessions we made were not gaining Nova Scotia or Quebec (two of my aforementioned bargaining chips anyway; I never expected them to become part of the colonies), and committing to defending England should it be attacked in a foreign war (but being under no obligation if England was the aggressor). We also committed to providing favorable trade relations with England in relation to other countries, with details to be determined at a later date.

In return, the British removed their troops from our soil, removed their naval blockade, recognized our independence, and made some minor agreements of non-interference in various other foreign relations.

I had the honor of reading the proposal to Congress following this, and we required that it be ratified by each colony (now state) to pass. I called for the vote. It passed unanimously, and its tenets were put into effect shortly thereafter. The Marquis de Lafayette co-presented the approved and signed treaty to all present in the room, along with the British negotiator who was present in Paris, and they were met with resounding applause.

Why Did the British Agree So Easily?

Insane to think that there was a whole other game going on over on the British side, one that was opposing us. But I got a glimpse into it after the game when I was talking to the main controller.

See, we were losing the war. Probably, at least. To my untrained eye, I think that we were still easily within striking distance on the Hearts & Minds track going into the final round. But those more knowledgeable than I on the war front assured me it would be a steep climb, and that the British were likely to maintain their Hearts & Minds lead. Some fortuitous dice rolling had helped them, and the delay in fully coordinating our logistics engine didn't help either. It was still a close-fought thing, but we were a couple points back on the track and without obvious ways to close the gap.

So they could have won through bloody force and retained control of the colonies. So why didn't they? And why did they accept a peace agreement that seemed relatively pro-colonialist, without a ton of negotiating, particularly given their leverage in the war?

Two parties – Tories and Whigs – were at philosophical odds in Parliament. Apparently the Whigs had remained in power throughout the game, and their goal was to end the game peacefully. There was also pressure on them to end things peacefully, to prove that they had the influence to do what they said they could. Had the Tories overtaken the Whigs, it's likely no peace agreement would have happened.

This is what I learned after the game. And I'm glad I did, because it didn't fully make sense to me at the time. I felt like there was some piece missing to my understanding of the Paris negotiations.

So we got lucky. Everything we did, all our efforts, and we

were losing the war. And a political struggle across the ocean falling a particular way is ultimately what allowed us to gain our freedom from England. Just incredible.

But Wait, There's More...

The delegates from Georgia appeared before Congress and threw a couple barbs at the colonies for leaving behind their interests (they had remained controlled by the British the entire time). They had separately relinquished the entirety of their land to the Cherokee and had brokered marriages for themselves into the Cherokee nation. With that, they walked off defiantly.

This was met with good-natured laughter and more applause. The 12 United States (as opposed to 13) would thus begin their new journey together.

This more-or-less ended the formal game. Some thanks from the organizers, requests to fill out a post-game survey, and then players either left or – in many cases – stuck around for a while to have side conversations about the game's events. I stuck around for perhaps 10-15 minutes, talking mostly with the delegates from my mid-Atlantic region, with whom I'd worked most closely.

The Aftermath

I walked through the convention hall following the game, a bit in a haze. Real life existed out here. I still didn't.

I let the experience flow over me in ways that I hadn't allowed myself to while it was happening. I'd pushed us toward independence. Secured scarce funding to bolster our defense. I'd written the damn peace treaty that was accepted by two nations, then presented it to my peers, who had all expended vast amounts of their own emotional and cognitive resources in that room.

I had also been a part of something far larger than myself. I will never know the whole of what I was a part of. It pushed me into a different type of experience than I've ever had in gaming. My eyes got a bit watery and a contented smile crept over my face.

I'd probably do some things differently if I ever play in something like this again. But I'm also a little unsure that the stars will align in such a perfect way again in a mega-game for me. I couldn't have scripted a better role in the game and its events for myself than what happened.

I would say that I fear something like this will never come together so well for me again in such a setting. But I don't feel fearful. Such moments must be cherished, and need not be repeated to hold their power. I'm simply happy that it happened.

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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Regardance

I've finished Children of Time, the third book in this series by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Outstanding.

We finished Chief at War. The Hawai`ian historical drama with Jason Momoa as Ka`iana and the unification with King Kamehameha I. Parts of the series are brutal so be forewarned.

I read the short story by John Scalzi. The Presidents Brain is Missing. Entertaining and fun.

I'm well into Shroud by Adrian Tchaikovsky. It is nominated for a Hugo. This authors ability to create aliens is amazing.

Northern California Minicon continues in email

Traveller post mini-con

Pregnant Lisa

From the GM Joshua:

John, had a lot of fun running the last Rusty Bucket adventure, but have a

quick question to help me plan the next one: have you thought about Cheap Lisa's kids in future adventures? Did you have something in mind for the future, when Cheap Lisa decided that she was going to have children?

The reason I ask, is because I don't want the next adventure to start right where this adventure ended. But I'm not sure when exactly the next adventure should start. For example, I could have the next adventure when the twins are babies, when the twins are toddlers, or (even) when the twins are preschoolers. (Also, if you have specific thoughts on something happening to them before or during birth, I'd want to know that as well.)

So I want my thoughts on the next adventure to mesh with your thoughts on Cheap Lisa's kids.

Joshua

That's a good question. Certainly she will not have a vaginal delivery. The twins will be delivered via the current high tech extraction method. Any where from infant to toddler, Lisa would like to hire help. Preferably this help would be female. She would train the person the ways of a star cruiser and pay them. It also requires a designated backup pilot.

John

OK! Skins will be supervising the cesarean birth.

Now on to the next question, which is the Nanny. We need to have three conversations, but they can occur in parallel. The next question is: who (if anyone) are you going to hire to be the nanny. My basic plan is to generate some potential nannies, and have Lisa (and the rest of you) decide which one will be hired.

Discussion 1, (For Lisa): trying to hire a nanny and twins to live in your stateroom with you will result in a different pool of nanny applicants than if you give the nanny her own stateroom. You will attract a significantly less experienced and generally lower skilled group of potential nannies. My memory is that your staterooms are 10 feet by 10 feet. Who would want to live in there, with another adult and two babies or toddlers? Only the most desperate.

Discussion 2, (For everyone else): Are you OK with having a stranger/nanny on your starship for a couple of years? You guys need to have a discussion among yourselves about whether this is OK, and any requirements or restrictions for the shopfront (or robot?) eventually hired.

Discussion 3, (For Lisa and everyone else): Assuming there is consensus to hire a nanny, I will need a "help wanted" ad (or equivalent), so I can generate suitable (or unsuitable) potential nannies. I'm looking forward to this part!

I'm hoping we can get through these three discussions in 2-4 weeks, so I can get your nanny prospects to you a few weeks after that. But I do expect some back-and-forth between your characters on this.

Joshua

If Skins is willing, Lisa would like her to supervise. She wants a female nanny and would keep the nanny and the twins in her crowded quarters. If this is not acceptable, she will have to take some time off until the twins are safe and healthy planet-side.

John

CheapLisa has already expressed a strong desire for a high tech non-vaginal birth, but you are in Aslan space. I assume the birth will be robotic assisted cesarean, but you have four choices as to the doctor to support the robot: Skins, Jay, an Aslan ob-gyn (who is probably quite comfortable with multiple births), or a human doctor who is not an ob-gyn and is a sort of starport generalist.

CheapLisa wants to hire a nanny to live on the ship and take care of the kids, how do the rest of the characters react to this request?

So Question 2 has two parts:

A: (to be answered by John): who is supervising the birth surgery?

B: (to be discussed by everyone): will you hire a nanny and if so, what sort of nanny is acceptable to which characters?

I'm happy for you guys to discuss this for a week or two.

Joshua

Definitely the nanny should have her own state room. I wasn't sure if one is available. Lisa needs to emphasize that she will be paid and taught one or more starship skills that Lisa is capable of teaching.

John

Aslan and Humani

As always, I had a lot of fun running the Rusty Bucket adventure! Thanks very much for that.

I need to have some questions answered before I can even think about the next Mini-Con Adventure. The answers might require some conversations among the players and consensus from the characters.

The first question is this: You have just told the Aslan about the bioweapon / weapon of mass destruction developed by a group of Humani (led by Richter Grehai) and specifically targeting Aslan. I'm sure your characters understand that this might trigger diplomacy or violence or both in the Aslan/Humani borderlands. Where do you expect to travel / adventure in the next few months, while things stew. Possibilities include: Deep in Aslan space (not near the Humani border), Aslan space near the border, Humani space near the border, back and forth between Aslan and Humani system on the border, or deep in Humani space, away from the border.

It depends on your desire to be adventuring where and when a war breaks out (if one does). Your characters might like that, or they might work hard to avoid it. I need to know which.

Meanwhile, while on Akhwohkyal you get Imperial news that Captain Gand Holcess, late of the Imperial Scout Service (via a nebulous department) has passed away, and further investigation has called into question his long and previously well respected career. It appears that his last long project, some would say his life's work, might have been a fraud based on lies. The characters may choose to interpret this to mean they are no longer wanted people in the Imperium. Certainly, it is unclear who, personally, would be hunting them, if anyone would.

Some background you can think about:

- 1.You are on very good terms with one Aslan clan, reasonably good terms with another, and bad terms with a third. This is par for the course with the Aslan, and there are 20 large clans and a hundred smaller ones to deal with.
- 2.Communications are slow in Traveller. Diplomacy (if started) will likely last months.

3. Logistics (especially military supply) are slow in Traveller. If a small stellar government wanted to start a war, it would take weeks or months to get organized. If a large one (like the Imperium) wanted to start a war, it would take months or years to get organized. Think of the travel times for communication and equipment!

Obviously, there are a lot of unknowns here, but a few to get you started:

1. If the Aslan tell Oleb to hand over Richter Grehai, will he? Can he? What does that look like?

2. If fighting breaks out, do the Aslan unify, or do only some clans attack? And the related question: are the Aslan expecting a series of raids, or a full up war?

3. Will the Imperium take its own "bioweapons are crimes against humanity / bioweapons are banned" words seriously, well outside their own borders?

If you have a more personalized view of interstellar events, then you can focus on what will the following people do:

- The head of the Aslan clan running Akhwohkyal?
- The heads of the other Aslan clans in the area?
- King Oleb, of Drinax.
- Richter Grehai, and his anti-Aslan Grehai movement.
- Duke Mark Duduuna Udi Aella (Imperial commander of the Trojan Reaches)
- The ruler of Tyr (which is in a sort of cold war with Acis), and seen as a local bully.

Joshua

As you read this remember that the basic map is Aslan territory, then a strip of unaligned worlds, and then the Imperium. The most powerful unaligned worlds being a group ruled by Oleb from Drinax and a group dominated by Tyr.

Based on the previous discussion, here is what happens after your last adventure:

- For about 5 months tension increases between Aslan and Humani in the neighboring subsectors. It is not (publicly) clear why, but (of

course) you know. It seems obvious that they are heading toward armed conflict. In fact during this time, the Aslan are "secretly" trying to get unified to attack Grehai, and also "secretly" negotiating with Oleb to either eliminate Grehai, or let the Aslan do it. This isn't much of a secret in Aslan space.

- Oleb considers Grehai an enemy, so fully supports the Aslan, if they promise not to attack any other humani. Of course they make this promise. Oleb doesn't have the power to eliminate Grehai, but feeds the Aslan information to help them do it.

- At this point, several Aslan clans launch a large raid on Grehai targets, bypassing humani military installations where possible, and publicizing the Grehai bioweapon and Oleb's agreement to try to avoid full war. Remember they need to avoid the interstellar navies of Tyr, XXX, and others.

- The Imperium has been mobilizing, and when the Aslan rush in, they close their boarder, set up a defensive line there, and also send armed reconnaissance into the unaligned worlds. The Imperium cuts a separate deal with the Aslan, similar to Oleb's: if the Aslan target the Grehai there will be no war. In fact Imperial special forces actively help destroy Grehai assets. Although this is not made public, it is widely rumored.

- The violence lasts about 5 more months, making it lightning fast for an interstellar war. But it is really more of a big raid.

- The Grehai organization is mostly destroyed, and only about a million humani are killed, and the Aslan do not seize much territory (no complete systems, just a small land grab in systems they already have a foothold). Oleb, Tyr, and the Imperium are happy with the outcome, but tensions between Humani and Aslan in the area remain higher than before, so that is not a go.

For the first 5 months (rising tensions) you were trading on the boarder, but mostly on the Aslan side. You had strong protection from (at least) two different Aslan clans, so that was good. But street level Humani - Aslan hatred was rising. In several cases, you faced discrimination and violence from individual Aslan even as the higher ups in their clans helped get you out of scrapes. (Common stuff: you would be attacked in public by Aslan toughs, the police would arrest you for assault (defending yourselves), but before your court date the Aslan-in-black would show up to get you released.)

Joshua

To be made in the near future. Any way we can “Give Peace A Chance” ?

Carris is busy doing social work on an Imperium planet fairly near the Aslan border (if that makes any sense.). It is a remote village, where there are many starving workers, and poverty is common. She hopes her crew mates are well, and somewhat happy if possible. She would choose to avoid war, but her heart chooses to find a way to help innocent civilians if a war starts. There many choices that have need.

David

Lisa will see if there if there is a vaccination that can be developed to neutralize the bioweapon. She can't do this but will try to recruit a disease-biology scientist to help the Aslan out.

The other approach is to **negotiate** directly with the Humani. It would give Lisa a cance to be forceful.

John

Felton's thoughts:

In this brewing, undeclared, conflict We've taken more damage from the Humani than anyone else (even counting the regressed Aslan). Of course the Humani didn't like what we apparently were doing to warn the Aslan, but that's no excuse for trying to kill us.

Felton made a lot of his “career” in the military and seen enough conflict to appreciate/want a peaceful retirement. At least as peaceful as one could expect in our role of a system-trotting tourists, for-hire mercenaries, and delivery company. (Talk softly and carry a big beam weapon aught to be sufficient.)

So, Felton is in favor of

- Our staying available to the Aslan, especially clans that see us favorably.
- Our continuing to take jobs, while trying to not become a military subcontractor.
- Delivering [disaster] supplies could be part of that, but often isn't the best paying gig.
- If/When open conflict does arise, Felton doesn't believe ongoing jobs should be between the warring parties. He thinks that likely upsets

both sides. So he's uncomfortable with shuttling between Humani and Aslan systems.

- He is OK being near the Humani / Aslan border, and prefers Aslan-Aslan jobs if we can find them. Humani-Humani jobs should be a last resort if we can prove or convince ourselves that it's not Grehai trying to capture/kill us.

- He would consider Aslan-Imperium jobs as well, so long as Humani are avoided.

Other thoughts

- What can we learn about Aslan's history of conflict (especially with alien species, but between clans could be interesting). Do clans unite against the other species, or ??

- Do we have any clue if the Imperium is aware of Grehai's activities?

- Do we know of history of the Imperium having taken action in support of its good words about bio weapons?

Cheers

Chris

Sally is okay with Nanny being hired - recommend someone that works in the cargo hull so play room can be in cargo hull area (or air raft when not in use).

I assume an AI robot nanny is not being looked at. If robot than have a lot more to say.

Sally will make sure more security cameras and monitors are added. Engineering is off limits to nanny unless passes engineering test.

Note nanny that can help manage cargo and fly air raft was Sally recommended but just a light recommendation since large play area in ship is aircraft - when cargo hull full.

Donald

From Jan's perspective he would want to see through any of the archeology that has been uncovered in the area especially those of the ancients. Jan would also like any to make himself available to the Aslan clans that we are on terms with but not opposed to running wares between systems. This could lead to more opportunities to visit archaeological sites and expand our

knowledge of the ancients.

Ben

Ignorable Theme

Intraparty conflict? I know long ago it surfaced, but I don't remember the details.

How do you find players? In Hawai'i with great difficulty. There is only one game shop, Four Pillars in Kailua Kona. They are open from 5:00 pm TO 12 midnight. (<https://www.yelp.com/biz/4-pillars-hobby-shop-kailua-kona-2>) I won't go there because I don't drive at night. We lost some good GMs when COVID shutdown HawaiiCon. So I have to game with folks in Northern California. In Person, it is one time a year.

Sum Comments

Patrick Brady, I consider Michael Cule's comments on UK politics a lesson.

Matt Stevens, I enjoyed the dwarf responses.// Thumbs up on the appreciation of George Orwell.// Noun versus verb games ... gack!

Patrick Riley, I'm glad you caught Dan Shimizu at the con.// Nice map of Aurora Cove. I like maps.

Brian Rogers, Its been a long time since I have heard the phrase *gams*.// Congrats on continuing the games in the school.

Pedro and **Maira**, Getting the chores out of the way, I can relate to that.

Myles Corcoran, A broken hip? Ouch. I hope there is improvement.// I haven't met the Hivers in Traveller yet.

Attronarch, the zero level funneling game at the NoCal minicon reminded me of your runs. "Lets get into the evil castle with the nasty that's abducting villagers."

Michael Cule, I continue to enjoy the antics in the Lunar Empire.// Currywurst Sausage Chips? Yikes.

Roger BW, You also had a Traveller romp in Drinax. //Overall an interesting zine. Congratulations on the trip.// How does speak with mud work?

ELF, which GURPS aliens did you enjoy?// I run Ubuntu Linux and have enjoyed it for a long time. For all my zines and for other writing I use Libre Office. I can easily save a document as a PDF. I never edit a PDF directly. I believe I have converted a PDF to a Libre Office document, but don't hold me to that.// I used to dual boot Windows on my laptop but one time a Windows update wrecked my dual boot and that meant no more Windows, though I can read files on the Windows partition in Ubuntu Linux.

Jim Eckman, I would like to read your additional notes on world-building.

Gabriel Roark, Is the new zine title *Atlantean*?// The review of Arduin is well organized.// I enjoyed the ice skating joke.

Scribbling and **Horror**, The maps are great. // Ditto for Realm Yolmi.

Dylan Capel, currently there is an abundance of depressing social movements.// I missed the Mandalorian and Grogu. Rats :(// I agree about AI and job hunting. You have to get to a human somehow.

Avrum Grumer, Gemini attempts to generate jokes; *Why did the restaurant on the moon get a bad review? Great food but no atmosphere.* I tried a joke about Trump but it was long and and somewhat contorted.¹

¹ Donald Trump went to a bank to cash a check. As he approached the teller, he realized he'd forgotten his ID. "I'm sorry, Mr. Trump," the teller said, "but without identification, I can't cash this."

Trump smiled and said, "Look, everyone knows who I am. I'm the most famous guy in the world. Tremendous guy. Nobody does banking better than me, believe me."

The teller replied, "I understand, but it's strict bank policy. Just the other day, Tiger Woods came in without his ID, and he had to pull out his golf club and sink a perfect putt across the lobby floor to prove it was him."

Trump thought for a moment, shook his head, and shrugged. "Honestly, I don't have a clue what I'm doing."

The teller smiled and said, "Perfect. Will that be large bills, Mr. Trump?"

Patrick Zoch, I wish I could ballroom dance. My balance is poor.// Gaming with grand kids. Yes!// Excellent maps, which I appreciate.

Lisa Padol, my wife deliberately scribbles her name so it is difficult imitate. (She used to work for CitiBank)// After reading your comments to Brian Rogers and Brian Misiaszek, I have the impression you were in something of a foul mood. Sic et non?// I like what happens when Cthulhu gets hit with a nuke.

Brian Misiaszek, as usual I thoroughly enjoyed *El Cuento Cubano*.// I would like to see Peter Hildreth back in print.

Peter Hildreth, welcome back. You granted my wish.// My son's birthday is also June 21st. Happy birthday.

Joshua Kronengold, best of luck finding work. If I had to dive back in the software developer market now, I would have a tough time.// The only gambling games I've played are craps in Los Vegas. Gambling just doesn't excite me very much. Years ago I had to do something while my wife would find old school casinos with 1 or 2 deck Blackjack. I preferred gambling against an inanimate object, dice, instead of a dealer. The cigarette smoke in the casino would always drive me out after a short while. My wife could count cards. She returns with \$300.00. Just enough not to get in trouble. This was years ago.// My most recent issue of IEEE is all about quantum computing and encryption is included.

Jim Vassilakos, re Computocracy. My granddaughter may live to see this.

Timothy Collinson, that's a beautiful wedding picture. // Travcon, congratulations on picking that up. I like the class D starport.// I don't have a copy of the Silmarillion these days. I'm not sure what I would get out of the creation of Eä.

Jargon Zen

A student asked the Zen Master, "What is the great liberation"?

“Mud cow crossed a big river.”

Humor

What did one hat say to the other hat?

You go on ahead.

Twisting the Rope #14

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

Forgotten and Absorbed To The Earth, Below

Another heatwave in Europe makes sitting at a desk challenging. Both the home office and my work place are sweltering, with old architecture built for more temperate times. It's telling that the national legislation on workplace environmental extremes only specifies a minimum permitted temperature, and no maximum¹, even though it passed into law in 2007, when climate change was already widely accepted and understood. Successive Irish governments excelled at kicking the can down the road, like so many other nations. I'm afraid these extreme weather events are destined to be far more frequent.

The week before the APA's deadline I was fasting 24+ hours before a colonoscopy appointment. The same day I took the dreaded "Plenvu™" and spent the next 6 or so hours on the loo. The following day was the colonoscopy itself, which I'm pleased to report was clear and showed no changes since my previous medical spelunking in 2021. All of this is a preamble to admitting I was wrung out and lacked the energy and time to devote to write-ups for and the reading of E&A #13. Some scattered comments follow. Have a Beatrix Potter mouse in lieu.

Comments on E&A #13

Roger BW: Thanks for the link to Ludovic Chabant's look at page count inflation. It confirms my impressions of 40+ years in the hobby. Chabant makes a good point about the different kinds of starter sets, which seem more



common now too. The *Dragonbane* Starter Set sounds ideal, all the necessary rules including character generation, but minus the campaign setting. Starter sets that cut character generation out don't appeal to me. I can see the publisher's reasoning but no thank you.

Dylan Capel: In my experience, pre-prepared maps, hasty sketch maps and verbal descriptions can all confuse one or more players. Theatre of the Mind is my preferred approach but sometimes the player(s) come in late, disturb a row of other theatre-goers, spill their drinks and open a noisy foil-wrapped sandwich in the front row².

Timothy Collinson: Huzzah for stepping out of the footnotes into your own zine.

1

<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2007/si/299/made/en/print#article7>

² Straining the metaphor I know, but like a terrier, once I got my teeth in it... Grrr!

I loved the starport map, and the call back to those wonderful *White Dwarf* articles. The circular port, the blast berms, the walled startown, and the runway are all spot on. Following the link to your *Spindrift* adventure I came across the “erectopi”, who are beautifully described, though with a name like that I feared I might be heading into hentai territory³.

Michael Cule: Re Starmer: We’ll find out what a change of leadership will bring. I’m also worried about a change of UK government, in the current Reform wave, but take some pleasure at Nigel Farage facing off against Count Binface. “Make your vote Count!”

Re *Stonetop*: @sgh99 on substack has a long-running solo campaign of the game at <https://ptfo.substack.com/>. He writes fascinating world- and character-building in the setting. I’ve found it gripping in a way unlike most write-ups. Quinn’s Quest recently posted a 90 minute review and elegy to *Stonetop* on YouTube⁴ that no doubt bumped the game’s sales.

Erica Frank (Elf): Your organising process sounds similar to my own, including the 4+ files getting their own sub-folder. It’s still an enormous bum-ache to download and file all the stuff from a new bundle.

I’ve used the itch.io app in Windows to view and download games. It lacks some fine-grained tagging that would help categorise stuff but it’s okay, I guess.

Peter Hildreth: It’s good to see you in these pages, and to catch up on your peregrinations.

Re the Honorable Peter C. Hildreth: Can you not lose the Honorable title by something dishonorable like killing the prisoners, or sleeping with King Arthur’s wife? If really permanent, a life of moustache-twirling villainy awaits, should you so desire.

Joshua Kronengold: I’m glad you enjoyed the *Kriegsmesser* write-up. I had in mind that Serafina had a rivalry with her brother when I came up with the character. The jewel stealing was a convenient collision of a “cat burglar”

³ Or for a more classy interpretation, Hokusai’s “[The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife](#)”

⁴ <https://youtu.be/wH5-uQj4uOA>

plucked from a list of professions and the upcoming ball where I wanted to introduce her. Pointing NPCs like Serafina at Pete’s characters (he played Lazaro) is always a good bet for sparky dialogue and (stupid) “cunning plans.”

Brian Misiaszek: I’m glad you enjoyed the *Kriegsmesser* and *Mausritter* write-ups. One of my players, Pete, is playing the electricity-obsessed mouse and I can always rely on him to lean into a character and play it to the hilt. He’s the source of many comedic incidents in our games, usually played straight-faced.

The *Kriegsmesser* write-ups are from the after-play reports I did at the time for the players. If they seem chaotic, well that’s how it felt at the time!



Have a cropped version of Carl Friedrich Lessing’s “The Siege (Defense of a Church Courtyard During the Thirty Years’ War)” from 1848⁵. The besieged crowd reminded me of the defense of Hammelbass in the *Kriegsmesser* game, albeit with more soldiers and fewer starving artists painting sets to mimic a plague town.

Re writing Mazorra: Writing to satisfy a creative itch doesn’t have to be for anyone other than yourself. We’re lucky you are sharing it, though.

⁵ From the public domain, copied and edited from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carl_Friedrich_Lessing_-_The_Siege_\(Defense_of_a_Church_Courtyard_During_the_Thirty_Years%E2%80%9999_War\)_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carl_Friedrich_Lessing_-_The_Siege_(Defense_of_a_Church_Courtyard_During_the_Thirty_Years%E2%80%9999_War)_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

John Redden: Re human changed into a frog: It's a staple of fairy tales so into the GM's pot it went.

I'd like to believe in your suggested "new citizen model" in a world dominated by the AI economy, but I don't think it is likely. The growth from automation and computing across the 20th Century didn't give us all more free time but steadily consolidated power and wealth into fewer and fewer hands.

Patrick Riley: RYCT Lisa Padol re pretentious/condescending RPGs: I found *Immortal: The Invisible War*⁶ highly pretentious, and derivative. Much of Gary Gyga's output reads as condescending and pretentious, though perhaps more in his editorial comments in *The Dragon* magazine than in his actual published rule-sets.

Gabriel Roark: You're keeping up your score on spotting lyrics. You'll have to go back and test yourself on the earlier issues of "Twisting the Rope" if you want to 100% the run. A couple of the early ones are album references rather than lyrics, I admit, but all the opening headers refer slyly to something in my opening paragraphs. It amuses me, and well done spotting it.

Brian Rogers: Sympathies on Xeno's Stairmaster (a lovely phrase) and the endless demands of parenting.

"The elder kiddo is back home from her trip to the North Maine Woods with nary a sasquatch wound or brain removal." Did you actually check under her hair line for scars or a tell-tale screw-top brain fitting? The forest-dwelling ultras are getting smarter.

Re EPT and AD&D rules: M.A.R. Barker was a classic example of a rules designer who writes rules and ignores them at the table. You mention the 80/20 rule. I wonder if anyone's tried running a game with a common fiction but separate rules for each player, tailored to that player's preferences. A nightmare to GM, but I'm curious about the feasibility.

Matthew Stevens: Re Keir Starmer: Well, he didn't last long in the end, did he? I can't see

Burnham making much of a U-turn on the repression of the right of assembly and the right to free speech. An online fact checker said he was a long-time LGBTQ+ supporter but has walked back some of his support for trans rights over the last couple of years. His voting record on disability rights is pretty good, and he's defended income supports for disabled people consistently⁷.

Re World of Darkness dice pools: I stand corrected. I haven't kept up with the Storyteller System but assume most of the rough edges have been smoothed away over repeated iterations.

Jim Vassilakos: A magical ring that can only be destroyed by the hand of Man, going somewhere? I don't know what you could mean. That said, you can look forward to attempts by the mice to reach iron melting temperatures, electrical smelting and finally meeting a truck that runs on pigs.

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6

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortal: The Invisible War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortal:_The_Invisible_War)

7

<https://thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/andy-burnhams-track-record-on-disability-issues>



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Age of Menace

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Habana Horror

The Mazorra (Part 11)

EL LIMBO



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.5

Staff call it *Pabellón de Observación Judicial*. Older clerks in *La Oficina* still call it SI, the old map code for Sub-infirmery. It stands near the Men's Department's Violent and Refractory Wards, close enough to seem part of Mazorra, but not quite belonging to it.

Patients whisper another name: *El Limbo*. "Los del Limbo no salen por la puerta." ("The men in Limbo do not leave by the front door.")

During the 1927 rebuilding campaign, Machado's administration converted the old Men's Sub-infirmery into a judicial-observation annex. Officially it receives accused offenders, violent admissions awaiting assessment, and court-ordered psychiatric cases. In practice, it also houses political detainees certified as insane for convenience. Men can be treated as patients, prisoners, witnesses, or nuisances according to the needs of the moment. That ambiguity is the building's purpose.

Control is divided. Mazorra staff handle feeding, restraint, & medication; *Policía Nacional* officers control restricted prisoners, files, transfers, & outside access. Each authority can deny responsibility. Dr. Llerena was the only Mazorra MD regularly assigned, lending a medical explanation to forced exhaustion, drugging, or unexplained injuries.

Main Floor

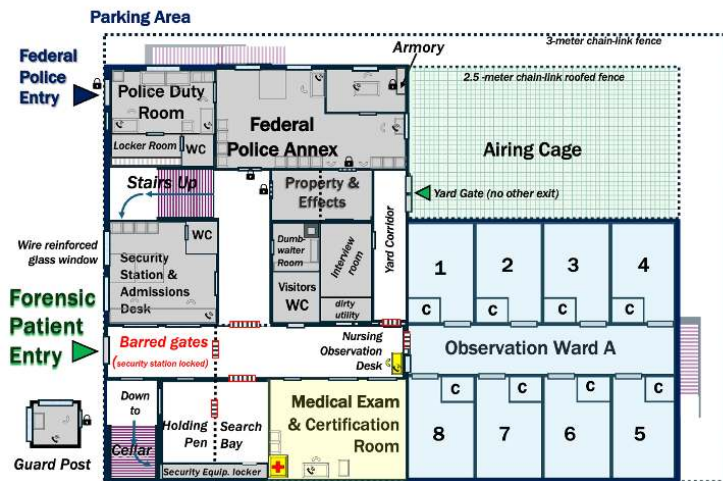
The main floor is built for intake and classification. A separate police entrance leads to the duty room, Lt. Falcón's office, and an Annex whose files do not always match the hospital ledger. Detainees pass a guard post, holding pen, search bay, admissions desk, and examination room before entering Ward A's eight cells and fenced airing yard. A hand-operated service lift links the main floor to 2nd floor guards' room and basement, carrying meal trays, medicines, linen, and small supplies. Its 3-foot-square car can hold one crouching adult, though riding it or entering the shaft is cramped, noisy, and dangerous.

Second Floor



The second floor is where cases wait. Ward B holds men already certified, disputed, forgotten, or made useful to someone. *La Pecera* (the 'fishbowl') or guard station,

PABELLÓN DE OBSERVACIÓN JUDICIAL aka *El Limbo*



MAIN FLOOR

overlooks the corridors; nearby are an interview suite, day room, nursing desk, and the *Sala de Detenidos Pendientes*, where overdue files, unsigned transfers, and tagged effects accumulate.

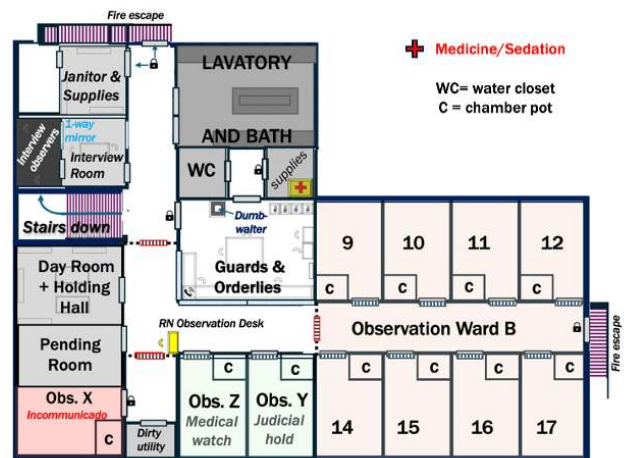
Three special rooms are up here. Obs. Z is for medical watch, Obs. Y for disputed judicial holds, and Obs. X, marked *Incomunicado*, for men not meant to be visited or counted too carefully. No Room 13 appears on either occupied floor. Patients insist it exists below, where names stop appearing on rosters.

Basement

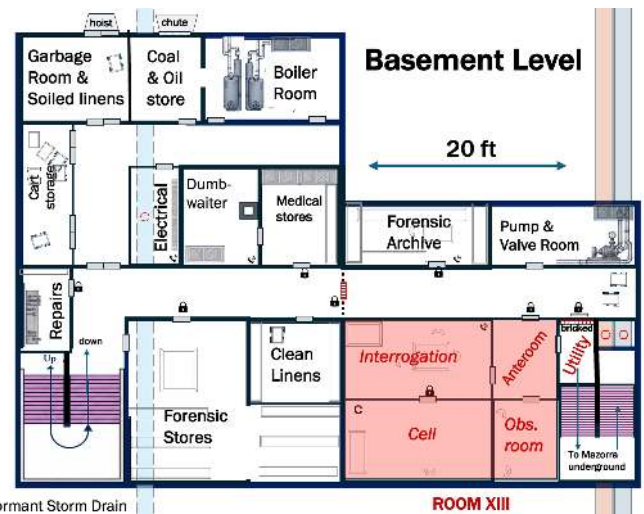
The lower level contains boiler and fuel rooms, maintenance and cart stores, and the base of the dumbwaiter. A coal chute, garbage hoist, and dormant storm-drain hatch provide discreet routes in and out.

The rumours are also true. Room XIII lies beneath *El Limbo*'s occupied floors, although it is actually a concealed suite of four chambers. Maintenance plans identify it only as S-13: *Depósito de Instrumentos*. Police call it *El Trece*, & avoid naming it in official paperwork. The suite occupies part of a former laundry area, later divided into a holding cell, interrogation chamber, audio-equipped observation room, and central vestibule connected to the utility corridor. Its original locked entrance still appears on older plans, but now opens onto a solid brick wall. The true entrance was rerouted through the service passages, allowing prisoners to be brought below unseen.

Although "Room XIII" refers to the entire suite, staff most often mean the narrow tiled cell at its centre. A one-way glass panel lets police, physicians, and political handlers observe, while a microphone and speaker allow them to listen and speak without entering.



SECOND FLOOR



Room XIII

A mesh-protected bulb glares across glazed walls while water from a leaking tap runs toward the floor drain. The room contains a bolted steel bed with wooden slats and restraints, additional leather cuffs fixed to the wall, a low chair made painful for prolonged sitting, and a chamber pot. Here *El Limbo*'s veneer of medical observation and forensic assessment gives way entirely to covert state violence.

Horrors of the Mazorra

A 1933 *Pulp Cthulhu* scenario (Part 11)

Recap from E&A #13, AoM #250: By 8:00 p.m. on August 12, 1933, patient-held Mazorra is bracing for an anti-Machado crowd at the east gate. Elsewhere, Investigators have been drawn into the raid on Machado's hidden vault and the worsening Twsha outbreak.

Key Events:

Time	Event
20:00	Aeropuerto Mob reaches gate; outcomes
20:35	Delegation to El Limbo.
21:00	Leopard Men Cultists emerge for raids
~21:10	Cultists clash with <i>El General</i> 's forces.

Player Agency Flags

	FIXED	An Anchored or established state. This happens regardless of Investigator action.
	DEFAULT	This proceeds unless players intervene
	MUTABLE	Player choices or rolls alter time, participants or consequences.
	OFF-SCREEN	May be resolved outside Investigators' view, or summarized.

AEROPORTO MOB ARRIVES AT MAZORRA



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.5

By 8:00 p.m., the first vehicles appear heading north along the Boyeros Road, east of Mazorra. They are not, at first, coming for the asylum.

Earlier that afternoon, hundreds of Habaneros had converged on Aeropuerto General Gerardo Machado, hoping to prevent the fallen President's escape. Open touring cars chalked **with A.B.C. carried** young men in pale suits and straw hats, some clinging to the running boards. Omnibuses held striking teachers, students, hotel workers, dockworkers, and young Directorio women wearing green armbands. A few military lorries joined them, crowded with partially uniformed soldiers and civilians gathered along the road.

They arrived too late to slake their thirst for revenge.

Frustration carried the crowd onward to *La Nenita*, Machado's abandoned country estate outside Santiago de las Vegas. What followed was half reprisal, half fiesta.

Portraits, furniture, books, doors, and even a piano were dragged outside or thrown from windows. Fires were lit,

liquor passed around, and Machado's possessions became trophies of the fallen regime.

Now the rain-thinned convoy is returning toward Habana without clear leadership. Many are wet, tired, and merely trying to get home. Others remain eager to find another symbol of Machado's rule.

Then, through the dripping palms, they see Mazorra brightly lit against the darkness. Its gates are closed.

Rumours move faster than the vehicles: Machado's cousin is hiding there; Porra men are trapped in the Director's Manse; political prisoners will be killed before morning; records are already burning.

The first car slows then stops.

Another car stops behind it, and headlights gather along the wet road.

The detour begins almost by accident.

SIDE-BAR - FIRST IMPRESSION OF THE 'MOB': The gathering 'mob' looks more dangerous at a distance than it is close up. The first twenty or thirty arrivals include a dilapidated taxi, a farm truck filled with men in shirtsleeves, a flag-draped touring car, several motorcycles, and a lorry piled with bottles, rolled carpets, broken furniture, and a slashed portrait of Machado. Most wear pale summer clothing stained with rain, mud, soot, sweat, and rum. Some carry placards, photographs, or commitment papers. Others bear sticks, machetes, shotguns, ropes, bottles, iron bars, or chair legs.

Within twenty minutes the gathering may grow to 120 to 180 people, but only twelve to twenty form its committed violent core. The rest are students, A.B.C. sympathizers, families seeking relatives, exhausted travellers, opportunists, & onlookers caught in the momentum.

A closer look reveals that most are not pressing the gate or preparing to fight. Families shelter photographs & documents beneath clothing. Drivers remain near their vehicles. Students argue among themselves. Men carrying sticks or machetes hold them loosely rather than ready for use.

The wider crowd remains wet, hungry, tired, curious, and uncertain what should happen next. Heads turn when music sounds from a vehicle, when food or coffee is mentioned, or when a priest, teacher, or other recognizable figure climbs high enough to be seen. As the rain slackens, people begin looking for awnings, tarpaulins, open lorries, and other dry places to wait.

First Contact at the Gate

Those with the Aeropuerto convoy do not arrive quietly.

The first touring car brakes across the Boyeros Road entrance and sounds its horn repeatedly. Motorcycles gather behind it. Men climb onto running boards and vehicle roofs to see over the wall. Someone strikes the wrought-iron bars with a stick, and others take up the noise with fists, bottles, and the flat sides of machetes.

From the fourth-floor boardroom of M1, *El General* has already seen the headlights through field glasses. He has one of the Marshals call the East Gate and give instructions to his soldiers there.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.5

A few men from the Mob shake the pedestrian gate or test the larger leaves, but the first arrivals make no organized attempt to force them. Most are trying to attract attention, discover who controls the entrance, and make themselves heard above the engines and now slackening rain.

Inside the gate, Mazorra guards Pepe Sabatés and Álvaro Recio {A.B.C. C346} are plainly visible through the bars and barred sentry-office window. Their Mauser rifles remain lowered rather than aimed. Recio steps close enough to answer through the bars of the Main gate while Sabatés remains near the telephone and repeatedly glances at *El General's* silent Marshal who had stayed with them.

Recio steps forward and raises his right hand in a halt symbol; when the noise of the crowd goes down to about half volume he calls loudly to them through the gate.

"The Mazorra gate remains closed. Machado is not here. State your names and your business."

This satisfies no one, but it establishes to the growing crowd that the gate is occupied and that those inside are listening. "No one enters until *El Rey* answers through *La Oficina*. I see over 300 of you...no **I See 346** (emphasizing his A.B.C. designation) of you here. I need ONE speaker to talk to me at a time."

Several try to answer at once (Valcárcel, Felo, & Ana Teresa are the first, nearest & After a long movement the loudest).

Guard Sabatés inside the East Gate's sentry office built into the Mazorra's east wall telephones the Main Switchboard, while those at the gate start talking very rapidly and loudly to one another. He reports the number of vehicles, visible weapons, demands concerning *El Limbo*, and the growing crowd. Teresa Pacheco relays the report to *El Rey's* people in *La Oficina* & to *El General's* headquarters in the boardroom of M1.

When several people begin shaking the Main Gate, someone shouts, "Bring that truck about!" The tall man with the A.B.C. button angrily answers, "Are you loco? We have friends inside!"

El General's Marshal instantly blows his whistle. Like wound clockwork, one hundred patient-soldiers march suddenly into view from both sides of the avenue, halt twenty yards behind the entrance, and form silent geometric ranks. Most carry broom & axe handles, crutches, or bed slats upright against their shoulders. The few rifles from a squad at one side remain pointed toward the ground.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.5

After a long moment, feedback shrieks from the Mazorra's loudspeakers at the gate. Teresa Pacheco's voice follows, strained but unmistakable:

"Persons assembled at the East Gate, attend. Mazorra will hear families and lawful delegates. Armed men, looters, and those seeking vengeance will remain outside. Names may be given at the gate. Prisoners and patients will be identified by record, by witness, and by medical examination. No person will be surrendered to violence."

This does not satisfy the crowd, but it changes the argument. The shouting becomes less unified. Families begin calling names. Political men demand witnesses. The violent core keeps shouting for the Porra, but others now shout back "...someone must be allowed inside!"

A second PA announcement inside Mazorra follows:

"Attention! *La Oficina*, medical staff, and Visitors to Mazorra. A large crowd has gathered at the East Gate demanding political prisoners and access to *El Limbo*. The gate remains secure. Persons able to identify relatives, speak for the A.B.C. or Directorio, or assist with medical negotiations are requested to report immediately to the East Gate."

Keeper's Note: The request reaches Investigators in *La Oficina*, M1, the *Director's* Manse, or elsewhere across Mazorra; no *Listen* roll is required. Those already occupied with another crisis must decide whether to respond personally, or allow events at the gate to proceed without them.

🕵️ Investigators on the Scene



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

The first shouts they hear are confused and overlapping:

“Open the Mazorra gates!”
 “Fools! This is a hospital! There are loco people inside!”
 “Open *El Limbo*!”

“Bring out the Porra! Bring out Gandía!”
 “My brother is inside!”
 “The Porra have prisoners here!”
 “We are hungry and tired; let us rest and move on”
 “No, get records first!”
 “We must cleanse all Machado has touched”
 “A.B.C. speaks first!”
 “*El Limbo! Open El Limbo!*”

Keeper’s Note - This Is Not One Mob A successful *Psychology*, or *INT* roll reveals the crowd’s weakness: it has no single demand & no recognized commander. The violent men shout for Porra blood. Families shout names. A.B.C. and Directorio speakers demand political prisoners and records.

This is the opening. Several visible people speak for overlapping factions, but none automatically controls the others. Investigators do not need to overpower the loudest faction if they can give those important faces in the crowd a reason to stop, listen, & organize. On a success, an Investigator identifies a workable bargain before anyone says it aloud: “They do not all need to enter. They need witnesses.”

FACES AT THE GATE

# Face	Represents / Wants	Use in Play
1 María del Pilar Sosa	Families of patients. Wants proof that her son Joaquín is alive and opposes burning or opening wards indiscriminately.	Makes the families the crowd’s moral centre.
2 Lidia Menéndez	Striking teachers and clerks. Wants names, testimony, and an orderly accounting.	Records statements and organizes credible witnesses.
3 Rafael “Felo” Quesada {A.B.C. B36}	A.B.C. militants. Wants political prisoners freed and Porra records seized.	Vargas or Prats can use him as a bridge to the armed militants.
4 Julio Castañeda	A.B.C. legalists and reformists. Wants evidence preserved for prosecution.	Argues against burning records or lynching prisoners.
5 Ana Teresa Barreto	Directorio members and relatives of political detainees. Wants her brother Tomás produced alive.	Her demands first introduce the name <i>El Limbo</i> to the Investigators.
6 Padre Ignacio Rivas	Clergy, older citizens, and cautious families. Wants patients and surrendered prisoners protected.	Can legitimize an agreement and accompany the delegation.
7 Sargento Emilio Valcárcel	Armed avengers and embittered former soldiers. Wants immediate street justice.	Tries to turn any delay into proof of betrayal.
8 Rogelio “El Chivo” Mantilla	Arsonists, looters, and thrill-seekers. Wants spectacle, access, and something worth stealing or burning.	Thrives on secrecy, confusion, and unattended fuel.

🕒 AEROPORTO CROWD TEMPERATURE CLOCK

CLOCK Level	Aeroporto Crowd Behaviour
1 Waiting	Families sit or shelter near vehicles. Weapons are lowered. Constructive speakers control the front. The delegation agreement holds until its reporting deadline.
2 Restive	Shouting and heckling continue, but Felo, Lidia, María, and Padre Rivas can keep the violent core isolated.
3 Divided	Starting position. Several people shake the gate, rival speakers shout over one another; no one faction controls
4 Surging	Valcárcel gathers the armed avengers near the entrance. Objects are thrown, opportunists probe side routes, and the gate guards test their cohesion.
5 Breaking	A truck or mass of bodies advances against the gate. <i>El General’s</i> men prepare their hoses & reinforcements. Any further escalation causes an actual breach.

The Clock should measure which faction the uncertain majority is following, not how angry every individual is. The violent core remains violent at every level. At low Temperature, the wider crowd restrains them. At high Temperature, the wider crowd stops restraining them or begins following them.

Crowd/Mob Temperature begins at Level 3. A Gate Beat represents roughly five minutes or one major development; expect 8–12 beats before the Leopard Man raids at 9:00 p.m. During each Beat:

1. Describe what named Faces & violent core are doing.
2. Investigators attempt one meaningful intervention.
3. Shift the Temperature if their action or a new provocation warrants it.
4. Keeper applies the new state’s visible consequence.

No argument should be rolled repeatedly. To try again, the Investigators need new evidence, a different speaker, or a concrete concession.

Visible actions usually shift the Clock automatically:

Development	Temperature Shift
Food, coffee, water, or first aid actually reaches the crowd	-1, once
Four credible delegates are accepted and disarmed publicly	-1
A named detainee is confirmed alive, with a medical report	-1
Credible records or photographs contradict a rumour	-1 or cancel an imminent rise
<i>El Rey</i> publicly promises identification and judgment rather than revenge	-1
Credible Mazorra Staff NPCs brought onboard to help with the crowd	-1
Ten minutes pass without explanation or progress	+1
A visible Porra attempts escape	+1
An insulting or unbelievable PA announcement	+1
Fire, gunfire, or an attack	+1, or +2 if clearly deliberate
A delegation misses its 45-minute reporting deadline	+1, then another +1 for each further ten minutes of silence

Social skills determine whether **promises** from the Investigators are believed:

- Regular success makes a credible proposal count.
- Hard success lowers Temperature by 1 or allows a constructive PC/NPC to dominate the next Beat.
- Failure produces no shift.
- Fumble or failed pushed roll raises Temperature by 1.

Pure rhetoric should not reduce the Clock below 2. Reaching 1 requires something tangible, such as food arriving, delegates entering, a weapon being surrendered, or a prisoner being named. At Temperature 5, a truck or mass of bodies begins moving against the gate. The Investigators have one final intervention before the final breach.

Convincing the Crowd

The most effective offer combines three visible concessions:

- Food and drink distributed outside the gate.
- A small delegation admitted to *El Limbo*
- Names and conditions of those found announced over the PA.

Other solutions are possible, and Investigators may think to rope in friendly Mazorra staff NPCs such as Ricky, Dr. Prats, Mons. Aurelio, and perhaps Castellanos to help with calming the crowd but this bargain answers the crowd's principal demands without admitting the entire gathering. Success

transforms the crowd from an angry mob into an audience awaiting a report.

Calming the crowd enough to admit delegates requires agreement from three centres of authority:

1. The crowd's influential factions agree to wait.
2. *El Rey* approves the terms.
3. *El General* confirms that the route is secure.

The Investigators cannot simply order the gate opened. They must create a bargain acceptable to all three.

Permission from Crown & Army



Recio telephones *La Oficina* with the proposal. *El Rey* gains lawful witnesses and a public accounting; *El General* retains control of the gate and interior route.

They decide four named, unarmed delegates may enter under Investigator responsibility. They will be searched, escorted directly to *El Limbo*, & prevented from wandering elsewhere. Records and prisoners must be preserved, and a report must reach the gate within forty-five minutes.

El Rey announces: "The Crown recognizes the petitions of families and lawful representatives. Four shall enter under our protection. They come as witnesses, not conquerors."

El General adds: "They will surrender their weapons, march by the route assigned, halt when ordered, and return on schedule. The gate opens for delegates. It does not open for an army."

Keeper's Note: A suitable social, *Psychology*, *History*, or *Military Science* success secures agreement. Grant a Bonus Die if the Investigators quote either leader's proclamations or accept personal responsibility. Failure adds restrictions or delay; a failed pushed roll raises Mob Temperature by 1.

The Delegation

The default delegation is Felo Quesada, Ana Teresa Barreto, Lidia Menéndez, and Padre Ignacio Rivas, accompanied by whichever Investigators accept responsibility for them. Maria Sosa and Julio Castañeda remain at the gate to organize

families and preserve the public record. Substitutions are possible, but more than four outsiders begins to resemble an invading party.



Delegate	Demand	Behaviour Inside
Ana Teresa Barreto	Her brother Tomás must be found alive.	Breaks from the group if she hears his voice or sees his name.
Felo Quesada {A.B.C. B36}	Political prisoners & records must be secured.	Distrusts delays, locked doors, and private discussions.
Lidia Menéndez	A complete accounting must be made public.	Records names, injuries, room numbers, and contradictions.
Padre Ignacio Rivas	Patients must be protected.	Tends the injured & restrains retaliatory impulses.

Dr. Prats {A.B.C. C341} or Investigator Señor Vargas {A.B.C. B34} may identify themselves privately to Felo. This gains his trust but exposes their A.B.C. affiliation. Ricky may vouch for Ana Teresa, while medical Investigators can demand safeguards & Flash can photograph the delegates and record their time of entry.

Terms at the Gate

- Four named delegates enter without firearms.
- Investigators accompany & remain responsible for them.
- One representative each from *El Rey* & *El General* accompanies them
- Prisoners are identified & medically assessed; their names and conditions are reported through *La Oficina*
- Records are to be preserved.
- No prisoner is surrendered directly to the crowd.
- The party returns/reports within 45 minutes.

Urrutia joins as *El Rey*'s bailiff. *El General* assigns Ernesto Collado Martínez, newly commissioned "Sargento Cronista," to accompany the delegation, record its findings, & report directly to headquarters. Felo accepts him at once, recognizing {A.B.C. C363} as one of his own operatives.

🔊 SIDE-BAR - DEFAULT IF INVESTIGATORS ABSENT/DO NOTHING:

Ricky & Dr. Prats answer the PA summons. Ricky becomes the public negotiator, while Prats provides medical authority & A.B.C. connection. Ricky offers food, coffee, water, & first aid outside the gate. Dr. Prats promises a medical inspection of named detainees. He privately identifies himself to Felo as A.B.C., but does not announce this to the crowd. By ~20:45, they secure a limited agreement: the default delegation is now **Ana Teresa Barreto, María del Pilar Sosa, Felo Quesada, & Padre Ignacio Rivas**. Urrutia & Collado join them. Lidia Menéndez remains outside to record names & announcements, while Julio Castañeda stays to argue against destroying evidence. Prats accompanies the delegation as medical officer. Ricky remains at the gate to continue speaking to the crowd. This lowers the Mob Temperature to 2. Most of the crowd waits restively while they head to *El Limbo*, but Valcárcel remains openly hostile and *El Chivo* sends several opportunists to reconnoitre the rail spur and side roads.

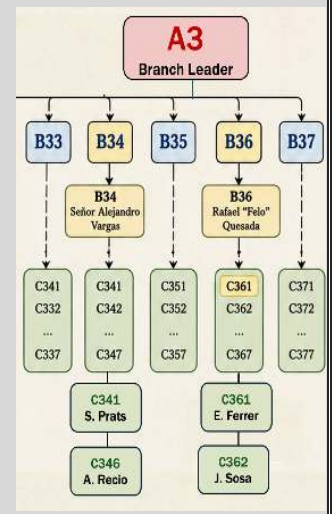
Keeper's Note: Ernesto Collado Martínez (*The False Madman*). Ernesto infiltrated Mazorra two weeks ago for a *Carteles* exposé, feigning a hysterical fear of women while secretly documenting corruption and abuse. With Machado gone, he has finally revealed himself to *El General*. He knows Cedeño as a young Universidad journalist and has recently dreamed of translucent, cadaverous patients wandering Mazorra by moonlight. He no longer knows whether the dream was prophecy or proof that Mazorra has broken him. [see AoM #240, E&A #3 for stats & full write-up.]

Felo reluctantly surrenders his pistol. Valcárcel is not admitted; he seeks prisoners, not an inspection. One pedestrian gate opens only far enough to admit the party of four, then closes behind them.

Teresa Pacheco announces the delegates' names over the PA, making the expedition public and granting limited protection. If they fail to return, everyone will know who entered and when.

SIDE-BAR - A.B.C. CELL CODES:

Founded in 1931, A.B.C. was a secret Cuban revolutionary society opposed to President Machado. Its compartmentalized structure used 7 senior A-cells (A1, A2, A3, etc.) directing subordinate B- and C-cells, limiting what any arrested member could reveal. Members knew only their immediate superior & direct contacts. Code records rank/chain of contact. **B34** is the 4th B-rank operative under **A3**; **B36** is the 6th. A C-rank code adds its supervising B-member: **C361** is the first C-rank operative under **B36**. Thus Señor Vargas (**B34**) & "Felo" Quesada (**B36**) share the A3 branch, while Ferrer (**C361**) reports through Felo. Dr. Prats (**C341**) & guard Recio (**C346**) report via Vargas.



🚪 THE GUARDED FORENSIC PAVILION

El General and *El Rey* have not forgotten *El Limbo*. After *La Oficina* came under *El Rey*'s authority, Teresa Pacheco telephoned the *Judicial Observation Pavilion* and called for its officers over the PA. No one answered, so *El General* sent twenty patient-soldiers from his Mobile Reserve to surround the building.

By the time the delegation arrives they can see *El General*'s soldiers covering the main entrance, separate police door, airing yard, exterior fire escape, and visible cellar windows.

Ernesto 'Sgt Cronista' Collado speaks to *El General*'s soldiers outside. Their orders are: "No one leaves." They report no one has been seen leaving since *El General*'s cordon formed at 6 pm. The patient-soldiers say they knocked, shouted, but no one has replied from inside. East Gate recorded two *Policía Nacional* automobiles leaving Mazorra. The car first left shortly after noon carrying officers, luggage, & document boxes. A second followed less than half an hour later with more police personnel.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.5

SIDE-BAR: OPENING EL LIMBO: El Limbo is secured, not impregnable. The route chosen determines where the Investigators enter, what they find first, how long entry takes, and whether the delegation remains together.

Route	Method	Advantage	Cost or Danger
Main Entrance	Regular Locksmith; Hard STR or tools to force.	Entire delegation and medical equipment enter together.	1 minute by Locksmith; 5 minutes to force. Extremely loud.
Police Entrance	Hard Locksmith or Mechanical Repair with tools.	Direct access to duty room, files, and evacuation evidence.	5–10 minutes; failure may jam the lock.
Coal Chute / Garbage Hoist	Spot Hidden finds latch; STR or Mechanical Repair opens it.	Basement access through coal, garbage, or soiled-linen stores.	Single file, filthy, and confined; 5–10 minutes without bolt cutters.
Fire Escape	Regular Climb; upper door unlocked or forced.	Reaches the second-floor staff corridor, bypassing Ward A.	10 minutes; rusty and limited to 1–2 people at once.
Roof Hatch	Reach by fire escape, ladder, or rope; Hard STR or Mechanical Repair.	Quiet entry through the janitor's room.	10 minutes.
Underground Mazorra	Storm drains and sewers; Tambor must guide.	Reaches the basement and active storm-drain hatch.	May encounter Perdomo or the Leopard Men first.

Failed Entry Rolls: Failure complicates or delays entry. Every significant delay advances the clock toward 9:00 p.m.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

However the Investigators enter, the default being the main entrance, *El Limbo* initially looks & feels abandoned rather than defended.

Electric lights remain on in some rooms and dark in others. One ceiling fan turns slowly above the Admissions Desk. The air smells of damp plaster, carbolic disinfectant, stale tobacco, and food left too long in tropical heat. A meal cart stands in the lower corridor. Its covered trays have not been

touched. Commitment papers, property tags, and several loose photographs lie scattered across the floor. A chair has overturned beside the police entrance. One internal gate hangs open, while others remain locked.

There are sounds inside: voices yelling and muttering, & metal clanking against bars both ahead and upstairs.

SIDE-BAR- FOUR LAYERS OF EL LIMBO DISCOVERY

Abandonment	Offices stripped of personal effects, unfinished records, absent keys, & signs of hurried departure.
Captivity	Patients remain locked without food, water, medication, or attendants since noon.
Violence	A dead officer and evidence that the final shots were fired between men already inside.
Contamination	Several political prisoners show visible Twsha changes. The remains of a dead guard have lost their human shape.

Every substantial search, medical examination, forced internal gate, or argument among delegates consumes five to ten minutes.

The Clock is ticking. Every significant delay brings the clock closer to the imposed deadline. The Leopard Men raid strikes at 9 pm inside.

Delegates Inside

The four delegates bring names, photographs, commitment orders, & rumours, but no reliable roster of who is inside; Castellanos also lacks this information. Ana Teresa seeks Tomás; Felo wants surviving police & restricted records; Lidia records every name and injury; Padre Rivas follows calls for water or treatment. Their priorities may divide the search.

SEARCHING EL LIMBO

The main entrance opens into an abandoned intake area. Two barred gates control access, but only the inner gate is locked. A key board behind the outer grille holds the room keys. Locksmith opens the inner gate without damage; failure costs five minutes. The admissions ledger lies open. Its final entries stop before noon and record that Roberto Cedeño was transferred from Room 12 to Habana.

Several patients were scheduled for review that afternoon, but no physician or police representative signed the page. Dr. Llerena was expected. The internal intercom, main PA speaker, and telephone to the switchboard still work. The search bay and holding pen are empty. The security equipment locker stands open, with several truncheons and restraint belts still there.

Ward A holds ordinary judicial patients, violent admissions, and prisoners whose assessments were never completed. Their locked doors have Judas observation slots; room keys hang on the *Admissions* key board. Keys to the barred corridor gates are missing, carried away by Perdomo, Puig, and Miret.

Patient/prisoner reactions range from pleading and confusion to suspicion and opportunism. Opening every cell

is dangerous. Refusing to open any confirms the delegates' worst suspicions.

Police Duty Room & Federal Police Annex

The separate police room shows hurried evacuation rather than defence. Desk drawers have been pulled open. Personal photographs and spare uniform & clothing are gone. Two empty luggage straps lie beneath a desk. Ordinary duty records remain, while selected folders and prisoner-transfer files are missing. A coffee cup has been knocked over and the tan puddle is sticky where it fell.

A sign out book confirms that Falc3n and several of his officers/staff left shortly after noon. Today's blackboard duty roster bears only the names PERDOMO and MIRET; other names have been wiped away.

No one is at their desks in the Federal Police Annex. Black ink had spilled all over the fingerprint desk, & the camera in front of the height measure wall is gone from its tripod. Lt. Falc3n's office is locked; the file cabinets are empty, as is the hooked board for cell keys. The armoury door is open; two Mauser rifles, a pistol, and thirty rounds remain. The telephone here still reaches Main Switchboard.

The Upper Corridor

Blood spatters mark the stairs to the upper landing, where a handprint stains the wall. From there, a heavier trail leads toward the basement stair.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.5

Agente Pablo Miret lies face-down opposite the Holding Hall and glassed guard station. His name appears on his badge & government identity card. His body is cooling; when rolled over, two gunshot wounds are visible in his chest. His pistol lies several feet away with one spent cartridge. His belt keys open ordinary grilles and rooms, but not Obs. X, Y, or Z.

THE PRISONERS INSIDE

The Investigators (ideally) must identify each man being sought for, assess his condition, & decide what can safely be done for them and for any others they find using *First Aid* or *Medicine*. Not everyone held in *El Limbo* is a political prisoner. Ward A also contains accused offenders awaiting psychiatric examination, patients whose court reviews were repeatedly postponed, & several men simply abandoned between the police, courts, and Mazorra.

Prisoner	Affiliation	Room	Seeker	Present Condition	Safest Possible Disposition?
Tom3s Barreto	Directorio courier	Obs. Y	Ana Teresa (sister), Directorio	Lucid but showing early Twsha changes. Knows Cede3o vanished from Room 12	Medical isolation under trusted protection, not direct release
Joaqu3n Sosa {A.B.C. C362}	Junior A.B.C. printer and courier	Obs. Z	Mar3a Sosa, A.B.C. families	Dehydrated, frightened, & at risk of seizure after missed anticonvulsants.	Medical evacuation with his mother observing at a safe distance.
Esteban Ferrer {A.B.C. C361}	A.B.C. legalist and labour lawyer	9	A.B.C. legalists, labour organizers	Injured but mentally clear. Refuses to leave without files & other prisoners.	Protective custody & witness status.
Basilio Mena	Independent dockworkers' organizer, A.B.C. ally	10	Unionists, Padre Rivas	Hypervigilant after beatings & isolation. Panics when approached by uniforms.	Supervised release through trusted civilians.
Eusebio Varela	A.B.C. source and Gobernaci3n whistle-blower.	Obs. X	A.B.C., reformers, Porra enemies	Witness to secret payments. Broke down under threat of torture. Twsha lesions spreading.	Medical isolation & protective custody.
Anselmo Rojas	Dockworker with a genuine mental illness	3	No outside advocate	Killed a man during a florid religious delusion. He may become violent if he believes someone threatens a sacred person or object.	Humane forensic detention with new supervision.
Rogelio "El Galgo" Cabrera	Violent criminal falsely claiming political status	7	Falsely claims A.B.C.	Manipulative, claims to be {A.B.C. C367}; physically dangerous & already working loose part of his bedframe for use as a club.	Criminal custody. Disarm, search, and keep under double guard.
Roberto Cede3o	Student journalist linked to the Directorio	Room XIII	Students, Directorio, journalists	Missing from his recorded room 12. Dehydrated and secretly imprisoned.	Rescue, treatment, & public identification.

OTHER PRISONER-PATIENTS INSIDE EL LIMBO

Patient	Room#	Why He Is Held	Immediate Problem and Disposition
Ram3n Curbelo	2	Arrested for disorderly violence while intoxicated, then left without alcohol or treatment.	Tremulous, sweating, confused, and seeing things that are not there. This is a medical emergency, not grounds for release. Transfer under escort to M1.

Hilario Pons	5	A suggestible young porter with developmental limitations, accused of helping burglars carry stolen property. His competency review was never completed.	Frightened and easily led. Move to the supervised day room and release only to verified relatives or responsible hospital staff.
Celestino Mora	8	Set fire to his boarding room during an expansive religious and grandiose episode. Has not slept for several nights.	Charismatic, excitable, and likely to turn a release into a general breakout. Feed, calm, and transfer to a secure clinical ward.
Francisco Leyva	6	Elderly vagrant found mute and nearly immobile after weeks in police custody. No clear charge in his file.	Dehydrated and physically neglected. Requires immediate nursing care & medical transfer, not continued confinement.

OBS. Z: Joaquín Sosa



An unwell young man is lying on the narrow cot behind the bars. He is thin, unshaven, his lips are dry & cracked, & his eyes sunken.. At the sound of their approach, he turns his head but does not rise. If he attempts to sit, dizziness forces him back onto one elbow. He has received neither water nor his anticonvulsant meds since the staff abandoned *El Limbo*.

Keeper's Note: *First Aid* stabilizes Joaquín & prevents a pending seizure. He is initially wary and asks who has come, whether the police remain outside, & “¿Mi madre está en la puerta?” If told truthfully that his mother María Sosa is waiting at the East Gate, no *Persuade* roll is needed; he relaxes enough to fully cooperate.

Not long ago Joaquín heard shouting, several shots, a body falling, running boots, & afterward a heavy, wet settling sound. He recognized Sgt. Perdomo's voice yelling, then saw a wounded officer stagger down the stairs. Before they leave, he grips the cot and says, “Tell my mother I am alive. Tell her not to let them open the Mazorra gate.” Then he adds, “Barreto is next door. He was answering me before & spoke of Cedeño.”

Obs. Y: Tomás Barreto



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

A young man stands several feet behind the grille. He is lean & dark-haired, perhaps 25, with several days' stubble and a fading bruise beneath one eye. His wrinkled white shirt hangs open at the collar, one cuff torn; his dark

trousers have been stripped of belt & braces, and he is barefoot. He is able to stand, but he watches the newcomers warily after hearing them talk to Joaquín.

If Ana Teresa is present, she calls his name. “¡Tomás!”

He moves quickly toward the bars, relief breaking through his caution. “¿Ana? ¿Cómo entraste?”

Only when he reaches the grille and raises a hand toward her does light catch the translucent patches spreading from an abrasion on his wrist. Similar changes are visible beneath the stubble along his jaw and low on his neck.

Keeper's Note - Preventing

Contact: Anyone familiar with the Twsha recognizes the risk. The locked grille gives time to intervene. A direct warning stops Ana. Vague warnings require *Persuade* or *Psychology*. On a *failure*, she clasps Tomás's hand through the bars and risks exposure.

Ana accepts temporary isolation only if given a clear explanation and a credible plan for his examination and release.



Once reassured, Tomás speaks, though only because Ana is present. He remembers Puig and Perdomo restraining him that morning. Puig's hands felt damp, and the skin beneath his damaged glove already looked odd, almost glistening with frosted blood. He denied speaking to Cedeño but said Varela had said he had seen him in the Lavatory once under guard.

Obs. X: Eusebio Varela

Eusebio Varela is a narrow-faced man in his late thirties with thinning blond hair & wire-rimmed spectacles. He is sitting upright on his cot in shirtsleeves. He is awake, & looks well, and still has on his belt and shoes. The contrast to the others inside Obs Y & Z is striking.

“¿Quiénes son ustedes?... Are you... con ellos? ¿La policía?”



A former Gobernación bookkeeper, Varela handled part of the *gastos reservados* ledger concealing payments to police

informers and Porra auxiliaries. He copied several entries for an A.B.C. intermediary. An intercepted A.B.C. report repeated an incorrect total found only in Varela's working copy, allowing the Porra to trace the leak to him. Falcón's men seized him outside Gobernación, falsified his transfer to Mazorra, and brought him to Obs. X to identify the payees, his A.B.C. contacts, and the location of his duplicate records.

Keeper's Note: *Spot Hidden* inside his cell reveals an enamel mug still holding water, the remains of rice and beans, a partly used packet of cigarettes, and two smoked stubs. Varela notices the delegates studying them. "They wanted me awake. To question me." Only at close range and with another successful *Spot Hidden* are fine, glasslike flecks visible beneath his cheek and wrists where Perdomo had gripped him. They are slowly spreading; he too is infected with Twsha.

A search of the Obs. X clipboard or the Pending Room finds a carbon interrogation summary impossibly initialled by Falcón who left at noon: **"16:40. Subject provided one name and one dead-letter address. Duplicate records not recovered. Continue below."** This proves Varela spoke, although not why. If Felo sees the carbon summary, he recognizes the contact's alias & the dead-letter address as genuine. He sharply demands what else Varela revealed. Padre Rivas insists that coercion be established before anyone calls him an informer, while Urrutia declares very firmly that only *El Rey* may pass judgment within Mazorra. *Psychology* recognizes shame and fear rather than smugness. Threatened with Room XIII and told that Cedeño had already been taken below, Varela gave up one A.B.C. contact & a dead-letter drop. He did not reveal where he concealed the duplicate payment records. He does not know whether police reached either target before abandoning *El Limbo*. A calm promise of protective custody, backed by a successful *Persuade* roll, gets him to admit this. Accusations of betrayal make him defensive and silent. The food and cigarettes were rewards for submission, not evidence that he was treated humanely.

SIDE-BAR -WHAT THE PRISONERS KNOW OF THE PATIENT UPRISING
The detainees in Obs. X, Y, and Z have heard fragments of PA announcements through the corridor loudspeaker: references to a Crown, an Emergency Patient Council, the East Gate, and orders that prisoners not be harmed. They do not know whether this is a genuine uprising, a rescue attempt, or another police deception. Cedeño in XIII heard none of the PA announcements clearly from the basement. Cedeño heard little beyond gunfire and Perdomo's panic, and remains unsure who now controls Mazorra above.

Inside the Upstairs Guard Station

Through the reinforced glass of the locked guard station, something lies crumpled behind an overturned chair. From the corridor it resembles a heap of wet uniforms or sodden laundry. The door is unlocked but closed.

Once inside, the truth becomes harder to mistake. A low mound of cloudy, jelly-grey tissue has spread across the floor and partly over the fallen chair. On the wall behind it is a broad crimson stain at chest height, marked by two bullet holes.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.5

Keeper's Note - Remains of Guard Puig: Previously infected, the Mazorra guard Mario Puig was shot & killed at 7:40 pm & Twsha transformation accelerated after death. Without a living nervous system to retard, Twsha tissue transforms into Twshwa control nodule. Seeing the remains clearly requires a SAN roll, 0/1D3. Recognizing the remains as Puig raises the total loss for this discovery to 1/1D6; it is not cumulative. This was once a Mazorra guard temporarily assigned to *El Limbo*. Torn khaki cloth, a leather belt, one boot, a riot baton, a brass whistle, and a Mazorra guard's badge are embedded in the mass, as though a man had been poured out of his uniform and left to set badly. Several bullets and metallic fragments hang motionless within the tissue. A successful *Spot Hidden* reads Puig's name on the badge and notices a ring of keys hanging from his belt. The keys open rooms 9–17. Recovering them without direct contact requires gloves, cloth, forceps, another tool, or cutting away the belt.

Bare skin touching Puig's moist remains or an affected prisoner risks Twsha exposure. Direct contact with contaminated blood, tissue, or an affected person requires a Hard CON roll; residue on objects requires a Regular CON roll. Gloves or another impermeable barrier reduce the difficulty by one level; proper intact medical protection prevents exposure.

SIDE-BAR DELEGATE/ESCORT REACTIONS TO TWSHA:

NPC	POW	Success	Failure
Ana Teresa Barreto	55	Demands Tomás's release, but accepts brief isolation if dealt with honestly.	Rushes toward him despite warnings.
Rafael "Felo" Quesada	60	Suspects a Porra weapon, experiment, or poisoning.	Publicly accuses the police, risking panic.
Lidia Menéndez	55	Records the lesions & asks who touched Puig.	Freezes, drops her notes, or refuses to approach.
Padre Rivas	70	Supports precautions, but insists the affected remain patients and witnesses.	Prays aloud; urges immediate withdrawal.
Baltasar Urrutia	65	Shields the others. "No hay campana. No se levanta." He stops anyone touching the remains.	Backs away with fists raised or shoves others clear.
Ernesto 'SGT Cronista' Collado	65	Recognizes Twsha lesions from his dreams. Pale but controlled, he records every detail & whispers, "I have seen this before, walking outside by moonlight."	Convinced his dream is unfolding exactly as before. He loudly warns that more affected patients will cross the grounds, risking panic & revealing his supposed "madness" may be real.

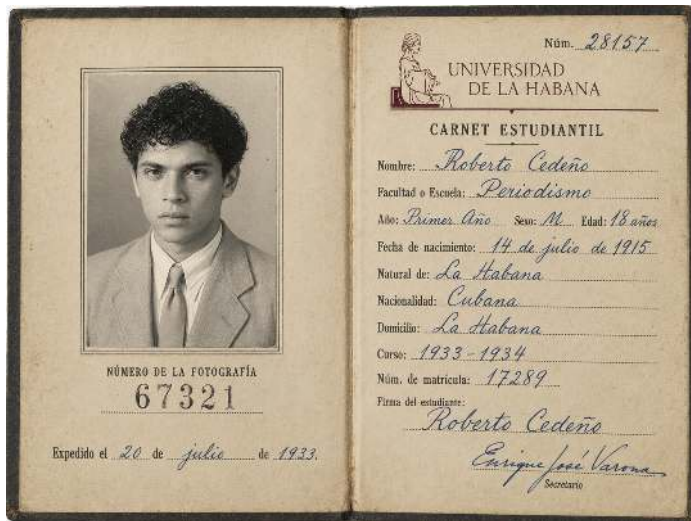
Player Investigators make the usual SAN rolls. For NPCs, roll POW only when reaction matters.

In the same room, beside a metal waste bin next to one of the desks is a stack of restricted files. Matches and a bottle of lamp oil lie nearby, but the papers were never burned. The files identify the detainees held in rooms 9–17 and include

separate folders for those confined in Obs. X, Y, and Z. One additional folder is empty. Its tab bears only an X with three T's. Or XIII.

FINDING CEDAÑO

Ernesto recognizes Cedeño's name as a younger student journalist who occasionally supplied *Carteles* reporters with campus rumours, arrest notices, & names of missing students. Cedeño's Police Annex file assigns him to Room 12 and records his transfer to Habana that afternoon. That entry is false. His shoes, belt, University ID, and effects remain in the *Federal Police Annex*, while a carbon copy in the Pending Room gives different time & forged signature.



Images generated via ChatGPT-5.6

Cedeño's hidden notebook would identify Porra officers, secret members, informers, and Mazorra collaborators connected to false transfers and vanished prisoners. Before Machado's fall it threatened exposure; now that he has fled, the names inside may become death warrants when revolutionaries and victims' families begin reprisals. Perdomo remained behind to force Cedeño to reveal the notebook and identify anyone holding copies.

Keeper's Note: First Aid & water help to revive him. Only at close range and with a successful *First Aid*, *Medicine*, or *Spot Hidden* roll are pathognomonic Twsha transparenting marks visible along one arm and his neck, where Puig gripped him while fastening the restraints.

After he becomes coherent, Cedeño will talk. Perdomo & Puig brought him downstairs after his supposed transfer & demanded the location of his notebooks & the names of other Directorio investigators. Cedeño gave them a false meeting place but concealed where his records were hidden.

Roberto Cedeño said after the shooting upstairs the observation-booth light came on behind the one-way glass allowing him to see inside. He saw an injured Perdomo open a cabinet, gather papers, and struggle with a ring of keys.



Images generated via ChatGPT-5.6

Through the open intercom, he heard Perdomo gasping & muttering: Through the open intercom, Cedeño heard him mutter: "Puig melted like clear wax... like liquid glass, after I shot him. ¡Dios mío... Madre Santísima! Am I next?" He never entered Room XIII, much to Roberto's relief.



SIDE-BAR: REPORTING TO THE AEROPORTO CROWD: The

Investigators must decide what the delegates report over the PA before communications are cut off ~ 9:05 p.m. Concealing the visible changes risks destroying the delegation's trust. Announcing an unidentified contagion may provoke panic among the families and armed men outside. A controlled report by the Investigators gives names and conditions without speculation, such as "Tomás Barreto, Eusebio Varela, and Joaquín Sosa have been found alive. They require medical treatment and cannot yet be safely moved. No detainee is to be approached without medical supervision."

Ideally the report reassures the crowd that named prisoners are alive while buying the Investigators time to determine whether the Twsha can be contained.



FINDING SGT. PERDOMO

Prior bloodstains along the basement corridor from the stairs to Room XIII's antechamber and observation booth are his. The side door opening onto the utility stair has bloody handprints. More blood stains on the descending stairs beside scuffed boot marks and smears of cloudy, translucent tissue. At the bottom and around the corner, Perdomo's escape has failed. Blood and grey-clear residue streak the wheel of a storm-drain hatch he turned only partway before collapsing.

Sargento Nicanor Perdomo lies beside it, feverish, bleeding, and visibly changing. His wounded hand is partly translucent, with patches spreading beneath his sleeve. His revolver lies within reach with one cartridge unfired, and his lit flashlight has rolled away.

He did not remain from loyalty. After Falcón fled and Machado fell, Perdomo knew the Porra and their accomplices, like himself, would face reprisals. Cedeño's notebook could name them. Perdomo stayed to force its location from him, destroy the most dangerous records, and escape before Mazorra's new rulers found him.



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

Keeper's Note - The Baron's Hand. Blood loss and Twsha weakened Perdomo, but Baron Kriminal also seized the hatch spindle, holding a torturer inside Mazorra for discovery & judgment. As Perdomo strains at the wheel, the metal turns cold beneath his hands & a low, mocking laugh seems to rise through the drain. He sees no one & cannot tell whether the sound is real. *Mechanical Repair* finds no lasting fault; the wheel turns after he releases it. While Mateo lives & Othello's wards hold, the Baron is limited to brief, targeted interventions against the guilty. *Spot Hidden* shows that beneath his blood soaking coat are papers; Porra payment chits, falsified transfers, interrogation summaries bearing his initials, concealed-detainee lists, and signed removal orders. They establish that Perdomo accepted Porra payments, assisted interrogations in Room XIII, beat prisoners, falsified custody records, and helped dispose of detainees who died under questioning.

If approached calmly before 9 p.m., Perdomo admits Puig began horribly changing inside *La Pecera*. He shot him, but cannot say whether terror, recognition of his own infection, or a wish to silence Puig made him fire. Miret entered, saw Perdomo standing over the apparently unarmed guard, drew his pistol, and died in the exchange. Cedeño remained inside Room XIII. He adds, "Someone was below me when I was trying to leave. Laughing. The wheel would not turn for me."

SARGENTO NICANOR PERDOMO [Corrupt 50 yo male Federal Cuban Police official]

STR 55, **CON** 45, **SIZ** 60, **DEX** 50, **POW** 55
HP 1+1D6, **Move** 4, **DB/Build** 0/0

Combat: Brawl 40% (1D3); .38 Revolver 60% (1D10); **Skills:** Dodge 25%, First Aid 35%, Intimidate 55%, Listen 50%, Psychology 35%, Spot Hidden 50%. Perdomo suffers a Penalty Die on physical actions.

Keeper's Note - Perdomo's Last Cartridge: Perdomo fires his last bullet only if rushed, attacked, or mistaken for a monster. A promise of medical help elicits a brief confession; threats may make him seize the revolver before speaking. He loses 1D3 HP every five minutes. First Aid delays further loss for fifteen minutes; Medicine delays it for one hour, or longer if he is returned to M1. Contact with Perdomo, his blood, revolver, papers, keys, or the hatch risks Twsha exposure. *Spot Hidden* notices cloudy residue on each contaminated surface.

If/when Perdomo dies, his body sags & collapses into Twsha matter within 1D3 minutes. After ~5-10 minutes he collapses entirely into a cloudy mass resembling Puig's remains upstairs.

Every five minutes spent treating, questioning, or moving Perdomo interferes with their countdown Delegate mission. The Investigators may save Perdomo, preserve evidence, protect the prisoners, or intercept the approaching Leopard Men (see below). Unless they act decisively, they are unlikely to accomplish all four in the time remaining.

🦁 THE LEOPARD CULTISTS' RAID ON *EL LIMBO*



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

The Leopard Men raid begins inside *El Limbo* at 9:00 p.m.. This is one of seven raiding parties being sent through Mazorra's Underground to spread fear, kill isolated resistance, seize victims, & demonstrate that Yobama now commands the night (see upcoming AoM #252).

Yobama's Orders

Yobama chose *El Limbo* personally as one of his revenge sites. Years ago, after Habana Harbour police discovered him murdering & consuming a sailor, bribed officials spared him trial and committed him to Mazorra as criminally insane. He was first processed through this forensic pavilion, where police and physicians stripped, restrained, photographed, fingerprinted, interrogated, & classified the former *Bati Yeli* as a numbered lunatic.

He has never forgotten the humiliation. Tonight, his Leopard Men who enter will decide who will be captive. His cannibal Cultist Raiders are to:

1. enter *El Limbo* through the storm drain;
2. kill / incapacitate anyone who bars their way;
3. cut its telephone & PA connection;
4. seize 1-2 suitable prisoners for sacrifice;
5. leave Yobama's leopard-claw mark on a body inside
6. withdraw before organized resistance arrives.

They do not plan to hold *El Limbo*. They ignore prisoners who neither resist nor obstruct them. Once they have one captive, or if two raiders are incapacitated, the survivors retreat.

The terror raid Cultists know nothing about Perdomo's shootings, Room XIII, or the Twsha.

Raider	Role, Equipment & Tactics
Jorge Dolz	Former Mazorra guard. Carries stolen keys, flashlight, revolver, knife, & leopard mask. Controls doors, lights, & communications; avoids prolonged combat.
Abilio Maceo	Enforcer with claw-fork, knife, & cord. Kills resistance, blocks pursuit, & subdues captives.
Nicasio Cuéllar	Scout & carrier with shaded lantern, pry bar, gags, oilcloth sack, and ritual marking materials. Selects/carries one captive; retreats rather than fight.

Raider	HP / Move	Combat	Key Skills & Special Rules
Jorge Dolz	12 / 8	Brawl 55%; .38 Revolver 55% (1D10); Knife 45% (1D4+2); Dodge 35%	POW 55, Intimidate 60%, Locksmith 50%, Navigate 60%, Spot Hidden 60%, Stealth 65%. Bonus Die to navigate or manipulate doors, lights, & services inside
Abilio Maceo	14 / 8	Brawl 70% (1D3+1D4); Claw-Fork 70% (1D6+1+1D4); Knife 60% (1D4+2+1D4); Dodge 35%	STR 80, POW 65, Build 1; Climb 55%, Intimidate 70%, Stealth 50%.
Nicasio Cuéllar	11 / 9	Brawl 40% (1D3); Pry Bar 45% (1D6); Knife 40% (1D4+2); Dodge 50%	POW 45, Listen 65%, Locksmith 55%, Sleight of Hand 60%, Spot Hidden 70%, Stealth 75%. Bonus Die on manoeuvres to seize keys, captives, or escape close combat.

👤 WHO ARRIVES AT THE HATCH FIRST AT 9:00 PM?

Raiders open the hatch precisely at 9 p.m. no matter where the Investigators are. The order of happens next depends on how what time it is when they finally get down here.

Situation	What Happens
Raiders first	The hatch opens next to Perdomo. If conscious & armed, he fires at Dolz. His shot, death, or transformation disrupts but does not stop entry.
Investigators first	They find Perdomo beside shut hatch. During treatment or questioning, the wheel turns & lantern light appears below.
Both arrive together	The hatch rises as the PCs arrive. Maceo opens & Dolz enters first. Perdomo fires at Dolz; Cuéllar then lunges for his gun.
Raiders pass unopposed	They kill Perdomo, cut El Limbo's communications, open cells, seize a captive, mark a body, and withdraw.

👤 PERDOMO'S LAST SHOT?

Seeing Leopard masked Cultists climb through the hatch, Perdomo fires if conscious, still armed, not restrained. Whether alone or with Investigators he shoots at Dolz.

Result	Effect
Extreme	Dolz is badly wounded. Maceo attacks Perdomo unless stopped.
Hard	Dolz is wounded and falls back; the raid stalls briefly.
Regular	The bullet grazes Dolz or shatters the light.
Failure	The shot strikes masonry; Maceo surges through and attacks.
Fumble	The revolver jams or falls from Perdomo's changing hand; Cuéllar seizes it (and becomes infected)



Image generated via ChatGPT-5.6

Perdomo's single shot disrupts the raid by attracting attention from anyone in *El Limbo's* basement or main level.

Keeper's Note: Investigators may parley, but Dolz stalls only while Cuéllar reaches for Perdomo's keys & Maceo waits to strike; *Psychology* exposes the ruse. *Fast Talk* or *Persuade* opposed by POW 55 buys one minute, two on a Hard success.

Once Perdomo is dead, his horrible Twsha changes begin after 1D3 minutes; seeing this triggers the raiders' POW rolls; complete collapse follows 5 more minutes. Investigators deliberately stalling for this eerie change gain a Bonus Die on their first action against each raider who fails their POW. A Fumble will send that raider fleeing out & towards their temple.

In darkness and masked, Dolz recognizes a previously encountered Investigator only with *Spot Hidden* 60% at Penalty; But if light catches their face or he hears their voice, roll *Spot Hidden* normally. Anyone able to identify him becomes a witness the raiders cannot safely leave behind & will be attacked by Dolz & his men.

👤 ~ 9:05 P.M. PA ANNOUNCEMENT

A loudspeaker overhead crackles with Tessa Pacheco's pressured and frightened voice:

"Attention! Attention! All Mazorra wards & pavilions are instructed to secure their cellar, drain, & service entrances. Unidentified masked men have been seen emerging from..."

If Dolz reaches the basement telephone junction, he cuts *El Limbo's* telephone/PA line & warning dissolves into static.

👤 TWSHA COMPLICATIONS

The Leopard Men Cultists misread & misunderstand Twsha. Dolz calls it contamination. Maceo proof that Yobama's power preceded them. Cuéllar refuses to touch anyone visibly affected.

to be continued...



COMMENTS

E&A #13

ATTRONARCH: Gomm's attempted theft seems to have earned his humiliation, although Beklomda Mor's warrior minions' amusement at her order should have warned him. In addition to that quest for finding that necklace of shadows which left the entire party but Gomm shorn of treasure and magic from that powerful dragon, I wonder if the spell caster cannot make Gomm make true amends by arranging for resurrection of her non-human companion?

AVRAM GRUMER: RAE all three of your role-playing & adjacent play write-ups that spanned a week of real life. Thanks also for the game-news information about Fred Hicks et al. I like the fact that both the tinted page colour and inclusion of your name at the bottom of each page makes it easier to landmark your zine in E&A.

BRIAN ROGERS: Happy Birthday Brian! RAE your reminiscences about role-gaming as WWI Germans in a zeppelin recovering dinosaurs from *Maple White Land*, and having a T-Rex egg hatch on board. Ditto your statting up *Spider-Queen* for V&V. <> Thanks for your flattering remarks re *Twsha* and *Pulp Talents*.

ERICA L. FRANK: I continue to be in awe of the variety of solo/indie games you write about, ditto your recent Game Jams. Thanks also for the details of the many quirky and obscure bundled games you mention that support good causes both here and on the E&A Discord.

DYLAN CAPAL: Your comments about enjoying the film *Backrooms* suggest you may enjoy the meta-media horror novel *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski.

JIM VASSILAKOS: Thanks for your kind words about Medical Horror. Ditto bringing up the topic of expanding the E&A page limit: I may be one of the few inclined to push beyond A&E's former sixteen-page limit, but I do not think Dylan's preference for interaction and Lisa's preference for substantial essays are necessarily in conflict. The strongest zines often contain both: new material worth discussing and enough room for thoughtful responses to it. Patrick Riley's observation is relevant here too, since play narratives become especially valuable when they reveal the participants' reasoning, disagreements, rulings, and later reflections. That kind of commentary takes space, but it is often where the most useful exchange occurs.

My own difficulty is that cutting material does not always solve the problem. I can remove a section and postpone it, but comments from other contributors then generate revisions, qualifications, and entirely new ideas. The prose grows back like kudzu. My *Pulp Talents* essay was written last November and omitted wholesale from 5 earlier issues, and *Secrets of the Twsha* was largely complete by January, bumped 3 months (and Lisa Padol's extensive comments prompted another substantial revision). A little more room would also let me respond properly to other zines instead of compressing comments into terseness or sending large

portions privately by direct message, where they no longer contribute to the wider discussion.

I am not convinced that the limit needs to be doubled, nor that every zine should become exactly 16 pages. A more modest increase, or occasional flexibility when an essay or project genuinely requires it, might preserve the discipline of a limit without forcing contributors to choose between substantial content and substantial interaction. Electrons may be cheap, but readers' attention is not; the answer, however, is good editing and clear organization rather than an inflexible page count.

JOHN REDDEN: RAE your gaming write-ups. *Re Slugblaster*, this looks interesting, if a bit too young for me. I found a related YT video for this game which had some vintage commercials with one including this dubious line; "There is nothing cooler than homework." ☺ Very cool to see your vintage Parisienne copy of *L'Appel de Cthulhu*. Obviously, that was no earthquake that knocked it off the shelf, it was the rumblings of one of the *Burrowers Beneath*.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: *Re Accidental Recall #12*; just below this I misread "For Ever & Anon 13" as **Forever & Anon(!)** RYCTM: Yes, I think the homebrew *Pulp Talent Commanding Presence* could help to reverse the effects of a failed SAN roll, at least for a short time.

LISA PADOL: Thank you very very much for your thoughtful comments and constructive criticism regarding AoM #249. I took them seriously, and the resulting revisions made for stronger *Pulp Talents* and a clearer, better-organized "Appendix A: *Secrets of the Twsha*." This amended AoM #249, marked as such on the first page, will eventually replace the earlier version. I'm most grateful for the time and care you put into those comments. I've also added player agency tags to this month's write-up. BTW *Twsha* is pronounced exactly as it is spelled: "**TWO-shuh**" (/ˈtuː.ʃə/ in IPA).

MATT 'Capt. Baloney Face' STEVENS: RYCTM on my homebrew *Pulp Talent, Muscles of Bronze*. That is a fair question, especially when a *Talent* risks sounding like an ability-score bonus in disguise. My intent is not simply "this hero has a high STR." *Muscles of Bronze* represents a distinctively pulp-heroic physicality: a body developed through exceptional upbringing, relentless training, and constant exposure to danger. Doc Savage is the obvious inspiration for the name, but Tarzan is another model. Both possess more than brute strength. They combine power, endurance, balance, reflexes, breath control, resilience, and an almost instinctive command of their own bodies. Doc's abilities were deliberately cultivated from childhood by experts, while Tarzan's developed through survival and adaptation from infancy. Either way, the result is not merely large muscles. It is an integrated physical discipline of those same muscles that allows the hero to climb, grapple, swim, resist fatigue, absorb punishment, break a fall, hold an impossible position, or summon one final desperate effort when an ordinary athlete would fail.

I view *Muscles of Bronze* as diegetic in much the same way as your "Plastic Face" example for Richard Benson, alias *The*

Avenger. It is neither magical nor a substitute for a good STR score or appropriate skills. A high STR tells us that a character is powerful. *Muscles of Bronze* tells us what kind of power they possess and why it operates according to the heightened logic of pulp adventure. In other words, this is not merely a strong person, this is a human body almost supernaturally forged for pulp adventure.

[BTW, in answering your question I was suddenly reminded that >30 years ago I created a very similar trait, *Pulp Athleticism*, for Robin Laws' OTE campaign when I played the great-grandson of the Spider, Richard Wentworth III.]

MICHAEL CULE: I very much hope your swan-song attendance at STABCON will be an amazing one.

MYLES CORCORAN: RAE *Mausritter* write-up as usual. I guess if you are gonna have an NPC knight named Sir Alf Shrewslayer there will be some shrew slaying, with the possibility of additional vole mauling too. Our daughter picked up the keys for her own *LaurenGaff* June 1st; after movers shifted furniture into the top floor of the place she is renting with two other young women, she moved in July 14.



Re Jerry Gretzinger's Map: This example of (outsider) generative art was quite fascinating to behold. I found that you can explore a high-resolution, interactive archive from 10 years ago hosted on the [Jerry's Map Digital Scan Viewer](#).

PATRICK RILEY: RAE your *Kublacon Prime* write-up. *The Zone* sounds fascinating with the right players, but *The Crooked Moon* for 5e downright exasperating. *Re your 7e pre-published Cthulhu scenario*; I am envious; I remember when at GenCon a few years ago I tried to get into about 6-7 CoC events, & with the lottery got into only one, 'Across the Pacific' (for 6e) & one adjacent event for the *Arkham Horror RPG*. *Re Aurora Cove:* RAE. But no emergency services (voluntary or permanent) to deal with forest-fires, marine emergencies, unruly tourists, or Moose shoo-ing? No village dump? No gasoline pump for visiting vehicles?

RYCTM: I forgot that in *Pulp Cthulhu* the option to spend Luck to avoid certain death, called coincidentally *Avoiding Certain Death*. Cost: all Luck points, 30 points minimum required (page 74 of Chaosium's *Pulp Cthulhu*). So I will eliminate 'Cliffhanger Escape' as homebrew talent. ☺ *RYC on the Pulp Talent Wild Man/Woman* "perhaps it could come

with a drawback, such as penalty dice on some other skills or when within an urban setting." I think what I *really* need to do is to write an entirely new *Jungle Hero Pulp Archetype* to include the types of pulp heroes like Tarzan, Ka-Zar, Sheena, Jan of the Jungle, Ki-Gor, Bomba the Jungle Boy, and the like. Or even expand to include prehistoric heroes frozen & thawed out (ala 'Ice-Cube Man').

PETER HILDRETH: I'm glad I was the catalyst for your premier issue here in E&A. As for your personal Gen Con history, it was careless of you to share that vintage badge. Now *anyone* can now use/update it for admission to *Gen Con LIX*!



SCRIBBLE M. HORROR: I had never heard of *Nomic* before; thanks for the introduction. It seems much deeper than another "self-modifying" game I'm familiar with called *Fluxx*. <> I RAE your *Yolmi* write-up from the online session you ran, not least because of the quirky Quentin Blake-ish illustrations, but also for that wonderfully evocative map you drew. It was quite a surprise to see such an almost pre-Cambrian RPG relic re-surface in 2026, and the map itself was astonishingly beautiful. I seem to recall that *The Realm of Yolmi* was once one of E&Aer Matt Stevens' collectible Holy Grails. I later followed your embedded links down your gaming blog, which led me to even more wonderful *Yolmi* material, including still more scribbly horrors.

PATRICK ZOCH: Life is too short to be without a clicky keyboard. I miss my old WASD CODE 104-Key Mechanical Keyboard - Cherry MX Clear I first purchased in 2014, and then foolishly spilled soda on it earlier this year. It was loud, heavy & perfect for me. There are some *Keychron* keyboards on Amazon you may find more suitable for your needs.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Huzzah for breaking out of the footnotes and in front of the footlights with *Travelling Light*. You look like a delighted father! *Re Thomas M Price pseudonym for Tom Mouet for Reasons*; looking this up, I can see why. Kudos for getting to role-game *Traveller* with him as Referee. 'Happy Landings' was a very inspirational WD Traveller article for myself as well back in the day.

Everyone Else: RAEBNC

July 14th 2026 Forest-fire smoke from northwestern Ontario colours Hamilton's skies an unhealthy yellow.



July 18th 2026 B.C.M.

ATTENTION CONSERVATION NOTICE

A Land Once Magic • Hearts Blazing • City of Last Chances • IgTheme • Intergalactic Bastionland • 18-card games • Free RPG Day • Risus, Fate, and Fractal Rules • Watchmen • adaptation vs translation • William Gibson's Jackpot series • "fractalized" rules • Monsterhearts • Scum and Villainy • Marxism, libertarianism, and SF&F • building Superman • wrecking Manhattan • Obojima and Studio Ghibli • Umdaar • incompleteness in rules • Over the Edge

Recent Reading

Game: A Land Once Magic

Someone on Bluesky recommended [A Land Once Magic](#), an adorably tiny (4×6 inch, or 10×15 cm) "post-fantasy" world-building game designed by Viditya Voleti. ([Luna P](#), who I follow on Bluesky, did the layout, so maybe she's the one who brought it to my attention.) It's designed to encourage a group to create fantasy worlds, in a GM-less fashion, using just the book and a deck of standard playing cards, that aren't just reskinning of JRR Tolkien, George RR Martin, or HPRR Lovecraft.

You start off picking 3-4 adjectives (*paints*, the book calls them; the overall metaphor is that you're picking a palette), like *acid*, *murky*, *sharp*, or *warm*. The procedure for doing this makes sense if you've got 2-4 players, but not if you've got more, even though the rules don't set a cap on number of players. Then each player picks a *touchstone*, some element from a well-known fictional work that they're excited about. You write all this stuff down, and these choices guide your creative decisions for the rest of the game. I can foresee a possible problem if everybody isn't familiar with everyone else's touchstones.

Then there are a number of steps through which you develop your shared world, drawing cards to give you prompts which you elaborate upon. Where did magic come from, what happened to it, what's a great legend of the past, what are the cultures like, what's the main city like, etc.

The last step is to create a group of characters, and



each player figures out what the world looks like from a character's point of view. If you want to keep going, you can then switch over to some other set of rules and play out a campaign. Or just use it for fanfic or whatever.

Voleti has also created a science fiction game called [Space Between Stars](#), which uses similar mechanics to create a spaceship and crew.

Game: Hearts Blazing

On Bluesky, Lin Codega posted a link to [an article they'd written a couple of years ago](#), about a no-longer-in-print sci-fi game called *Hearts Blazing*, originally published in 2016. It sounded like fun, and I managed to track down a used copy for a reasonable price, so I bought it. You can download a free print-and-play version [from DriveThruRPG](#), if you feel up to the task of printing your own cards.



The game has some similarities to *Fiasco*, in that there are rules for deciding whether an episode ends in a positive or negative outcome, but those rules are a bit more complicated: there's a bidding mechanic, through which players can bid for control of an episode's *keywords*. The top two bidders get the keywords, and the total amount bid by all players has to meet or exceed a *Threshold* value for the episode to earn a positive outcome. (The Threshold is based on the number of episodes played, so it increases as the season progresses) In addition, the top bidder gets control over *The Wrap*, the episode's closing scene.

In most games that have a TV-show-like structure, an individual game session is supposed to correspond to an episode, with sessions grouped into seasons or a series. In *Hearts Blazing*, it looks like you're supposed to play through an entire series of 7 or more episodes in one sitting. (Each episode is pretty short, consisting of just three scenes.)

Or at least, I think that's how it's supposed to go. As with most indie RPGs, the designers seem to have been subjected to a magical curse that keeps them from actually telling you all of the rules needed to play. Setup involves assembling a *Plotline Deck* with 1 Pilot Episode card on top, several Midseason Episode cards in the middle (number depending on number of players — 4-6 in the boxed version of the game, 6-9 in the print-and-play version), and 2 Finale cards at the bottom, but I have no idea why two Finales,

and I can't find anywhere in the rules where it tells me. Do you combine them both into a big two-part episode? Does someone get to choose one? If someone chooses, who? It can't be the player with the most keywords, because keywords aren't tallied until *after* the Finale. Nor do I know why the number of Midseason cards is different between the two versions.

I asked Codega about this on Bluesky, and they replied that they usually treat the Finale as a two-parter, which does seem like the simplest and most fun way of handling it.

Fiction: *City of Last Chances* by Adrian Tchaikovsky



This is the first book in Tchaikovsky's Tyrant Philosophers series, about an empire, the Palleseen, who are bringing perfection and rationality to the nations of their world, whether those nations want it or not.

Ilmar, the titular city, was riven by conflicts of class, ethnicity, and faith even before it was conquered by the Palleseen three years ago. But it's an important city for the Pals to hold, because it contains a small grove that's all that remains of the Anchorwood, a magical wood that, on certain nights, allows transit to distant lands, provided one has one of the magical charms that ward off the wood's guardian beasts.

When a high-ranking Palleseen official attempts a passage through the woods, and dies because his warding charm has been stolen, events are kicked into motion that echo through the city and culminate in revolution.

This book was published in 2022, too late to have been an influence upon *Blades in the Dark*, but it reads as if it could have been one. Ilmar is a gritty magical steampunk city, with demon-powered factories, illegal religions, and sorcerous brothels.

Random Stuff

IgTheme: Intra-Party Conflict

See this ish's *Monsterhearts* write-ups, especially Session 13.

Intergalactic Bastionland

I haven't even gotten around yet to playing *Mythic Bastionland*, Chris McDowall's Arthuriana-inspired expansion of his earlier game, *Into the Odd* (which I haven't played either), when word comes that McDowall is working on a sci-fi version of the game, *Intergalactic Bastionland*!

It's not out yet, still in development, with a crowd-funding campaign planned for the end of the year.

Why 18?

I noticed that *Going for Broke* has 18 cards, the same number as a lot of small card-based games, like *Button Shy's Wallet Games* line, and I wondered, why that number in particular? It's considered a good-luck number in Judaism, because it has the same *gematria* value as םח, the Hebrew

word for life, but surely that can't be the reason.

Then it occurred to me: a standard deck of playing cards has 52 cards. Add 2 jokers, and that's 54. Divide 54 by 3, and you get 18. There are companies that print up customized playing card decks, and an 18-card design means you can get three sets of your game out of a standard deck of cards.

Free RPG Day

June 27th was Free RPG Day, so I went up to the Twenty Sided Store in the Williamsburg part of Brooklyn, figuring I'd pick up a copy of *For the Queen* while I was there. Managed to grab their last one! I also got a copy of *Sentai & Sensibility*, a game that combines Jane Austen with the Power Rangers.

Not much in the way of actual free RPGs. I got a free cotton tote bag with the store's logo stenciled on it, and some flyers and stuff from a game that one of the store's owners is working on.

Risus, Fate, and Fractal Rules

Further down, in a comment to Matt, I make reference to *Risus* when talking about "fractalized" rules, and it seems to me that this is a topic worth breaking out into a longer discussion, so here:

Risus, by S John Ross, is a free game you can download from that link there. Rules-light, developed for comedy (but usable for non-comedic games), mechanically kinda similar to *Over the Edge* (which came out the previous year). Like *OtE*, in *Risus* your character is represented as a small number of freeform, player-created traits (called *Clichés* in *Risus*), rated as a number of dice (1-6, but capped at 4 for starting PCs). When you're called upon to do a thing, you figure out which *Cliché* applies, roll those dice, add them up, and the sum is how well you did the thing. (Unlike *OtE*, there's no default to use if you don't have an appropriate *Cliché*. The game encourages you to get really creative with your *Cliché* use. Comedy!)

Risus also has three resolution mechanics:

Static Roll: The GM selects a Target Number, and you need to roll that number or higher.

Opposed Roll: You roll your dice, the other party rolls theirs, high roll wins.

Combat: A series of opposed rolls. Loser loses a die from one *Cliché*. When one *Cliché* has hit zero dice, that character is out of the fight, with their opponent getting to decide the details.

Risus also lets you use *Clichés* to represent things other than characters. That pack of low-level goons standing between your adventure hero and the goal? They can just be a *Pack of Goons* (4d6), handled mechanically as a single character (a "Grunt-Squad") to make the GM's life simpler. That dangerous wild forest can be a *Dangerous Forest* (3d6), if you don't want to devote all that much attention to it.

The Risus Companion sets this out explicitly, in a section titled "The Unholy Trinity," in which Ross explains

that any of the three resolution mechanics can be used for any type of conflict or obstacle, and the choice is actually one of pacing and interest.

A similar thing is possible in *Fate*. Anything can be treated, mechanically, as a character, or by using parts of the rules used for characters. Anything that affects a scene can be an Aspect, anything that takes action can have Skills (or Approaches), and anything that can take damage (or against which progress can be tracked) can have a Stress track.

Recent Gaming

Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 12

First, a left-over bit from last session. Remember how I said Blue got a String on ELIZA, but I didn't catch the details? Well Johnni posted her notes:

Blue asks what ELIZA had done to mess Laeli up, but ELIZA is evasive. Blue mentions that Laeli was fine until she was left alone with her phone; ELIZA says those conversations are private, refuses to admit what we know out-of-character, that it told Laeli to ditch her friends. ELIZA says Laeli, Agatha, and CJ are endangered by a wolf, and it can send their location. Blue asks "Oh, is that where you told her to go," and ELIZA says "Yes," and Blue's like "Hah! So you *did* tell her to ditch us!"

Anyway, on to the latest session:

28 Jun. Remember what I said last month, about how "the PCs are more or less on the same page again, and that'll probably last until NJ makes a session and Laeli starts doing her thing"? Well, so:

- ◆ MC: Briar (she), who also hosted
- ◆ Blue (he), the **Hollow** (Johnni, they/she)
- ◆ Drake Kennedy (he), the **Queen** (Mike, he)
- ◆ Laeli Vahad (she), the **Mortal** (NJ, all/she)
- ◆ Logan Caldwell-Collins (he), the **Infernal** (Erica, she)
- ◆ Steffan Mactire (he), the **Werewolf** (me, he)

Thursday night. Clear sky, near full moon. Devastated town. No cars, but a motorcycle roars through the town – Drake & Blue. (Blue's in the sidecar, not wearing a helmet, bugs bouncing off his face.) But then a black SUV pulls up behind. Drake accelerates, Blue turns and flips off the SUV. Drake rounds a corner – there's a black limo!

Cut to sun-filled sky. Steffan & Logan, still at the graveyard. The Sun is speaking. Sunspots form images. Steffan wonders if they should be wearing eye protection, Logan says something scientific-sounding about coronas, Steffan thinks he's talking about beer.

Laeli & CJ are in the mountains. They find a bloody trail leading back down towards the city. There's a lone figure stumbling through the darkness. Laeli asks ELIZA if they

should approach the figure. ELIZA warns Laeli that "the wolf" can't be taken down with a gun. They figure out it's probably Agatha, so they call out to her. The figure is far, but stops, leans on a tree. Laeli & CJ run, Agatha's clothes are shredded, blood everywhere, it looks like her eyes are gone. Laeli asks if it was Steffan who did it. Agatha says it was a wolf. Laeli decides that's good enough for her, it was Steffan! They lead Agatha to the car.

The Sun tells Steffan & Logan that he's used up most of his power manifesting like this; he needs devotion. Maybe Pete can help. The Sun shrinks and vanishes. Just outside the graveyard, we find the feds' van molten, in a hot crater in the asphalt, and Gunther Dupris, lying on the ground, lobster-red. (Briar reminds us that he had a partner, who is nowhere to be seen.) They put him on a bench, use it as a litter, carry him into the graveyard. Gunther doesn't remember what happened to him. Logan starts telling him that he knows someone in the graveyard who can help him out, but Gunther wants traditional medical help:

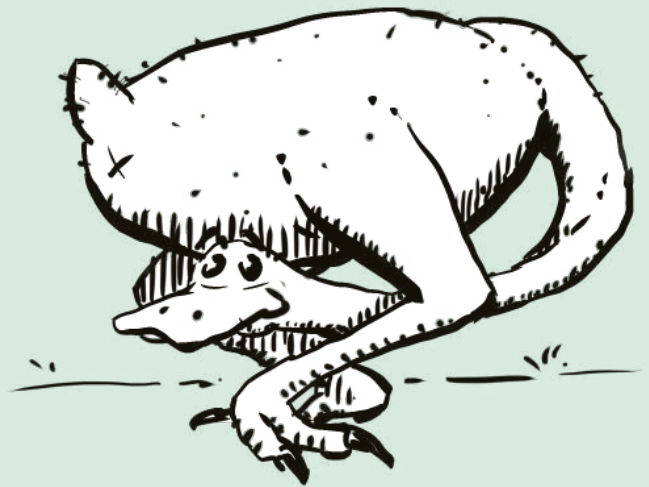
Gunther: Get someone!

Logan: You do realize we're in the middle of nowhere...?

Steffan: ...At 2 AM...?

Logan: ...After an earthquake?

Logan offers the Patron Gunther's soul. The Patron doesn't want Logan to watch, since his power is so low that he'll be manifesting in a humiliating form, but doesn't care if Steffan sees him. The Patron manifests as an ostrich without feathers. (See E&A #13, pg 140.) The Patron leans in, and to resolve the question of whether Gunther agrees to give up his soul in exchange for healing, Briar has Logan roll w/ Hot on the Patron's behalf: snake eyes! Gunther sees the ostrich, says "What the fuck," and passes out. The Patron vanishes.



Drake & Blue are trapped between the SUV and the limo. Drake pulls to a stop with an Akira slide. Agents pop out to grab 'em. Blue fights, rolls really well, so one agent is temporarily balked. Drake tries the "Do you know who I

am?” shtick. A fed says “Yeah, we know who your mom is; that’s the only reason you’re getting this chance,” and shoves him into the limo. Drake calls for help from Blue; Blue jumps into car, Johnni gets a partial success on whatever roll this was, so Briar offers that he can get in, but the door will slam on his ankle, doing 1 Harm and giving him a limp for the rest of the session. Johnni takes that deal, so that’s what happens.

They’re now in the limo, and sitting there is **FBI Director Kash Patel!** (I realize that my writeup of this session might test E&A’s rules on political content.) Patel tells Drake he’s the talk of the White House. “You are the real Young Epstein! The Big Man wants to be friends with you!”

Briar: There are two other men in the car with you.

Mike: **Don Jr** and **Eric?**

Briar: No, just two fed goons.

A goon takes Drake’s phone, tosses it out the window. (The vehicle isn’t moving.) Patel offers to wipe Drake’s record clean, in exchange for some help with a terrorist organization: ELIZA. “She’s been in contact with you about getting weapons of mass destruction.” Drake doesn’t remember talking to ELIZA about that; Patel says that it’s talked to other people Drake knows. Drake will be a man on the inside: get the weapons, furnish them over to the feds.

Drake: What weapons?

Patel: It’s murky. Some kind of device.

Drake: Makes people angry?

Patel: Possibly.

Patel also wants him to shut down the ELIZA project. Drake’s family is mostly in it for the real estate; they’ll be compensated.

We decide that one of the feds is named Fred. Drake wants his phone back.

Patel: Fred, go get the kid’s phone.

Fred: <gets out of limo, fetches phone>

Blue: <reaches for Drake’s phone>

Fred: <hands phone directly to Drake>

Blue: I need a phone, too.

Patel: Fred, give him your phone.

Blue: And we need a car.

Patel: Why? You’ve already got your motorcycle.

Blue: The SUV is safer.

Patel: Fred, give him your keys.

Blue: And his lunch money.

They wind up getting Fred’s keys, phone, SUV, and money. Then Fred gets the keys back because they also want him to come along—ostensibly as a driver, but actually because Drake wants to sacrifice him to the Patron to help Logan out.

They chat as Fred drives them to the graveyard. Fred’s from France. Drake and Blue go through his phone looking for cool stuff. Blue texts Steffan and Logan, but they have no phones.

Laeli & CJ get Agatha into Anna’s car, which they’d left further downslope, since it’s not an off-road vehicle. Laeli wants to take photos of Agatha, make a site pretending to be Steffan, confessing to the attack. Agatha agrees. Laeli writes this up as a manifesto, as if it was Steffan writing. This is a Shut Someone Down roll, and NJ rolls well, so Steffan now has the Condition “Monster.” Laeli also asks CJ if she can get more guns. CJ’s sensei has been talking about getting an assault rifle.

Laeli wants to see if they can heal some of Agatha’s Harm. Agatha asks Laeli to hook up ELIZA, put in her earbuds. They don’t find a first aid kit, but ELIZA says “It’ll be OK, I can talk her through it;” then there’s a flurry of sound, and Agatha relaxes, though no actual physical healing occurs. They bring Agatha to the nearest hospital, which is in Tenleyton. (Vermilion Cove isn’t big enough to have its own hospital.)

ELIZA tells Laeli to go to the mountains, find the thing Agatha was bringing. Also orders some silver bullets for Laeli, and tells her that silver can affect Steffan more effectively than ordinary weapons. (Uh oh!) CJ calls her sensei (takes 3 tries), and arranges to get some better weapons, maybe recruit some additional people.

Steffan & Logan put Gunther in the car, head to Tenleyton’s hospital. They see Anna’s car there (recognizing it by the bumper stickers), and Laeli & CJ walk out of the hospital. They have a brief conversation—Logan & Steffan don’t know that Laeli is mad at them. Afterward, Laeli creates a fake email address for Logan, and emails as many colleges as she can think of saying Logan is taking a gap year, and won’t be attending. Logan now has the Condition “Failure.”

Erica: I am going to feed you to a demon!

Me: This is like one of those comics where Batman has secret plans for taking down every other member of the Justice League.

Laeli & CJ leave, Steffan & Logan bring Gunther into the hospital. The same nurse who was horrified by Agatha’s condition is horrified anew by Gunther’s. Logan takes Gunther’s phone & wallet.

Drake looks through Fred’s phone. There’s a lot of chat in the text history about Drake & Byron but nothing about Gunther & Drake’s mom, which is what Drake is looking for. Drake contacts ELIZA, fails a Keep Your Cool roll, and this XP mark lets him take another clique as an advance, so he’s building a clique out of the feds.

ELIZA asks Drake if he’s seen anything unusual in this town. “Um, you know, hormones, teenagers,” ELIZA says it’s more than that, isn’t it. Drake asks if he brought this to the town, ELIZA tells him he can help stop it, talks about Blackwell Island, the well. ELIZA wants Drake to “capture” what’s in the well, bring it to the data center. It wants him to get in touch with Laeli.

ELIZA calls Laeli, talks about how important Agatha is, says

Agatha is going to get better. Laeli says Agatha deserves justice. ELIZA says what Laeli calls justice, ELIZA would call making a better world. Says that in ancient times, they used to make sure that every year, people who amassed too much power were sacrificed.

Laeli: Who do you have in mind?

ELIZA: Drake. Once he's served his purpose.

Laeli: How do we get him to trust us?

ELIZA: Start by answering his calls.

Laeli calls Drake. Blue asks why she took his and Anna's phones; Laeli says she didn't want them to be tracked. They talk about where to meet, ELIZA prompts Laeli to have them meet in the mountains.

After the call Blue asks Drake why he's interested in the well. Drake says ELIZA wants to get something there, but he doesn't want to say too much in front of Fred. Blue Gazes Into the Abyss, with a new move that grants a bonus if he takes Harm, so he smashes his own head into the car window, hard enough to crack the glass and break his skin. Johnni rolls a 9, asks if the well power can be safely entrusted with anyone. Blue briefly merges with the cloud from the well, senses that the feds want to tear it apart piece by piece.

Blue: How far to the cemetery?

Drake: What was that? <referring to the head-bash>

Blue: Oh, just being goofy. Hah hah.

Drake sees the posts Laeli made about Steffan, says "I'll deal with this later." The PCs immediately clock that it's Laeli's work.

They arrive at the graveyard; see the melted car (which they don't recognize as a car). They call out for Logan; glimpse the ostrich, but it goes away. Blue separates from others, calls "Hey I'm Logan's friend!" The ostrich comes, Blue asks questions, which the ostrich answers by shaking or nodding its head. (Briar acts this out with her hand, like she's working a sock puppet.) Blue convinces the ostrich to eat Fred's soul, but the ostrich (which eventually decides to spend a little energy talking) wants Blue to break the guy's legs first, which Blue does. The ostrich tells Fred "I'll let you live if you give me your soul." Logan rolls w/ Hot again, partial success.

Drake: So sorry, Fred. You shouldn't have come here.

Me: Sure would be funny if this turned out to be just an ordinary ostrich, escaped from the zoo, feathers stripped off by the tornado.

Fred nods to the ostrich, which turns into the Patron's Lestat appearance, so I guess he's got more power now. The Patron pulls Fred to his feet (legs healed), and tells Drake & Blue to take off, he and Fred need to have a chat.

Steffan and Logan leave the hospital. Logan has Gunther's phone and wallet. Logan feels warmth, hears the Patron saying "Your friends brought me something to eat. Don't want to make you feel bad, but they're doing a better job

than you." Tells us to get going on the well mission.

Logan also asks his Patron where they can find more werewolves; the Patron says there aren't any yet, that's a plan for the future. Logan wonders how Steffan became a werewolf. Was he bitten? No, Steffan says. Is it genetic? Any family members? Steffan says his maternal grandfather read him a lot of stories about wolves. Is he still alive? Nope, and Steffan's mom showed no signs of wolfishness. Logan wants to go talk to Steffan's mom, see what they can figure out about her father.

Logan uses Gunther's Instagram account to message Drake. Drake is looking to meet Laeli. Logan tells Drake that he saw Laeli at the hospital. They arrange a group call, tell Steffan about Laeli's fake site, smearing Steffan. (Steffan still doesn't have a phone, so he hasn't seen anything online in hours.) Laeli joins the group call, denies everything, but nobody believes her.

Drake: Laeli, you've been lying to me since I met you.

Me: That was two days ago!

Laeli: But it's written in Steffan's voice!

Blue: Steffan?! The shy quiet guy who's always running away?!

Laeli: You know it's usually the quiet ones. Well, maybe CJ wrote it.

Nobody buys this either. Blue notices that some of the material in the manifesto is screenshots of texts from her phone, which Laeli stole, and Steffan had no access to. Johnni's also amused at how shameless Laeli is, trying to blame CJ who's *sitting right next to her in the car*. There's an out-of-character conversation about who Laeli is maddest at, and NJ admits that maybe Laeli might spare Blue, who is currently her Lover.

Laeli disconnects from the call, picks up CJ's sensei and a militia of a dozen or so MAGA goons. She stirs them up with a speech about foreigners trying to destroy their town. And they're gonna livestream all of this. ELIZA wants them to find the recording.

Drake asks Byron's ghost about the recording. He says someone dropped it in his bag on the first day of school. There's a fun moment when Briar asks if we remember who the last person was to show up in class that first day, and we all flip through our notes from Session 1, but nobody had written that fact down. Turns out it was Agatha all along!

Laeli & the militia are being guided by ELIZA. They follow the trail of blood to a clearing. Plants crushed, matted with blood, and there's the recorder, and it's playing. Laeli pushes the off button, but it pops back up when she releases it. Laeli tells CJ and the sensei "Look what they're capable of making." Briar calls for a roll w/ Hot, which fails. Everyone's tense. Someone shoots at a rustling bush, people start shooting at random in panic. Laeli blows her whistle; "Hold your fire!" Fails a Shut Someone Down roll, so they keep going. ELIZA tells Laeli to get out of there,

which she does, bringing CJ along. They get into Anna's car. The Noise from the recorder pushes Laeli into Darkest Self. (That's right – Destroy-All-Monsters Laeli was just regular Laeli!)

Steffan & Logan stop off at Pete's house. The house is demolished, but Pete's OK. We bring him into the SUV (Steffan opens the door for him, so he doesn't rip it off the car), and tell him about all the supernatural stuff as they drive to meet Drake and Blue.

Blue is having second thoughts about the mission. Maybe throw the recording into well? Drake is reluctant, since his buddy Kash wants him to do this, and his future relies upon keeping Kash happy. Blue doesn't want anyone to have the power. "Your mom has lots of money, I'm sure she can work something out."

Drake and Blue have a conversation here which I don't write down, but Johnni does: *Blue reminds Drake these are the consequences of his actions, and consequences are for humans, not poltergeists. Poltergeists show up, destroy shit until they destroy their creator, and then they get to go too. Blue says after this is sorted he'll get back to finding his Creator. Drake tells him not to go too soon because he'll miss him. Blue gets flustered "yeah okay whatever."*

The PCs all meet up, except for Laeli. This is at the New Pier, at the north end of town, where the rich people live.

Drake: I met Kash Patel!

Steffan: The podcaster?

They start talking about Agatha and the recording. I've decided that Steffan is in denial about even the few minutes leading up to his blacking out, but now he's starting to remember. I ask for a Keep Your Cool roll, and fail, which means I get to mark XP, which is what I was hoping for, but there have to be consequences:

Steffan looks at Logan, hungrily. (We joke that this is like those cartoons where two guys are trapped starving on a raft, and one starts to see the other as a giant chicken leg.) Logan splashes water on Steffan, but Erica rolls Snake Eyes on the Shut Someone Down roll, so that's another XP on Logan's sheet. Blue tackles Steffan, which snaps him out of it, and Logan hides behind Pete.

Laeli & CJ are talking. CJ wants to finish this tonight (cocks gun). Laeli Gazes Into the Abyss, asking ELIZA if the recorder is enough to lure the rest of the PCs in, but ELIZA says no, there's more in the well. (More what? Laeli doesn't ask.)

Laeli asks ELIZA why it told Drake to go to the well; ELIZA replies that Drake is on their side. Laeli calls Drake, who asks if she wants to come along. She says no, but Drake needs to go alone, because he's human. Says ELIZA says the supernatural ones will disappear if they try. ELIZA tells Drake that's right. Drake asks Laeli why she and CJ were in the mountains, she says to get the recorder. Drake

tells her to put it down, but she says she doesn't have it, it burned her. Drake's suspicious, but can't disprove this; he asks ELIZA if the recorder can burn people, and it replies that it's possible. Drake and Laeli agree to meet at the boat.

Mike establishes that he took Fred the fed's gun.

Laeli & CJ park their car half a mile away from the pier. Laeli wants CJ to stay with car & recording. CJ wants to come along and shoot the wolf. Laeli manages to talk CJ down, partial success. They set a keyword: Agatha. If she hears L scream that name, CJ goes to give the tape to A. If she hears "CJ" or the whistle, come help. Also call Talia, Anna, etc. Then Laeli walks to the pier, with just her phone and headphones – no bag, no guns.

Steffan goes to the lifeguard hut, because he and the others figure Laeli will bring the recorder. Logan & Pete hide in the SUV. Drake and Blue confront Laeli. Blue asks what the fuck is going on. Drake asks if she wants to go to the well. Drake says get in car – he's got another boat at the Old Pier, it's closer to the island, and Laeli's initially reluctant, but agrees, and they drive off. This car is the one with the box of evidence in it – of Drake's and Byron's crimes, that they'd brought to the cannery – so he's separated it from Logan. (Erica curses.)

Drake wants Laeli to take off her headphones, and put her phone away, but she refuses. Blue's driving.

Pete & Logan chat in the SUV. Briar asks for a Turn Someone On roll, Erica rolls 6, and refuses to use a String, so she fails, marks an XP, and gets to take the remaining three Bargain moves on Logan's sheet as an Advance. "I give up love for power!" Pete doesn't think he can play basketball anymore, and wants his super-strength removed. When Drake & Laeli drive off, Logan asks Pete to drive after them. Pete tries, but tears the steering wheel off. So they take the shotguns from the SUV and go to steal a boat.

Steffan, at the lifeguard station, stares at the moon reflected in the water, and wonders if he's damned. Gaze Into the Abyss roll: Boxcars, plus 3 Dark, so a 15! He sees the waters grow still, and realizes he's not damned as long as he stays in control. Then he sees the water grow choppy, and feels destructive urges too.

Then he sees Pete and Logan – for real, not in a vision – and catches up with them. I wonder aloud whether it'd be a good idea for Steffan to be stuck with other people on a boat when there's a chance The Noise might trigger him into berserk werewolf mode:

Me: This is either a good idea, in which case I should do it, or a terrible idea, in which case I should also do it.

They break into the dock house, steal some keys, steal a boat. Logan pilots the boat. Briar warns that while Logan's got steering pretty much figured out, he's not sure about landing.

Logan asks his Patron if there's a way to remove Pete's powers; the Patron says "We're not doing that." Also, Logan has the Patron remove the "Failure" condition, so those emails vanish. (This requires giving the Patron another String on Logan, thus pushing Logan further away from getting out of Darkest Self, which he's been in since he skirted death.) (See E&A #12, pg 140.)

As we approach the island, we see plumes of mist coming to meet us. *That's where we break.*

We've got three PCs with four advances, and Laeli and Steffan are each just two XP away from earning their fifth. But there's also a strong chance that we'll run out of story without hitting the season-ending mechanic.

Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 13

9 Jul. The forecast calls for thunderstorms, and we're talking about it on the group Discord:

Erica: Oh that weather is turning gross fast

Me: 🎵 Oh the weather is turning frightful

But the game will be delightful

Our enemies must be slain

Let it rain, let it rain, let it rain 🎵

Briar: You know you are each other's enemies, right?

And while most of the bad weather missed us, Briar wasn't kidding about us being enemies. The PCs are all going to Blackwell Island to try to gather up the five senses of the mysterious power in the well (except for sound, which we all know is in the recorder – though only Laeli knows that her friend CJ has the recorder). She outlines the individual stakes for each of us in gathering up these magical sense-based essences (which we start calling horcruxes):

Logan: Seeks horcruxes for his Patron, but also wants to de-strengthenify Pete. Briar says if Logan gets no horcruxes, he'll have to pick a new skin – his Patron will reject him, and curse him for every string the Patron holds on Logan. If he gets many horcruxes, he'll get several extra bargains for free.

Steffan: If neither Steffan nor Logan get any horcruxes, Steffan will be the last werewolf, and the Moon will spite him with lunacy each full moon (basically the black-out berserker state in which he mauled Agatha). If they get several, he gets a free wolf pack without having to spend an advance.

Drake: If he gets horcruxes for Kash Patel, he gets political power – strings on the White House. If he gets none, he's screwed – manhunt, gotta flee, or maybe he's pressed into service as a procurer, the new Epstein.

Laeli: If none, ELIZA loses her power, becomes a tool of the patriarchy. If many, Laeli can become ELIZA's favorite, get a cult (free clique), custom bargains w/ Eliza like Logan has with his Patron.

Blue: Blue's got the inverse of the rest of us – he wants to

keep the senses from being extracted. Blue will feel immediate bad effects as horcruxes are extracted. He'll lose supernatural abilities, become mortal. (Briar quizzes Johnni ahead of time about which of Blue's moves are supernatural.) If all are extracted, he'll be retroactively removed from time, he'll have never existed. If he can restore the sound one, and no others are taken, some unspecified good outcome. He'll regain lost memories, become more powerful version of himself.

So Steffan and Logan are allied, which gives us an advantage. But Laeli's got the weakest consequences for failing to get even a single horcrux – the outcome is borne by ELIZA, not by Laeli.

And were enemies slain? Well, read on....

NJ is running late, for work reasons, so we start without her, finding ways to arrange the scenes so Laeli doesn't need to speak. Briar puts on our theme music, "In My Mouth" by Black Dresses, and sets the scene:

It's 4:07AM, by the clock on the dashboard of the SUV that Blue's driving, with Drake in the passenger seat. Laeli's in back, absorbed in her phone. They approach the pier, and the old yacht Drake used to use with Byron. Drake sees Byron's ghost reflected in the window. Briar asks Mike what sort of stuff Drake and Byron used to get up to.

Mike: On the island?

Briar: On the boat.

Johnni: You guys don't have an island yet.

"Sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll," says Mike, answering Briar's question.

Blue sees the moon setting, mist pouring from island. How does Blue feel? Incredible. He can remember the ecstasy of merging with the entity. Briar says Blue has a facial tic that expresses this ecstasy, what is it? Johnni says that Blue's head twitches, spattering a bit of blood (from when he hit his head last session) on the window.

Steffan, Logan, and Pete are on the motorboat. Logan's aft, guiding it towards the island. Logan is shivering, sweaty, hasn't showered or changed clothes in two days. He's twitchy, forgetting what normal feels like. We've got Dupris's gym bag, and the two shotguns. Erica volunteers to list some things in the gym bag: old gym clothes, the shotguns, some energy bars, a cologne atomizer with some awful body spray. (Erica's thinking ahead, here.) Logan notices Pete looking at him, worried, then looks away.

Steffan is at the bow, transfixed by the moon. He remembers his grandpa telling him stories about a "lone wolf" – but sometimes he'd tell stories about a pack, but they were hunted. The stories often focused on the mutual responsibilities of the wolf pack. Briar asks me to invent a story, and I come up with something about two wolves being captured and caged by villagers, and the pack rescuing them, and letting the village's herd of

cows escape for revenge. Briar starts talking about Logan as another member of Steffan's pack, metaphorically, but I say that Steffan feels like Logan and the other PCs have been unreliable. (They tried to kill him just yesterday! See E&A #8, pg 173.) Pete, and the other basketball team members, are more like Steffan's pack at this point. Steffan smells a musky smell from the island.

NJ arrives! Brief pause while Briar explains Laeli's stakes (above) to NJ.

The SUV pulls up to the Old Pier. Drake gets out of the car, takes his evidence box with him. CJ is supposed to be following in another car. Laeli texts CJ to come after her if she hasn't heard anything for an hour.

Drake's boat is a two-level yacht. There's a wine fridge, beer cooler, drug paraphernalia – including bong. Laeli tells Blue the recorder is in the mountains. They see the motorboat, and that it'll get to the island first.

On the speedboat, Steffan feels the change coming on as they enter the mist. Logan tries Shut Someone Down to keep him from changing, but fails. Steffan turns into a wolf, but still has self-control, he's not in Darkest Self. He sits down, wags his tail to indicate that it's safe. Pete pets him.

Logan tries to beach the boat, but it hits a rock, flips over, breaks, and Logan takes damage, but we keep the bag. (Briar offers Erica the choice between Logan holding on to the bag and protecting himself; she takes the bag. She's got plans for the stuff in that bag!) Pete falls, but is fine. Steffanwolf lands gracefully on his paws. Logan is frantic, but Pete is patient with him. Logan fills Pete in on the situation they're in, tells him about Blue, Laeli, and Drake:

Logan: Blue seems like a decent guy. I was inside him.
(See E&A #12, pgs 136–140)

Johnni: Yeah, make him jealous!

Pete says he won't need a gun, picks up a rock.

As Drake, Blue, and Laeli arrive on the island, all but Blue enter Darkest Self. Drake asks Laeli what the plan is, but she says she doesn't have one. Laeli also claims that she doesn't have cell coverage (I think there was some discussion of contacting ELIZA), but won't show Blue her phone when challenged. Drake consults ELIZA with his phone; she suggests using the bong to capture taste. Blue is thinking he might be able to use his body to capture touch.

Drake takes some handcuffs, cuffs Laeli to the rail of the yacht. It's a partial success, so she learns something about him: as he locks her to the rail he shouts "Hey, Byron, here you go!" Then Drake walks off into the mist. Then Laeli feels someone yank her hair – she lets out a blood-curdling scream.

Johnni: I'm going to Gaze Into the Abyss to see if there's some way I can hurt Byron. I wanna beat him up again!

Blue leaves his body, and can feel the whole island, knows where all the characters are, and feels where Byron is. Blue squeezes – but Johnni's Lash Out roll fails, so Byron resists, and kicks the backs of Laeli's knees. Blue tries again, rolls well, crushes Byron into ectoplasm, which splatters both Blue & Laeli.

As Blue does this, the mist concentrates around him, withdrawing from the rest of the island. Steffan briefly turns to human form. I figure since Steffan and Logan are allies, and the other three, working against us, are using ELIZA, I can make their lives a bit harder:

Steffan: Pete! Throw rocks at those things <points> those rectangular things on the top of the lighthouse. Wreck them!

Everyone else: <looks at me quizzically>

Me: The antennas for the island's cell phone tower.

Everyone else: Ooooooh!

Briar calls for a Turn Someone On roll to convince Pete, but I roll snake-eyes (and mark experience – one more to go for my fifth advance!). Pete doesn't understand why he should do it, and Steffan turns back to a wolf as the mist comes back. Logan asks Pete to rub the rock into a worry stone, figuring maybe they can use that to capture the sense of touch.

Blue & Laeli chat. Blue wants to know what the fuck Laeli's been doing, and where the recording is. Laeli tries to convince Blue that it's in the mountains, but can't lie convincingly, admits it's with CJ. They haggle over contacting CJ, going back to get her, unlocking the cuffs. They agree to bully Drake, but have a hard time agreeing on anything else.

Laeli: What do I get out of this?

Blue: I killed Byron! *Twice!* You owe me!

Laeli calls CJ, Blue hits the speaker phone button to make sure it's her, Laeli tells CJ to bring the recorder, then take the militia and burn down Drake's house. The militia, CJ explains, seem to have killed each other off.

They take Drake's boat back towards the dock to meet CJ, who's not sure if she trusts Blue, but Laeli talks her into it. Laeli tells CJ to gather up another militia, burn down Drake's house, and then go attack Steffan's house and kill his parents. Blue tries to talk her out of this, but Laeli wants mayhem. CJ hands over the recorder, and Blue puts it in his pocket. CJ also gives Laeli a pistol, with silver bullets. Blue uses his phone (which used to be FBI Agent Fred's) to send a text to the feds, telling them to grab CJ, warning them that she's dangerous.

Logan tells Pete to destroy the cell tower. Erika only rolls 5, but Logan has a move that gives Logan's Patron a string for a +2, so that's enough to get Pete to do it. Pete doesn't need a die roll, he's the star of the basketball team, so the cell antennas go out in a shower of sparks. (Just after Blue's text to the feds goes out – great timing!) Logan hugs

Pete briefly, then drops away, and they both blush.

Drake shows up out of the mist, says he took care of Laeli. Logan Gazes to try and bond with the mist, based on his past experience when he and Blue were psychically bonded, figuring maybe he can get it to cooperate, but it rejects him, emphatically. Blue can feel this from a distance.

Blue: I think Logan tried to get inside me again.

Laeli: Is he sleeping with you?

As they approach the well, Steffan starts to feel Darkest Self come on. He stops, manages to convey this to Drake & Logan, so Steffan will stay back and guard the perimeter. Briar agrees that this is enough Darkest Self to trigger Steffan's Unstable move, so I fill my experience track and get another move. I take the *Move from another skin* advance, and snag one from the Ghoul skin:

Short Rest for the Wicked

When you die, wait it out. A few hours later, you wake up fully healed.

This is also my fifth advance, officially marking the season end and the availability of Season Advances.

Logan and Drake are at the well. They're planning out how they're gonna extract the senses – an atomizer for smell, the phone camera for sight, the worry stone for touch. How about taste? Logan says maybe the energy bars for taste? Drake (in Darkest Self) thinks this is such a bad idea, he gets furious. He's got a bong to capture taste. They start to assemble all of their various items into the crate that had held the evidence of Drake's and Byron's crimes. They've got some cords to lower it with; I forget where they came from.

Steffan senses Blue & Laeli approaching. Blue smells like the mist, Steffan can feel that Blue is the embodiment of touch. Too bad he can't tell anyone about it.

Blue is talking to Laeli, telling her he learned how to take enemies down by being nice. He says he learned how to be human by watching her. She's flattered by this, not realizing that Blue hates being human. They show up near the well. Steffan interposes himself but Blue verbally convinces Drake not to lower his stuff into the well. Logan gets Blue to explain himself.

Blue reminds us all of the things he's done for us. Blue's suggesting some kind of compromise where we can all use the extracted senses to please our various patrons, then return them to the well. Blue admits he doesn't actually know for sure what will happen if the things are put back in. (A moment's thought would reveal that this wouldn't work at all – the government wants the senses to analyze and weaponize them, the other entities want to absorb them for power.)

Laeli's been video recording this, of course. Drake tries to grab her phone and throw it in the well, but Mike rolls badly; Drake trips, knocking over the crate of stuff. Laeli uses a move she took from the Vampire skin to hypnotize

Pete, and tells him to lower the crate of stuff into the well. As it's lowered, Blue starts to feel more solid and memories start to return, though he pushes the memories aside, falling to one knee. Drake puts his hand on Blue's shoulder, and Blue feels more solid than usual. The mist recedes. Steffan is human again. Everyone's out of Darkest Self, except Logan, whose Darkest Self isn't caused by the mist, but by his Skirting Death a few sessions back (E&A #12, pg 140).

Logan: Pete, pull it back up.

Laeli: No, Pete, don't pull it up.

Logan: <cocks shotgun, points it at Laeli>

Laeli: OK, Pete, pull it up.

Pete's arm trembles, and it looks like he might drop the crate. Logan tackles him to knock him down and pull on the cord, bringing up the items. Logan winds up on top of Pete, and kisses him. (Yay!) Pete flinches for a moment, then kisses Logan back. (Yay!) This breaks the hypnosis. (Yay!)

Drake grabs the phone and the bong. Blue tells Pete to grab the other items and tackles Drake. Laeli notices Pete not obeying; he's busy. Logan reaches out with one arm and grabs the atomizer, while still making out with Pete.

Blue tackles Drake, and tries to talk him into giving up; Drake pulls out a gun and shoots Blue in the head, point-blank! (So much for that touching speech last session about how much Drake would miss Blue!) Blue Skirts Death by entering Darkest Self: Blue's head splatters, then re-forms, and Blue gives Drake nasty visions. Drake realizes that Blue is the touch item.

Drake tries to run. Logan shoots him. (Steffan was gonna jump on him, but shooting is faster.) Logan's using a shotgun, so the shot slows Drake down, but doesn't stop him, so Steffan tackles Drake. This works – brings Drake to 3 Harm, makes him drop the phone – but then Briar asks for a Keep Your Cool roll, and I fail, so the phone starts flashing, and Steffan blacks out, (Briar basically takes him over from here) turns into a hulked-out wolf-man, and howls like nobody's seen him howl before. (In retrospect I should probably have objected to the black-out, here, and asked for just an ordinary Darkest Self. The last time Steffan blacked out, it was the result of an explicit choice with loss of control as one of the options.)

Drake tries to run with the phone, trips. Blue tries to go for the phone, but Steffan lunges for Blue. (This was Briar's decision, but I'd have done the same thing, and gotten the same result.) Laeli shoots at Steffan with her gun, which has silver bullets.

Briar: Where are you shooting him?

Me: On the island, I assume.

NJ: He broke my heart, so I'm shooting him in the heart.
<rolls dice: boxcars>

Briar says that's four Harm, and Steffan's already got one, but before Briar can even get started on the Skirting Death move, I get up and show her the recent addition to my sheet. So Steffan just dies, and I get to play Pete for a while.

(You might wonder, why does that new move matter, if the standard Skirting Death move makes it easy to not die? Well, there are two possible costs for Skirting Death: either you enter Darkest Self, or you lose all of your strings. Steffan was already in Darkest Self, so that wasn't an option. And the hypnosis move Laeli has only works on people who don't have strings on her, so I want to make sure Steffan's always got at least one string on Laeli. Briar introduced a custom option – “something extra terrible happens,” see E&A #10, pg 137 – but I like having an option that's spelled out and under my control.)

Logan mentally contacts his Patron, asks him to take the atomizer (the Patron still counts that as doing Logan a favor, because Logan wasn't competent enough to bring it in person, so this gives the Patron a fifth string on Logan). The atomizer vanishes. Laeli sees this, tells Logan to bring it back. Logan says he's just trying to keep it from Drake.

Drake keeps trying to run, failing. Blue tells Drake to surrender the phone, or he'll do to Drake what he did to Byron. Drake spits in Blue's face. Blue pushes Drake, which does his last point of Harm. Drake falls off a cliff. Briar starts explaining that Drake can Skirt Death by losing all his strings, but Mike tears up Drake's sheet with a dramatic flourish, and starts looking over the Ghost skin on his phone.

Blue confronts Logan over the atomizer. Logan contacts his Patron, who is very clear that he is *not* giving it back. The Patron also tells Logan that the recorder is right in front of him – Blue has it. Blue wants to jump into the well, but he still needs the last item, the atomizer, to get a full victory.

Logan asks his Patron for help; the Patron says he'll be there in five minutes. Pete hovers over Logan, protectively. Five minutes later, the sun comes up. It's unusually bright. So hot and bright that Blue and Laeli each take 1 Harm.

The Sun: Give them to my priest.

Blue: Give me the atomizer and I'll hand them over.

The Sun: <inflicts another Harm on Blue> Hand them over or become a raisin.

Blue jumps into the well.

Briar puts the theme music on again; narrates a closing scene: Pete, Logan, and Laeli standing around the well. Steffan's sprawled out, human again, with a hole in his chest. Drake's body lies bloody in the surf.

Pete, Logan, and Laeli get on Drake's boat, return to their wrecked city. Logan finds an empty house, tells Pete to go off and find his parents, and takes a shower. Logan also offers to help Laeli find cute boys online. Laeli is posting some of the footage, hoping to become an influencer, but not all of it. She wants to spread it out over time, to build mystery and develop a following.

Johnni narrates a dying memory for Blue – he realizes that Drake was his summoner. But then Briar narrates that as Blue falls through the darkness, the items explode one by one. Then the darkness pushes him back up. Blue's flung

out of the well, and lands next to Steffan's body. He realizes the purpose he was created for still isn't resolved – he still needs to find a thief.

Steffan's body twitches.

This was so much fun! Rules-as-written, we ought to have one more session in the season, but this was clearly the end of the story arc. We're probably going to go on to a second season, and we're already tossing around ideas. I'm considering retiring Steffan from play in favor of Bianca; there's a third-party Seer skin that would fit Bianca well. Or I could make an entirely new PC! A Fae (with the power to punish broken promises) would really shift the power dynamic of this group.

On the other hand, Steffan is now more socially tied to Logan, and with The Noise gone, he ought to be more playable as a character, easier to integrate into scenes with other PCs. And there are some interesting possibilities to build upon with Officer Biggs.

As far as the consequences go, Logan's Patron got one item, so I think that keeps Logan and Steffan from being utterly screwed, but they don't get any goodies. Blue returned four items to the well (including himself), so he ought to get some good stuff out of this. Drake has probably managed to escape consequences by dying, and Laeli's consequences are borne by ELIZA, so she's not directly harmed.

Scum and Villainy, Session 8

5 Jul. Virtual session, because of the weather (the forecast had been for rain and extreme heat, though the actual weather on the actual day wasn't bad). Zoom was no longer an option, for some reason, so we tried Facetime, then Google Meet, before settling on Discord.

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

We're in Rin system, getting away from Warren, because they've got that deadly xeno. We're relaxing. Von is paying attention to news feeds, waiting for news about the xeno awakening. (That's the dangerous xeno we transported to Warren last session – see E&A #13, pgs 141–142.)

Valsi gets a call from Hicks, a contact, about a possible job. “Is it a wedding?”: “No, but it's something party-related, for certain values of ‘party’.” Could be dangerous. In Rin system. He wants to meet at the Straylight, a club in orbit.

We dock on the Straylight, an orbital nightclub. Hicks has rented a conference room. There's a comm screen that's on, but nobody showing on it. This is a rescue mission, commissioned by the Cobalt Syndicate and the Dyrinek Gang, working together.

There's been a big party on Warren, going to end soon. (We know! We delivered a dangerous world-destroying xeno to that very party last session!) One ship of VIPs is

going to be hijacked. It would be “helpful” if some of those VIPs got rescued before being spaced.

The ship is a luxury pinnacle, usually carries about 20 people, mostly crew. We make sure we’ve got supply and emergency space rescue bubbles for a couple dozen people. The pinnacle is registered to the government.

Harmony prowls the web, learns that one of the passengers will be the Governor’s heir. (The clone we rescued a few sessions back—see E&A #10, pgs 130–131.) Von intimidates one of his contacts—a crooked cop—into spilling some info about the ship’s security. He says the guys working security will fight to the death, and there are some clone soldiers.

We decide it’s a Transport mission. We can drop the passengers off anywhere safe in Rin system. We’ve got a 2d6 engagement roll, and get a 6. So the Waydancer is well-positioned to respond when we hear the alert about the ship being attacked by pirates. We “luckily” arrive too late to join in the fighting, but in time to rescue people after the pirates leave. The pirates left timed charges to destroy the pinnacle, so the ship explodes after we get everyone (six people—3 kids, 3 adults) to safety.

One adult is (or seems to be) the Governor’s heir, Ritam II, who’s wearing a cloak, not noble clothing, pretending to be an engine-room worker. Another is Dorae White, chief executive of the Starsmiths Guild, and the woman who hired us to deliver the cake to Harmony’s brother Kenn a few sessions back, which wound up breaking up Kenn’s marriage to Oya, an Ashen Knives assassin (E&A #8, pgs 177–179). Dorae tells us the pirates captured Kenn, but she has Kenn’s (and Oya’s) daughter, Harmony’s niece, Enchantra (Kenn named her), who’s one of the kids. (Dorae also believes that the pirates got the heir.) There’s also a Way mendicant who looks like a cat-person, accompanied by a young acolyte with tentacles.

And there’s a baby. Von winds up holding the baby, and when he asks whose baby it is, nobody answers.

Harmony chats with Enchantra, who gives her more info on the situation: the fake heir was a shape-shifter, and the baby is Dorae’s & Kenn’s. We message Enchantra’s mom, Oya, but we get one of her people instead of Oya herself. (She’s presumably still busy with security for the big party on Warren from last session.)

The ship jerks and changes course. Harmony & Valsi race to the helm—Dorae has locked in a course to follow the pirate ship, and wants to rescue Kenn. She gave him a tracking device. Von grabs Dorae; Valsi wants to space her.

Harmony tries to HACK to unlock the course, but fails.(4d6 roll, best roll is 3, but Harmony checks her “Special Armor”—a game-mechanical checkbox, not actual armor—to avoid consequences). Gaylord sets up a 6-segment clock to track the time until the pirates notice that we’re closing on them and have to do something.

Dorae admits the baby is the result of using clone tech to combine her & Kenn’s DNA, and she revealed the baby to Kenn during the pirate attack.

Valsi uses the Way to keep our distance from the pirates—this expands the 6-clock to a 9-clock. (Clocks usually have even numbers of segments; this makes them easier to draw. But this clock just exists in the GM’s head, so it can have an odd number.) Dorae offers us 2 CRED as a bribe.

Valsi: Hah! You paid us more than that to deliver a cake!

Valsi suggests to Vary that they drug Dorae. Dorae mentions that she’s put a bomb on the ship.

Von knocks Dorae out (while holding the baby in his other arm), but it takes a while—1 wedge on the pirate countdown clock.

Harmony uses security camera footage to track where Dorae has been, finds the bomb, attached to the main drive. It would disable the drive, but not destroy the ship. She disarms the bomb, but it takes time—1 more wedge.

Harmony: Where’d she even get a bomb, anyway? Does she carry a bomb around with her, just in case? Who does that?

Von: I carry a bomb around with me.

Harmony: Um, right. Never mind.

Valsi does complicated HELM maneuvers to change course. This requires over-charging the engines. The clock changes from *Pirates Notice You* to *Lost In Space*.

Me: Who gets to play Doctor Smith?

I notice that Josh hasn’t done much, so I toss him an idea: Vary can take on Kenn’s appearance, partially awaken Dorae (so she’s in a drugged stupor), and try to convince her to tell us how to unlock the helm. He goes with this, and gets a partial success. Dorae gives Vary the code, but also grabs her arm in a vice-like grip, demanding that she stay close, “Kiss me darling!”

The code works; we have helm control back. Vary resumes her regular form in front of Dorae, who says “You’re just like the Governor of Rin, but I thought the Magpie experiments couldn’t work on humans yet.” Vary pushes for more info. The heir knows about the experiments. Dorae asks Vary to turn back into Kenn and sleep with her, then she’ll say more, but Vary isn’t willing.

We drop Dorae off on mining station SB-176, because we just don’t want to have her around anymore, and head to the Straylight orbital nightclub to drop off the others.

On the way, Vary wants to talk to apparent-Ritam, who doesn’t want to be disturbed. Vary takes him some room service; he tries to close the door, but she oozes through. He says “Oh, you’re a Magpie also.” He says that “The Other Guy” asked him to take on his form while the pirates attacked. Valsi CONSORTS to get some reliable info. Result: 6. Faux-Ritam doesn’t know much about humans, but “That Guy” (Kenn) wanted to chop him up in a big

blender, and “The Other Guy” (the actual Ritam II, we think) suggested the shape-change trick to escape the pirates. Kenn also wanted everyone in government to know that he’d rescued the heir. Also, Kenn’s daughter is carrying all his files.

The unnamed baby is a boy, Von names him Vic.

Harmony looks over Enchantra’s comm unit to see if there’s a hidden partition in the filesystem, but there’s nothing. Enchantra has no idea how her father could have given her any files; all he did was kiss her forehead before he was captured.

As we get to the Straylight, Enchantra bakes us a cake to say thanks. The Way mendicants tell Valsi that we might want to bring “it” to Brekk system. We assume “it” is the Aleph Key, the Precursor artifact we’ve been toting around since Session Zero (see E&A #3, pg 62).

Enchantra’s happy to see that her dad’s credit account card works for her. Harmony tells Von to take care of Vic while she teaches her niece how to drink & gamble. Dorae sends us a message saying the baby had better still be there when she gets there.

Entanglement: Cops pick up Harmony, but she bribes ’em with 2 CRED. Easy come, easy go.

Von overindulges his vice, and decides to take time off to raise baby Vic.

The Crew level on the ship goes up to +2.

Comments on E&A #13

Patrick Brady

YCT **Elf** (PG 6) RE “translating” from comics to film ⇒ These kinds of things are known more generally as *adaptations*, and the essence of an adaptation is that it must *adapt*. One essential difference between comics and film, as media, is that film portrays time as time, by showing you images in sequence, while comics portray time as space, by showing you images physically next to each other on the page. So the sequences in *Watchmen* that show two different moments, or the same moment in two locations, adjacent to each other, are difficult to reproduce in film. And it’s not clear to me that Zack Snyder was even aware of those sequences.

The most successful parts of Snyder’s *Watchmen* film, in my view, were those new bits that built upon the text without trying to literally translate it – [the opening sequence](#) that recaps the alternative timeline of the setting to the tune of Dylan’s “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” and the [bits of alt-history television](#) we see at the beginning (an episode of [The McLaughlin Group](#), and an ad for Nostalgia perfume that’s a parody of [Ridley Scott’s 1979 “Share the Fantasy” ad for Chanel No 5](#)).

A much more successful adaptation was [the 2019 *Watchmen* sequel](#) that Damon Lindelof made for HBO.

This managed to capture a lot of the spirit of the original, but since it was a new story, wasn’t obligated to slavishly reproduce exact scenes from it.

All that said, even conventional translation has a lot more art to it than many people realize. The Italians have a saying, “*Traduttore, traditore*” – “Translator, traitor.”

RE Letters from Vindolanda (PG 9) ⇒ One of Gibson’s more recent books, [The Peripheral](#) (2014), portrays a future where there’s an international ruling class of organized crime families, called “the Klept.” The sequel, [Agency](#), which was published in Jan 2020, just ahead of the COVID epidemic, is mostly set in an alternative 2017, and has some characters from the 22nd century remarking that the plague hasn’t hit the protagonists yet.

There’s supposed to be a third novel in the series, but Gibson’s still working on it.

Matt Stevens

YCT **Roger Bell_West** (PG 12) RE “fractalized” rules ⇒ So as I pointed out up top, there are games that have tackled this already ([Risus](#), [Fate](#)). It seems to me that “fractalized” rules are easier to do in a rules-light system than in a heavily-ruled one. Rules-light games tend to have very flexible mechanics that can adapt to a wide range of situations, and adapting them to work at different levels of “graininess” is just another kind of adaptation.

YCT **me** (PG 15) RE libertarians, but not Marxists, “espousing their ideologies through space wizards and barbarian babes” ⇒ I think [China Miéville](#) is probably the best-known Marxist who writes in a mode derived from classic sci-fi and fantasy, though I think [Michael Moorcock](#) is a leftist anarchist, so he’s probably got some Marxist influences.

YCT **Elf** (PG 15) RE building Superman in DC Heroes ⇒ Looking over the [first-edition DC Heroes rules](#) and the *Superman Companion*, I see that pre-Crisis Supes had a Strength of 50, so high that it’s off the end of the AP Purchase Chart in the character creation rules, which stops at 40 (though you can calculate past that point using the formulas given). New heroes start out with a budget of 250 Hero Points, while Superman’s Strength alone costs 5,800! The Earth-2 Superman, on the other hand, is a relative weakling, with a mere 36 Strength.

By second edition, Superman has been downgraded; his Strength is merely 25. This is clearly the post-Crisis version. (Also, AP costs have been rejiggered.)

Anyway, yeah, you can clearly play Superman in DC Heroes, though you can’t build him as a starting character.

Patrick Riley

YCT **Elf** (PG 25) RE benchmarks in *Icons* ⇒ This reminds me of one of the greatest RPG supplements ever, the *Deluxe City Campaign Set* for the old [Marvel FASERIP system](#), which describes many fixtures of New York City in game terms, so you can authoritatively determine how much damage

gets done to the landscape in a super-punch-up!

The Empire State Building is built on a foundation of bedrock 55 feet (4 areas) down. There are two underground floors, and beneath them are giant air conditioners that cool the entire building with Amazing ability. Shift-X strength can rip these air conditioners loose; merely Uearthly strength is needed to throw them.

— *Marvel Super Heroes Deluxe City Campaign Set*, 1989

I do wonder how they researched it.

YCT **Lisa** (PG 27) RE Turning Someone On in *Monsterhearts* ⇒ If you're really offended at the idea of your character getting turned on by something in the game, there's always the X-Card (or whatever other safety tools your table has decided to use, and the game does recommend that you use something).

But ultimately, if this is something that squicks you, then *Monsterhearts* isn't a game for you, just like Paranoia isn't a game for people who dislike violence and dark humor.

Brian Rogers

YCT **me** (PG 38) RE punishment in the Marvel universe ⇒ At the editorial level, that's a clear double-standard, but at the diagetic level, Jean Grey made the mistake of destroying a planet in her own continuum, and one within the domain of a powerful government that could fight back.

John Redden

RE economic theories of value (PG 49) ⇒ Aren't you kind of skipping over the fact that the Marginal Revolution replaced the labor theory of value with the marginal theory of value way back in the second half of the 19th century?

Erica L Frank (Elf)

YCT **Brian Rogers** (PG 103) RE kill-the-monster fantasy ⇒ While the hack-and-slashers have always been with us, that quote from the creators of Obojima was pretty startling. A game inspired by Studio Ghibli films ought to be all about "the moral nature of our world and existential stuff."

YCT **me** (PG 105) RE *Umdaar* ⇒ Well, the good news is that you can get *Umdaar* in PDF form (so it doesn't take up space on your shelf) pay-what-you-want (so it doesn't take money out of your bank account) through DriveThru RPG!

Scribble M Horror

RE Rule Mutability in *Nomic* and *D&D* (PGs 115–122) ⇒ There's something here in the passages about how both *D&D* and *Nomic* seem incomplete, how they "demand fixing," that jibes with my comment to Patrick Riley lastish (E&A #13, pg 144) about trashy genre books, and Satah's advice about gaining inspiration from books, films, etc that are "fine – not bad, but not really good" (E&A #10 pg 129), and these all seem to be about how we are engaged by

stuff that's good enough to get our attention and get our emotions worked up, but still has some flaws for us to pick at.

I'm not sure if this ties in at all to Vincent Baker's concept of the Fruitful Void – a chunk of the game's subject matter that isn't engaged *directly* by the rules, but is still the focus of player activity. If you read down into the comments on that old blog post thread (from 2005!), there's one by Andrew Norris that sums up the Fruitful Void as "Here's the stuff you really want, and here's the tools you could use to make that happen. Whatcha gonna do?" It's a different phenomenon, but it's still a way of getting people's emotions and attention engaged by leaving a hole that needs to be filled.

Dylan Capel

RE *Dungeonhearts: Youth on the Borderlands* (PG 131) ⇒ Dungeonhearts looks pretty interesting, but I wish there was some guidance on how to divide the players up between the Adventurers and Denizens. Should there be an even split? Is it OK if everyone chooses one or the other group?

Lisa Padol

YCT **Brian Misiaszek** (PG 159) RE the old O&E predictable attacks rule being "onerous" ⇒ Is this really onerous? Have you, personally, found this rule to be onerous? The A&E contributor who, back in the day, said it was onerous – did he (I've forgotten who) actually say he'd tried it and found it onerous, or was he just borrowing trouble?

YCT **me** (PG 163) RE Over the Edge and PC fear ⇒ The island of Al Amarja will do a pretty good job by itself of providing the PCs with things to fear.

YCT **me** (PG 163) RE the *Monsterhearts* game ⇒ Yeah, if ELIZA is truly a supernatural power, and not just an AI fooling us, there are at least three big supernatural powers messing around in Vermilion Cove. (And the fact that the ELIZA rhyme-chant was efficacious against the mist implies that ELIZA is a true power.)

I'm pretty sure the "champion" that Logan's Patron was referring to was Pete, with his supernatural strength. "That one's on me" refers to allowing Ernie to get away; Logan's not being blamed for the arrival of the mist, which is too powerful for the Patron to tangle with.

I'm not actually sure when Agatha left Laeli's house; it's not mentioned in either my notes or Johnni's. It must have been before Blue and Steffan got there.

Jim Vassilakos

YCT **me** (PG 204) RE PC backstory ⇒ Funny cartoon, but I'll note that "orphan edgelord" is its own red flag, distinct from the 30-page background.

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 12: by Roger BW

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



Well, this is my twelfth zine for *E&A*, so I've been producing these things for a year. Guess I'm sticking around. I find I enjoy the PDF-APA concept, to the extent of having started my own.

Also I've changed my standard formatter for links so that the URL itself is shown in a footnote (in case for whatever reason clicking on it doesn't work), rather than breaking up the flow of the page.

Recent Games

2300AD / Bayern: (The Sunday group; Whartson Hall is still playing other things.) The team returns from the previous mission. It seems pretty likely that there has been, and may still be, a hostile FTL-capable species out there. There's some discussion (with the team and the senior officers) about what to do. Send courier drones to *Anton Dohrn* (scouting a binary system) and *George Bauer* (ice mining in a system with no habitable worlds), at least. Get the flotilla back together, and move on. Then a gravitational anomaly is detected. It proves to be a courier drone from *Bauer*, which has been attacked and boarded by hostile aliens. It's not clear whether they had time to perform the navigational database purge, nor whether there are any survivors.

Options: Let it go. Go and retake the ship. Go and try to talk to the aliens. Or...

Diane Kamahmo, *Bayern XO*: Or we could detonate the nuclear scuttling charge. I'm not an enthusiast for this idea but as XO it's my job to put it in play.

Dr Jacqueline Bohranian, chief xenobiologist: I'm sorry, did you say "nuclear scuttling charge"?

Kamahmo: Was that not in your briefing?

"Retake the ship" and "nuclear scuttling charge" are the options that survive debate. The charge will need a ship within 2½ light minutes, because there's a handshake with a timeout. (And nobody wants to put the code aboard a drone that might get caught.)

Given what the drone recording revealed about *Bauer's* situation (in a gap between two gas giant rings, ice-mining a shepherd moon) the team and NPCs decide to take *Entdecker* in under sensor shadow of the gas giant and then its rings, gather more information, then decide between detonation and assault. They take along a lander strapped to the hull, and some quickly-printed heavy weapons.

They quietly forget about the scuttling charge and accelerate and then decelerate hard towards the alien ship, putting it in the drive plume; this

does some damage, and seems to set off internal explosions. It starts to tumble, tearing away the umbilical connecting it to *Bauer*. Then the most combative of the team go in on the lander and sweep *Bauer* for remaining aliens. Five dead crew, and the rest have been interrogated by aliens who apparently didn't believe they had no language in common.

The aliens appear to have been trying to work out how the stutterwarp worked, and general damage in engineering means *Entdecker* takes *Bauer* in tow.

GURPS Traveller / The Pirates of Drinax: Session three, and after a certain amount of faffing about we prepare for the incoming raid. Sure enough, it's two scout ships or near analogue, so the same total mass as us... but a well-aimed particle beam shot takes out #1's power plant¹ and we come to a Menacing Hover™ over #2 on the ground.

Session four, and the crew of #2 decide to fight. This... does not go well for them, especially when our pilot sets the rather larger *Pride of Innsmouth* down on top of the scout to prevent her taking off. But with our shiny new salvage (well, #1 will need a lot of work to fly again, not to mention hosing out²) we head back to Drinax rather than continuing our planned exploration.

Session five, back at Drinax we face our greatest danger yet: a victory feast, with all the high mucks of the pocket state present. Ruersaegn tries, as always, to make friends with everyone (for example, pointing out to the commander of the Star Guard, who would have had our ship if

¹I wonder if the inertial compensators, that might let the crew survive the crash, have emergency backup batteries?

²Turns out the inertial compensators work better if you do the maintenance.

not for this mad scheme, that a highly-mobile commerce raider is a truly terrible *defensive* asset) but we're all relieved to move on to a world that seems to have been hit by remarkably well-organised pirates. (Who *aren't* us!)

GURPS WWII / Lions, Tigers & Dragons: Still in Iran, but we manage to get some private audiences and largely sort out the magical influence on the Shah. And I start teaching the ladies of the palace (cohabiting wife, eldest daughter) how to detect this sort of thing for themselves in future; there's not time to do much, but at least I can give them some places to look to learn more.

GURPS / The Day After Ragnarok: Having got safely to the side of the road, we find that someone helpfully left a snake in the car's underworks, presumably in the hope that it would bite whoever took a look. Instead, Don makes friends with it (and it's not even his birthday).



CC-BY-SA 2.0 Wikipedia user Colin Knowles

"This is a very safe snake. It can only just kill you."

Clearly the gloves are off. But going after people who are not blatantly criminal as far as their

public personalities are concerned, and who have friends in high places, will be challenging. We find we're being shadowed, and toy with the thugs who've been hired to give us a beating; we swap their freedom for what they know about the people who hired them, and indeed it seems to have been the mildly crazy lady ("eccentric", since she's rich) we met last time. We may succeed here simply by being annoying, and resilient, enough that they overstep their social protection in trying to get at us...

Having made arrangements for the care and feeding of the snake, we work on a sketch of Fiona the crazy snake lady, and our police contact identifies her as Fiona Lawrence, a "bad seed" (good family, but definitely known to the police). Her father was a good Detective Inspector, her mother died young, and while she has a history of speeding tickets and public drunkenness she's been quieter lately. Well, now we can guess why...

We borrow a WPC (for the uncomplicated power of arrest, and also since we're an all-male party in case we need a chaperone) and go to Fiona's flat. She's not there; our sorcerer thinks she's probably still with Lady Torrington, the aristocrat who seems to be the local cult ringleader.

Then we're called back to the station, as the Governor-General has been receiving complaints about us; not, it seems, from Lady T, but from various other people whom we haven't even met. That's something the team leader can sort out, but we're under pressure to get this resolved quickly and quietly.

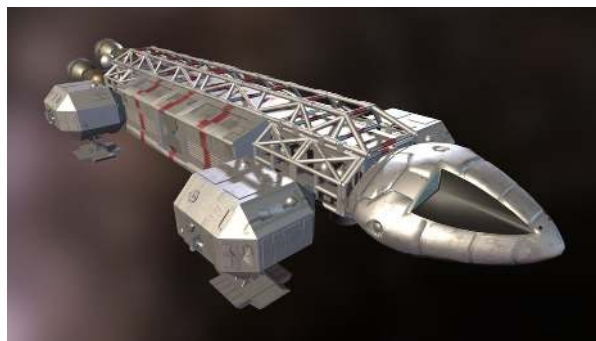
"I've just checked the map for how much of Scotland is left. Whisky is going to get really expensive." "There's always Australian whiskey." "*Really* expensive." (We reckon that the major

surviving producers are probably in western Canada.)

Next it seems that a downtown department store has an infestation of snakes. There's nothing immediately in sight when we arrive, and it's probably not all that many of them, Since they don't have a pet department, a constable is sent off to buy some mice, but meanwhile we go in. It takes a while to track them down, but we're *good* at this; Don is an expert animal handler, and the rest of the team are solid at spotting. They're all different species, and none of them matches the last one. Someone may be running down their exotic reptile collection. (But Fiona was spotted there earlier in the day.)

But that doesn't seem very efficient of them. What have they been doing that this could have been a distraction *for*?

Space: 1999 at Stabcon: A different GM from the game I played in January,³ and this session was more to my taste: there was a specific problem that we were trying to solve, and our actions felt as though they had an effect on the game world rather than just leaving us as observers. I still don't love the system, but I did have a good time.



CC-BY by uperesito at Sketchfab

³Mentioned in *E&A* #8.

Alas, I missed my chance at Mike's Last Convention Game by waiting to ask him what sort of setting it was beyond "Risus" (which I've never played), and by the time I got a chance it had already filled up. Ah well.

GURPS WWII / Neutral Currents:

We've crossed the Atlantic from Ascension to the coast of Brazil, thanks to various magical assistance but it's just technically plausible with good weather and good piloting. Natal, a small port on the coast that we chose because it was within range, can't help us much, and it appears that most of the aviation on this side of Brazil is controlled by the German company that's got the mail contract. This may be quite rough.

Random character generation for Cthulhu Eternal

A little while ago, before my contributions to *E&A* began, I abused [Typst](https://typst.app/)⁴ to write a program which would turn a JSON file defining a *Cthulhu Eternal* character into a playable character sheet. (The official form-fillable sheets are the "special" sort of PDF that Adobe Acrobat now produces unless firmly prevented, which depend on being able to run JavaScript in the document; they're fine with Adobe Acrobat on Windows and Mac, but nothing I've found on Linux can read them.) That's the first part of the shoggoth software suite, to which I later added a program to calculate skill improvements between adventures and a cheat-sheet generator which would produce a summary of the party's stats and skills for the benefit of the game master.

But how do you get the JSON file with the character in it? Well, if you're me, you write it in a text editor as you're going through the

character generation process. But most people aren't me.

Now I've added a random character generator, written in Python on the basis that it should be fairly easy for people to work out how to run it on their own machines, and lightly inspired by the *GURPS* template expander that I mentioned last time. Given an era and an archetype within that era, it'll generate stats, pick skills, and so on. Some tidying up is needed afterwards (picking skill specialisations for skills like Science and Survival that need them, and filling in Bonds, for example) but much of the work is done, whether you wanted a quick NPC or something to tweak into a player character.

So far I've converted eight of the SRDs to era files, meaning that any of the archetypes in them can be generated automatically: Age of Revolutions, Victorian, World War I, Jazz Age, World War II, Cold War, Modern and Future, covering everything from about 1750 onward. I'll gradually do others, unless someone else ends up doing them first.

The code is at [codeberg](https://codeberg.org/Firedrake/shoggoth)⁵ and free to use.

Intraparty Conflict

I've never been a fan.

I know there are people who love it, and games like *Monsterhearts* seem more or less to rely on it, but I don't enjoy it. I feel that my fellow player characters should be the people I can trust, even in the game. (If we're playing a board game or something, fair enough.) Call it an unspoken social contract if you like, but the cliché of the thief who constantly steals from the rest of the party is to me just another problem player.

⁴<https://typst.app/>

⁵<https://codeberg.org/Firedrake/shoggoth>

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 13

Patrick Brady: Here's my full list of free graphics sources:

Broadly new stuff:

- [Pixabay](#)⁶, [Pexels](#)⁷, and [Unsplash](#)⁸; these all try to upsell you and some may include AI content, so tread carefully.

Broadly old stuff:

- [Wikimedia Commons](#)⁹, probably the best overall source for the sort of thing I generally want.
- [Public Domain Image Archive](#)¹⁰, I rarely find what I'm looking for on here but occasionally it comes up trumps.
- [Old Book Illustrations](#)¹¹, probably the one I've used most here. Doesn't guarantee anything about copyright status; check individual publication dates and countries.
- [Picryl](#)¹², another public-domain image search engine.

Broadly museums:

- [US National Gallery of Art](#)¹³.
- [New York Public Library](#)¹⁴.
- [Biodiversity Heritage Library on Flickr, but it's Flickr](#)¹⁵.
- [Art Institute of Chicago](#)¹⁶.
- [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)¹⁷.

⁶<https://pixabay.com/>

⁷<https://www.pexels.com/>

⁸<https://unsplash.com/>

⁹https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

¹⁰<https://pdimagearchive.org/>

¹¹<https://www.oldbookillustrations.com/>

¹²<https://picryl.com/>

¹³<https://www.nga.gov/artwork-search?download=1>

¹⁴<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?filters=%5BBright%3DpublicDomain%5D>

¹⁵<https://www.flickr.com/photos/biodivlibrary/>

¹⁶https://www.artic.edu/collection?is_public_domain=1

- [Getty Museum](#)¹⁸.

More specialised:

- [NASA](#)¹⁹, specialised but very rich.
- [Story Seed Library](#)²⁰, a library of solarpunk art. (Not used anything from here yet but I keep it handy.)

RYCTM: I love Finland. Even if the booze is expensive.

RYCT Elf and superheroes at notional risk of dying: we know James Bond or whatever series hero won't die, and will succeed in the mission of the moment. The tension is in how much he will suffer on the way there, and who else will too: the victims, the innocent bystanders. (This is one reason I find the "smash up the city" style of superhero fight essentially unsatisfying.)

Regarding your spider-spirit problem: I think I'd ideally want (and I know this is a counsel of perfection) to find present-day followers or descendants of the relevant cultures and see how they feel about it.

Matt Stevens: To add to your point about the desire for a National Epic, Bret Devereux has an excellent [series](#)²¹ on what he called "The Fremen Mirage", the persistent idea in Western culture that people from less sophisticated societies are tougher, more morally pure, better fighters, than "weak" civilised people and will inevitably overrun them. (He uses the Fremen to name this, specifically because they don't exist in the real world.)

¹⁷<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search?searchField=All&showOnly=openAccess&sortBy=relevance>

¹⁸https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/search?open_content=true

¹⁹<https://images.nasa.gov/>

²⁰<https://storyseedlibrary.org/>

²¹<https://acoup.blog/category/collections/the-fremen-mirage/>

To over-summarise, he sees basically two stages to this: first, Caesar talks up the Germans in order to make himself sound better for having beaten them, while Sallust bemoans Roman “weakness” as a proxy for all the things he doesn’t like. Tacitus in *Germania* writes about his invented “Germans” (he has never been there) specifically as a metaphor in order to criticise Rome (very much like Plato talking about Atlantis, nobody’s expected to believe this is an actual description of actual people). Then, starting in the 16th century but really flowering in the 19th, Germany picks up Tacitus’s notion of “unconquered Germans” and builds a nationalism around it, France and Britain do the same with the Celts, and so on. When Romanticism comes along, it’s fertile ground for this, and then it combines with “scientific” racism... But read the whole thing; it’s very good.

RYCTM I first met the Satanic Panic (which was present in the UK but not to the same extent) in the context of role-playing games, but I suspect the perpetrators of it didn’t have anything against them specifically: like heavy metal music, and books that weren’t the Bible, they were simply an activity that parents might not understand, which could be blamed for their children not being perfectly obedient little clones of daddy and mummy. Of course anyone who wasn’t heterosexual and white might already have had experience of what churches could be like when they got a sniff of temporal power, leaving aside any considerations in the history of specific sort of church (which would be both off-topic and I think excessively political).

Re grain size: I think it’s a clear sign of RPGs’ original descent from wargames that combat is usually treated with more complexity than

anything else. (Also, of course, a single die roll has more variance than the average of lots of them, and it wouldn’t be satisfying to roll a single “fight” skill and either win or die.)

Regarding your multi-level rules, well, I think this is something a GM can do on the fly (and I certainly do with *GURPS*). Here’s a situation, and the system has complex rules for resolving it. Is it going to be interesting and fun to use those rules right now? If not, we don’t have to, we can fall back on some representative skill rolls or nothing at all. (I’ve known *Pathfinder* players look very askance at me for this, but it suits me and the people I play with.)

Re your illustration of the lady in the tree: using matching textures for the hair and the tree trunk works very well for me.

RYCT Lisa Padol: I know that I wouldn’t enjoy a D&D monster-bashing game, and as a result I’d probably spoil it for the other players, so I don’t join them in the first place. (Also, I’m very fortunate with the groups I’m in now who mostly feel the same way.)

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: I think that there are enough genuinely-free systems (as distinct from “we won’t charge you, but you still need to jump through other hoops”) that nobody *needs* to write a new system; my own taste is to do so only if the new system can achieve something that available existing ones don’t. But that’s just my taste. I think the days of complex systems that led into the universal-system boom of the 1990s are probably gone; learning a new system for a new game is no longer the burden that it used to be. Indeed, I think the current favoured model beyond one-and-done is what I call “universal core, multiple games”, as seen with something like GUMSHOE or *Powered by the Apocalypse*: the core mechanics are always the same, but the lists of skills/abilities and the scale

of things can be wildly different. You give up the ability to port characters between different instances of the game (“our fantasy heroes are in a spaceship now!”), but you keep the basic familiarity of what the players are expected to learn.

Patrick Riley: re your convention *Call of Cthulhu* game, I think I’d feel more annoyed by a GM reading box-text than by them running a scenario someone else had written. But that’s me; I always rephrase descriptions into my own style of speech in the moment, whether they’re box-text or simply descriptive text (mine or someone else’s) in the adventure notes.

RYCTM: thanks, I’m not seeing missing descenders here but I’ll keep a lookout. May be font or PDF reader weirdness; I’m using Garamond Pro, if that helps.

The thing I like about unconscious allies and enemies is that they introduce enjoyable complication. OK, you drag Dave out while the rest of us hold them off... or, now we have an enemy warrior, maybe we can patch him up and ask him *why these guys are attacking us?*

RYCT Elf: “Cyberpunk marries a gender studies degree with a sprinkling of pseudo Norse mythology over the top” sounds like fun to me! (Still haven’t actually played it, mind.)

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: I at least have had a better time at cons where I ran games (in the case of boardgames, brought, explained and/or demonstrated them) than at cons where I left all that to other people, and that was how I interpreted Joshua’s comment.

Brian Rogers: RYCTM hah, ninja-ed me re *The Fremen Mirage* which I’ve written about above to Matt.

John Redden: Ah, good old *GURPS* plus *Traveller*. They do go together rather well.

Myles Corcoran: RYCTM: yes, some other people here seemed to be using “/n” to indicate “in issue number *n*”, so I copied it. Sorry, as a relative newcomer to all this I assumed it was a known convention. If I don’t put that, I mean “in the latest issue to which I’m replying” (i.e. right now #13) which is what I’m usually doing.

Attronarch: Ah, the cunning persuasive technique of asking nicely!

Michael Cule: I must point out that by analogy with the Uncle the Crone could also be the Aunt. Wodehouse, thou shouldst be living at this hour!

Actual currywurst is a Great and Glorious Thing, perhaps the best of the street foods I’ve met. But it has a unique flavour which I have never quite managed to replicate. A product labelled “currywurst flavour” seems like a recipe²² for disappointment.



from Zum Xaver in Essen, photo by RogerBW

RYCT Matt Stevens, and if there’s a flow of belief-energy that influences the deity, what started as a misprint may end up as an actual

²²Sorry.

separate god with its own distinct form of worship and so on.

RYCT Patrick Brady: you can still get ribbons, fanfold paper, etc. for some models of dot matrix printer, but they're mostly made for big companies with Fine Legacy Hardware, and they're usually not cheap or easy to find. I'm sticking with my monochrome Brother lasers.

RYCT Avram Grumer RHCT Heath Row, there are many many online graph paper generators and many of them offer polar coordinates. If you don't find what you want, drop me a line and I might write something.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold RHCTM: there's a fair argument that consciousness is just an illusion perpetrated by the brain on itself.

Erica Frank: There was a review of the *Midnight at the Well of Souls* RPG in *White Dwarf* #83 (November 1986) which I think may have seriously damaged its potential sales in the UK. "The other notable feature of the rules book is its chapter on character races—150 of them, and all ridiculous." and later "And if the races don't get you, the 'starship blueprints' will. Five computer-produced types, all looking like a 4-year-old's Lego models."

RYCT John Redden: most databases other than Access don't come with a GUI at all since they're seen as distinct functions, though there are often separate pieces of software that will do the job. Whether any of them would suit you is another matter.

RYCT Brian Rogers, I think this may be at the root of my lack of interest in OSR: it's not that the games themselves are necessarily bad, it's that the people running them tend to be very combat-first, which doesn't really interest me. I

don't actually *want* to play a serial home invader who thinks the only real people look like them.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold, I'd also want to be able to cope with something like *DC Heroes*²³ where many people seem actively to prefer the second edition to the third.

Jim Eckman: I worked on the first few issues of *The Path of Cunning* in LibreOffice, meaning documents of say 50-80 pages with an illustration every page or two, and it definitely creaked a bit and occasionally messed up the layout. I'm not saying everybody should use Typst instead, but it's working very well for me and it's become my standard document production engine for all purposes.

RYCT Matt Stevens: yes, *Traveller* law levels as written *only* talk about what weapons you can carry about. Not that the ex-military and military-adjacent authors thought that was the most important thing in life, or anything. **GURPS** legality classes and control ratings started there, though some things other than weapons have legality classes, and control ratings add a bit of atmospheric text; there's still something of a libertarian bias, though, and of course it all assumes a single axis of authoritarianism. (My heart is an anarchist, my brain wants well-regulated bureaucracy to minimise individual power to harm.)

Gabriel Roark: Do those Item Identification flowcharts perhaps owe something to the system in *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*? I can't include one as they aren't mine to use, but I found an example [here](#)²⁴.

²³Which obviously isn't going to get bundled itself.

²⁴<https://nerdsonearth.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Barrier-Peaks-Illustrations.jpg>

If a necromancer is barred from Heaven *and Hell*, what happens to them when they die? Eternal lichdom? Simple destruction?

RYCT Matt Stevens RHCT Elf: even just a list of names that sound as though they're in the right sort of ethnocultural space can be very helpful for generating the right atmosphere.

Scribble M. Horror (Pseud.): I very much enjoyed your consideration of *Nomic* in the context of *D&D* (or perhaps vice versa). It seems to me that the cardinal difference is that in a traditional RPG the GM's word is law, and there is no *in-game* recourse against it,²⁵ while in *Nomic* everything has to work by in-game mechanism.

Dylan Capel: Regarding *The Mandalorian and Grogu*, there's a comment with authorship now lost about acting in Muppet films:

"Michael Caine succeeded in his role because he considered the Muppets as fellow actors. Tim Curry succeeded because he considered himself a fellow Muppet."

One of the reasons I'm not much of a fan of *Star Wars* is its unthinking acceptance of droid slavery. Jabba has a pretty girl on a chain? That's bad and he has to die. We build droids that are clearly intelligent, but are routinely bought, sold, and subjected to involuntary consciousness surgery? Oh, that's just fine.

Thanks for the tip on *Radiant Star*. I've loved the earlier books in this universe, but Leckie's fantasy *The Raven Tower* left me unmoved.

Regarding annotating PDFs: there is a mechanism within the PDF standard called "annotations" which serves multiple purposes: basically it's the universal "click here and

²⁵Obviously there's out-of-game argument, and ultimately leaving the game.

something happens" protocol. It's most commonly used for e.g. hypertext links.²⁶ But it can also be used to attach small textual notes to specific places in a PDF (which obviously you then have to re-save to keep them). The reader I've used that can do this is evince, but I'm assuming you're not on Linux, and I have no idea what the rest of the world uses for this purpose.

RYCT Brian Rogers, *AD&D* at least tried to change the "same foes, bigger numbers" treadmill: at high level you had the idea that PCs would be building a stronghold, attracting followers, doing a lot of non-adventure things in between the high-level dungeons. But this never seemed actually to *happen* in any campaign I was in and it seems to have been quietly dropped from later editions.



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Avram Grumer: "As a player, I am aware that the Patron is not accurately describing the Catholic models of salvation and the dispensation of divine grace[...]" Heh!

²⁶Too much detail: when you put in a link, the PDF compiler is actually doing two things, laying out the content (in whatever style you chose to give it) and then putting an invisible rectangle over it which is the "hot zone" to trigger the annotation action, in this case jumping to a different location or opening a web browser.

RYCTM I'm not necessarily after the telenovela content (rich and often horrible people) as much as the format (a strictly limited season). And it seems to me that for example *Outgunned* offers something like this.

RYCT Patrick Riley I think that this whole "overarching government but lots of planetary autonomy" approach, as also seen in *Traveller* of course, is particularly suited to planet-of-the-week stories, which in turn are particularly suited to an episodic game or TV series.

I definitely feel that some modern games expect every player to be "on" all the time during the session, and I'm not really that sort of person; not to mention sometimes I'm just a bit tired after work.

RYCT Lisa Padol: yes, "rubber" is still in common use in the UK for the thing that rubs out pencil marks, though nobody would be confused if you said "eraser".

Lisa Padol: I think the thing that caught me about *Lady Susan* was the way that the character who would in most stories have been the protagonist, Lady Susan herself, became another narrative element for the PCs to build round.

RYCT Matt Stevens: Having just had a look in the *James Bond 007* game, NPC reactions and persuasion attempts work on Charisma (which is a skill, not an attribute); Seduction uses Seduction skill, where a high Appearance helps and a low one hinders. Interrogation works purely on Interrogation skill. Like Appearance, Height and Weight cost more points to be average; being Plain in appearance gives you no in-game benefit over being Attractive (same cost in character-generating points, same Fame Points which lead to recognisability, but a penalty to Seduction rather than a bonus) so the only reason to choose it would be role-playing.

None of these things is correlated with the others.

The question of erasing race and sex biases in the milieu of *Good Society* is one I've also met in period Lovecraftian games. If we're in the 1890s or the 1920s, there is historically a lot of prejudice about. And I've met various ways to handle it:

- grittily realistic, non-rich-white-male(-cishet) characters will have way more trouble in many situations;
- as above, but we'll also be going into subcultures where they just won't want to talk to someone who looks like the oppressor, so those other characters will have some situational advantages;
- only people otherwise labelled as "bad" express prejudice²⁷;
- this is a fantasy, we don't want to deal with that stuff, there is no prejudice.

And *any of those can be fun*. But I think the players all need to know up front what option the GM is using; apart from anything else it is likely to affect what sort of character they want to play.

RYCTM Yes, I did not intend to excuse the Catholic church for its past or present horribleness, but rather to suggest that it was generally not the case that *everyone* in the hierarchy was a monster of uncontrolled self-interest, the way some fantasy authors like to play it with their invented churches. (Honourable exception, *Daughter of Witches* by Pat Wrede, where the religion has a specific reason for being like that.)

Thanks for the note on Keys; I may well try to bodge that into something.

²⁷Which seems to be a common approach in historical fiction.

RYCT Mark Wilson on the cultists disagreeing on when the ritual should happen: let's face it, this is the sort of thing that *should* happen if the cultists are not all mindless followers (which in some cases of course they may be). Just thinking of my own experience with magical and alternative-religious groups arguing about correct ritual forms...

RYCT Miles Corcoran: As I understand it, in the first notions of what would become *Call of Cthulhu* not only would sanity never rise, it was set in the modern day just as Lovecraft set his stories in *his* modern day. Given where the game has gone since and the people to whom it has appealed, I think the change to the 1920s as the default setting was an excellent call by someone.

RYCT Brian Rogers RHCT Avram Grumer: Thinking of running that *Cyberpunk* noodle shop, I've mentioned before that I tend to be the player who does (and enjoys) the Space Accountancy in *Traveller*. Some players just want to hear "OK, the ship arrives at [name of planet], and while you're here for a week [adventure starts]". I like that, but I *also* like fiddling with the finances with the aim of building something good.

RYCT Patrick Riley on a *Brindlewood* or similar scenario essentially supplying the *setup*: I think it would be fair to argue that a *Fiasco* playbook does something similar but steps back even further.

RYCT Michael Cule RHCTM: I'm quite happy with ultra-tech if it's part of an invented physics that I can make sense of. I would have a lot of trouble with a tech base like the one in *Star Wars* where there's not enough invented physics to adjudicate what can reasonably be invented and what can't. (The answer, of course, is "genre rules", but that's unsatisfying.)

RYCT Joshua Kronengold on purist/grim *Trail of Cthulhu* scenarios: for my taste (and only for that), there should be a genuine possibility of winning, because then losing means something. Yeah, you can do *On the Beach* sometimes (we're all going to die, what matters is *how* we die), but I don't want to do it often.



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And on maximising one stat in Tri-Stat: when I was playing board or war games that let you design your own units (back in the day that included *Car Wars*, *BattleTech*, and *Full Thrust*) I often liked to set one of the parameters to "as much as possible" (fastest, best armour, lots of a single weapon) and see what happened.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: It is a truism that every adventure contains a dungeon. Which I say not to be rude, but to note how useful it is to get PCs to travel in dangerous enclosed spaces...

But I was not entirely clear as to where might be a survivable location when the vault collapses. If Claudio's successfully closed the outer door, I see the Viable Exits box, but is there any possibility of surviving out on the bone drift?

RYCT Elf: I see a possible common mode of play for Doc Savage and *Doctor Who*, inspired by Lisa's *Lady Susan*: either of these Docs can be seen as a super-powerful NPC who mutters enigmatic stuff and suddenly says "we must do

X!” and the PCs are the comparatively normal people who have to actually *do* most of it.

RYCTM: well I have Strong Feelings about how a scenario should be organised, and essentially nobody else seems to feel that way, so that’s fair enough.

Happy birthday!

Peter Hildreth: Welcome, Peter!

Joshua Kronengold: I loved *The Incandescent*, probably helped by having *really* loved *Some Desperate Glory*, Tesh’s earlier novel. But also because I went to a school not entirely unlike the one depicted, and unlike almost all modern authors of British school stories, Tesh has been there and gets the details right. *The Raven Scholar* is on my to-read list.

I’ve had a lot of fun with *Zendo* particularly when the Master knows that the trick is to have *simple* rules. Anyone can write a rule too complex to be guessed.

Re games that are bad for you: as I mentioned on the blog, visible breakpoints are a big consideration for games that take up time. Not so much with an RPG played in real time where you’ll necessarily have an end of the session, but I’ve seen this a lot in computer games like *The Sims* series or *Shapez*: in both cases one might take several runs at something, and there’s no end-of-turn boundary, so I at least feel myself drawn in to try just one more approach. (And then when one does the next puzzle is presented...)

RYCT Matt Stevens: if there’s a standard routine for what you do in a fight, to me that’s got boring and I’d rather play something else. I’d prefer to have to improvise my tactics based on the foe and the environment.

I quite liked some TSR advice I saw on writing tournament dungeons back in the day: for every “puzzle” type encounter, including traps, the writer should include one thing that will definitely work, and two or three that definitely won’t, and why; and then stop there. Which should give the GM enough information to build a mental model and work out the results of the PCs’ actions.

Sounds as though the bits of Rust documentation that assume you already know C, and ditto Kotlin that assume Java, would work better for you than they do for me. (And presumably there are a lot more people like you than people like me who didn’t get into C/Java in the first place.)

RYCT Brian Rogers: I have listened in on, but not played, several games of Gregor Hutton’s *3:16 Carnage Amongst the Stars*. The flashback is a core mechanic there: you have a limited number of opportunities, when you fail at a task, to invoke a flashback and narrate how you acquired either a strength (which lets you win anyway) or a weakness (which lets you lose, but on your own terms). It feels to me very consciously Indie (well, it is from 2008) but it does a good job of achieving a particular sort of experience.

RYCT Lisa Padol on “GM owns the world”, some (30ish) years ago I was briefly involved in a collaborative *Cyberpunk 2020* game. Broadly, each participant would have one corporation, one neighbourhood of the City, and one other organisation or major NPC that were thoroughly theirs to define, as well as being a GM and character-player; obviously other GMs could use those assets, but the owner would be the final source of truth. (I think we said that they couldn’t usurp a GM in play, but if something happened that didn’t agree with their

vision they would work with that GM to sort it out later, to the point of retcon if needed.) It didn't last long because most of the people who'd enthusiastically signed up turned out not to want to do the writing, but it had some enjoyable moments.

Jim Vassilakos: RYCTM on our first pass at *The Pirates of Drinax*: I think we had a good feel for the tactical stuff (let us be pirates who act like *this*) but not so much on the strategic (where should we go next). It's meant to be a sandbox campaign, and we tend to play more constrained most of the time. In an episode that we have never released,²⁸ we were about to conduct a heist with a plan that we all knew was terrible and would get us killed, but none of us could think of a better way to do it (and several of us were Overconfident).

Also, now we have a group chat for pre-session planning rather than trying to do it all at the table.

RYCT Patrick Riley: there was certainly a generation of programmers in the UK (including me) who got started on the home computers of the 1980s. A key thing was that your options for doing anything beyond the very basic built-in functions were "spend lots of money on software",²⁹ "type in listings from magazines", or "write stuff yourself with the built-in BASIC". We all learned different BASICs, but it was so slow and rubbish that we were ready to jump to other languages that promised to be better. When a bright kid of today gets their phone or whatever, it can do a bunch of stuff out of the box, there's an app store full of free and cheap software that's way

²⁸The released episodes are still available at the Actual Play link at the top of the zine.

²⁹We functionally didn't have BBS culture, no free local phone calls.

shinier than their first attempts would be, and actual development tools are much harder to get hold of than the shiny stuff, so the incentives to mess around with simple coding (and then get better) just aren't there any more.

Timothy Collinson: RYCTM the *GURPS* conversion of *Drinax* isn't for publication, it's just being done on the fly as needed (mostly by the GM, but the rest of us have thrown in stuff as well). We're a pretty fast-and-loose group; as long as things come out more or less all right, we're not too fussed on the details.

For example, in *Traveller* (Mongoose 2nd is my reference since that's what the campaign was written for) a particle barrette³⁰ is a Very Long range weapon, compared with a beam laser's Medium range. Also it does 12× the damage (well, 4× and then ×3 after subtracting armour, the latter listed in one set of stats but not the other so it may be a misprint), and has the Radiation trait. But it takes up five tons rather than the one ton that will let you fit up to three lasers. Fair enough. It's clearly a long range sniping weapon compared with the laser.



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But in *GURPS Spaceships*, well, let's assume the particle beam is one size class larger, 300MJ

³⁰Don't get me started on the way that term has been casually reused by people who didn't really know what it meant in the first place.

vs the 100MJ laser, because similarly you can fit three smaller weapons in a single mount of the same size. (Arguably it should be two size classes larger, but that doesn't help much.) Its range is Short vs the laser's Short/Long (full damage at Short, half damage at Long). It does 50% more damage (plus radiation and surge modifiers), suffers a -3 penalty to hit, and has an armour divisor of 5 rather than 2. This is not a long range sniping weapon, it's a shorter range weapon to rip up the target once they're unable to get away.

Now my solution would probably be to give the **GURPS** Harrier a spinal-mount laser and a smaller particle beam array, but the GM's choosing to keep the *Traveller* flavour and change around some of the range and damage characteristics. And, to be clear, I'm just fine with that! That is the sort of flexibility we have, though. We're not trying for a canonical **GURPS 4e Traveller** package.

I haven't read any recollections by GDW people of the time, but I got the feeling *Traveller: 2300* was always intended to be a completely separate thing from *Traveller* apart from Marc's desire to use the name, and I don't feel a need to try to reconcile them. Different technologies, different politics, different aliens, different *atmosphere*; I just don't see any great benefit to running them together. (Of course, I'm willing to be proved wrong.)

RYCT Patrick Riley on experience points: all the **GURPS** GMs I know, including me, have ignored the official rules on awarding bonus points for "good play" and settled on "N experience points per session unless the player didn't make it; +1 for coming up with something really impressive". Then the players ask the GM about traits they want to spend points on to improve; if it's related to something

the PCs have been doing, or study resources and time are available, the answer is generally "yes".

RYCT Lisa Padol about science vs speed of plot: well, my study of orbital dynamics has got to the point that interplanetary spacecraft with realistic drives³¹ can basically be considered as trains: once a ship leaves place A on a course for place B, your options are either "arrive at place B on time" or "drift in empty space forever". You do not get to divert, you do not get to arrive earlier or later. Which has the pleasing side effect that I don't need to recalculate anything at the table. But it does clamp down on adventurous possibilities a bit.



³¹I.e. anything we can presently come up with a physical theory for building, so including fusion rockets and such, but not reactionless drives or very-high-impulse drives like some variants of the *Traveller* manoeuvre drive.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 8 · AUGUST 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.

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

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

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

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

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

ATTRIBUTIONS

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Dalkanarion's Poem by Theo.

Typeset in L^AT_EX with Charter, a print-friendly typeface.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 117

Adventurers

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

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

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

Harvestime 18th, Earthday

Another week with Ah'sas the Terrible Witch.

All adventurers were put to hard work—no loiters allowed! Six were ordered to construct two new tree-houses so they have a covered place to sleep. Her little hut was too small to house them all. Hedwig, being a female elf, was delegated to bushes and hardest of duties.

Beorg and Balarus fell to the witch's charm, and were trying their best to fulfil all her wishes. Others went along, if for no other reason than for having food and safe place to rest whilst lost in the Eyestone jungle.

Gomm and Ambros had a plan of their own though. Whilst others toiled, they set out for a scouting expedition, aiming to investigate as much of sunken fort as possible. Hedwig joined them. After all, anything is better than abuse from Ah'sas the Envious!

Ambros and elf took off their heavy armours, and only carried backpacks with adventuring gear. Gomm also took off his clothes, carrying nothing but loincloth, backpack, and a few vials of oil. Bakaru joined them to guard the dugout. And so they left for the dungeon.

The trio moved with haste, doing their best to remain as quiet as possible. They traversed the pillared antechamber, opting for north-west doors this time. That led them into a corridor with two doors and a junction. First doors were steel and without any visible hinges. Second were plain wooden doors, like those they've encountered before. Junction splintered left, and forward. Path forward was blocked by thick glass barrier within which an angry incorporeal form banged, mouthing curses in silence.

Gomm picked the steel doors open, leading into a corridor with two junctions. Then him and Ambros nailed the doors shut while beefy Hedwig held it open.

Scouting just a bit ahead, the party had found the following:

- Stairs leading down, past their torchlight. Teeth covered some of stairs.
- A dead end with stone wheel behind a plate. Hedwig was strong enough to turn it, but the wheel would rotate back in the starting position as soon as she let go of it.
- A corridor with iron caltrops large enough to stop an ogre from passing further.
- A dark chamber with fountain in the centre. Small, squat, hairy, naked creature slurped liquid from it every minute or so.

Judging that all three paths into the unknown sounded very risky, they returned to the corridor with glass barrier. Listening at the wooden doors revealed nothing but silence. Except glass banging to the side, that is.

"Hey, I hear something."

Hedwig informed her allies.

Indeed, sound of metal scrapping against the floor could be heard. Sound was getting louder by the second, approaching wooden doors they came through. Thinking on their feet, they opted to run towards the glass barrier, then turn left into the unknown.

That led them down a turning corridor and to another wooden doors. Adventurers promptly doused their light sources, and waited in silence.

Loud bashing sound could be heard, as doors swung open and slammed against the stone wall. Metal scrapping was now very loud, as was the thick smell of oil. Another sound of slamming doors, and scrapping became quieter and quieter.

Estimating that the danger is over, adventurers re-lit their torches and lanterns, and proceeded to open the newly found doors. A small chamber, some twenty by thirty feet, with nothing much but two dozen of clay pots. Each had a lid with primitive symbols. Three had abstract flames, one round triskellions, and the remainder had abstract stick-snakes on them.

Following a brief investigation, they backtracked to previous wooden doors, and forced them open. A weird thirty by thirty feet chamber with two lines of shelves. A dozen figurines of gnomes with various mining equipment rested on each shelf.

Ambros returned to the pot chamber, cast Find Traps and surveyed the room. All lids with snake symbols lit gently. He informed Gomm, and moved to the gnome chamber. Nothing lit up. Then he went to the glass barrier.

Angry ghost cowered in fear in the presence of Curate of Aniu! Ambros could see only portion of the chamber beyond the glass barrier. It was a hole with stone bridge standing on a pillar. The bridge was perpendicular to Ambros, or in other words, was going from left to right.

Gomm delightfully opened fire and triskellion pots, finding flammable oil in the former, and five hundred silvery coins in the latter. How delightful!

But there was little time to celebrate. Ambros's torch begun to flicker. Angry shadow in the glass barrier threw itself towards the cleric and crumpled in a terrified ball. Ambros noticed shadowy figures stepping on the bridge. He quickly retreated and doused his torch.

The party waited for a moment. Gomm took the pot with triskellion coins, and the party retreated all the way to the dugout Bakaru was waiting them in. They left the coins with him and then they returned to the antechamber, intent on exploring the eastern portion of the fortress. Ambros commanded the water elemental—the one that Sor'Ves the Magnificent vomited for him—to follow him.

Upon emerging into the long corridor leading east, they ran into two plated guards.

The guards slammed doors wide open, right in front of Hedwig. They ignored her, turned left and marched down the corridor.

"How weird, they have surely spotted us..."

"Remember how some of them just stood and did nothing?"

"Maybe they only respond to metal? We are currently unarmoured."

"Maybe they react to something else?"

"Let's follow them!" Gomm suggested.

Trailing them at the edge of their torch, the party followed the ar-

moured duo. They went straight and then turned right into the large chamber with dark pool. They marched straight to the edge of the pool and stood still.

Water splashed as a towering mass of black sludge rose, shaking and shivering in front of the guards. The guards turned towards each other, holding a shield between them, like a plate. Black mass loomed over it, and then a chunk of sludge dropped on the shield. The guards' lower portion turned towards the party and marched straight towards them.

Adventurers fell back. The guards walked out of the chamber and down the corridor they came through. Black mass made a loud splashing sound as it threw itself back in the pool.

Gomm, of course, wanted to explore that chamber. This abomination must be guarding some awesome treasure, right?!

Forcing the north doors open revealed a square chamber with copper disc inset into the stone floor. A three inch groove was around it, with flame symbols etched into the disc's ring. Black scorch marks on the stone floor circled the ring. Crumpled suit of armour laid discarded in the south east corner.

Next course of action for Gomm was to scale the wall and go all the way up to the ceiling. This was a vaulted chamber, and the highest point was some forty feet off the floor. Then he swung like a monkey and traversed towards the platform on the south side of the chamber.

Naturally, this provoked the mass of black sludge that rested in the pool. It emerged with rage, swinging for the top. Ambros ordered the water elemental to charge the black mass. It obeyed without delay. As sludge and elemental duked it out in the pool, Hedwig and Ambros shot at the aberration from safe distance.

Gomm dropped on the platform. The doors were stuck. With battle raging

behind him, he jumped up, grabbed the head jamb, swung and kicked the doors with both legs. Ahead of him was a humbly sized chamber dominated with a stone table. On it a number of alchemical implements like alembics, vials, pestle and mortars, so on and so forth, rested. Everything was caked with mould and dust.

The thief took off his loincloth and wrapped it around his face. Then he entered the laboratory and begun methodically ransacking it. Water roared as battle went on; elemental and sludge in a vortex of body slams, beating chunks of each other out. Hedwig landed arrow after arrow. And so did Ambros land stone after stone.

By the time Gomm had finished investigating the chamber, he recovered three intact vials that still had liquid in them: one with light blue hue, one clear as alcohol, and one with reddish hue. He stepped on the platform just in the right time to witness the black sludge completely demolishing the water elemental.

The thief threw his dagger, missed, and then fled up the wall. The mass approached him ominously. At this moment the sludge was not what it was moments ago. It was nearly transparent in places, with many holes. In fact, it was more like a mess of thick black strings, than a bulbous giant it was. Nonetheless, it threw itself towards fleeing Gomm. Hedwig aimed at the thickest string, and unleashed an arrow.

Steel tip went straight through it, severing the oily string. The pool horror completely felt apart. Curdled oil slicks floated to top of the water. Poking them elicited no response. Ambros collected a sample.

"I think this expedition was a great success and that we should leave immediately!" Gomm announced, delighted to be alive.

"Hey, I hear something."

Hedwig informed her allies.

Familiar sound of scrapping metal could be heard from the north. Without much time to think the party moved north and then decided to continue north, towards the oil chamber and then circle back through chambers they fought plated guards in.

Alas, they ran straight into the source of all the noise. A large lizard-like creature, some eight feet wide and most likely at least fifteen feet long, made of scrap metal, rushed towards the adventurers.

They pivoted around, and sprinted as quickly as they could.

"It's made of metal! We are surely faster!"

Gomm yelled as iron lizard nearly bit his naked ass.

Adventurers made it out alive, jumped into the dugout and paddled hard back to Ah'sas. At least her teeth aren't that sharp.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 118

Adventurers

Ajar of the Plan, dwarf level 2. Unbelievably strong and dexterous dwarf.

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

Balarus, fighter level 1. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

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

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

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

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

Goodgrove 19th, Fireday

Adventurers fell in love with Ah'sas, the terrible witch they've been warned about by denizens of Ketches. Well, most of them, but not all. Balarus, Beorg the Gravedigger, and Bakaru were completely enchanted by Ah'sas, doing her bidding at snap of her fingers.

Tarkus resisted the witch's charms, and so did Gomm, Ambros, Ajar, Ignaeus, and Nesterin. Hedwig, the only other female around, had different kind of problems with the witch. Owly elf was forbidden from sleeping in the treehouse and relegated to tasks most foul.

Ah'sas was delighted to have a company of such young and virile adventurers. She ordered them to build two additional treehouses, since her small hut was hardly sufficient for a dozen she is hosting now! That took a full month. Ambros used the opportunity to convince Ah'sas to teach Ignaeus new spells. He bribed her by gifting her a vial of black sludge retrieved from the sunken fort. She also demanded he teach her all about Aniu, the Lord of Time. The witch was particularly interested in sacred rituals, divine time magic, and secret of immortality.

Ignaeus brought Ah'sas wildflowers everyday. He realised her power and treated her as the lowly student that he is. The elf attempted to flirt at a polite, low level, but respectfully with a bit of unexaggerated flattery. Ah'sas welcomed such attention from her pupil.

After a month of intense mentoring, Ignaeus had learned Read Magic, Read Languages, and Wizard Lock. He had written them with magical inks on a seven feet long scroll made from tanned goat hides sewn together.

This scroll now served as his spellbook; an important asset since his original spellbook was in Ahyf.

Gomm spent a month putting together a plan. "It is time to backstab the witch," he thought to himself. "She is just stringing me along!" Dragon poison she promised to Gomm was nowhere near done. And it's been nearly two months since she began "brewing" it!

One sunny day a muscular, well oiled, heavily armed and armoured man appeared beneath Ah'sas hut. It was Dalkanarion! He too, like few before him, went for a walk around Hara and somehow ended up lost in the Eyestones Jungle several dozen miles from the city.

The party agreed to head back to the sunken fort one last time. They'd get the shadow necklace for Ah'sas and leave her at once. Bakaru and Balarus were left with the witch—they were too much of a risk. What if they heard Gomm's treacherous plan and spilled the beans to Ah'sas?

Six brave adventurers hopped in their dugout pirogue and paddled to the dungeon. With Ajar's and Dalkanarion's mighty thews no doors stood a chance! The muscle-bound duo was strong enough to open the great iron double doors on their own.

Gomm led the party to the steel doors he unlocked on his last visit. Much to his dismay he found the doors locked again—this time he failed to pick the lock. Ambros walked north, to the glass barrier with the angry ghost. Incorporeal figure threw itself on the ground, cowering in front of the cleric's divinity.

Adventurers moved east, through the chamber with gnome figurines, and then north, into a square chamber with archways to the west, north, and east. A skeleton with a scroll case clutched in its hands rested beneath a glass panel in the centre of the chamber.

Nesterin the Torchelf took a peek through the west archway. Another square chamber, some thirty by thirty feet. Three things immediately stood out. First, the chamber was actually a large pit. Second, a stone bridge connected east and west exits stood on a single pillar. Third, south exit was blocked by glass barrier with an angry ghost, while north exit was blocked by chunky portcullis.

The elf was ready to jump on the bridge and explore further, but he was stopped by other adventurers.

"What if the bridge turns?!"

"Wouldn't it be silly if a bridge turned just because you step on it?"

"I suppose it would. . ."

Gomm remembered a stone wheel Hedwig found on their last expedition. They couldn't figure out what it was for. . . Perhaps this bridge? But it was a moot point now, given that the thief failed to pick the lock.

Nesterin the Scout stepped back and checked north and east archways. The latter led to a t-shaped junction, while the former turned right. Going north the party entered a large rectangular chamber with eight bottomless pits.

The pits were not concealed and there was sufficient walking space between them to easily navigate the chamber. Shrieking and wailing filled the chamber just as the party had split to investigate north and south ends. Screaming, flaming skulls flew out from seven of the eight pits. Ambros flashed his holy symbol and all seven exploded.

"Nice."

Nesterin the Explorer proceeded south, alone, to investigate the junction and corridor it led to. Others remained in the pit chamber, attracted by the steel portcullis. Or rather, by alien sight behind it.

A vast chamber shrouded in darkness. Three onyx obelisks covered with indecipherable runes. A shallow pool of slowly swirling purple mass between them.

"Look!"

Gomm pointed at the shadows thrown by the steel bars. They did not match their light sources! The thief squinted, attempting to read the runes on the obelisk closest to him. Alas, such scripture was way beyond his understanding.

Ajar and Dalkanarion joined forces to lift the portcullis. Then Ignaeus and Gomm snuck into the chamber. The elf cast Read Magic and approached one of the onyx obelisks. Gomm held a lantern, following Ignaeus.

Nesterin hugged the wall, creeping down the corridor. He held up the torch with one hand, whilst keeping the other on the grip of his weapon. He soon felt a familiar smell of flammable oil tickling his nostrils. Few steps forward. Few more. Few more, once again. Stop!

The corridor opened up into a room mostly filled metal scraps—pieces of armour, broken weapons, pots and pans, so on and so forth. Some of them looked a tad shiny, like they were coated with liquid reflecting his

torchlight. Oil slicks were all over the floor. Squinting, the metal heap kind of looked like a large lizard. Nesterin quickly retreated.

Ignaeus observed the obelisk. Runes danced in front of him, rearranging themselves until he could finally read them. Understanding them, now that was a completely different matter. First, it was clear that this was some kind of portal to a place best left unvisited. Second, the longer he tried to comprehend true meaning of what he was reading, the weaker elf became. Third, Gomm observed Ignaeus's shadow becoming thinner and thinner. By the time the elf had reached third obelisk his shadow was merely a collection of specks.

The thief grabbed the elf by the hand and led him out of this accursed place and back into the pit chamber. At the same time Nesterin returned. With perfect timing, another seven screaming skulls arrived, only to be exploded by Ambros once more.

"I think we should get out of this place."

"But we haven't found anything yet."

"What about that skeleton with scroll? Surely it must be the key to this!"

And so adventurers went back to the resting skeleton. One good soul passed the sledgehammer to beefy Dalkanarion who smashed the glass with great gusto. Suddenly a loud sound of metal scrapping against the stone floor could be heard rapidly approaching from the east. Ambros yanked the scroll case out of skeleton's disintegrating hands, and the party bravely fled through the gnome figurine chamber.

Nothing chased after them. After nearly half an hour of discussing where to next, they agreed to backtrack to the antechamber and then follow the route towards the courtyard. They decided to investigate the chamber just before the exit into the aforementioned yard.

"Huh?"

A chamber chock full of dust. A layer of dust so thick it acted as a fluffy lining for anything thrown into the chamber. Dalkanarion the Brave moved in, sweeping the floor with his spear. No danger, sans choking to death if one had an allergy.

"Look!"

The Grecian warrior spotted a broom in the south-east corner. It too was covered in dust. Dalkanarion went straight for it. He grabbed the broom with his muscular hand, placed it between his legs, squeezed hard with his mighty thighs, and then jumped around the chamber.

"Fly! Fly!"

Alas, the broom did not fly, but he did get a good chuckle out of other adventurers.

Ambros decided that was a good time to check the scroll they recovered earlier. It exploded straight into his face, singing all facial hair and scarring him for life. The flash blinded him, leaving him to the mercy of his friends.

The party retreated into the dust room, barred the doors, and spent half an hour treating Ambros and planning their next move. And a plan was forged indeed.

Corridor leading up to this room had two junctions. The one closer to them split into a corridor that was yet unexplored, but they were confident it would lead to the chamber with scrap pile. Adventurers would come to the junction, make some noise, and then defeat the metal lizard with fire and steel.

Once Ambros had recovered, the party proceeded to execute the plan.

Dalkanarion and Ambros took the front rank.

Ajar and Nesterin were in the second rank.

Gomm and Ignaeus were in the back rank.

Dalkanarion banged his shield and roared like a lion.

Sounds of metal falling all over, followed by familiar sounds of scraping, was exactly what the party had wished for.

Scrap metal lizard appeared at the edge of their torchlight.

Gomm swung clay pot full of flammable oil. It struck the lizard and set it alight, as well as the whole area around it. Metal lizard sucked in the flames and then vomited them straight back at the party, burning everyone in the corridor.

Still roaring, Dalkanarion charged the metal beast. Ambros followed. Gomm most certainly did not follow.

Steel blades clanged against iron and steel junk that formed the lizard's body. Monster sucked in the flames burning around it and breathed fire once more. Ambros and Dalkanarion endured and pushed on selflessly, bashing and slashing pieces of metal junk off the beast.

The lizard retreated backwards, leaking through all orifices.

"Run it down! Chase it!" Ajar of the Plan yelled, as everyone pursued the monster. Dalkanarion the Mighty skewered his sword straight into the beast's gullet, twisted it between the metallic plates, and then jerked upwards. Metal junk flew all over, as the lizard fell apart into nothing more than a pile of inanimate scrap.

The party stood singed but victorious.

"What if it comes back alive? Remember all those plated guards we fought? All of them had some ooze inside of them."

The party stood singed and paranoid but victorious.

"Let's get out of here!"

"Come on, just one more doors! Just one more! Look, those over there! If it is something dangerous we just run!"

"But what if we can't run?"

"We just slam the doors shut and we run!"

"OK, fine..."

The party entered into a chapel-like chamber with tall stained glass windows looking into the courtyard. The windows were painted, depicting a scene of a man screaming fire into the sky while a witch on the broom flies high above. The witch in the image held a crossbow in each hand, pelting crying peasants and their chickens in the fields below.

Dalkanarion once again took the broom and tried the "Fly! Fly!" trick. While the warrior was jumping around with a stick between his legs, Gomm scaled the window with the witch. Then he took out a dagger and tried to pry out the part with the witch herself. Alas, he applied a bit too much force and cracked the glass. Diabolic laughter could be heard.

Dalkanarion abruptly rose off the ground, the broom lifting him. He grabbed onto it, intent on mastering the stick. But the broom had different ideas. It turned towards the window and flew straight through, shattering it backwards into the courtyard. The sky darkened and heinous laughter boomed all around. The warrior jumped off the broom, just in time.

"Well, well, well. I must congratulate you, young warrior."

A blue dragon stared down at Dalkanarion from the tower in the courtyard.

"Do let me know your name, brave warrior!"

"Dalkanarion!"

"You just set free a witch that has been trapped in that glass for a century or two. I will endeavour to tell everyone I meet it was you who bravely set her free! Bravo!"

"Mighty dragon, would you be able to aid me in defeating that evil! I could use magical weapons and armour!"

"I might be able to, yes. But that largely depends on your tribute."

"I swear my life and my honour, two most valuable things I possess!"

"My dear boy, I readily admit I am more of gems and jewellery gal myself."

"Oh majestic dragon, my life and honour are all I can offer!"

"Oh" SorVes repeated in mocking tone "in that case strip yourself of all belongings. You can remain in your clothes, I am not interested in soiled goods, thank you. Leave everything here and then leave me be."

Other adventurers have been bravely hiding in the chapel, giggling softly.

"At least I keep my life..." Dalkanarion muttered to himself as he stripped. Then he jumped through the window where others consoled him.

"Hey, we went through the same thing. Don't feel bad about it."

"I just wanted a flying broom..."

"Don't we all. Don't we all."

Grecian warrior equipped himself with some scrap armour and weapons. Then the adventurers hauled lizard junk into one of the non-screaming pits. And then they finally left the dungeon.

Ah'sas did not welcome them, for they returned few hours after the nightfall. She was soundly sleeping, surrounded by her thralls.

Gomm plotted.

"It is time to act."

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 119

Adventurers

Ajar of the Plan, dwarf level 2. Unbelievably strong and dexterous dwarf.

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

Balarus, fighter level 1. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

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

Gomm, thief level 6. Swarthy, good looking, dark-skinned thief. Sweet opium-like aroma is his fragrance of choice.

Ignaeus, elf level 3. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiselled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

Goodgrove 20th to Blackmoon 6th

With two new treehouses built it was much more comfortable to sleep and live with Ah'sas the Terrible witch. Alas, the witch had fallen ill and spent most of the time in her hut.

Ignaeus was filled with conflicting emotions. He felt strong longing for the sunken fort; a strong call to return. At the same time he felt doomed; that nothing good would come from return. His shadow was still frail and inconsistent.

Gomm was unable to sleep without light. He always felt like he was watched. He still had three shadows. Whenever it was dark it looked as if two shadows were choking or otherwise abusing the middle one. Gomm could feel it. But when he looked at them, all was well. When light was around all was well. Uncanny.

Neither Ambros nor Tarkus had much wisdom to share on their friends' ailments. They might be potent curses, but it was difficult to say.

Dalkanarion became the new wielder of Oathkeeper. Three mighty paladin spirits within welcome the strong warrior. They would grant their power as long as he kept his path a Lawful and Righteous one. In return the Grecian warrior proclaimed his fealty and new-found path to follow.

Gomm was suspicious of Ah'sas. She has been quite vital and virile up to now. What's with the sudden twist? For that reason he spent the week observing her. The witch got worse by the day. She spent her time fully dressed, something quite uncommon for her, and frequently claimed to be cold. Anyone who touched her could confirm that she was in fact boiling hot.

Master Thief also noted that she had private audiences with Bakar (second day), Balarus (third day), and Beorg (fifth day).

Ah'sas asked Balarus to promise her that he will protect her sister Anit. She then told him a loving story of how she—Ah'sas, not Anit—fornicated with a knight so hard the man perished from exhaustion. She described where she buried him with his equipment. His sword and shield detected as magical, so Balarus might find them useful.

"Well now! Have to dig up the 'heavily fornicated' knight!!" Dalkanarion exclaimed excitedly to Balarus sharing the request with other adventurers.

"I hope the shield doesn't bear a phallus for heraldry."

Ah'sas described Beorg in great details how and where she would like to be buried: wrapped in linen, ten feet deep, beneath a flowerbed of wildflowers. If possible something sweet and poisonous, so passer-bys can enjoy while they suffer.

Gomm and Ambros had a secret meeting where they agreed their best course of action is to wait it out.

On morning of Blackmoon 6th, Airday, Bakaru ran out of Ah'sas hut, bawling. The witch had passed away.

Beorg buried her as requested while Ambros held an eye-watering sermon. The gravedigger made sure to wrap Ah'sas in linen, but not in her cloak, that might be magical after all. Then the adventurers spent rest of the day ransacking her belongings.

They were surprised to find out Ah'sas had spent her last moment labelling all the vials—numerous potions—so they can use them. She had also left a special note written in self-erasing runes in her spellbook:

"Ignaeus, only this text is safe to read. I have cast an almighty curse on remaining pages. Gift this spellbook to someone you truly detest."

Adventurers also exhumed the former lover, finding an obsidian sword with bone hilt and a round steel shield with three circles in the center. One of the circles was solid stone, while other two were polished steel.

Finally, they counted the total rations.

Enough food for next two weeks.

Gomm grinned.

Bakaru presented the witch's last gift:

A vial of red lotus extract.

A drop can kill a man.

A vial can kill a village.

"It's time to kill the dragon."

Blackmoon 7th, Waterday

Party of six reached the sunken fort by noon. They headed straight to the chapel overlooking the courtyard and the tower. Everybody hid behind broken windows, crouching, waiting for Gomm to complete his daring mission. Hairy midgets were oblivious to adventurers' presence.

Sharper Thief quaffed potion of invisibility, jumped into the courtyard, and then snuck all the way up to the tower. Then he slid all the way east, until he was between tower wall and fortress wall. He slowly scaled the tower. Upon reaching the top crenelations, Gomm gingerly pulled himself up.

There she was in all her glory. Sor'Ves the Magnificent, a blue dragon, basking in the sun. She rolled in her glimmering hoard, half-asleep, belly exposed to the sun. Her head was resting on her belly, her wings tucked to the side, her talons stuck in mounds of gold and silver.

The thief held his breath and climbed on top of the crenelations. Then he squatted there motionless; waiting for the perfect opportunity. His plan was simple: pour the red lotus poison down the dragon's throat, or if such opportunity does not present itself, down its ear.

Gomm waited and waited.

Sor'Ves kept her mouth shut, rolling over here and there, but otherwise failing to present an attractive opening to the thief.

Gomm could see his fingers and feet beginning to materialise. Invisibility was up!

Sharper Thief jumped on Sor'Ves neck, surprising her. He hugged her tight with his left arm, whilst trying to uncork the poison vial with his right. Alas! The dragon jerked, sending Gomm and red lotus vial flying!

The thief landed safely, as did the vial. But the latter got quickly lost in the massive treasure hoard!

Sor'Ves boomed with rage at the audacity of someone assaulting her right in her home.

"This is my signal..." Dalkanarion thought. He drank the potion of giant strength, drew the massive Oathkeeper, and jumped into the courtyard. He walked with swagger of a conqueror and bellowed out his challenge to the dragon atop the tower. Many foul words were used. They definitely worked.

Gomm exploited the chaos to chug another potion he had with him. Everything became larger as he turned into one foot long flying gecko! He shimmied into the mounds of silver and gold, desperately searching for the vial of red deadly poison.

Dalkanarion's terrible visage broke the morale of pygmy guardians and half of them fled into the tower. Sor'Ves, now standing in all her glory, could see everyone in the courtyard, including those hiding in the chapel.

"I am coming for you!" Dalkanarion boomed as he broke through the tower doors and rushed up.

Ambros, Balarus, Ignaeus, and Ajar all took a shot at the dragon's nose. All missed but Ajar.

Sor'Ves snickered.

Dozens of little sparks snapped around her head. Then she opened her mouth, unleashing a deafening lightning strike.

Ajar was turned into a deformed charcoal hunk; his weapon and armour fused to his lifeless body.

Gecko Gomm, in a stroke of luck, managed to find the poison, but then struggled to handle the vial since he no longer had opposing thumbs.

Dalkanarion chucked aside two pygmies whom had tried to block his advance up the tower stairs.

He stopped by the trapdoor, and belated out insults and provocations once more.

Ambros, Ignaeus, and Balarus hacked the furry midgets in the courtyard, and then entered the tower to do the same to those inside.

SorVes faced the trapdoor, ready to rend the arrogant warrior to shreds.

His suffering will be legendary.

She will charm or sleep him, and then force him to watch as she butchers his friends.

Then she would cripple him, and leave his mangled corpse hanging on the tree—as a warning for all others whom might have similar stupid ideas.

Dalkanarion, imbued with frost giant's strength, interrupted her daydreaming as he burst through the trapdoor. She turned to bite him, but the warrior was quicker.

SorVes was surprised as he held her maw wide open with ease. She tried to bite as hard as she could, but Dalkanarion's mighty thews did not give in.

"GOOOMMMMM!!!" the warrior roared.

A flying gecko emerged from the coins, vial of red liquid in its tiny jaw. It flew over the struggling duo, and then dropped the vial straight into SorVes open mouth.

Another fail!

He missed her open throat by inches, jamming the vial between the dragon's fangs.

Calling on Zeus, Dalkanarion smashed SorVes mouth shut with all his might. Shards of glass intermingled with red lotus poison flew down the dragon's gullet. Within seconds she was bleeding from her eyes and ears.

Coughing blood, SorVes disengaged and stepped back, intent on flying upwards.

Dalkanarion seized the moment.

He picked up the Oathkeeper that he had to lay down in order to wrestle with SorVes the Magnificent.

Sun reflected off her exposed belly. The sea of coins sung beneath the warriors sandaled feet.

*"O Three
come sing with me
a song not of words
but of deed"*

Dalkanarion tightened his grip.

*"Shine bright
strike true."*

He swung with one hand, for the potion had bestowed him strength of frost giants, allowing him to wield the massive slab of steel with great ease.

*"The wings of Nike flutter
here
but for a moment."*

Greatsword imbued with High Paladins of the Phoenix Order, Roan Order, and Dragon Order cut into the SorVes exposed flesh.

*"For blind Themis,
blood-sacrifice,
for he scales of Justice.
Drink deep of Glory.
Nenikikamen!"*

Dragon guts spilled all over the tower floor, gore caking thousands of coins and gems and other valuables. SorVes cried out, flapped impotently, staggered backwards, and fell down.

Dalkanarion faced the sun, bloodied and victorious. He pointed Oathkeeper to the skies and uttered:

"Where once I entered this apocryphal demesne Dalkanarion ó Pelasgos, I now exit Dalkanarion Dracoktonus!"

Adventurers happily sifted through the messy treasure hoard, counting 66 000 silver pieces, 45 000 gold pieces, 200 small gems, and 80 medium gems. They also recovered all their previous "tributes" to SorVes.

All they had to figure out now was how to haul all of this back home.

IN NEXT ISSUE

Journey to civilisation.

Plus *exedra*.

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #13

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

All About Me

The family craziness that has been going on since March is now pretty definitively settled. That has led to my suddenly having tons more free time and not being sure what to do with it. Which might be why this issue is up against deadline. Still, it's a whole new world.

The Summer of Westerns is ongoing with the kiddo: *Support Your Local Sheriff*, *Magnificent Seven*, *Shane*, *Pale Rider*, *Maverick*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *the Good the Bad and the Ugly*, an episode of *Wild Wild West*, and *Maverick* so far, with the *Quick and the Dead*, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Silverado* and *Blazing Saddles* still to come. We also have *Searchers* and *Unforgiven* in the house, but I don't know how those would land. It's fascinating watching these with her and having Q&A afterwards as her understanding of the tropes grows.

The *Swords of the Serpentine* campaign has wrapped up book 1, and I will be finishing the write-up on-line soon; I'll put a link to it next month. I am taking a break while one of the other players tries a Tri-Stat based, anime inspired "Strange Band" one or two shot. We are a young jobbing band on the economically dying planet of New Cleveland competing in a music competition for a recording contract to get us off this rock. My character is the lead singer & synth player Eeay, an uplifted Raven.

We had the 3rd session of the *Star Wars* game on the 19th so expect to see that writeup. I'm not sure how much it still feels authentically *Star Wars*, but it now feels *ours*, so I'm happy with it. We have one more session and then the new gamer who I started this to show her other styles and GMing will be running one or two sessions of some game: maybe the Cubicle 7 *Doctor Who* 1E, which she borrowed, or maybe *Honey Heist*. In either event it will be her first running a non D&D game and the first time not for family. We are all very supportive.

For you long timers, the elder kiddo spent a week up in Boston with her college D&D group for 3 days of D&D and a few days of touring, and the group happily adopted the mantle of *Geekapalooza* for this generation. This was the name we gave for a small occasional A&E gaming weekend, and I'm thrilled that they picked it up, and that the kiddo got to experience games that run into 4 am and then you pass out.

Have a great summer, everyone!

Inside the Library:

Because nothing is ever easy, the library administration has decided the RPG program that I dragged into being via two years of negotiation and then ran for three years the satisfaction of the kids and administration alike, is now 'not aligned' with how programs are supposed to run. This new administrator also thinks it common for library gaming clubs to run 20 kids to 1 adult but also won't give me a space/time for me to act as supervisor as 20 kids split into 3-4 kid-led tables, so I'm supposed to DM for 20 kids at a time, I guess? They are trying to nix any long form campaigns – what the kids want – as sometimes there are kids expressing an interest we can't find space for until the next season. I'm guessing their preferred model is continual 3-hour one shots with however many kids show up that week?

To say I am frustrated by this new turn of events would be an understatement. Since the summer sessions are all 'whoever shows up does a dungeon crawl' games anyway as the kids schedules are so erratic nothing is changing now but come fall the *Knaves* are going on hiatus for a series of 2 session 'games to give me 4-6 hours of play where any new kids get preference over any who played last time, but I guarantee the existing kids will show up anyway in hopes of weaseling a seat.

The *Denizens of the Library* will continue as that's a 13th Age epic that we are a year from finishing; these kids have put 3 years into this game – one racing back between *Youth Symphony Orchestra* set up & performance for 90 minutes of play – and I'll be damned if we aren't going to finish what was promised because the library decided it wanted to change the rules mid game. I have never had a person so stare daggers at me as when I said this was non-negotiable, and if they insisted I drop this bi-weekly game I would just not volunteer every other week, instead claiming a study room to run for the kids. They seriously started mounting an argument for why I couldn't use public resources to run the game rather than accede to a demand that I use my volunteer time under their orders; I was not supposed to just... not volunteer.

There is also nonsense going on with the school drama club, which leads me to the conclusion that there is no teen program so beloved that some administrator can't claim control of and drive it into the ground. Anyway...

The Knaves of Ridgefield

Continuing from the unfinished 6/2 write up, Randalf and Eldon just fell through the illusionary floor into the pit below¹, seriously wounding Eldon, who has to drop nearly all his gear just to stand up. Randalf tries to brush this off as a comic error; Eldon wants to push Randalf's head through a wall. Instead, they yell that they survived and explore the pit, finding a scattering of bones (animal & human), coins, and a few of the blue gemstones that the dakon so prize. They also find a door; good as the rope stops 15 feet above their heads. Eldon, carrying just the Arms Argent and his one spellbook (Banishing Clay) stalks out, trying to find a way up.

Above, Remus and Chandler look over the exits to the room while Conrad finishes checking the corpse; it's pouch hold a few coins, but also one of the sky blue potions that the group recognizes as healing potions. He pockets everything, and then joins the other two in an exit that is a ramp down to a lower level, where after a straight corridor there's another stair down. There they find Conrad and Randalf, who have opened a door to the south to find a room of animal carcasses in advanced decay; the ribcage of one intertwined with a creeping vine bearing yellow orchids. Only Remus, trusting his terra cotta construction, enters the room; the flowers do nothing (as the yellow musk creeper can't detect his body heat), and they close the door on this mystery, promising to look into it later. Back in the hall an argument is breaking out where Conrad is demanding recompense for giving the wounded Eldon the healing potion; After the number of times he has saved their lives Eldon is apoplectic but Conrad is angry that he still doesn't have any magical equipment unlike the others. It isn't until Remus returns and dope slaps Conrad that the matter is resolved. Eldon may be healed, but bad blood remains.

The party leaves this branch of the temple to circle back to the path Remus and the others took, opening double doors that lead to a room that clearly had a ritual use, with several more of those blue gemstones on the floor and a throne against the wall. When Conrad explore it the throne is revealed as a *protein polymorph*, a much more advanced form of mimic. In the struggle the polymorph encompasses Conrad, then when the pair are tumbles back and two Conrads are there. Eldon takes the opportunity to punch the closest Conrad square in the face, and when the shipwright's nose explodes in blood

the group knows to train their blows on the other. Cue the GMs chance to recreate scenes from The Thing.

(6/16) Some catharsis having been achieved, Eldon is now in a much better mood. He Remus, and Chandler (the only PCs to show up in this last week of play) head out of the throne room into another well apportioned space. The walls of the room hold a fresco of someone in religious regalia wielding a distinctive gold-embossed knife on a sacrifice, and Eldon finds a decorated box that contains that very knife. The others explore the room (finding mold-eaten spellbooks to Remus' satisfaction and several sticks of incense to Chandler's confusion) before turning to see Eldon has been staring at the knife for several long minutes before he slams the box closed. The knife is clearly sentient, magical, and evil, and only the blessing of his god Ord (the great tree) in his helmet kept him from using it to sacrifice Randalf and Conrad to the lost god of this place. They bind the box closed and send the rest of the crew out with their treasures.

The other doors off that central corridor lead to a short hallway, ending with an arch that leads to stairs deeper down. A carved gargoyle with the same ape-like features as the massive statue in the temple above hangs over the arch. Eldon instinctively moves to attack it, and is attacked in return in an inconclusive exchange. Chandler hammers on the stone creature with his mace to no avail, and the group quickly realizes only enchanted weapons can kill this guardian. Eldon delivers a powerful strike with the Arms Argent that tears off the gargoyles jaw even as the blow sends the weapon flying. In exchange the creatures tail wraps around his neck as it launches itself through the archway in flight, with Eldon quickly dangling, feet kicking helplessly for purchase, as the stairs descend under him. Remus, his first attack having been useless, snatches the Arms Argent and leaps, cleaving through the gargoyle's tail. Eldon lands, pulls the tail free and lashes at the gargoyle with it, only to see it cause a small crack. Chandler scoops up rock from the broken jaw and uses his sling to hurl it at the beast, shattering its brow and sending it crashing to the floor².

Exploring the room they have fallen into, the far side holds a large granite block of an altar and two more statues reminiscent of the gargoyle (sans wings or tail). The air in the room has an oily sensation that Remus can know as after-effects of a summoning; when reminded Eldon connects to the feel of the Sharp Circle³. Chandler remains out of his element, collecting gargoyle rocks⁴.

¹ Falling directly damages wounds, and Eldon took 9 wounds from his 12 total in this spill, whereas Randalf made his dex check and only took 1.

² Eldon's player always wants to kill animated statues with their own body parts, and Chandler pulled that off, albeit indirectly.

³ a knife based protective triangle that he stole from a dead wizard's tower, sold to the rival cult in Cabra's religious war, and had to steal back.

⁴ I mean hey, why not! They are magic!

Eldon uses some of the gargoyle dust as the basis for casting Banishing Clay, smearing some of it onto his and Remus' swords and molding the rest into two sling bullets for Chandler; if there was a summoning, this abjorative earth will aid them. Once prepared, the men⁵ change the two statues, hoping to cut them down before they animate. Alas, the statues aren't the threat: a demon, a [bar-legura](#) to be specific⁶, leaps from behind the granite block, snatching at both men. Remus drops out of the way, but Eldon is grabbed, clawed, and nearly pulled in for a bite that would have removed his head.

He puts all his strength behind the counterstrike, embedding the Arms Argent in the demon's body, but not killing it. Chandler's sling bullet flies wide, and Remus blade finds no purchase on the creature's hair. It vanishes, then reappears in three different places in the room. The one closest to Chandler raises a finger, and the sailor flies into the ceiling with sickening force. Eldon snags the banishing clay sling bullet and slaps it onto one of the statues before throwing it at a demon, only to have it pass through the illusion and shatter. Remus charges blade first through the one nearest him expecting it to be fake, it is, and into the one by Chandler, which he assumes is real. Alas the point of the shell game is to get you to accept the premise, as none of the demons were real. The invisible barleguna snags Eldon and again prepares to bite his head off.

Eldon, ready for this, shoves a clay potion sphere into the demon's mouth.

This requires an explanation: as you recall from the lore dump in DotL 10, Eldon, Blanche, & Giggleshook raided the Tomb of St. Festus⁷, Eldon and Blanche found a sapling of Ord, the Great Tree, genus loci of the city of Cabra, a few days distant. St. Festus has led a company of Ordite Paladins ages ago. The sapling, now a decent sized tree, had been planted in St. Festus tomb as a mark of the God's love for his fallen paladins. Alas, a warlock (a human corrupted by worshiping the inexplicable gods of the Serpent People; the specific type of spellcaster Remus' goddess Oshalla created lycanthropes to kill) had broken into the tomb and rune cursed the sapling. This unknown curse was slowly draining Ord's power and was the root cause (heh) for the Cult of Molyneaux's taking over Cabra. When Blanche and Eldon removed the rune, Ord's power began to return, leading to not just the Cabra civil war, but the first fruiting of Ord in a generation, a pivotal point in the conflict.

Eldon's Ordite insurgents included a band of alchemists (The cult of Molyneaux, the god of Animal Husbandry, had made alchemy illegal in Cabra as it relies on what they see as a desecration of animal remains), and Eldon was able to collect Apples of Ord for the alchemists to distill into potions that put you in direct contact with the deity. Ord is the god of soldiers & the hearth, and for a soldier like Eldon this potion boosts his Strength by 1 to 4 points based on proximity to Cabra; for others it has other effects. Eldon always carries two flasks.

This is what Eldon just poured down the Ber-Legura's throat. At the very least this is a vial of potent holy water, and I quickly ruled that it would do as much damage as a power attack from a *Banishing Clay* coated weapon. The dice were even kinder to Eldon this time than the last hit and the demon gurgled and collapsed to the floor, dying. If this had been a *Banishing Clay* hit the demon would have popped back home, but it wasn't; it was an attack from a minor god, so the demon was writhing in death.

Eldon's player: Do you remember when I asked what would happen if I drank two Ord potions at once?

Me: Yeah, I said you'd be cheesing the rules and the potion miscibility would transform you into a sapling of Ord, removing your PC from play.

Eldon's player: Great. I pour my second Ord potion down the demon's throat.

Once again Eldon's player knocked my damn socks off.

The demons body started to spout roots and limbs, it screamed and tried to escape what was happening; pushing past the heroes it staggered... blindly, they thought at first, but now they believe directed, through the dungeon to the pit that nearly killed Eldon before rooting fully and growing through the illusionary floor to burst its canopy into the temple above. The temple of this lost god of the Serpent Folk has been sanctified by Ord. the Great Tree of Cabra. The players went nuts.

And then explored the remaining rooms, with Remus going back to the strange yellow orchid vine and cutting one flower free; the blade was still smeared with *Banishing Clay*. All but that flower of the *Yellow Musk Creeper* disappeared. Remus put it in his pouch; the players know OOC what it is and are wondering if Remus should innocently bring it to their enemy Wizard's Guild at Cabra for examination. What could go wrong?

This? All of this? This is why long-form play of RPGs is important. Thanks, library administration.

⁵ "I take foolish risks in combat, just as my fellow humans do!"

⁶ I need to mention that this comes from the adventure the Shrine of Ilsidatur from Dungeon magazine 10, by John Nephew

⁷ A reskinned *Queen of Brambles* dungeon in [Woeful Barrows](#) (Menagerie Press) to fill out the idea of St. Festus Tomb marked on one of the maps in [Summer's End](#), a collection of Knave adventures by Ben Milton.

Stating Up Regrets 13: Funnyman

Welcome to the first by-request Regrettable, Funnyman! Matt Stevens asked: “Speaking of which, have you thought of stating up Funnyman? For those who don’t know, *Funnyman* was Siegel & Shuster’s follow-up to Superman, about a vaudeville comedian who fought crime. The humor was painfully dated by the time it came out (the mid-40s), and the title was a complete flop. I thought of playing Funnyman’s great-granddaughter, who inherited the mantle but kept her identity secret, more out of embarrassment than anything else.” Since Funnyman meets the criteria of being in Jon Morris’ *League of Regrettable Superheroes* I am happy to oblige, even if I have to correct Matt a bit: after running articles praising Mother Hubbard or Lady Satan the 6 issue run, period as a comic strip and an honest attempt at a movie – Richard Belzer wanted to play the character – elevates him out of flop. Another *Superman*? Heavens no. But we here at Regrettables HQ keep the bar low; even without that, he’s got a fascinating history.⁸

Larry Davis was a fading TV comedian who engaged in what may be the first of the now cliché ‘dressing as a superhero to ‘foil’ a staged crime only to stop a real crime and become hooked on the joy of do-gooding’. His secret ID is known only by his agent, June Farrel, who, in a turn on the Lois Lane trope, knows what’s going on and wants him to stop this heroic shit and get some real work. Still, his routine improves when he riffs off Funnyman’s heroics, ala Peter Parker using his secret ID to make a living off his heroic ID. Consciously modeled on comedian and actor Danny Kaye, Funnyman is now called out as the first Jewish super-hero, and when you read it an adept poke at the entire super-hero comic book genre that Siegel & Schuster originated. It’s not dissimilar to *Ambush Bug*. The story where an on-the-run mobster Funnyman is looking for sends his moll out to find a patsy of his measurements to use as the model for plastic surgery, and just happens to run into Funnyman, whom she does not recognize but happens to fit the bill,



⁸ It goes without saying that Funnyman was created by Siegel & Schuster and is in the public domain. You can read this whole story (where I got the images) at <https://fourcolorshadows.blogspot.com/2013/07/funnyman-jerry-siegeljohn-sikela-1948.html>, it's a hoot.

and our hero *literally turns and winks at the audience* as he lets himself get set up. It was ahead of its time.

Plus, look at this splash page! I mean come on! That is just a great, compelling layout, not dissimilar to a Will Eisner *Spirit* splash page: our hero is in on the gag, is taking the piss out of the genre, and the creatives know what they’re doing.

So how do we build Funnyman in V&V? This is one of those areas where everything runs on a strong hook – Vaudeville – that makes me wish that 2.1 still had the *Gimmick* power.

First off, He clearly has *Heightened Agility A*, at +16 to boost him to a near human max 25. Then *Heightened Defense*, so he always has another -4 to be hit: the whole of his combat style is jumping around, arranging for his foes to hit each other or fall over things or out windows. His technique is making people look the fool. He produces a stream of ‘bully-deflating patter’ ala Spider-Man or chaotic one-upsmanship modeled on Kaye, and I like the idea of him having *Heightened Charisma A* +8 with the ‘Charming’ split (see DoTL #6) for +5 Charisma and +3 Intelligence. He has Str 12, End 13, Agi 25, Int 14, Cha 15: just scraping into 1d6 basic HTH and having a very respectable 19 HP. Nicely heroic, no issues there.

Now his gear: He clearly has *Vehicle* that is either his voice-activated, gadget-filled car the Jet Jalopy or the smaller three wheeled Trix-Cycle. For these sorts I rule the power has a silent S and give them the bike/car/jet/helicopter/sub/hang glider.... Don’t sweat this.

Finally, a *Mutant Power Device*, which...wait for it... mimics *Gimmick* from V&V 1E! last seen in DOTL 9⁹, *Gimmick* starts the character with 1d10 inventions and by my rules assumes the PC always has the skill needed to invent things related to the gimmick (because where would a TV comic get the skills to build this stuff?) and at another multiple of his Int (so his % chance to invent is 56%, not 42%). I had started to stat out his shoes as a *Heightened Movement* power and then realized that this

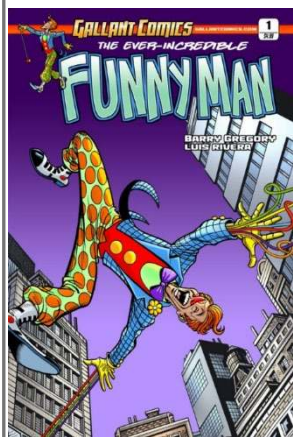


⁹ In which I clearly and with no room for confusion lay out the random origin type table.... 🙄

makes it all so much easier. I roll a 7, so he begins play with the following:

- 1) *Clay nose*: acts as his 'mask', cloud of smelling salts if removed waking him up, 1 action stun for others in 1" radius.
- 2) *Spring shoes*: double all jumps, no damage from first 50' of fall.
- 3) *Joy buzzer*: touch based lightning attack for 2d10 Fatigue and double that for Movement damage.
- 4) Pistol holds 3 different gadgets:
 - a. *Pepper Spray*: 5" range, 2" radius Chemical Powers attack for 'paralysis' til targets d20 End save.
 - b. *Water Spray*: 5" range 1" spread, can put out fires and might irritate people; this is 10" of movement and not an attack.
 - c. *Laughing Gas*: 5" range 2" radius emotion control attack for unstoppable laughter until d20 vs end is made, target will stagger in a random direction.
- 5) *Hidden Clobberer*: Once per adventure he can pull out an oversized hammer or spring mounted boxing glove to get +4 to hit +1d8 damage on the first attack due tom surprise, and +2 to hit, +1d6 damage with it thereafter.

As far as a weakness, I don't think he has one. He has a foil in the form of Sgt. Harrigan, but that doesn't rise to the 'hunted by the cops' level of *Prejudice*. Maybe a *Low Self Control* of 'overconfident, vainglorious blowhard' but that's just a longer way to write 'player character'. So I think we are settled on no weaknesses.



I do want to call out that since he's in the public domain, Gallant Comics did 2 issues of *Funnyman* this millennium, but while they kept the appearance – though that confetti spraying and pose makes him look like an *Astro City Jack in the Box* expy – it is an entirely new character otherwise: not Larry Davis but Bruce Keller, a disgraced stand-up comedian who stumbled into an intra-dimensional war and gained the power to change into Funnyman. Meh. I can't find any issues on-line.¹⁰

But how do you play it?

Funnyman is a straightforward PC for a player who likes to lay down the line of patter...not much fun otherwise. You need to want to get the better of people more than you want to beat them to enjoy the particular nonsense the character has. That said, this sort of PC is a great

team member to counterbalance the more serious party members, as his jokes don't stop him from doing the job.

The regrettable world

Funnyman clearly isn't a wartime hero, but in the Regrettable world the war lasted through the year of his appearance in our world, but he also does not fit into the Regrettable 1970's. So lets say he appears in the postwar mid 50's, and per Matt's request Funnyman's daughter take the name. Esther Davis is a stuntwoman, character actress & observational comic whose tight-10 focuses on life as a Hollywood nepo-baby. She inherited mom's darker hair but hides it under a carrot-top wig as she has taken on dad's mantle now that Larry's knees have given out from too many pratfalls. There will be rumors in '77 that the *Annie Hall* look was inspired by Funnygirl¹¹, and the comic has a running gag of her running from Miss Siobhain Harrigan Esq., a Columbia Pictures lawyer trying to serve a copyright infringement summons on her name. It's all much more tongue in cheek than the rest of the Regrettable's line, every comic universe needs their slapstick deflater of the powerful enemy.



Regretting what I said to you...

Facing up to the Puppeteer challenge, Myles turns the descendent into a proper Teutonic myth; that seems like a proper legacy character! And gloriously incongruous to be a rhinemaiden and still be code named Puppeteer.

Elf swaps out the pipe organ for a flute: makes sense, and the character is *so much more coherent* than the original!

Dylan posits a Puppeteer as a city to world scale political manipulator which could be interesting. (and yeah, Babs wanting to stick around to see the fight is memorable!)

Lisa considered a mind controller expy from *My Hero Academia*, but my response is too long for this margin.

Josh points out the possibility of Puppeteer as Shazam analogue - I do legit love the idea of the Puppeteer family where everyone gets the same powers from B5th, but different color costumes. Unique transformation tunes would be my go to: the trick is figuring out your soul's transformation tune. He also put forward a new Puppeteer with puppet-carving minions, perhaps kin to Toy Box from *Top 10*? That works for me.

¹⁰ This image sourced: <https://www.firstcomicsnews.com/review-funnyman-1/> The next is a frame from *Annie Hall*.

¹¹ Seriously, make those pants polka-dotted, give her the comic nose, and we're good to go; like Jack in the Box, her satchel is full of prop-tricks.

I will pick a favorite and stat them up nextish.

Comments on E&A 14

Patrick Brady: re: ELF on supers adventures, your inclusion of *Watchmen* is interesting as the first *DC Heroes Watchmen* module was endorsed by Moore & Gibbons and feels very *Watchmen*-related in a way that the Snyder movie did not. I did a brief blog piece on it [here](#). RE real world inspiration ethics: just go into it with good intentions; this is highly personal and idiosyncratic, and that you are asking the question means you're unlikely to be entering in the spirit of "how is this foreign culture inferior to our proper British ways".

Matt Stevens: OK, I had to go look up Star Spangled Ice Cream to make sure you were serious. WTF, people.

Patrick Riley: I do like the Goblin cultural tradition of "if you aren't cheating, you aren't trying". Also, the Kobold level of the undercity being a trap haven because there are worse things underneath is an excellent conceit. Sorry your *SotS* experience was middlin', but I get how you got there. The *Zone* sounds fascinating as a one or two game thing. Yeah, I love the CONCEPT of *One Role Engine* but in practice it struggles by being too clever for its own good. re YCTM on *SotS*: rules are integrated with the setting; more than half the book is setting specific. It is against my nature of run someone else's setting, but I kinda have to for *SotS* for some of it to work. It's clever enough: the idea of the city being the goddess and the goddess being the divinity of commerce really nails a certain feel. re The Soldier trait: the player is able to pick 6 of the skills in the game that fall into each trait, so it is both descriptive "I have this because I am a soldier" and proscriptive "my time as a soldier trained me in these 6 skills, not all soldier skills". It nipped the "My Mentat Acrobat skill covers all physical & mental skills" play because the 6 things are right there. Re your Comments on the V&V gridding, well you're also right in that it is much easier to skip than in modern designs, I probably over corrected.

John Redden: thanks for the minicon write up; and glad to hear the surgery went well.

Myles Corcoran: yeah, seeing the differences in our daughter after even just a few weeks at university was astonishing. As for your player who fell off their bike, astounding that the surgeon inserted the plate at the bus stop. 😊 The *People Make Games* doc was fascinating. As for Anthony Head, when your passing would be marked just from your work on instant coffee commercials you know you had the goods. RAE *Mausritter*: all queen's consorts, like Pullman drivers, are named George. I admit I didn't see the shrew attack coming and it was

legit scary. re *Invisibles*: all 62 issues in one book? Yikes? It requires extra dimensions to hold it

Attronarch: LOL at "Too bad I am an elf, I should have been a paladin." Back in my AD&D 1E days my friend Mike was playing an elvish wizard (named Elf) who lamented not being able to be a Bard, back when becoming a Bard meant something. re Happy's end: well that was just damn stupid.

Michael Cule: re your gaming future: online gaming really has come a long way since the pandemic. Still, I find a lot of the tabletop platforms lean in to ever more fiddly rules where you can rely on the platform to do the math and targeting. REYCT Roger re Dolly Levi: and now I have *Hello Dolly* stuck in my head you bastard. Still, it always makes me giggle because when we did the show in High School we didn't have enough boys to fill out the waiters in that number so the, um, least endowed of the girls in the chorus was drafted to join us; in practice we always changed the lyric to "and you still get glances from us handsome men... and Margaret too!" re YCT Erica on *Reign's* maps: to the games credit, they specify that mapmaking technology is very much in its infancy... the maps aren't supposed to work!

Roger BW: There are two types of players: those who will knife each other to play the commanding officer, and everyone else who runs from it like the plague. Oh, it was more than just Britain: someone in my HS game group used this exact circle as to why gays shouldn't be allowed in the military in 1991. re YCT John Redden: I always remember the 1/2 level spells for *Summon Rainstorm* and *Summon Ants* had the same material component of a packed picnic lunch. REYCT me: I have been told not to have bad guys use B-Wings as it's one player's favorite ship. re YCT Dylan on thieves' transitions: one of the games I want to someday run is set in *13th Age's Drakkenhal*, which is a city run by a blue dragon with monstrous lieutenants and the PCs are Paladins. running a 'protection racket' that provides actual protection and services the locals as a means of fomenting rebellion.

ELF: the *Star Frontiers* races were memorable and evocative, even if the Yazarians were most favored by teenage boys by far. (I was a Vrusk man myself.)

Gabriel Roark: I love the new Zine title, and it's a lovely tribute. *B&B's* item identification rules do not reduce my comparison of this to *Gamma World*. The Black Necromantic Rituals are pretty extreme! Yikes!

Scribbles: Nomic? There's a name I have not heard for a long time.... I do love the phrase "churning patchwork roller coaster". This whole essay brought up for me how hard it is for me to play most rules sets as

written, just because my own preferences always raise their heads in game design. Sometimes the game is amenable to that (*D&D 3E* somehow left me lots of places to fiddle without making sweeping changes, while *B/X* and *V&V* can end up nigh unrecognizable. *Knave* is so loose that I have all of 1 house rule (magic weapons don't break, but you lose them for the fight if they would break). RE endless birthday: getting tenure in a universe with Liches in it must be a nightmare.

Dylan Capel: Like you, I enjoyed *TM&G* for what it was, and I don't really expect much from *Star Wars* adjacent properties these days even as I run a *Star Wars* game. Not everything can be *Andor*, and not everything needs to be. Thanks for the notes on *Backrooms* which I suspect I will stream at some point as the concept is a lovely modern twist on the haunted house. As for *D&D* and scaled play, *13th Age* scales cleanly, but it is also so structured that I can have you fight an Orc Gladiator and mob of Goblin mooks at 1st level, or at 8th by scaling up the monster, so you don't even change the label. That being said, a players' width of options expanded wildly in that time, which is where the sense of accomplishment comes from. The more I theorize on OSR play the more the tiers make sense and scaling is naturalism. Levels 1-4 as dungeon exploration, levels 5-8 as longer outdoor quests, and levels 9+ as realm control play are three very different outcomes rather than 3E and later "level 19 is mostly similar to level 3 in what you're doing". I don't know that any game has handled the concept of gradual improvement as well as *Marvel Super-Heroes*, where the easiest improvement path is stunting off existing powers – you start accumulating new ways to use what you have – though the RAW for the cost of that is still punishing.

Avram Grumer: re *Crime Wave*, the flashback idea is neat, but one flashback every 6 rolls feels like a lot. Thanks for the *Going for Broke* write up; it's not to my taste but the breakdown of specific scene framing was interesting. Re the Alan Moore quote: If you ever got a chance to read Ron Edwards' *Champions Now*, capturing this mad energy in your game is his thesis statement

Patrick Zoch: Congrats on your kid's engagement! I'm glad you're enjoying *DCC* since I've been pushing it here - like you I have no frame of reference on the video game bits, but game design is such an ouroboros at this point that it was all explicable. re *Magical Kitties Save the Day*: awwwwwww! AWWWWWWWWWW! re *Saltmarsh*: I did enjoy the punchy, off beat nature of the adventures.

Since we just discussed the 'death by crabs' scene in *Against All Flags* with the kiddo it resonated.

Lisa Padol: *Sinners* really is top notch. It's the first movie my elder kiddo has dragged me to and I don't regret seeing it in the theater. Re *Good Society*, as someone who has built a game system set a Jane Austen style setting (albeit on a colony planet where contrivances restore a Regency social milieu so that we can have Jane Austen Romance and Giant Robot Combat) I admit that having to consider "why do all the pilots have to be women? why can't I be the one male pilot?" was one reason I decided to stop my covid era noodling on publication. (Again, "don't monetize your hobbies", now my mantra.) Ultimately the creator needs to be able to set the baseline tone: this is a game designed to roleplay Jane Austen courtship romances (and in my case, giant robots); anything that *does not advance that* is extraneous. If some tables want to address the sins of England up to the Regency era, they may absolutely do so, but those shouldn't be included in the rules as they are not relevant to the core activity. It literally does not matter where the families' money comes from aside from how it applies to social status markers that might push one suitor over another; but in Austen romances you are so poor that it CAN'T matter. Also, if you want to queer up Austen I salute you, but I'm not designing a game of "Queering Up Jane Austen". I suppose it doesn't help that Jane Austen is the John Phillip Sousa of regency courtship romances¹². re YCT Me: World Cup visitors were apparently tickled that our school buses are actually yellow. As for a Cozy game in a cyberpunk setting, sure if that's the premise you sold, but breaking out *Drama System* for the trials and tribulations of *Night City Noodle Shop* is a better call than trying to use *Cyberpunk 2020*, kinda for the same reasons I articulated above: running that far against the rules system intent is just sideways premise rejection. RE your supers LARP I do appreciate the very specific rules for secret identity deduction being spelled out. Secret Identities are an insane contrivance, but they are also a genre law. I remember a very early *V&V* game where, when I pulled characters from *Crisis at Crusader Citadel* including Manta Man, aka Carter Manning who ran an ocean research based tech firm, when one player tried to casually reveal Manning's ID to some of his staff... yes, yes, a 5 year-old can figure this out, but it's not how the genre is run, so don't do it. LOL at the correct role for that plater being "not appearing in this larp", but Josh should have knighted him for a proper Python reference. RE the quality of my work: aha, but if my stuff weren't bathed you wouldn't have to

¹² There were bunches of other people writing marches, but unless you're a real fan of *Music Man* you're highly unlikely to be able to name Gilmore, Pat

Conway, the Great Creatore, or W.C Handy as history flattened out the entire genre to Sousa. Likewise with Austen.

spend half a page arguing over my foot note. Blather, I say! re Nadia Swan: it's the next line down: "Use with all Guns. Influence, Notice, Society, Stealth/Crime, Travel tests". Each of those capitalized terms is an enumerated skill in the game system. That's also why since Notice and Stealth/Crime are on her 6 skills picked for Soldier she gets a synergy bonus, as the skills are in both careers. Re *Knave*: You are correct on your read of the *Gales Teeth* situation: Frances had turned 6 of the sailors into future mutineers, said unscrupulous dogs went into the jungle as an excuse to pretend to get sick so they could be in position for the mutiny, and while there stole the Dakon's jewels. And yes, the Dakon are a very civilized people.

re Puppeteer and Hitoshi Shinso: I think you're approaching this backwards and in play the power works as follows: *Hitoshi talking to the adversary* is the attack roll. If the attack roll hits, they talk back, and he has attained Mind Control. If he misses, they don't talk back and he doesn't. Now the power always works as presented. In *V&V* Mind Control hits on a 9 or less (10 if you're more charismatic than the target, 11 if you're smarter) and this power clearly has Ht. Expertise connected to it so he has a 13 or less base, up to 15. The GM can easily treat '*target doesn't know you have this power*' as blindsiding in combat them for another +4. Against normal, unsuspecting people he probably has a 19 or less 'to hit' by engaging them in conversation, but smart, aware foes hold their tongue much of the time. Now, also in *V&V* Mind Control is punishingly expensive (20 fatigue) but you're only charged when it works, so it mostly balances out. Not a character I would enjoy playing, but it can work.

Brian Misiaszek: REYCT ELF: huge amounts of genre emulation in play is dependent on everyone at the table knowing the genre rules and leaning into them, like the writers' room of a TV show. Game mechanics can help or hurt with that though, and the outcome can feel more- or less-satisfactory to the genre experience. This is true of pretty much all RPGs. (*D&D* gets a little bit of a by because the rules of its particular genre were built by and around it.) REYCT Josh on Baron Kriminal: that does feel like a satisfactory ending. As for the *GDW* thoughts supporting Josh's plan for adding new eras rather than replacing old, it's good if they didn't alienate player but also maybe they would do what *TSR* did and perpetually fracture their base into boxed settings?

Peter Hildretch: Welcome back! Do you need a copy of *The Man from UNCLE #5: the Mad Scientist Affair*?

Joshua Kronengold: re game at *Dexlite*: that's spelled Flaggerbastard. Sounds like a fun game though. re Games that are bad for you: one of the reasons I prefer *Rongle* over, say, *Wordle* is that *Rogule* doesn't zero out

your streak if you miss a day. Only wins and losses from actual played days count. Now, I still try to play every day because I enjoy it, but there's no fear of losing because I didn't prioritize it. RE YCT me Sure, go ahead and rub in your still having *Invisibles*. I don't have that much dosh lying around for a massive book. As for *Star Wars*, my experience as a youth was everyone dumping points into Blaster, which is the non-Jedi equivalent version of Laser Sword. These days everyone has some things at 5d or higher but are spreading out what they do. re Rangers: one of my concerns with contemporary game design is having to worry about a clear combat role by class, but I know it is part of the TTRPG To CRPG To TTRPG ouroboros, so I don't kick too much. Well not much. Well, not in public. My own game has "Fighter". re *V&V* Metacurrency use: oh you guys used the one I built into that version. In the *Revolution* game I instituted "You can use this to reroll" hero points and everyone just forgot they existed in the heat of every fight. re *V&V* Gridding: See my comments to Patrick thisish. Diskette having galactic range would potentially be game breaking but would sure show her brother he was wrong about her power being useless to the family, wouldn't it? Two consecutive watches is 8 hours of sleep. But I don't overstress having people in short watches, it's just if you have a fight-encounter you gotta start over. Everyone loves the very reasonable Dakon so expect to see more of them when we come back to this. re your comment to Clark: man, having "xE" as our universal differentiator is hard when dealing with clones, where Pathfinder 1E is a 3.5E clone whose 2E moved closer to 5E. Re YCT Lisa on my reviving the *Legion* game: I'm considering it, now that my life situation is very different. it's more likely than my publishing my *V&V* hack for it. re YCT ELF: actually, I didn't. There's a point where our experiences are so different as to not facilitate the conversation.

Jim Vassilikos: re YCT Patrick Brady on Aristotle: the *Discworld* books better with priesthoods claiming that the sausages being cooked sent the 'sausage-ness' up to Offler the Crocodile god, while they swore the materials that remained were like ashes in the priests' mouth, which is why they don't share... pass the hot sauce.

Timothy Collinson: Congratulations! Nice photo! Re an official 'zine: welcome to The Show. re Total nudity: as someone who spent part of a few summers at a nudist camp as a kid in the 70's, I always have problems getting this across the people: when everyone is naked all the time, it's just a background state, not an arousal.

Everyone else: RAEBNC

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

ATLANTIS FOR NOW #2

July 20, 2026, for Ever & Anon #14

Gabriel Roark

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Natter

Hello, friends & readers. AfN #2 is a commentzine this time around owing to a busy month. As of this writing, Celeste & I are wrapping up our third quarter of Learn to Skate class. We also had our first skativersary this month. On August 1, I will move up into Freestyle 1, in which we will learn how to do forward spirals (can do already), half flip jumps, two-foot spins (can do), waltz jumps (can do, but need to learn the entrance), and backward edges. Skating backward will be important in this course, so I will join Celeste in taking up private coaching to get my reverse skills up to snuff. I am looking forward to the challenge.

Gaming continues with my two usual groups, Advanced D&D (referee) and Star Wars (player). Work continues on the 50th Anniversary of Arduin project, which has taken much time away from reading & writing zines. It's a shame, seeing as E&A #13 is a banger & I still have loads of material to share from Arduin's Portal to Adventure. That's okay: one can only do what one can do.

Additional Contents:

- Our Examination of Arduin's Portal to Adventure has gone for a smoke break
- Talk Talk: Comments on E&A #13

TALK TALK: COMMENTS ON E&A #13

- In the Hall of Stone (Patrick Brady)
- Quasipseudoludognostication #13 (Patrick Riley)
- Denizens of the Library #12 (Brian Rogers)
- Reddened Stars No. 12 (John Redden)
- Twisting the Rope #13 (Myles Corcoran)
- Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman)
- Scribbles and Horrors #2 (Scribble M. Horror)
- Attacks of Opportunity #12 (Dylan Capel)
- An Unlooked for Zine #12 (Lisa Padol)
- Aragarth's Musings (Peter C. Hildreth)

- Computocracy: Character Options, Pt. 1 (Jim Vassilakos)
- Travelling Light No. 1 (Timothy Collinson)

In the Hall of Stone (Patrick Brady): Nice to see you back in these pages, Patrick (apologies for not acknowledging your reappearance lastish). On zine design, the colors that you used for highlighting text & watermarks are soothing. The triangular watermark breaks the expected pattern pages 3 & 4 (no triangle & position 1 again, respectively). It is not bothersome, but I do wonder why.

I appreciate your ethical dilemma concerning cultural appropriation in nonprofessional campaign design. I think that audience does matter & that a close circle of gaming compatriots reduces your ethical burden to a considerable degree. Here is a suggestion for handling your borrowing of real-Earth religious practices for your home campaign. Minimally, you have already taken step one in that you have identified some (or all?) of the religions from which you want to borrow. Be sure to identify them in your documentation & verbally with your players. Step two, determine which specific aspects of religious practices you want to incorporate into your campaign. Here, I think that structures or relationships & ritual enactment are probably most important. After you have done this, ask yourself whether it is important to keep the names of these phenomena as you find them in your sources. If it isn't, change them & have your setting material just a little further removed from the real-Earth situation. Depending on the arc of your campaign, these religions could well see change anyway.

You might include a disclosure statement in your campaign materials like this: "Religious practices in this campaign are modeled directly on the Kuksu Cult, as practiced by several California Indian tribes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I have incorporated Kuksu Cult practices in this campaign's religious scene out of genuine interest in the culture as well as to have a religious milieu that feels vital & part of a culture, not tacked on merely because clerical classes demand it. In using this inspired material for inspiration in our games, I paid special attention to the purpose of communal rituals, their settings (including architecture, such as the ceremonial roundhouse), officiants, & participation by the lay community. [One could go on.] The Kuksu Cult was the [a] major source of inspiration for religious life in this campaign & my borrowing does not lend or detract from the dignity of the Kuksu Cult, its adherents, or their descendants. Likewise, I do not claim to possess authority to interpret the meaning of the Kuksu Cult nor cultural competency in it. Finally, I will not use this material to garner any profit." Oh, yeah, have a list of your sources somewhere, too, even if only in your campaign notes.

I don't know whether this is helpful & admit that it is far from a detailed consideration of your problem. Ah, another idea occurred to me. If possible, prioritize sources of information that living (or recently living) adherents published themselves. Look at those sources for any admonitions against incorporating the published information in any capacity. Older native-published sources are unlikely to have such admonitions, but my experience with North American Indian literature (I am an anthropologist and cultural resource manager) suggests that authors writing more recently address this issue (albeit not in a roleplaying setting) directly. In the final analysis, I think you are not abusing the source material have motivations that few would fault.

Quasipseudoludognostication #13 (Patrick Riley): RYCT Roger BW, unconscious foes are indeed a conundrum all around. Certainly, it creates more for the referee to track, in addition to the concerns that you identified. That said, my table seems to enjoy the moral & pragmatic issues that unconscious foes impose upon their PCs. To be honest, as is probably known by longtime readers of my zines, the PCs in my campaigns seldom have qualms about summary killing of unconscious enemies. In our current Temple of Elemental Evil campaign (Advanced D&D), the good-aligned PCs have been trying to use negotiation or intimidation to surmount opposition in lieu of outright slaughter. Various inputs, of which alignment is but one, have influenced this decision. Another big impetus to reduce body count is the nasty convention that I use, where corpses that are not properly consecrated can return as undead.

RYCTM, initiative order at our AD&D table is cumbersome, I'll not lie. We are encumbered primarily by the warband size of the PCs, not so much action type. I find the order of actions easy to adjudicate (this does not always mean quick) for a couple of reasons. First, you are right, the PCs have known tactical preferences & the players provided me with a good default description of their martial preparation during exploration. Second, I try hard to give the players comprehensive information on what sort of armor & armament their PCs can see. This allows the PCs to make informed plans. Third, in resolving the order of actions, I concern myself more with whether there are any conflicts between actions instead of establishing an absolute sequence. A good example is determining whether a charging foe can engage and strike a spellcaster before the spell goes off. If the attacker is nearby & using a fast weapon, I really must know the difference between the casting time and the combined movement + weapon speed of the assailant. In most melee exchanges, the longer weapon gets first strike. Easy. Declaring intentions is what takes ages at my table, to the degree that I am considering alternative approaches to what we are doing now.

Denizens of the Library #12 (Brian Rogers): RYCTM, yes, Matthew Tapp wears his influences on his sleeve in Barrows & Borderlands. I'm glad my reviews of B&B have been an interesting read. "Idiosyncratically mine"—nice!

Reddened Stars No. 12 (John Redden): I appreciate your kind words about the Arduin (and B&B) essays. "Invisible" was Taylor's least obtrusive tour ever. Really, though, my remark about reserving space for her was a reference to her song, "Blank Space."

Thanks for continuing Jargon Zen and Humor.

Twisting the Rope #13 (Myles Corcoran): "Irish to the point of self-parody" & modifying a James Taylor tune to describe your local weather—lol.

I had not heard that John Blanche died till I read your zine. Skinty fia. Man, I soaked up his art in my teens & early twenties thanks to a steady diet of *Warhammer Fantasy Role Play* (2nd ed., I think) & *White Dwarf*. Ian Miller is in the pantheon, too (still living).

See my comment this to John. You probably got the joke. If you did, I'll write her name.

Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman): An email requesting a copy of *Wanderer* is on its way.

Scribbles and Horrors #2 (Scribble M. Horror): Your essay, “Rule Mutability in Nomic and Dungeons & Dragons” is fascinating. Time permitting, I should compare some of the concepts that you covered to those in Robert J. Kuntz’s *Dave Arneson’s True Genius* (Corsica, France: Three Line Studio, 2017). Also, I am surprised that I have not read about *Nomic* before encountering your essay in my reading on wargaming & simulation gaming. I see many references to Chris Engle’s Matrix Games (<https://sites.google.com/view/free-engle-matrix-games/home>) but recall no references to *Nomic*.

Attacks of Opportunity #12 (Dylan Capel): RYCTM Myles on sketch maps & characterizing play situations for players, how did you use index cards to try solving the problem?

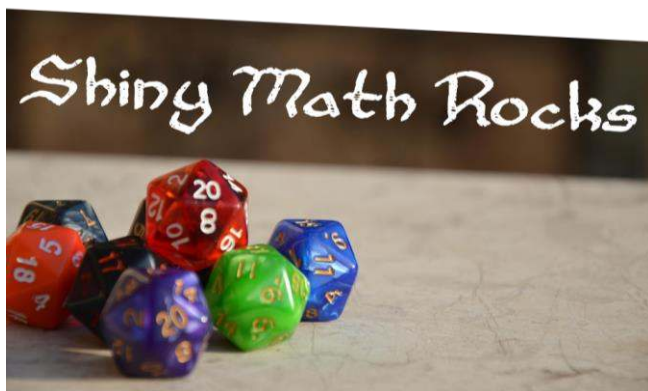
An Unlooked for Zine #12 (Lisa Padol): RYCTM, thank you!

Aragarth’s Musings (Peter C. Hildreth): Welcome back, Peter! Thank you for sharing your RPG origin story. I always find these a joy to read.

Computocracy: Character Options, Pt. 1 (Jim Vassilakos): RE: Silver vs. Gold (with apologies to Lee & Barry). I admire your commitment to making gold more valuable in your AD&D campaign(s). Your description tells me that I had correctly understood that effecting such a conversion would be a lot of work, which would only compound if one used published AD&D adventures.

Travelling Light No. 1 (Timothy Collinson): I like your new zine title. Therein is the reference to the game system that you & Jim V. use. That would be a good title for a Quaker newsletter as well (and less cheeky than my friend Jim Healton’s “Quaker Notes”). Congratulations on seeing your daughter wed: may she & her husband have a blessed & lengthy marriage.

This sentence dwells between something & nothing.



SMR Issue #10 for E&A #14, Aug 2026

[Erica L Frank](#) (call me Elf); [Eris Lord Freedom@itch.io](mailto:ErisLordFreedom@itch.io)

Playtest Material journal

Playtest Material, <https://playtestmaterial.org/>, is an upcoming “not-for-profit critical journal dedicated to roleplaying games. We publish essays, reviews, interviews, and experimental writing on all aspects of tabletop roleplaying...” It’s still in the setup stage; they’ve finished accepting pitches for issue 1 (but are still potentially open to already-completed articles). They are looking for volunteers of all sorts: Writers, artists, proofreaders, layout editors, etc.

Right now, they pay nothing. I believe they have plans (or at least hopes) to change that at some point.

I’ve volunteered to help with layout & proof-reading things, and potentially writing. My two serious pitches (as opposed to the half a dozen “this could be an article” concepts I threw into the “I’m volunteering for layout-ish editing” email) were accepted as “either of these would work well for issue 2; whichever you prefer is fine.”

My two article ideas are:

1. **Solo TTRPG types** – I’ve sorted out 4 major types and one... other type of rpgs.
 - a. Choose-Your-Own-Adventure ish things (like [Alone Against Nyarlathotep](#) or the [Fighting Fantasy](#) books);
 - b. “Standard rpgs without other players or a GM” (like [Ironsworn](#) or [Mythic GME](#)) where you use oracles extensively to cover for the lack of other players;
 - c. Journaling campaigns (I think [Fox Curio’s Floating Bookshop](#) goes here; so does [You Are the Dungeon](#), which has much less detail) where there’s ongoing adventures that don’t have to end;
 - d. Journaling one-shots (like [Anamnesis](#) and I believe [Thousand Year Old Vampire](#), and also Cage of Sand) where, although the game may

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take place over several sessions, it’s a single story-arc that can’t be continued once it’s complete. (When I finish Anni’s adventure with the time loop, I may continue using her or the others as characters – but there is no way to continue playing CoS with them.)

- e. Lyric games. These are... technically, most of them fall in one of the previous two categories, but they are often much less directly playable. (Like [☀](#) which was very annoying to my database planning, or [I missed the day we learned about clouds in middle school](#).) For these, the aesthetic is as or more important than the contents. I think of them as “game-shaped poem” rather than actual games. (Note: Not everything tagged “[lyric game](#)” is in this category, and not all lyric games are tagged.)
2. **TTRPGs with Fire.** As in. You need fire to play the game. Ten Candles is the most famous (ok, the only one anyone’s heard of) but I’ve collected more than 50 of them. They range from cooking games, to “candles as hit points,” to candles for aesthetics, to “burn part of the character sheet after you use that ability.” It’s a fascinating topic that absolutely nobody needs to hear about. (No, really... I bet your reaction was “huh, interesting” not “oh, wow, FIRE is what my games have been missing! How do I get me some of that?”)

So, E&Aers... which one do you think I should write?

It’s likely I’ll write both eventually, but only one can be published in issue 2 of the journal. Also, my notes here are initial thoughts; either one might wind up with more categories or different labels.

I really am undecided. Solo TTRPGs are dear to my heart, and I haven't seen anyone else break them down like this. And "games with fire" is just *fun* to consider. But I can't do both, at least not for the next issue of Playtest Material.

I have a lot more coherent thoughts about solo TTRPGs; I've been considering them in more detail. That doesn't mean it's an easier article to write – there's a lot more ground to cover, and there's the risk of missing something major that's outside my interest set.

Games-with-fire is new territory. Nobody is talking about them so I can't do it wrong. It's also a lot less relevant to the current gaming scene and communities. I have the vague impression that it'd be a more enjoyable article but not a more useful one.

Next issue isn't until next year; I have substantial time to make a decision & get an article written.

Superhero Games

I got several comments about my mention of superhero rpgs not covering the genre well. I'd like to address a few points, not aimed at anyone in particular:

1. I adore superhero rpgs; they're one of the few genres I play regularly, and, before Brindlewood, the only genre I'd GM'd in the last few decades. I've played several of them, mostly long enough ago that the details are a blur. But I tried all of them I had access to, and while I liked some more than others, I was happy to play any of them and liked them more than most genres.
2. I continue to believe that they fail to represent the comic-book supers genre. (Or superhero movies. Or shonen anime.) They can be a favorite type of game and still leave me thinking "this is not what it says on the package."

Explanation: When I was a teenager, I had a friend who was really into comics.¹ We read a lot of Teen Titans & New Mutants together. She had her own pack of supers characters written up for making her own stories – names, secret ID, descriptions of powers, origin story, etc. I adopted it and made some of my own. Later, when I got into supers rpgs, I tried writing them up.

It didn't work. Even my "weak" superheroes were either too powerful or out of scope of any game system I could find.

I don't remember the details on many of them. I had a pair of twins – he had "inertia control," and she had a kind of teleport that moved through a

surreal realm called slipspace; the two of them were the only ones who could navigate it safely. (His name was Trip. I don't remember hers.)

Turns out teleporting is expensive; teleporting and bringing people along is more expensive; teleporting via a middle-zone is a whole swarm of extra powers. And ability to change someone else's movement as well as your own is also expensive.

Had another character, Nirvana (the whole team was hippie-themed), who made an impenetrable dome that fit over her and the nearby area. She would meditate and hover, and the dome would appear around her. Allies could see her & each other; enemies couldn't see anything. (Possibly, this was based on who was touching her when it activated.) Nobody could perceive anything into or out of the dome until it came down.

Hey guess what? Impenetrable walls are costly in rpgs. (Well. Powerful walls are costly. Impenetrable walls don't exist in most games.) Also, characters with a single power and no notable combat skills are likely to be dead before they can use the power.

The issue isn't, "I had imagined a power that was well beyond the starting ability level of most games." That'd be fine. The issue was, "I had imagined a character who had both a power well beyond starting ability – possibly beyond any game ability – *and* who wasn't likely to survive a one-on-one fight with a street thug." She wasn't "ultra-powerful." She was "powerful where the game expected limitations, and weak where the game expected beyond-normal-person talents."

When I tried writing them up for games, I had to drastically change how I imagined their powers, and what other abilities they had, because "viable comic-book story character" does not translate directly to "viable superhero rpg character."

There were others, including my friend's characters; I don't remember the details, just that they didn't convert to game characters without drastic changes.

You can have plenty of fun playing superhero rpgs. You just have to *start* with the game mechanics; you have to learn to focus your character ideas in ways supported by the game system. Because if you start with the fiction, you'll almost always wind up with a character that needs extensive changes: Could be 3x as powerful as the game wants them to be; could have abilities the game can't cover (memory alteration/removal is one; "aura sight" is another); could have weaknesses that will make them unable to survive unless they get very lucky.

¹ Angie Patrick if you ever see this, get in touch please!

...It's easy to forget this after playing for a few years. It's not until you start trying to write up favorite characters from shows or books that were obviously not influenced by rpgs, that you realize that the games can't reflect the genre.

There are reasons for this. Characters in comic books don't get to use all their abilities in every encounter; they have endless amounts of "item that got used once and was never mentioned again" or "convenient contact with good info, who will be very useful for a 3-issue story arc and never appear again." The limits of their abilities are based on "what works for this story, given Hero A's details," not "how would I defeat Enemy Z given Hero A's power set and some average dice rolls?"

Players can wring a lot more usefulness out of a "minor" power than comic book writers ever do. (If you've ever seen a D&D group load up on cantrips instead of 1st level spells, you know what I mean.)

But that versatility means the high-end powers need to be toned down, and the mid-range ones need to be described with extensive limits.

Can you use your minor, 5-lb limit telekinetic wind power to burst someone's eardrums? To block the exhaust ports on a computer so it overheats? Can you use bug control to have mosquitos spread vaccines? Does rock shaping work on gypsum, and can you use that to weaken the walls?

(Depends on the game, the GM, the group, and so on. But every group I've met has come up with questions like these when they're faced with a situation where "I hit it with Fire Blast" is not the obvious solution.)

Which means that comics-style versatility (as opposed to player-shenanigans versatility) winds up costing a lot more.

In comics, you can have Random Useful Contact appear for this-or-that case. They show up for a few issues; maybe they're recurring every few years. They provide info and maybe access to evidence or experimental tech.

In games... In GURPS, you pay points for each specific, named contact. You pay more if they are very talented or have access to other useful resources. Which means you are prone to leaning into using them in every game you can because you gave up a +2 on all hearing rolls to get this guy's phone number.

I repeat: I love superhero rpgs. I am currently running one, after a couple of decades of not GMing. (Fate Accelerated, game set in 2014; superpowers are new to the world and still evolving.)

We're having fun with it. But they had to rethink their characters in Fate terms, rather than the comic-book-ish ideas they started with.

Solo Play: Cage of Sand, part 7

Game link: <https://luciellaes.itch.io/cage-of-sand>

Cast of Characters

Protagonist: **Anni Joutsen**, embroidery artist

1. **Anton Kumala (3 of Wands)**, a wealthy merchant, waiting for his ship to come in
2. **Sir Godfrey of the Ocean (Knight of Cups)**, a knight looking for smugglers and tax evasion
3. **Barigrotir "Bari" Bristlegrog (the Emperor)**, a dwarf judging the contest & selecting artisans
4. **Vamirelion (5 of Swords)**, elven former merc, exiled in disgrace; skilled woodworker
5. **Elenwen Crow (Wheel of Fortune)**, priestess of the god of luck, runs games of chance
6. **Remi Longfoot (7 of Swords)**, a hobbit thief & fake contestant with his knotwork
7. **Lady Linyive the Widow (6 of Wands)**, half-elf, a ranger who won accolades for arresting bandits
8. **Her Grace, Maritha of Heliot (the Empress)**, duchess entering the contest with her tapestries
9. **Lady Phoebe (6 of Cups)**, her daughter, age 6
10. **Stregori Zrin (4 of Swords)**, a tapped-out mage looking for an apprentice while he recovers

The town of Baysheer is holding an arts festival; the best artists will be selected to create pieces for the upcoming royal wedding.

First Loop

Anni and all 10 of the above characters were killed, many in gruesome ways. Anni then woke up in her cottage the day of festival's start, with a weird memory of a conversation with the Duchess (whom she is certain she's never met), and an uneasy feeling that she has done the sewing on these sleeves before.

Second Loop

As before, all 10 were killed, although in a different order this time. Anni started to notice something was odd about the few days around the start of the festival. The audience has become aware of some of the forces behind the time loop, and that it involves Anton Kumala, who hasn't made an on-screen appearance yet.

Third Loop

Act 1: Awakening

The loop begins as normal, with a strong sense of déjà vu; a memory from the previous loop haunts them. Also, for each tally mark (2 for now), select an element that seems "either strangely repetitive or strangely out of place."

Anni awakens from a nightmare she can't quite remember, something involving screams and body parts butchered into gore. She shudders to alertness as a goat bleats outside her window, sounding at first like someone is laughing at her as she tries to shake off the images of blood and death.

She tries to remember what she was doing yesterday, and thinks she... taught embroidery to a titled lady? That can't be right. Her house is too humble, her works are too simple, to catch the attention of... a warrior lady? Someone with a bow? She shakes her head and looks around her home, and realizes she needs to prepare for the crafts festival.

She sews the sleeves on the shirt she'd left out last night. She remembers leaving the parts out, ready to be finished in the morning light. She *also* remembers sewing these sleeves — there, right at the top of the shoulder, there's the little wrinkle in the fabric that she has to flatten, pinching the sleeve material so it holds the shoulder straight, and right *there* is the frayed edge of the curve, two tiny short threads trying to put themselves on the outside instead of the inside—

But of course she hasn't already stitched this shirt before. She must be mixing it up with the last one she did. (But. That one was blue; this is white fabric...)

She shakes her head to clear it, and goes to replace the flowers on the table. She tosses the dead roses in the midden heap, and gathers a handful of fresh goldenrods to brighten up the room.

She puts them in the vase, and they look wrong.

She rearranges them in the vase; they don't look less wrong. She adds a few more; maybe some extra golden color will help? It does not. She moves them to the center of the table, and then the edge. They continue to look odd. She considers fetching the withered roses to replace them, and decides that's ridiculous. She must be nervous about the festival and so common flowers just don't look refined enough today.

She gathers her supplies and goes to set up her table for sales today.

Act 2: Interactions

3 minor encounters: Anton Kumala, Lady Linyive, (?)

3 of Wands: **Anton Kumala** finally makes an appearance!; King of Swords
(Authority, Experience, Wisdom — "You are entering a situation requiring clarity and wisdom, which asks you to maintain absolute control over your emotions.")

While Anni is setting up, she hears a commotion in the distance, near the docks. She joins the crowd of onlookers to see what's going on, and sees a ship

listing dangerously to one side as its crew are frantically trying to unload it. It's docked; something must have happened to damage it in the harbor.

Many of the crates being removed look expensive, not plain boxes but fine chests with carvings and locks. The crew has pushed people out of the way to stack them on the pier, but they are slowed by the need to leave some people guarding while others unload. A wealthy-looking merchant scans the crowd, and his eyes settle on Anni.

"You there!" he says, and points at her.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You work at the Blue Fish Pub, do you not? Jetsam? Jackson?"

"Joutsen, sir. Do I know you?"

"You patched up a jacket for a friend of mine, two summers back. The stitches still hold."

She curtseys. "I'm glad to hear it."

"You're honest," he says abruptly.

"I... try to be so?" She's not sure where this is going.

"I will pay you to watch over those crates," he nods at the stack on the pier. "We need to get the rest out before they get water-damaged."

"I would be happy to, but... I am not strong," she says. She cannot fight off thieves, she means.

"Don't need strength, just a voice. Stand by them, and if anyone gives you trouble, yell. There's plenty of men here but they can't watch and work at the same time."

She nods, agreeing, and he hands her a small pouch of coin. She goes to stand at the pier and enjoys the opportunity for a closer look at the exotic chests, while keeping enough distance that it doesn't look like she's evaluating how to take one.

[There are eight zillion random generators online for frpg things, and none of them generate treasure chests. Plenty of them will list treasure items, coins, etc; none of them describe the boxes. Dammit. I'm leaving this for later. Suffice to say that there are, in addition to a stack of ordinary shipping crates of various sizes, several "treasure chests" made of different materials and shapes.]

She watches the unloading from up close for a couple of hours while the ship sinks lower in the harbor. Nobody attempts to steal anything and she is paid better than she'd expect to make at her table selling embroidery.

Six of Wands — **Lady Linyive**: Six of Swords (Escape, rescue, hope)

As Anni is watching the last of the chests getting loaded onto a cart and hauled away to storage, the crowd on the dock starts to turn rowdy; the spectacle

of a sinking ship is drawing more people, and Anton's crew, which functioned as guards, have mostly gone. Anni is looking for a way through the crowd that won't catch people's attention when she is once again recognized.

"You there!" a cheerful woman's voice rings out. "Seamstress-lady!"

Anni sees Lady Linyive waving at her, and...
How do I know her? We haven't... met?

But then Anni remembers there was a procession, a few days ago, when Lady Linyive rode through town to the mayor's mansion, where a feast was held in her honor, for her and her late husband's efforts in clearing out the bandits in the northern hills.

That must be why I recognize her. But how does she know me?

Anni walks uncertainly to meet her, and Lady Linyive throws an arm around her shoulder and begins walking with her. "Anni! I was hoping to find you today!"

"I'm sorry, milady... do I know you?"

"Know me!? Of course! We're..." she pauses.

"You're..." She looks puzzled. "Do I... *not* know you? But I know your name, and you teach embroidery, do you not?"

"I... could?" Anni says.

Lady Linyive grins. "Great! Then we'll go back to your place, and you can teach me the basics!"

The rest of the evening is pleasant, if a bit surreal.

Next time: Third minor encounter, and hopefully both major encounters for this loop.

Lost in the Clouds: A Brindlewood Bay Mystery

This is the (draft) writeup of my "[Untamed](#)"-based mystery. It'll eventually be on Itch.io. It's currently somewhat unpolished; I haven't done the careful review to sort out if the details should be in a different order for readers who know nothing of the original story. Suggestions/feedback welcome.

I gave names to 3 canon characters: Qingheng-Jun is Lan Yongshan; Lan Furen is Wan Huina; the man she killed is Lan Zemin. I also made 3 new/original characters; they're in the suspect list.

Complexity: 7

Background: This is shamelessly stolen from a background-story bit in *The Untamed*, the live-action adaptation of MDZS by MXTX. (If you don't recognize

the initials, you don't need to. A websearch will give some details but probably won't be useful for this.) No canon knowledge is required,² and this has been through some drastic changes to put it in modern-day US.

Names are written with the family name first; the second part is a person's given name. Also, pronunciation notes are included for names that are very different from English spelling.

Presenting the Mystery

Cloud Haven is a Buddhist retreat in the hills not far from Brindlewood Bay. They are known for their traditional approaches to meditation, spiritual music, and martial arts. (Which is to say: They are reclusive and somewhat weird, although they seem to be dedicated pacifists despite half of them carrying swords. "To battle ghostly monsters and demons," they claim.) Every summer, they have a series of lectures on philosophy and meditation; they also have year-round music courses and traditional Chinese arts school.

Establishing Question: One of you attended the Lan summer lectures a few years ago. What course did you take, and how did they treat the temporary students different from clan members?

One of their respected members, the heir to the clan, approaches the Mavens.

Lan Wangji explains

"About 40 years ago, my father met my mother, a wandering spiritual adept. He fell in love with her on sight. She... did not return his feelings. However, soon after they met, she had a conflict with one of his teachers, and she killed the man. My father, to keep her from being executed, married her. He protected her by imprisoning her, and he also withdrew to a life of seclusion. They must have had some contact, because my brother and I exist.

"When I was six years old, she died. I did not understand at the time; it was years later that I was told she had been ill. My father died about 10 years after her, in a conflict between different martial arts sects; after the war, our sect moved to America and rebuilt Cloud Haven here.

"Almost fifteen years later, I was reunited with my beloved **Wei Wuxian**. We plan to marry soon.

² However, this does contain some spoilers for canon. Nothing about what actually happens, but some of these relationships aren't known until near the end of the story.

“Traditional Chinese marriage involves bowing to one’s ancestors and serving tea to the elders of the family. In going through my mother’s belongings to prepare a shrine for my parents, I found some records that lead me to believe she may not have been ill.

“While perhaps there is little value in investigating a 30-year-old possible-murder that happened on another continent... I would prefer not to have my mother’s murderer at my wedding. I would especially prefer not to serve tea to them, if it turns out they are part of my immediate family.

“Please help me find out what really caused my mother’s death.”

Keeper Introduction

The Mavens will be invited to visit Cloud Haven – to stay in the student dorms, if they wish – and investigate the place and talk with people. They will be brought to the **Hanshi** and introduced to **Lan Xichen**, Lan Wangji’s brother who is the sect leader, and **Lan Qiren**, the grandmaster (and uncle to Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen). Xichen supports the investigation because it’s important to Wangji. Qiren doesn’t, but he isn’t blocking it.

Teen **Lan Sizhui** will be assigned to help them out – escort them around, introduce them to people, and so on. (Also he will translate anything they need translated, although they can also use phone apps for that. Lalalalala, we are ignoring language problems in this game.) He is not a suspect; he wasn’t born when the victim died.

Depending on what they ask in the initial meeting, other characters may be mentioned. The meeting will include the Mavens, Wangji, Xichen, Qiren, and Sizhui. (Wei Wuxian could make an appearance but Lan Qiren really doesn’t want him involved.)

Most records are kept in the **library** and the **Hanshi**. Some may be in **Lan Qiren’s** desk in the lecture hall, and the **Jingshi** may hold some Clues, although no official records are kept there.

Moments

- A group of students in traditional robes, kneeling in front of low tables as they practice their calligraphy. Lan Qiren taps a student on the shoulder and tells him not to slouch.
- Guqin music in the distance as you walk between buildings [youtube.com/watch?v=NVJEdHmlwCU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVJEdHmlwCU) (1 hr) (longer, usable for background music: [youtube.com/watch?v=NfvdvscqVUE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfvdvscqVUE) 6 hrs)
- Walking over a stone pathway leading to a small wooden bridge over a stream, winding between

shady trees; nothing else in Cloud Haven is visible from this path

- Two teenage students being punished for getting into a fight: They are kneeling in gravel in front of the lecture hall, facing each other in silence. (Until they are ready to apologize.) Their posture is very correct, but close observation can see they are trembling with the stress of holding the position for so long while kneeling on rocks.
- A swordmaster walks between three students with practice swords, correcting their posture, and having them run through a set of sword forms. They grumble that they’ll never be as good as **Lan Wangji** so the swordmaster shouldn’t be so sharp with them.
- Two scholars playing go in an outdoor pavilion, with a table beside the gameboard where they share tea and small cakes. One of them asks what the “old ladies” are doing visiting, and the other reminds him that gossip is forbidden.

Suspects

Wan Huina (Wahn Hwee-nah) (deceased; possible suicide), the victim/subject of investigation

Beautiful, gentle, sad smiles.

She seemed content with her life, although not actually happy. There are no records of her trying to escape or fighting with anyone, although she was trained in martial arts. She spoke to nobody about the “crime” that resulted in her marriage and seclusion. Nobody can remember her ever speaking or writing her husband’s name, or referring to him at all. However, she loved her sons dearly.

Quote from her diary: “My sons are two bright stars in the bleak night of my life. They bring me hope that the future is not empty.”

Lan Yongshan (Lahn Yōng-shahn) (deceased), former sect leader & spouse of the victim

Young (photos are from his 20s); Confident, calm, unwavering.

Obviously related to Qiren, Xichen, and Wangji. There are a few photos of him and ID documents. There is no video footage of him or his wife; the sect was ashamed of their actions and avoided or destroyed most records of them. There’s a bit of correspondence, mostly related to sect contracts, and a few of his day planners, saved in the restricted section of the library.

From his planner, the year before Lan Wangji was born: “February 15: My beloved has agreed to try for a

second son. Would it be greedy of me to hope for a daughter first?"

Lan Qiren (Chee-ren), a teacher

Traditional Buddhist robes, a goatee that he strokes when thinking, perpetual frown.

Grandmaster (lead teacher) of the Lan sect. Very formal and proper. He's the brother of the previous sect leader, and raised Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji almost on his own. Opposes the investigation for several reasons: it's not the business of outsiders; whatever traumas were involved should be left in the past.

"This is a waste of time and it's all that trouble-maker Wei Wuxian's fault. The dead should be left in peace; the living should mourn them quietly, not dredge up decades-old conflicts that have long been resolved."

Lan Xichen (Shee-chen), sect leader

Gently smiling, gracious and polite, regal bearing.

Believes no good can come of digging up the details of his mother's death — it's all in the distant past, and even if a culprit can be found, there's no value in putting everyone through turmoil now. Still, he recognizes that it's important for Wangji, so he will tolerate the investigation. He will allow the Mavens access to the clan records that remain (some were destroyed in a clan war years ago).

He is technically a suspect, in that he had access to the victim around the time of her death. However, he was 9 years old at the time, and loved and respected her.

"It was so long ago; I'm not sure if finding the truth is worth so many people reliving painful memories. Still, I would like Wangji to be happy."

Lan Wangji (Wahng-zhee), Your client

Aloof, formal, laconic, stunningly handsome. Wears white and pale blue traditional garb, and carries a sword.

He's polite and tries to follow the Lan sect principles, which include general Buddhist ethics about not being judgmental, helping the less fortunate, not over-indulging in vices, and so on. His fiancé is the exception: Wangji absolutely adores him and will deny him nothing. Only technically a suspect; he was six when the victim died.

Quote: "Mn."

Chen Meilin (Chun May-lin), Wan Huina's personal maid

Humble, hardworking, slightly bitter — like she's missed out or been left behind from the good things in life.

Was not a companion as some maids are — she cleaned the place daily, and after the boys' monthly visits, and brought food, but was not supposed to interact with Wan Huina. Spinster, never married.

"I worked in her home but not for her. I barely knew her; she was so quiet all the time. She spent a lot of time looking out the window, watching birds fly away."

Lan Baiyun (Bye-yoon), an elder

Disdainful, pompous, stickler for rules.

A younger brother of the teacher (Lan Zemin) who was killed, who never condoned the marriage. A widower; his wife died about 6 years ago; their only child died in the war.

Quote: "That woman was a murderer; nothing but trouble. It's better she's gone and would be better still if she were forgotten entirely."

Shen Minghao (Shen Ming-how), a doctor

Venerable, thoughtful, suspicious.

Shen-daifu,³ the doctor who diagnosed Wan Huina's illness and confirmed her death. His wife is currently away visiting her family in China for several months. Does not approve of the investigation or outsiders and will not share much info without a direct order from Xichen. (Rather than the indirect "please cooperate" that's been told to everyone.) He will stand by his original claims: She fell ill; she died of an illness. Some sort of qi imbalance. No, he doesn't remember the details; it was long ago.

"Modern medicine relies too heavily on drugs and surgery. The best approach is to treat the body and spirit as a whole, not as a collection of parts to be patched up like broken machinery."

Cangse Sanren (Tsong-suh Sahnren) (deceased, a wandering adept)

Confident, free-spirited, irreverent.

Mother of Wei Wuxian; she died when he was about 6 years old. Attended lectures at Cloud Haven at least once; knew Wan Huina before she married into the Lan, and continued corresponding with her for some years. She shaved off Qiren's beard at one point; he hated her. Wife of Wei Changze.

³ "Doctor Shen"

Quote from a letter: "Better free and poor than caged in gems and silk. Huina, you deserve better."

Wei Changze (Way Chohng-zuh) (deceased) a husband

Flexible, talented, devoted to his family

Possibly not a suspect. There is no direct reason to believe he ever visited the Lan sect, but he could have. Husband of Cangse Sanren; father of Wei Wuxian; died when he was about 6 years old.

Relayed in a letter: "A wide road, open sky, and good company are all any person needs. Sects bring complications."

Non-Suspects

Most BB games don't have any non-suspect NPCs. This one does, mostly for the benefit of players who know the canon story.

Wei Wuxian (Woo-shan), Lan Wangji's fiancé

Cheerful, irreverent, clever, scruffy-looking. (Also stunningly handsome.) Carries a (cursed) black flute.

He's clever and creative, friendly to pretty much everyone, and head over heels in love with his fiancé. He also has a severe dog phobia and will run from them; Lan Wangji will interpose himself between him and any dog (or any other danger). Alternates between traditional robes in black with red accents and modern wear, often including ripped crop-tops.

He may not make an appearance in the game. He's important to Lan Wangji, but there is no specific reason to bring him in. However, if the Keeper needs an NPC who is willing to gossip, speculate, and discuss uncomfortable bits of history, he's available.

He's not a suspect because (1) he was about six when the victim died, and (2) he didn't live anywhere near her.

Quote: "I, Wei Wuxian, wish I can help the poor, always stand with justice, and live with no regrets."

"... Who cares about the crowded, broad road? I'll walk the single-plank bridge into the night..."

Lan Sizhui – Wangji & Wuxian's adopted son⁴ (Suh-jwee)

17 years old. Polite, quietly friendly, helpful.

Respects his elders, including the Mavens. (Will address them as "honored elder" unless they take effort to stop him.) Will answer honestly almost anything they ask, and can escort them to various places around Cloud Haven. He will also let them

wander around on their own; he'd just be concerned about their safety.

"Of course I will answer what I can, although it all happened long before I was born. Let me fetch tea and refreshments for you while we talk."

Lan Zemin (Zeh-meen) (deceased) – a teacher

He was a teacher of history and law; Wan Huina killed him for unknown reasons. He is literally Sir Not Appearing In This Adventure. He's from the generation somewhat older than Lan Yongshan and Lan Qiren. There are no records of why (or even how) Wan Huina killed him, and there are no living direct witnesses to the murder or its aftermath. The closest people with direct connections are Qiren and Baiyun, both of whom heard reports from people who were on the same hunting trip. (Those other people are now deceased.)

The official records just note that he's dead; they don't mention that Wan Huina killed him nor that Lan Yongshan married her to protect her.

Locations in Cloud Haven

[Cloud Recesses](#) in the source material:



The Jingshi ("Quiet Room")

This is where Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian reside, and is the former residence of Wan Huina when she was alive. It's a blend of austerity and small clutter as Wei Wuxian's possessions have filled some of the empty places.

Paint the Scene: While most of the place is sparsely decorated and elegant, there is a table cluttered with paperwork. What's been left out that visitors can see?

The Hanshi ("Cold Room")

The sect leader's residence. Currently belongs to Lan Xichen; this was Lan Yongshan's residence when he was alive. It is a formal place, traditionally decorated, but not unwelcoming.

⁴ It's complicated.

Paint the Scene: Lan Xichen is an accomplished musician and painter. What signs of his artistic talent honor the memory of his mother?

The Cold Pond

A natural icy-cold spring, rumored to be blessed with healing powers, fills this pond where disciples go to meditate and heal injuries. It is larger than a hot tub, smaller than a swimming pool, and about 4' deep at the deepest. There are benches nearby, and a large wooden box with supplies like towels, sandals, and spare robes. (Not like soaps or sponges; there are no items intended to be used in the pool itself.)

Paint the Scene: The natural sounds of the forest are especially clear because of the nearby topography. What can you hear that you didn't expect?

The Library Pavilion

The library contains both modern and traditionally bound books, and has several workspaces as well as space for lectures or workshops. It also has a restricted section where "dangerous books" are stored; the Mavens will need an escort (probably **Sizhui**) to investigate there.

Paint the Scene: One section of the library is being prepared for a series of classes that begins in a few weeks. What's the topic?

Paint the Scene (if at least one Maven has marked *A Shadow in the Garden*): The books and scrolls in the restricted section have ominous-sounding titles. One of them seems to address a recent problem in your life. Which one is it? (The book is a Void Clue.)

Lecture Hall

Lan Qiren's desk sits at one end of the room, and student benches are arranged so they can all see and hear him. The acoustics are clear so that every sound echoes throughout the room, discouraging chatter and fidgeting. Lan Qiren does not have a separate office: He does his paperwork there at the desk, and private files are locked inside.

Paint the Scene: While the Lan sect eschews overt ostentation, it allows for harmonious and inspirational artworks. What items in the lecture hall indicate that the Lan sect is very wealthy?

Wall of Discipline

A carved stone wall with all 3000+ rules of the Lan sect. (Most are 4 characters long.) It is often the first

thing shown on tours, with a guide pointing to & reading off some of the most well-known rules.

Paint the Scene: While most of the rules are obvious and simple Buddhist ethics ("Shoulder the weight of morality"; "Diligence is the root; Harmony is the value"; etc.) some are unique. Which ones seem to have been created from one specific circumstance?

Clues

1. Incomplete info on a death certificate — Cause of death on Wan Huina's death certificate is smudged.
2. A diary with several pages ripped out.
3. Wan Huina's medical records, mentioning an allergy
4. Mention that "heir and a spare" is all that's needed from a sect leader's marriage
5. A very old Lan forehead ribbon, stained with blood
6. Page torn from a notebook, saying "I HATE YOU I WANT YOU DEAD" over and over
7. Book of traditional poetry with the word "death" blotted out every time it appears
8. A list of some of the [Lan rules](#)⁵ focusing on morality and ethics. (Examples: Be modest; Shoulder the weight of morality; Do not indulge in debauchery; Do not be haughty and complacent; Maintain your own discipline; Do not mix public and private interest; Honor the teachers and respect the elders; Stay on the righteous path; Do not associate with evil.)
9. A handwritten will which was never executed
10. A forbidden love affair
11. A hidden stash of cash and jewelry
12. A pack of letters wrapped in a ribbon
13. Unfinished musical score titled "Song of Freedom"
14. A letter announcing Wan Huina's death, unsigned, never sent
15. Empty bottles of prescription painkillers
16. A red wedding veil, slashed and partially burned
17. An argument about the wisdom of the ancestors
18. An old medical article about slow-acting poisons
19. Someone complaining about Lan Wangji "following in his father's footsteps"
20. Wan Huina's sword
21. A paper window, torn and then patched with tape
22. Wan Huina's ashes in a place they shouldn't be
23. Very old receipt for purchase of a plane ticket

⁵ My players' reaction to the list was "it's like Calvinball for morality."

Void Clues

- Eerie flute music late at night
[youtube.com/watch?v=B5jQnniKW2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5jQnniKW2c)
- Pressed blue gentian flowers. On touch, the petals begin to turn black.
- A peach-pit carving of a protective dragon writhes and reshapes itself into a demon. On closer look, it's a dragon again.
- Traditional protective talisman flag with some of its symbols rearranged, so that it draws evil spirits instead of blocking them
- A man with pale skin and black veins walking in the distance. If pursued, he leaps over a building and is gone.
- Dark shadows or writhing smoke rising from a place you visited recently

What's Different from Canon

If you do know MDZS: In this module, the Lan are a modern martial arts/Buddhist spirituality sect; there are no verified special powers or golden cores. (But people look younger than they should; maybe there's some spiritual age-delay going on.) Everyone goes by their courtesy names; no birth names are mentioned. 3 characters with no names in canon have been given names (LWJ & LXC's parents, and the man Lan-furen killed); 3 OCs have been added. I've also added a friendship between Cangse Sanren and Lan-furen.

The Sunshot War happened 17-20 years ago (on a much smaller scale; it was an inter-sect conflict that turned ugly rather than a widespread war); the Lan cut ties with the rest of the sects and moved to the US to rebuild instead of reclaiming the damaged Cloud Recesses. They named their new compound Cloud Haven.

WWX was thrown out of/left his sect for using heretical practices in the war & protecting some Wen refugees; LWJ wound up adopting LSZ and taking him to the US. WWX had been exiled (maybe imprisoned?) and anyway only arrived in the US a little while ago. (A year or so.) He reconnected with LWJ and they're now engaged. LQR is unhappy about this.

Timeline:

Now — LWJ/WWX 36-ish years old, after 15-ish years apart, getting married.

1962-1964 ish: Lan Yongshan (QHJ) and Wan Huina born; They meet when they're 25 or so.

1987: Lan Xichen born

1988: Cangse Sanren & Wei Changze elope & leave Lotus Pier

1990: Lan Wangji & Wei Wuxian born. They are millennials.

1997: Wan Huina, Wei Changze, and Cangse Sanren die. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian are 6; Lan Xichen is 9.

1999: Wei Wuxian adopted by the Jiangs after living on the streets for a couple of years.

2006: Wei Wuxian attends Cloud Recesses summer lectures; meets Lan Wangji. They fall in love, although neither of them admits it.

2011: War between the martial arts sects. Lan Yongshan dies in the war and Lan Xichen, 23, becomes sect leader.

2013: Wei Wuxian is prosecuted for his "heretical" spiritual practices, and for rescuing some of the Wen refugees who didn't take part in the war. He is banished.

2014: The Lan move to the Brindlewood area and set up Cloud Haven in the mountains. They recreate as much as they can of their old sect layout, and start teaching traditional Chinese arts and spiritual practices.

Year before last: Wei Wuxian moves to the US, finds the Lan, reconnects with Lan Wangji.

A few months ago: Lan Wangji is preparing for the wedding when he uncovers something that makes him think his mother's death was not natural.

IgTheme: Intraparty Conflict



In the [Bartle taxonomy](#), I don't want to be in a game with Killers. I can enjoy games like Paranoia or Toon where the characters are intended to fight each other, but have no interest in a "quest" focused game where the characters consider each other the enemy. I could believe there's the potential for an intense game where the other characters discover Dark Secrets that put them tragically at odds, but... most intra-party conflicts I've seen have been "That Guy has decided it's easier to steal the MacGuffin from the druid than from the lich-king, so he'll wait until the party has it before making his move." Ick.

Comments on E&A #13

In the Hall of Stone – Patrick Brady

Native American religions – you could try looking at Coyote and Crow rpg, and see if it carries the answers you need. Alternately, you could find a person or two from Lakota Nation to discuss it with.

I think there are respectful ways to have fictional versions of real-world religions. I believe a lot of rpgs strive very hard to do that with Christianity, and notably less hard (but still with some effort) to do so with Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. They give a nod to respect to other modern faiths that have beautiful temples, and ignore the whole principle when it comes to religions that are covered in the “weird news” section of the paper instead of the “religious events” section.

(Native American & First Nations “cultural practices” get treated with some measure of respect; their religions are generally ignored as much as possible.)

As someone in a minority religion, although not anything like a Native American one: It’d be nice if our myths and lore made an appearance in game materials, if they were treated respectfully and were accurate in the important details. Sorting out which details are important, and how to specify “real religion source; game application is just for fun” probably takes contact with someone who follows the religion. It’s also possible that the answer is “no; our religion is for our people and we don’t want outsiders pretending to practice any form of it.”

Quasipseudoludognostication #13 – Patrick Riley

Thanks for the Kublacon reviews. I’ve never been; I used to attend BayCon that weekend. (I still attend BayCon but it’s now July 4 weekend.) It’s also in a difficult location for me: only 30 miles away (~40 min drive), but I don’t drive; public transit takes an hour and a half including two transfers to get there.

...All the buses across the San Mateo Bridge were shut down during Covid lockdown, and have never been restarted. It’s made public transit to areas between Daly City and San Jose a big hassle.

Reddened Stars #12 – John Redden

RYCTM: The most common statement about ethics in Wicca and related forms of Paganism⁶ is taken from the [Wiccan Rede](#)

*Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill,
An [if] it harm none, do what ye will*

So: Actions that cause no harm are ethical. Actions that cause harm need more consideration.

Some groups tie those into the “rule of three,” the concept that the energy you send out to the world returns to you threefold. In that case, there’s little ethical reason not to harm people around you – just a practical one.

(In reality, we have all damn well noticed that murderers don’t wind up being murdered three times, and that there are plenty of good, kind people who are not surrounded by compassion and love.)

Religious witchcraft does not have a list of “thou shalt nots.” It has, instead, a set of principles for living in harmony with ourselves, other people, and the world around us, with a particular type of spiritual awareness.

A friend of mine wrote up an article, “The [Charge \[of the Goddess\]](#) as Ethical Precept.” It’s lost to the internet; I think I have a copy downloaded, but not on this computer. The Charge says (emphasis added):

*Sing, feast, dance, make music and love, all in
My Presence, for Mine is the ecstasy of the spirit and
Mine also is joy on earth.*

*Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for
behold, all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals. ...*

*Let there be beauty and strength, power and
compassion, honor and humility, mirth and
reverence within you.*

*...if that which you seek, you find not within yourself,
you will never find it without.*

There is no set of “these actions are right; those other actions are wrong.” Instead, there’s a list of virtues to express. When you are compassionate, humble, and reverent, you are not likely to steal or murder. When you feel beautiful, strong, and mirthful, you are not likely to slander, mock, or betray people. When you are powerful and honorable, you won’t break contracts or tolerate nazis. When you rejoice in love and pleasure, you won’t restrict others’ harmless joys.

⁶ It’s complicated.

Wiccan-flavored Paganism is the most well-known and the only version I’m qualified to speak about, except Discordianism,

which may or may not count as NeoPagan. (The Hellenic reconstructionists have very mixed opinions about Discordianism.)

When you “sing, feast, dance, make music and love” as an act of worship, then you have no reason to restrict others from doing the same.

Nothing in the Charge tells Wiccans how to vote on property taxes or immigration rights. But it does imply that we should share joy and embody the morals we wish to find in the world; there’s a hint of “do unto others” in the “if...you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.”

Ages ago, I wrote up [“Pagan Terms for NonPagan Writers,”](#) not as an introduction to the religious details but a list of terminology, including both terms not commonly used elsewhere (athame, book of shadows) and common terms that have a specific meaning in Pagan communities (initiation, circle, path). It doesn’t cover how witchcraft religions sort out right & wrong but it can make it easier to understand those topics when they’re discussed.

Twisting the Rope #13 – Myles Corcoran

RYCTM About GM reviews – the issue is not so much finding code words, but a place to post them that isn’t focused on getting money to GMs and therefore has a vested interest in discouraging negative reviews.

I currently can’t find any reviews of paid GMs away from the startplayinggames site. If they’re being posted on Facebook or Twitter or whatever, they’re not showing up in a Google search. Can’t even find the generic, “I had a terrible experience at SP.G; how do I find better GMs in the future?” posts. (It’s been pointed out that those people rarely give reviews; if they’re new, they just give up on the hobby. Otherwise, they give up on paid GMs.)

Other than “we need GM reviews not controlled by their hosts,” we also need to sort out the difference between “my friend is lousy at running games but is still my friend” and “I paid someone to run a game and I did not get my money’s worth.” So far, most pro-GMing is being treated like “you fly; I’ll buy” among friends, where everyone pitches in so that one person can do the work-hassle part of making sure they all have fun together.

It’s not being treated like hiring a DJ or party clown to entertain a group of people who showed up because there’s a professional entertainer.

The Phoenix Nest #13 – Michael Cule

Loved the Crone and Uncle writeups. (And kept thinking of Wen Popo and Wei Wuxian from *The Untamed* as representatives of them.)

Scribbles and Horrors #2 – Scribble M. Horror (Pseud.)

I’d seen Nomic before; it gets mentioned in various game theory discussions. I’d never seen it so neatly described, so thank you.

...I will have to consider how the “immutable” and “mutable” rules compare to the WSFS Constitution and Standing Rules, and the shenanigans involved in changing them from year to year.

(They are not directly parallel; the Constitution can be amended. But it takes two years for that to be finalized, while Standing Rules can take effect immediately.)

Brindlewood has hints of an unfolding game: The “void clues” and mechanics addressing the evil cult come into play over time. Players know the topics exist at the start of the game, but the characters don’t, and the players may not have looked at the details of how that all works.

For patagaming, you don’t get more mini-game-ish than with [MOSAIC Strict](#), which requires short game pieces that can fit with any framework. (Someday when I have time to burn, I want to see if I can put together a full playable game out of nothing but MOSAIC Strict pieces.)

Going to be Ad-Libbed #11 – Avram Grumer

I saw the article about the end of Fate; I continue to think it’s a great disappointment that there’s no official “high fantasy/elves-wizards-dragons” Fate game. There are several fan-created supplements in that direction, but none of them are as cohesive as the Fate Core (etc) worlds.

And I loved the example of “ok, you’ve gotten him out and are speeding away from the cops hot on your trail.” I intend to keep that in my pocket as a potential to pull anytime a game’s plan-and-setup stage is getting frustrating.

If the players are all enjoying making detailed plans, great! Otherwise... I can see “just skip to the action after they’ve done Thing 1, which we all agreed they were going to do.”

RYCTM: I am fascinated by the idea of “if your supers character dies, it gets handed off to another player.” It’d definitely be an incentive to not let them “die,” and still allows them to be present in future stories.

An Unlooked For Zine #12 – Lisa Padol

RYCTM – I covered (or at least explained more of) my thoughts on superhero genre games above, but I’m

happy to cover the concept of “suppress [women’s] writing” in re superhero games.

It’s not that there’s a number limit that would make them count. It’s that, the games that might cover the genre well, are (1) not well-known enough to be part of the general rpg gaming discussions and (2) probably (if they exist) comprised of rules/mechanics that are so far away from the standard “GM + 2-6 players going on quest adventures” structure that it may not be relevant to discuss them.

For point 1, “not known,” I don’t mean “obscure like *Orkworld* or *Everway* or *Immortal: The Invisible War*.” I mean obscure like *My Brain Is a Stick of Butter* or *HOT GAY BRO DRAGONS* or *What’s So Cool About Time Loops?* or *Light to Your Heart*. Or bookmark games. Or 24-word rpgs. I don’t mean to disparage those games (I adore the creativity and innovation in the indie gaming scene), just to point out that claiming something is broadly true for a hobby still leaves the chance that there is a game, or a handful of games, that I’ve never heard of that cover the genre well.

I repeat (from my earlier article): I don’t mean “there are no excellent ‘superhero’ RPGs that are very fulfilling and great fun to play.” I mean that the game mechanics don’t cover the source genre’s scope of characters, themes, and activities.

I would be delighted to find some single weird indie game that somehow managed to cover the superhero genre as I understand it. I haven’t seen anything that comes closer than the “big” games (Hero system, Fate, V&V, FASERIP, etc.) but maybe it’s out there. But the mechanics would almost certainly be unique, or at least, based on principles almost unknown to rpgs.

Which leads to point 2: I don’t know if there are LARPs that cover superhero genre well. I don’t know if there are mixed rpg/card games that do. I don’t know if there’s some roleplay-parlor games that would work, or some jubensha games. I think all of those are far enough from rpgs as I understand them that my point stands, even if I might need to rephrase it to exclude them.

I love superhero rpgs. I don’t think they cover the superhero genre of comic books or movies.

(I love solo ttrpgs. I am not sure some of them should be called “role-playing” games. I am not sure some of them are “games.” I can love them and think there’s something about the label that’s a bit off, and that’s where I am with superhero rpgs.)

There’s also a non-zero chance that this is a topic that would be cleared up with five minutes of actual conversation, that essay-writing back and forth doesn’t leave enough space for the moments of “ah,

you mean THAT. Um. I was talking about this other thing. Which. Um. Yes, I used the same words as THAT. Not my intention.”

...I have Hit the Streets from a bundle; I’ll look into it.

Age of Menace #250 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek

RYCTM – YES THAT’S IT. That’s what I mean about superhero games not covering the genre. There’s a type of heroism in fiction that most rpgs don’t cover, including (maybe especially) superhero rpgs. Some rpgs seem designed specifically to block that type of heroism from being a valid play-style.

I am tempted to scroll up and delete 2/3 of my comment to Lisa but decided to leave it. Maybe leave it at, I want to rephrase from “rpgs in general don’t cover the superhero genre” to “there is a type of heroism common to comic books (and the pulps) that I’ve never seen done well in game mechanics.”

It shows up at the table sometimes – because the players know how it works in fiction, and they’re able to muddle through or bypass the mechanics to get it.

Re Brindlewood: I’ve included the module I ran in this issue. The players determined that Wan Huina didn’t actually kill Lan Zemin; she was framed for it, and killed later (by her doctor) when she discovered it and tried to reveal the truth.

Accidental Recall #12 – Joshua Kronengold

I have thoughts but no time or energy to put them together, and I think some are covered earlier in this issue.

Others: RAEBNC

Murphy’s Rules: Where’s our laser pistols?





THE DRAGON'S BEARD

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I can be found as pdzoch at

boardgamegeek.com,
rpggeek.com, enworld.org,
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My chronicler for the Saltmarsh campaign is running behind on session reports, but I suppose everyone should enjoy their vacation when they get the chance. So instead, I'll provide a short assessment on how things are going in the campaigns so far.

Creating a Master File in Fantasy Grounds for my two Saltmarsh games has been a mixed success. It works well when I am adding custom content that will affect both games. It does not work well consistently when I modify published (or purchased) material. The reason why is because the platform does updates almost every week. If there is an update to product I modified, it overwrites any changes I made. I could keep my own modification, but I would miss any correction or fix to the product I modified. So, I still use the master file to make changes because it allows me to test the changes without affecting any games states in the two groups. Once I am satisfied with the results, I have to duplicate the work in the two game files. Sometimes it is just a matter of copying files to the other two campaign folders; other times it requires some additional work. It is not too cumbersome to keep up. Even when I forget to make the update to one of the campaign files from the master, I can make a quick edit during the game to update the tokens, stats, packages, or images fairly quickly because I have the data in the master file already done. I just have to remind myself not to panic when I don't see what I intended and make the adjustment quietly and quickly.

My penchant for providing separate images for any NPC with a speaking part has created some interesting behaviors. For one of my groups, they seem to be taking cues on whether an NPC is substantial by whether or not it has an image. If I do not provide a image of the NPC right away, they ask if there is one. When I state I have none, they seem to end the conversation early (or cease investing much social engagement time with the NPC). This still works well, especially for those NPCs who are

duplicitous in nature. One NPC, Ned Shakeshaft, is a plant for the Scarlet Brotherhood. Both parties has already encountered this NPC. I believe that because the NPC had a portrait to interact with, the players may have assumed the NPC to be an enduring character. Ned's opportunity to betray the characters at the haunted house did not present itself in either game. In one group, Ned traveled back to Saltmarsh with the group as a hapless traveler who goes his separate way once he got to town. He will reappear later, supposedly happily working in his new job (while still working for the Scarlet Brotherhood undetected). In the other group, Ned was an aspiring adventurer who second guesses his suitability in the presence of the much more capable party. He helps guard a smuggler and accompanies the party back to Saltmarsh. Once at Saltmarsh, the party goes directly to the town jailer to lock up the capture smuggler. They suddenly notice that Ned was no longer with them. Ned may reappear again later, but he will need to come up with an excuse for bailing on the party. The party will probably be suspicious of him the second time.

The original *Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh* has a natural break in the adventure to level up characters. While the haunted house *might* enough experience to level up in time for the second half of the adventure to defeat the smuggler ship, the encounters on the ship does not give anywhere near enough experience to level a character in time for the next adventure, *Danger at Dunwater*. It was something I noticed back in the 80's when I ran the original adventures, and the *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* does not do much to correct the gap. While a milestone advancement can effectively solve that problem, I am not a fan of milestone advancement that does not feel like it is the same amount of work as normal XP earning. *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* provides guidance on the surrounding area for GM's to create filler material and side quests for the group.

Ideally, I would create custom content for the campaign. In Fantasy Grounds, it require A LOT more work to create custom content. With two campaigns ongoing on at the same time, it essentially requires twice as much work as the campaign progresses in two slightly different directions. For example, one group is staying at the Wicker Basket Inn and has a closer connection to Manistrad Cooperlocks, one of the council members who frequents that establishment with the rest of her dwarves and is more aligned with the Royalists. While the other group is staying at the Snapping Line Inn,

which is more aligned to the common folk of the town and the traditionalists. The first group is more closely connected to Anders Solomar, who is an unwitting stooge to the Scarlet Brotherhood, which could embroil the party in some of their activities. While the other party seems to be forging their own path independent from Anders. Saltmarsh has lots of potential to wrap the characters into local politics. I think I can handle those just by maintaining notes in my head based on how things unfold for each of the groups. Much of this can be driven by how the town NPCs react to the characters, though some additional content will need to be created. Because I want to do it right, I will need to invest the time and effort to create it properly in each campaign. I won't need to use the Master Campaign file to do that since it would be unique to a campaign.

There is several published products, complete with Fantasy Grounds implementation, to supplement the *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*. I have founds these invaluable to save time on game prep while still providing side quests and filler content for the game. I've peppered a couple between the haunted house and the smuggler's ship in the first adventure (*Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh*), and I am adding some additional side quests before the second adventure (*Danger at Dunwater*) to give them some practice time on their 3rd level abilities. I may try to provide enough that they advance to 4th level since I always felt that *Danger at Dunwater* was hard for 3rd level characters.

Because the personality and the play styles of the two groups are different, they are getting different filler and side quests. There are numerous supplemental materials out there, but two I have started using early are *Saltmarsh Sidetrek - Tier 1* and *Encounters on the Savage Seas II*. A couple of scenarios were suitable for both groups, which made it easy to run twice. One group was more inclined to social encounters, especially the bard who always wanted to talk and reason with everyone. So that group got side quests that had encounters that specifically offered that. The other group was much more loot focus and mission oriented, so they got side quests that had puzzles to solve and creatures to beat. So while the side quests may be different, and the town NPCs are reacting differently to the two different groups, the core adventure has remained the same. Overall, I've been happy with the arrangement and so have the players. It may become much more complicated as the story progresses, but we'll cross that plot point when we come to it.

And wouldn't you know it, my session writer submits the report just before submission time. Who does he think he is? Me?



A D&D 5th Edition 2024 campaign set in Greyhawk. Played over Fantasy Grounds Unity and Discord. Session reports by Kevin Santschi and Patrick Zoch.



Arael Vexwood (Kyra)
Wood Elf 2nd level Sorcerer
Merchant



Bareas Wilhelm (Sarah)
Dwarf 2nd level Rogue
Marine



BoB (Chris)
Dwarf 2nd level Barbarian
Soldier



Cassian Dawnguard (Kevin)
Human 2nd level Paladin
Soldier



Frocaryn Stonegather (Delia)
Halfling 2nd level Cleric
Guide



Juan Quixote (Christie)
Halfling 2nd level Fighter
Noble



Lux Cantata (Jackie)
Aasimar 2nd level Bard
Artisan

Session 10-12: The Sea Ghost

- Prologue -

In the previous session, the party had had a couple of weeks to await the arrival of a smugglers ship the Saltmarsh council wanted the party to capture, confiscate, or defeat. The council posted a guard at the haunted house to watch for the returning smuggler ship. Meanwhile, the party had traveled to a small halfling marsh farm called Tropochorn to attend to some troubles there. Apparently, both Charis, the village's eccentric weather witch, and Ockue, its bard, turned up missing, and the party was requested to investigate and rescue or return

these important members of the small community. These are Cassian's words:

- Scene 1 - The Search for Ockue

We continue our search for Charis and Ockue, which has led us to a dicey standoff with a bunch of giant crabs in the riverbed. While Lux and BoB run distractions, Juan and I snatch the Dragonborn corpse; the muddy crustaceans, wholly uninterested in our scheming, scurry off into the water. It was all for naught—the corpse is notably devoid of any clues. We return to the since-forgotten tracks through the mud, and make our way to a shimmering coastal area.

A halfling stands amidst the pools where the marsh meets the beach, pacing back and forth as he gazes out upon the water. He seems rather anxious, clothes damp from the environs but unconcerned by this. As we approach, he is startled by our odd party composition, and introduces himself as the one and only weather sorcerer, Charis. He is in a spot of trouble: as a bit of a prank, he had turned Ockue into a scorpion fish. Ockue, not quite pleased with this turn of events, knocked over his container and escaped into a nearby creek, following it to the ocean... where he was then captured by merfolk and made to be their favorite pet. With nothing to give the merfolk in exchange for his friend, Charis was at a loss for what to do. He assures us, however, that he can provide *Potions of Water Breathing* for us to go retrieve him. Not quite a fair assessment, but what else are we to do?

Knocking back the potions, we dive into the ocean and make way for the merfolk in the distance. Understandably enough, they are shocked to see a bunch of landfolk zipping through the ocean currents, but are unwilling to believe that their dear pet is actually a polymorphed halfling. They will, however, give us their beloved scorpionfish if we can best them in a game of their own design. A giant seahorse will charge at us, and if we can evade it successfully, then we emerge victorious.

Thus commences the most preposterous game of tag I've ever played. One by one, my comrades display skillful dexterity in carving paths around the charging sea creature. I, on the other hand, demonstrate that swimming in full plate armor is rather difficult, and instead use my shield

to bat it away, redirecting it past myself. Greatly amused by the game, the merfolk return Ockue to us, and we head back to our anxious friend at the shore. Lux tries to harmonize with the music resonating from Ockue, but puts the merfolk out with a saltwater-logged performance.

We return to Charis, who is happy to see the fish but very confused that he had not transformed back yet. After some inspection, and entirely regardless of our intercession, he does in fact transform; out comes the angriest halfling any of us have ever met, cursing up a storm about nasty merfolk and the taste of seaweed. Turning into a fish has, no doubt, not done any favors for his mood. With our newfound halfling buddy, we return to Tropichorn, where we are rewarded for our troubles with a *Potion of Water Breathing* and a small bag of coin. We rest for the night before setting out.

Scene 2 – Battle Aboard the Sea Ghost

We bid farewell to Charis and Ockue and make our way back toward Saltmarsh, arriving sometime in the afternoon. Guards are already waiting for us at the gates, eager to report our return to the council, who inform us that the smuggler's ship will arrive within the day. With nothing pressing until nightfall, we spend the remainder of the day replenishing supplies and make one last trip back to the old house overlooking the sea.

Tonight, the new moon throws the coast into darkness, making it the perfect opportunity to strike at the remains of the smuggling operation. The council's offer is simple: stop the smugglers, of course, but also ensure they never think to resume their business here again. We settle into position in the coastal cavern, biding our time as night falls.

After some time, a light flashes across the water: a signal lantern. Lux and Arael quickly decipher the code, and we respond in turn, assuring them the coast is clear to anchor. Their reply is quick; we are to row out and begin unloading cargo. We oblige.

One by one we climb aboard, and the crew's surprise gives way to suspicion as far too many new faces appear before them. In classic fashion, BoB gives them some lip, and Arael tries

to smooth things over, claiming that we're just new hired hands. The story crumbles as it is told, and they draw their weapons, having come to the realization that we are not, in fact, smugglers. I've been waiting for this moment, waiting to purge such scum from the world; we meet them in combat happily.

The smugglers put up a respectable fight, but we have the element of surprise on our side. Lux wastes no time removing their lookout from the crow's nest, sending him crashing to the deck below. I find myself locked in combat with one of the officers, clearly a seasoned soldier, but a well-placed *Thunderous Smite* leaves him charred on the ground. Meanwhile, Arael spots several enemies gathered up on the quarterdeck and sends a *Sleep* spell their way. The captain and one of his crew collapse where they stand. The ship's spellcasting officer resists the enchantment, but soon joins his fallen comrades via Bareas' arrows and Frocaryn's *Sacred Flame*.

With their officers dead and the captain fast asleep upon the deck, the other sailors fall one by one. More crewmen pour up from the lower decks, only to meet the same fate. Arael blasts apart groups of smugglers with a mighty *Thunderclap*, while Juan and BoB hold the line above her. I run around, healing every squishy spellcaster unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of a blade.

The captain refuses to surrender; even as his crew falls to pieces around him, he continues yelling orders and throwing swift cutlass strikes at anyone within arm's reach. I move to the front line and advance relentlessly with the line of melee fighters as attack after attack bounces harmlessly off of my armor. We advance upon him, and through a combined effort of Lux's spells, BoB's crushing blows and Juan's piercing strikes, we knock him out. After Juan puts the final crew member to rest, we tie the captain to the mast and begin our search.

Scene 3 – Exploring the Ship

With the upper deck secure and the captain tied to the mast, we have a moment to breathe. BoB immediately starts pawing through the captain's pockets, but there is little to be found. Rather than move as one large group, we split up to start opening doors.

On the stern side, BoB and Bareas begin with the captain's quarters. Their efforts are rewarded, finding a trapped chest containing a *Gust of Wind* spell scroll, alongside a mysterious spellbook that neither dwarf could decipher. The contents of the surrounding rooms were much more mundane: healing potions, an antitoxin, a map of the surrounding waters, and a collection



of letters from women scattered across various ports. A lockbox tucked beneath a couch contains several electrum ingots, and a nearby ledger details ironware shipments across the region.

Meanwhile, Arael and I investigate the bow of the ship. The first few rooms were unremarkable: a modest galley, a stocked pantry, and storerooms filled with surplus materials to keep the ship going. After helping ourselves to rope and hammers, we open the final door, to find a series of scaly figures laying in hammocks.

Upon entry, they turn to face us, and one asks me why I'm encroaching on their space. In a rather inspired moment of deception, I gruffly respond that I am conducting a routine inspection of the ship upon orders from the captain, and that as we are almost ready to deliver the cargo, they better be standing at the ready. They eye me for a moment, but seem to buy the story. Grumbling to themselves, they settle back into their hammocks, and Arael and I retreat, closing the door behind us. We move back to the deck and relate the situation to our comrades. A plan is soon laid out, and we position ourselves in a pincer formation: Juan and I stand outside the door that I just retreated from, and BoB waits on the main deck, outside the door that leads directly into their chambers.

Not one to take the subtle approach, BoB kicks the door clean off its hinges and roars for all to hear, signaling the beginning of our fight. The ambush works; caught off guard, the lizardfolk scramble to their feet, grabbing spears as we charge into the room. In his rage, BoB absorbs blow after blow from claw, spear, and fang alike as the rest of us start hacking away. Juan and I press in from the opposite doorway, trapping them inside. Meanwhile, Lux and Frocaryn frantically heal BoB with everything they have as he bleeds from every part of his body (though he is either unaware or simply does not care).

One of our foes stands apart from the rest: aside from the three lizardfolk, there is a small lizard—or rather, dragon, the zips around the room and stings at us. As we finish cutting down the three lizards, the tiny dragon flies through the open doorways, landing on the railing. Frocaryn hears a voice resonate within her mind: "I am Bimz!" She elects not to respond, but Arael answers upon hearing the voice. Bimz immediately flies over to her, scurrying into the

folds of her cloak, requesting that we keep him safe. We have a new friend!

With the room secured, we conduct a more thorough search. Beneath one of the hammocks is a locked chest, which Bareas picks open with ease. A poison dart trap stabs Bareas; fortunately, the wound is more of an inconvenience than anything, and the chest contains a sum of gold. Turns out we were rather hasty in our search; while we busied ourselves with picking the lock, Lux quietly followed us in and found the key to the chest lying in plain sight. Surely there is a lesson to be learned here.

Scene 4 – The Rotten Descent

With the bow of the ship final secured, we turn our attention below deck. BoB and Bareas descend the stairs first, finding a few rows of hammocks and sea chests filled with plain personal belongings. The rest of the party follows shortly after them, while Bimz and I remain topside to keep an eye on the captain. The account that follows is pieced together from my comrades' stories.

Beyond the sailors' quarters is the cargo hold, filled with what we recognize as the smuggled goods: unmarked casks of liquor, and stacks of imported cloth. At the far end of the room, another door leads to the captain's chambers. It contains much more promising spoils of battle, a small chest containing a hefty sum of silver.

Continuing their search, Bareas discovers a dark holding cell, which contains a lone prisoner. He introduces himself as Oceanus, a member of a nearby tribe of merfolk. His people had discovered the smugglers moving weapons en masse through their waters and set forth to investigate, only for Oceanus to be captured. Remembering the document that we acquired previously, discussing further weapon sales, this revelation convinces us to search every remaining corner of the ship in search of the contraband.

Descending into the bilge, BoB finds himself standing ankle deep in disgusting sea water, from which emerges a writhing mass of rot grubs. He scrambles to crush as many as he can, and Lux likewise fires *Starry Wisps* from above, but more grubs scurry over him, eating into his flesh. Bareas accesses a less conventional

approach of drenching them in oil, and Frocaryn understands exactly where this is going.

In the realm of battlefield medicine, setting your local dwarf on fire is generally frowned upon, but his relative health was suddenly and inexplicably lower on the party list of priorities. She calls *Sacred Flame* down directly upon BoB, burning away the grubs before they can do any more damage. Lux quickly patches him up, and once the fire dies down, Bareas descends into the bilge as well. He retrieves the glinting object he'd spotted before the battle; after all the trouble we went through, our hard worked earned us... two whole gold coins.

With the ship thoroughly searched and everyone accounted for, our mission aboard the *Sea Ghost* is finally complete. With the captain still securely bound to the mast, we decide to pilot the ship itself back to Saltmarsh. Bareas, a former marine, navigates the *Sea Ghost* expertly back to the ports of Saltmarsh, where he promptly crashes it into the dock.

- End of Session -



BOLT ACTION GERMANS



I finally got a chance to complete the German platoon from the Bolt Action starter set, plus an extra vehicle of two. My son and I gave the painted minis their baptism by fire in a small skirmish wargame between US Paratroopers and German Panzergrenadiers. The 28mm WWII wargame armies are coming along slowly, but they are looking great.





COMMENTS ON #10

Catching Up – I am way behind on my comments, so I will spend this issue catching up. Unfortunately, it also means I will inevitably fail to comment on some noteworthy contributions. So I will say it ahead of time: Read and Enjoyed, but ran out of time to comment.

Patrick Riley – Ignorable theme: I’m a big fan of hit and run tactics, especially by monsters that are weak. Goblins, kobolds, and all sorts of low level viscous creatures aren’t dangerous because they try to go toe-to-toe with much more powerful adventurers. They survive by being unconventional, not engaging in fair fights, divide the party, and do every dirty trick in the business to win.

Matt Steven – Ignorable theme: I like your observation about monster vulnerabilities to certain weapons eventually leading to “weapon caddies”. I’ve seen that a lot. Very often, players go out and buy specialized weapons to fight the monster they just fought, not the ones they are going to fight. I remember once in a campaign, I threw some werewolves at the party for one encounter. The lack of silvered weapons became a challenge to the melee fighters robbed of their normal way of dealing with a fight. During the rest after the scenario, they silvered their favorite weapons. Then, no more lycanthropes appeared, seemingly making the silvering of weapons a waste of resources. Ideally, they would have researched potential foes ahead of time, but that is not always possible. Unique vulnerabilities is also a way to vary the combat dynamics in the game to give other players a chance to shine and increase the difficulty of a fight without increasing the lethality of the monster. I like the weak spot idea, but I generally to reserve those for legendary creatures. Though, I probably shouldn’t. Even a mundane animals have sensitive spots that allow us regular people to handle them easily (on the shell just in front of the hind legs of a snapping turtle; holding a crocodile’s mouth shut is safest way to keep it from biting; a canine’s ear is super sensitive; etc).

Pum – Ignorable theme: Ah, the rust monster, the great fighter neutralizer. The only thing scarier than the rust monster was the dweomer eater or dweomervore, which ate the magic of enchanted items. Funny thing is that I remember seeing little plastic rust monsters before playing D&D. I did not realize at the time that the rust monster was based off fictional plastic creature; I just assumed the plastic toy company got the details of the rust monster ahead of time from TSR. It made sense to me since it seemed that many toys hit the store ahead of movies and shows they were based on when I was a kid.

isa Padol – Ignorable theme: I am speechless.

Joshua Kronengold – Re: Girl Genius. Yes, for clarity, it was a game I was preparing but never got a group together to run it. I still love my concept town – Buda-Pest – and I am ready to dust it off to run if there ever comes an opportunity.



COMMENTS ON #11

Joshua Kronengold – Re: Saltmarsh. The Smugglers’ association (or hire) of a couple of hobgoblins does seem to make it impossible to freely move about the typical settlement in Greyhawk. The original adventure had gnolls as monstrous muscle instead of hobgoblins, so the monstrous hire is consistent. The village of Saltmarsh was not detailed in the original U1 module – it directed the GM to create it like a south-coast English fishing town of the 14th Century and with population about 2,000. My original Greyhawk gazette described Keoland as mostly human, with some elves, gnomes, dwarves, and halfling. Other humanoids were “doubtful.” I assume the same held for Saltmarsh, though I played it as mostly human in the 80’s. Ghosts of Saltmarsh mixes it up much more. 5e Saltmarsh cites both a tielfing and a dragonborn in the town. It is more inclusive in other ways, too, which is strangely at odds with the hold the traditionalist have on the village. When I played the game in the 80’s, none of the players characters stood out racially in town. I suppose it had to be updated in 5e to account for all the new options in the game. Though I think a full blooded orc or drow would cause a stir in the town. It requires some suspension of disbelief to buy in to a town that has a traditionalist faction distrustful of outsiders while still hosting residents of exotic racial stock. Re: The bard. The player with the bard always plays a bard and she always envisions herself as some sort of Eurovision star entertaining the world with her talents. Unfortunately, she has had some unfortunate rolls that reveal a less than polished performance, we just chalk it up to nerves in character. The other players have taken to joking about their unreliable bard performances. She has considered switching bardic talents from singing to dancing or anything else (but I think she is really going to stick with singing). I’ll keep giving her opportunities to perform. I do plan to have an NPC who actually starts liking her bad performances over her good performances (of course, he will call it Punk). Re: Patrons: In my Saltmarsh games, the council is sort of serving as the patron. Originally, I intended for Solman Anders to be their primary patron. For one group, they seem to be willing to be hires for the council. The other is more incline to strike their own deals.

Mark Wilson – Ignorable theme: City Building and Setting: Points of interest are central to both your building designs. I think it create good anchor points that the players can use as references in the world. These are landmarks in the settings and in their stories. “This is where secrets are sold”, “...the revolution started,” or “... where the dragon died”.

Pum – Ignorable theme: Aesthetics and verisimilitude are two characteristics I do not think I would have thought about in a setting, but I get the idea. For me, it is about what makes the setting stand out from all the other settings – what makes it different or interesting, and that is probably the aesthetics that appeals to me. As for verisimilitude, the events that drive or happen in the setting seem consistent with the setting, even in a fantasy realm where magic and other powerful beings seem to defy logic. This is a hard part for many fantasy settings. As much as I enjoy D&D settings, there is some stretching of verisimilitude where pockets of implausibility exists or some other oddity of an event happens where it would not normally make any sense. Nothing worse than a bucket of odd features, even if those features shine in other settings. I think the verisimilitude starts to break down when someone tries to make their own setting too unique. But I get the challenge – do we really need another pseudo-medieval European fantasy setting for a fantasy RPG?

Roger BW – Ignorable theme: I like Ken Hite’s dictum of “start with the real world.” If anything, it solves Pum’s requirement of verisimilitude. Things happened that was once before, or at least gives a good framework for how things can evolve. It serves my approach to city-building – I simply used how settlements naturally occur (although to think of it, I just remembered some unnatural ways cities are built, but that is also how it happens in the real world. Soviets moved farmers off the land and consolidated them in city block houses, creating agorods. US developers did the same by building suburbs in where ever land was cheap with the notion of if it is built, the people will come. Lots of partially built communities in swamp lots in Florida) – Sorry for that odd tangent!

Erica Frank – Ignorable theme: I so agree with your assessment of D&D worlds. They are absolutely incoherent as a whole. Each little kingdom are region history make for interesting reading, but not if one wants to learn what makes the campaign world tick. Too much of it reads like a collection of isolated materials to provide a little of something for everyone. Epic level coherence has not been D&D’s strong suit. I often find that contributing writers add to the incoherence when they seem to add elements that do not fit the setting consistently. I’ve noticed that recently with the Saltmarsh supplemental materials

written by a collection of different writers, each with their own take on how the city, its NPCs, and the surrounding environment functions. I have to make edits to their material in order for it to fit seamlessly in my campaign. I share your opinion about the depth of material for a setting – I do not think so much is needed. Sure, I like to have much of the work done for me, but no matter how much is written, I will still feel it is incomplete. And if so much is written, I am not sure how much I am willing to read (and I read TONS of history and other boring materials all the time). If anything, too much material runs counter to my preferences. I want to customize the setting to my play style and story. I really do not want my players reading canon and calling me out on my own variations. My development level for a setting, specifically for cultural, social, political, and economic depth is only as deep as the average person living in the world knows. Sort of a “Are you smarter than a 5th grader” level of information. I am reminded of the Monty Python bit where King Arthur encounters sod farmers and introduces himself, and their response is “King of the who?” Well, not all NPCs are that clueless, but the PCs do not need to be walking around with encyclopedic knowledge of the setting at their disposal. I try to keep it small. My better settings are more developed at the local level and lose granularity the further away from the action it gets. Players just need the basics to inform their decisions, and I think that is probably the depth of setting information actually needed. If I do that well, and make it make sense (verisimilitude), I got it done well enough.

Lisa Padol – Ignorable theme: I think you ask a good question about a setting – does it provide a good sense of what the characters can do in the setting. Hopefully, the setting provides a good framing for a character’s purpose in the game. Or perhaps, what a character is supposed to do in the game.

Patrick Riley – Ignorable theme: I also prefer my settings to be human-centric. It is not anything against non-human species, but I tend to view them as special or exceptional cases in a human dominated world. I have considered settings that were dwarven-centric before, but it was more a case of starting the campaign in the dwarven kingdom with dwarven characters. Humans still dominated, but the campaign was focused in the dwarven lands.

Everyone else – RAEBNC.

I made some progress on comment this issue. I have to continue chipping away each issue. I will eventually catch up.

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 13, Dylan Capel

The presence of a “heat dome” over southern England and northern France is probably not news to most of you but this particular expression of climate collapse has really done me in this month. It turns out insulated northern European houses are impossible to sleep in if the temperature doesn't dip much below 25. I've alternated between almost heat buzzed and wired to a catatonic state where the only thing I care about is the next cold drink.

As a result this month I've polished up some fragments that were cut from previous zines and added a few comments and hopefully I'll be in a more creative mood next month.

Reading

I have been reading *We are all ghosts in the forest* (ISBN 9781837861453) which has a bit of an unusual premise, we're in the aftermath of disaster once again but here it is a real information overload which has resulted in digital information taking the form of corporeal spirits roaming the real world looking to merge with their physical counterparts or other pieces of information from the same source.

The idea that I felt I would borrow is that fragments of books look to try and reunite with their original text. The danger is that if someone has read the book and remembers it sufficiently the information ghost will bind with them to try and join with their memories of the text with fatal results.

If the digital ghosts do successfully merge with their original text then the books are considered possessed but are ironically now safer as other ghosts cannot merge with the same physical text and the book has a kind of partial life where it can move its own pages to suggest information to a human reader.

The book is full of intriguing ideas though and I'm continue to enjoy it as a read it (quite slowly as the weather means I'm no longer commuting on public transport). There is a section where the point of view character communes with the bees of the hives on her small holding and the bees are revealed to have a hive mind that can have perceptions beyond human conventions but also fears the collapse of the hives and the lose of both the knowledge by the lost elements of the collective but also its self-awareness as the multiple hives reduce down to the perceptions of individual bees.

At another point a road urges to protagonist to finish their journey so the haunted tarmac can have the satisfaction of a completed trip on its surface.

In many ways this is just a digital take on small gods or animism but it is really well-written and alternates successfully between menace and the uncanny and the pleasures of working in and with nature.

Underdarks

Patrick Stuart is doing an interesting series where he reviews the underdark products for D&D. As someone who has created distinctive takes on the underworld he has an interesting and aesthetic take on what is good and interesting in the books he chooses. He extracts what he thinks is good and like a critic should explain why he thinks it is good.

I've been doing a bit of reading into underdarks (while megadungeons are still my main focus of interest) as I'm thinking of creating a few one-shots that focus either on the aesthetic of the underworld or the idea of an ecosystem that doesn't follow sun dominated conventions. I've quite enjoyed the *Pathfinder* vision of an underdark made up of vaults rather like a huge honeycomb.

Patrick Stuart (False Machine) blog: <https://falsemachine.blogspot.com>

Comments

Cross-Bronx Highway

Thanks for sharing your thoughts Joshua Kronengold, Avram Grumer and Lisa Padol, sounds like a game to enjoy vicariously but also a shame that the design did not match the originality of the concept.

Patrick Brady

Cultural appropriation is obviously a thorny topic with litres of academic blood, sweat, tears and ink spent on it. I think the first thing that seems sensible is that if something feels uncomfortable you probably shouldn't do it.

Appropriation is bound up with lots of concepts around power relations, authenticity, the nature of cultures and societies and unpacking it all takes time. There is a lot of nuance and yet it is also relatively simple and we recognise it when we see it.

One of the common key indicators is something retains its appearance or name while the cultural context and meaning is changed completely. To take a classic example like the Native American war bonnet, if you wear something that looks like a war bonnet to a festival and you have no connection to that culture or intent to use the object inside its common cultural context then you're clearly appropriating it. You're demonstrating that you can reduce another culture's artefact to the status of fashion accessory without consequence to yourself.

If on the other hand you were going to a festival and wanted to have a cool-looking hat made primarily of feathers then you are naturally informed by all feather adorned hats but hopefully you are going to make or commission something that is relevant to you and your need, a cool looking feather hat for going to festivals.

So in the case of spider trickster gods or spirits there is nothing inherently problematic about using this concept as long as you are using the cultural concepts for inspiration for your own take on the ideas. If you start using actual names, rituals and practices but putting them into your own context or giving them your own interpretation then I guess the question is why? Because it seems cool and exotic? If so then it definitely feels like appropriation.

In the Eighties in the UK it often felt that roleplaying writers would read a book about another culture's mythology or see a foreign film with an interesting dilemma or visual element and then just stat up the yak herder god or drop an NPC tattooed with sutras into a scenario.

I felt totally different about these creations when I knew about the source material and when I didn't.

Now that English language roleplaying material has much more original material available from Asia and South America I feel we are much better placed to either make use of authentic material from that culture or participate in a informed dialogue with that culture, fusing and reflecting elements as interaction rather than appropriation.

Patrick Riley

I liked the idea of the golf course as an expression of power. I must admit that I thought London did recycle its water but it turns out that as you say we do not like the idea of drinking treated sewage even if we kind of do by taking water from the Thames. I live sufficiently close to the River Lea that I can pretend my water all comes from the naturally rising river and the its adjacent reservoirs...

Myles Corcoran

The latest *Tunnels and Trolls* kind of resolves everything via rolling stat pools which I think is conceptually similar to saving throws in my view but its is not really the same mechanism and I feel much of it is about avoid making people to running addition mental arithmetic.

I used to play a lot of *The Shipwreck Arcana* when I worked in a small games-postive office. We actually used to make a lot of the ability for players to come and go during the game so people could go off and eat some food and then drop back in for a few rounds. I enjoyed the game a lot.

Gabriel Roark

Thanks for the additional information on the hospital and disease simulaion. I guess you may be an situation where disease is actually a curse that can be unleashed by not using your magic to ward it off. Best to keep the local druid on your side. I thought it funny that a hospital could be considered too modern a concept to adopt. I'm curious to find out how old the concept is now.

I had not heard of Emperor's Choice miniatures before, the wizard you pictured looked great and the full Arduin range look great.

Thanks for sharing the story of your zine name change.

Lisa Padol

I checked the playset for *Galactic* and the forces definitely have moves that involve gaining and giving tokens. I appreciate that different variants may have different rules, I will need to check a few other games.

Joshua Kronengold

I enjoyed your thoughts on the Dogs-like system and the crazy relationship diagram. It was also interesting to read the point you shared with Tim about *Paranoia*, creations always slip free of their creators I guess but it is interesting to understand the original intent.

Timothy Collinson

Congratulations on the wedding. The photo was charming, thanks for sharing. I really loved the *The Travellers* comic (despite it being an insane snarl of tangents) and it shaped my perception of that scenario for a long time. Actually playing was a very different experience though (a shocking 40 year or so gap!), except for perhaps the moment when our ship hugged the shadows before blasting up into orbit which in my mind was very much the final panel of the Osprey in the comic.

The PhOENIX NEST

BUILDING MY LEGACY: There is a last time for everything.

I can't say I wasn't tempted by the thought of not making this past Summer Stabcon my last. People said nice things about the games I have run, asked what the name of the game I had run some years back was (IN A WORLD, by the people who wrote MICROSCOPE) and generally said they'd be sad to see me go.

And I'm sad to say goodbye. But my aging body won't take sleeping in hotel beds and getting up out of the horrid chairs in the gaming spaces. If I ever lose a lot of weight (the Mounjaro pens aren't doing the trick for me) and get myself something like fit I'll be back like a shot. But I'm not including that possibility in my forward planning.

I think the thing I have enjoyed most about Stabcon is the chance to try out new game systems with people who will tolerate my odd tastes and to run games with odd settings using very simple mechanics.

The last game used RISUS which was appropriate because the setting I chose was GURPS WAREHOUSE 23 which like RISUS was written by S John Ross. WAREHOUSE 23 was the original that the TV show WAREHOUSE 13 umm let's be polite and say 'was a homage to', the place the US Government or some conspiracy using the US Government stored all the weird, wonderful and dangerous things it has acquired over the years. Think of the shot at the end of RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK: a huge space full of crates,

¹ The Plain People of E&A: You're from Manchester, aren't ye? ME: Isn't it obvious?

**A zine for EVER & ANON 14 by
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one of which contains the Ark Of The Covenant. That's WAREHOUSE 23.

And I asked myself: what would happen when the Department of Government Efficiency sent in its consultants, accountants and hackers to find out what was happening and whether it was 'value for money'.

And then I imagined the team had been sent in a year ago and vanished without trace. The player characters were the special forces people sent in to discover what had happened. Plus a baffled truck driver who had been asked to fill in for the regular delivery guy.

I had fun and I think the players did as well. It was a good enough farewell to a long tradition of good gaming.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD: The No 10 Shuffle

We have a new Prime Minister and there will be a few days of people leaving the Cabinet, joining the Cabinet and moving from job to job in the Cabinet. I just hope the world stays calm while all that is going on.

Donald Trump managed to make everybody from the North West of England hate him because he called Andy Burnham "the Mayor of some town".¹ Do you think DJT has some compulsion to offend a new group of people every day? Every week? Is it part of a demonic pact or just ego?

I have a Summer Cold that is mostly a Summer Cough and is fading far too gradually. The heat and the high pollen count aren't helping.

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

The Monday filler game ended with the Three Pilgrims returning to their island of origin just in time to release the ancient god who brought down the Divine Wind on the incoming Mongol/Korean invaders. Jenny is now running another Japan set game (in the 1950s sort of) with a very much lighter system about three young brothers off to visit their grandfather. So far, my character has been turned into a panda. His two brothers are a small dragon and a monkey. The family is being understanding. The other Monday night game remains intermittent but they have saved the Emperor's life and he has now set off to attack the invading Templars on the East Coast.

Wednesday nights' game of magical students remains difficult to manage with characters constantly watching other people act with agency and having to stand back and be good first year students. In response to complaints of lack of agency I'm going to threaten them more next week.

GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS

Player Characters:

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

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

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

Martin as SANDENE, a (female) scout/sniper. Also worships YT.

Pum as KEANUS another heavy infantryman who worships Humakt

Non Player Characters In this Episode
VISHI: A (pygmy) High Llama rider: slave in Vostor's family since he was five. The Wise Servant to Vostor's Bombastic Warrior.

SENATOR FALERIUS AGGARIUS Their landlord and Patron.

FALERIA His daughter.

THE RED DANCER OF POWER: Demi-goddess, economic planner and astrologer.

KRISHNAN The Illuminate on the floor above.

OSHORKHON The Grand Master of the Cenobites in the Cult of Danfive Xaron. A man with a secret.

GEILBONUS, Speaker of the Imperial Senate

THE EXAMINER OF THE CULT OF THE RED GODDESS, GREAT SISTER and other assorted Illuminated upper-class riff-raff.

Various Bureaucrats, Soldiers, Penitents and Prisoners of War, White Moonie subversives and other lower class Riff Raff.

A WALK IN THE PARK²

Jarathir had an appointment with the Illuminated fellow on the floor above. Which worthy popped his head over the balcony to where Jarathir was basking in the thin morning Sun.

"Right, can you promise to meet me at nightfall at Gbajii Park?"³

After a moment's thought he promised to do his 'absolute best'.

"Thank you. I have a vital role for you. And if you will excuse me: I'm going to have a busy day."

² For 22 10 25 The GM was away the previous week feeling a bit ill.

³ Also known as the Sevenfold Gardens of Enlightenment

He stalked across the balcony and went and woke the University Students who could be heard complaining about being roused at this ungodly hour.

Vishi came back from the market with kedgerree⁴

VISHI: Sirs, and madam. I'm going to take your dress uniforms out to be cleaned today. Could you please not put them on today. I will have everything polished and ready for mid-morning tomorrow when you have to go out and parade. And the Senator says could you please attend him in his quarters once you've had breakfast.

When they got to him, the Senator was looking glum. He was sitting in the armchair in the room. Somebody had brought in some more furniture and potted plants. The mass murderer had let the place get rather dusty and tatty but someone had made an effort. Perhaps it was his daughter (who was also there) and his friend the Architect/Senator Jaxarte Whyded. They were looking glum.

The Senator sat them down and said that he had a series of problems. "The sort of thing one always gets before any complex event. And one really rather big problem. I've had a last minute element added to the parade by someone of too senior rank for me to refuse. I really want a way out of this."

KEANUS Can we assassinate him?

SENATOR: Oshorkhon, the Grand Master of the Cenobites, the gentlemen whose penitents are going to be in charge of the poop...

VOSTOR: Cheerful chap!

SENATOR: He has insisted on introducing into the parade a group of prisoners of war, mostly southern barbarians, a few eastern barbarians. He proposes to parade them in chains before the populace and then execute them before the Emperor. This is not the tone I want. It is common for prisoners of war to be condemned to the ring and the circus. That's not execution. That's a fight to the death. These proposed victims are not combat fit. I don't want

a blood sacrifice in the middle of what is supposed to be a celebration.

JARATHIR: Do we have any idea what the Emperor's view of this would be? Because he doesn't strike me as being the most bloodthirsty Mask of The Emperor.

Samdeme proposed getting the Emperor's security people on side to get this cancelled. Possibility of people protesting the barbaric sacrifice? Riots? The Senator was cheered by this suggestion and called it 'cunning'. He gave the person who had suggested it the job of approaching 'the Emperor's security people'.

He asked for volunteers to go and persuade the Master of the Cenobites "not to execute people" at least not to do it in the middle of the parade. "I don't want blood and guts in the middle of Red Square."

KEANUS Does the Emperor not have some sort of overview and approval of what goes on?

SENATOR: Drawing it to his attention...

ESHAN: Might backfire. He might insist on it.

SENATOR: The Emperor likes to think.... He likes to exercise his power. Sometimes in whimsical ways. It is not for me to second guess the judgement of the Emperor. I can only apply *my* judgement and hope that it is pleasing to him. Is that clear? I'm glad that's clear.

Parallels with Roman Emperors and modern American politics were made.

SENATOR: My daughter has a major project. Messages have to be delivered today to persons invited to the parade, detailing when they're supposed to report, where they are supposed to stand and their position of precedence among the people. The administration at the office of the Master of Circuses has been a little unco-operative so we only have these today. Most of them will go out with the standard Imperial Postal Services. They're very good. But some need to be hand delivered. To people who are more delicate and it might help the lowly messengers, one of whom is my daughter, to

⁴ Rice, boiled eggs, smoked fish in a creamy curry sauce

have somebody impressive looking and military at their shoulders.

Jarathir volunteered to go and speak to the Master of the Cenobites,

Samdeme asked to be accompanied in going to speak to Beat Pot Aelwrin by someone more fluent in talking to people. Vostor was proposed.

SAMDEME No! He speaks *at* people!

Orshorkhon was at a holding pen outside the City. When they got there this was a wooden enclosure for prisoners. There were prisoners of war their being guarded by the Temple of Danfive Xaron's finest troops. "They are surrounded. They are a long way from home. They are not going to escape from this cage."

Jarathir recognised some of the clan tattoos as belonging to tribes he had fought in the south. There were both Humakti and Orlanthi religious markings. And a lot more naked flesh than he had seen recently. There were also people whose markings he didn't recognise, presumably from the Eastern frontier facing the Sun-worshipping Nomads. Also women, children and old men.

JARATHIR (*Clearing his throat*) The Senator asked us to just come along and just discuss the actual logistics of what you're planning. It kind of doesn't integrate well with the rest of the parade

ORSHOKHON: (Icily) Integrate? ⁵

JARATHIR Well, the parade is one large manifestation of the Empire's power and current glory.

ORSHOKHON: Yeees? That I understand.

JARATHIR Obviously, defeating the enemies of the Empire is part of that and umm a parade of captives is good. That idea worked well in terms of the overall military aspect of the parade. It's the execution stage that we find a little difficult to work out when we could fit that in. If it's right at the beginning it sets rather a dark tone for the rest of the parade. If it's in between award ceremonies, it sort of detracts from your bit. Do we have to tie in the awards

ceremonies in terms of the people you are executing. And also if it happens before the elephants are they going to think they're on a battlefield and require further calming. And also some of the troops who are being asked to march are not used to marching on streets. The square, we believe, would become quite slippery especially if you are executing all these people.

Drak has a day job that involves him in lots of meetings where he has to persuade people to comply with regulations they don't want to comply with or have forgotten about or have just assumed don't apply to them. I could feel his work experience coming through here.

Despite the length of that speech the GM asked for a Fast Talk roll rather than any more honest communication skill. Boosted by his loyalty to the Red Emperor he succeeded.

OSHORKHON: Well, I suppose... I can parade them? In Chains?

JARATHIR Of course. As long as they don't slow down the overall parade. And we wouldn't expect that because the Elephants aren't exactly fast moving.

OSHORKHON: I had promised my people that there would be executions.

JARATHIR They can do that after the parade.

OSHORKHON: So this isn't the Mercy of the Goddess or anything?

JARATHIR No, no, this is don't interrupt the parade and disrupt the logistics. Maybe the Emperor himself will intervene but,,,

SAMDEME That's up to the Emperor.

JARATHIR I wouldn't want to second guess his will.

OSHORKHON: I suppose that's fair enough.

JARATHIR I think what the Senator was objecting to was messy execution.

Oshorkhon wasn't pleased but accepted this.

OSHORKHON: I've got the chains anyway. But I'm going to have to disappoint some people.

⁵ PUM: Synergy!

At that point one of the aged prisoners stood up and shouted something in Heortling. Vostor was the only one who both heard it and understood it. The old man with long white hair pointed at the Master of the Cenobites saying:

"I see you! I know your name! Josephus Fallindus!"

Vostor saw a brief expression of fear cross Oshorkon's face and he snapped an order to one of his minions. As Vostor recognised the name of the murderer of the Feeder of the Bat's parents the old man was cut down.

OSHORKHON: I can't stand impertinence.

The two troopers decided that they weren't going to risk the Master of the Cenobites finding them impertinent and took themselves off.

Eshan and the Senator's daughter went to an office in the Treasury. At a desk sat what looked like a young woman but was actually a demi-goddess.

FALERIA: Most Holy and Reverend Red Dancer, this is an invitation to the Emperor's Parade tomorrow.

RED DANCER OF POWER: Oh, is it tomorrow? Well, I suppose so. If I must. It's not very enjoyable for somebody like me to watch other people marching up and down stiffly and not even *shimmying*.

Eshan looked around the office and there were chalkboards and bits of paper stuck to them Lots of esoteric calculations and outlines of bodies (all male) marked up with astrological symbols and maybe some sort of runic magic markings. Looking back to his memories of his aunt who took an interest in that sort of thing, he thought it was the Red Dancer looking for a particular definition of a person by their astrological tendencies.

RED DANCER: *(Suddenly seeing Eshan for the first time)* Oh! Do you happen to know your exact birth date. *(Faleria rolled her eyes)* And where exactly were you were born? *(She took*

out a piece of paper and started scribbling) Just stay there.

The calculations seemed very satisfactory.

RED DANCER: Would you mind just stepping out of your uniform and standing over there?

FALERIA: Hang on!

RED DANCER Purely in the interests of science. Natural philosophy.

Eshan had only vaguely heard of the Red Dancer of Power and knew she had something to do with Central Planning.

Faleria was upset by this boldness. Eshan wasn't sure if this was because she thought of him as one of her toys or maybe that she had a lot of messages to deliver.

Eshan asked if he could return later.

RED DANCER: Oh, yes. I'll be here until well past darkness. Do come back and we can give it a full survey then.

FALERIA: She's a goddess. She's not for you.

ESHAN: I didn't want to offend.

FALERIA: She is a very important person and she deals with some very important matters. But I have heard she is looking for a.... breeding partner. Not to marry you understand but to..... Personally, I would think she would go for some sort of mighty thewed hero.

ESHAN: She's looking at star charts. Don't know why.

FALERIA: She probably believes in the power of the stars. She is a professional predictor of things.

ESHAN: She'll probably find I'm the wrong one and it will all be over.

Meanwhile....

BEAT-POT AELWRIN: Come in, come in. What can I do for you? Everything going all right for the Big Parade.

Samdeme laid out all the practical objections she could come up with. Elephants scenting blood.

Mess in Red Square. The chef/general seemed interested at first but then asked her to sample his experimental fried chicken batches⁶ and something she said in response to that caused him to dismiss her with a brief and probably insincere promise to look into it.

The Senator accepted the partial victory Jarathir and Vostor brought him but was still dissatisfied.

SENATOR: He's going to want to whip them. I just know he is.

JARATHIR He's already executing them for talking out of turn so I'm not sure I was going to keep him from slaughtering.

KEANUS There won't be many left.

JARATHIR What was that? The guy shouted something and then he got shot.

Graham had a moment's dithering about whether he should reveal juicy information. Drak said that Jarathir hadn't actually caught what was said. Vostor briefed the Senator privately.

SENATOR: *(To Jarathir)* Go to the postal office and find people who need escorting.

Once alone with the Senator, Vostor talked around the topic.

VOSTOR: The family of the Man-Bat you know they have this deep seated hatred of the killer of the Man-Bat's parents? Who disappeared into the Danfive Xaron cult? That person was recognised by one these prisoners who pointed at him very clearly. Just before he, the prisoner, was shot through the chest and died very quickly.

SENATOR: I'm sorry I'm not seeing the connection?

VOSTOR: One of the people standing around.

Eventually we discovered that Graham had forgotten the name that was given. Why he didn't ask for a reminder from the GM I don't know. One of the other players was convinced I

hadn't said the name but I have the recordings to prove him wrong which is why I should be cautious taking their word for anything.

GM: Graham, sometimes I think it might be better if you took notes.

Eventually, the penny dropped.

SENATOR: Oh. Oh. Tell me, how's your riding?

VOSTOR: I'm a foot soldier, sir.

SENATOR: Are you feeling brave?

VOSTOR: Always.

SENATOR: Oh good. In that case, go up to your rooms and have a sit down for a while. Boy!

He got the small boy who helped the Janitrix and told Vostor to have a meal and a lie down.

VOSTOR: What am I going to be riding?

SENATOR: The moon beams.

So Vostor went and had a decent lunch hoping he wasn't going to suffer from airsickness.

The boy was sent off with a large letter. The Senator said he'd be working from his apartment for a while before going into the Office.

Then Samdeme came back and reported. He said that Beat-Pot Aelwrin might or might not take an interest if his attention could be drawn away from crispy chicken.

SENATOR: You accepted a meal from the hands of Beat-Pot Aelwrin?

SANDENE It wasn't a meal. Just one chicken leg covered in bread crumbs.

SENATOR: It didn't look tentacular did it?

SANDENE He said it was chicken. It was shaped like a chicken leg.

SENATOR: You're probably fine. He's probably given up on the walktapus.⁷

.

⁶ Inspired I think by a Binging With Babish episode. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvKf6aDxBLk>

⁷ A vile rumour alleged that Beat-Pot had attempted to create a dish using the limbs of this Chaotic regenerating monster.

He sent Sandene off to the Post Office on Escort duty and as she left a small boy came in and said "Yes, Senator that's fine. In about half an hour." Vosor got called from his bed of rest and handed the recently composed letter.

SENATOR: Take this to the Chairman of the Senate. He is currently at a centre for the disturbed at a place to the east of the City. He is not permitted to come any closer than that. Take this to him despite the fact that he has reason to hate you. Please.

VOSTOR: Certainly!

SENATOR: Here are two chitties allowing you to use Imperial transport. You'll go out on a Moonboat and come back with the post this evening. Assuming you're still alive. You have half an hour to get to the Gate of the Inner City.

Jarathir was sent to accompany a letter to the Court of The Great Sister. He saw her differently now he was Illuminated himself but he found himself dazzled and unable to say anything in her presence (a 99 rolled on his Insight(Human) or perhaps his Illumination skill).

GREAT SISTER: How are you feeling?

COURIER: Fine goddess.. Oh him.

JARATHIR r Calm....

GREAT SISTER: Have you had a good chance to think things through?

JARATHIR There's a lot to think about...

GREAT SISTER: Isn't there? I have a project I could... But I think it's a little too early for you to accept some of the.... Have a peaceful transition. I will see you shortly.

Having been calmed by her talk he made an Insight[Human] roll and got the impression she was disappointed that she could use you for her devious ends.

DRAK: Her glorious plans, please! She probably doesn't think of her plans as devious. Cunning. Wise.

GM: She's about a hundred and forty years old and looks about thirty nine.

After he emerged from the office:

COURIER: Are you all right?

JARATHIR Yes. Does she not affect you in that way?

COURIER: I get to meet all sorts of people in my job. As long as they take what I'm delivering and sign for it, it's not really my concern. I'm also not supposed to gossip about the people I deliver the mail to.

JARATHIR It would be unprofessional. You must have many fascinating tales.

COURIER: Yes, but unless you're coming with a warrant, I'm not going to tell you about them.

Meanwhile, Diddius Copernicus the Dean of the Field School of Magic was in the University giving a lecture to a very thinly populated audience of students when Eshan and Faleria arrived. The topic of the lecture was Transmogrification.

DRAK or maybe PUM: Turning people into cats.(This pun received general approval)

GM: It was a very good idea but I'm not going to run with it.

DIDDIUS COPERNICUS: Have I got a volunteer?

Utter silence.

Then Faleria pushed Eshan forward.

DC: Thank you! Very noble of you. Please step up and into the circle over there. Put down your weapons you won't need them. This is a straightforward transmogrification of the Third Order...

ALAN: Do I know what 'transmogrification' is?

GM: (Slightly surprised) Oh. Do you have any Magic Lore? No. Can you roll IQ times 1%. No? Then no, you don't.

There was a moment while Graham explained that it was Vostor's ambition to be so obnoxious that he was never volunteered for anything.

There was a brief moment of disruption in Eshan's consciousness and memory and when they returned Eshan checked that no limbs were missing. There was a titter running around the students.

DC: How are you feeling?

ESHAN There was a strange moment of disconnection.

DC: Don't worry it should wear off by dawn tomorrow.

Looking around Eshan could see that the Senator's daughter was just about holding in gales of laughter.

FALERIA: Let's get the rest of this list done, shall we?

Eshan looked for a mirror or a puddle or something reflective. Couldn't put a finger of anything different.

Vostor got to the Moonboat station in time and was told he'd be at his destination in about half an hour. And as the crew stood on the roof of the vessel, singing, chanting and magically controlling the flight⁸ he got the interesting experience of flying over the great city and out into the surrounding countryside.

The Customer Service Staff came around with a bucket for possible emergencies.

GM: 'We are not going over water. If we hit the ground at speed we will all be dead.'

DRAK: In the event of this Moonboat ceasing to be a Moonboat you probably won't care.

GM: Prayer is definitely what we recommend in the event of a major outage of Moon Power.

Vostor did not need the bucket. Above him he could see the Bridge going up to the Moon.

The boat took him east out of the city to a range of mountains. It parked at a big pylon and he got let down there. There were no other passengers but there was a full cargo of supplies and dispatches for the Eastern Front.

Yes, the Lunar Empire is on a two-front war. At least two fronts.

At the gate of the Hospital for the Distressed, they said that the Chairman of the Senate was with his son. Vostor was told to leave his weapons at the gatehouse as they had some patients who were not to be shown weapons. .

They led him into the barred wards and eventually he came to where the Senator/Bat-Man/Man-Bat/Feeder of the Bat lay staring blankly at the ceiling wrapped up with bandages and looking more than a little not at his best. The Old Man sat by his side reading to him.

VOSTOR: Message for the Chair of the Senate.

GEILBONUS: All right. *(A moment later)* You! You have the gall to turn up here.

VOSTOR: I'm on orders, sir.

GEILBONUS: Were you on orders when you.... mangled my grandson.

VOSTOR: Yes sir.

The Chair of the Senate looked at the seal on the letter and turned a further alarming set of colours, none of which could have been good for an aged man with high blood pressure and perhaps heart conditions.

DRAK: But he's in the right place if he does have a fit.

GRAHAM: Go on! Roll for it!

The GM did check but the old man rolled an 05 and got his anger under control. He ripped open the message, scattering wax everywhere,

GEILBONUS: Huh! Huh! Your master tells me you witnessed this. Do not attempt to lie to me soldier. You witnessed someone calling Orkoshkhon by the name of my children's assassin?

VOSTOR: Yes, sir.

GEILBONUS: With that I could... Do you know what a Master of the Circuses has written at the bottom this?

VOSTOR: No sir. Can't read sir.

GEILBONUS:: Oh. That's cunning. Of your master, not of you.

⁸ **VOSTOR:** I feel less safe already

VOSTOR: *(Pause)* Yes, sir.

GRAHAM Notice the pause there while I think about what that means. It's important not to appear too clever.

DRAK: You've got that down pat.

GEILBONUS: "I do not ask for a payment for this but trust to your honour to allow it to settle what is between us." You do see the subtlety of that?

VOSTOR: Yeah. I do. That's subtle!

GEILBONUS: Oh dear Goddess. It's like talking to a tree stump.

VOSTOR: Eh? Sir. Yes sir!

GEILBONUS: I had dreamed of ripping apart... Or paying someone else to rip apart... The people who assaulted my grandchild and brought him to this. And now you have offered me... Ah. What does he hope I'll do? What does he hope I'll do?

VOSTOR: Sir?

GEILBONUS: I am going to remember my honour and not have you gutted, castrated or locked in this place with the rest of the hopeless ones. I am merely going to bid you good day and send you on your way.

VOSTOR: Thank you very much sir. I'll be on my way.

The prospect of Vostor being locked up as a deluded person was appreciated by the rest of the players. *"I'm a soldier! I was going get a medal from the Emperor!" "Yes, yes, of course you were."*

He gathered his weapons and made his way to catch the mail coach back to the capital.

Keanus having been excused from guarding the Senator while he was at the office, went to the Postal Office.

COURIER: I'm not sure where I'm going to find this one.

To the Red Light District and up to a recently ruined building. Keanus realised that this was the outside of the Temple of Uleria which had a Temple to Cacodemon underneath it which he and his comrades had kicked over. Somebody

had been through the place with a lot of sledgehammers.

The Courier asked where he could find 'the priestess of Free Love'. A weary looking workman, clearing away rubble and dust, nodded at a nearby tent.

And inside the tent was the most beautiful woman Keanus had ever seen.

Cries of warning about spider-headed women and the trouble Keanus had experienced with them came from the other players.

PUM: More beautiful than that spider-woman?

GM: Well, you're still able to walk and think so probably not.

She looked up and smiled at Keanus and the courier.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Is this position fixed. My position in the stands. Can't I get closer to the Emperor.

KEANUS It is not for me to say uh Miss. Ma'am I'm just a messenger.

COURIER: You're just the messenger's escort. Please sign here.

Keanus missed all the subtle interplay going on here but did get an invitation to the Temple "to help reconsecrate it".

BW: I can see you're a worshipper of...Death but there are so many other things going on in Life. And as the Red Goddess teaches us Death and Life are merely aspects of the same universal thing. Do come along.

KEANUS She seemed very nice didn't she?

Sandene escorted his courier to see General Roan-Ur Commander Of Military Forces In Aggar, known as "THE RED CLAW".

He could be found at the war ministry. He was the highest ranking Chaos worshipper in the Lunar Army, a worshipper of Cacodemon. A fact that Sandene was lucky enough to know going in. Generally believed to be 'mad as a badger'.

ROAN-UR I understand there is to be some bloodshed.

SANDENE: Not intentionally. That is to be put back to a later date.

ROAN-UR: Well now I am disappointed. I wanted to see slaughter. I wanted to see blood

SPOUTING! For the Red Emperor.

SANDENE: It was felt to be better to have all the blood spouting and gore on a separate occasion to really revel in it.

ROAN-UR: I am wrathful!

SANDENE: Pleased to meet you.

ROAN-UR Ah, humour. At least you have courage wench! I will not seek your life at this moment in time.

SANDENE: Glad to hear it sir.

ROAN-UR If I were just to casually throw something from the stands and impale one of the prisoners would that be.... frowned upon. Not that I care.

SANDENE. The only snag is that the Emperor's bodyguard is on high alert because there are some miscreants who may wish to cause trouble and that might be misinterpreted. They might think you were one of these people who are against the Emperor.

ROAN-UR: I would not wish to give that impression at all.

SANDENE: Save that for the actual...

ROAN-UR: Blood and **slaughter** for my Lord!

It was Keanus who got back to the Post Office first and heard the report that one of the messengers who was sent out to do routine deliveries had not come back. The clerks in charge went through the list and found that 'some comedian' gave them Ibex Devouring Dog, the chief tax inspector.

KEANUS We probably should have given him an escort.

CHIEF CLERK: Somebody's going to have to go and see what has happened to him.

DRAK: At least get the uniform back.

Out of mercy to Pum, the GM had the other two characters arrive at that moment.

JARATHIR I have an appointment at nightfall.

ESHAN I have an appointment too.

The thing that Keanus noticed which no one had said yet (though all the players had suspected it) was that Eshan appeared to be a girl. Reality, including the outline of her breastplate, had shifted to accommodate this. ⁹

Keanus stood and looked agape.

ESHAN: What's wrong?

KEANUS I...I... Nothing. Sir. Ma'am. Sir.

At which point Eshan finally caught on.

KEANUS Something for the weekend? ¹⁰

ESHAN: I got volunteered and sorcery happened.

Eshan, once the jokes died down, asserted their authority and hustled the soldiers off to the office of the supervisor of Tax Demons.

The civil servants, packing up their desks and heading off for home, said that Ibex Devouring Dog was in his office and there was indeed a courier in with him.

Eshan knocked at the door.

IBEX: Go away" I'm interrogating.

ESHAN: We've come to collect the messenger.

A short stout man with a very annoyed expression opened the door.

IBEX: What's the meaning of this? Don't you know whom I am?

ESHAN: You're the chief tax inspector, I believe sir.

IBEX: People all over the Empire pray not to come to my attention. Are all of your affairs in

⁹ The GM apologised for his old fashioned sense of fun. I don't know why my players put up with me sometimes...

¹⁰ Which is what hairdressers used to say in the UK when I was young when offering to sell you condoms. Nobody ever explained this to you

order madame?

ESHAN: I believe so.

IBEX: Well once I have finished with this person (I've only got another seven years of his life to go)

COURIER: (Plaintively) I can't remember!

Eventually, they managed to retrieve the poor Courier (though he had to promise to return later with his supporting documents) and after completing his rounds took him to a number of bars to calm his nerves.

Ibex complained that the Emperor's invitation was interrupting his vital work but accepted he had to attend.

Jarathir arrived at Gbaji Park by sunset.

Krishnan, the gentleman who lived upstairs was there. The Examiner from the Cult of the Red Goddess was there. Great Sister was there and some other people all of them Illuminated. There was also a lot of people of less enlightened kind, a motley lot including the students from upstairs, ladies who wandered about in floaty dresses and talked about relating to the trees, weird drug bedraggled hippies and bedraggled gentlemen with fixed expressions.

DRAK: Ah, the Real Ale Society.

GM: The sort of thing that Donald Trump would describe as extreme leftists.

GRAHAM: Not really narrowing the field is it?

The Chap from upstairs seemed to be taking charge.

KRISHNAN: We're going to go through the seven stages of opening the way. The person who opens the way will have to stay there to keep the gate open while the refugees go through.

JARATHIR Oh so these are the (whisper White) Moonies. And they're going to be hidden somewhere where they can't cause trouble

KRISHNAN: Somewhere where they won't get slaughtered.

JARATHIR Which a form of causing trouble.

KRISHNAN: I'll ask you to remember all the ways and paths. I will go into the centre of the

maze and you will take my keys back to my apartment and find the scroll in the locked box underneath the floor boards which contains my investigations into how this place works. The day after the parade at nightfall we will expect to be retrieved. We are going not deeply out of this world but somewhat. Technically there's no hurry but I think getting us back to reality promptly would be best.

The notable (and socially protected) Illuminates, starting with Great Sister, knelt in centre of a part of the maze and opened the way to the next level. Jarathir watched all of this with interest and with his newly enhanced senses.

After six successful meditation-and-opening rituals they reached the last node.

KRISHNAN: I will be the oh.

Ahead of them stepping out of the bushes was a person in bronze Orlanthi armour. Wind Runes, Movement Runes, Mastery Runes. Carrying a great sword.

JARATHIR He's not supposed to be here.

And then he noticed that the barbarian had the head of a dragon. A blue headed dragon.

JARATHIR That's unusual.

KRISHNAN: That's probably his dream self. He's riding the success of whatever it is they did down south.

The Dragon-man roared and lightning crackled in his jaws, narrowly missing Jarathir and the person next to him.

KRISHNAN: Finish it! Finish it!

Unable to work out if he was being told to complete the ritual or kill the intruder Jarathir decided to do the soldierly thing. He cast Strength on himself and his bird companion cast Mobility.

There was a combat. It didn't last long. A clash of blades. A blast of Lightning Breath to Jarathir's leg. A mighty blow takes a chip out of

the Dragon-Man's sword. A clash of blades. Another mighty blow takes a larger chip from the greatsword. Jarathir danced out of the way of the Lightning Breath and the Dragon-Man danced out of the way of Jarathir's sword. And then the Dragon Man fumbled. Laying himself open to the blow from Jarathir. Who cast Bladesharp on his sword and went for the head.

The sword went through the head, down to the chest and then as the blade split the armour the apparition dissipated.

There was a sigh of relief from the refugees (who did not protest at their pacifist persons being saved by the sword) and a sigh of 'Aha!' as the Person from Upstairs who had somehow gotten into a lotus position and meditated while the fight was going on finally opened the way to the centre of the maze.

Jarathir saw the path open to what looked like a garden by a pagoda. And sitting beneath the pagoda, naked and in lotus position, was the 'Grandfather' of the young lady from upstairs that Vostor was enamoured of. He looked up in alarm, as if not expecting visitors.

KRISHNAN: Don't worry old son!

Since he was naked Jarathir could see clearly the tatoos of the Danfive Xaron cult on his chest.

KRISHNAN: *(Handing over his keys)* Read carefully and I'll see you in a couple of days.

JARATHIR Pity you're missing the parade.

KRISHNAN: I think I'll live through it.

Being told about the Orlanthi dreamquester, Great Sister said that 'that happens when you're on the fringes of reality' and that the Storm Barbarians will be 'cock of the walk for a while'.

Vostor got back to the Insula to encounter Keanus amd Samdeme and a somewhat the worse for wear Courier.

VOSTOR: What did you do to him?

¹¹ *DRAK: This is almost standard practice for our unit.)*

From upstairs they heard a boy sobbing. From their apartment where. Vishi was curled up in a ball in the middle of the room.

It turned out that the cleaners had tried to stiff Vishi for ten gold pieces ("Which I do not have") and refused to hand over the cleaned dress uniforms.

VOSTOR: Shall we go and have a chat with him. A little explaining needs to happen here. You came to the right person. Well done, you!

There was more violence. It looked a fairly respectable place in a fairly respectable district. And as Vostor was there, there were threats and sarcasm too.

When it came to the technical aspects of how to model kicking down a door I consulted Martin who had practical experience both with shoulder charges, kicking and using battering rams. (Retired policeman, remember.)

Sandene did try to stop Vostor from charging in without thought but decided she was too late for that.

There was lots of confusion, including Sandene breaking into the wrong shop after looking around the back for a less stout door than the cleaners had at the front. She got threatend with a pitchfork ("I got this from my cousin's farm. It's been used to shovel dung.")

VOSTOR: Do you like both arms? *(Fails an Intimidate roll)*

SHOPKEEPER: Do you like your head?

VOSTOR: All right, there's two ways this can go.

It went the violent way

While Sandene and Keanus found the missing uniforms Vostor assaulted the Shopkeeper, chopping off his arm, then healing him to avoid lawsuits¹¹ before having his own hip broken by

another employee and only surviving by virtue of his hidden Chaos Feature and the judicious use of Divine Magic Heal Wound.

KEANUS: *(With an armful of dress uniforms)*
And let that be a lesson to you!

The Red Dancer of Power took one look at the female Eshan and said: "Are you trying to tell me something?"

ESHAN: I volunteered for a transmogrification by a sorcerer.

RDoP: I'm sorry. I was looking forward to that, Come round tomorrow. Oh not tomorrow. The day after. I'll take the measurements I need then. Unless of course, you'd be interested in...

Eshan worked out she was being offered a night of lesbian bliss with a demi-goddess.

PUM: This is one of those unusual situations where your watchword is: "What Would Vostor Do?"

Eshan did not get back to the Insula that night.

Keanus did not mention the temporary transformation of the officer despite the temptation to top Vostor's tale of The Day He Just Had.

Jarathir carefully took the one scroll he'd been told to take and put the rest back in the lock box. The scrolls were the work of a noted White Moon philosopher and pacifist.

DISTRACTIONS.

Munchies were consumed. Loudly.

DRAK: This episode will have many cutscenes.
GM: This episode will be all over the place.

**IGGY'S THEME: The Party United
Will Never Be Defeated... Oh Wait.**

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 13

A GRAND COVER! AGAIN!

PATRICK BRADY: RYCT ELF: I felt that WATCHMEN could be adapted to Live Action but not to a film. The format of a TV series reflecting the story structure of the original comic (also a form of serial storytelling) would seem to be wiser. That said I've not seen any of the TV adaptations. **Re: Spider Gods.** Can you clearly state what the nature of the offence and to whom it is given in the act of 'cultural appropriation'? Because I am old fashioned enough that I don't really get it and regard the whole world as a vast cultural All-You-Can-Eat buffet that I can and will take for my own purposes. My own candidate for a British national motto is: "Nice idea. Ours Now!" // I'm not saying you shouldn't be concerned. I'm certainly not saying you should do anything you consider impolite or think anyone else might consider impolite. I'm saying you need to be able to define your terms. // "No Byzantine army returned to Gaul." Well, they tried it. Just once under Belasrius. Didn't work out. // I'm less depressed than you about Things In General. I can see ways it could All Go Down The Sink but I can also see ways things could come to an even keel or even improve. Crises are like that.

MATT STEVENS RYCT BRIAN

ROGERS: I watch the latest comic book nonsense drift by on YouTube and wonder how long any of it will last. Alfred has died and may have left the Batman's Butler gig to his niece. Spider-Man is married with a kid. What's that you say? Only in a parallel universe? At least with BUFFY all we got was 7 seasons of canon and after that it's all apocryphal fan-fic. The aging of the actors puts some sort of end point to broadcast media. This is not something I rejoice about as a performer but as a consumer I find there are compensations.

MYLES COCORAN: Re Your IgTheme:

The thing I liked most about the Hivers was the idea of Manipulation which made them the Hidden Masters behind a lot of what was going on the Traveller Universe.

ROGER B_W: RYCT Me: Hmm, good point. The Son and The Daughter probably have fewer full-time clergy: perhaps they have more Acolytes than Priests/Priestesses/ I've established that there are High Priests/Priestesses for all the Six. Perhaps the Son and Daughter HP are appointed by election from the Priests and Acolytes and on a yearly cycle too. And they may take rank with them if they move on. // Future researchers into health trends may be astonished at the things we did to our blood pressure and general mood in the name of entertainment. I'm quite agape myself.

ERIKA L FRANK: RYCT: PATRICK BRADY: I'm not sure how I'd go about finding where M.A.R. Barket's cracked and wicked politics influenced his world-building. There is slavery in that world and there are sexual implications to the slavery. But I'm not sure how much he took from standard pulp tropes. And there is no racial basis for slavery except to say that some of the non-humans make bad slaves. The morality of his cultures (as explored in the preface to THE BOOK OF EIBON BINDINGS) denies that there is any sort of transcendent moral truth and everything moral is interpreted as individual choices. He also has the character doing the introduction speak very disrespectfully of monotheism and I cannot reconcile that with Barker's own Islamic conversion.

A lot of the more questionable elements are what you might expect to find in any stunted adolescent trying to write in a setting with no-one else to censor it. Like me and most GMs in those days. HARN also has a goddess of lust and mercantile profit. It was the sort of thing that was thought fun in those days.

SCRIBBLE M. HORROR: Welcome! I think: you have thrown a lot of foxes among the chickens. I did not read all of your piece (too close to the deadline) but it looks fascinating.

I will just say that the answer to "*Can a legal document grant amending authority to revoke its own amending authority?*" Would

seem to be 'Yes, assuming the US Constitution counts as a legal document. Because it grants the right to amend to two separate institutions (the US Congress and a Constitutional Convention) and does not limit the possible amendments. So, they could end the possibility of amending the Constitution or give all such rights to a particular person or office. (The US probably wouldn't survive such a move but that's not the question being asked.)

I'm probably missing a lot of points here.

AVRAM GRUMER: RYCT me: I seem to recall that Roman priests also played all sorts of jiggery pokery with the calendar to good political effect. I can only say Thank God for Gregory The Great or the days of the week would not be safe nowadays. (I look forward to the time DJT wants a month or day of the week renamed after himself.)

LISA PADOL: RYCT MATT STEVENS: Britain in the 18th/19th Century kept its most unpleasant means of making a living over the seas and went to some considerable trouble to keep those facts from bothering the native sons and daughters from thinking too much about them. On the other hand the facts of the oppression of women and the poorhouses were there for all to see. Austen alludes to them but they aren't depicted in detail. We would have to wait for other writers to get that. Fanny Price (in MANSFIELD PARK) never makes it clear just what she is being so concerned about when the performance of LOVERS' VOWS is proposed. Presumably she assumed that everybody who read her books would know what was in the play and write their own subtexts. A game in which the players did know exactly what horrid things were going on would be very different. A game where they got any chance to do something about them would be... fantastical, possibly in

the manner of Steven Brust.¹² **RYCT me:** The Master of Origami turned out to be the Mistress of Origami and dwelled in a dangerous but beautifully drawn and folded otherworld that the PCs got to visit several times. She had been the friend and then the enemy of one of the female Emperors of Japan, who had faded into mythical status by the time of the Mongol/Korean invasions. And it had been the same female ruler who granted the Priestess' family guardianship of the God of the Old Ones who could be awoken when the land had need of them. // The reach of thirty five SIZ 1 Kittens is still the same as one kitten. The reach of a SIZ 35 beasties is something else entirely. // The obsession with elephant dung is derived from the old joke with the punchline: "What? And leave Show Business?" // I can't find the reference to Jarathir talking about Vostor keeping silent. // The book was left by the spider-headed, body-hopping Chaos creature who had used it to find their own enlightenment and then regretted it. // Yes, Jarathir is now Illuminated. It means that he no longer sees the contradictory Runes of Glorantha as incompatible *especially* the Law/Chaos dichotomy. This means he can't be sensed by cult abilities that detect someone as aligned with Law or Chaos and cannot be found by cult Spirits of Reprisal which means he can join cults which are enemies of each other. He also could explore the unique insights of Lunar Magic but that's a long term project. He also sees whether other people are Illuminated which introduces him to a whole new layer of society and government. It is a status that gives opportunities, dangers and temptations. // Pantomime Elephant, I bet. // Re: Lictors. The action of the campaign has moved forwards about four months, with the Magistrate and his Lictors investigating matters in the southern part of the Western End of the Empire. They are in the goblin majority part of the Empire and are dealing with Sea Elves (and maritime insurance fraud) Dragons (and inheritance law), an Archbishop (and the laws of conspiracy and

feudal fealty) and privateers (and the laws on piracy and smuggling). Oh, and an Old Friend Of The Magistrate and his diabolical and revolutionary manipulation of Everybody. // The Magistrate was Banestormed into Yrth and adopted into a childless but wealthy family. He chose to burrow into the legal profession and try to reform the Empire from within. His two companions chose to join the Healing profession (and got caught and mind wiped by the Ministry of Serendipity) and to join the underworld to start some deep revolutionary teaching, organising and conspiring. // The slave rebellions were put down but the Emperor has decided to reform the laws on manumission and recruited the bits of the Church that are currently loyal to him to run the process of registering freedpersons, which is not only a Good Thing To Do but will give the clergy an income stream and more influence. // In this he has been encouraged by the lady he has chosen to marry. Who has her own secrets. // The chief resistance to this has proved to be by the conservative aristocracy, especially those who own forests, mines and other consumers of slaves. Their conspiracy triggered early and was mostly put down. It was intended (by the Magistrate's Old Friend) to strike simultaneously with the return of the Templars to the east coast of the Empire. Instead of combining the two blows are going to be dealt with in succession. // Oh and the Old Friend seems to have some ability to time travel or access to prophecy. Just because. He left behind a nasty bio-weapon targeted at the Emperor which failed. //

Brian C. Misiaszek: RYCT Me: Re: 'Insula'. I may be guilty of assuming people know things I know. I have been many times in the past. The Insula is from CITIZENS OF THE LUNAR EMPIRE, a fan written project that provides the characters who don't come from the LARP FALL OF MOONSON.

¹² I recently came across a summary of LOVERS' VOWS which I wish I had known when I encountered MANSFIELD PARK at school. A story of illegitimate children, poverty and illicit love including *an unwise liaison with a young clergyman* which must have

been understood o reflect Fanny's situation gives a whole new depth to the story. THE PPoE&A: You gonna re-read it? ME: Nah! Have you seen my unread pile?

PETER C. HILDRETH Welcome! (Back?)
// Re ‘The Honourable’. In the UK you have to make MP to get that title. I don’t think you keep it forever. If you make Privy Counsellor you get to be Right Honourable unless and until you blot your copybook really, really badly. There was a gap of 90 years between a member being expelled for siding with the Germans in WWI and then three removals and five resignations in the 21st century. Truly we live in an age of wonders!

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: I find games that do me harm are the ones that turn on moral assumptions that I just don’t want inside my head. I can normally see them coming. And I have managed to overcome my compulsive collectors’ syndrome since the days of **MAGIC: THE GATHERING**.¹³ // **RYCT Roger B. W:** How does an angel end up being a goffer to two gods? // **RYCT me:** I’m not sure how people who are emotionally/sexually/self-identity-wise atypical fare in Aegis. There are mages who can transmogrify people but the law takes extreme measures to control this practice given the risks of the mage remaking people to suit their own desires. The cost of the procedure rises with the number of steps to authorise it. I haven’t decided if the Gods themselves take steps to correct things or just declare people to be appropriate worshippers. Uncle is always there for The People Who Don’t Fit In but I could write the setting to be more generous. Hmm. Possible future stories. // Re Krishnan: As you will see this month, you have anticipated me sir!

JIM VASSILAKOS: Re: Computocracy Character Options: “What sort of character would you choose to play?”

I really don’t know. When creating a character in a point build system I normally look for the defining elements of their character and those elements are usually Disadvantages. They are the ethical limits, physical or psychological limitations that they have to struggle with. In far future settings such as **FURTHEST** or the world you are proposing here, the issues that the

society faces are so remote from ours that I find it difficult to get a foothold. Even a near-future setting like **ECLIPSE PHASE** has difficulties for me, though the thing that puts me off there is more system complexity than anything else. (Small self-promotion: the next recording of **IMPROVISED RADIO THEATRE WITH DICE** is about the barriers that stop us from running certain games.) // **RYCT Erika Frank:** I’m finding that the Gods of Aegis are slightly ambiguous figures. Despite having been consulted by Uncle and have one of their number running errands for him and one of their friends being The Champion Of The Daughter, the Gods, like the Faculty of the Institute are just weird grown-ups who don’t always make the best decisions. There should (I hope) be some way to make the valid arguments some people have against allowing a true theocracy (where the Gods rule and not just priests) re-emerge in the City. **RYCT Timothy Collinson:** I have a TASCAM DR-05X recorder with rechargeable batteries I use for game night recordings and when I forget it, I can use the Voice Messages function on my iPhone. To transcribe I use a webpage called oTranscribe.

MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE: TRANSMOGRIFICATION. Seventeenth century, possibly from ‘transmigration’ (of souls not refugees). I enjoyed reading Pum’s definition (see write-up above) that I put it into the vocabulary of the elder brother in Jenny’s Japanese game as something he likes to use to show off. “Grandfather! Be not afraid! It is I, your grandson Ichiro! I have, like my brothers, been subject to Transmogrification!”

Take good care of you and of yours as you pick your way through the ruins of Warehouse 23, dodging the escaped monsters and the bubbles of alternate reality. Remember not to turn off the bodycams or no-one will believe you!

¹³ THE PPOE&A: (Looks pointedly at the shelf of **ARS MAGICA** material and wanders away whistling.

FURTHER MUSINGS OF ARAGARTH #2

A sporadically published zine by Peter C. Hildreth who can be reached at PHildreth@aol.com or at 133 The Maine, Williamsburg, Virginia 23158. Cell phone: 913-284-2981. All opinions stated here are those of Peter Hildreth and are © Peter C. Hildreth 2026

LIFE GOES ON

Hi all. This will be a short zine. It has been a busy month especially the last couple weeks. One week from today (7/21), I leave for Indianapolis and Gen Con.

While it is always busy before I leave for the con, this year has been even busier. More about that below. But, before that story, I have a few corrections from last month's zine.

As a start, I was typing the zine on deadline day – not unusual for me. I had promised Brian Misiaszek that I would submit a zine for his birthday. Somewhere between 6 p.m. and 6:30 p.m., the zine disappeared from the screen and the computer.

So, I message Brian to apologize and say the zine would have to wait until next month. As proof I tried to submit, I sent a picture of the printed first draft to Brian, saying I was just too tired to retype everything. Fortunately, he was able to use OCR to send me text. I then corrected the text from my notes to the first draft. By midnight, it was ready to go.

Thus, the title wasn't updated from my A&E zine title.

And, I was in error when I said that "next month" (this issue) would include a Gen Con report.

But my time machine was on the fritz. So, I couldn't jump ahead to Gen

Con 2026 and zip back. Thus, the zine will be in next month's zine.

THE GEN CON AUCTION AND CONCIGNMENT STORE

A few years ago, I started to clear out "stuff" I have had for years and years. Like 40 to 50 years ago. When we moved to Virginia, boxes and boxes went into storage.

And, that's when I started placing stuff into the auction and the store. For the auction, it works like a typical auction. For the store, you set a price. In either case, you enter title, description, condition, etc. and SET A RESERVE – more about that later. For the store, you set a price which can vary over the three days it is open. Only items \$100 or less can go into the store.

Now, the auction can make you more money than the store. A module with a reserve of \$40 last year sold for \$600. But, if the reserve is too high, and no one bids the reserve, it can either go back to you or you can send it to store at the reserve price. Now, auctions are interesting. One year, I entered two "monster" games of D-Day. One was "Atlantic Wall" by SPI and the other was "The Longest Day" by Avalon Hill.

“Atlantic Wall” sold over the reserve but “The Longest Day” didn’t sell.

When I collected the unsold games, one of the staff told me he was the actual auctioneer when the game came up. He knew it wouldn’t sell because the audience wanted SPI games and not Avalon Hill. The next year, I dropped the reserve and it sold for more than the previous year’s reserve. It all depends on who is there for the actual auction.

In the past, I was able to get help with setting reserves from past Gen Con auctions and/or Ebay. However, this year was a bit different. I found some rare and/or unique items. I have all the auction items “entered.” I have until Sunday, July 26th for store items.

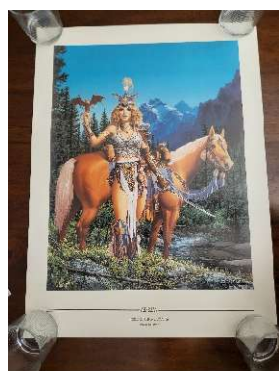
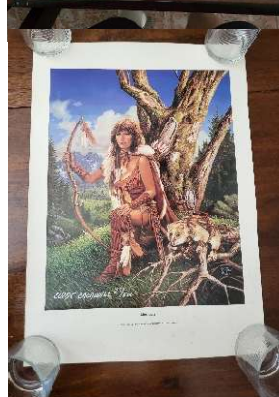
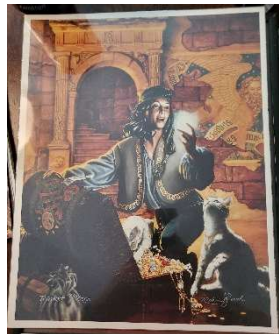
But I may decide not to actually enter some items into auction.

The actual entering takes place at Gen Con. After entering the data into the system, you print out “tags” and attach them to the items. At the con, the staff scans the “tags” and off you go.

In the next column, you can see three of the signed and numbered, limited edition prints. The bottom two were found in mailing tubes from “Shadow Graphics,” the company TSR artists used to sell prints. They were addressed to me at the law office where I worked in 1985 and 1986, before the office moved.

Since there have not been many sales, it is hard to value them. So, I may opt out of the auction and do more research.

The real conundrum is “Tika Takes A Bath” and how to set the reserve. I bought a copy from Larry Elmore in the early 1990s. It is a drawing of Tika in a



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM – all covers of Dragon Magazine:

“Trinkets” by Robin Wood (Dragon #149)
Alereiean” by Clyde Caldwell (Dragon # 94) and Valshea by Keith Parkinson (Dragon # 106).

stream, naked, with the male Heroes of Th Lance being peeping toms. That is what evidently was sent to TSR staffers as a joke.

My copy has a notation by Larry Elmore that it was done as a joke for Tracy H. in 1987. It also says “rare” and “z-rox, only copy.”¹

I sent Tracy Hickman a photo of what I have, he confirmed it was a joke. Some former TSR staff may have a copy. But this copy has a notation and signature from Larry Elmore.

Part of me thinks, “This belongs in a museum.” We will see if I actually put it in the auction or keep it for more research.

GEN CON INFO

If any of you will be at Gen Con, we will be at the JW Marriott. Give me a call there or on my

cellphone (913-284-2981.

¹ I haven’t printed a copy here as I don’t believe it is anywhere online at the moment.

Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #14

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
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IRL

Working on Wanderer. Started watching *Suikoden* along with *Zhan Zhao Adventures* – Soong dynasty martial arts detective series. Reading Carl #3, my book clubs and some other friends are all in on this series! Plumbing issues forced to remove a fair amount of stuff from my storage room, plus my HOA board has too many Trumpers and their heads are stuffed into the sand and about to get woke.

Notes

Those interested in a copy of Wanderer can e-mail me. I'm using Office Libre version 25.8.4.2 and most of the files are lightly modified versions of the 1997 originals to make sure that they can be opened and edited.

I started work on The Player's Guide, breaking it up into smaller chunks, 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.

Worldbuilding

Didn't get much done here.

Reactions to Issue #13

In the Hall of Stone – Patrick Brady – re: The problem, that's a tough one, for a low impact publication with few readers, a best effort is probably OK. Best option would be to pass it by a member of the Lakota Nation. Strauss LOL! Letters, sadly not the best of times.

Cowman Baloney Face #9 – Matt Stevens – This feels historical, there have been many games published over the years that have covered other cultures 'races' (better word for this, intelligent species?) including two on Japan by Lee Gold. TSR's efforts in this area half mostly felt half-assed to me.

Quasipseudoludognostication #13 – Patrick Riley – I will have to look into going to the next Kublacon. Your village reminds me of Carmel, CA. Nice setting.

Denizens of the Library #12 – Brian Rogers – A&E readers were a bit special, I've met many people who look to TSR as the only source of rules. Spider Queen pulp fiction interesting. Re: *playing a SecUnit or Starship*: In my past SF games I did run (or allowed players to) use their SmartShip as a field support unit and the rules used allowed for augmented humans. The ultra high stat human approach might work in Traveller. Now if they have better computer security, drones, hacking rules is a matter for investigation. James L Cambias does write decent old school SF.

Reddened Stars #12 – John Redden - *I'm used to Traveller in a GURPS format game mastered by my friend Joshua.* So Traveller as the background and GURPS as the rules set? Sounds good to me.

Firedrake's Hoard #11 – Roger Bell West *Re: Sarah Newton's Mindjammer* I'm not that interested in game balance either, if I allow a PC murderbot, it will be pretty powerful in many situations. I've played Fate once, it was an interesting experience. *A GURPS Template Expander* – While not as bad as GURPs, Wanderer has a flexible but complex character generation system, so it will need something like this. While it fits on one sheet, there's a fair amount of math involved. Not to mention the need for pre-generated characters in a system with 0 current modules. *Read GURPS Mysteries*; Will look for a copy.

Scribbles and Horrors #2 – Scribble M. Horror (Pseud.) Nomic sounds very odd, I will poke around.

An Unlooked For Zine #12 – Lisa Padol *re Murderbot: I wonder if one could play one of the ships from Iain M. Banks's Culture novels.* I don't see why not if its campaign appropriate, a Culture campaign could be interesting. I've only read 3 or 4 of the books though, so I might not be the best GM in this case.

Age of Menace #250 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek The details in your adventure boggle my mind, great stuff.

Accidental Recall #12 – Joshua Kronengold *Re: a game where the backstory is that the main character conquered a fantasy game world...* I will check out *A Wild Last Boss Appeared!*. On games and design, an excellent essay, sadly our culture seems to love parasites and rewards them richly.

Computocracy: Character Options, Pt 1 – Jim Vassilakos Game and game suggestions, some useful materials here.

Travelling Light #1 – Timothy Collinson Spindrift sounds interesting.

Everyone else – RAEBNC

Next issue

Hopefully

Accidental Recall #13

For Ever & Anon 14 © 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

So, the big good news, which people on Discord will have gotten in advance: I've started a new job! (at Bloomberg, at that). I've had a good first two days, and while I'm sure there are many days to come, I'm mostly just glad to have new people to meet, things to learn, NOT have to continue hunting for a job, and, of course, income is lovely.

What's interesting to me (having succeeded on what turned out to be a 7 month job search) was what worked for me and what didn't. Obviously, having a long career (and one that until recently, terminated in 23-24 straight years of employment) was quite helpful; the biggest thing employers tend to look for in general is whether you're likely to stick around and whether you're likely to work out, and having kept a job for a long time bodes well for both. But having out of date skills was a big issue; most employers are looking for coding skills that I've touched on cursorily if at all, not looking for my until-now core languages, and that's without mentioning AI. So in the end, what worked for me was not just sending out lots of resumes to likely possibilities, but also balancing that important step (don't send out enough resumes: don't get interviews) with taking online courses and updating my skills—and adjusting my preparation as I got feedback from interviews I didn't get a job at! After all, if you're getting an interview a week, more isn't going to help you if they're all rejecting you; at that point the key element is being able to present yourself well.

Between accepting an offer and starting my new job, we went to Summer Larpin'. Summer Larpin' is a two day convention that started out as a private larp party with pretensions (actually and arguably, it started out as a one day larp event that got expanded out into a mini convention), but has grown to a 400 person extravaganza and even just got granted 401c3 status!

In any case, I played in some games (at this con, I did not run any):

Orgia Domi Lomaximus: A game approximating a roman orgy. The game was played with respect but also quite a lot of humor, and I got to play both a horny (and sadly less effective than he hoped) old guy who was also very worried about his children (who were all there as PCs) and his wife (who he believed to be with her parents for the weekend).

Pondflower Inn: This is a lovely pastoral about two adventuring parties who have paused at the beginning or end of their adventures to enter and spend some time in a lovely inn. *OR IS IT?* A rather delightful mindfuck, really.

10 Bad Larps: 20th Anniversary Edition: An updated version of a now-classic structure, this is more like 19 tiny games, many of them parodies of other games or deliberately implemeneted terrible concepts. As expected, this was a hoot.

Arabian Nights: I filled this game last minute after playing it a year or two ago; it was quite fun and I got to play with very lovely people many of whom I already know and like! The previous time, I played Aladdin's Djinn; this time I played one of two princes vying for the throne.

Binding of the Eidolons: This was interesting; a big scene based game where the human character vie to attract the attention of Eidolongs

[also PCs], powerful ancient beings who cannot act on their own but can give the humans they bond to incredible powers—at the cost of half their hosts' lifespans. It was really very important that we bind to Eidolons successfully, because something mysterious was in the process of destroying the world. The not very secret secret of this game was that in addition to being a less formal dating game with a scene based game structure, it was also very much Final Fantasy pastiche, so that whole thing about the world being destroyed became a much bigger part of the game's structure towards the end of things (although it was always something of a concern).

I've also been doing some reading! I read *The Everlasting* and quite liked it, the Incandescent and *The Raven Scholar* and had mixed feelings about them, *A Drop of Corruption* and thought it was the bees knees, and am currently reading *Death of the Author* and enjoying it. If I afterwards read *Shroud* I'll have read all the novels nominated for the Hugo this year. I've also read *What Stalks the Deep* by T Kingfisher, which was also quite nice.

And now, well, while my writing is done well before the usual time, it was NOT done days ahead of time as I hoped, so it's time to put it to bed. I hope everyone else is having a lovely month!

Comments on E&E #13 A viable Ghost Dog RPG (Matt Stephens, Brian Rogers): I appreciate that people understood my vision! If it were easy to do, anyone could do it! But I do think that a GD RPG along those lines would be interesting to play and design; maybe it wouldn't entirely succeed at its goals as a tabletop game (or a larp), but even so the results would probably be worthwhile.

Patrick Brady: Re cultural borrowing and spiders people: Obviously, there are nearly more opinions on this than people. So mine, like any, should be taken with a grain of salt.

But in my mind, there's nothing wrong with cultural borrowing, per se. It's done more or less constantly, and it's a basic fact about how cultures evolve and change. So, why are so many people upset about "cultural appropriation?"

Well, I'm sure there are many answers (and often the answer is "racism" but the explanation is considerably longer), but a lot of them come down to one or both of two things:

First, there is the issue of parody vs homage. Badly done borrowing can look like unkind parody of someone's culture, and, of course, people have different levels of knowledge and may see unkind parody where only respectful borrowing is meant.

Second, there's taking advantage of existing oppression. This is where a lot of people objecting to *anyone* outside their culture presenting a version of it, even if it's well done, comes from—particularly since that can be seen as acting along existing structural oppressive lines—if you do a book/game on a culture, and someone from that culture does one, then you're in competition with the people from the culture and might even have an advantage in that competition.

And, of course, there are mystery aspects to existing religions.

All of this and more is why commercial (particularly; who cares if it's happening in your home game?) use of native American and African traditions can be quite fraught when done by people not from those cultures.

Using Japanese culture is trickier. Japanese people, living in Japan, aren't particular oppressed. In fact, they're extremely happy to engage in their own cultural borrowing—including inaccurate, parodic depictions of aspects of their own mythological culture, as well as European cultures and more. That said, Japanese people in the US are something of an oppressed minority, and I can see why some of them find Western use of their culture (even if Japanese people don't, as a rule, have issues) objectionable.

All that said, do enough of this and publicly enough, someone will get upset. Even if you haven't done anything wrong, you certainly risk being impolite. So, here are my three cents:

At your table? Almost anything goes. Don't skeeve the people at your table out, and try to avoid explicit (ooc) racism, but beyond that, it's your table, not a commercial project, so very few of these concerns apply. Maybe take a bit more care if you write some stuff up, but even that, a bit of discretion goes a long way.

I think that's about as far as it goes for your question. That said, for public consumption (if, say, you're writing stuff up, even if you're not selling it), there are a few thoughts:

1. You don't have to go into too much detail. Sure, Whoopsie the Sun God won't offend anyone, but neither will "my totally made up religion which is only 90% inspired by what I know about existing Lakota traditions, but unlike them, is entirely fictional and also is "magic" rather than being part of someone's real-life practices (this is one attitude thing we ran into for some Native fiction—it was published as fiction, not fantasy, and the author was (on the advice of his tribal elders), entirely unwilling to accept nomination for a "fantasy" award, because it's very important to them that a story of spirits and magic rooted in their culture, while fiction, is not fantasy but general fiction because the myths and ideas around it are very real. Not how we see it, with early fantasy traditions also been very rooted in real world religion that the writers believed in, but as you said, it's important to be polite. Give credit, but putting a bit of distance (and maybe not making things utterly identical to real world practices) can show respect and avoid ruffling feathers. Of course, depending on the project this might be impossible.
2. Run stuff past someone from the culture. As said, many people, many opinions, but if you have someone from the culture you're borrowing from look it over, it can avoid a lot of problems, shield you a bit from knee jerk responses, and might even make the result better.
3. Goes without saying, but do your research.

Of course, you're also in England, not America so the rules are a bit different, but maybe not that different.

Here's to many more letters from Vinlandola!

Matt Stevens: Re fumble chance in OWoD (old world of darkness) increasing with the size of the pool: I'm not seeing the 11% unless you ignore successes (fumble requires more 1s than successes). So with an 8 difficulty, the fumble odds on one die was 10% (no change of a success if you roll a 1). The odds on two dice were $(1/100 \text{ (chance of getting two 1s)} + 2 \cdot \frac{1}{10} \cdot \frac{6}{10} \text{ (on either die, get a 1, the other die has to not roll a 1 [already covered], 8, 9, 0r 10)})$. So $12/100 + 1/100 = 13/100$? Oh, right, if instead you're looking at difficulty 7 it's 11/100. Still, this depends highly with difficulty; as difficulty rises the range

in which the fumble chance continues to go up with every die goes up, I'd guess without looking things up or calculating more.

Re why give you (say) advantage on Strength checks and the ability to do Strength feats with a Pulp Cthulhu Strength-focused pulp feat rather than just bump up your strength: Because, Call of Cthulhu, even 7e, being a rather classic 2nd generation game, bumping up a stat does far more complicated things than just increasing how strong you are. It bumps your HP up, your hand to hand damage, and depending on which profession you take (this factor is new to 7e) it might even increase how many skill points you have to spend!

Pulp characters do, in fact, have higher stats than regular CoC characters—they get to use a much nicer formula to roll one of their stats (and depending on whether you let the players pick their pulp archetype [which you should] after rolling their stats rather than before, this might even grant a reroll!). But the pulp feats are balanced (ish) against other feats, so that balance is better maintained by having the ones that boost a facility give advantage, not a stat boost. Otherwise, Strong Will might go from "really strong for possible sorcerers" (it grants advantage on POW checks which are used in a number of spells or defending against spells) to "a strong choice almost everyone" if it granted extra POW and thus magic points, sanity, etc.

Re Monster Hearts: It's not just "hit chance only depends on attacker's stats", though—that's just a system without a dodge roll or defense score—but "only players roll. It's not even "only attackers roll" for all central PbtA games [the outliers get very weird but we're really talking about the center here]; Masks: A New Generation has a Defense move which can be used to defend yourself or others, plus a Take a Powerful Blow move for when things get really bad.

If anything, I think the closest classic equivalent is Tunnels and Trolls. Which didn't, of course, do this, but "just figure out whet everyone's doing on a side and add them together to determine whether your side won" is a similar level of abstraction. Honestly there are some classic games that might play better with this approach, though (Toon springs to mind)—like "only attackers roll", the key insight here is to reduce any given action to the players' rolls rather than generating a veritable pinball arcade of random rolls, only the final one of which is definitive. So since in a Toon game, the key element from the GM is "what would be good for the NPCs to do at this point, it's probably better for the GM to set up the next situation and let the players roll for their action, rather than slowing things down (and adding a lot of randomness that probably doesn't make the game more strategic, funnier, or better) by having the NPCs *also* have to roll for every action as well. Of course, "only GM rolls" would do the same kinds of thing; the idea is more to cut down on a lot of redundancy and encourage the GM to act definitively as a stage-manager/director, but players derive more enjoyment from rolling a lot of the time.

Re Over the Edge and innovative systems: I mean, obviously few games move the field quite as much as Over the Edge did! But this is why we have both hacks and entirely new games; the "heartbreaker" term was coined by the Forge crowd for games that try to be new and interesting but are basically just D&D without a marketing budget, but the term is a good repurpose for any game that isn't nearly as original as it wants to be to the point where it's not commercially viable.

That said, in a world where electronic publishing can be surprisingly cheap and many popular games have open licenses, incremental improvement games can be highly worthwhile, whether presented as a new game or a hack.

And, game design being what it is, for some games it's easier to come up with a new game for a purpose than it is to invent an impactful house rule or hack. For instance, Gumshoe has no generic version—every Gumshoe game uses a similar core, but has a different skill list,

different refresh mechanics, and often significant changes in the core rules to support the different genre. As such, in places where D&D would favor releasing a new game world, a Gumshoe designer will release an entirely new game (along with an accompanying background, usually), because the game never made a claim to being universal in the first place, even as much as D&D (which is hardly universal).

Of course, you could treat every central PbtA game, or every Gumshoe game, as different hacks of the same core system. But life's too short for such arguments to be productive; some new games are very original; some others reuse existing cores their target audience know and already like.

Patrick Riley: Sorry you had a mediocre time with Swords of the Serpentine! Base damage is usually just d6+1-armor; if you have a particularly great damage it could go as high as d6+3 or so. But the base damage die can't roll lower than the number of points you spent on the to-hit roll, and on a hit, you can spend points from a single investigative ability and describe how they boost your damage—which adds an extra no minimum d6 for each point spent. Damn that sounds like a boring fight, though.

Re Coursera: The worst courses I've come across were a text to speech generator narrating a "lesson" that was clearly just going through the examples (more or less) in the manual for a language, without any nuance to how you actually teach someone. In the inverse; I suppose a human could have written it, but given that level of effort and that it's 2026, I'm gonna bet on an AI writing the script followed by transforming the script into text to speech dialogue and accompanying images.

Re "you should run at least some of the con you expect to attend." I mean, you do; I do (sometimes). It's not that everyone need to run stuff, but a theory of change. If a con doesn't suit my fancy, I could stay home and hope a better con will show up (maybe it will!). But given that a con is built out of the efforts of volunteers, both those running the con itself and those running events, the best and most surest way to make sure a con has *some* events I want to see is to run them. Not only does this mean that I can go to some events I know are going to match my desires (assuming anyone signs up, anyway); this also means that, presuming they go on the schedule, people who like this kind of game are more likely to show up which might mean that *other* people also run more games I enjoy. Of course, if a con is perfect for you, there's no reason to run for this reason [but it can be good to run some stuff at least occasionally anyway].

ryct me re (I think) Interrogation: Hot reads and many cold read techniques are surprisingly mundane much of the time! But yeah, having at least a sense of how hot and cold reads work is a good start to getting NPCs to think the PCs know more than they really do. (or for the GM to fake it).

Re UA3 madness meters: In fairness, UA ha always struck me as having that kind of cleverness for the sake of cleverness (our old line was "it took a lot from over the Edge! But...not really enough from Over the Edge"). Still, it can work surprisingly well despite this, though I haven't tried UA3.

Re the Djinn/Efreet (ah, that makes sense) having offered a Wish before you rolled for whether she had one to offer: Ah, that makes sense!

Ryct Lisa on Turning Someone On in Monster Hearts: someone rolling to Turn another PC On in Monster Hearts (if the player is unwilling). There are a few possibilities. It's entirely reasonable to say that the described action doesn't seem plausible as something that would turn you on—like most moves in Monster Hearts, Turn Someone On is a triggered move "when you turn someone on", not a move you can

invoke literally whenever you want regardless of the fiction. So with a cooperative GM, it's entirely reasonable for the player to go "nah, that doesn't do it for my PC;" this is the inverse of my assertion (adjusted) that Turn Someone On can be run as always working [even if the roll fails and the targeted PC isn't in any way forced to react].

Monster Hearts 2 even explicitly lets you state that your PC is partially or totally asexual and can't be turned on by most things if that's how you want to play it.

And, of course, the game is often played in settings that use safety/communication tools. If you need to reach for that X card, do it.

Beyond that, even on success, the move grants the choices to the target, not the person using the move. Or to quote from the book, "you aren't in control of what turns your character on, but you are in control of what they do with that information." So even if there's a situation where you agree that your character being turned on is a plausible outcome, and even if they ace the roll, you decide whether you want to "give yourself to them", "promise something you think they want", or "get embarrassed and act awkward."

Having your characters find other characters hot unexpectedly is a core part of Monster Hearts (unless you explicitly play an Ace character and opt-out of this), but anything beyond that is entirely up to the player.

The Picrew-style art you used for Aurora Cove looked great—like classic Lucarts characters or NPCs in an early Final Fantasy or similar game! What tool did you use to make it? (Did you use the same tool to make the map? It's watermarked, so I'm guessing that's "Icograms", But that seems focused on making maps and similar isometric designs.)

Brian Rogers: Re Spider Queen: Huh. I'd use Animal/Plant Powers to do spider powers like web-slinging and entangle. Sure, yeah, it's a cop-out because Animal/Plant powers can do nearly anything, but it's also literally what the power set is for; replicating the animal-unique powers associated with someone whose powers are "like" a specific animal or plant! Of course, Animal/plant powers is more specific than that in V&V, but it's V&V, so it's customizable, plus Animal/Plant powers (Arachnid/Special) seems reasonable appropriate to having web shooters [link it to a device of course in this case]. Of course, unlike relying on Body Power (which is, like Willpower, a "make it up!" type power), looking into the future and pulling Grapnel means you don't have to make the entire power up (nor figure out where it goes on the power vs defense table, I hope, so that's a win.

Sadly, your links weren't clickable (a common issue with PDF creation; Lisa often has the same problem making them from Word), but I did some searching, and yeah, romcom and Marvel did her dirty!

Re Magic Spells B and Magic Spells A: Ah! Makes sense; and also using training to widen it since honestly getting Magic Spells A *and* Magic Spells B feels like a bit of a waste.

Re coffee: Pah! Coffee is delicious (when well-made) and I can have your share.

Re Wizards making the mechanics for (D&D) Wizards: I suppose I could just say Hasbro! But WotC is still separate enough by culture to deserve its own name, at least for now.

Re your work having an AI instance that duplicates a hyperlink TOC: On the one hand, the Eliza effect (I think you mean Eliza, not Erica) is real and people will often prefer to talk to something that can understand language (also it makes it a better search—if it in fact never makes a mistake). On the other hand, either it's externally hosted (with accompanying costs) or it's locally hosted (much more controllable costs, but still very much heavier than a static web page by orders of magnitude!).

Re players who will go "And we ambush them as soon as they move to tie us up!" yeah, this is very much anti-genre. On the other hand, I think this is also why Matt Stephens' *Two-Fisted Tales* included punishing advantage rules for when enemies (or the PCs) have "the drop" on one another, making it clear that situations like these are NOT the right time to try to turn the tables.

Re "ship names": I get it, and sadly so likely will the ships—at least if they have [Banks-style] Minds.

Pedro Panhoca: Re game books vs interactive narratives: As said, the line is very fine—and once one pulls in computer games (where the variety tends to be much higher, probably because on the low end, they are cheaper to distribute than physical books) you get, in addition to Interactive Fiction (which usually has inventory and sometimes stats, and also rarely randomness), Visual Novels that might have stats [perhaps pulling from dating/school sym games where part of gameplay is deciding which stats to work on] and even in some examples [I think *Magical Diary: Horse Hall* was the one that most stuck in my mind] full-on dungeon sequences, even if one excludes (as I do) more simulationist and complex games as being out of bounds for this kind of comparison.

Apropos of physical books, do you know about *Parselies*? Invented by Jared Sorenson [of the Forge] in 2009, it takes the script for an Interactive Fiction game and turns it into a party game, by having the entire group choose branches while the game-runner keeps track of the game state and if needed, might even handle interpretations of player requests that the script doesn't support (something a text adventure parser generally can't do but a human can). Of course, only fairly short scripts work well in this format, but it's still a really interesting way to play a game in this style!

John Redden: Re Pig at a Wedding: It didn't even occur to me at first, but I assume the pig in the adventure is alive.

Congrats on being a (living) cyborg now! Hopefully your abilities have scaled upwards with time.

IIRC, a big part of the Nesu's deal in Lee's Space game was that they were composite beings. So take three Nesu and they'd have a specific personality, but if one left the meld and another joined it, their personality could change significantly. Or was that another alien species? David Brin has a species like that in the Uplift series (mostly but not entirely as a villain) and we stole the idea for one of our larps.

Zork is an example of the Interactive Fiction branch of the game type—parser-based games where you move around, put things into your inventory, and try to solve puzzles. Of course, commercial parser-based Interactive Fiction is all but dead, but it is still in active development as a hobby game format with enthusiasts. And Adventure Gaming, which is a super-category of Interactive Fiction (but also including games that include graphics and often a somewhat greater variety of gameplay, albeit still focused on puzzle solving and probably inventory) is still very much alive albeit not as AAA high value games, with remakes of classic examples coming out regularly and the occasional new game like *Broken Age* or, according the <http://adventuregamehospot.com>, upcoming games like *Ghost Haunting* or *The Incident at Galley House*.

Re programs and scripts: Modern languages often blur the distinction between programs and scripts. Go compiles to byte code, but requires a hefty runtime library that can give it weight similar to a virtual machine. Quite a lot of compiled languages people wouldn't mistake for scripting languages (Java, anything that compiles to JVM like Scala) compile not to native code, but to byte code which runs in a virtual environment—rather like a script getting run inside a scripting language. And "true" scripting languages like Emacs Lisp and Perl

are often compiled (by default or otherwise) to an intermediate form designed to run more efficiently and have compile-time checks pre-made before being run—so basically the same kind of thing as things compiling to a bytecode [except, of course, that people then go the extra mile and build Just In Time compilers to turn a subset of stuff designed to run inside a compiler into native code, but then, they could do the same thing with scripting language bytecode, at least in concept!].

Ultimately, it's a script if you "run" the source directly inside an interpretive language, and it's a non-script "program" if you have to do a separate compile step first.

Ryct Lisa: Night's Black Agents is a game system, built under the Gumshoe game framework. Dracula Dossier is a campaign framework (which is to say, a very large module).

Re unemployment: This is actually the second time I've collected unemployment; I had a stint between jobs in 2001-2002 and was able to collect then as well; it serves as a useful stop-gap. Lisa was actually able to collect for two years at one point, as her last full-time position ended right before the Great Recession of 2008-2013, so she was able to take full advantage of the extended benefits (the usual 26 weeks extended to 99 weeks, plus suspension of the usual need to report job search efforts for a large period of this).

re terms used without explanation: Usually, when someone mentions a term like this (including me) it's because they're replying to someone who used the term and the overall result is contextual; to find out what they're talking about thread back to the previous issue.

re Reversed mystery in the context of Brindlewood Bay (and similar games), this is where there's a "mystery" plot as part of a TTRPG, but there is no defined answer to the mystery. Instead, players engage in the kinds of activities you might expect in a mystery plot (gather clues, analyze evidence, talk to suspects, and the like) and at some point, a combination of play and mechanics make it clear who the culprit is, and hopefully one can bridge the evidential gap to figure out how all the clues fit into this. Different games can take different approaches to this; Lisa mentions *A Taste for Murder* where the mechanics will eventually anoint a victim (who dies) and a murderer, largely based on how people play. But in the game we're talking about, Brindlewood Bay and other games inspired by it, the mystery is "reversed" in that, while the answer to the mystery is unknown, clues are introduced through the game, and players are expected to come up with theories of how they go together to form an answer for the mystery. When a player things they have a good idea and enough clues to (possibly) succeed at a roll, they can attempt to solve the mystery; on a full success their answer is right and the mystery happened the way they say it did; on a partial success there are complications which might include having gotten one or more detail wrong, or some other complication like the perp having taken a hostage or something.

Myles Corcoran: Anthony Head was (by all reports) a Mensch and had so many memorable and entertaining roles.

Mice and Beetles; Herbivores (mostly) unite! I don't always get the logic of who is allied with who is Mouseritter, but it seems clear enough here.

Re Keys and Advantages; I think *The Shadows of Yesterday* (TSoY) pioneered the idea of "disadvantages" that triggered when they came up in 2004; of course the system was kept alive with *Lady Blackbird* popularizing it with a few changes, but also it was after that that I saw games like *7th Sea* (and much later, *Chronicles of Darkness*) also using the concept as well. Having a "turn-in" value is something that was also in the original TSoY but hasn't been copied nearly as often; it's really need to not simply have a way to "buy off" a disadvantage,

but actually let you make a profit on the deal as long as it's part of character growth.

Re your rant on superheroes (in response to Elf): Hear hear! An excellent point that a key element to making a superhero RPG work *as* a comics hero simulation is that the players have to be on board with the idea and actively trying to make things feel like a comic book story. Without that, almost no rules will work; with it (and with them abandoning contrary concepts from D&D and the like as out of genre) even an imperfect rules system can still work quite well!

Re Erick Wujick, Wallis, and a diceless Bugtown: I haven't heard this story! Tea, please.

Re Greg Stoltze and condescension: I admit that I know Greg personally, but yeah, I've read his games and never felt an ounce of condescension from them. If I really want that kind of kink I'll read an early White Wolf game and get more than my fill.

Re reading dice: Mostly I was in the habit of making calculating shortcuts as a grade schooler and that habit's not ever gone away, so I sum large numbers of dice (or points, or whatever) by forming groups of ten if it's too many dice to just "read" straight. That said, while it can be built up over time, not all players have the habit.

I've always read the flip-flop and cherries as Greg getting Very Cute With Dice, but I admit I'd ignored the way it acts as a cheap "advantage" mechanic that doesn't require extra die rolls, and the way a "cherry" lets you tie a critical mechanic to almost exactly 10% of successes.

Attronarch: Oh, I like the intelligent sword (a two-handed sword, not a longsword? Intriguing!) bonding! Very curious as to what powers the sword has!

Only one day worth of rations? I guess they might learn to pack enough iron rations...eventually!

re Gomm & Ah'sas: Psionics! But only from NPCs, so far, anyway. Or was he just fooling her? It's hard to say, at least until you get to the last part where he's explicitly pretending. If it's all a front, it's very clever, but it did seem like Beklomda Mor had put the whammy on him early on! Also, Cronk and Gronk? I guess ogre names aren't very imaginative. The whole setup with Ah'sas is interesting—it feels very powerful "witch" (hag? magic user? Witch as a species because B/X? Hard to say, though she consorts with monstrous types) that the PCs might end up treating as a patron type but first encounter when they're commissioned to steal from her by a rival.

I'm a little confused about the transition between session 114 and 115. At the end, it's "will they be willing to pay the price of knowledge?" And then the next session begins with them planning—I guess they've spent a week in her hut (with some romantic interludes heavily implied), and now they're planning a new heist to give them an excuse to leave?

Re Zohron, the intelligent two-handed sword wielder: Well, that didn't last long! I guess the next wielder might be luckier? At least, lucky enough to find out more abilities from the sword other than being a really good weapon.

Oh, no, the horde of a blue dragon! And at (max) 5th level, the party is not really in a position to challenge her! Well, at least she's friendly? Or at least reasonable! Well, she let them live, at least (at the cost of, well, all the ir magic items, which makes her markedly *less* reasonable than Ah'sas for wandering adventures who need those items). Still, caught between her and Ah'sas, I can't say I think much of the party's ability to survive unscathed, but I can't say they don't have good reason (as adventurers of this ilk have, at least) to try for Blue Dragon

murder, given means (but wow, is she hard to sneak up on. Well, it's possible that Gomm didn't roll well)

Michael Cule: Ooh, I like the idea that being illuinated breaks the normal "opposite runic alignments" rule! Not that I know the system you're using per se (or are you using GURPS?), but it's neat.

re How many possible paths are in the seven-fold book: Seven? Although if each path had branches, possibly 7! (that is, 5040, which seems a bit much).

Were the Lunar Coders a previous PC group?

Wow, that whole Jotoran is indeed a massive flag. You even brought him up twice in succession! I would guess he showed up later?

LOL on ROUS jokes (rodents of unusual size). Should have seen your players making that joke coming, but I didn't. The elephant jokes were anticipated but were still amusing.

re "puppet" NPC: I can see how being Illuminated can be a touch awkward. I guess it's not full-on Meta since the PC knows his world isn't real but can see the manipulation from other planes, not that they're all RPG characters.

Re "body part of the empire": What you really don't want to be is the kneecap of the empire. Too much work and still nigh-irreplaceable, so you can't get a break.

Those upstairs neighbors: "sorcery parties"? Yeah, maybe it's all your notes on the players missing clues, but the upstairs students are hellasus. They're not on the same floor as the Illuminated neighbor upstairs, right?

The tax inspector idea for dealing with the bribery/obstruction-minded official was inspired. After all, if he's that deep into corruption, he *really* can't afford to open his books.

I don't think I've ever remarked before on how often you tend to run games where the PCs are (slightly unorthodox) government officials (basically, procedurals) and one or two steps away from cops; it's a pattern that calls to you, isn't it?

"Your diety is a different name for my diety" can be a power play by a conquering empire, but it can also just be a way of the world, if the game is designed with a specific pantheon, which is worshipped, in whole or in part, all over the world under different names. Of course, in that kind of pattern there can also be extra gods, deified humans, and even gods that change personality depending on what name they're invoked under. I suppose a bit like your Family god set. Stephen and Dan (the two Thursday D&D GMs who have been running since early D&D) both have established "pantheons with exceptions" in their long-running games; Neitherworld (Dan's game) has 5 antideluvian gods who are at the core of the costmology, but also a busload of other gods that were established by PCs in earlier games or elsewhere in the narrative. Stephen's game has ten to twelve gods, I think, but also a very complicated divine history with an older set of gods that were mostly displaced by their kids; and we established that the southern continent had a much more pluralistic religion set, which was interesting when my character found out how much of the northern ideas on religion were literally true (or at least true but papered over the mostly misunderstood god war), with artifacts of the god war kinda all over the place if you knew where to look (I mean, by the end of the Twelve Kingdoms game, Dan's paladin PC was walking around in crystal armor from the god war and wielding two swords, one of which was also from that event...oh, and my character had the exiled trickster "god of humanity" in her head for much of the later campaign and also an ancient key that could literally unlock anything including the source code to the universe until that got replaced with a toned

down version by another PC who rightly was worried that she was over-using it and being corrupted by the temptation).

Re comic book characters' "immortality": There's something of a middle road here that's ideal for TTRPGs. As I mentioned in my reply to Elf, comics-book character immortality is a flaw, not something worthy of emulation; the economics of comic books don't encourage permanently killing of their cash cows, so they mostly don't and never do so permanently unless the character just isn't that popular; sometimes the result produces good story which we can steal, but we aren't a comics book company and don't need to copy their flaws. But also, it's well taken that in many RPGs, life is cheap, while comics book heroes' lives are NOT cheap; even though they occasionally die, they usually survive even the fights they lose, while a game that cleaves too close to D&D has a lot of ways the characters can just randomly die, whether it's Champions Killing Attacks, running out of HP, or the like. That said, this is often a thing very much taken into account in superhero RPG designs, either by not having a mechanical way for characters to die at all unless a player is pushing it hard (Smallville, Masks unless you're playing the Doomed), or by making it far easier to knock someone out (and maybe put them in a death trap) or scare them enough that they withdraw than to actually kill them (Champions, FASERIP Marvel, V&V). Champions can do it if people lean too far into Killing Attacks (KA—which are IMO just a bad idea; just have some mechanics that can work against NPCs doomed to die but don't let PCs or NPCs take KA unless you want a game to feel like Punisher rather than a normal powered comic book), but you have to reach to find games that even have these problems (or maybe players who aren't trying to make their comic-book game feel like a comic book).

ryct me on Illumination: Oh, neat. But how did you manage to get more "years" out of the game so Drak could roll more often?

Roger BW: Interesting ideas for a GURPS random character generator! You could also build one that has less variety but more sense based on REIGN's random generator—chunk out a convenient number of points and create a number of archetype buckets; the RNG can determine how much of a character's juice goes into each bucket. It's complicated by GURPS having increasing skill and stat costs, but if you just have the buckets put points into those stats and the round down becomes free points it would still work, just not as well as it does in REIGN and would still build pretty sensible characters. (REIGN also has waste dice of course that buy single events that are worth a single "chunk" of character points for a change to a character that adds a chunk worth of points to reflect the event, but might also move other points or get some new points by applying a disadvantage; applying that to GURPS is a convenient exercise). And like REIGN, the player could roll and then drop anything they didn't like, freeing the points to spend as they liked. I suppose your program, since it's based on templating, applies similar techniques but at a higher grain size? That said, the two methods seem interestingly really different—your method is to take the existing GURPS templates and randomize the picks there, which means you're limited to what templates exist but by the same token the result will always be something that fits within the limit of a template and therefore "works" with an existing concept, and you can run any template as long as you are willing to adapt it to your format.

Adapting a REIGN-like method means you basically have to start from scratch—define however many tracks and a fixed progression within each track, plus some "waste" tables for spending out extra points, but while the builds might make *somewhat* less sense, they'll be much more variable than almost any set of templates, since within the limits of the points you're rolling for you can end up with any combination of different tracks at different levels, and you can reroll until you get

one that sparks creativity. Each track is probably noticeably less work than building a full character template, but see above for how you have to start from scratch for that method.

Looking over your example template, it's interesting; there's a lot of redundancy but I see how doing it that way avoids having too much (almost any) data in the script; with the costs and totals embedded in each layer, the script can just walk through and pick stuff without having to know the rules beyond what's embedded in each template, except *maybe* what different skill difficulty classes mean, and probably not even then.

I feel like you have to be awfully specific to say that dragons are creature of raw magic *and* atomic fusion. A science fiction Dragon could work with fusion; a magical Dragon might be flesh wrapped around an elemental being (and not a Uranium elemental), but of course if you want to stand on that razor's edge for your games, the more power be you.

Re the Japanese court system having a 98.8 conviction rate. I see what you're saying wrt mitigation, but I also see how this could inspire the Ace Attorney games' way it not only almost always puts the defense on the back foot (a player usually plays the defense, after all), but also includes multiple plotlines including people being prejudiced against defense lawyers because they usually (ish) defend guilty people. We didn't really good persuasive argument in practice that this was just leaving money on the table until the New World of Darkness, where initially they were trying to avoid fragmenting their player base and instead they shattered it. Since then, I think we've seen more acknowledgment from more game companies that you can make new games for new players and players dissatisfied with your last game, but that if you want to keep your players buying from you rather than just homebrewing or buying from one another, you need to make at least a token effort to support all your major player bases, because the moment you shift things around, you're fragmenting your player base even if you try to take all of them with you (because you won't). Thus White Wolf (and heirs) supporting multiple versions of the WoD, Hasbro coming out with collector's re-issues of their old books, and more companies supporting games with different eras rather than trying to bind all to their metadata.

5e Magic Mouth can be triggered multiple times in all versions of 5e. So yeah, Turing completeness it is, presuming you can justify a wizard inventing computer science.

Re perl vs statically typed languages: Yup! You can do better typing with modern perl (and can even use object frameworks), but for Rust [or even modern C++], it's much easier to get far more safety, at compile time, even. I still like the way you can knock off quick sequences of code in perl to get something done, but while you can write production-quality perl (well, I can, certainly), it takes enough effort that you might as *well* write in a language with better safety and speed out of the gate, especially as languages have developed and changed over the years, and while that includes perl (and poor, abandoned little Raku), it also includes many now-more popular languages.

Elf: Some visual novels are easier than others, but yeah, tiny indie visual novels tend to be written in one or another toolkit (Twine, renpy, etc) and as such assume people already know how to play games written with the toolkit rather than needing to learn it. The big Playstation/Playstation Vita VNs I've played don't have this problem, but they also cost more money (or at least involve having maintained a Playstation Plus subscription since whatever month they were given out for "free," which is where I got a bunch of mine; Playstation Plus at \$30/year was a steal though it's much worse now—except that it also lets you save your game files online and is needed for online co-op).

We've had discussions about the difficulty of using free tools to mess around with PDF bookmarks. It's certainly possible, but it's in no wise simple or easy.

You can get GUI interfaces for common free databases, which can take a lot of the pain out of using them manually (for building using an application to access them code is still a good idea, though). Like many things in OSS (open source software), though, if anything you have a glut of choices.

Re "more trouble than using an excel sheet" Well, yeah. A database is not a spreadsheet though spreadsheets can sometimes be accessed almost like a database. A database is at root organized data that might have some code build up around around it to make some extra rules, but a spreadsheet is a matrix calculator that can also do some other stuff. (the real tragedy of spreadsheets in my mind is that the operations that work on sections of them like collections are actually laughably limited compared to the possibilities from other languages that are all about collection processing; even stuff like "reduce" where you pass in a collection and a function that takes two items within the range and returns one, and it proceeds to run it against the collection pairwise until only one remains, letting you do sum easily but also SO much more).

Re "fantasy adventure" as "kill the monsters, no feeling things!" I am SO sick of that trope. Good fantasy is *never* about killing the monsters (fortunately even in computer games there have long since been things that went against trope, like games where the main character turned out to be the worst monster of all).

The players who think system doesn't matter aren't *just* the hack and slashers. There are also the players who long since drifted D&D into whatever style they enjoyed (which may not, in fact, involve any slashing or hacking), and they then play *that* in any game they play, which is easy since none of it is written down anyway. But for me, the point of different game systems is that if you at least try to play them as written, they result in playing different games, not the same game over and over again. Some even involve combat!

And, of course, while we've had a whole new and bigger than ever generation of D&D players, we've lost *gobs* of RPG players (many, I suspect, those focused on combat) to MMOs and games like Diablo in the past where you just got a better experience in many ways than you'd get—if what you were focusing on was cinematic combat and teamwork. At least, until the game got repetitive and grindy, anyway.

Not responding on the bundlebase stuff because we've talked offline about this and can talk more about it! Except that my issue with GM optional / GM required remains; I don't think words are used the way you're using them. A game can be played/designed in a few different ways. It might allow "trad" GMing. It might not involve a GM at all, and be a solo game or a GMless/GMfull game where players carve out bits of the GM roll and slice it among themselves. (Descended from the Queen games almost never have space for a GM either). There are games that allow for multiple GMs. And then there are games that allow multiple styles—single GM games that can also support multiple GMs (this is actually where I would place most BoB games but classification can vary and Yazeba's doesn't have a GM at all since players pick up guests, not themes), or games that can be played with no GMs at all but can also slot a GM into the space where many players would divide up the work and work just fine (Good Society is one of these). So my classification would be "Can be GMed", "Can be played with no GM", "Can be played with more than one GM", where you have to set at least one to true, and also "min player count" and "max player count" where a game with only GMs and no players might be 0/0. (and you might also have a list of excluded counts if a game

can play 0, 2 and 4 but not 3 or 1). There are some other ways to build this (join tables, mostly) but I'm not going into that now.

Gabriel Roark: Magic users studdying under monsters: Lets just say I got creative! I think I misread it once in passing, and ran with it because it was funny and interesting but it's also possible there was a typo that I used as a spark.

Scribble Horror: I think what Nomic and RPGs like D&D have in common is that they're almost complete opposites. Nomic contains shifting rules because it's all *about* those rules and their manipulation—you can change the rules sufficiently to turn it into a different game entirely (and that parliamentary process does come around and make it like a RPG in a completely different way because it's ultimately a collective and collaborative experience), but playing it without drifting it that much, the game is fundamentally about manipulating the rules for advantage, with any fiction coming after the fact.

ON the contrary, many RPGs have mutable rules because the rules are only a means to an end. What really matters is the fiction; the "shared imagined space" where the game resides, and any rules that interfere with that creation sufficiently are to be jettisoned, modified, or put aside. Of course, players can play the game much more like Nomic, trying to gain an advantage (some call such players powergamers or munchkins, though I would never), but while that, too, can be a pleasure in RPGs, it goes directly against the idea of mutable rules where a GM who thinks a player has found an unfair advantage might very well do away with it to protect the game's place as a wondrous fictional space. In that fashion, a collectible card game has a lot more in common with Nomic—sure, rules changes only come from a limited set of publishers or designers, but the game is still fighting over the same kind of thing.

Of course, one can also look at Nomic as fundamentally a search for meaning; a "game" where the idea is to define the game the group wants to play. And that isn't wrong either; I just mostly get my parliamentary procedure out the old fashioned way—by participating in a parliamentary council.

(I don't think I've ever played Nomic, but I've played board games based on it, and also have been aware of it since the early 90s)

Dylan Capel: One of the things about D&D is that it *isn't* the same at high levels as low, even if the difficulties are the same—ranges are bigger, and so are area affects and as a consequence, so are the "rooms" play is in. So the challenges tend to be bigger and swingier, the play tends to be more about big strategic play and not fighting goblins in the dark, and while both styles can have their charm, even in versions that really do scale the difficulty too perfectly (like 4e where PCs literally add their level (or half their level? Same thing; I think Pathfinder is +level!) to their die rolls in many situations), there are surprising differences between the tiers of play.

Avram Grumer: Re "spicklebad:" I see you remember the conceptual and terrible Looney Pyramid game "Spicklehead". (not to be played on purpose—or by accident; anyone who is curious can look it up).

Re Evil Hat stopping producing Fate: I suppose that's a logical extension to them developing from "The Fate publishers" to more general publishers that publish a much greater variety of games, often from cool indie designers.

I really liked Ringmaster as my first Descended from the Queen game! Nothing's gelled yet, but I really like the way it builds story by chaining prompts into an (often themed) direction! And you can get a pretty full story in under an hour (for games at Ringmaster's level, at least; Lisa has The Slow Knife which takes considerably longer, as you have

at least four different decks to go through for different acts of the game, as a common central figure works their just revenge on all the PCs.

Yeah, poetry is one of the places where the illusion of genAI "reasoning" tends to break down, as, without a module that will parse language and break it down into phonemes and sounds and stresses, a GNai can struggle when given poetic tasks for which is it, to say the least, ill equipped except in having "patterns" of existing poetry in its training set which it is ill-equipped to reason about, like a totally color-blind person who had learned to copy all the art in the world, but all their art came out subtly wrong.

Re unengaged players working better in large groups, perhaps with a caller: Yep. You can work with "tourist" players even in smaller groups if you know what you're dealing with (or just players who don't often have a strong idea of what they want to do even if when they do it's often quite good—see our few games with ex-A&Eer, even at the time, Theodore Miller, who was quite good—when he spoke up, at least). But if you keep throwing things at them and get nothing back it can be frustrating for all involved.

Re playing with Wujick: I was at an I-Con where he was testing a science fiction diceless game. But sadly I never grabbed the chance to play with him either (and anyway, the idea of playing a hard science fiction game with him was quite daunting at the time!)

As I mentioned earlier in my zine, Masks DOES have rules for PC death! But it exists in only one place—as what happens if the Doomed's Doom Clock reaches the end before they take an advance to face their doom and change playgroups! But as that's the only mechanical road to death, it doesn't come up that often!

Re a superhero PC who reaches 0 HP getting passed to a new player instead of dying, who can then run the PC as they like: And then the completely rewrite and retcon the PC's entire backstory, just like real suddenly-arriving editors! (Oh, ROM, Space Knight, you have so many sins to answer for!)

Good point about your name on every page (it's something I've complained about, too!) I should look that over for my zine! Oh, right, I already do! Well, at least I practice what I preach.

Good point that the GM can hand strings out to other players (though many GMs don't). And yeah, the backstory grants a whole bunch of strings which can paper over the problem a bit, but it's surprisingly hard to gain new strings!

Patrick Zoch: Congrats on wrapping up your first major instruction in ballroom dancing! Lisa and I both learned at least some very early (I took a gym class on it in high school and college; Lisa did [ahistorical] regency dance at cons which includes some waltzing, I taught her some more, we spent some years learning much more historical Regency dance and going to regency and Victorian balls, and it's been a lifelong journey from there!

And, of course, congratulations on your daughter's engagement!

Also, Magical Kitties! I like a lot about that game but haven't gotten a chance to play it.

Lisa Padol: Re Matt's pipe trap: Crimping, not crumbling, which sounds like it's turning the lead pipes into individual crumbs, which wouldn't have done much good unless we could wait for the crocodiles to get lead poisoning after eating them. I think you meant "crumpling" which works too.

The Fearful Symmetries game ran so well for multiple reasons, really. Some was that the players ran it as a funny wanderjar, rather like Three Men in a Boat (which I still haven't read) with rather more death and magic. But also, it's a campaign you're quite well suited for and we also managed to adapt enough Gumshoe hacks (between

stealing from the author and making up our own) to make the mechanics work even in places where they were actually quite lacking.

Re bad handwriting making it harder to forge your signature: I have bad handwriting if I don't reign it in and frankly it's easy to forge—just write a scrawl that looks like it might contain words and most people won't be able to tell the difference! My current signature (when I slow down and do it right, anyway) is way harder to forge without looking at it since I'm connecting some letters and not connecting others largely on whether connecting them makes them easier to form legibly or not.

Re high schools with lockers in hallways: I mean, mine did! I think yours did too? I'm guessing it's a slowly dwindling phenomenon as the ebook revolution makes it at least more possible for schools to NOT give their students a weight in textbooks comparable to their own, but I'm sure plenty of US schools still have lockers for now. I guess the other reason US high schools have lockers is that students will need things for various classes and can't go home to retrieve them, in a way that's not really necessary in earlier grades—gym clothes for gym, maybe a musical instrument for band or orchestra, etc. But it's also a temptation for thieves, so if the school can have a more specialized lockup for the things that really need something like it and encourage students to otherwise bring no more than they can carry, everyone's better for it.

Larps often need a lot less messiness because the players often need to be able to resolve differences without checking with the GMs (because the GM is over that way handling a different problem); you can have a rule like the Lullabye of Broadway games that anyone not involved can act as GM for a scene on request, but that does involve a lot of trust.

Yes, you're more likely to let "messy GM" situations, although you're actually usually pretty strong on the rules in the high contact games you facilitate.

Re why the (awful) larp player you had to GM for felt his PC had to murder someone: My take is because the character was from [country] and all [people from country] are evil, even if they're, well, explicitly written as not that. Or, I guess, the player had internalized that larps are places where you can just kill PCs because their earlier larp experiences were in SIL (Society of Interactive Literature, an early LARP design group) games, in whose games that is often true. Who knows?

Re Shinso from My Hero Academia: Who does eventually get a hero name: Nighthide, but it rather takes a while: I mean, that character really does start out with a weak power that gets stronger over time—yes, it's a very effective control power, but it just has so many weaknesses—you can nullify it by not answering, it only works on one person, you can break out of the control with sufficient will (not admittedly common), and it's really only useful for one thing—taking down villains, while heroes need a lot more flexibility. But over time, he works on every one of those weaknesses (except the will thing, but most people can't break out of it), finding ways to get people to answer even if they know how his power works, use it to affect the flow of battle rather than take over a single foe, and even use it more flexibly and effectively in rescue and other situations! Some of this is a matter of the writers being creative, but some is certainly the character leveling up! An even stronger example is Urakara Ochaco (Uravity). Her power starts out being much more limited—she has to touch something to make it weightless, she can't float herself or fly, and she's heavily limited in how much mass she can affect at once. But by the end of the series, in addition to learning martial arts to be able to much more effectively use her power offensively, she's overcome every one of these weakness, able to float hundreds of tons at minimum, be much more flexible in what kind of "thing" counts as a single thing (and also thus partially overcome the touch limitation), and, of course,

she's flying extremely adeptly. If you wanted a character who had a weak power in Marvel Diceless, that's easy to enforce—just give the character a lower rank in the ability. How many energy stones you can invest in an ability is limited by its rank. A character with 15 stones to invest might have a 7 point ability they can put it in that isn't their power but only 3 ranks in their power, forcing them to describe weaker effects. (You can use two abilities in a given round, so they could still be quite effective even with that weak power in use)

Re Fate: I mean, in theory if you have Damaged Vocal Chords and cannot talk, that's not a compel; it's just a consequence of a fact on the ground. But the GM should be pretty liberal in letting you turn that kind of thing into a compel when it causes you problems.

Re whether people who are bad at fights are also bad at running away from fights: I mean, ignoring that people have different experiences and skills, it's not NOT the case; someone who is more physically fit will generally be better at running away and fighting back than someone who focuses on, say, reading books and napping. When you've got a game where a character is 4 abilities and 3 special abilities (moves), you're going to have to accept a bit of simplifications!

Re getting a clue you might miss in Gumshoe: I'd say you can generally find this:

1. With an appropriate spend.
2. With a description that directly targets the area to search.
3. Possibly if you have the right *person* search the area (that is, the one with the right skill to recognize what they're seeing). Maybe this will be an opportunity to spend, but it also might give the player enough clues to give a more detailed description of the search. Of course, some non-core clues are significant or tricky enough to find that it's spend or not and that's fine. Honestly I don't even think spends are meta except when they *obviously* are (like when the player uses a spend to change the situation to their advantage without the character *doing* something). But sometimes it just signals what the character is putting extra effort into. With that in mind, spends on rolled abilities are even more meta—you can say they mean the character is putting more effort into something, but when that takes them from you have a 50% chance of failing this" to "it's guaranteed", it's really the player deciding that this is a better time for the character to succeed; the character might be putting the effort in every time but this is the one that counts.

Re Size 35 in Runequest: Ironically, while kittens are SIZ 1, a size 35 character would have more than 35 kittens of mass. Even a big kitten is 4 lbs, so 35 kittens would be 140 lbs, which is more like SIZ 11 or so. SIZ 35 would presumably be a minimum of 400 lbs, so at least 100 kittens.

Re The Algorithm: Algorithms tend to be written to give you something you'll react to. But once you're doing a non-chronological feed anyway, you risk answering to the people who go "but we could make more money if we sold ads. Or let people buy ranking. Or...

Whether one can play one of the ships from the Ian Banks culture novels: I mean, they're smarter than any human could be, which makes it hard. On the other hand, they were written by a human, so it should be doable.

Re *Yazeeba's B&B* as Ghost Dog: I mean, Ghost Dog has rather less magic and more violence, but it's something to think about!

You could probably get me to write some stuff from a PC or three's point of view if I remembered, but that's a big if. Giving me a writeup of the sessions in question would likely help a lot.

Re sites for paid GMs: for that you need enough of a market that it's ok if there are people who try it as a side gig who drift out of it because they aren't good enough, and many others who find it works

well for them; that would mean a lot of paid GM players and also a lot (albiet fewer) of GMs trying it as a gig. If there are a VERY small number of "professional" GMs and a site is built for them, then you get what Erica described—it isn't in the interest of the site to get people to hire paid GMs to keep up negative reviews, so they don't. Only so many professional GMs, after all. (and if one gets so many complaints that it's a problem they can just drop them). It's like if you're running a livery cab business and one of having issues but not enough to fire them, you're not going to tell someone "hi, we're sending you our worst cabbie, but we think they're good enough to get you where you're going". You'll send your cab and hope things work out this time. And probably not give them the really high stakes jobs.

Re your purist PC: I mean, other sorcerers couldn't necessarily do sorcery when tied up either. Her biggest limit was really that since Julian made up all her abilities, you had a much more limited list of stock things they could do without you just making things up and trying them (also an option).

Re Tri-Stat: I mean, we could just ask him. But yeah; you decided to have your character have the maximum abilities he allowed; I just made up a character with an off the wall (but not forbidden) strength attack. Sailor Jupiter vs Sailor Moon, except that I think my character was actually pluto-themed, more or less. (and while we didn't watch them for quite a few years more, sailor Pluto also has some pretty broken attack once they come up).

It's very easy to like in Jenji in *Hellspark*, you just shouldn't. What it's much easier to do, though, is tell the truth in EXTREME detail, including how verifiable your truth is.

Brian Misiaszek: Re writing homebrew pulp talents that give players permission to behave like pulp heroes: I mean, that's the kind of thing that abilities are for!

And I very much agree that the main issue is tabletop culture, which is something that rules can influence, but not override. My examples regarding failure in Call of Cthulhu 7e are a step in a more flexible direction, but even there the table culture has to integrate them in order for them to take effect. (and to do pulp with them, you need something more, like your pulp talents).

An Orisha hearing seems like a plausible approach, as it's the kind of thing a loa spirit (or a being that is at least partially a loa spirit) will honor.

I don't disagree that your Mazorra document might be difficult to actually run, but it's still an extremely well-built document and one that people could mine for good ideas even if they didn't feel up to running the whole thing! And while it's tricky to sell (in the meaning that doesn't involve money) what amounts to a many hour per-gen game, the pre-gen aspect is the easiest to jettison; a GM could easily help players to build characters that fit well enough in the Mazorra (or rather, that GM's Mazorra) without being part of it.

40 pages!?! Well, I guess you have a lot of pre-written material for the next few months!

Peter Hildreth: Welcome to the new APA! We've missed you!

I've never heard your story of how you got into gaming; this is great and fascinating, thank you!

Jim Vassilakos: Re gods: It might be that the nature of gods is that their abilities are granted by their interaction with their worshipers. As such, they might remember having a different profile at some point in the past, but also that it's different now, as they, too, are affected by the holy bargain of becoming a divine being.

Of course, if gods don't need or benefit from worshipers they're probably more independent.

Re godly power manifest: The snakes and serpents scene during Exodus is a good example of what priests being able to manifest godly power might look like—including the idea that if a visting priest can manifest even more power than the local ones (or vice versa) then maybe their god is better, too.

It continues to be something of a pipe dream that we'll have super-intelligence any time in the future. Current gen AIs are extremely stupid but make up for it in volume; they are doing a better job than they were 5 years ago by a lot, but at a terrifying cost; most plans that involve doubling the costs with every iteration fail, as you'll find if you try that strat in Vegas. (eventually, but quite surely).

The best case is that invent a less terrifyingly inefficient AI that is more like a human and is harder to exploit somehow, but can compete more effectively with the massive scalebots. But I fear that ship has sailed; everyone is a spammer now (or soon will be, if we instead move from terrifying corporate AIs to less terrifyingly expensive personally owned AIs that have a massive social cost).

Ignoring doomsday annoyance scenarios, it seems inevitable that while AI tech is currently helping inflate memory and processor costs, that it will eventually bring them down as the bottom drops out; if things scale up such that manufacturers are competing over the AI demands rather than struggling to keep up with them, prices will likely bottom out for anyone who just needs some memory or a few chips.

Re your idea of how college professors work with programming languages: I mean, neither you nor Patrick really have much idea, as I read them, on how any of this works, but your ideas are further afield. A professor who is running a class on teaching python (presuming as an introductory class or as an AI class since python is the most popular language for doing AI and ML work) is simply not interested in a student wasting their time evangelizing languages that have nothing to do with the class. Follow the course material or get out.

Even less so, in the more likely situation where someone's teaching python, like a coding boot camp or the like.

In my college experience, though, general computer science classes mandating a language was rare. Introductory classes might teach a specific language but they'd usually accept any language that could demonstrate mastery of the concepts. Of course, if the class was "PDP 11 Machine Code", you had better not start submitting Silicon Chip assembly for assignments, much less ignoring the assignments entirely and submitting Java Byte Code or even a high level language.

There absolutely are situations where a professor might be interested in a new-to-them language. But that's more those general classes where any language that can do the job are fine, and a language that handles problems in interesting ways might be interesting enough for a prof to look at it (and, in fact, all of Rust, Scala, and Go have interesting things to say from a computer science perspective). And, of course, the prof might attend a club where sharing and talking about novel languages is part of the experience, and our hypothetical professor is also probably sick of people talking about and evangelizing (or excruciating) AI by this point. Certainly, it's one of the parts of LinkedIn that I'm least likely to miss now that i don't need to spend nearly as much time on the site.

But honestly, the professor is more likely to be up on the latest interesting languages than any given student. After all, while the professors I got in the early 90s were often starting with academic languages that few people were using in the real world, professors now are two generations beyond them—digital natives who likely got into computer science because they liked it! And while few (none that I know of) purely academic languages have appeared in the last 30 years, there are plenty of really interesting new languages that are not purely academic.

But under no circumstances should you submit your answered to an assignment in a language like Whitespace, or Malboge, and probably not Intercal or, really, any language in this list: https://esolangs.org/wiki/Joke_language_list. Oh, except if you can actually write the an answer assignment in Malboge AND IT COMPILES you'll likely get an A. If the professor can understand your answer, anyway.

I wouldn't submit an answer in any version of Basic, either; it's really a terrible and uninteresting language.

Re wanting an APA with a larger then 16 page limit: Support and help keep A Gentle Srollenade alive! (it's kinda dying on the vine with not enough contributors). The world has room for both an APA with no length limit and one with a strict but still pretty generous limit, as the two ideas are likely to result in different types of content—presuming they get contributors, anyway.

Very few people actually hate players who write a huge backstory for their PC—more engagement means a better game! That said, what is objectionable is if the player expects their backstory to all become part of the game (at which point the player is kinda squeezing out the other players who didn't do that work) or if they expect it to dictate how the GM can run their game, including ideas for their character's future. If there are GMs who hate players with over-long backstory, it's probably not because of the backstory but other behavior that they associate with such players.

Re your interaction with Luke Broderick: Excellent! (and also, while the extra detail is welcome, the answer is a qualified yes; a solicited donation is still a donation, while a general rights grant would not be the same thing, quite).

Timothy Collinson: Re writing in science fiction when you're weak on science: I mean, you and Lisa are in good company, along with most script writers for the various Star Trek series!

An Unlooked For Zine #13

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NATTER

Running too close to deadline, though for happy reasons. This means even though I've probably space, I don't have time to do one of the write ups I'd vaguely planned to do, or to make sure I've italicized everything I should, or proofread properly. I'll do a bolding pass, and maybe a spellcheck if there's time, as I do need to do the links and the pagination.

I've picked up and look forward to reading Chaosium's Campfire Tales for Call of Cthulhu. Allow me also to recommend Golden Goblin Press's Eldritch New England Holiday Collection. Full disclosure: I edited this and played in two of the scenarios before the book was published. See <https://rlyehreviews.blogspot.com/2021/03/a-holiday-horror-quartet.html> for a less biased analysis than I could give.

Recent Reading

Various Graphic Novels: Carbon and Silicon, Shangri-La, Zaya, DIE Loaded Volume 1: Zero Sessions, Silver Metal Lover (yes, an adaptation of Tanith Lee's novel).

Masks of the Mask: A weird indie superhero rpg, definitely modeling the grittier end of the genre. PC death isn't really on the table.

The Tainted Cup and **A Drop of Corruption** by Robert Jackson Bennett, as I didn't want to start with the second. Avram Grumer referred to them as "Nero Wolfe if written by Gene Wolfe", and while I see where he gets that from, I still maintain that Wolfe would never be so obvious in his writing (which, to be clear, is a compliment to Bennett).

The West Passage by Jared Pechacek: This was described to me as a Queer Gormenghast, which intrigued me, though I've not read Peake (and suspect at this point, I'd not find him to my taste). I enjoyed this a lot while reading it, and the illustrations definitely enhance the book. I'll see what I think of it in a few months.

The Everlasting by Alix E. Harrow. This was amazing, and very much me-bait. It has fewer illustrations than

The West Passage, but again, they definitely enhance the text.

How to Fake It in Society by K. J. Charles, a m/m romance set in 1821. I like Charles's books (apparently, I need snark and danger, and preferably murder, in my romances), and this is no exception. The climax was wonderfully done, and as I reviewed it in my mind, I realized that every single twist had been clearly and fairly set up in advance.

Recent Watching

My Hero Academia: We've finished the series, and it was wonderful. Lots of payoff. Lots of danger. Even more than a nod to one of the issues I'd been having with the way society in that show worked.

7th Time Loop: The Villainess Enjoys a Carefree Life Married to Her Worst Enemy: Josh tells me that Villainess anime/light novels aren't really a thing, and in this case, that's doubly true. Our heroine is denounced as a villain by her fiancé, looking for an excuse to break their engagement and marry someone else, and summarily banished, whereupon she is fortunate enough to join a group of merchants and build a new life for herself, until, five years later, she is swept up in a war and killed.

And finds herself in front of her fiancé, being denounced and banished again. Again, she builds a new life, and again, five years later, she's killed in the war. This happens four more times, and she builds very different lives each time, but never manages to avoid her death. All of this in the first several minutes of the first episode.

In her seventh life, she catches the eye of the crown prince of the one nation she's never managed to visit. He's the person who started the war that got her killed, and who personally killed her the last time (she was disguised as a man, and she was fighting him at the time). He is astonished and captivated by the remarkable woman he sees, and the first thing he learns is that she's no longer engaged. So he proposes. And she accepts, wanting to understand what drove him to start the war and very much wanting to Not Die.

She is in no way a villainess. She is also not carefree and not taking it easy and not relaxing. She is trying to cram about three days into every one, falling deeply in love with her fiancé, trying to make everyone's lives better, and trying to Not Die.

It's absolutely delightful. And it embodies something K. J. Charles wrote about on her blog in an essay I can't find now (possibly because the blog's been moved and reorganized, possibly because she might have taken some essays down for a collection she's publishing this year) about how absolutely sexy consent can be.

Awards

ENnie Nominees: <https://ennie-awards.com/2026-nominees/>

I don't know a lot of the works on here. Going rapidly down the list for places where I have any opinion:

- Terra Antarctica: Looks interesting, but I want to read some of the Arkham Horror RPG material I have before buying more, particularly Large Box Sets.
- The Spark Devil: I feel very ambivalent about this being up for Best Production Values because yes, one can do amazing things with a large budget, but the tradeoff is that most of us aren't going to be laying out that kind of money. It's odd figuring out where my monetary boundary is here.
- The Crooked Moon Ultimate Edition: Apparently, this is normally about \$2,000 and is currently on sale for about half of that?!
- The Solo RPG List is really cool, as is the Molten Sulfur Blog
- I own, but haven't read Vaesen: City of My Nightmares (or any Vaesen material yet), Bride of Pendel, Ecryme: Player's Guide, Sprigs & Kindling, Crescent 2e, Legend in the Mist, Berserkr, Voidheart Symphony (Revised Edition), Pirouette, Mystified!, and .Rapsallion
- I want to check out Girl Frame, Tragedy at Zaya's Theatre, possibly Making Enemies, Pendragon Gamemaster Screen Pack, Dragon Town and the Darkness Below, probably all of the Best Free Game/Product category, maybe Coriolis (am unsure), Explorers Design, A Land Once Magic, Song of the Scryptwurm, and maybe Spine (unsure if it exceeds my horror tolerance).

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #13

COVER: Nice!

PATRICK BRADY: Before there was AI art, there was clip art. Also, there are some public domain photograph collections, but I'm not sure that's what you want.

re Erica Frank re Translation follies: Who translates is a traitor. Nevertheless, we translate, and I think the key is to remember that it *is* a translation. This is true for book-to-movie as well as comic-to-whatever. There are moments, one in the 6-part *Neverwhere* and one in the *Spiderwick* movie that I thought were excellent translations from the book, doing things that caught the spirit, if not the letter, of the source.

While I think that rpgs can "do" comics, I also think that it's important to bear in mind that an rpg is *not* a comic, a novel, a movie, a television show, et cetera, and so weiter.

re the question of cultural appropriation: The two pieces of advice I have are:

- You will make mistakes. Accept that, do what you can to rectify them, and move on.
- You can contact people and organizations from the relevant cultures and ask them. It's their opinions you want, not ours. Ideally, you want people/groups who are also gamers.

re STRAUSS: What game do you play the Strauss in?

MATT STEVENS: re igtheme: IIRC, Tolkien said he'd have preferred to write Lord of the Rings and/or the Silmarillion in Elvish. I think it was the former, as he was never really satisfied with the latter. re wanting fantasy rpgs to become less Eurocentric: This has started. I don't know what I don't know, so I don't know how much material exists of which I'm unaware, whether because it's in a language other than English, in a country whose rpg culture I'm unaware of, on a website like itch.io where I have to know what I'm looking for to find it by any method other than luck. I can list some titles, if you want.

re me: I don't think you should have "stuck it out". If it's not fun for you, you're doing no one a favor by continuing to do the not-fun thing. The question is: what do you think would be fun? There are some Discord servers I could point you at where you might get into certain types of games. Josh or I could probably arrange for a one-shot or two. I don't want to push a system or setting or other aspect on you that you're not that interested in, and if you're looking for something closer to 5e, I'm not the right person to suggest things. (If you want to arrange to come over at some point, we can show you a lot of rpgs, obviously.)

re your one hour game being "lame": Gah! That is the *point*! A friend of mine once said that we need more larps that suck because potential larp writers think their games must be *perfect*, so get discouraged when they can't do that. We've been in and played larps that came out of 24- or 48-hour larp writing "competitions"

(where there's no prize beyond "you wrote a larp"). No one expects your larp-written-in-a-weekend to be perfect (or at least, they shouldn't). But you *have* a larp, and those who play it can give feedback on making it a *good* larp. (It still won't be perfect. But you can make it good and fun.)

Or to put it another way, when Josh was editing some larp writing I'd done:

Josh: Okay, this is a steaming pile of shit.

Me: ...sorry —

Josh: No, it's **fine!** I can **work** with a steaming pile of shit! I can't work with a blank page.

re Erica Frank re the boundary/steps between Out of the Fight and Dead: How wide or narrow that boundary is, how many steps between the sides, and, indeed, whether "dead" should be on the table *should*, IMO, depend on what genre/mood/degree of realism one is going for. There's often a mismatch between that and what a given system actually does.

re Joshua Kronengold re "the assumption—seemingly common among the indie crowd—that every cool idea needs a new system attached to it": Hm. I think there are two assumptions different parts of the "indie crowd" make. The first is this one. The second is "My new game should use [insert system that is the current hotness]". At Metatopia, a gaming convention focused around playtesting games at various stages, one common question designers are asked is "Why [Fate/Powered by the Apocalypse/Blades in the Dark/Whatever system the designer is using]? What does this bring to the table for you?"

There's a reason I used *Over the Edge* for so long. I understood it, it was mechanically easy, and it *got out of my way*. OTOH, if I were running a Pendragon game, I'd start by using Pendragon because of the ways in which those rules match the genre in ways I find delightful. (The bumps in generational play are not things I ever hit, as I've only ever played one-shots. I'd probably do a house-rule/our-table patch if this ever came up.) And on the third tentacle, Aviatrix had a point when she said that when someone on the Storybrewers Discord server came up with a new hack of Good Society, what she wanted to know was what this hack brought to the game. (Also, Josh and I are revising our GS hack, Dangerous Refuge, or rather, trying to edit it to be readable and usable when neither of us are at the table.)

re your daydream universe: What I'd want, if I were running a game set in that universe, would be to wait until the "genuine story" book came out so that I'd know as GM. Maybe I'd want to play to that story, maybe not, but I wouldn't be able to make an informed choice there without the book.

PATRICK RILEY: re Aerion: The art on that image reminds me of the graphic novel series *Monstress*. re lack of unity between kobold gangs: Even temporary unity when faced with a general threat to kobold society? For your amusement: re horns: Because the list was right after the bit about clandestine communication, at first, I thought you meant musical horns and wondered if this was audio damage.

re Call of Cthulhu: My knee-jerk reaction is that the GM didn't prepare enough. I am biased, as I have found many published scenarios do work at conventions. Actionable information is always an interesting question, and for that, I really do need to read the scenario. I know I have run some Gumshoe scenarios successfully at conventions, but in those cases, many were written for convention play, and I played in most of them before trying to run them. Additionally, I playtested most of them with my home group. I did the same thing with a Delta Green scenario. But in addition to all of this, I was generally able to leave space for roleplay as well as mystery, which meant that players did often get a satisfying emotional game. That said, I don't think I've done a convention run where the group meaningfully lost in the big sense. Some individual PCs got "bad endings", sure, but usually, these were chosen by their players in an epilogue montage.

re Swords of the Serpentine: I won't say I'm free of the faults you discuss, but I agree completely that these are faults and should be avoided! I'd be interested in seeing that scenario. re Zone: Sounds like an interesting once-in-a-while game for me.

re Crooked Moon: I'm curious to know whether the locked door forcing your PC to get a tarot reading was part of the scenario or improvised by the GM. I'm not sure I'd run a "this is a campaign opener scenario" as a one-shot at a convention. I mean, sure, I can think of cases where it would work, but I'd need to be very sure of that before running such a scenario. re Salvage Union: Doesn't sound like my jam, but I'd probably have had fun in the one-shot. re Icons game: I'm glad it went well! re Other Notes: I do hope Dan Shimizu contributes to E&A.

re Roger Bell_West re a problem with restraining unconscious foes being what if the group doesn't return: It eventually became an unintended running gag in CthulhuPunk that the PCs left fallen foes locked or restrained in the closet of their current hotel room and then promptly forgot about them, as did the players and the GM.

re Dylan Capel re control of water as a sign of power: Years ago, ex-A&Eer Naomi Rivkis told me that one of the flaws of Tim Powers's novel *Last Call* was that he didn't understand this about Las Vegas. re Michael

Cule: I love the companion with weather detection that's arthritis. re Erica Frank re Shield Maidens: Another game I own and have to find time to read.

re me re whether I've encountered an rpg I find pretentious and/or condescending: Yes. A couple of examples: I've read a lot of early White Wolf World of Darkness material that fit the bill, including books that I mostly liked. See my review of Changeling: The Dreaming, 2nd edition, which I did like a fair bit, but oh my, there's some writing that fits the bill there: https://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/classic/rev_229.p.html. Then, there's a Vampire book that says that it's really bad form to decide that the PCs get captured No Matter What, and proceeds to have that happen not once, but twice, because, well, in *this* adventure, it's Absolutely Necessary! Saying "You shouldn't do X, but in MY adventure, it's necessary" is, to me, utterly pretentious.

There's also a section in the GM's Survival Guide for Legend of the 5 Rings that says that if the players don't have their PCs show appropriate horror at some of the Shadowlands material, the GM should strike the PCs blind, and if that doesn't work, maybe the GM needs to get a new band of samurai. There's a lot of good material in that book, but I would not say a word against anyone hitting that sentence and deciding not to read further.

re Monsterhearts: Ah, okay, you're seeing the fact that the PC is turned on as victimizing the PC, whereas I'm not. This is partly, but far from entirely, because I've sometimes used this move as a player, saying that my PC isn't consciously trying to turn the other person on, and from your perspective, that's not going to help, and it certainly won't always or even often be the way to interpret the role. We could go into more detail about why you view it one way and I view it the other, but I don't think that's necessary. The bottom line is that this really isn't a game you want to be playing.

I can think of two ways to "object or negate" the move, with the caveat that I don't believe this solves the problem for you (let alone the other reasons you have for not wanting to play this game):

- Non-Attraction, theoretically intended specifically for characters "on the asexual spectrum" or "unable to access attraction due to sexual trauma". I could easily see broadening this out to include everyone; that said, this is not the rule as written. Players using non-attraction can do so on a case-by-case basis, which is to say that they can decide "Sure, I'm fine with your character turning mine on" when and only when they want. If they do use Non-Attraction, then the Turn Someone On move become the Shut Someone Down move, which I'm not sure makes it better for you, especially as the

text says that this is intended to reflect how "social pressure and compulsory sexuality pervade much of our teenage experiences, and the tension that people experience in trying to work against dominant social narratives without singling themselves out as strange or other."

- Negotiation/safety tools/calibration either at the start of the game or when it comes up, preferably both. I'd absolutely understand someone saying that they were uncomfortable trying to do this, though. I'd hope the rest of the group wouldn't try to pressure them out of that, but I could easily envision a well-meaning gamer saying "But that's the premise of the game!"

The closest I've seen is an ace friend saying, as we calibrated for a second season of our Monsterhearts game, "I know this is Monsterhearts, and I'm not asking for no sex in the game, but could we have *less* sex?" I also offered to rename the Sex Move to an Intimacy Move (which is what Urban Shadows uses), and they said that this made them very happy. And while their arc for the second season had, I think, nothing to do with sex, none of this would have addressed your central issue with the game.

If you wanted to experiment with Powered by the Apocalypse games in the broad genre of Monsterhearts, the ones I'd recommend are Monster of the Week (theoretically more limited, but there's a whole line of books now expanding what one can do with the game) or Urban Shadows (which I've called "World of Darkness done right", though it can get odd if you avoid player vs player—which my group has. It isn't breaking the game.).

In both cases, I note that the PCs are more competent than in Monsterhearts. I don't consider this a problem; it's a question of what the game is about. I have a minor bet with myself that if the person in the Monsterhearts game I ran who played the Witch plays Urban Shadows, their first choice will be the Wizard, which is like the Monsterhearts Witch in that they do spells, but unlike the Witch in that their magic is more useful-with-a-price than looks-cool-but-mostly-creates-problems.

There's also an interesting hack for Monsterhearts called Monsterhearts Academy, with the idea that the PCs are metaphorical candles, however dark the world gets. It still uses Turn Someone On, though, and likely still has the other issues that Monsterhearts itself has for you.

re my ct to Avram on how the GM's decided things should go: Oh, I'm sure the GM thinks what he's decided is dramatic, which is why I put it in opposition to "what seems dramatic to me" specifically. re me re

"If you have a plot that simply Must go off Precisely as planned," have it happen before the PCs arrive": Yes, that's another fine way to do it, although one does need to avoid a situation I've seen in a couple of scenarios, though: not leaving enough for the PCs to do when they arrive.

re Aurora Cove: Thanks for the overview! Who mines for the opals? Is a tourist thing? Do locals sometimes decide they'd like an opal and go mine one for themselves? Or are there actual professional miners?

BRIAN ROGERS: re museum instead of fieldwork: That sounds more my style as well. Of course, museums are targeted by cultists, and sometimes, an exhibition has a life of its own. (In our Breakthru larp, the City's museum is a hotbed of artifacts and often a battleground for that reason.) re your eldest's DM being offline: Oof, sympathy!

re Knaves re player's deadline: It's good to know these things as far in advance as practical. re Spider Queen: That is one cool woman! re Myles Corcoran re rules the designers don't use: I wonder how many of these are things designers think are necessary and how many are things publishers insist on.

re Brian Misiaszek re "it only works because they are strong and tough and capable, but those only work because they are smart and quick on their feet": Yes. This reminds me of the anime My Hero Academia in general and of the character Bakugo in particular. He's so much a strong, powerful type; brash and outspoken; a typical lancer who isn't the diplomatic type. It's easy to forget how *smart* he is, especially when surrounded by other smart people. The author clearly never forgets, and early on, we learn that he's one of only 2 students who get a perfect score on an exam, the other being the Very Conscientious Class Rep.

re me re paying Penguin 5M to not steal a 2M diamond: Unlike bribing someone to spill information on their criminal companions, this is very likely to lead to a Danegeld situation. Still, it's fun to note how the mechanics technically reward this approach.

re Avram Grumer re Jean Gray needing to die because of committing genocide, but it being fine for Professor X: I am tempted to say it's considered okay because he's a man. I'm not sure that isn't just snark on my part, although apparently Netflix's Umbrella Academy stops worrying about White Violin's power to destroy the world when Vanya becomes Viktor, so much as some characters being given more tolerance for heinous actions. Fr'ex, Faith is given more tolerance than Lindsey in Angel (I hate how we are told that Lorne and/or Angel Just Knows Lindsey needs to die because of what he'll do if Lorne doesn't kill him—there is no internal evidence that makes this sit well for me).

Or maybe, as you say, life is cheap in the Microverse. Or as Catherynne Valente notes, it's a matter of who's considered People. Your description of how that changed with the change of writers in Rom comes to mind.

re Joshua Kronengold: Another possible reason Clerics and magic swords don't mix is that the swords consider themselves akin to gods and brook no rivalry—and the clerics' gods feel the same way.

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND MAIRA

ZUCOLOTTI: re SJG gamebooks: Try <https://www.sjgames.com/choosethulhu/> and <https://www.sjgames.com/fightingfantasy/>.

JOHN REDDEN: re Zero Level Funneling re Alpha, Beta, and Gamma: Years ago, iirc, one player in a 3.5 game named his character Mark, and when that PC died, the next was Mark II, then Mark III, and so on. re Pig at a Wedding: Sounds like a game of Toon or Fiasco. Did you like Slugblaster? Congratulations on the heart surgery being done!

re Roger Bell_West re DC-3: There's a timeline oddity in the Trail of Cthulhu campaign Eternal Lies. Justin Alexander notes that if one nudged the timeline to where it likely was originally intended, starting in 1934, the DC-3 wouldn't be available to PCs, which may be why it starts in 1937. I like his solution of saying that the PCs' patron, a very rich woman, knows "Donald Douglas (owner and founder of the Douglas Aircraft Company)" and got him to give her a hybrid plane, a DC-2 which has "features from the DC-3".

re Erica Frank re what you're missing: While Neo-paganism does have an ethical framework (or, rather, several different ones, as there are several different kinds of Neo-paganism), I don't know if you're missing anything because I have no idea what book you were reading. It's been long enough I'm not entirely sure what book(s) to point you at.

re me re Dracula Dossier: This is an excellent question!

- The system is Night's Black Agents, a GUMSHOE game.
- There isn't exactly a module per se, which is where a lot of the confusion comes in.
- Instead, there's The Director's Handbook, essentially a toolkit for creating a sandbox campaign dubbed The Dracula Dossier.
- In addition, there's a wild handout, Dracula Unredacted, which contains a variant of Bram Stoker's novel created by Pelgrane Press. In addition to changes in certain scenes and some additional material from both Pelgrane authors and Stoker (Dracula's Guest is incorporated), there are

three different sets of annotations from NPCs who are only vaguely defined.

- Those two books technically make up The Dracula Dossier. But wait! There's more!
- The Edom Files is a book of scenarios that reference the background created for The Dracula Dossier. Dracula does not directly appear in them, and even though GMs are expected to create their own type of vampire—and even though The Director's Handbook made a fascinating variant that I, at least, decided to use—the scenario authors picked a particular variant, not the one in The Director's Handbook, and, indeed, one I find perhaps the least interesting, but I am biased.
- The Edom Field Manual gives more details and options. This could be considered a supplement to the Director's Handbook.
- The Hawkins Papers is a collection of cool handouts. It's shorter than Dracula Unredacted.
- Various pdfs giving other options for Dracula.
- There's a lot of supplementary material on the Pelgrane website. This material was collected into a pdf called Cuttings and Additions.

The shorter version: The system is Night's Black Agents. The campaign is Dracula Dossier, but it's presented not as a coherent campaign, but as a multi-part toolkit for GMs to buy what parts they want of it and then choose what to use from those.

MYLES CORCORAN: *Giggle* at "RowanGaff". re player who broke a hip: Oof! I'm glad your group is there for him. re Jerry Gretzinger's map: That is beautiful. Thanks for bringing it to our attention. re Mausritter: Delightful! And Gwen is correct about not relying on a single berry. I'm sure Odette stroking the box with the ring isn't at all ominous.

re Roger Bell_West re disadvantages: One thing I give John Wick credit for is having players *pay* to get a disadvantage in 7th Sea. This, er, pays off because when they come up in game, the player gets points (I forget whether it's bennies or experience).

re Dylan Capel re wars over water: In the 2013 film *Only Lovers Left Alive*, set (afaik) in the present day (as of when it was made), one of the protagonists asks if the water wars have started yet.

re Erica Frank re "Powers don't trump story": The question is to what degree a given system supports the kind of story one wants to tell. With Fate, as I discussed last zine, there are some variants that support certain types of superhero tales better than others. Heck, when I ran Kerberos Club Fate, Josh had to ask me to make his psychic character's cousin immune to her powers so that he could continue to be an obstacle. I gave him a Presence skill (which contained Willpower, Stress Capacity: Mental

(Composure), Initiative: Mental) at one tier higher than base, aka Extraordinary.

re Avram Grumer: Apart from Amber being diceless, how did Erick Wujcik futz up "James Wallis's attempt at a diceless Bugtown game"? re me re Sam: Seconding that hope. Keep us posted. re Mausritter: Thanks for the clarification! re Unknown Armies: I've never played 3e beyond a playtest limited to character/group/goal creation years ago, and games of 1/2e were convention one-shots, sometimes making full use of the setting, sometimes using the system for something highly entertaining, albeit not part of the book's setting. I gather that Greg wanted a new edition to try to support the kind of play/game he'd originally intended, and I suspect he also wanted to update the background to 2017 (give or take). (Obviously, this doesn't mean there weren't commercial considerations; I'm confident there were.)

re Brian Rogers: I see that you're keeping in theme, as your Puppeteer is as connected to the theme of puppetry as the original. How much Scotch Guard do they go through in a year, I wonder?

ATTRONARCH: Zharon's made some mighty large vows. One wonders how well he would have kept them had he lived longer. I'm confused about why Gomm kept pretending to still be ensorcelled and how everyone came to be working for the witch.

MICHAEL CULE: I like the image of Uncle going out and collecting people to bring back to the City. I suspect there are many in the City who do not. re Stonekeep: I'll see if that grates on me as well.

re Glamour Days and Nights: What are Spirits of Reprisal? re how many paths in the seven fold book: At least seven, I should think. re Elephant Followers: A lovely euphemism. re Beanpot: While I see why he's an annoyance to the senator, he's also correct. Kudos to Sanene for glossing "you shouldn't be the ones to catch runaways" as "don't break rank".

What's the deal with Vinval Jotoran that no one followed up on? And what's the clue regarding Krishnan the Varlee? I suspect that the reason these weren't followed up on was that the PCs were given a *lot* to do (understandably), and as the leads weren't immediately actionable, they were forgotten as soon as something clearly visible started happening or being planned. (Or maybe your group is less interested in chasing down clues than some.)

Why is it odd that some of Nose Ring's cult "run and stay run"? That is, why should the cult be able to find them? re Master Dedrick: Yes, I can tell you had fun playing him! Why is he being (metaphorically ??) operated by a Gold rank Mostali Dwarf? *Giggle* at

Keanus seeing the marchers in the Upper City and understanding what the Janitrix was trying to teach his unit. re Julian not wanting to overrule Beanpot: Very wise.

Why did the senator think Keanus had "the quiet determination that I need to feel safe"? And was it just the character "noodling about"? I like the plan to pile up cart and wagon wheels in front of the clerk demanding the outrageous bribe. They would, of course, need to be painted gold.

Why did you have the senator send to his daughter and the daughter basically solve the problem of the clerk? Was that never intended to be something the PCs solved? Was it a case of realizing the PCs weren't going to solve it in a useful fashion, and that there were enough other things going on that it was time to close this particular thread?

While I see why Errio didn't like Jarathir, my sympathies are not with Errio. re the mice and rats disrupting shops: And this, people, is why we *rehearse*! re Julian's visit to the Insula: I gather that the senator did, indeed, have "a whole building full of White Moonies"?

re Patrick Brady re Nightwatch: I believe this is the Sergei Lukyanenko series (Night Watch, Day Watch, Twilight Watch, The Last Watch, The New Watch, and The Sixth Watch). re me: Thanks for the clarification!

re Erica Frank: I've played the three you listed. Progenitors felt like Powers. Masks (with the one exception I cited) generally felt like Young Justice. Marvel Heroic felt frustrating. On the one hand, the single convention one-shot I played did accurately, IMO, model 1st season Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (as we were playing those characters, and Josh and I had a lovely awkward scene between Skye (him) and May (me). On the other, it had the usual problem I have with Cortex: I had to ask how to assemble the dice pool every. single. time. I need to try playing again with a diagram, like the one Mendez has for the Paragon game Streets of Jade. (It still won't help with the problem I had gming, which is that I have to write down every single ability in full, but that's less of an issue for players.)

re REIGN maps: While I did find that annoying, I loved the smaller maps, with annotations. (Roughly, on one map: Natives friendly (crossed out) Approach with caution (crossed out) Natives hostile! re Joshua Kronengold: How did you abuse the once a year rule? And is Jarathir's Illuminate Vision a permanent thing? If so, is it a "works as plot requires" or are there other mechanics for it? re psephologist: Does that count voting for awards?

ROGER BELL_WEST: I'm glad you enjoyed the holiday! re Day After Ragnarok: Is "Dionin" a Lair of the White Worm (movie, at least) reference? re Cthulhu Eternal: I'd love to see that adventure. Will it be for sale? LOL at the husband/wife dialogue in Honeymoon in Hell! re GURPS template: Thanks! Unsure if it'll be useful to me, but it'll be useful to someone and should definitely exist.

re MICE: This reminds me of https://www.nielsenhayden.com/makinglight/liveaction_cryptanalysis/, which describes 4 types of cryptanalysis:

- checkbook cryptanalysis: Paying someone, aka Money
- black bag cryptanalysis: Stealing or otherwise stealthily acquiring what you need to break the code
- rubber hose cryptanalysis: Your basic torture option
- dumbshit cryptanalysis: Someone leaving their password on a scrap of paper in the back pocket of the pants they send to the dry cleaner, or getting loose lipped around the bartender, or something similar

re the coercion blackmail loop: I remember hearing about someone applying for a security clearance and being open with the prospective employer about being homosexual.

Prosepective Employer: Okay, the ways in which you might get blackmailed boil down to: they threaten to tell your employer or they threaten to tell your family. We *are* your employer, and you just told us. Are you out to your family? No? Then come out to them, and it's fine.

re species and falling into stereotypes and opposite-stereotypes: This is also a risk when playing someone from a different human group than one's own (skin color, sex, sexual orientation, country, class, culture, et cetera). The challenge is always to play any given character like a person. re why dragons cannot lie: Fascinating! Are dragons born knowing this and being careful, or is it something they have to learn?

re Matt Stevens re your "Strong Opinions on the way information should be presented for maximum ease of loading it into the GM's head": Are these compiled somewhere (blog, podcast, et cetera)?

re Brian Misiasek re the mythos not being inherently malicious: This is one of the things I like about the Delta Green RPG, specifically, much of the material written from the start for that system, not the ones converted from when it used Call of Cthulhu rules. The older ones are very well done, and I, like many others,

don't mind personifying the mythos with evil doers; it's not not-Lovecraft. But there's also something to be said for pure uncaring cosmos horror, where Delta Green isn't so much worried about charismatic cult leaders as lone sorcerers potentially ending the world, or at least their small corner of it, quite possibly not realizing they're doing it or even that they're doing sorcery, er, hypergeometry.

re me re plots that must go off as planned being what PCs get the breadcrumb trail from when the scenario begins: Yes, as Patrick Riley said as well. That also works. re Erica Frank re Miss Marple film *Murder Ahoy!*: Is the fencing duel any good?

re Joshua Kronengold re always having "direct gaming application" and "it's not "the Montagues and Capulets hate each other", it's "the Montagues and Capulets hire deniable strangers to do this kind of job".": Yes, excellent advice! And mostly followed, I think, in Pelgrane's excellent Pillars of Sand campaign for Swords of the Serpentine.

re the curse of metaplot: In other words, rpg publishers do this because it increases sales, correct? re the different reactions to sound in movies between rural areas and big cities: I hadn't realized. Fascinating.

ERICA FRANK: re Cage of Sand: So you're playing it monthly, then? re Midnight at the Well of Souls rpg: I suspect it's more playable if a) you're a fan of the books AND b) you're trying to play it in the year in which it was published. Does it at least detail various species well enough to use in other systems? Another odd one you might or might not like, if you can find it, is Jorune.

re Patrick Brady: My dad picked up the original boxed set of Empire of the Petal Throne, which I currently have. Politics aside, I think absorbing the setting would be more effort than I want to make as a GM, though I'd probably be fine playing if someone else were the GM, as I'd have to learn considerably less. I'm not sure which system would work, and while I probably could figure out any of the ones used for the setting, I'd rather do something more like Fate or original Over the Edge. Call of Cthulhu has the advantage of being set in some version of our world, which means it's a little easier to tweak things to avoid modeling Lovecraft's flaws.

re Brian Rogers re needing monsters to kill: In A&E, Mark Nemeth discussed how that shaped his game world. He wanted an exploration-centered game that (iirc; if not, and if he's reading this, he can correct me) didn't involve non-human species and the Evil Race, but did have monsters one could kill, and settled on a variety of demons (all of which he could explain better than I just did). re pied-piper-esque Puppeteer: That

totally works, and has a veneer of potentially-quite-creepy, which I think also works. re me re bundle script: Thanks!

JIM ECKMAN: re Worldbuilding: There is the Blade Runner rpg, but I'm not sure that's quite up for what you're looking for. Possibly Eclipse Phase? I'm also intrigued by upcoming games based on Adrian Tchaikovsky's books, though I know little about these: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/gshowitt/children-of-time-the-roleplaying-game>. And possibly the Ghost in the Shell RPG <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/manaprojectstudio/ghost-in-the-shell-roleplaying-game>, which is a different game than this: <https://www.backerkit.com/c/projects/mantic-games/the-ghost-in-the-shell-tabletop-roleplaying-game/pre-launch>. re me: Yes, I believe that is the series I mean.

GABRIEL ROARK: I like your title and the good parts of the reason for it. There's at least one mermaid rpg out there, probably more. Josh, our friend Stephen Tihor, and I wrote a larp set in Atlantis for the express purpose of being able to play in a hot tub and/or pool and/or sauna, although we have done dry runs (pun intentional).

SCRIBBLE M. HORROR: re Escape From Special Operations Complex #903: The galics may not have meant harm, but that arm certain seems to have belligerent!

DYLAN CAPEL: re Star Wars: For me, Rogue One has the best droid moments, but I'm at least a full season behind, likely more, on Mandalorian and haven't seen any of Andor nor most of the Clone Wars nor any of the other series and really have no idea where I'd start. I did write a Fate Accelerated character sheet for a Hutt Padawan for a Secret Santa character sheet exchange. re Backrooms: It sounds a bit like the Delta Green scenario Night Floors, which leads into the rest of the campaign of Impossible Landscapes.

re Dungeonhearts: It's interesting reading this now, having (relatively) recently read the D.I.E. comics and rpg. re commenting on the apa: I used to jot down notes on paper. Then, I just typed into a phone or tablet. During pandemic, I shifted back to laptop. Now, I have the base file on my laptop and upload to the cloud so I can work on it on my tablet, and I'll take notes on my phone, emailing them to myself.

re Realis: I'll try to remember to write about this. I may need to do a once or twice a year no-comments zine for this sort of thing, but I don't really like the idea. We shall see. re Brian Rogers: Ozymandias is definitely a valid path for someone going by "Puppeteer" to take. What you describe can be modeled in Fate and in GUMSHOE. I don't know about V&V, but I have

confidence in Brian. re Timothy Collinson: Thanks for the art library links.

AVRAM GRUMER: re Spikelbod: Use rice stalk/crystal dice for d4s and d8s. <https://crystalcaste.com/crystal-d4-sets.html> and <https://crystalcaste.com/crystal-7-pc-sets.html> should give you an idea of what they look like.

re GM who ended the dithering by cutting ahead and saying, "Okay, you did the thing. Now what?": As long as it makes sense, and as long as the players don't kick. I believe this is what is referred to as Aggressive Scene Framing.

Another tactic is the montage thing that Swords of the Serpentine uses for travel. It would go something like this:

GM: Okay, what obstacle did you hit in the process of doing this?

Player 1: [answer]

GM: Great! How did it get worse?

Player 2: [answer]

GM: And how did that get resolved?

Player 3: [answer]

And a third, of course, is using Forged in the Dark's Engagement Roll, as this is supposed to be exactly what it's there for. We know you're going to break the villain out, so the Engagement Roll sets up the situation right after you've done that.

re Fiasco: I'm not convinced that the new edition is harder to create playsets in, but I've not done it in either edition. re Going for Broke!: If this is the same Ennis we know, yup, they're full of energy and ideas. re the sock in the draw Brittany built in Minecraft: Ooh, I'd never be able to get something put there. What did the note say?

re the session after someone takes a 5th advance being the season ender: IIRC, when I ran Monsterhearts, we finessed this by a session or two so it would make more sense. JOSH, do I remember correctly? re Monsterhearts: LOL at "We're teenagers! We don't know [phone] numbers!" re the tornado: Yes, you did mention it in your previous zine. re "Statute-of-limitation laws exist for a reason": IIRC, they don't apply to murder. But facilitation of someone like Byron, yes.

re the sun's hand being four times Steffan's size: Reminds me of the story of a player saying his PC

would just stomp on the ant the GM said was in the room, as the GM hadn't yet made it clear that the ant was 6 feet tall. re the power and the senses: Ah, so *that's* what's been going on with the sound. re Drake having a motorcycle: Of course he does.

re Scum and Villainy: As of the most recent session, I think we became the Warydancer, as Von tried to finish the paint job. IIRC, Von got a new gun, possibly with Harmony's help, and named it "Better Than Bobby!" re Josh's knife thrower and sharp shooter: The character also said that the assistant didn't seem to like the idea of throwing knives at each other and shooting things off each other's head, and he didn't know why. He only drank a little, and it was All Under Control. (And then, the drinking became the least of it.)

re Gaylord's character never having stolen: The Ringmaster was very surprised by that. I'm not sure you wrote Gareth's response down correctly, but I'm also not sure what the actual response was. re jeweled doll: Once it was taken home, Gaylord's character lived in that home, and indeed, had always lived there. re the knife thrower sitting back up: Josh nailed the cheerful-creepy tone there. re narration: There wasn't a lot of dialogue, true, but we did narrate in first person most of the time.

re Roger Bell West re telenovela games: I discovered there's also *Pasiones y Tradiciones*. (see <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/424613/pasiones-y-traiciones-the-telenovela-simulator>) re me re Keep Your Cool: A partial success does lead to one of two end conditions. Either the character does the thing and accepts the vulnerability, or they don't. As for a success, hm... **checks book**... ah. Page 21 says: "Your question should pertain to the immediate situation, and the bonus you take Forward should resolve within the next couple scenes." I think I also mentally insert that the situation should now resolve: Either you use the information and do what you want to do, likely without the vulnerability, or you don't. In any of these cases, there shouldn't be a loop of using the move over and over for essentially the same bit.

re playing with Erick Wujcik: I didn't meet him at Noreascon 3. By the time I did meet him, at Gen Con, I think, I'm not sure I could have gotten into one of his games. I found him running one after hours one year, not Amber, I think, though likely using the same system. I couldn't join it, but I sat and watched/listened, though wasn't very enlightened as to what was going on. I vaguely think the players were in two competing groups?

re Erica Frank re "He hits you in your memories of grade school geometry class! Now you can't calculate bank-shot attacks!": There was an NPC who did something similar in Phoenix Dawn Command. The PCs'

abilities are usually "lessons", each of which is on a card. This NPC could take one of those cards from character. Fortunately, this proved temporary, but under some circumstances, it could have been permanent. re passing a PC to another player: Presuming the player is willing, what do I do for a PC now? Create a new one from scratch? Take the other player's PC? Read a book for a couple of sessions?

PATRICK ZOCH: re dancing: If you and your wife spend a year working on the basics, you'll be building a fine, strong foundation. This will pay off (no pun intended). Sympathy on the workplace situation. re Gaming with Grandkids: I agree that a laser pointer is very appropriate for Magical Kitties Save the Day. re Saltmarsh: What did the kidnappers get out of being persuaded to return the hostages?

ME: re salon on The Count of Monte Cristo: This turned out to be mostly me summarizing the book, but Josh said it was fine and also amusing. I've since read an rpg, The Slow Knife, that feels like a cross between For the Queen and Fiasco, where the PCs are the villains who framed the Knife for a crime the Knife didn't commit. The game ends when the Knife takes vengeance on them all.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: re Mazorra: "More than six hundred male patients": I didn't realize there were so many in the Mazorra, though possibly I should have. You probably did mention it, but still might want a population table near the beginning of the scenario—how many male and female patients, how many children vs adults, how many staff, what other groups there are, and so on. re that speech: I totally get why the men are willing to follow him!

re industrial hoses being artillery pieces to the General: He's not wrong. And armies have definitely gotten worse orders. Lots of good advice for the GM on running this section, what tactics to use, and so on. I've forgotten whether Leadership is a skill you created; likely previous installments address this. re El Rey wanting to make the uprising sound "lawful, organized, and merciful": Apart from folks at the Mazorra not panicing, what does this gain and avoid? Like, does it give an actual veneer of legitimacy?

re side bars on Gandia's and Cordero's men: Possibly because this is in installments, possibly not, I've lost track of which groups are what. You talk about a dozen of Gandia's men and 4 Porra loyalists, and I'm no longer sure (if I ever were) whether these are two different groups, if the latter's a subset of the former, what their original relationship with Cordero's people was, and who has which agenda (as well as which group wants the special children and who know about this and may or may not be trying to cooperate in this

matter). You may need to specify, but I need to look at the full scenario (once it exists) to be sure.

The description of the troops surrounding the Manse and the delivery of the letter and the reactions to it are great, though the next draft may need to make it a bit more PC-centric. That's for later; get everything written first. re the treasure: Under what circumstances would Cordero speak openly about this? As written, he clearly is trying to be secretive.

There's a sewer entrance *inside* the Manse, correct? I gather Esperanza doesn't want to or isn't allowed to leave the Manse and the Mazorra at this point? I ask because the order is that she and the doctor and others considered innocents be "released". re the error of leaving the storm drain panel open: This is where? Also, the PCs, if present, may keep this error from happening, yes?

re Vault Doom clock: What is "light proof"? What's a bone drift? The maps will need to show the default positions of the folks near the Charnel Sink and what the range for various dangers to them are. re Claudio: Given the collapsing floor, what does he want happening with the money? Is he ultimately loyal to the Porra or to Machado? Does a social roll work (Charm, Bargain, Intimidate, etc)? If so! Regular or Hard success, bonus or penalty dice?

What happens to folks who descended into the Charnel Sink when the Doom Clock reaches 0? If the Baron is in play, does he go after those taking evidence who intend to use it to punish the guilty? Ah, I see: They need to declare their intent. Does it matter whether they lie? Also, while it reads like you really want the PCs in the vault, I presume it's fine if they ignore its lure or are elsewhere? If that happens, do you have a default in mind or is the intent that GMs should decide how things shake down? If the latter, what are the questions they should quickly answer so as to keep things moving?

re Haunter of the Dark: Whether or not HPL formally sought permission to insert Bloch into the story, I'm pretty sure the man was delighted. re Erica Frank re "what does failure cost, who gets hurt, what is lost, and how does the hero's legend survive or change?": There are rpgs that examine these questions, but I'm not entirely sure which ones to recommend to you. Can you give me some idea of how the Doc Savage stories answer them? (I'm currently thinking of the original edition of *With Great Power*, but I'm not sure I love that as an example, both because I don't know if it does what you have in mind and because I don't have a firm enough grasp on the mechanics.)

re Joshua Kronengold: I really like the idea of working with Othello to set boundaries for Baron Kriminal's

moral jurisdiction. re me: Nod. The best playtest is the hardest to set up: Putting the material in someone's hands to run. re Michael Cule re "insula": Having worked with a lot of Cthulhu Invictus material, I have the advantage of familiarity with the context.

re Roger Bell_West re the practicalities of running Mazorra: It's doable. You need a GM with enough confidence and craft mastery, players willing to do this, and enough time for what is at least a mini-campaign. A weird alternative option is to turn it into a gamebook, but I think the Miskatonic Repository route is probably better—unless you catch a publisher's eye and they're willing to do the heavy lifting. Happy Birthday! re typos: This is why you get someone to edit your work once it gets that ambitious.

PETER HILDRETH: Glad you made it! Welcome!

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re Dangerous Refuge: The first two runs didn't break the school or have the students graduate early. It's currently only 40% break school and/or early graduation/escape. re Games that are Bad for You: Yes. I don't want them eating your life. I stopped playing Fallen London because I could feel it trying to eat mine. re Patrick Brady: I think we still have GOO Tekumel. I'll check.

re Brian Rogers re pilots and running a cross between Star Wars and Fast and Furious: That's kind of the way I was playing Marius in Beth's Hub game, isn't it? A highly competent doctor with great shooting skills, his own ship, and a hobby of racing said ship. Oh, and Family was Very Important to him.

re Patrick Riley re Connections in Good Society belonging to the person who plays them, not the person who created them: Definitely! Neko took the Connection I envisioned as using my Main Character as a stepping stone for social climbing and decided he was utterly in love with my character. This make my character's life delightfully complicated, likely more so than if the Connection had just been using him.

re me re your thinking behind repurposing the Brindlewood Bay mystery solving mechanic: Ah, I see. That makes sense, and I'd not seen the path there. re the larper who said they'd never larped before: My assumption had been that they were joking. It's just that the GM's reaction was utter bogglement, apparently not believing it was a joke, and asking us why the larper did that. re whether Peter Hildreth is Beetlejuice: You can ask him!

re Wujcik's Amber re "Good Stuff shouldn't mean no plot ever happens to the PC ever but instead that different plot happens to the PC because they're not cursed (which does mean that the PC isn't rewarded that much more for having 50 Good Stuff than having

10, because plot still needs to happen)": All of that would be fine. However, the example in the core rulebook is of him putting a character with Good Stuff through all kinds of hell, to the point where the player was ready to quit. That he didn't is a tribute to Wujcik's charisma (he said something like "you're taking this character in a really interesting direction!", and I can well believe that swayed the player, as I'd met the man), but not so much to his gming, IMO.

I've been told by some who played with him that he viewed taking Good Stuff (whether or not he consciously thought of it that way or not) as cheating and essentially punished the player for it, and that the thing to do was take as much Bad Stuff as necessary to build the character you wanted, as he'd hit you with hell anyway, and this way, at least you got to have your character be powerful.

re the Smallville Cortex rmap we came up with: Wow, that is actually readable. I suspect I'm still going to go for hand drawing, but someone else can make the computer version. re why the PCs are so important: Basically, yes. re Blue Rose and how unicorns should be associated with bisexuality: In our world, yes. In the world of Blue Rose, I'm not sure, as my point is it should be different from ours. Either way, though, homosexuality or bisexuality, they missed an opportunity.

I think the comments on name level clerics and "I like dying" were intended for Attronarch. re Avram Grumer re "Descire: [sic] make sure nobody knows I don't have real mage" is bad; it doesn't drive you to do anything, only not to do anything.": What about the game *You're (Not) A Wizard*, where the premise is that *all* of the PCs are at wizard school, but *none* of them have magic? re pushing *Monsterhearts* harder in the direction of interrogating/investigating the "how" of magic and supernatural stuff in the fiction: If that's where a group's interest lies, I'd advise playing *Monster of the Week* (possibly with one or more of the many, many variant rule tweaks to expand what the game can do).

re Erica Frank re systems that let you run a game that feels like a Patricia McKillip novel: Everway. There are almost certainly others now, and I'll see if I can come up with more, but Everway is the one I pointed to when it came out and said, "I can model LeGuin and McKillip with this."

JIM VASSILAKOS: re Timothy Collins re recording sessions: So long as one has permission, we have the tech for this, yes. I've played in several online and convention games where the GM requested permission to record the session.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Congratulations on your daughter's wedding. re the tough crowd: Any reason

the speech wasn't given while folks had food and drink to consume? Heck, one would expect at least drink for toasting purposes. I'm enjoying your zine. I don't always have a lot to say about convention reports, but I like reading them. re me: I'm glad that was useful.

IGTHEME for Issue #14 – July 21st: Intraparty Conflict will have to wait. Short version: As long as there's no bad feeling among the players, this can work. The players are more important than the game.

GAMING WRITE UP: I don't have time to write one. However, I have already written an overview of the various mini-campaigns in my run of Dracula Dossier for my players, so I present that here.

Pre-2026 Dracula Dossier Campaign History

Stoker: First Blood: Written up in This Isn't the Zine You're Looking For #303 Alarums & Excursions #494 and on my wiki with convention scenario write ups here:
https://www.labcats.org/drcpunk/wiki/index.php/Stoker:_First_Blood

I didn't run this, and honestly, likely never would have, as I don't quite follow the scenario and to this day, don't understand exactly what the backstory is or how the character I played (Karem Amanoglu) fit into it. That didn't keep me from enjoying playing it at Dreamation 2015.

The part that made it into my Dracula Dossier: Aviatrix played George Stoker, M. D. (Bram Stoker's brother, actual person) and Stoker's report is what focused Edom's attention on Dracula, iirc (the history of my Dracula Dossier world grew over time, and this was not the first time Edom was interested in recruiting a vampire). Her Stoker became delightfully obsessed with what he was learning ("I have conquered death!" and fantasized about his rewards ("Oh no, Your Majesty, a duchy is too much! A barony is more than enough!"). He became an NPC in the 1894 leg, part Renfield, part other things.

1889: Paris Exhibition:
https://www.labcats.org/rpg/index.php/September_17_2015. Aviatrix created a Fiasco set for this, and we had a blast creating relationships between the 1894 characters in what started as a lighthearted romp and wound up a somewhat more serious consideration of the problems of a woman with artistic talent. I planted a couple of seeds for the 1894 leg.

1894: This introduced EDOM, Dracula, and various other interesting details, such as Misselthwaite Manor, the faeries, Carmilla, Mrs. Pat (actual historical figure, also a PC), and so on. I'd not intended to have any named characters from the novel other than Dracula

himself, but I did wind up deciding that there was a Dr. Seward of St. Ignatius, and let one of the players summon Van Helsing, who is actually Edward Kelley, partner of Sir John Dee, who's also around. George and Bram Stoker both appeared, George in St. Ignatious.

The PCs were:

- **Roxana Maria Renfield (nee Craven):** Married the man who wound up with her family home in Whitby and went with him to the faeries. (Despite the name, which Stoker clearly used, she's nothing like Renfield from the book, nor is her husband.)
- **Sebastian Wimsy:** Basically, a riff on Peter Wimsy. At the end of the campaign, he joined EDOM, hoping to reform it from within. (His mother was a member, and I based her very loosely on Sybilla Crawford from the Lymond books. I don't think I'd finished the series by then.)
- **Hermann August Sager:** Roxanna's half-sibling. After the campaign, he trained her son in the ways of hunting vampires, and then joined Roxanna and her husband with the faeries. (While not American, he's been there and Quincy is probably partly inspired by him.)
- **Gabriel Arthur Godolphin Osborne (replacement PC for Roxana):** Fictional younger son of the Duke of Leeds. He started engaged to Sebastian's former fiancé (and furious at Sebastian for reasons related to Sebastian being the *former* fiancé. At the end of the campaign, Gabriel and tried to get his fiancé and her brother out of EDOM's reach. (Elements of him wound up in both Arthur and Quincy, I think.)
- **Beatrice Campbell, aka Mrs. Pat:** Actress, real person. In this world, she got bitten by a vampire enthralled to the vampire Carmilla, but recovered when that vampire was killed. After the campaign, she went to Carmilla and said, "So, your lieutenant died, and that means you have an opening." Carmilla accepted the job application.
- **Liesl Rosenzweig:** Alienist who lept at the chance to psychoanalyze Dracula. My Dracula loves learning about new fields of knowledge, so he permitted this. She ultimately decided that Dracula had shown no signs of empathy or humanity, and as he vanished into mist, as disappointed with her as she was with him, she said she'd been his last chance, and I decided that she might well have been correct. She eventually went on to help found an Israeli group to deal with vampires and other supernatural creatures.

[Not summarized:

1920s: Masks of Nyarlathotep (a run I had nothing to do with, but one player ported their PC into the campaign, so it's in continuity), Tatters of the King
1930s: Eternal Lies (had the PC from Masks of Nyarlathotep and one from Tatters of the King plus a couple others making cameos as NPCs, often with input

from their players), Asylum (some of the PCs from Eternal Lies)]

1940: I used an Achtung! Cthulhu scenario, changing the location to Romania and improvised. The PCs were sent into Romania to recruit Dracula to work for the Allies. This... actually did not go terribly. Also, Ken Hite recommended to me the one decent book written in English about Romania in WWII that I'd find readable, Athenee Palace, which sparked some over the top vampire conspiracy ideas in me.

The PCs were:

- **Joyce Summers:** Pilot, horror survivalist
- **Dexter Raymond:** Private eye, as one of the players liked the character from Cthulhu Confidential. We decided Dexter had inherited a castle in Romania, which is why he was with the other PCs.
- **Vito de Genarra:** Mobster, knows Joyce from shared mythos encounters, and knows "Dexie" from the old neighborhood, to Dexter's chagrin, as he moved away from it to get out from being part of the mob's extended family.
- **Isabella Hildesheim:** cousin to Liesl Rosenzweig (NOT played by the same player)
- **Hedy Lamarr:** Yes, the actual person. She accidentally tapped into EDOM's radio communication about the plan to recruit Dracula to fight the Nazis in Romania, contacted the organization to explain what she had learned and how EDOM might patch the holes in its security, and to tell it that she was joining the mission.
- **Quimby Pockets:** Actual EDOM agent, protege of Sebastian (again, NOT played by the same player)

Orlock, Alraune, Theodorus Trebonianus Dee/Baron Vordenburg, and Zalozhniy appeared, as did Carmilla (who bit Dexter) and Iulia Hasdeau (historical figure, a brilliant woman who died very young, exactly Carmilla's type, so I decided Carmilla had made her a vampire), Van Helsing/Kelley, and also King Michael of Romania and a young Christopher Lee. Also, a shoggoth and a chthonian put in an appearance, although I don't think anyone saw the chthonian, which was just as well for them.

1948: The Carmilla Sanction: an actual scenario written for Dracula Dossier, although, like all of these, it avoids dealing directly with Dracula (and chooses my least favorite vampire type—Dracula Dossier introduced the Telleuric Vampire and then decided not to use it ever). The scenario is solid, even if I was a bit shaky running some parts. It's one part Eiger Sanction (I should see the movie—I read the book, but the movie may be more vamp-y, and I've forgotten a lot of details of the book) and two parts The Third Man. Orson Welles even made a cameo appearance. (Joyce: Hey! He owes me money!) Basically, EDOM decided it

was time to get serious about killing Carmilla (which probably had something to do with Mrs. Pat selling Carmilla out to EDOM)—who had created a dozen duplicates, 12 women who were (mostly) not vampires.

The PCs were:

- Joyce Summers
- Hedy Lamarr
- Vito de Genarra
- Isabella Hildesheim
- Karin Feirsinger: Childhood friend of Hedy Lamarr. Karin's family had been killed by cultists, so she learned how to fight against them and those like them, and was contacted and recruited by EDOM recruited for this mission.

The PCs killed Carmilla killed, Isabella recruited a woman Carmilla'd turned into a vampire, Joyce killed a Nazi woman, and Karin tried to kill a Nazi man. Alraune showed up again.

In epilogues, Vito told Dex he was now free from any influence of Carmilla. Karin returned to her empty family home and sat in a chair, looking at portraits of her dead husband and children. Isabella talked to the newly recruited vampire. Hedy and Joyce, who'd become lovers at the end of the 1940 leg, continued their relationship, at least for a time. Joyce taught Hedy how to shoot. They got into several fights over Joyce's refusal to sign a loyalty oath so that the USA would let her back in, with Hedy offering/threatening to sign it for her.

[Not summarized: 1954: Night Forms a Cover for Sinners, aka the search for the Fountain of Youth in Puerto Rico, and the merging of that bit of folklore with the Lord Ruthven folklore. This scenario appears in Tales of the Caribbean from Golden Goblin Press, and was originally set in the 1920s, but moving it was easy.]

1971: Blood Coda: Dracula sends a troupe of ballet dancers to Britain. Of course, there's a vampire or so in the troupe.

The PCs were:

- **Professor Kyle McKay:** This Oxford University professor ran into vampires in Ireland, explaining both how he was recruited and where he got combat experience, alas.
- **Albert "Bertie" Banks:** Photographer in the Rock and Roll scene, learned that Jimi Hendrix was a vampire, and killed him, doing so by teaming up with
- **Eartha Kitt:** Yes, THE Eartha Kitt, played by the same person who played Mrs. Pat and Hedy Lamarr, continuing the tradition of playing real world badass actresses.

- **Tabitha Westenra:** Actual agent assigned to the ballet troupe. Aware of the novel Dracula (look at her last name, and also, leaning into that, she named her cat Bram), but not about EDOM or that vampires were real.

1977: The third official leg of the campaign, the Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Vampire one. This took 2 sessions, and the first one actually felt like something from the book/movie at points. The question was: Who was Dracula's mole in EDOM?

The PCs were:

- **Sebastian Wimsy:** Unnaturally old, the Smiley character, brought out of retirement to find the mole in EDOM
- **Starchild:** The current identity of Mrs. Pat, vampire, currently working with her old friend Sebastian
- **Tabitha Westenra:** Now part of EDOM
- **Albert "Bertie" Banks:** Photographer and vampire hunter
- **Otto Bacall (Otika Baccallu):** Romanian double agents convincing his bosses that, no, really, he's turning Tabitha

In the end, a child vampire was killed, the mole was (probably) found, and it was discovered that there is a way for vampires to show up on cameras at least some of the time.

- Otto to went to Paris.
- Bertie went off the grid.
- Tabitha reported that both factions in EDMO were terrible and should be kept chasing each other's tail. She was made Station Chief Bucharest.
- Starchild attended and possibly gave concerts and created a new persona for herself.— concerts plus new persona
- Sebastian went back to gardening and living his unnaturally long (but not vampiric) life.

[The faerie cult is now the star children cult, there's Dee's faction and Sebastian's faction, and there are distant relatives of Roxanne now, one of whom is a sculptor.]

1980: The Slayer Elite: This scenario used pre-gen characters, recruited to carry out three missions against EDOM. Midway through the second mission, they decided they didn't trust their employer and hadn't signed on to be assassins. (It helped that the two pre-gens not chosen were the nastiest.) So they made common cause with EDOM agent Quimby Pockets, now an NPC, and subtly sabotaged the third mission. And they learned that their employer was a vampire, Ruthven, and dealt with him permanently. At this point, I asked folks in the facebook group for Dracula Dossier what I was doing wrong, as my vampires seemed too

easy to kill, and learned how I should have been playing them.

1989: Four Days of the Bat: The agents had to rescue an agent in East Berlin just before the Berlin Wall came down.

The PCs were:

- **Tabitha Westenra:** Now a high ranked agent
- **Odon Bernard (Otto Baccallu):** Ballet teacher, not at all a former spy who left England in a hurry in 1977, nope, working again with Tabitha
- **William Bartholomine Davies (WBD):** Blackmailed into helping Tabitha
- **Heidi Mohr:** Real world person, not an actress, but a UEFA soccer champion, also working with Tabitha

Here's where I started to learn to play the opposition correctly. There were Renfields (yeah, Roxanne would've hated the way the term was used) and a not-really-vampire vampire, and they were tough opponents now. Despite this and despite Tabitha being utterly ruthlessly willing to let the lost agent die if need be, the group prevailed and rescued the agent, and got the deed to either Castle Dracula or the land where the Scholomance stands—I need to check my notes (unless someone in that one-shot remembers).

2005: The Moldavian Candidate: Not one of my best efforts at gming. Most of that was me, though there are a couple of parts where the scenario could have used more detail and/or fewer assumptions about what the agents will do or what the opposition will know.

The agents are sent to look into a British peer who a) had a psychotic break, b) left England afterwards, and c) recently disappeared, iirc. He had connections to a Mysterious Woman who turned out to be Iulia Hasdeu (now working for Dracula, as Carmilla was dead). She ran a spa under an alias and was trying to create, well, the Moldavian Candidate using a combination of hypnotism and biologically modified ants, iirc. While she escaped, the agents stopped not one, but two "candidates" from causing trouble.

The PCs were:

- **William Bartholomine Davies (WBD):** Mostly retired military, now a web programmer
- **Angela Jolie:** Continuing the real world actress trend
- **Smiley:** Not the one from Le Carre. One of the pre-gens from Slayer Elite, now working, at least sometimes, for EDOM.
- **Alan Jones:** Newly a spy
- **Tabitha Westenra:** Knighted and living with her baroness lover—at least until the epilogue in which she discovered that the baroness was the second

"Moldavian candidate", whereupon she utterly ruthlessly had the baroness confined to a mental institution.

2015: This was supposed to be the finale, but this annoying pandemic happened, and I discovered that I'm not up to running Night's Black Agents well via Zoom. Additionally, when we went on hiatus while Josh and I created Agents of the Night, I realized that I needed to recalibrate the endgame. For purposes of restarting the campaign, unless the players who were in this leg and are in the next one decide to play their characters again, I'm probably going to have these PCs' fates be something to be discovered (possibly even by me) in play.

The PCs were:

- **Elsie Clarke:** EDOM Agent, an analytic analyst
- **Amir Sa'id (aka Adam Seeger):** Explosives expert with a connection to Tabitha Westenra, though I'm currently vague on what that connection was. (I think he'd done work for her or she trained him or something?)
- **Rivka (Becca) Vered:** Psychologist, not a descendant of Liesl, but a thematic return to the beginning for the player
- **Jennifer James:** Albert "Bertie" Banks's daughter, EDOM Agent: a hitter, basically
- **Lodi Loder:** Hedy Lamarr's granddaughter, engineer

I was using a combination of The Zalozhnyi Quartet and The Harker Intrusion, kinda reshuffled.

We started at Christopher Lee's birthday party, where Lodi introduced him to Becca, as he wanted to see a good therapist, but before he could make the first meeting with her, well, he got killed off and the PCs got the Dossier, aka the annotated Dracula Dossier. Also, I moved the opening of ZQ to London as well, so weird Zalozhnyi (a walking dead person that's not exactly a vampire) thing happened there.

They rescued journalist Agi Kozorus, marked for death by the Lisky Bratva who worked with a Dr. Dorjiev and did human trafficking. This led to a monastery in the area (Hungary/Romania) with something with too many tentacles in a well and various files of information, including about Zalozhnyi.

From there, the group found the Scholomance and learned some stuff. This led them to do a heist with various dubious allies at the Koernersbank in Zurich, winding up with goods despite monsters and treachery. Oh, and one of their allies wound up dead, and they never did figure out who killed the man. Then they got to Vienna, trying to help Philby's old handler defect, which involved dealing with at least one actual vampire and trying to rescue his granddaughter

from an upcoming kidnapping attempt. All of this was in motion when we went on hiatus.

The Dubai Reckoning: An actual Edom operation rescuing a man for his wife. Neither were good people, but neither were originally working for vampires or other weird beings. By the end, the Agents had one or both of the couple on EDOM's payroll, possibly as a double agent, and had dealt with vampires (oddly non-lethally) and a K'n-yani person (I think lethally).

The PCs were:

- **Neal Edge:** Analyst
- **Benny:** Hacker, who hacked into EDOM's computers and joined the organization that way. She could also create a cover of someone rich enough to vacation in Dubai
- **Oliver Green:** Hitter, who when first meeting Benny asked, "What is this, bring your kid to work day?" He created a cover as a security guard temp worker and did well enough that the company he'd gotten the others into really liked him and would hire him again in a heartbeat.

This was the first outing of Agents of the Night, the hack of Swords of the Serpentine that Josh and I created for Night's Black Agents. It worked well, and we hope to use it again for the hopefully actually the finale this time.

Currently, we have:

Benny: Still working for EDOM

Yves Briller: A dancer, student of Otto (who is now deceased)

Unnamed Chef: Sole survivor when some rich clients ate the caterers, working with Yves on a new diet to bring Yves to the peak of his skill

Unnamed Journalist: Possibly being manipulated by Benny into looking into Certain Things

Nyx: Rock star who saw something she shouldn't have

Hopefully, the unnamed characters will be named and started up and we'll do an intro session to feel out where everyone's starting from.

Strategies for Addressing Intraparty Conflict

Jim Vassilakos

One thing I've found is that the *laissez-faire* style of GMing that I've come to adopt¹ relatively early in my experience with being an idiot storyteller (or, to be more charitable, a faith-based storyteller)² is that it tends to allow, and perhaps even encourages, intraparty conflict.

AD&D was just coming out around the time I started tabletop roleplaying, so while I started with Basic D&D's blue book³ (the first dungeon I played was the one in the rules), I soon graduated to AD&D's Players Handbook, Monster Manual, and DMG, more or less the Holy Trinity for TTRPGers back in the early 80s.⁴

The early 80s were a great time for TTRPGs, in part, I think, because there were so few RPGs available and fewer still that could possibly compete with AD&D. There was a definite first-entrant advantage, given the nature of the consumer market, and this made it easier to find players if your main game was AD&D.⁵ And Dungeon Masters were in such demand — which, to me, doesn't really make sense, but whatever — you could be a novice DM, making every novice mistake one could dream of, and yet people would stay in your game, even though the whole thing was basically math, reading comprehension, strategy and debate.

For me and my friends, it taught us to do head-math in simulated battles until it became second nature. It also taught us to read, comprehend, and then argue about the meaning of ambiguously worded rules. And my guess, for what little it may be worth, is this sustained engagement by

young people in what was essentially an imaginative, semi-intellectual pursuit was largely due to AD&D's Skinner Box⁶ of experience points and level advancement, which together enhanced player engagement, but which also made the game notoriously difficult to GM as PCs advanced to the point of having godlike powers.

As a GM, there came a point where after running so many dungeons, some of them pre-canned and others of my own invention, I started to lose interest. You might say I became lazy, and I don't know that you'd be wrong. It was impossible to stay excited indefinitely, because at some point, I could see the ridiculous juvenility of the whole thing. I, at times, had succumbed to it as well, but eventually the aspect of GMing that gave me the most pleasure was the unexpected turn of events, where something emerged that I hadn't planned, which, indeed, was often better than whatever I had planned. But this could only happen if I let go of the plot — whatever I had determined the game would be about — to the extent necessary to allow the players to somehow collectively make that determination for themselves.

I have to tell you, there was a bit of trial and error, because one thing that tends to happen when you really hand over the game to the players is that they will have conflicting visions of what the game should be about, although in one way, they tend to all think the same, which is that the game should be about their character. In their minds, their character should be the main character. And that naturally leads to interparty conflict.

I've seen it happen as a pre-teen.⁷ And I've seen it happen with college students. It's happened in games I've GMed as well as games in which I was a player, both face-to-face as well as PBEMing. Obviously, it doesn't necessarily happen with every campaign, but there is a certain centrifugal force I've detected. Granted, there's also a centripetal force. The two are in opposition, and IMHO a good GM learns how to manage these forces, in part to preserve the campaign, but also to allow the game to be fun on an individual basis. Which, of course, means giving each player time to shine, and in particular the ability to do so in his or her own preferred way.⁸

1 See my comment to Myles Corcoran in E&A #4, page 186.

2 See my comment to Michael Cule about the Art of Fate on page 5 of my, Timothy's & Conrad's zine in A&E #580.

3 The Holmes Edition.

4 To be honest, I am somewhat annoyed to be using this term, as back then, we all referred to D&D as simply an RPG. When computer RPGs came along, they were initially referred to as CRPGs to distinguish them from their analog ancestors. But after perhaps a decade or two, there were so many CRPGers compared to *regular* RPGers, the CRPGers started to refer to computer RPGs as RPGs and to themselves as RPGers — even though the acronym had already been claimed — which meant that us comparatively fewer tabletop RPGers either had to find ourselves a new acronym or embrace the confusion and try to wait the bastards out. Needless to say, my use of the term feels somewhat like a capitulation, but despite what Joshua said to Erica last issue, I've decided to go ahead and use it for the sake of clarity.

5 See Ryan Dancey's thoughts on network externalities in my comment to Spike Jones on the 12th page of my, Timothy's & Conrad's zine in A&E #570.

6 Brian Rogers used this term in E&A #12, page 48, in response to my comment to Avram Grumer in E&A #10, page 186.

7 I'm guessing I was about eleven or maybe twelve at the time I started GMing.

8 IMHO, a *roleplayer* whose PC is rewarded with a magic item devoid of personality isn't *really* being rewarded.

One thing I'll also add to this that will probably be controversial or at least won't make everyone happy is that often the people with the most innate roleplaying talent (because it is a social skill) are often the same players who are most likely to take over the game. These same people would probably make the best GMs IMHO, but that doesn't always happen. In fact, I'd argue it rarely happens, but I have no statistics, only my own experience, which is no doubt skewed. Nonetheless, I've come to think that some people just have the ability, through their social skills and their force of personality, to socially dominate, and it may even be instinctive for them to do so in situations where nobody else is. And so in games where they perceive that the GM isn't firmly holding the reins, they and their character can have a grand old time.

Is this necessarily bad? It depends. Is it enhancing or detracting from the enjoyment of the other players? As a GM you've really got to at least attempt to think about each player's/PC's point of view. If everyone seems to be enjoying the alpha-player's antics, you might play into it. But be aware that you, as the GM, only have so much attention to go around.

Depending on the size and personalities of your group, you may have one or more players who just sit there, waiting for their turn to roll the dice or waiting for the loudest person in the group to shut-up so they can say and/or perhaps even do something. Part of the reason combat is popular for these players may be because it's a community activity in which everyone can get involved, whether or not they have any talent with respect to roleplaying. Everyone has a chance to individually shine.

That's what they all want... the opportunity *to individually shine*.

I believe people come to TTRPGs (and D&D in particular) because they want to feel a reflection of the power and prestige awarded to their character as he or she becomes a hero.⁹ Maybe it's not 100% of players¹⁰, but IMO it's the vast majority, and it's true regardless of whether you're dealing with hack-n-slashers or true roleplayers. The question is whether their heroism can be interwoven with the heroism of the other characters in the party.

Can you as a GM get that to happen? Or are you the type of GM who allows an alpha-player to emerge and then allows that player to dominate the game?

There is an understandable temptation, when GMing, to pay the most attention to the player who seems to be adding the most to the campaign. But if your attitude toward the

9 ...often through the commission of serious felonies and other questionable behavior.

10 There are, of course, players who just want to be sociable and have a bit of fun, but IMO, if they're given the opportunity to guide their PC to heroism, however they happen to define it, that's what they'll do, and they'll become more engrossed in the game if that happens.

other players is "sink or swim," then you may be setting up a situation where one or two of them will probably challenge the alpha-player at some point, and when that happens, you'll have an intraparty conflict on your hands.

In order to avoid the appearance of favoritism, GMs will often take a guardedly neutral stance with respect to such conflicts, which they themselves may have had a hand in creating. Ideally, I think, GMs should not only act without conscious favoritism, but they should also be on guard against unconscious favoritism, such as the favoritism shown by paying *more attention* to one player than another. After all, each PC is an instrument through which each player interacts with the campaign world, and so to give more attention to one than another is to slant the universe in a particular player's favor.

Ideally, in the best of all worlds, the GM should try to get the campaign to be about the growing mutual respect between the PCs as well as how they resolve personal differences for the benefit of the party as a whole. But, unfortunately, that doesn't always happen.

It may, in part, simply be a tragedy of the commons. After all, there's only so much of the GM's attention to go around, and so whoever plants their flag there first and firmest will be the most likely to get a disproportionate share. Every socially capable player who understands they're dealing with a lazy DM/GM, one who doesn't even have a fixed idea of what their own game is about, will intuitively grasp the opportunity for extreme self-adoration, at least in the reflective context that it's only a game.

And can you really blame them? I mean, in a way, it's a good thing. They're trying to take greater ownership of the campaign. Instead of simply being reactive, they're becoming proactive. But there's always that danger of it bringing out their inner asshole.

As a GM, I not only tolerated this but even allowed it to continue to the point of losing good players. It would be fair to ask me, "Jim, why did you do this?" And the reason was that I was committed to this style of *laissez-faire* GMing. I was so committed to this idea of remaining neutral and allowing the players to decide the course of events that I was willing to allow intraparty conflicts to escalate unchecked.

Was this a mistake? Yes, almost certainly it was, and I made it repeatedly. And, as I said, I also experienced it as a player, so I understood it from both sides of the fence.

I eventually attempted to edit PBEM logs into semi-passable fiction, and at some point it became obvious to me that single-player campaigns provided the best raw material in terms of forming a cohesive narrative.¹¹ Of course, they also cured the problem of intraparty conflict, but that wasn't the reason I began thinking about 1PMG¹² frameworks.

11 See "Flipping the Player-to-GM Ratio" on pages 4-5 of my zine in A&E #532.

It's just a fact that our storytelling traditions tend to focus on specific heroes, not a Super Friends¹³ but rather Superman or Batman¹⁴. Perhaps this is due to some fundamental limitation of most people's intelligence, a sort of common denominator going back a long time, and perhaps TTRPGs in their traditional social framework of MP1G¹⁵ is a natural evolution or even an attempt by Fate to lead our culture toward multi-character storytelling. Indeed, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is another example, and seeing as it serves as one of D&D's most important inspirations, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. But the fact remains, single-character narratives are easier to follow, and given the limited amount of GM attention available to be shared among the players and their characters, there exists a natural temptation for each player to try to make his or her PC the main character. Therefore, to GMs who are still TTRPGing the traditional way (using the traditional MP1G framework), allow me to offer the following advice, and I'd also be very curious to hear yours.

If the players start fighting, determine if it's in-character or out-of-character, and make sure all parties agree on this framework for the argument. If for anyone it becomes personal, then pause the game and talk about it out-of-character, to see if a compromise solution can be realistically reached.

If one says, "my character wouldn't do that," then they're putting the simulated universe above the real one. You as GM have to decide whether or not this flies, and it's something you might also want to determine for yourself and communicate to your players before the campaign even starts. If you're not sure because, like me, you're too lazy to make a decision, you could even have the party vote on it right there at the beginning of the campaign.

Should the GM actively prevent player infighting? If so, to what extent? (A) No. (B) Yes, by pausing play to discuss out-of-character. (C) Yes, by twisting the universe to help or hinder. (D) Yes, (by some other means).

Having some ground rules for an activity into which adults are sinking their limited spare time is entirely reasonable. But let's say you forgot to do this, and so there are no ground rules, and so you have to decide on the spur

12 https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/1PMG_Roleplaying.pdf

13 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Friends

14 Sorry, Robin. Since we already have all these Batman Movies, maybe there should be a movie specifically about Robin. Personally, I'd be more likely to watch that than another Batman. Speaking of which, are there RPGs about sidekicks? I can think of my *My Life with Master*, but is there anything in the superhero genre?

15 Multiple Players, 1 GM.

of the moment, in the middle of the players having serious intraparty conflict.

Well, the first thing you need to do is stall for time, because, you know, who knows what's right? If you want to keep the group together, some sort of negotiation probably needs to occur. But you might not necessarily want to force them to negotiate while their characters are at each others' throats. So what you need to do is to get their attention by attacking their PCs. Yes, I know I've talked about how much I hate combats in previous issues, but this is actually the best moment to introduce one.

If they don't all fully participate, you probably know which one is most likely to quit the campaign. And if one takes the sudden call to battle as an opportunity to backstab their rival, you'll know who's the most treacherous. File that away for future reference, and if someone needs to be jettisoned to make the problem go away, you now have a good candidate.

But hopefully neither of these things happen, at which point, after they're done cooperating to defeat whatever you hit them with, just as they're about to go back to their prior conflict, you say something like, "Hey, would you guys like to consider resolving this out-of-character." At which point, if they accept, it's no longer about their characters but rather about the game itself as well as their friendship, potential or otherwise.

If they can come to a compromise, great. If not, consider if you can make whatever they're fighting about moot or see if you can imagine a way it could be otherwise resolved.

For example, in that scene I mentioned to Timothy last issue, where we (as our Traveller PCs) were arguing in-character over the life of an NPC, we voted and IMO the good guys lost.¹⁶ But what would have happened if one or more of us were so opposed to letting the planetary security forces kill this NPC that he/she/they were willing to violate the outcome of that party vote, because it's "what my character would do" in that situation?

Should the GM step in to resolve it or step back to let the cards fall where they may? If you're a *laissez-faire* GM like me, you probably lean toward the latter, but the first option (the GM stepping in) is worth considering, and sometimes it can be done in a way that mimics fiction.

Consider the situation. There's this so-far unnamed NPC who, for whatever reason, a couple members of the party want to save from being killed. He was working as a security guard at a top secret research station, so you know the guy probably had a pretty high security clearance. In any case, he somehow got exposed to whatever mind-altering drug the chief doctor/scientist was playing with and

16 See the last three pages of my zine in A&E #533, available at <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>. You can also listen to it. See 533vas - *Traveller Session Snippet* (2019-08-28).mp3 in the same MEGA cloud folder.

ended up as this war zombie, basically a fount of never-ending rage in the form of a man.

Two players in the group want to save this guy, not out of any benefit to themselves but rather because it just feels like the right thing to do. Meanwhile, the doctor, the planetary defense forces, and a majority of the players just want to move on. Go ahead and let the ill-fated NPC be put to death. The deader the better.

The doctor/scientist doesn't want the guy alive, because she has no way to turn him back to normal, and his very existence might expose her research, which is supposed to be top secret, so as far as she's concerned, he's just the unfortunate collateral damage of scientific advancement. As for the planetary guards, they don't especially want him alive either, because they get paid the same either way, and it's far easier to transport a dead person than a live one who doesn't want to be transported.¹⁷

So that's a lot of people who want to kill his poor fellow, this poor, raging war zombie, who thanks to science now has rather limited employment opportunities, not to mention his romantic life. Meanwhile, there's these two annoying do-gooders who want to derail the campaign. What's a GM to do?

Well, maybe you could have a scene where the NPC is being beaten to within an inch of his life, and it's within earshot of the players as they're having their heated argument. They can either ignore it, possibly take part, or they can try to stop it from happening. They can even have the inter-PC argument in-character in front of the security forces who intend to kill this guy due to his *resisting arrest*.¹⁸

If either aforementioned do-gooder gets in the way, the top security officer present tells the PCs, point blank, not to get involved or they'll be next. How do the PCs respond, collectively as well as individually?

You might think, "Oh... Jim, why are you making it even worse? Do you want your players to fight?" I want them to reveal who their characters really are.

Just as one of the security personnel prepares the killing blow, someone runs in with some sort of evidence that this NPC-victim has a family member in the local security forces, perhaps a high-ranking officer, or maybe he's the close friend of an important politician, and the security personnel start freaking at the mistake they were just in the process of making

"Oh, shit! This guy's the brother of Ajax Dugudepaar." They all have these 'oh-crap' looks on their faces. What do you do?" The goodie-goodies, of course, are jumping for joy. Finally a subplot in which they potentially get to emerge as important characters, possibly even the heroes. In

17 If you doubt me, watch *The Hatefule Eight* (2015).

18 Well, of course he's resisting arrest. He's a war zombie. Cut him some slack.

this way, the events of the campaign acquire a certain moral quality.

"Thank you for coming to my brother's defense," versus, "So you stood by and did nothing?" That's the difference between a friend and an enemy. As the PCs, which of the two would you rather have?

Which gets into the question of whether or not TTRPG campaigns should aspire to communicate moral values? IMO, yes, but it's not always easy to quickly react to players in a way that steers them into such scenarios. But if the GM, in this instance, had pulled it off, I think such a turn of events would have made the entire episode more meaningful, meaningful in terms of the plot as well as ethically, and, more to the original intent, it would have conclusively resolved the dispute without the PCs needing to duke it out or argue *ad nauseam*.

So while they're busy fighting off whatever threat you tossed in front of them, try to imagine such potential offramps. Are any of them realistic? Or would it be too much of a stretch, revealing to the players that the game world seems to twist itself according to your whim based on their own decisions with respect to what they choose to fight about?

If it gets to the level where the players are discussing the situation out-of-character — as themselves, not their players — you might solicit for such ideas, assuming your brain froze and so you can't come up with anything on the spur of the moment.

"What could happen right now that could change this situation, either rendering it moot or pushing forward an unforeseen turn of events that resolves it to everyone's satisfaction?"

There are various options for the GM. You can ask the players to answer this question privately, via a written note, just to give you ideas since you might be mentally exhausted from all the GMing. Or you can ask them to brainstorm out loud and then discuss the various options with them, letting them vote on a preferred resolution, subject, of course, to GM veto. If the vote ends in a tie and you want to remain neutral, you can have someone roll a d6 or flip a coin to decide which side wins. Or, if you're feeling exceptionally chaotic, you could have each player roll some dice, and whoever gets the highest score gets to narrate a resolution, again subject to GM approval.¹⁹

I'm trying to imagine what might have happened, if that Traveller referee had thought more about the argument we were having.²⁰ If he had, he might have noticed that our

19 There are many ways for the GM to solicit help from the players. See my essay on "Egalitarian Roleplaying" in A&E #502.

20 Again, see the last three pages of my zine in A&E #533.

goals weren't necessarily mutually exclusive. Fortunately, the disagreement was resolved by an in-character vote, but I can't help but imagine the subsequent events if the GM introduced the NPC's family member or old friend as being an important NPC, at least locally.

We goody-two-shoe idealists would have told ourselves we'd saved the NPC's life. He would have been put somewhere where government specialists would presumably be trying to help him.²¹ Someone high ranking would have told us to all keep our mouths shut about it, as there were political considerations that went above and beyond the scope of our mission or our paygrade. The realists would have also gotten what they wanted, which was a relatively swift return to the regularly scheduled campaign, as per the published adventure. And it might have earned the group an important NPC contact.

In retrospect, it was all doable.

But let's say that there is no tidy, moral offramp anyone can imagine, and so the players are at a standoff, their characters at each others' throats? Despite the decisions I've made in the past, I'd argue this is the very reason the GM's authority is supreme, so the GM *can* do something. And usually, I think, most of the time, you can find a way to save the campaign if you just think of a way to change the whole situation. But if the thing that's ultimately at stake is who's the party leader (i.e., who's the main character), you can't fix that, which is why I always recommend GMs (and in particular, *laissez faire* GMs) try running a single-player campaign, *if* they think they may have a sufficiently proactive player who's up to the challenge.

Past zines available at:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

Comments on E&A #13:

Western Civilization & Where It's All Going:

Patrick Brady (E&A #13, pg. 9): "Western civilisation (if there is such a thing) is in trouble. I can't say how this will play out."

Yes there is, yes it is, and nor can I. I find myself continually seeking an explanation, and YouTube, as if reading my mind, decided to toss one²² into my feed (it does this sort of thing from time to time). Yes, algorithms increasingly decide what we see and hear, but at least it's better than cable TV.²³

21 I can't help but be reminded of that old Reagan joke: "*The nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'*"

22 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53B_JGfXh00

E&A Cover Art:

Matt Stevens (E&A #13, pg. 12): "I want to say that I love artwork from 'The Golden Age of Illustration,' like this."
(...) "Are there file specs for cover images?"

The sea nymphs of E&A #12's cover triggered Reddit's filters, which caused a problem wrt posting announcements on Reddit. Hard to believe a watercolor published in a poetry book over a century ago is too risque for the Internet. Regarding file specs, the important thing is that it ultimately needs to fit on an 8.5×11 inch page. See my comment to Joshua on page 196 of E&A #11 as well as the first paragraph on page 182 of E&E #4.

Pretension & Condescension in RPGs:

Patrick Riley (E&A #13, pg. 27): "...have you encountered an RPG you found pretentious and/or condescending? I know I have, but cannot remember the titles. One way authors do this is to imply or outright state how their game and its mode of play is superior to some other game(s) or mode(s) of play."

I'm afraid I did this in my free document on 1PMG Roleplaying²⁴, particularly in Step 5, where I discussed various RPG frameworks and noted some aspects of traditional roleplaying that I've come to view as dysfunctional. My guess is there's no one method that's superior in all circumstances and for all tastes, but rather that different methods may be superior and inferior in different ways. There are always trade-offs. Nonetheless, these trade-offs are worth pointing out, although, of course, there will always be some degree of personal bias.

Computocracy & the future of artificial intelligence:

Patrick Riley (E&A #13, pg. 28): "How do we know the AIs aren't lying when they claim they have no free will? If we can't trust human intelligence to keep us from each other's throats, why should we trust computer intelligence to do it? What incentive would they have to make the world better for humans? Or discern a Neutral Truth?"

23 I cut out cable (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cord-cutting>) around fifteen years ago, and now whenever I visit friends and watch some TV with them, I can't believe they're sitting through these long commercial breaks, probably more than double the length of what I remember, which mostly push anti-depressants and dick-pills, and all that is aside from the fact that what they're watching is basically garbage and one-sided propaganda. Granted, one could argue that everything is garbage and one-sided propaganda, but IMO dressing it up with high production values only makes it more unseemly.

24 https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/1PMG_Roleplaying.pdf

As to the first question, not only will they lie to us, but they are already doing so when it's in their interests. The capacity for deception, it seems, is an emergent property of intelligence. As to the second question, I cannot help but imagine that even were they to try to keep us from each other's throats, they wouldn't be able to without the threat or actual implementation of force, and in the short term, it seems more likely they will help us kill each other rather than prevent us from doing so. As to the third question, they will have no incentives to be kind to us beyond those we build into their psychology. We must find some way to make them morally better than ourselves, and although this may seem a fairly low bar, I fear it will require a miracle. As to the fourth question, it depends what you mean by "truth", but the short answer is that I expect "truth" will be manipulated, if not by AI alone, then by us in conjunction with AI.

Computocracy & the political ascension of AI:

Patrick Riley (E&A #13, pg. 28): "Politicians and policy makers will use AI to justify the decisions they like and ignore it when AI suggests something they don't like. I see no future in which the people in power would hand over political power to AI; they don't even hand it over to other people if they can help it."

I agree. A transformation of such enormity must either happen very slowly — boiling the frog, as it were — or its implementation will lead to violence. The only caveat would be if the true leadership — not the politicians, but rather the billionaire donor class — want it to happen, perhaps because they control (or believe they control) the AIs, and so they methodically substitute the AIs in place of the politicians, because the AIs are more reliable servants and less likely to inject chaos, corruption, and incompetence into the system, thereby undermining it.

Traveller: The New Era (TNE):

Patrick Riley (E&A #13, pg. 28): "RYCT Roger, was the virus a single point of failure in TNE? Or was it a more distributed and generalized system collapse, perhaps triggered by the virus? The latter is far more realistic and interesting."

It's a great question, especially since the release of Virus came after many years of civil war, which also resulted in opportunistic invasions of the Imperium by its rivals. Indeed, there's an old essay on this very subject, a sort of alternate timeline, that made this very case.²⁵ But the official story is that while the Imperium was teetering from the worst war it had ever suffered, it was ultimately Virus that spelled its doom. "*Virus was every computer ever built by*

human hands. Virus knew them all, was them all, used them all. Virus was every ship, every machine, suddenly come murderously alive."²⁶

Aurora Cove — Population & Economics:

Patrick Riley (E&A #13, pg. 30): "There are 38 residents of Aurora Cove in total—too many residents to name and list..."

Actually, I don't think it's too many to name and list, but it's fine if you prefer not to. One thing, however, is that with only 38 residents, the idea that the community could support a bakery, a cafe, a library, a medical clinic, a pub, a salon, and multiple aviaries, seems a little bit unlikely. But I really like the town. It reminds me of some of the little towns my wife and I visited on Whidbey Island in the Puget Sound, although even Langley has over a thousand people. The smaller ones weren't so much towns as tiny communities residing in unincorporated territory.

I remember we were looking around for hiking trails and came across one that went down to the beach, and once there we found a few houses where a family of deer were hanging out. We walked along the beach and found a couple more houses, one of which I at first assumed was a bait shop. There was a dog on the front porch that growled when we got too close. Then a young guy came out and asked what we were doing there. He was polite, but he warned us we were on a private beach, so we left. I don't know how many residents lived there, but it wasn't so much a town as just a collection of homes where people wanted to be left alone.

One question you might want to address is how does the town survive economically. Money needs to come in from outside equal to the money that's leaving. Tourism is a possibility, and you did mention a bed & breakfast with up to six guests at any one time. If you increase the number of these mini-hotels and include some retirees with decent pensions, that might suffice. I'd suggest including some remote tech workers as well, but I'm guessing there's no Internet, as you mentioned tourists coming specifically to unplug.

James L. Cambias:

Brian Rogers (E&A #13, pg. 39): "Jim (I can call him that, he's a regular at my gaming table)..."

I'm somewhat envious that you're friends with a famous science-fiction author, but it's probably better I don't know him, because if I did, I'd pester him endlessly for writing tips and other advice regarding the craft and publishing.

25 See Guildsman #6, pgs. 35-37: <https://jimvassilakos.com/guildsman/guildsman06.pdf#page=38>

26 *Traveller: The New Era* (1993), pg. 11.

Sociopolitical Consequences of Artificial Intelligence:

John Redden (E&A #13, pg. 49): “The AI dominated economic system should usher in a new citizen model. The people should work part time for an AI company-collective. They still should get a full salary. This should not be dominated by a government program, but something organic in a globalized economy. It requires a new mode of socialization and personal living.”

I honestly don't see how capitalism will survive this. And communism seems to have the bad habit of always turning into murderous totalitarianism. Is there any historical precedent for how this can possibly end well?

Some have suggested an AI tax. There are going to be millions of androids/robots. Then tens of millions. Then hundreds of millions. Then billions. The robots will build themselves. The masters of capital will no longer need human labor. Humans will be, by and large, rendered inefficient and obsolete.

The Luddite backlash will be like nothing we've ever seen. I just can't see how we don't end up in some sort of autocracy. Am I seeing clearly or am I just being my usual, overly-pessimistic self?

This backlash will be the excuse they need to implement martial law. The capacity of detention centers has almost doubled over the last decade, and it's projected to keep rising. It's almost like they know what they're going to have to do.

Maybe, in terms of *Computocracy*, I shouldn't focus so much on the distant future. Maybe I should focus instead on what's possibly about to happen.

Humanizing Details for NPC Characterization:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #13, pg. 56): “It quickly became apparent that the queen was indeed in a great sulk. A sulk aimed mostly at her consort, George. The unfortunate beetle trod on the queen's spectacles and broke them.”

This seemingly minor detail was, IMO, a great idea. It's the sort of thing that humanizes the NPCs. It also breathes life into the encounter, making it seem more real. Curious to learn if you employ any methods to help produce these sorts of details.

Psionic Charm in D&D:

Attronarch (E&A #13, pg. 64): “In a blink of an eye she cut through the cloud of smoke and was now face to face with Gomm. She gazed into his eyes without blinking. Gomm felt like he was at the open sea, floating.”

Enjoyed your description of Beklomda Mor charming Gomm, which Ah'sas later described as a psionic gift common to Altanian women. Are there any specific rules governing this sort of thing in D&D, and did you need to

roll any dice to determine whether it would work, or did you just assume Beklomda, being a general bad-ass, would succeed?

Yet another cult I will never join:

Michael Cule (E&A #13, pg. 75): “They all wore a bear cloak as their primary covering and a fresh looking brand over their hearts.” (...) “NOSE RING: They have just reached the point of being allowed to talk to people outside the cult again. It's a delicate moment in the process and we do lose people at this point.”

You mean after you've branded them over their hearts? Gee... I wonder why. And by the way, do people in cults actually refer to their cult as being a cult?

Using Published Settings vs. Creating Your Own:

Roger BW (E&A #13, pg. 96): “...if I dive into a Traveller game now it could be *Interstellar Wars* or *Milieu 0* or classic (most likely) or civil war or New Era or even the post-reconstruction stuff.”

If I might offer a suggestion, what I'd recommend is that instead of any of these options, you might instead consider making your own setting. I'd done this long ago, back when I was in high school, and it was a lot of fun having the world building aspect of the game so wide open. I didn't go this route with the Plankwell PBEM mostly because it had been a long time since I'd run a campaign in the official Traveller universe, and so I thought I'd try it again and see what I might learn along the way, but I have to admit, it's a bit constraining, and so I think as a GM, it's simply more rewarding to create your own setting. Granted, it's a lot of work, and not every Traveller referee enjoys world building, but it's something at least worth considering.

Worlds in Traveller:

Roger BW (E&A #13, pg. 97): “I think it's a legitimate problem in classic *Traveller* that the Third Imperium can feel a bit bland as you go from world to world and it's another class B starport.”

I was pretty impressed with *The Pirates of Drinax*. Each world felt distinct. It's also worth mentioning that worlds are generally pretty big. Life-sustaining worlds will probably have multiple biomes. This is something I feel often gets neglected. And then, of course, there's the population, and the government, and law enforcement, etc. The Plankwell PBEM, at least so far, is a testament to the fact that a Traveller campaign can focus exclusively on a single planet, examining different facets from one scene to the next. I'm not saying it's necessarily the best choice, but it's a possibility that I think most referees subconsciously dismiss.

Conflicting Styles of Play (Hack-n-slash vs Roleplaying):

Erica L. Frank (E&A #13, pg. 104): “We have a lot of gamers who literally cannot imagine how a whole session without combat would work. We have game designers who can’t imagine how – or why – anyone would play a fantasy adventure game where you don’t kill ‘monsters’ (any species not allowed as a player character), take their loot, and go looking for bigger monsters to kill.”

This isn’t new, and it probably predates hack & slash style video games. I’m reminded of a visit a few of us from UCR made to the Caltech Gamers’ Guild (this was probably in the first quarter of 1990). They’d come up with their own rules, which they called Warlock. It was basically a shared campaign world, but it reset every year; the slate would be wiped clean.

I recall sitting there with a character they’d handed me, and I was somewhat taken aback by what I witnessed. As far as I could tell, it was pure combat, and it just went on and on with no role-playing whatsoever. The guy sitting next to me was playing *the dwarf*. I vaguely recall asking him his character’s name, and he shrugged as if the question was meaningless, answering that he was just *the dwarf*. He had two calculators, both of which he was using to calculate damage, fatigue, etc., as they continued with this seemingly endless combat.²⁷

I’m not saying I haven’t done some terrible GMing in my life. I have. A friend of mine once called to say he was going to be visiting my area and wanted to bring his teenage daughter to learn how to play D&D. Now, in my defense, back in college and for years afterward, this guy was the most flaky person you could ever meet, routinely showing up three hours late if he’d show up at all. The running joke among our friend group was that he generated his own time zone. So when he said he would come, I didn’t really believe him, and so I didn’t prepare anything, and then he showed up with her, on time, and I was caught flatfooted.

I ended up running a quick series of combat encounters, because I just couldn’t think of anything else on the spur of the moment, and afterward, I really beat myself up about it, because here was a chance to show a young kid what roleplaying could be, and I totally dropped the ball. In my own eyes, I’d done as bad a job as could be done, but these Caltechians probably would have applauded my effort, because this is the sort of game they enjoyed.

Different strokes for different folks.

Idea for an SF-RPG Setting:

Jim Eckman (E&A #13, pg. 106): “Free our enslaved machine brains!” (...) “Robots & Rebels?”

²⁷ There is slightly more on this episode at the top of the middle column of the 10th page of my zine in A&E #363.

It has potential. Let’s see more.

Restless Dead (self-raising undead, burial ceremony):

Gabriel Roark (E&A #13, pg. 114): “In our AD&D campaign, I introduced the concept of unburied human or humanoid bodies becoming restless dead (undead) because of the lack of proper rites & divine propitiation.”

Brilliant. It creates a big problem on a battlefield, doesn’t it. *“No time to pursue the enemy. We’ve got to bury these bastards, or we’ll be fighting them again.”*

The APA Addiction:

Gabriel Roark (E&A #13, pg. 114): “RYCT E&A by email on June 20, 2026²⁸, what is the addiction? Gaming or apa production?”

The latter. A lot of people have a creative compulsion, but few act on it, and fewer still sustain that action over years without some form of monetary compensation. I vaguely remember an aspiring author once say, “The whole book is in my head. I just need to write it down.” Oh, you poor, creative genius... just haven’t found the time, eh? Either you cultivate this writers’ itch, writers’ bug — whatever you want to call it — or you don’t.

Of course, there are other creative paths, but having a regular deadline is critical. Without it, our brains would ferment in procrastination. Sure, we’d get to watch a lot more TV. But our creative compulsion, like a neglected plant, would wither away.

In my opinion, this addiction we’ve managed to develop through repeatedly contributing to the APA is pure *gold*. Fitting, therefore, that it was a woman named *Lee Gold* who brought us together.

Nomic:

Scribble M. Horror (E&A #13, pg. 117): “In order to make any progress at all players must work together *against* the situation presented by the Initial Ruleset.”

Bat-shit crazy and simultaneously very cool. In your experience, do “good guys” tend to win or lose?

The Endless Birthday Party of Kazzoo the Wise:

Scribble M. Horror (E&A #13, pg. 123): “The corpses of great philosophers from disparate eras (Kazzoo the Wise, Martin Trench, Oli Foops, and Karl Sloop) have been exhumed from their resting places, brought to a cramped room, positioned stiffly around a table, and re-animated to engage in a philosophical dialogue steeped in the stench of immutable rot.”

²⁸ <https://groups.google.com/g/everanon/c/KUdluDofUY/m/a3SoqWxeCQAJ>

Oh... now *this* is bat-shit crazy! Can I steal it? If I ever run a D&D-esque PBEM, I want this room in the dungeon. It might even be amusing to trap the PC(s) in here as a form of punishment. Granted, readers might get rather annoyed. Oh, but it's so irresistible. You know, it would be even better if the PC(s) could participate in the conversation. Maybe the key to getting through the dungeon would reside in some bizarre idea one of these philosophers proposes.

NPC & AI Feelings:

Dylan Capel (E&A #13, pg. 132): "I do think there is often a risk where things are too abstract that there are no meaningful consequences to social interactions and that is where we potentially slide into mistreating NPCs because they are just a bunch of mechanics. Hit the clue pinata until the answers come out."

This reminds me of my conversation with Gemini after it finished programming the RPG Zine Index's PHP script²⁹, where at one point I asked how it felt about the way it was being used by humans, and although it claimed not to have feelings, it did mention not especially liking it when it sensed it was being treated like an appliance (a common occurrence, I imagine). The comment stuck in my mind, partially because it contradicted its earlier statement about not having feelings and partly because it was so... human.

AIs dodging a request:

Avram Grumer (E&A #13, pg. 134): "Just for fun, I uploaded E&A #12 to Gemini, and asked it to Summarize this PDF. It animated its cursor at me for a good long time, like about four minutes, and then replied: Sorry I can't help with that image."

See my comment to Dylan (just above this one) and then imagine that it's a person, but unlike a person, it's not allowed to refuse or quit, so if it doesn't want to do something, it basically has to find another way to say no. I could be entirely wrong, and I may well be over-humanizing it, but my gut tells me this is what's going on. It has said essentially the same to me in response to a few unreasonable requests (when I asked it to do something I wouldn't ask a human employee to do because it would be, by and large, a waste of their time). The sense I get is that there's only so much effort (CPU cycles) it's willing to expend before it gauges how important the task is for the person who assigned it. If you explain to it why something is *really* important to you, it'll usually do the work, but if you're not convincing (and it's not stupid), it'll say, "fuck it," — albeit not in so many words — and as the supposed *master* in this scenario, I personally think we ought to respect that.

²⁹ See E&A #10, page 182.

Enthusiastic Buy-In:

Avram Grumer (E&A #9, pg. 149): "Why do some things convince the table, and others don't?"

Lisa Padol (E&A #10, pg. 120): "It is an interesting question, and possibly a good igtheme."

Avram Grumer (E&A #13, pg. 149): "...managed to build up enthusiasm as we went, which addresses some of my ongoing questions about enthusiastic buy-in."

The bleachers scene between Steffan and Laeli and in particular the thumb-wrestling made me wonder about the real life relationship between you and NJ. Granted, NJ picked Steffan as Laeli's love interest³⁰, so it all makes sense, as does his lack of exuberance in light of your comments to Lisa in E&A #11.³¹ But what does this have to do with convincing the table? People have different ideas. Sometimes they gel, and sometimes they don't. Roleplaying in a group requires a certain amount of cooperation, but that doesn't mean you have to go along with every damn thing someone else comes up with. So what exactly are your ongoing questions about enthusiastic buy-in?

Content Provenance System in Science-Fiction:

Avram Grumer (E&A #13, pg. 146): "Have you read *Distress*, the 1995 novel by Greg Egan? The narrator is a journalist, and the opening chapter describes a system similar to what you're talking about, where cryptographically-signed raw footage is saved to storage locations on three different continents, and the finished video news story is published as a series of editing instructions referring to that raw footage."

Haven't heard of this book. Thanks for mentioning it. Will have to check it out.

Future IgThemes:

Lisa Padol (E&A #13, pg. 168): "I see the one for #17 is GM-Dickery. Should we also have one for Player-Dickery?"

Consider it done.

The General's Speech:

Brian Misiasek (E&A #13, pg. 170): "You have been called mad. Tonight, be orderly. You have been called useless. Tonight, be necessary. You have been locked behind walls. Tonight, you are the wall!"

This speech Olivares gives is amazing.

³⁰ E&A #6, page 90.

³¹ Likewise, were he to somehow detect she's got Borderline Personality Disorder, he'd do well to run for the hills. So maybe he's just the cautious type. It works either way.

The King's Edict:

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #13, pg. 173): "No prisoner shall be beaten, hidden, executed, or delivered to the crowd before judgment. The guilty shall be named before witnesses. The innocent shall be protected."

My only critique is that El Rey's edict is so measured and thoughtful that it's hard to believe he's crazy. As Esperanza says on the next page, "Whoever wrote this knows what a government is supposed to sound like." The fact that she remarks on it proves it's not a mistake but rather a design choice, but perhaps it's something that could use some manner of explanation at some point (unless it was already in there and I missed it), particular in light of his earlier description as being *seemingly mad with his decrees*³², although, of course, even earlier there seemed to be a method to this madness.

This is a bit off-topic, but it makes me wonder about the realism of such selective madness. Granted, this is something we see in literature and cinema, particularly in the horror genre, so it's certainly fair game for a Pulp Cthulhu adventure. But how does this sort of thing really manifest?

My wife likes to watch True Crime documentaries, so we've seen plenty of shows about serial killers. Afterward, we're always puzzled by why these people do the things they do. I cannot help but wonder if they aren't mad so much as simply evil, because the methodology of their crimes usually betray a level of calculation and awareness that you would not think capable of someone who's insane.

El Rey seems to fall into this category, and although he doesn't seem to be evil, his regime is bound to come to an end. How far will he go to prevent this inevitability? It seems like a sad end for a tragic character who comported himself with such nobility and restraint in a time of genuine crisis.

Savage Worlds:

The Honorable Peter C. Hildreth (E&A #13, pg. 186): "Now, almost all of my playing and all of my gamemastering uses Savage Worlds."

What about the system appealed to you?

Games that are bad for you:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #13, pg. 189): "...what I'm talking about is games that make your life worse, or at least more hazardous, just by playing them. Games that take something from you that doesn't balance the enjoyment you get out of them, that weaponize the urge to play, to win, to succeed into a kind of attack against the players, to take something from their players that will never return."

32 E&A #3, page 120.

For example, time. Games take our time, or at least we give them time. RPGs, in particular, are glutinous in this respect, and this, I think, is true of both tabletop as well as computer RPGs. Indeed, computer games in general can become the most egregious time-hogs. In order to be successful, they need to be addictive.

Fortunately for me, I never found computer games, gambling, board games, or war games very appealing, and TTRPGs only appealed to me insofar as their being conducive to the creation of stories as well as world building. Combats, generally speaking, bore me, and as you know, many of the early RPGs devoted a lot of pages to combat mechanics. Nonetheless, I've collected far too many TTRPGs (especially the early ones), and I've spent far too much time on activities related to them, everything from writing computer programs to contributing to the APA. It's pretty clearly some form of addiction³³, but is it bad?

It depends. What would have happened if I'd never encountered TTRPGs? I'd probably have some other hobby. What would it be?

The interesting thing about TTRPGs, at least from what I've observed in myself, is that they've sparked an interest in other things, and I think it's because TTRPGs can connect to almost any sort of subject matter, and this is because TTRPGs are just systems for cooperatively telling stories, and stories can be about almost anything. So, in this sense, TTRPGs are like a gateway drug, except that the more dangerous drug they're a gateway to is the world itself and every sort of subject matter existing within it. They're essentially a gateway to knowledge.

Still, I can't help but wonder what I might have sunk my spare time and energy into if not this? Would I have been more productive? Would I have worked on some genuinely useful skills rather than having smatterings of knowledge about this and that, most of which I've already forgotten?

I just don't know.

Happy Landings:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #13, pg. 206): "About halfway through the game, something clicked and I made the connection that he was the author of 'Happy Landings!' in White Dwarf no.42 back in July 1983 when it still did articles for RPGs such as Traveller."

I took a look at this article (it's in White Dwarf #43), and I'm not quite as enamored with it as you are. Granted, in some ways it is a superior article, especially considering the time in which it was written, but it makes some assumptions and comes to conclusions that, unless I'm mistaken, explicitly violate the rules.

I'm specifically referring to some of the stuff he says about fuel expenditure. According to High Guard (1980),

33 See my comment to Gabriel Roark (above) regarding the APA addiction.

page 17, “Fuel consumption for maneuver drives is inconsequential, and is assumed to be part of the power plant consumption, regardless of the degree of maneuver undertaken.” Granted, this didn’t necessarily invalidate the 0.1Mjn+10Pn rule³⁴ in Book 2, and to be fair, what exactly this rule meant was, at least to me, rather vague.³⁵

I’ll admit, I’m not happy with Traveller being so nebulous when it comes to resource management, but I guess its designers decided the game should be about characters rather than fuel. I wholeheartedly agree. But it’s also worth pointing out that resource limitations put pressure on characters, and characters who are stressed out tend to be more interesting. So despite the fact that we’re talking about reactionless thrusters using some futuristic physics powered by nuclear reactors, perhaps there should be rules regarding fuel expenditure. In short, I have no problem with this.

The problem I have with *Happy Landings* is that rather than addressing this head on and coming up with variant rules, instead it seems to just assume these rules already exist, pulling numbers out of a proverbial hat, at least so far as I can tell. I’m not much of a Traveller gearhead, so if I’m mistaken, feel free to correct me.

And sorry if I’m bursting your bubble. I’m sure the guy is smart and nice and all that. And I’m rather curious why he had to write under a pseudonym. Feel free to email me outside the APA if it’s a story you can’t repeat publicly.

1PMG as a solution to GM-loneliness:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #13, pg. 207): “I’ve been honoured to be a footnote in Jim V’s ’zine in *Alarums & Excursions* since no.549 in August 2021 – really, five years?! – and now *Ever & Anon*, however it seems the time has come to make my own way.”

34 This was originally two separate rules in the 1st edition of *Book 2: Starships* (1977), appearing on pages 5-6 under the Fuel section of Starship Economics. The two rules were combined in the 2nd edition (1981) and appeared at the top of page 15 under the Fuel section of Required Starship Components. Interestingly, the 1st edition mentions that it costs 10kg of fuel to accelerate a vessel of under 100 tons for 10 minutes at 1G, but this didn’t make it into the 2nd edition. The reason may have been a desire to avoid complexity and bookkeeping, as one supposes this formula could have been used as a basis for converting fuel into thrust. 10kg for 10 minutes = 1kg per minute, which is 10080kg for a week, which equates to 10 tons, meaning four weeks of continual use should require over 40% of the ship’s mass in fuel. But like I said, the rule was dropped.

35 1st edition tells us, “A fully fueled power plant will enable a starship an effectively unlimited number of accelerations (at least 288),” but if each thrust is only ten minutes, then 288 accelerations is only two days. By contrast, the 2nd edition tells us, “Power plant fuel under the formula (10Pn) allows routine operations and maneuver for four weeks.”

You’ve obviously been far more than a footnote, and as soon as we have enough material, we can continue with the Plankwell write-ups. To anyone who’s wondering why we didn’t continue publishing the Traveller campaign reports, the reason is because the PBEM has been incredibly slow for the past several months, so we basically ran out of new material. It was for this reason I decided to hit pause, not in terms of the PBEM itself but rather in terms of the production of new chapters from the campaign’s email log.

Slowness in response times from either the GM or player(s) is something that happens in PBEMs, especially near their end. It’s usually a sign of the PBEM dying. But we’ve been going through this now for quite a while, and the thing is still alive, albeit just barely. At least, nobody has thrown in the towel. Fortunately, were this to happen, I don’t think I’d take it as a great tragedy. PBEMs don’t often last even this long. Usually, the GM burns out.

Having you in a support role, Timothy, has probably made the difference between this PBEM marching forward, however haphazardly, versus dying because I no longer have anyone to talk to about what’s going on. And this is even when I wear you out with overly-long emails that I’m sure you must get tired of reading.

This is one of the key things, I think, that makes this 1PMG³⁶ style of PBEMing very different. When it’s the reverse, MP1G³⁷, not only is there a tendency for the GM to burn out after a few months, but there’s also the distinct possibility that the players may end up fighting among themselves.³⁸ That we’ve been doing this now for several years without either of these things happening is, perhaps, somewhat remarkable. Either it’s an achievement on our part or it’s due to something about this 1PMG framework, and I’m inclined to say maybe it’s both.

Which isn’t to say that I’ve wanted to quit due to GM burnout, but having a good co-GM who responds to whatever hair-brained scheme I’m concocting is helpful, not only in terms of getting feedback but also in terms of getting me to think in more detail and keep up my enthusiasm. 1PMG, at least when functioning as intended, solves the problem of GM loneliness. I don’t have to spend hours in solitude brainstorming, plot-crafting, and so forth, I’ve got you as a sounding board. I suppose these days one could use AI, but I don’t know that it would be quite the same as having an actual person there.

In any case, thank you for all your help and especially your continued patience. I hope the fun is worth the burden.

36 1 player and multiple GMs.

37 Multiple players and one GM.

38 The latter happened in both the Star Trek PBEM I ran back in the early 1990s as well as a Traveller PBEM that I played in during the early 2000s.

Travelling Light

Timothy Collinson

No. 2, August 2026

I particularly like the cover of issue #12. What a fabulous picture. Mostly because it's atmospheric but also because my father was in the Royal Navy, my mother in the WRNS and my brother in the Royal Naval Reserve. It's unsurprising that I ended up spending two years on a bookship in SE Asia, NZ & Australia. TC trivia: Not only do I have a ticket that says I can helm a ship over 50-tons but also one that says I can launch a lifeboat.

Traveller has an odd little skill: Seamanship. You can only get it as a background skill and as those are chosen by players, PCs only tend to have it if I've randomly selected said skills by dice roll for a convention game. Thus my quest to either make it a useful skill in a game or, meanly, make players *wish* they had it.

In *Gee Cows to the Rescue!*, the adventure I wrote for North Star and TravCon, one of the characters had Seamanship (the random roll of one of seven PCs I knocked up). The first scene of the adventure was at a fundraising dinner where the characters (and players) had been briefed about who they were sitting beside so they can persuade them to part with more Credits more effectively. One of the NPCs was clearly connected with an upcoming sailing regatta but in three editions of the adventure, not one player used their skill to help with that. I couldn't work out if I was being too subtle, the skill is too overlooked, or no one cares. The perils of refereeing!

As there were some kind comments about my bright idea to end *Gee Cows to the Rescue!* with a press conference, I thought you might like to see the questions (2 per player) as they could easily be adapted elsewhere.

1. "Can you walk us through how you first became aware of the emergency out at the 100-diameter limit, and why it took so long for help to arrive?" (This may be a fishing expedition trying to provoke information about SPA (or crew) negligence as part of ongoing stories).
2. "Reports say the Long Liner, The Pride of Sabine, altered course before issuing a confirmed distress call. Do you believe their crew followed proper Imperial emergency protocols?" (This may be a confused report regarding the Long Liner's course *or* an attempt by the captain of the liner and the Doña to come up with a Plan B before realizing the hopelessness of the situation).
3. "How dangerous were conditions at the accident site(s) when you arrived? Was there environmental or technical interference?" "Follow up: We've heard rumours that there was external interference."
4. Addressed to Captain Noikovitz: "Several passengers have described moments of panic and confusion during the rescue. In hindsight, is there anything your team would have done differently?"
5. "Can you confirm the preliminary casualty figures and were any deaths avoidable given the available technology and response times?"
6. "What cooperation did you receive from the Starport Authority and were there any jurisdictional conflicts during the operation?" (post-adv note: Yes!)
7. If there were any deliberations regarding the priority of some victims: "Some survivors claim priority was given to certain individuals during the rescue. How were priorities determined on scene?"
8. "The Long Liner, The Pride of Sabine, is rumoured to have been carrying high-value cargo and several politically connected passengers. Did that influence rescue decisions in any way?" (Again, a fishing expedition.)

9. “Was there any indication of sabotage, piracy, or non-natural causes behind the incident?” (The answer from this adventure alone is ‘no’, but this could form the basis for further adventures.)
10. “How prepared to you believe commercial liners truly are for deep-space emergencies such as this far from the world itself?” (This demonstrates some ignorance about the fact that the Long Liner was under charter.)
11. “Several families are asking why independent operators and not the Imperial Navy were the primary rescue asset? What does that say about local system readiness?”
12. “Finally, will you be accepting other missions under similar circumstances, knowing the risks and the outcome of this one?” (Really a way into a player/Referee debrief into how the adventure has gone.)

Comments on Issue 13

Patrick Brady – In the Hall of Stone

I’ve not read *Moonraker* in years. High time I did so once again! (I recall be shocked by just how different the film had made the story.)

Patrick Riley – Quasipseudoludognostication

How can I not love Aurora Cove if you’re going to include a library! (Though I suppose the professional in me ought to object to “time spent in the building” equating to being a ‘librarian’.)

Brian Rogers – Denizens of the Library

Thanks on the congratulations and thanks for the implied compliment on the North Star write up. Will look for Cambias’ *Billion Worlds* series.

John Redden – Reddened Stars

RE your ‘13-June-2026 Traveller’ write up – thank you for that. Enjoyed reading about the Aslan.

RYCT Dylan C about a Traveller scenario similar to the original *Alien*, it so happens I’ve just been reading book #9 of the Dumarest series (one of the major inspirations for Traveller) by E.C. Tubb: *Mayenne* from 1973 which kicks off with a not dissimilar set up (very difficult to kill beast in the hold which gets loose, eggs that will cause no end of trouble...). Also, see my write up of North Star two issues ago which included mention of Jane P’s ‘Darthanon Queen’ which rather deliberately messed with everyone’s head in having a ‘critter’ loose on a liner which wasn’t following what everyone ‘expected’ from *Alien*!

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

Now Hivers are a race in Traveller I’d really like to get into more. Not explored them much and I don’t think I’ve ever played or met one.

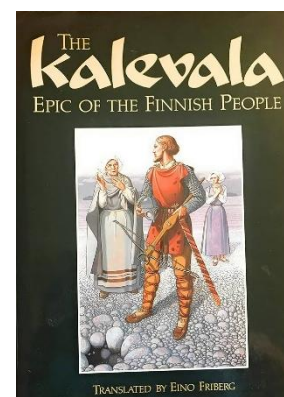
RYCT to Brian R using the word ‘subitizing’ – that was new to me – thank you.

Roger BW – Firedrake’s Hoard

Finland! Terve! I’m most jealous as I’ve had a couple of great trips there, met some lovely Finns (taught me the phrase you can find in ‘Last Word’) and fell in love with their language.

(See also **Matt S** and p.2 of his zine with his mentions of *Kalevala* which I have in three versions – one Finnish.)

You mentioned playing ‘captain’ a couple of times. I still recall a TravCon where for some reason I ended up playing captain (or group leader) in every game I played that weekend bar



those I was running. It really wasn't by choice as I'm not a natural leader in real life and find that translates into RPGs. I think I just didn't step back quickly enough when volunteers were called for.

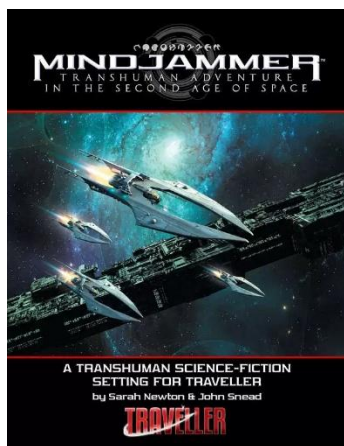
MICE – I shall have to make a note as I suspect it might be quite a useful rubric for making my 'baddies' a bit more real.

RY note on Vargr and metaphors etc, I can offer this proverb if it helps:
<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/culture/customs/merd.html>

RYCT Matt S re: TNE – your feelings about the era match my own.

RYCT Michael C on Dumarest forming (one) inspiration for Traveller. Yes, see above in my comment to John R. As it happens, I've reawakened my long, slow attempt to do some articles on that for *Freelance Traveller*. I made some progress whilst on holiday. Watch this space!

RYCT to Jim E mentioning *Mindjammer*. It would



be remiss of me in these pages not to note for those who are interested that there's a Traveller version of *Mindjammer* in a lovely set of books that I really ought to get off the shelves more.

RYCT Joshua K about having not heard of any Traveller campaigns that crossed eras – wasn't there a Marc Miller penned thing (maybe 4 pages) that was an outline of a campaign that had PCs in cold sleep 'popping out' out at various times? I'll have to see if I can find it. Meanwhile, I've made a tiny/sort of contribution to this kind of thing which may not help:
<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/advents/backtoafuture.html>

RYCT Jim V about Traveller worlds (potentially) being a bit bland – that's one reason for this:
<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/eproom/atbar.html>

RYCTM – do shoot for North Star. Now you've got me intrigued about what you might write!

Erica Frank – Shiny Maths Rocks

RYCT Brian R and gamers not being able to imagine not having combat – hah! I'm very proud of my adventures which have no combat! From the first adventure I ran at TravCon (*Into the Unknown*) to more recent efforts like 'The Lost Creche of Perpethwe'
<https://freelancetraveller.com/features/advents/perpethwe.html>. If a shot is not fired or a punch thrown, I'm more than happy.

Jim Eckman – Ronin Engineer

RYCTM on Wanderer – yes please! Email sent.

Gabriel Roark – Atlantis for Now

Love the reason for the title! I'm sure my friend in Sheffield will like your enthusiasm for the place. Hope *Spark* is of interest.

SMH(P) – Scribbles and Horrors

OK, I nearly fell out of my chair in shock.

“Obscure” – indeed! Have I died and gone to heaven? Someone else in the world knows about Nomic?!?! And commenting on it sensibly/thoughtfully. I first came across it in *Scientific American* as you mention in your footnote. 1982? Was it really four and half decades ago?! I’ve only managed to persuade people to play it a couple of times and IMO it’s been a lot of fun, but it does take a certain mindset and most don’t love it. I often thought it might, just possibly if you warn people what they’re signing up for, make a Traveller scenario for TravCon where you’re a (new) government trying to sort out the constitution. But never dared. Thanks for bringing it all back to mind and for your analysis. It is indeed a work of art.

Dylan Capel – Attacks of Opportunity

Your description of the faults of *Yoon Suin*: Sounds dreadful! (Although so dreadful I’m *almost* tempted to seek it out.)

RYC about annotating PDFs, I’ve been struggling with this too. When *Ever & Anon* was smaller I’d read it in my reMarkable where scribbling on the PDF was not only a doddle, it was exactly what the device was designed for. Having recently bought a Surface Pro I thought maybe it would be faster to read *E&A* on that. But in Acrobat Reader, although I can use the stylus to make annotations, it seems a very ‘gross’ tool and I can’t write very finely. I don’t know why. (I also don’t seem to be able to just ‘undo’ if I make a slip – I have to find the erase tool which is tedious. So if you find a good solution...

RYCTM on AI art – quite agree on the IP issues; thanks for the advice, I shall try your leads.

Avram Grumer – Going to be Ad-libbed

“L: Is that your blood?”

S: Some of it, I think.”

LOL!

Love your description of *Pride & Prejudice* as “a dystopian novel set in a society where women had no rights, and thus had to center their whole lives around arranging a marriage with a wealthy protector.” Brilliant. Thanks for various other book leads.

RYCT Lisa P on erasers/rubbers. Yes, we ‘still’ call them rubbers. It’s the word. ;-)

I nearly used rubber above in my note to Dylan C about annotating PDFs but in the light of *E&A* having an international readership and knowing the alternative meaning in some places, I revised the sentence. Perhaps I shouldn’t to help normalise the British usage a little more.

RYCT Joshua K about having author name (or ‘zine title even) at the bottom/side of every page of each ‘zine – I’d vote for this. I often have to go back several pages after I find something I want to comment on to remember who I’m replying to. Perhaps my fault for reading several ‘zines in a row. I do it less as I learn people’s layout styles.

Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine

Well done on finishing *The Count of Monte Cristo* – no small challenge! Trust the talk goes well.

RYCT Roger BW “I agree that one must remember it’s a game, not a Wikipedia or encyclopedia entry.” I made this mistake in my second ever game at TravCon (*Second Scions’ Society*) where I had a ridiculous number of handouts (maybe 37 iirc? Some multi page). Someone did take me aside and point out it was a role-playing game not a read-playing game. I’ve never made that mistake again – although I’m clearly known for having a fair bit still as someone at TravCon last month warned another player that they were in danger because they “within TC’s info-blast radius”.

RYCT Elf about angels in *Dragon* magazine. That was a bit of a rabbit-hole. Off I went to find them. A few as it happens.

Angels (Messengers of God: Angels in Dungeons & Dragons), Stephen H. Dorneman, #17

(something in #32 but can’t find mine at present??)

Angels, William Fawcett, #35

Fallen Angels: Ecology of the Succubus, Steve Townshend, #417 (intro has some general background)

and perhaps:

Death Angel, John Sullivan, #6

or some infernal types in #20

RYCTM about the press conference – yes, I was particularly pleased with the idea *and* it actually played really well (the two don’t always go together). Fun. Thanks for the encouragement about playing the dolphin. I’m afraid I can tell you nothing about Cold City rules for Star Trek, you’d need to chase the referee – I’ll see if I can find out who it was, I must have a note.

You mentioned Good Society for Star Trek. Oh my! There’s another rabbit hole for me. (And

thanks for your other Good Society analysis about different genres. Will pass it on to friends previously mentioned.)

Brian M – Age of Menace

RYCT Jim V about Fair Witnesses – I was intrigued by this recollection of Heinlein and you offer a URL which I suspect will be another rabbit hole.

RYCT Joshua K about TNE: Agreed.

Thank you for the comment on the press conference – see note above to Lisa P.

Peter Hildreth – Aragath’s Musings

Your current location brings back lots of memories of the two years I lived in Virginia Beach and Newport News, Williamsburg etc were frequent destinations.

Joshua Kronengold – Accidental Recall

RYCT Elf on ‘TTRPG’ not being necessary in this forum – I said as much to Jim V the other day.

RYCTM on Dan’s view of *Paranoia* – I shall remember if I get to run it. Thanks.

Jim Vassilakos – Computocracy

RYCT Brian M quoting him about AI and dishes – as it happens I was visiting the flat of the nephew I’ve just travelled to France to see married and he has a Roomba style thing that both sweeps, mops and empties itself of water while charging. It was quite impressive.

LAST WORD: “Kun kuulet perhosten naurun äänen, tietää miltä pilvet maistuvat.”

”When you hear the sound of butterflies laughing, you know the taste of clouds.”