



EVER & ANON

Issue #9
March
2026

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Contributor Guidelines:

Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Ever & Anon will be available to the public for free, so matters you don't want publicly known should be discussed elsewhere. Please adhere to all the normal rules of public discourse: no libel, no inciting violence, no infringement of another's copyright or trademark, and no pornography. Zines should use page dimensions of 8.5" x 11" (portrait). Maximum zine length is 16 pages. Maximum length for fiction (other than campaign reports) is 6 pages. Discussion of contemporary politics is discouraged but permitted with a maximum length for political content set at 2 pages. AI-generated artwork is allowed, but AI-generated text is not. If you want to use an AI to help you edit your zine, you may do so. All artwork must be attributed to its creator, whether human or AI, unless it is in the public domain. When you submit your zine to Ever & Anon, you are granting the APA a perpetual, non-exclusive right to publish your zine in a single issue of the APA, meaning that you retain the copyright to your work, and so you can publish it elsewhere, but you cannot force Ever & Anon to 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 #10 – March 21st: The best/worst/funniest monster combat tactics.

Issue #11 – April 21st: RPG Setting Design: What makes a setting great, what are your preferred methods for setting design, and is there one you've created, want to create, or simply want to explore?

Issue #12 – May 21st: Gods, Demigods, and Other Riffraff / Religion, Spirituality, and the Cosmic Order

Issue #13 – June 21st: What's the most interesting fantasy race &/or science fiction species you've played, NPCed, or simply read about, and which, if any, do you personally identify with?

Issue #14 – July 21st: Intraparty Conflict

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 #9 (ver. 2) – March 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme:

City Building for Fun and Adventure: What do you need and where do you start?

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

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?

A: An APA.

Q: What's an APA?

A: An Amateur Press Association.

Q: What's that?

A: A collection of zines. It can also refer to the community of people writing the zines.

Q: What's a zine?

A: A fanzine. A small, amateur magazine usually distributed for free or at cost.

Q: So this is a collection of free fanzines written by amateurs?

A: Exactly.

Q: And each one has a separate author?

A: Right.

Q: But I see the same names appearing again and again throughout.

A: Those are comments. We comment on each others zines. When you see *Avram Grumer: blah-blah-blah...*, if there are no quotes around the *blah-blah-blah*, that's probably a comment to Avram.

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q: Who is Lee Gold?

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

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

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

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

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

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



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

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

Abbreviations & Acronyms You Need to Know:

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

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

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #8

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

All About Me

It's early February as I pushed through quick to get two issues of comments done before we took a Valetines weekend break away from the kiddos. Wow, 4.5 pages of comments felt like a heavy lift. I don't know how you heavy commenters managed it! The family is doing well, and elder kiddo is settling in nicely to her 4th semester at college. Her school has a summer abroad program that she'll be using to visit exotic... northern Maine, where the school maintains an active archaeology dig. It's a sign of her enjoyment of her major that she was shocked that other students weren't trying to horn in on this coolness. Set builds for *Mystery of Edwin Drood* have started, in which Brian has to learn more about making manor house window tops than he ever wanted.

The *Swords of the Serpentine* game continues apace, and last session the players were shocked to find the most likely suspect for a crime in fact committed the crime, and they had to perform a quick caper to get the suspect, who had been living in their brothel, out before he could use the demon inside him to wreak havoc. Their prior meddling caused the master villain to mess them up by siccing some of their old adversaries at them; they responded by making peace with another old adversary so that person could further mess up the master villain's plans. They have the initiative now, but this only ends with his death or theirs. I figure we have 1, maybe 2 sessions left¹.

The Star Wars group is eager to meet again, so it's the question of whether I can find the time to play. I know I can find the time to write up an 8-16 page book with all the rules mods I want to make to WEG d6 to bring them into the play style that emerged with these players². I did ask them what they wanted to do next and posited what I saw were the most likely directions. They have been having almost-in-character chats about merging and altering my suggestions, so its clear they are engaged.

This month I'm focusing on the Knave group, but there will be more on the Denizens next month. I am coming up with some interstitial in the city stuff for the rest of this school year so next school year will be all *Red Hand of Doom*, which will take the oldest kid through his senior year and lead to a rousing conclusion to his PCs story.

Inside the Library:

The most recent Knave game was, due to St. Cuthbert's oracular bones of, as cinematic a session as I've ever run.

Some context: a century ago the city of Koralgesh chief wizard betrayed them, allowing demon-backed pirates into port. The god Kor destroyed the city via volcanic eruption, killing the invaders and letting refugees escape. "The Keep at Koralgesh", and the shrine of Kor, set in the mountain above the city, miraculously survived intact. A year+ ago the PCs learned this, along with the location of a secret entrance to the Keep from the Shrine, only revealed at the solstice. They got caught up in other things and didn't make it last year; those adventures funded the purchase of the sloop that got them here this year. They've been exploring it for weeks.

A new player joined and Knave's classless PC creation uses 2 rolls on a Careers table. Knight & Priest. I present 3 options for the PC: 1) the PCs hired a sailor to run the sloop to be the PC of a player ended up not attending; we could swap a career for Sailor and he's that guy. 2) a player who had to drop out had a PC who always abused the carousing rules, and he's been drunkenly telling people where the PCs went; this could be the survivor of a rival adventuring party. 3) a few sessions back the PCs freed 3 Koralgesh guards petrified by a medusa summoned by the betrayor-wizard, and 2 of them became henchmen for the PC who saved them, but she didn't have enough Charisma for a 3rd henchman, their reaction rolls were horrible, and the 3rd guy stomped off. He could be that guy, a Paladin of Kor. who has realized that the PCs aren't temple robbers, they are a recovery team sent from his god's church in another city.

Of course he picked 3.

So the Paladin joins and they depart from the sloop for the 2-day trek back to the Keep; everything is going wrong on the travel die; repeatedly coming up fatigue (you need to rest a watch) and depletion (1/6 chance each spoilable item spoils, which all of them keep rolling 1s) leaving them exhausted and without food. They are seriously frustrated, getting nowhere. Then an encounter comes up. Random Roll? One of the ubiquitous B/X Giant Crab Spiders. Nasty, but doable. They hear the telltale clicks of the spider -crab, and the Paladin... starts

¹ After that a break for 1-2 sessions of Pacesetter's *Chill* in Victorian era.

² not the least is making the initiative system less clunky

reading his prayer book,. There are no actual rules for miracles, but this retro-clone centers deity-worship, so I let the kid make a Charisma check (Cha being the "priest-stat" here with the +5 from his Priest career. 19, total is 25. Well now.

The spider lunges at the party's fighter in the tree's overhead, and its attack is truncated by its branch breaking, dropping it into the camp near the paladin... The spider runs to attack the paladin... and rolls a 2, the Paladin warding it off with his shield as he continues to read from his prayer book. Sure, why not, make a Charisma roll. 26. This is clearly a sign, I rule I'll reroll the spiders reaction in light of this piety; reaction rolls are 2d6, high is good. **12**

Oh what the hell, the Paladin's Charisma gives him 1 henchman slot. The Paladin now has a pet giant crab spider, a miracle of Kor. To say the new player is ecstatic and the other players are jazzed is an understatement.

Travel through the oppressive jungle continues, and the travel dice come up Sign;, roll for the next encounter they'll likely have and get "Ettercaps"; ok, the campsite the PCs built mid-trip last time is covered in webs. Since Kilk-klack the crab spider can indicate yes/no answers the party can confirm this wasn't his doing. They expect more spiders.... 2 watches later the ettercaps appear. And their reaction roll is a 10; non-hostile, they have an incomprehensible dialogue w/ Kili-klack before leaving. The PCs look at each other, shrug, and move on. Weird shit happens in the jungle. But the Paladin's player is just beside himself with how cool his PC is.

They reach the shrine and the Paladin, not wanting to shove the huge spider through the secret door, asks Klik-klack to guard the entrance. He really is looking out for his new spider-buddy, validating my decision here.

Last session the PCs got into the Keep's treasure vault but couldn't get all the coins out, so that's their goal. The Dungeon die give me a Sign result, and Caterwaul (I replaced most monsters with Fiend Folio nonsense to emphasize otherworldly shenanigans happening in the jungle; and unlike the 5E verisons these keep their area effect sonic attack in their first round of combat). The players have seen sign of the great cat before, but haven't encountered it yet.

The vault entrance hall has an antigravity pit trap: if you aren't carrying the right token when you pass under the ceiling hole you fall up into a 'pit' and skeletons appear. There's mild hazing the new kid where the fighter tricks the paladin into 'falling' into the pit, but the skeletons were already destroyed, and the party uses a healing potion to bring the paladin back to full. They're teenage boys, this stuff happens, everyone shakes hands.

Once they use it to open the vault, they leave the token under the pit so they can travel back and forth safely, and all the PCs climb into the vault to bag up their loot. This is when the Caterwaul, now able to enter this hallway since the doors are open and the 'pit' is disabled, stalks after them. The fighter's henchman standing guard yells a warning but misses his bowshot. The fighter tries to charge the caterwaul, knock it back before it gets in, but the party fails initiative.

The caterwaul leaps through the door, screaming, and mauls the henchman before swatting the fighter with its paw knocking him prone. They are trapped, the henchman down, the fighter & witch-hunter wounded... but the paladin made his save vs. sonic and is unharmed. the fighter yells for the paladin to grab their henchman and get out... he has a plan! Comradery established from the hazing the paladin complies, rolling another 26 to get around the beast and out with the henchman.

The witch-hunter (well, actually an animated terra-cotta statue temple guardian of the goddess of lycanthropy and abjuration) lands a solid blow on the beast before getting banged up, but is on his feet. And the fighter enacts his plan. See, a few sessions back they found the traitor wizard's spellbooks, and the Fighter's new level lets him cast 1 spell/day. So he cast "Landu's Celestial Marble Servant". The medusa summoning spell...³ But I'm not the boss of them, and the medusa slithers (I'm a Clash of the Titans Harryhausen medua fan, so human torso and snake tail rather than legs) up out of the floor, and the fighter makes his first INT save. 15, +1 Int = **16!** He's got control! The medusa turns her gaze on the caterwaul! The great cat petrifies, making a rather fetching statue and the players try to figure out if they can take with them. As they run. The plan now is to run.

Witch-hunter "Can't you just dispel it?"

Fighter: "No, it's here for 10 minutes"

Witch-hunter: "YOU IDIOT! THIS IS WHY I HUNT WIZARDS!"

³ Knave uses random spell name generation that you then define. Here's my spell for *Landu's Celestial Marble Servant*: Summons Stone Medusa for INT turns; INT save (16+) per turn to control or it turns on you. While controlled you are immune to its gaze and it will follow complex instructions.

This is a NIGHTMARE; the Medusa is damn tough, the caster can't just end it, and unless you're Int 10 with a magical career for the +5, you're eventually gonna lose control. It's a spell for a master wizard, which the fighter... ain't. But this is classic Grey Mouser nonsense.

The two of them scramble out the door as the fighter makes his second INT check. $15+1=16!$ He has control for one more minute, ordering her to stay put. The Paladin is waiting, and once they are past snatches the token out from under the pit as they flee around some corners and wait. INT check = 3. She's loose with a roar of rage. They hear her slither out after them... and hit the anti-gravity pit! SLAM! Ha! she's trapped! they just have to wait the remaining 7 rounds....

"Of course she can figure out that she can brace herself with her snake body to climb out..."

I toss the d20 across the table to see if she succeeds. 18. The players groan.. and hearing her hands scrape across the ceiling as she pulls free they yell "RUN!"

Skidding around corridors they head for the furthest room they have mapped and hunker down.

"Of course, she has a chance to track you..."

I toss the d20 across the table to see if she succeeds. 19. "Ooooooh crap!" they moan The players describe hiding in the music room, holding their shields up (or in the case of the witch hunter, pretending to be an inanimate statue) as they hear her round the corner....

"Wait a minute..." the fighter says, looking at his sheet. See he doesn't just have a sword and shield. Last year on the side trek that made them miss the Koralgesh solstice he recovered the *Arms Argent*, artifacts of a knight that were buried at the Witch-Hunters temple. Magical silvered weapons, they are a Sword +1/+3 vs lycanthropes and a Shield +1 of... Gaze Reflection.

The fighter stands valiantly in the doorway, shield up, as the medusa bursts in, 2 rounds of life left...and falls victim to her own gaze attack!⁴ She freezes! The paladin walks over and decapitates her with his greatsword just as the spell was turning her to dust anyway.

Witch hunter:: Yup, this is a double-tap scenario.

As we are closing up for the week"

Me: "So, I don't know what your other D&D games have been like..."

Paladin, bouncing in his seat : "This is insane!"

Witch Hunter: "SHENANIGANS!"

They left the library trying to figure out how to get the caterwaul statue out of the vault.... Because of course.

⁴ Now, I could have said "the spell medusa is already stone, so her gaze has no effect" but that would be churlish. They walked themselves to this moment of repeated near death all on their own, give them the win.

⁵ No, there are no recruiting rules, why do you ask?

V&V Basic Characteristics

As you may remember from DotL#2 and 711, Charisma in V&V is unusual, being how much they emocdy their alignment (so High Charisma villains are very Evil while High Charisma heroes are very Good), which drives their initial reactions with people, and current reaction modifies their loyalty if you recruit them⁵. It's all kind of a mess, and as you saw with 711 it makes things harder than it needs to be. Before we do this month's *Regrettable* I need to fix it. And if I'm gonna fix that I might as well do all the Basic Characteristics.

First, human range for Basic Characteristics runs from 1-27. The rulebook calls out that 0 Int is animal intelligence, so I am comfortable with saying that 0 or less is also below human. Why 27? V&V has some deep simulation when it comes to carrying capacity, combining Strength, Endurance & Weight. At a 20 in both S & E you're lifting 5x your weight, which is human maximum lift⁶. That calculation relies on cubing $1/10^{\text{th}}$ your Strength score, but I've always felt 20 was too low for real world best, so I reduce cubing to squaring; once you do that the magic number is 27 to get to 5x weight. Fortunately, the fastest human mile is roughly 17.5mph, which works out in V&V to a move rate of 77; move rate is the sum of S+E+A, so you're at peak human speed at... 26 in each. That's close enough for me⁷. Finally, 27 is a good number to cap out for average 9-11 score people with a +2d10 skill bonus.

Strength:

Strength is your musculature in relation to size. Size matters for your carrying capacity, so your carry cap can't be backed into a strength score; again, V&V simulationist bent. A 100 lbs. character can lift half as much as a 200 lbs. one. Strength is the greatest driver for carrying capacity, and carrying capacity determines basic HTH damage.

Strength is also factors in to your Hit Points, Fatigue Points⁸, and ground movement. The other half of my ground rules is that if you have any sort of superhuman strength you go back to using the cube of your S rather than the square of it; in the early comics Captain America & Spider Man both have Strength scores of 27, but Cap can lift 5x his weight and Spider Man can lift 11x, even if all the other Strength related details are the same. This is all idiosyncratic to me.

Endurance

Endurance is the biggest factor into your Hit Points and adds to your Fatigue Points & Movement just as Strength does, but it also determines your healing rate. The current rules for healing rate are just too slow. Zippo from DotL#3 has a 24 Endurance and manages to heal 2.4 HP of his 21 PER DAY. Yes, you're supposed to shift a lot of damage to your Fatigue Points and in theory yoo are more likely get Knocked Out (tamage taken as % chance each time you're hit) more often than incapacitated to capture the comics, but...

⁶ Trust me on this, I've done too much research. Huge people don't get that high a multiple but x5 lift is the best any weight category has managed.

⁷ and probably more rigor than anyone ever put into this nonsense.

⁸ In V&V this is your Power score, but "Power" is the "Level" of V&V.

Given that I'm happy to steal more modern game technology I'm more than willing to shift to a Recovery system similar to 13th Age, where everyone has 5

- 1) With an action recover your Endurance in Fatigue Points in a fight ('catching your breath')
- 2) Between fights recover your Healing Rate in HP.
- 3) Between fights with medical attention undo the lasting effects of a Special Attack. If you remember from Zippo, Special Attacks let you target weapons or body parts to disable them, and the recovery is entirely GM controlled; this puts a framework up for recovery.

Agility:

Agility is the second biggest factor into your hit points, adds to your Fatigue Points & Movement rate, it also modifies your accuracy & damage and is the basis for your initiative. It's widely accepted that Agility is overpowered: you will likely get a playable hero with just Heightened Strength; you can *always* get one with just Heightened Agility. Swapping how A and S effect HP is a common hack, albeit not one I employ as I find converting published material HP more onerous than changing carrying capacity. Not sure why.

Instead of changing Agility's rules, it's the Basic Characteristic I most police during character creation to rein the number in. In college my "players based on characters so UConn has a 'Variant Studies' program that teaches people superhuman law, ethics, and power use, you are Section Eight in VS101" game I had PC creation and the first session at the very end of Freshman year to find the PCs Agility spreads unplayable: the martial artists & animal powers PCs had Agilities around 40 would get 3.5 actions/round, the energy projector was 30 and would get 3, and the psychic and strongman were 'normal' and would get 1.75; the fight ran



Warped Warrior-Talon-
Misanthrope-Warped Warrior-
Death Penalty-Talon-
Misanthrope-Warped Warrior-
Death Penalty-Talon-
Misanthrope-Excellent Woman-
Tombstone Cowboy-Warped
Warrior-Death Penalty-Talon/
Misanthrope-Excellent Woman?
Tombstone Cowboy got 1 action
out of 18. Untenable. Over the
summer I reduced the "I rolled
Ht. Agility x3" PCs so each had
1 instance and scores of 18-25.
Some grumbling about 'nerfing'
PCs but everyone admitted that
the game improved.

⁹ Halfway through the first year the PCs started taking the super-heroing thing seriously and Death Penalty changed her name to Arclight, while Excellent Woman became Gypsy... problematic in retrospect. Misanthrope and Tombstone Cowboy had dropped out earlier, to be replaced by two new players whose characters were Shriekback and Skywalker. Original sketch of Talon by Jason Dressel.

¹⁰ Count yourself lucky: the original rules had Detect Entrances and Detect Traps, which is really displaying its *Empire of the Petal Throne* roots.

Intelligence:

The least factor into your Hit Points and an add to your Fatigue Points, Intelligence also applies to Damage Modifier, Invention chance and Inventing Points (as we discussed with Zippo) and your Detect Hidden and Detect Danger. It's also the characteristic that protects you from Mind Control.

Changes? Well, The split of Detect Hidden & Detect Danger, each being a couple of percentage points apart and those being a couple of percentage points from your Intelligence score is just over-fiddly design. Detection is now a d% roll vs. Intelligence¹⁰. But that's pretty well it.

Charisma:

Scrap everything, start over. Even if the Charisma rules in 2E worked as intended—as an Alignment Indicator—no one uses Charisma or Alignment that way now. So, what is Charisma? In a phrase, *Force of Personality*.

- 1) It's the basis for Reputation. Given Supers play, we don't have Reaction rolls of the OSR "hey you bumped into a thing in the dungeon and I have *no idea* how it will react to you... it might be friendly! It might want to eat you! Let's find out!" but instead Reputation rolls to show your starting advantage. Poor rolls mean people think you're ineffectual, potential allies think you a shmuck, foes quickly coordinate against you. Reputation is where the fluctuating nature of Charisma from the old rules lives, as the GM can boost or lower it from its start based on incidents in play. Note that this doesn't *define* your Reputation: Superman & Batman have high Reputations, which are very different in interpretation, but mechanics are the same: everyone knows they are effective, allies trust them, and opponents are halfway beaten before the battle starts because the outcome feels inevitable.
- 2) It modifies Interaction. When a character tries to convince someone of something and the GM doesn't see an obvious outcome, this modifies the roll. Subterfuge, interrogation, diplomacy, affirmation... all Interaction modifier. An angry Superman can be terrifying, while a rarely avuncular Batman can convince you you're able to do so much more than you think.
- 3) It determines the breadth and loyalty of your contacts and recruits. Much of V&V's Charisma rules are a weird mini-game of tracking recruit loyalty¹¹, which we don't do here. Instead heroes get a number of Contacts based on Charisma while villains have a number of Henchmen loyal enough to wear themed uniforms. Once you get to a 27+ charisma this number gets ludicrously high to account for whole organizations that support a single hero or the masses of devoted henchmen
- 4) Finally, it's still the thing characteristic that modifies and resists Emotion Control attacks.

¹¹ The Prejudice weakness (the "people on my side see me as an enemy" weakness) comments that "Achieving and maintaining a somewhat average charisma (by operating incognito, accepting no credit for one's own exploits, etc.) will reduce the negative reaction modifiers to agreeable levels... villains will be forced to operate without flunkies or backing from criminal organizations", so the intent of the Charisma rules for having a villainous companion, small gang of cleverly dressed thugs, or vast armies of fanatics.

Stating up Regrets 8: Lady Satan

Staying in the dark days of World War II (1940-1955) this issue as we look at the Eye's first agent against the Thinker's wartime time meddling. If the war lasted an extra 10 years from our view it's not the fault of this lady, from whom science hasn't found a way to track how little she puts up with Nazi bullshit. I give you...

Lady Satan. ¹²



Because women should have their own “angry hero with no ties to humanity”, we never learn Lady Satan’s name, just that her fiancé is killed by Nazis, and she survives, dedicating her life to fucking Nazis up. Laudable goal. She spends the war in Europe doing just that as a highly lethal femme fatale. Her exploits to my mind, are vast, but she only appears in a few issues before vanishing... until after the war, when she returns as, I kid you not, a sorceress, fighting both real monsters and those pretending to be monsters to terrorize people. Once there were no more Nazis she had to keep herself busy

Her only ‘power’ in her early appearances is her chlorine gas, which she claims “won’t hurt them”, which I take to mean “won’t hurt them much”. Upon her return, she has a variety of supernatural trinkets. We are left to ponder where and how she got such magic...

Lady Satan is easy to build under this’s new rules. In the old rule I contemplated giving her a Body Power “Gorgeous” to make up for how she plays on her charisma but clearly isn’t an avatar of good. She has *Ht. Charisma A +15* taking her to a human max 27. She also has *Ht. Intelligence A +12* (21) and *Ht. Agility A +8* (23). Her last skill is *Heightened Expertise +4* with ‘spy weapons’, of which garotte and knife are her favorites. With her 21 Int she has plenty of inventing points that she turns into ‘suicide knives’ and other gear; I could have her Chlorine Gun be an invention but I to keep it as a Poison/Venom device for reasons I’ll explain in a minute. She almost generic were it not for her great visuals and ethos.



In game terms, this means she’s able to react before most any normal person (her minimum initiative is 24, where even fast people max out. Her intelligence and agility combine for a +4 accuracy and +4 damage, augmented to +8 accuracy with spy weapons, which with the conventional weapon bonus is +10¹³. With 11 Strength, 10 Endurance and 120 lbs. size her carry capacity is just enough for a 1d4 Basic HTH. Her surprise hits are always special attacks get max bang for her buck-20 weight.



With that weight she’s getting an Agility bonus the same way that Iron Skull and Speed Centaur took penalties, but it does mean her HP are just 10, backed by an impressive 66 fatigue. If she’s able to roll with attacks she can take a beating from conventional hits, but with no defenses and those scores she’s not suited for toe to toe combat. But she seldom needs it.



¹² Lady Satan was created by George Tuska for Dynamic Comics #1 and is in the public domain. All images taken from Paul Tobin’s blog, here <https://www.paultobin.net/public-domain-loves/lady-satan>

¹³ As you can see she is a firm believer in getting facing bonuses as well, so make that +14, for a 19 or less when she backstabs. And yes, I had to include this whole sequence on principle.

But wait... Sorcery?

By design, *V&V* fatalities are rare¹⁴. When circumstances dictate a PC die they're allowed a d% Fatigue save to survive PCs are the stars of any campaign, and should be especially hard to kill. They should be miraculously saved if at all possible, or allowed to come back if not, unless the player chooses to have his character stay dead. A slain player-character brought back from the dead may or may not retain the same super-powers; GMs option.¹⁵

Sometime during the war Laday Satan *should* have died but was rescued by mystics. Under their tutelage she abandons her *Poison Venom Device*, replacing it with a *Magical Spells Item*. This is what *Champions* would refer to as a 'radiation accident', the chance to shuffle up the PCs powers due to a near death experience. It's also why I wanted the chlorine gun to be a Device and not invention, so we had something to swap out for the *Magical Spells Item*. I suppose it doesn't matter: if a player come to me saying they wanted to shift up their badass spy into being a monster hunter I doubt I'd object. Since this is happening just before the end of the war, and our WWII lasts 15 years, I'm gonna say she's about 7th level when this happens.

I think this is this our first Item! Items are like devices but magic (or tech so advanced its magic); they either have charges & Basic Characteristics like Devices or use the wielder's Fatigue & Characteristics. Hers is clearly external for number of charges and characteristics... with one exception. The rules for *Magical Spells* are that you can use *Inventing* rules to make, well, magic spells¹⁶ but their spells are 2/3rds as potent as a standard Ability, while invention are roughly 1/3rd. This is clearly the Doctor Strange power: you get a bunch of spells that you get to name and invent all the nonsense for, which is fun! But you do have to invent them, which takes time, your *Inventing Point* resources, and good dice rolls. If I wanted to be a hardcase about this, I would roll 3d8 for the Item's Intelligence and she would use that for the inventing points & percent. But by 7th level she's trained her INT to 24, so it's better for her to her INT to invent even if the items all rely on their own characteristics.¹⁷



If she invented one spy gizmo per level that leaves 9.8 *Inventing points* for magic. Known spells include *Xanda Powder* (messes up werewolves), a *Shadow People Urn* (they perform searches for her), *Dragonscale Powder* (shifts one's perception to the 'shadow world'), and something that gives her "the strength of 20 men" (in bursts, since she doesn't show super-strength all the time). Plus a handful of unknown things.

But how do you play it?

You stab Nazis. And then werewolves. And since Nazi behind-allied-lines-resistance was 'Werwolf', maybe Nazi werewolves. She is very much a solo operator, but a game where the Eye pulls together agents for a critical mission every year of the war sounds playable.

The regrettable world.

By the time we get to the *Regrettables* 1970's timeframe she's been 15 years a Nazi fighter and 15 years a monster hunter; in her mid-50's she's now a level 15 or so support NPC, making use of the new *Contact* rules. Maybe give her a *Weakness* to explain why she's not in the field¹⁸.

Regretting what I said to you...

Lisa Padol felt that Doctor Hormone reached new levels of WTF. That's the *Regrettables'* promise to you!

Roger BW built on my thought of Doctor Hormone: similar to the 3rd Doctor: I agree, an incarnation of the Doctor trapped during WWII would be fascinating for a short campaign. (Maybe an arc of my long-hypothesized *Susan Who* game where the Time Lord is Susan's 2nd incarnation after her grandfather's 12th death.

Joshua Kronegold pointed out that Dr Hormone as a bit of a dupe: No! He was just so effective that the Thinker had to take him off the board! And also a dupe.

Myles Corcoran & Elf commented on exploring *Public Domain Superheroes*, which I applaud. I put the "it has to come from this Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes*" restriction to stay focused! Otherwise, I'd drown in this stuff.



¹⁴ Except for Nazis. Screw those guys.

¹⁵ *V&V* 2.1, section 7.2 REPLACING SLAIN CHARACTERS

¹⁶ something that I let any magic based hero do just for rituals and trinkets

¹⁷ And yes, rather than being one item giving her spells, she has one per spell

¹⁸ 'Paraplegic is classic, but I like the idea of her missing an arm because a monster bit it off as she was holding a grenade. Or just "too old for this shit?"

Comments on E&A 7 & 8

Matt Stevens (7): the *Top Secret* plot diagram is great; thanks for sharing. RE Charisma in *Under the Giant's Shadow*: yeah, I was tempted, but fighting tradition's tide of tradition wouldn't net me much. Interestingly, *Knave* uses Charisma as its "how good a cleric are you" stat. re Story Games: Someone on my social media pushing back a snooty against trad story gamer with how games can be described as "new school mechanizations of things that don't need to be mechanized". That wasn't her stance per se, but she's also not wrong.

Clark B. Timmins (7): Elaria, especially at the end, feels like a Clark Ashton Smith dying civilization where there's one last outpost that the PCs stumble into.

Patrick Riley (7): my favorite bizarre bit in *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* is it was possible to reduce technology to the level that *clubs* didn't work, never mind levers.... These tropes exist to stop early adopter D&D 1970's-80's engineering students from creating gunpowder and dynamos as a fantasy games premise rejection. re V&V Grid: no, the game assumes you're using one, or at least positioning things on the table. The equipment needed includes a ruler and tokens/25mm minis; all ranges and speeds are given in inches. We all just skipped it.

Roger BW (7): I have run a *Mission: Impossible* game, using *Castle Falkenstein*. The game ran 6 months and was immensely fun; probably my wife's favorite of the games I've run for her. How I handled it

- 1) The players had stable PCs, invitees of "The Baron", a Second Compact spymaster. Sometimes I would add a NPC to their team to give them a new thing to play with such as when they had a Brownie and they used his great feat to build a fake roadside inn to lure their target to meet them rather than the person's actual contact.
- 2) We met monthly, and the players got the mission target & objectives 3-4 weeks before we met. They then had that time to ask questions, collect data, and make plans before play started. There wasn't *additional* information gathering: once at the table the fuse was lit and Lalo Schiffren was playing.
- 3) The players learned they had a lot more leeway than they thought because unless they screwed up the mark was unaware. It took time to stop doomsaying their own good plans with "but what if he suspects that someone will build a fake inn?"

Ruritanian Malenkoslovakia is a name for the ages!

REYCT Lisa on Credit Rating being renamed as Social Etiquette: this is long overdue. A few years back I was explaining how Credit Rating was meant to work to people on line and they were gobsmacked.

RE YCTM on *Draw Steel* and need to know mechanics: this gets tricky, because so much of the early parts of *D&D* had simple mechanics compared to what we have now. Needing to know what your abilities could do in *B/X* is a cakewalk compared to how *5E/Draw Steel* abilities not just work but mechanically interact. For ex., the kids' Devil Talent could project a telekinetic field that knocked back anyone too close to the target, and she cast it on the Dragon Knight Fury, who could then use his movement boosting powers to race through lines of opponents to send them caroming like they'd been hit by a cue ball... the players *loved* figuring that out, and that's the 'holy crap we could do this' moments of clever crunchy bits interaction *Draw Steel* wants. Player skill in the old days was "are we clearly communicating intent to the DM? Are we making good decisions in a deadly and antagonistic environment? Are making the best use of our scant resources?" The first session of the library *Knave* game had 1 player, who was basically a fighter with Tattooist & Carpenter backgrounds, and before he first entered the dungeon he used his carpentry skills and tools to make a trap at the entrance to kill anyone chasing him if he had to flee... which is player skill in the OSR; Its interesting to look at the scoring sheets for 70's-80's tournament play on that regard. All that being said, *Draw Steel* has lots of rules for generating drama – that's Colville's big shtick in GM advice – but it expects a chunk of combat fun to be from playing silly buggers tricks with your characters crunchy bits.

REYCTM on Most Important People: with this perspective, I'm very interested in your thoughts on last month's *Star Wars* game write-up. *Star Wars* has an incredibly clear narrative that the players aren't in, but this game is taking place *after* it. Similarly, when I ran *Hufflepuff & Ravenclaw* the events started 7 years before HP1. (The early *Star Wars* published adventures do lean into some of your complaints, where the PCs kept getting assigned to scut jobs...while mentioning Luke/Han etc were off being important elsewhere). REYCT Pum on initiative: as you saw in my write-up, *Star Wars* uses a similar system and it's very frustrating. RE early *WoD* dice pool failures: to my dying day I will remember the Brujah-turned-in-1860's- west-gunslinger-in-modern day PC with 9d in his Dex + Guns pool fumbling with four 1's and the player saying "Mhy gun... exploded... in mhy hand..." for much of the rest of the session. re YCT Elf on Dice: I did get a cube of 36 spiffy new d6 from Santa because my wife knew I was running this *Star Wars* game. The players all appreciated it.

Myles Corcoran (7): Interesting use of social combat on Simon to avoid bloodshed. Always nice to see. re Solo Traveller: what do you mean "FIN"?! The story ends with an soundless explosion in space? I did notice the phrasing of the questions tweaked a little facing really

high or low die rolls, but I suspect that's inevitable. Maybe "better outcome/worse outcome" rather than "yes/no" as the outcomes. re adding a small number of character tags: INCREASING GAME COMPLEXITY IS INEVITABLE! I did appreciate how things like Oona's theft ended up not 'mattering', which gives us the messiness separating write ups from polished fiction – sometimes stuff just happens & means nothing. REYCT Me: 2026 does not appear to be vectoring over 2025. REYCT Lisa on write ups vs. comments: I'll admit I use *E&A* to scratch the social media itch of getting ideas in front of people and it's so much easier to bang out characters and write ups, but it's like any game economy: if I don't put Comment Chips in the bin I can't expect to get Chips out. As for your body, that meme that says you're an electrical ghost driving a meat mech isn't even correct: it's biochemistry all the way down, which is terrifying. *Wait, Everyway* 2E is 780+ pages long?! WTF?! Insane.

Patrick Zoch (7): As someone who runs mostly for kids age 12-18 these days I see this sort of behavior all the time. It's a learning experience. Your comments on *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* match my responses when reading it; it's the only 5E book I still own. I do love how GrnHrtBrwnThmb stepped up to make more content to resolve some of the issues. I enjoyed the "fantasy worlds are the contemporary reskinned" tropes played out with the 'apartments'. Re *Band of Brothers*: Never mind that, any reference to Easy Company brings me directly to *Sergeant Rock* from DC Comics. re Deadlines: I see a lot of myself in your strategies; in my case I've had several cases where 2 weeks from deadline the project was canceled so the fact that I had done nothing on it as yet was good time management! Echoing your thanks to Jim for this pivotal first year of *E&A*

Attronarch (7): continue to enjoy the OSR goodness.

Michael Cule (7): Good luck on the medical changes!

Jim Eckman (7): I had seen ads for *Bushido* for years in *Dragon*, but it wasn't one of the *FGU* games we ever picked up. Fascinating review.

Lisa Padol (7): re *Monte Cristo*: happy to help. My daughter got me a copy for Christmas and the 1230 page stack is looming from my bedside table. re Necrobiotic: Deadium is now going in my list of Atomic Horror elements along with Brobdignagium and Liliputium. It's amazing how much my bad *Metatopia* experience sticks with me a decade later. re *The World's Problems*: ooh, I know people who would kill for a good *Sandbaggers* game. re a fine distinction between no random death vs. no plot armor: Yeah, but it's a meaningful one. I don't run *Knave* games with "save or die" or "the first person

through this door is struck dead" that can exist in OSR games. Death isn't *random*. But I don't have a plot built for any of these PCs: the players pick where they want to go, what they want to do. For example, the Knave PCs are exploring the mountain keep where the city beneath it was destroyed in an earthquake, and there was one room where there was clearly some treasure on the far side, but there was also a burned off at the legs body halfway across the room – something was going on. So Remus went alone and unarmored across the room, hearing the floor creak under him, but made it there and back. The players eventually realized the 'floor' was a thin skin of cooled magma and too much weight in the middle would collapse it: a single person out there had a 1 in 6 chance of breaking it, more than that 3 in 6. If they had fallen into the lava (which *Knave* is very clear means instant death) it wouldn't have been random: there were clues warnings & clues that they successfully interpreted. Now, Remus got a mission from his goddess to handle whatever is happening in the lost city of Sangkon Bhet and the players plan to go there next, but if Remus dies they may, or may not, go explore it: this won't end the world, I don't have plots built on it, it's just another adventure site. So there's no *plot armor* because there is no story I'm trying to tell.

See my comments to Roger BW about *Star Wars* PCs doing minor stuff. Your 3rd option, agency if you don't disrupt canon, is strange to me because why I-as-GM set that up? Why open the door to "you learn the Empire are building a second Death Star...but you'll never be able to tell anyone!" unless I want to follow it with "Mwahahaha! I'm a Giant Asshole!?" It's hard for me to even imagine a GM or publisher doing that. But if it's you-as-player going "Screw this post Hoth mission, I'm going to Endor to see if there's a second Death Star!" I'd stare over my glasses at you and ask you to stop premise rejecting. (Not that I expect you, Lisa, would do that.) I'm not saying this *doesn't* happen, but as with Josh's comments on a *De&D* 3E GM snaking the parties treasure out from under them when the game engine REQUIRED them to be at those levels, it's just baffling.

re *BESM*: I don't so much think we're *arguing* because you're having a pretty reasonable emotional reaction to where it's easy to see the mechanics screwing you, while I am having (what I hope) is a pretty reasonable logistical reaction to those mechanics unconsciously pushing premise rejection. The *BESM* writers assume that in a narrow focus "everyone is an X" game some PCs will be in competition to be best at [core activity] because that is core to lots of Anime stories, whereas most players I know do the *Pendragon* "OK, we are all different flavors of knight and none of us are bickering over who has the highest Sword or Lance skill."

re Romance for Larger Groups: the structure of the romance novels I'm thinking of is a short series (trilogy or quartet) where there are a collection of siblings/found family of marryin' age and their circle of old/new acquaintances also of marryin' age. And in book one we watch one sibling pair off with one acquaintance, while one sibling sets up a dislike with one acquaintance so that in the last book they get their enemies to lovers arc. But everyone's stories advance book by book so in the last book the couple that paired off in the first book get married (or have a kid) and we're watching the dominoes fall. In the middle of this they have some family shared business that they need to advance/protect so there are issues/problems around all the romance.

Gabriel Roark (7): Congrats on the skating! and healing! RAE ToEE

Brian Misiaszek (7): all our sympathies on Sadie's passing. Can't wait to see if Lauren got into UT. RE Your comment to John Redden on *Habana Horror* to come: and I thought my *Regrettables* was a lot of advance work. Hokey shmokes! RE YCT Michael Cule on "the inspiration of Immersion": I just saw that in the Star Wars game write up lastish where the Abyssin player spotted a way through the ever tightening web of their prior poor decisions that would *work*. He was legit giddy. It was beautiful. REYCT Me re *Draw Steel*: Not all games are for all tables. I still want to find a place to use it, but everyone is happier coming back to our prior *13th Age* game, where *Red Hand of Doom* is on docket. (*13th Age 2E*, alas, is not). As for ascribing blame to me for *V&V* when you should be giving *Joyous Thanks*, well, I'm sure you'll come around. To be honest, *V&V* modules are a mixed bag, in part because no one has cracked how to write an exceptional super-hero module.

ELF (7): Enjoying the *Wanderhome* discussions. LOL at Sea of Non-Specificity. re *Draw Steel*: to be fair I hadn't expected how tactical/map based combat would be...

Joshua Kronengold (7): Massive piles of books is always something that bugs me on an ahistorical sense, but I also routinely add printing presses so the fantasy urban cities have broadsheets. Internal consistency? Bah! RE YCTM on *D&D 4E* slog: I expect there is less of that in *Draw Steel* just because there are fewer levels, it's extensively playtested, and the resources are smooth. Re *Smallville*: Good observation on it having too many fiddly bits piled on top of the big idea structure. I never got a chance to play it but that sounds right from character creation. I do appreciate the positive reminiscence on the LSH game. I know after the restart petered out that my mind/schedule isn't there. As for distributing it, well, I decided a while back not to monetize my hobbies, and having seen sooo many "lets steal from V&V" supers'

games out there I don't want to add to them. So this sees distribution here as a set of hacks. REYCT Patrick Riley on Bardic Inspiration: I really felt *13th Age* had cracked that with magic songs vs. battle cries, but alas battle cries are wildly modified in 2E. Reading your *Brindlewood Bay* Meddle Move discussion crystallized how much I dislike "move" systems for play as being so damn reductive and mechanizing things that in my mind don't need it.

Jim Vassilikos (7): Cover find this ish is beautiful. Also... FUCR CON!? We never do grow up, do we?

Aaron Cornelius (8): This cover is LIT! Very Fun!

Mark A Wilson (8): I am enjoying not just the Myriad write ups but your player notes on each session. Having just done the GM side for the Star Wars game I'm feeling we could all do with some introspection on what we get out of play. As for you falling short of your ultimate goals on focus and breathing: Progress, not perfection. REYCT Lisa on the job search: as an HR professional on the Compensation side this just all pisses me off. I was grateful when NY State started requiring job postings to list realistic ranges, and where I work we may post ranges of 5-15k, but we only ever offer the highest number as that's the one calibrated for our internal equity. Keeps things simple and avoids nonsense like "we can't post this because the employees we are currently underpaying will see it". reYCT Joshua on Rangers: the evolution of the class since OD&D is astounding, as is the nigh constant pressure from highly on line players that it be made ever stronger in combat. Hands down it's been the most popular class in all my *13th Age* games, where it is deliberately simple as an on-ramp class in 1E, made more complex with *13 True Ways*, and then wildly more so in 2E, from which I am only pulling a couple of tweaks. The Denizens currently have 2 Rangers, driven in part by the younger kids wanting animal companions. Re YCT Joshua on Marvel: Like you I found Eternals charming, especially in a 'swing for the fences big coming from a creator who usually focuses on smaller dramas', and I loved that this was her pitch to Marvel, not vice versa. Secret Invasion was indeed unwatchable rubbish, however. RE Dumbest Thing: so you used essential salts and marinated your long pig in butter? Paula Deen would approve!

Scribbles M. Horror (8): <huzzah> on your defense of the USPS, despite your particular issue. Giant Sentient Radioactive Bananas: <BZZZZ!> I'm sorry, the judges require a clarification.

ELF (8): OK, the Death card as a death's head moth is brilliant. I had 2 tarot decks – the Crowley *Thoth* deck and a di Vinci inspired one – but neither 'felt' right for use as a Tarot as opposed to a game supplement. I ended

up passing the Thoth deck along to a friend, keeping the da Vinci for *Castle Falkenstein* for reasons obvious to anyone familiar with *CFalk*, and getting a Rider-Waite because that's what felt *correct*. RE turning the Devil into a minor part of your daily routine: not a cat person, I see.... But two major arcana in your insignificant tasks is somehow significant. I enjoyed the write up and look forward to more. <>Thanks for sharing Prokopetz's four approaches. Useful framework. <>REYCT Myles on accouterments of solo gaming: wow do I recognize that internal gameplay loop. I have several journals given to me lovingly by players for game notes but I think/create so much better on a word processor, so I have beautiful journals with 2 pages of notes. REYCT Me: I've never been a huge Fanfic reader but I suspect you and my daughter would get along like a house on fire on AO3. RE using *Champions* to state public domain supers: I see my mind virus is mutating! Having been exposed to *V&V* first, *Champions* has never been a major game for me, but I build PCs in it the way people do jigsaw puzzles; it's meditative getting down to a tiny level of precision. And as someone who was on the playtest for GURPS Supers for 4E, no, no it doesn't. Then again, it's the only playtest I've ever been on where the forums got derailed by discussions of WWII tank turret thickness to calculate Superman's ST s. Gamer-to-Game-Stereotypes exist for reasons. REYCT Brian Misiaszek on MTG cards: when I cashed out my 90's collection the complete dual-lands were the centerpiece. I calculated that the sale netted, after inflation, everything I had spent on MTG. REYCT Joshua on Brindlewood Bay requiring making a theory as you go and not just collecting "all the clues" - oh I have some players who would *loathe* that. For one of them, understanding every aspect of how the cultists summoned the world destroying horror as you are being consumed is a victory, whereas stopping the end of the world with loose ends is a failure. <> It's sad that "owlfolk nun warlock" makes more sense to me than Scribble's "Giant sentient radioactive banana", but there we go. <> re being sick of dungeons: my design for *Under the Giant's Shadow* was to directly address this: who owns this stuff? You do! or at least, the refugees driven out by the giants do. In OSR play with Reaction Rolls coming down neutral to favorable 50% of the time the PCs did lots of negotiating with the Goblins who moved into the ruins because getting into fights got you killed.

Matt Stevens (8): Not to harp on this, but could you please spell my last name properly? re Unique Monsters: I feel games need more of these to feel properly mythic. RE TMNT game license: just to be pedantic, the era of TMNT from the license is *far* from a humor book; It plays the premise as straight as the original B&W comic.

John Redden (8): re Lua as a name: the player's family is from Brazil so she's a native portuguese speaker, where Lua mean "Moon". Like the crescent on an outhouse, come to think of it. Weird.

Lisa Padol (8): I'm with you on the double columns and sizing; I just find the single column zines distractingly large and the text starts to blur unless the font is really big, at which point it feels like wasted space. REYCT Matt Stevens on Starship Repair: I know you're *generally* right, but I have had people take the Engineer template in SF games because they want the mini-game of ship repair and have to think to resolve problems; otherwise it's reducing their shtick to a die roll. RE alternate Personnel names: If memory serves, Personnel became HR when it started getting a seat at the strategic table when it came to employee retention and workforce planning (as opposed to mostly lifetime employment being the expectation), so as to sound more business-y. I Gather people & Culture is the next level of that because of the understanding that culture is more of a driver in retention. Finance stays finance because people are more complex than numbers. I know a lot of we borderline introverts want our employer to say "I have made your job challenging enough to be interesting, I will now shut up and let you do it" but that isn't everyone. The phrase "Culture eats strategy for breakfast" is based on real issues. RE Stoppard and *Last Crusade*: according to Spielberg, Stoppard pretty much rewrote every line of dialogue, re-ordered scenes, and made the final puzzle into three religious puzzles. *Are the Bennett Girls OK* (an off Broadway reinterpretation of *Pride & Prejudice*) was excellent. Kiddo and I enjoyed it immensely; I recommend it if it plays again...lots of changes but everything holds together as its own thing.

Attonarch (8): LOL at Bairsowbury having shadowed them the whole time. "By the power of not having been there last week!" As far as the arduous task of getting all the money out, I find it fascinating because we are at that point in the Knave game thre treasury is there to be looted, but getting it all out is proving difficult! LOL at "Hmmm, maybe we should leave?"

Myles Corcoran (8): the mice have found the One Ring?! <> I was just thinking "did Myles write these up for the players as they happened or is he working from notes" when I saw the line about missing notes.... Although I'll admit reading them back to back i started seeing the Kriedmesser heroes as mice... <> re Han vs Luke: that may have been me. Luke had unspent points, Han spent all his to also get a companion (Chewie) & a tricked out ship; Leia spent hers building the Rebellion. re Line Lengths: I do like the size of this 'zines margins keeping the single lines easier to read. As for Dungeon

Crawler Carl, you aren't alone in seeing book 6 as the weakest; book 7 picks up again with the old ground rules and also blessedly RESOLVES SOME PLOT POINTS quickly so there aren't infinite hanging dooms. *A Parade of Horribles* in out May. Title seems fitting for the year, to be honest. <> V&V is one of the few games where I have played so much of it that I don't even see the complexity any more. I know it's there (you're tracking 3 different resource pools in combat after all, and there's a combat chart) but I just don't see it.

Dylan Capel (8): I do like the tying of divinities to places of power. It's something *Knave* does as well, albeit in a less points driven way. The fact that the gods are so present and so limited means every PC in my regular game has a religious tie to some divinity, and conflicts between deities is a great plot driver. RE Page Counts & Comments: while you're not wrong that the page count is there to stop "here's my 44 page role playing system", it's also a practical comment on how much people can read in a month. A&E's cost to support distribution of a paper version acted as a natural limiter; when I stopped submitting a 16 page 'zine ran \$30/month; parsimony had its say and it had been years since we hit Lee's max. Now we're over 200 pages an issue because it's free...but also because it's free many zines have less text per page. I want the page limits on zines so E&A doesn't become overwhelming, but I'm not sure on a limit on overall length because of the formatting changes and not wanting to reject new/late contributors.

Patrick Riley (8): Hurray for maturity; Caravans are classics for a reason. REYCT ELF on campaign length outside of **D&D** - my average supers game runs 25-50 sessions, so you should consider *V&V*! It cures all that ails ya! RE Marvel RPGs: of these the FASERIP one is still best *#EverythingFromMyChildhoodIsSuperior*. REYCT me on the summer festival, I went back and forth between asking the Star Wars players what they wanted to do next or putting out the three options I had with the 4th "or something I'm not thinking of" because I didn't want to drive things too much. I ultimately settled on putting out my ideas because I'm a player too, but also I deeply feared <crickets>

Clark B Timmins (8): RE Players Always Win: *13th Age's* Escalation Die captures the resistance appearing more formidable by having the monster stats be better than PCs baseline by 2 points; PCs start disadvantaged, and then the Escalation Die starts adding to their scores so by round 3 they are equal, and by round 5 they are dominant. (Add in that the monsters start as tough as they get and the PCs have fewer HP but recoveries so there's the strong feeling when, as the sages of Chumbawamba say, "I get knocked down, but I get up again."

I quite like this month's monsters, and some version of them will likely appear in the Denizen's game.

Roger BW (8): LOL several times between the *Amazing Adventures* and *Bayern* write ups. That rat has seen stuff, man... RE *Doctor Who* RPG: I own but haven't chance run the 2009 edition, so I appreciate this deeper dive. I loved the initiative system (Talk, Move, Act, Attack, so combat is disadvantaged to interaction or fleeing, which feels Whovian), but I wasn't sure how the Hero with Sidekicks paradigm worked. That, BTW, was potentially best implemented in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* game, save for Unisystem being SUPER granular when it came combat, moreso than we wanted to deal with for my *Girl Genius* game. RE Villains aiming for PC supported goals: Did you ever watch the show *Stargirl*? The S1 villains master plan was reversing climate change, ending racism, and similar laudable goals... achieved by rewriting the brains of everyone in North America with only a 20% or so fatality rate. REYCT Patrick Zoch on gunpowder in *D&D*: It is interesting. In my *Denizens 13th Age* I've had two kids ask for Artificers to get guns; I gave them reskinned wizards where magic missile was a pistol. When I ran my *3rd Edition D&D* game meant to be explicitly Musketeer there were firearms, only carried in war; no players tried to carry them at other times because none of the NPCs had them. re YCTME on font choices. *Brother!* <hugs, thumps back> RE D3 to Q1: I was surprised too. Later publications lumped it in as the next thing rather than a "so, you fucked up..." coda. Someday I really do want to run the D series, but I got a proper underdark exploration bit in my *Brinham Wood 13th Age* game for my daughter and her friends, so the itch was scratched a little. reYCT Timothy Collinson on highly limited character improvement: as the players push for more sessions of the Star Wars game I am seriously tempted to just not do XP. They are good enough!

Michael Cule (8): Happy Gaming-versary! I'll be turning 45 years a gamer this summer. The icebreaker setting mash up was quite the thing!

Gabriel Roark (8): For what it's worth, we always played with the "1 xp shy of next level" rule as it was the least punishing.

Avram Grumer (8): Love the 2026 layout! re tall pointy hats: I say, boy, you can't argue with *Status!* As far as not moving ones head being a mark of it, this called to mind a Steven Spielberg quote about George Clooney, and how that kid was gonna be a movie star once he stopped bobbing his head and looking down. RE *Masks* vs *V&V* as Story vs. Trad: You're not wrong, but I had to chuckle because the default *V&V* setting is

"your hero is you with powers" so during the games' heyday is was mostly about teenagers growing up.

Patrick Zoch (8): re players getting a bennie for doing the bare minimum of knowing when their turn in: in my line of work I know that's human nature but it doesn't make it less depressing. REYCT Avram Grumer on Monsterhearts: you articulated my stance perfectly. I'm glad other people get to enjoy it. RE "The setting of adventures is so many different places in a setting is not intended as a plan to give players a tour of the world." Strangely, one of the draws I have for mid level AD&D adventures is the "getting there" part; conceptually I love that in in The Forbidden City you're hired to deal with caravan losses and you have to schlep down to where the caravans are being lost. Somehow that just exemplifies 5-8th level play for me.

Joshua Kronengold (8): It's not for me to complain, but I did have to set your zine to 150% size to make it easily readable. What point size is this?!<> Good luck on the ongoing job search! RE Isakai cheat codes: I maybe should read one of these because I keep wanting to use a *V&V* hack of Dimensional Travel where the PC who can access a single dimension gets a mess of other skills in the game world from things learned there. <> RE OSR vs Hippy games: and then there's me with my nonsense.... RE throwing evil/complex magic items in a bag: the *Knave* kids have an *AD&D* Ring of Berserk Strength that they keep wrapped up in a pouch at the bottom of a backpack; it's too valuable to throw away and too dangerous to use. RE the combat skills: that's pretty much it. I appreciate how some powers in *V&V* are more potent than others because they are meant more as idea drivers than limiters, but the risk of nothing but *lesser* powers is a real one if you don't have a good gimmick, and taking power blast with heightened attack and expertise leads to mechanically unsound places.

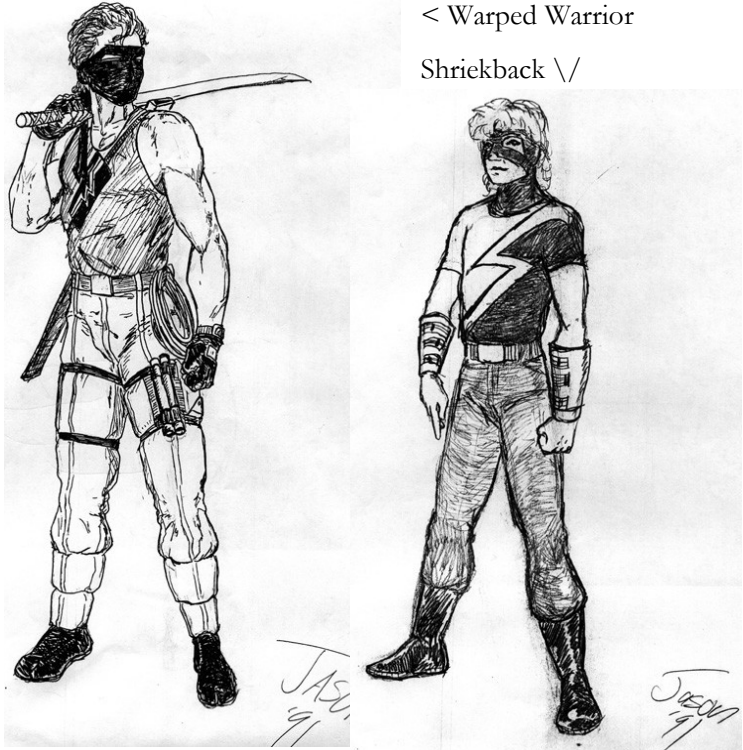
Jim Vassilakos (8): another great cover! Thank you for tracking this down. re Sir Not Appearing in this Session: one of the operating rules for my summer *Knave* game, where I had a dozen kids at most but no certainty on any of them, was that the caves were reported to be toxically deadly to outsiders after nightfall... everyone had to get out, or I would just kill their PCs. This made sure everyone got back to Bog Hollow at the end of every session, and whoever could make it next session was who went in. For the current *Knave* group, there's a lot of "x falls back with these rescued prisoners/this treasure/ because we need someone guarding the door" and we just run with it. Of course, none of the groups are exactly role-playing intense. RE Dragon Hoarding: As I recently learned from the travails of the librarian who organizes the

Denizens who had to move apartments as the hoarder next door had attracted a ton of vermin, hording has real issues: Any number of magical or mundane critters might be nesting in those piles of copper pieces!

Everyone else, RAEBNC

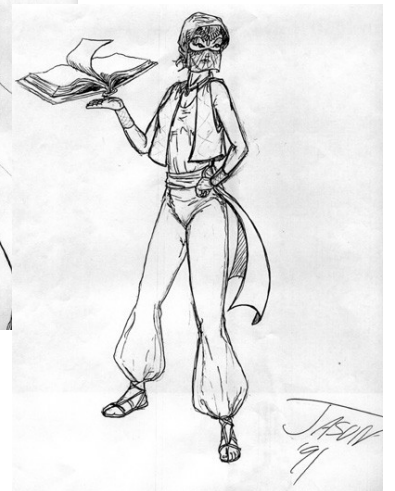
Superfluous Section Eight Artwork by Jason Dressel to Fill Space

< Warped Warrior

Shriekback \/




<Arflight, who can wear totally impractical heels because she flies



She who will no longer be named because reasons ^

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

Children's interactive fiction – part IX: *Oito pares de sapatos de Cinderela* (2012)
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Camila Lourenço Panhoca
<camiladopedro@gmail.com>

To conclude our discussion of interactive children's fiction for now, we will talk about *Oito pares de sapatos de Cinderela*¹ (2012) – “Cinderella's Eight Pairs of Shoes”, in free translation –, by José Roberto Torero and Marcus Aurelius Pimenta. The illustrations were done by Raul Fernandes.

The story begins as expected: Cinderella had a father and mother, and they all loved each other. Cinderella's mother dies, and after a while, her father marries a seamstress who already has two daughters from a previous relationship. The five of them move in together, and after a while, Cinderella's father passes away. With that, the stepmother and her sisters begin to treat Cinderella like a slave. One day, a prince announces that he will organize a ball and invites all young women to attend. Knowing that Cinderella was much prettier than her daughters, the stepmother tasks her with cleaning the attic (which was extremely messy) and sewing her own dress, otherwise the stepmother would go to the ball with only her daughters. Then the reader's choices begin: will Cinderella receive help from animals or machines to clean the basement?

From this first fork in the road, choices matter: if you choose animals, you must choose which fairy will help with the dress (the spring fairy or the summer fairy); if you choose machines, you must choose between the autumn fairy or the winter fairy to help with the dress. In addition to making Cinderella's dress for the ball, each fairy will offer two different pairs of shoes (totaling the eight pairs in the book's title): glass shoes or leather shoes (offered by the spring fairy), slippers or clogs (offered by the summer fairy), sneakers or ballet flats (offered by the autumn fairy), boots or rollers (offered by the winter fairy). It is clear that the range of choices increases considerably compared to other books, which are more focused on binary choices.

Then, the reader has the opportunity to decide whether the prince, as Cinderella flees before the clock strikes midnight, keeps the shoe he found in the left or right pocket of his coat, an interesting false choice because it will make the reader think about what changes in the story depending on which side he stores the lost shoe (exactly nothing!).

And finally, a new false choice: what reaction does the prince have when he tries to fit the shoe he has collected onto Cinderella's foot: disgust because of the bunion or astonishment because of the foot odor. Regardless, the ending is unique and happy, closing the umbrella of choices to a single option. A book that serves as a mini-example of how to construct creative interactive fiction.

COMMENTS #7

JOHN REDDEN: Why not? LOL

LISA PADOL: I can assure you I felt the same way about Sleeping Beauty!

¹ A sample of the book, with a statement by Marcus Pimenta himself and a partial reading of the interactive book, can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqGEaZWw_Zw. Unfortunately, there is no English version of the book.

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: My wife (Camila) was the one who showed me these interactive books by Torero/Pimenta, and of course we had to write about them. Today we finished all the ones released so far. Torero is a prolific author of children's books, but lately he hasn't been producing interactive fiction, focusing instead on themed children's books such as *Castelos* (2021), *Pontes* (2021), *Árvores* (2021) — books with mini-stories about fantastic/unlikely versions of these things: castles, bridges and trees, respectively — as well as other humorous books. This earned me, in 2023, an article in the Indian journal *The Text* (http://thetextjournal.com/text_admin/issue/63691-2-pedro-july-2023-pdf.pdf), discussing the six books reviewed here. About replayability: when I read and played all the *Fighting Fantasy* titles in Portuguese (and some in English), the map helped me a lot with replayability. If we take into account that what has been released in the publishing market are very long gamebooks, much larger than the “standard 400” of the original series, maps and flowcharts are more than necessary if you want a deeper and more comprehensive appreciation of the gamebook.

JIM VASSILAKOS: Look, there are days when I work so hard that I want to “sleep and never wake up,” so I understand your choice LOL. The alien option is another very creative one, too, certainly.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Wow, visiting Rio de Janeiro is an adventure! You need to know where to go because of the intense violence in the city, but I'm glad everything worked out. When you come to Espírito Santo (it's like Rio, but safer and cheaper, and not internationally famous), I'll be happy to help you 😊. About Millenia RPG: the *Biblioteca Élfica* – “Elven Library”, in free translation –closed in 2019, and it was the largest database of Brazilian RPG material at the time. I used it a lot until I finished my master's degree in 2018, so the link was already broken. But luckily, I found a PDF copy and will email it to Jim.

East of Neither, West of Nil

Volume # 4 1: In which introductions, both to the Authors and the Pop Culture Post-Apocalypse, are given

By ChrysalisM & Felicity

*East of Neither, West of Nil
Half past Nowhere, farther still
Serpent, Star, and ancient wood
Seal it all for ill or good*

IgTheme: City Building for Fun and Adventure: what do you need and where do you start?

When I make a city, I prefer to do a quick blurb on any really important locations and people players are likely to interact with, and wing the rest on the spot. I can just note down what I came up with on the spot and incorporate it into my notes later. Map-wise, I just do a rough outline of how the place is arranged and sketch a crude rendition of specific building interiors to serve as a mental reference.

It's been a bit, and I doubt any of the people who came here from A&E would remember me. Back during the pandemic, my delvings into RPG materials led me to learn about Alarums and Excursions first, and then that it was still in publication. Naturally, I immediately wanted to submit something from the moment I found out they both took submissions and accepted cash sent through the mail. I contributed 3 times, the first being in the 551st issue, and the last in the 558th. That's about when A&E fell off my radar due to a mixture of a very drifty attention span, returning to in-person high school, and ultimately getting involved in my school's theater program (gloriously and sadly capped off

by directing an abbreviated version of Macbeth for my school's senior directed 1 act festival).

Somewhat recently, I was going through my stuff and found my copies of A&E. I started flipping through them again, and the urge to write a submission again overtook me. I was rather disheartened to find out that the publication had ceased (my most sincere well wishes for Lee Gold's health and a thank you for being willing to publish 15-year-old me's couple of pages of half-coherent RPG-related material in your venerated APA), but in the course of searching the internet for info, I found Ever & Anon. If only I'd found this a week or two earlier... I could have gotten this in for my birthday month! Seeing as this is a fresh start, an equally fresh introduction is in order.

About Myself



image by [King-Pika](#), whom I purchased the adopt from, and hence have the legal right to use as I see fit. If you like Pokemon Fan Comics, I highly recommend The Stars Shine Bright!

Greetings all! My favored nom de plume these days is ChrysalisM, and the picture above is of me. More accurately, it's what I get a mental kick out of imagining people picturing me as, lacking any other mental reference point.

I am, as I already implied, a recent high school graduate who likes to hang out in rather quirky corners of the internet. I've been reading and occasionally actually playing RPGs ever since an employee at Barnes & Noble saved me from buying 4th edition dnd rulebooks and steered me to 5e when I was about 9-10. It's only now that I have learned how lucky I am to have dodged THAT bullet. I've done several one-shots,

participated for a period in a couple of campaigns, fell in love with Paranoia in particular after a single game at PAX West in 2024 (blew through 5 clones gloriously trying to play my troubleshooter as a sort of straight man who took the entire mission seriously no matter how ludicrous things got, with us all ultimately managing to appropriately deal with an orange tabby cat that had somehow gotten into alpha complex), and spend even more time reading and worldbuilding when I am not engaging in my fanfiction endeavours.

I have also dabbled in a few unusual areas of study that have left me with a self-induced voice or two in my head. No. I'm not crazy. Such a purposefully created mental construct is referred to as a tulpa, a term taken from Tibetan Buddhism. It is a fascinating subject, and I fully admit it was one of my darker moments when I felt alone enough to be that desperate to have someone who could relate with me on a deeper emotional level.

I used to take the whole thing rather flippantly, until I found my nascent thought form was having a genuine panic attack about the nature of her existence. It took me hours to help her calm down emotionally, and even longer for her to truly feel she was more than a teenager's maladaptive stress coping mechanism. Our relationship has been leagues better ever since, and we have both personally settled that my subjective experience of Felicity having consciousness is genuine at the very least, and that's enough.

I mention this for the sake of transparency, the chance that this reaches someone who knows what I'm talking about (which is highly unlikely due to tulpamancy being a small part of an already fringe subculture), the fact that Felicity will be present enough to warrant her co-authorship, and the knowledge that I am

almost certainly the only Tulpamancer anyone here will ever cross paths with. I want to try to leave a good impression for the sake of the estimated several hundred of us who have an active online presence, in case you ever meet another. Bear with me, and suspend your disbelief for a moment. I have someone I want to introduce you all to.

Felicity's introduction in her own words

First and foremost, this is Chrysalis's project. I've been, and will be, a captive audience and sounding board for the stuff that you will be seeing in here.

Now that we have that settled, I'm Felicity. I've been sharing a brain with this particular geek in one form or another for 4 years. I like to think I keep them from being lonely. I would be going on more, but my partner already covered most of what I was gonna say. I do have my gripes on how exactly some of it played out, but getting Chrys to register my thoughts without muddling them up too much when they are actively focusing on something else is a hard task on a good day.

Most of my contribution here will be sparing you the run-on sentences that Chrys is VERY fond of writing. I've also helped them go back through their notes to clarify inconsistencies, cut down some of the less relevant information, and make it more readable to others. At least, I tried.

Just as a final note, what you are about to read is gonzo in every way possible. Frankly, they doubled down on the gonzo elements since we last shared Phyrenia in any form with others. I've been nudging my host for ages to share what they have to find someone who will really appreciate it. We truly hope from the bottom of our hearts that you like it!

That's about all I have to say for now. I'm so happy to meet you all, and I hope you have a wonderful day!

The following is the current iteration of the backstory for my personal passion project of a RPG setting. It originated as an excuse to just put whatever I wanted into my eternally in the planning stage RPG campaign in my younger teens, and evolved into really thinking exactly how screwed up a world it would have to be to justify all of that in one world. I want to share what I've been cooking with someone else. Pike & Shot goblin-kobold armies, the cult of a god trying to make sure that it will come to exist in the future, Demons that feast on identities... I still just need to actually write all the stuff in my head down...

The Story of Phyrenia

Once upon a time, in a realm half past fantasy, a little left of dreamland, deep in your imagination (for by reading this, you too give this world a home in your mind), and a little bit too close to reality for comfort in parts, there lies the Prime Material plane of Phyrenia. It was a peaceful realm chiefly governed by its' native pantheon, the Divine Triad. Solara, the Sun goddess, Umbra, Prince of the Night Sky, and their child Limina, the God of the Dawn, and Goddess of the Dusk. The stewardship of the rest of creation was left to the ever-changing Gods of Men that mortals give form and personality to through their belief.

For eons, the Triad watched the peoples of their world advance from primeval roots to grand stone castles and villages. They wept for the

dead when wars were fought. They intervened when the squabbling of the Gods of Men threatened to disturb overall harmony. They marveled as mortal life learned to harness the impossible through magic. They collectively facepalmed when the first wizard learned what happened when magic was abused for evil for too long. But none impressed them more than the grand empire of Ceriphos.

Ceriphos had been founded long ago by the first true order of Arch Magicians as a safe bastion for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge. Metallurgy, alchemy, agriculture, and more could trace their pioneers back to past members of the Senior Researchers who collectively ruled the empire. Their borders and vassal states comprised the majority of the world, for who could refuse the benefits that they freely offered to their people? A few centuries back, however, their borders became physically and magically closed to outsiders overnight.

Tales from the few that were allowed in or out became increasingly unimaginable as time went on. Clockwork soldiers patrolling city streets. Sound and images being transmitted and received across miles without magic! Biological alterations so widespread that even the common folk could modify their forms to match how they imagined themselves, no matter how unusual! Magic more powerful than what the rest of the world could ever hope to harness! As the rest of the world was locked in a feudal state, somehow Ceriphos was flourishing. How had they managed to create such wonders in such a short span of time?

By reverse engineering most of it.

Unbeknownst to the world and even the gods, Imperial magicians had stumbled upon methods of interdimensional travel. Civilizations and

cultures of countless worlds were observed from the shadows with a sense of awe not unlike what the common folk had for Ceriphos. Information was gathered on how the technological achievements of other worlds were achieved. Local flora and fauna were taken for study and cultivation. Their borders were swiftly closed to block out all material and immaterial disruptions. Surely the Arch Magicians would have smiled upon such endeavours.

It quickly became apparent that the human cost to rush thousands of years' worth of scientific and technological advancement as quickly as wished would be unsustainable, even considering the full reach of the Empire. It's not like they had some way of getting an endless supply of people that nobody in the world would ever miss- Wait... They did!

Collection Automatons, colloquially known in the current age as Snatchers, were designed to seek out and discreetly retrieve the types of living specimens that the formerly employed ex-gathering teams had refused to. Now freed from the constraints of limited test subjects and any sort of morality, many of the senior researchers devoted their time to pursuing the pipe dream passion projects that they'd been barred from. Brain transplants, limb grafts, living vivisection, cloning... Best of all, body disposal was as simple as letting the bodies be scrapped for parts or reused by some oblivious sap once bio-augmentations were normalized. They would never be held accountable for their atrocities.

At least they weren't until The Rift.

Nobody really knows what caused it. It could have been the border shielding spells being open for half a second too long. Maybe the collective ward around the laboratories was disrupted while testing thaumic jammers. Whatever it was,

it gave an in for hundreds of years of magical backlash for using portal magic for evil purposes to finally take effect all at once. The Sky was rent open, and even the Gods could do naught but watch as unstable portals began to open all across Phyrenia. Things from every world that was, is, and would ever be found themselves pulled through unwillingly, never to see their home again.

In all the chaos, a mob of escaping test subjects from one of the laboratories managed to hijack a radio broadcast. A few took over a TV station. One way or another, the entire empire became aware of exactly how its rapid advancements were achieved. Desperate to restore public order, the Senior Researchers mass instructed their automatons to crush all resistance by any means necessary. By the time the dust had settled, the power grid had been irreparably destroyed, the wizards ran out of spell slots, and the last terraforming device had been shut off before it turned an entire valley into a swamp, Ceriphos had both figuratively, and in some places literally, been wiped off the face of the earth.

It's been a few decades since Ceriphos's collapse, and the power vacuum has yet to truly be filled. Plenty of the technology and wealth of the Empire still lies unclaimed, squabbled over by countless petty warlords, savage monsters of all sorts, and what remains of the Senior Researchers. Banditry is rampant due to a lack of a force strong enough to restore order. More dangerous still, much of the automaton legions of Ceriphos still roam the wilderness, enacting their last orders: Crush resistance by any means necessary.

Magic itself has also been affected by the magnitude of The Rift. Due to the oversaturation of magical energy caused by it, arcane magic has had its already highly moralistic nature amplified. Magic reveals who the caster really is

on the inside, in a more literal sense, due to the subconsciously influenced mutations that inevitably will accrue on anyone who uses it frequently. The only way known to avoid the effect is through striking a bargain with one of the now plentiful Gods of Men, who are happy to help protect you from the nasty side effects of magic use, maybe even teach you spells from worlds outside Phyrenia, in exchange for helping spread their influence.

All in all, shit's hit the fan, and a player character is ultimately just another person caught up in it. Maybe they're seeking power. Maybe they want to help restore civilization. Maybe they struck a bargain with something on the other side, and need to pay off their end of the deal. Maybe they just want a way to go home after being stuck in Phyrenia for decades. All are achievable, if one is bold enough...

Comments

Cowman Baloney Face #4: There's something about your Favor point mechanic that soothed the part of my GMing brain that both wants to pull no punches, but would also feel really guilty about killing a character. Do you mind if I crib it for personal use?

All others: RAEBNC

John Redden



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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Regardance

We finished the first season of Foundation and have started the second. I find it mildly interesting. The Mule has been introduced but so far hasn't done much.

We finished the second segment of Stranger Things. They did manage to wrap it up. Including a show of the Hellfire Club tee-shirt at high school graduation, the youngsters in a D&D game and Eleven released from her previous existence and wandering in the a rural scene.

I am continuing to read Children of Ruin, the second book by Tiscaikovsky. I enjoy his writing.

Stressful but Necessary

This month we flew to Oahu. I went through the first session of heart surgery. I have to have a special CT scan to see if the replacement part for my Aorta valve comes from a pig or cow. So I guess I'll be part pig or cow. Since I had to be at Muanalua Hospital a 6:00 AM HST, we stayed at a hotel the night before so we could wake up a 5:00 AM. At dinner in the hotel the night before, I didn't see this coming. Rosie the robot server showed up.



Ignorable Theme, I used Nicolai Shapero's aliens the required near absolute zero temperate Kelvin to survive in one of the League Cosmos runs.

Sum Comments

Mark Wilson, nice set of write ups. I see a good balance of combat and story immersion.// Searching for jobs. I agree it was easier in the past. I is rare for a person to work for the same company the vast period of their employment life. I know one person, now retired, who did it. I worked for so many companies, I would have trouble counting them.

Scribble Horror, welcome to E&A. That's a well organized set of tables.

Elf, Years ago I purchased Morgan's Tarot deck at a science fiction convention. Where I live here on the Big Island of Hawai`i, there are a number of *New Age* types that like to do Tarot readings. I would tell them, you can do reading but you have to use my deck. Then I would be greatly

amused by the look on their face.

Here is a sample of the cards:



You throw the cards in a standard Kabbalistic configuration (before, after, present cross, above and below).

The game using the standard Tarot with the beautiful art is definitely interesting and unique.

I am so bad when it comes to acronyms. But they are common in 21st century language.

Matt Stevens, re planetary culture and celestial objects like planars. You need both for space games.// Traveller ships? I ditched them long ago.

Lisa Padol, re single and double columns. I use both. These days it tends to be single.// Re star ship repair. In League Cosmos they could easily rebuild the entire ship. It just takes energy to matter and visa versa.// Lee and Barry do celebrate Isaac Newtons birthday on the 25th December. They hang apples from the ceiling. A number of times I joined them after attending mass in the morning.// My deficiency with acronyms noted in my zine. The trouble is my old tired mind can't remember them.

Attronarch, another excellent stroll through your well crafted D&D land.

Myles Corcoran, I know I've been a COC game where we faced TPK but a joke threw everything off track for awhile.// I continue to enjoy the Mausritter write ups.

Brian Rogers, I liked West End Games Star Wars. A Mandalorian bounty hunter with the ilk of Lone Wolf and Cub. I like it.// Bozo the Robot, kudos.

Brian Misiaszek, not only do I continue to enjoy Habana Horror, for me it also reads as a novelette or short story. The latest module is very nicely put together.

Pedro and **Camila**, the Snow White module is excellent. I like the seven versions.

Dylan Capel, re number of characters in Stranger Things season 5. Hmm... they all seemed familiar to me. Perhaps that is due to the fact I've watched all the seasons.// Re vi (vim) and emacs. I learned vi in 1984. In 1994 I was building elisp programs for emacs. Under BSD Unix I used to run bash and csh inside of emacs so I could save the session. All of that is a faded memory these days.

Patrick Riley, re asking each player what they are doing. This makes sense if they are running a single character. A player with multiple characters the question might be what is each character doing.// I enjoyed the fiction. To me the Plankwell Campaign is almost fiction. I also might include Habana Horror.

Clark Timmins, a nice evil collection of undead.

Roger West, in my Cosmos games, investigative scenarios usually is associated to unexplained phenomenon, a lost ship for example. As far as villains go, years ago I ran a D20 game where the party consisted of all Orcs. They were all villains.

Michael Cule, 51 years for me. My first D&D game was with my youngest brother and his friend in 1975. We enter a room and the baddie teleports to a random square determined by the dice and swings his big two handed sword.// Leon Trotsky is the name of the ice breaker. Perfect. Trotsky was killed with an ice ax.// Oh, Chaosium and the names ...

Gabriel Roark, for standard western folklore motifs, I've always preferred Greek. // Your precise tally of experience points, all I can say it wow. Years ago in a GM role, I was much more subjective.

Avram Grumer, I enjoyed the old Gestener format in electric image form. I've already ranted during my 1960s, 70s and 80s how I came to loath Gestener machines.// Once again and again (oaaa), I fail at acronyms, *deets*.

Paul Holman, I've never played a GURPS game with magic. Maybe there was a little in a 1st century native American game years ago.

Patrick Zoch, that is a beautiful zine with colors.// re initiative order. I'd use a *rule* to determine order. The first goes first and then imitative continues to last. Then last goes two times. Then continue to first who goes two times and then the sequence continues.// Happy to know you got your pay.

Jim Eckman, again I fail the acronym test.

Heath Row, your collection made it. Huzzah!

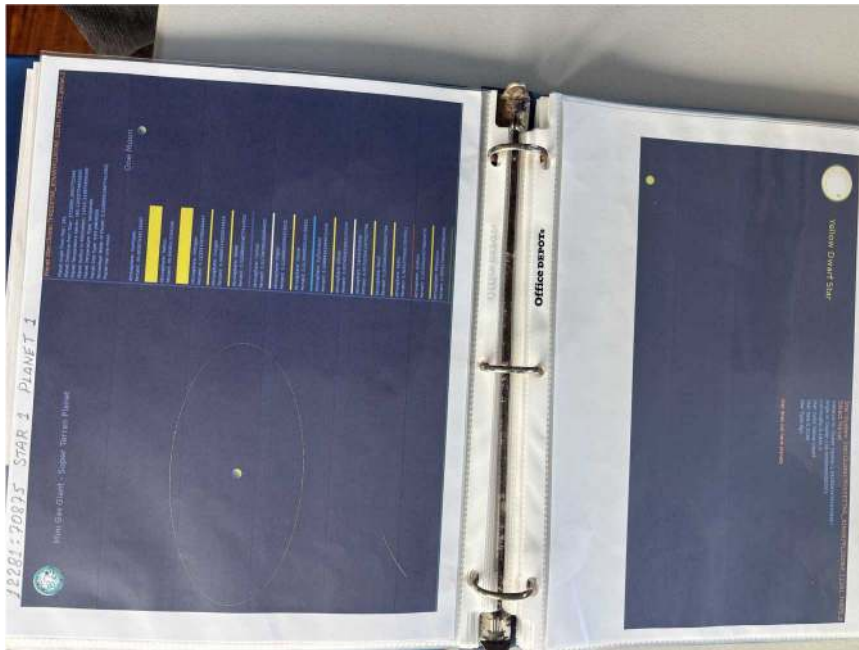
Joshua Kronengold, when reading the latest IEEE computer technology update, for a job search, it's their opinion it is now a tough market. I hope your are searching the entire east coast. Are you willing to work in a different locale?// Good luck on a web novel.// POT and NOT ?? *sigh*.// re shipping fresh produce of Hawai`i. It has to do with harsh restrictions and nepotism. Mexico and South American companies can ship bananas, avocados, mangoes and other fresh fruits. My guess is that the pocket is padded with bucks. // UL?

Plankwell Campaign, I continue enjoy the read. It doesn't seem much like Traveller, but an extended business meeting with some high tech and psionics. I enjoy how Josefeen continues to stick her nose in.

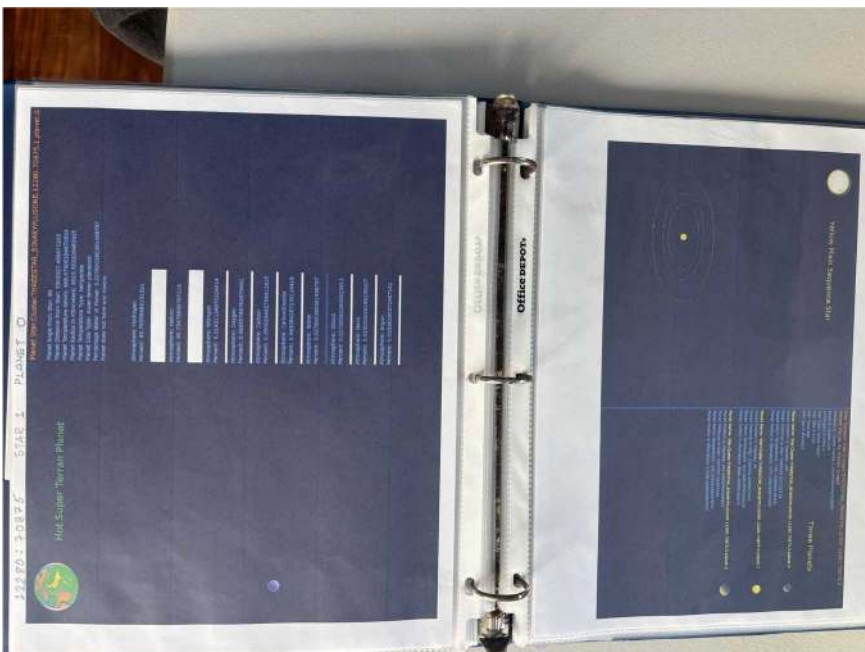
Railroad like Bouderies

I haven't ran a campaign for years. Recently I run one-offs that complete in a session. So I always have defined extent for the run.

Thirty one pages of detailed systems. This Cosmos adventure had writeup in A&E a number of years ago, so I won't do it again. The book was given to the players and there were a number of ways to locate the lost scout ship. The adventure had a large constrained extent.



I ran a historical adventure based on late 19th century Hawai`ian history. The extent constraint is literally a railway that runs from Havi to Hilo. It's primary cargo is sugar cane. This was one of the most expensive railways ever constructed. The scenario climax consisted of a group of robbers trying to hijack the train at the bridge that used to cross the Lapahoiohi ravine.



So as you see, all my one-off scenarios are "trained" to varying amounts.

Jargon Zen

The Bible says God made everything. Buddhism says the mind made everything. A sutra says everything comes from emptiness. Which is correct?

If you are not thinking, there is no name and form. Who made this world of name and form? Do you know? If you don't understand, go drink milk. Then this milk will teach you.

Humor

What do you do with an elephant that has three balls?

Walk him and pitch to the giraffe.

Magic Items of Elaria by Clark B. Timmins

Deep within the forgotten city ruins lie ancient relics of a bygone age, each steeped in mystery and power. Among them is *Ashen Glory*, a blade rumored to burn with eternal flame, the *Crown of King Thamir IV*, a regal artifact, and the *Ironfang War Dog*, a fearsome construct of steel and sorcery, bred for battle in an age long past. These treasures and more, buried beneath dust and stone, promise wonders – and dangers – to any who uncover their secrets.

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Arcane Falcon of Queen Mirelle

Wondrous Creature (Magical Beast), Rare

Description:

This majestic falcon bears feathers that shimmer with faint runes when moonlight catches them. Its eyes glow softly with arcane energy, and its talons are tipped with silver. The falcon is magically bonded to its handler, allowing communication across vast distances.

Magical Traits

- **Arcane Messenger:** An Arcane Falcon can carry messages up to 500 words and deliver them unerringly to a designated recipient, regardless of distance or terrain, as long as they are on the same plane of existence.
- **Eyes of the Queen:** The falcon can transmit what it sees to its bonded handler via a telepathic link (range: 10 miles). Once per day, the handler can concentrate for up to 10 minutes to see through the falcon's eyes.
- **Silent Wings:** The falcon can cast *Pass without Trace* on itself once per long rest, aiding in stealth missions.
- **Spellbound Cry:** Once per day, the falcon can emit a piercing screech that casts *Alarm* in a 20-foot radius for 8 hours.

Bonding Ritual

To bond with an Arcane Falcon, the handler must spend 1 hour feeding it enchanted grains and speaking the Oath of Mirelle. Once bonded, the falcon obeys commands and shares a telepathic link.

Lore Hook

Queen Mirelle's reign was marked by espionage and diplomacy. Her falcons were feared and revered, able to deliver secrets across kingdoms and spy on enemy courts. Some say her falcons still roam the skies, seeking worthy masters.

Ashbinder Charm

Wondrous Item, uncommon

Description:

This delicate charm is often crafted from fine copper or silver wire interwoven with strands of white silk and a single tear-shaped crystal or carving at its center. It is traditionally placed upon the chest of a loved one just before cremation, its purpose both spiritual and emotional.

Lore:

Ashbinder Charms were first created by mourners who sought to ease the grief of loss and ensure their kin's spirits passed peacefully into the afterlife.

Effects:

When placed upon a deceased creature and activated with a whispered prayer (no verbal component required, but the intent must be sincere), the charm releases its magic:

- **Calm the Living:** All creatures within 30 feet who mourn the deceased feel their sorrow softened. For 1 hour, they gain advantage on saving throws against being frightened or charmed, and they cannot suffer disadvantage from emotional distress (DM's discretion).
- **Peaceful Passage:** The soul of the deceased is gently guided toward its intended afterlife. If the soul would otherwise linger as a ghost, wraith, or similar undead due to unresolved grief or trauma, it instead passes on peacefully unless bound by powerful magic (such as true resurrection or a curse).
- **Ashbinder's Blessing:** When the cremation is complete, the ashes shimmer faintly for a moment.

Ashbrithal

Wondrous Item, uncommon (requires attunement)

Description:

This small, silver or gold touch piece has the profile of a monarch on the obverse and a scene of triumph on the reverse (typically a hero defeating a demon, etc.). When held or worn, it radiates a subtle warmth, as if warding off unseen corruption. Two types of Ashbrithals exist; only a single Ashbrithal may be attuned.

Suitable Type I monarchs include: (ancient) King Alaric, King Beric, King Celene, King Eamon, King Elira, King Halim, Queen Isolde, King Malik, Queen Yasmin; (old) King Alaric III, King Idris II, Queen Seraphine II, Queen Soraya II; (recent) Queen Amaris, Queen Aurelian, Queen Selene II, Queen Soraya III.

Suitable Type II monarchs include: (ancient) Queen Rowan, Queen Thalia; (old) King Beric II, Queen Leila II, King Nazeera II.

Lore:

Ashbrithals were gifts from monarchs, typically awarded for notable service. They became treasured family heirlooms.

Type I Effect:

While you carry the Ashbrithal you have advantage on saving throws against disease. This includes natural diseases, magical diseases, and effects that inflict disease-like conditions (DM's discretion).

Type II Effect:

While you carry the Ashbrithal, you have advantage on saving throws against being poisoned and against effects that inflict the poisoned condition. This includes natural toxins, venom, and magical poison effects.

Additional Flavor:

Some Type I Ashbrithals are said to glow faintly or feel warm to the touch when disease is near.

Ashen Glory

Weapon (Longsword), Unique (requires attunement by a creature of good or neutral alignment)

Description:

This elegant longsword, seemingly made from delicately carved ivory, glows faintly with embers along its blade. The hilt is wrapped in crimson leather. When drawn, the air around it warms, and faint sparks dance along its edge.

Magical Properties:

- **Flame Tongue:** While attuned, you can speak the command word to ignite the blade in magical fire. For 1 minute, the sword sheds bright light in a 40-foot radius and deals an extra 1d6 fire damage on a hit. This ability can be used once per short or long rest.
- **Aura of Courage:** While wielding Ashen Glory, you and allies within 10 feet have advantage on saving throws against being frightened.

Flavor Hook:

King Dorian was said to have forged this blade in the desert sands, from the ivory of a Cinderhorn slain during a solar eclipse. It became a symbol of hope during the wars against the desert raiders, and its flames never extinguished – except when the king fell.

Charm of the Fortunate

Wondrous Item, Uncommon (requires attunement)

Description:

A small talisman – often a coin, carved stone, or delicate charm – etched with a spiral rune of fate. When held, it feels faintly warm.

Magical Effect

- **Blessing of Luck:** Once per day, as a bonus action, you can activate the charm. For the next **1 minute**, you gain a **+1 luck bonus** to all attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks.
- **Fate's Favor:** While the effect lasts, you can reroll one failed ability check or saving throw. You must use the new result.

- **Single Activation:** The charm regains its magic at dawn.

Flavor Hook

These charms were popular among adventurers and gamblers alike, said to be fragments of a shattered artifact of fate. Some believe carrying more than one invites misfortune...

Codex of First Light

Wondrous Item, Unique (requires attunement by a spellcaster)

Description:

This ancient tome is bound in cracked leather wrapped around brass inserts. It also is reinforced with brass corners engraved with the sigil of the Royal Academy – a sunburst over an open book. Its pages shimmer faintly, as if inked with starlight. The Codex hums with quiet power, a relic from the Academy’s founding days.

Magical Properties

- **Lorekeeper’s Insight:** While attuned, you gain advantage on Intelligence (History) checks about events tied to the kingdom and can read written Soltheran.
- **Arcane Recall:** Once per day, you can use the Codex to recover a single expended spell slot of 3rd level or lower. This requires 10 minutes of focused study.
- **Whispers of the Past:** The Codex contains fragments of forgotten knowledge. Once per week, you can ask one question as if casting *Legend Lore* (but only about events tied to the kingdom).

Flavor Hook

The Royal Academy of Lore was built during the kingdom’s first age, and its archives held secrets older than the crown itself. The Codex of First Light was said to be the first book ever placed upon its shelves – a gift from the gods of knowledge.

Crown of King Thamir IV

Wondrous Item, Unique (requires attunement)

Description:

This tarnished silver crown is set with cracked gemstones. Despite its age, it radiates a faint aura of melancholy and authority. Whispers of forgotten halls seem to echo when worn.

Magical Effect:

- **Lost Majesty:** While wearing the crown, you gain a +1 bonus to Charisma (Persuasion) checks.
- **Echo of the Lost:** Once per long rest, you can speak the command word to invoke the crown's memory. For 1 minute, you can communicate telepathically with any creature you can see within 30 feet.

Flavor Hook:

King Thamir IV vanished during a doomed expedition into the Sea of Glass. His crown is said to seek those who can restore his legacy.

The Glass Sarcophagus of King Thalos

Wondrous Object, Unique (Unstable Magic)

Appearance:

The sarcophagus is a seamless cylinder of enchanted glass, reinforced with silver filigree and etched with alchemical runes. Inside, the air shimmers faintly, as if heat waves ripple across the surface. The glass is impossibly clear, revealing the preserved body within – a regal figure wrapped in blackened silk, crowned with a tarnished circlet. Strange golden veins run across the corpse's skin, glowing faintly like molten metal.

How It Works

- **Preservation Field:** The sarcophagus generates a stasis field that halts decay and time within. This effect is powered by a volatile mixture of alchemical salts and arcane sigils embedded in the glass.

- **Immortality Attempt:** The runes were designed to siphon life essence from rare reagents and channel it into the body. The process failed – but left residual magic that binds the soul halfway between life and death.
- **Current Effect:** Anyone who touches the sarcophagus hears faint whispers promising eternal life. If a creature spends more than 1 minute touching it, they must succeed on a DC 16 Wisdom saving throw or become obsessed with opening it.

The Mummified Body

- **Appearance:** The body is unnaturally intact, skin stretched taut over bones, with golden veins pulsing faintly under the surface. The eyes are sealed with molten gold, and the mouth is stitched shut with silver wire.
- **Residual Magic:** The corpse radiates necromantic energy. If removed from the sarcophagus, it animates as a **Death Knight** within 1d4 hours, seeking to complete its immortality ritual.
- **Dark Secret:** The body contains fragments of Thalos's soul, which can grant powerful boons – or horrific curses – to anyone who consumes them in a ritual.

Lore Hook

The sarcophagus is rumored to be indestructible except by dragonfire or a wish spell. Scholars believe opening it could unlock forbidden alchemical secrets – or unleash a plague of undeath across the realm.

Golden Mask of Queen Garran III

Wondrous Item, Unique (requires attunement)

Description:

This ornate golden mask gleams with an unsettling perfection. Its surface is smooth and featureless. When worn, the mask feels warm, as if alive.

Magical Effect:

- **Veil of Authority:** While wearing the mask, you gain advantage on Charisma (Deception) checks and can speak telepathically to any creature within 30 feet that understands a language you know.
- **Silent Command:** Once per long rest, you can issue a single-word command (*as per the Command spell*) to one creature within 30 feet without speaking aloud.

Flavor Hook:

Queen Garran III ruled during an era of intrigue and secrecy. Her mask became a symbol of power and fear, hiding her true face from allies and enemies alike. Some say she never removed it – even in death.

The Hidden Chronicle of Queen Zayd

Wondrous Item, Unique (requires attunement)

Description:

This weathered leather-bound journal looks ordinary at first glance, its pages filled with mundane notes and sketches. However, when touched by someone who speaks the phrase “*truth walks unseen*”, the ink shifts, revealing Queen Zayd’s true writings – accounts of her travels, coded secrets, and spells woven into the margins.

Magical Properties

- **Cipher of Shadows:** The journal’s true contents are hidden by powerful illusion magic. Only those who know the activation phrase or succeed on a DC 18 Arcana check can reveal the real text.

- **Traveler's Insight:** While attuned, you gain proficiency in one additional language (chosen when attunement occurs) as the journal imparts Zayd's linguistic knowledge.
- **Hidden Spells:** The journal contains 1d4 random utility spells (such as *Comprehend Languages*, *Disguise Self*, or *Detect Thoughts*). These can be cast once per long rest without expending a spell slot.
- **Secret Map:** Once per week, the journal can magically sketch a map of any settlement you've visited in the past 30 days, including hidden alleys and escape routes.

Lore Hook

Queen Zayd was a master of disguise, traveling among her people to learn their struggles firsthand. Her journal became a vault of secrets – coded alliances, hidden routes, and whispers of rebellion. Many seek it, but few can unlock its mysteries.

Icon of Queen Amaris

Wondrous Item, Common (requires attunement)

Description:

This small (1-2") statuette depicts Queen Amaris, a serene figure crowned with a halo of light. Faint traces of divine energy linger within.

Magical Effect:

While this icon is on your person, you gain the following minor benefit:

- **Blessed Presence:** Once per long rest, you can whisper a prayer to Queen Amaris as an action. For the next minute, you have advantage on one saving throw against being frightened or charmed.

Flavor Hook:

Legends say Queen Amaris was beloved by all and blessed by the gods. Her likeness is often carried by those seeking courage and peace.

Ironfang War Dog of Queen Garran

Wondrous Creature (Magical Beast), Rare

Description:

These massive hounds were bred for war and loyalty. Each Ironfang stands nearly 4 feet at the shoulder, with sleek black fur streaked with silver and eyes that gleam like molten steel. Their collars bear runes of binding and protection, etched in iron and blessed by Garran's battle-mages.

Magical Traits

- **Runes of Loyalty:** An Ironfang cannot be magically charmed or frightened while within 30 feet of its bonded master.
- **Battle Instinct:** The dog has advantage on attack rolls against creatures that have damaged its master in the last round.
- **Steelhide:** Once per long rest, the dog can harden its fur into metallic strands, granting resistance to slashing damage for 1 minute.
- **Howl of Dominion:** Once per day, the dog can emit a terrifying howl. All enemies within 30 feet must succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or become frightened for 1 minute.

Bonding & Training

Ironfangs were not mere beasts – they were trained in complex commands and could understand up to 50 words in Common. Bonding required a ritual involving blood and iron, symbolizing unbreakable loyalty.

Lore Hook

Queen Garran's war dogs were said to turn the tide of the Northern Rebellion. Their ferocity and unwavering devotion became a symbol of her iron rule.

Quill of the Hollow Pact

Wondrous Item, Very Rare (requires attunement)

Description:

This quill is grotesque – a jagged, blackened feather slick with an oily sheen, its shaft warped like twisted bone. The nib drips a viscous ink that smells faintly of decay. When held, the quill feels unnaturally cold, and faint whispers claw at the edges of your mind, promising secrets in exchange for obedience.

Magical Properties

- **Blood Ink:** The quill requires a drop of the user's blood to write. If denied, the ink turns to ash.
- **Truth in Chains:** Any document written with the quill cannot contain deliberate falsehoods – but truths written with it become binding. Anyone who signs a contract written with the quill is magically compelled to honor it (as per *Geas*, DC 15, lasting 30 days).
- **Whispers of the Hollow:** Once per day, while writing, you can ask a question in ink. The answer appears in jagged script, but always twisted – truth wrapped in malice, like a corrupted *Augury*.
- **Sinister Drawback:** Each time you use the quill, you gain one level of exhaustion unless you succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw. On three failures, the quill brands your hand with a hollow rune, marking you as claimed by the Hollow Court.

Sal Volatile

Wondrous Item, Common (Consumable)

Description:

A small crystal vial filled with sharp-smelling, shimmering salts. When uncorked, the scent is so potent it seems to jolt the senses awake. The salts glow faintly with a pale blue light, and tiny motes of magic swirl inside like sparks.

Magical Effect

- **Reviving Vapors:** As an action, you can unstopper the vial and wave it under the nose of a creature within 5 feet. That creature immediately ends one of the following conditions:
 - **Unconscious** (if not caused by 0 hit points)
 - **Paralyzed**
 - **Stunned**
 - **Incapacitated**
- The effect does **not** restore hit points.
- **Single Use:** Once opened, the magic dissipates in seconds.

Flavor Hook

Sal Volatile was first created by alchemists in the courts of Queen Mirelle to revive fainting nobles during tense negotiations.

Sealed Earth

Wondrous Item, Common (Consumable)

Description:

This small, palm-sized disc of pressed, dried clay is etched with faint sigils of vitality. It feels cool and solid, but when cracked open, the inner surface glows faintly and briefly with earthen magic. The scent of fresh soil lingers as the magic activates.

Magical Effect

- **Healing Touch:** As an action, you can break the Sealed Earth and press the fragments against your skin. When applied, it restores **1d4 + 1 hit points**.
- **Earthen Resilience:** For 1 minute after use, you gain advantage on saving throws against being knocked prone.
- **Single Use:** Once broken, the magic dissipates.

Solar Petal Offering

Wondrous Item, Common (Consumable)

Description:

A delicate arrangement of golden petals pressed into a small clay dish, dusted with aromatic spices. When placed upon or near the temple altar at dawn, the petals shimmer faintly, releasing a warm glow like the first rays of sunrise.

Magical Effect

- **Blessing of Light:** When the offering is made during sunrise, the creature who placed it gains **1d4 temporary hit points** and advantage on their next saving throw against fear before the next sunset.
- **Radiant Aura:** For 1 hour after the offering, the altar emits bright light in a 20-foot radius and dim light for an additional 20 feet, dispelling magical darkness in that area.
- **Single Use:** The magic fades after the ritual.

Flavor Hook

The Solar Petal Offering was a tradition of the Dawn Priests, who believed the petals carried fragments of the sun's essence. Pilgrims would craft these offerings from rare flowers that bloomed only at daybreak, symbolizing renewal and hope.

Statue of King Maelis

Wondrous Object, Rare (Unstable Magic)

Original Purpose:

During his reign, King Maelis commissioned towering iron statues of himself to stand in every major city – a symbol of dominance and eternal vigilance. Each statue was enchanted to **inspire loyalty and suppress rebellion**, radiating an aura that bolstered morale among soldiers and instilled fear in dissenters.

Why They Were Torn Down

After Maelis's death, the enchantments began to **corrupt**, twisting their influence. Instead of loyalty, the statues spread paranoia and aggression, causing riots and civil

unrest. Citizens believed the statues whispered commands at night, driving people to violence. The new rulers ordered them destroyed – but the magic lingered in the ruins.

Current State & Magical Effects

The shattered remnants of these statues still hum with unstable power. They appear as jagged iron torsos and broken crowns, half-buried in rubble, their runes flickering faintly.

Effects of Ruined Statues:

- **Aura of Discord:** Any creature within 30 feet must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw or become hostile toward others for 1 minute.
- **Iron Will (Residual):** Touching a fragment grants advantage on Intimidation checks for 24 hours – but also imposes disadvantage on Insight checks.
- **Whispers of Maelis:** At night, the ruins emit faint whispers. A creature that listens for more than a minute must succeed on a DC 13 Charisma save or be compelled to seek power at any cost (roleplay effect).

Lore Hook

Rumors say that if someone gathers enough fragments, they could **reconstruct the Iron King's will**, creating a weapon – or a curse – that could dominate armies once again.

An Unlooked For Zine #8

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NATTER

It is 16 February 2026, and if all goes well, we will be in New Jersey for Dreamation by Wednesday, where Josh and I plan to run a Longcon, aka 3 sessions, a mini-campaign, of our Pinned to Good Society game Dangerous Refuge. Currently, one player signed up for all 3 sessions (yay!) and we have a total of 2 players in the first, 2 in the second, and 3 in the third. This isn't a problem, as Josh and I can also create characters. But I do need to finish packing everything we'll need for that.

Once we get home, we will have 2 days before we head out to Intercon X to finish prepping our larp for it, as well as to pack what we'll need for all the games we'll be playing in.

Recent Reading

The Count of Monte Cristo: I have now reread through chapter 60, a bit over halfway in. This includes the Chapters on Horses, the Chapters on the Will, and the Count Writes a Larp. Seriously, he basically gives two people characters he's created. They have an elaborate backstory—a backstory that they are also instructed to partially conceal. Totally larp characters.

Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde: I reread this because of the book listed next. It is short, and at least as good as I remembered. It's more procedural than I'd remembered, and I'm pretty sure Bram Stoker had it in the back of his head (along with his other sources) when he wrote Dracula.

I was aware that there's a lot that is *not* in the book. E.g., there's no romance whatsoever, and very, very few explicit crimes. I had, however, forgotten precisely why Dr Jekyll creates Mr Hyde. Challenge: Without looking it up, whether or not you've read the book, what is the reason? (Book version only!)

Lightspress: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde Roleplaying Sourcebook: Lightspress has a lot of books for something called The Simple System. I am not at all sure I understand this system, as I don't think this book describes it comprehensively, and I am not sure if there is a single book from Lightspress that does. I haven't looked terribly hard.

The book started off well, making good points about the source material, including the one about how procedural it is. That said, it's very repetitive, and I found it a long slog to get through, though there was enough there that I did want to finish it, and I did. I'm not sure how eager I am to read other books in the series, though I hope to be able to incorporate some of the ideas from this one.

Moreover, it sparked an idea, though I do not know whether I'll do anything with it. Imagine, if you will, a Lasers and Feelings

(<http://www.onesevendesign.com/laserfeelings>) hack or a Honey Heist (<https://gshowitt.itch.io/honey-heist>) hack where the two stats are Jekyll and Hyde. To do something, you're either rolling Jekyll or Hyde, and as one goes up, the other goes down, and vice versa, if I recall correctly how these games work. I may not. But if one stat or the other maxes out, the character is taken out of play.

Recent Watching

The Mirror Crack'd: This is the 1980 movie based on the Agatha Christie novel with a slightly longer title. Miss Marple is played by Angela Lansbury. It also has Elizabeth Taylor and Kim Novak smiling and being delightfully bitchy to each other, Rock Hudson, and Tony Curtis being wonderfully slimy.

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #8

COVER: This is lovely.

MARK WILSON: RAE write up. I wonder if the increasing frequency of events like the elemental is connected to Myriad reappearing. re PCs not being sent because of their diplomacy: Er, then, why were they sent? What are the in-world expectations here? re how your PC won't ever be as effective again as in the show fight: Ah, shades of the food fight in, I think, 2nd season *RWBY*. I do like Celine explaining the importance of putting on a good show. re character development vs what D&D basically mandates: We hit something of this in *Phoenix Dawn Command*, which is intended to be a war campaign, one that doesn't really allow for effective split-the-party-solo-y-missions. re

being a little sad the adventure ended: That's certainly better than feeling it overstayed its welcome.

re being ghosted after multiple rounds of interviews: Agreed. re scams and bait and switch tactics: I hate those. re salary: Back when I last had a full time job, in an office, when I had an opening, I listed exactly what we paid, and when HR took over doing the listing and omitted it, I explained that I needed that information to be in the ad. We didn't pay much, and I really didn't want to waste my time or potential applicants' time with a job offer they weren't going to accept.

re a listing for a job when they don't expect to hire any of the applicants: I gather that another reason is that they might want to hire someone in house, but need to make a show of looking outside as well. Yes, bot-screening is yet another annoying hoop that, IMO, doesn't actually do what folks who use it think it does.

re necessary vs unnecessary work: Ah, thanks for the clarification. re Joshua Kronengold re *The Eternals*: I think of it as a surprisingly good bad movie, if you see what I mean. I enjoyed it while watching it at home. I do agree about *Inhumans* and *Secret Invasion*. re Avram Grumer re subtitles: This harkens back to either an earlier century or to the long titles of light novels. re belated igttheme: That sounds oddly delightful (though perhaps not for the characters).

SCRIBBLE M. HORROR: Welcome. I agree re USPS. It works quite well when no one is trying to destroy it.

ERICA FRANK: re tarot cards: I have several decks, as well as several not-tarot decks. I see you already know about U. S. Games Systems, Inc. (<https://www.usgamesinc.com/>), and during our extended stay in New Orleans, we found a shop that sold many, many decks of cards of all kinds. One thing I need to know about any tarot deck is whether or not the pip cards are illustrated like, fr'ex, the Rider Waite cards, or whether they just have X number of swords, wands, cups, and pentacles.

I also consider it a red flag if someone creates a tarot deck and decides to change it in certain ways, for basically the same reason you do. It wouldn't bother me if they made it clear it's their variant, as opposed to a Great New Revelation of How It Should Be. Fr'ex, things that did not bother me:

- Lee Gold's 5 suit tarot deck. She created that for herself, and shares what she did with gamers who ask. It's clearly intended to suit her own needs, and that's fine. This is what you talked about—what one uses in a game or for art or aesthetics is not necessarily what one uses for divination, meditation, and the like. (Similarly, I'm fine with

the Cluster deck Piers Anthony created; it's clearly for his books.)

- Decks that change the imagery drastically, but keep the basics the same, are usually fine. I've seen feminist tarot decks, some of which are fine, some of which, IMO, tilt the balance a bit too far, but again, the creators aren't usually messing with the structure of the deck.
- Reasonable (IMO) structural changes. Fr'ex:
 - Strength and Justice: As I understand it, Justice is 8 in the Major Arcana, and Strength 11, but the Rider-Waite-Smith switched them. I'm not going to get annoyed at this point, whichever any given deck butts where.
 - Renaming cards: Crowley did it, and if I accept it from him, I need to accept it from others, at least, within my tolerance.
 - What element goes with which suit: I am told that the Golden Dawn deliberately put in "traps" for the unwary, to protect their secrets, and that one of these was the Strength/Justice swap. Supposedly, another was swapping Swords and Wands, as originally, Swords = Fire and Wands = Air, and that feels correct to me, though at this point, my brain finds it hard to detangle from the RWS Swords = Air and Wands = Fire. And, of course, other decks may do it completely differently.
 - Adding cards is kinda on the borderline for me. It depends on what gets added and why, I guess.

re write up: I see that there's an SRD for *Cage of Sand* (<https://lucillaes.itch.io/fallen-through-the-hourglass-srd>). I enjoyed the story so far, and almost wish it weren't going to shift quickly into horror. re the length of time the set up takes: Interesting. This isn't true of either of the two journaling games I've played. But journaling and solo aren't identical, even if there's some overlap.

re Matt Stevens re world's greatest heist game: At the moment, I cannot disagree. re Patrick Riley re players not being on board with "I can't hit the undead skeleton with a weapon because that's disrespectful to the dead": While I do recall a playtest of *Shadow of the Century*, where my character's sentient motorcycle very much disapproved of the group trespassing in a tomb (My character (seeing the bad guys): They shouldn't be here. Motorcycle: *We* shouldn't be here!)), and my character did agree that, in principle, at least, the motorcycle was correct, a) that was *Fate* with a weird 1980s setting, not *D&D*, and b) while it's possible I misread the GM's intent, this felt more like flavor, because the tomb was obviously where the action was

and the PCs were obviously supposed to be where the action was.

re me re *Wake Up, Dead Man*: Yes, exactly. re Avram Grumer re *Belonging Outside Belonging* games: There are, of course, more, including *Butterfly Court*, *Yazeba's Bed and Breakfast*, *ExtraOrdinary*, *Blackborow Academy*, and *Cantrip*, as well as several listed on <https://www.indiepressrevolution.com/xcart/Belonging-Outside-Belonging> and <https://itch.io/c/674342/belonging-outside-belonging>, and no doubt, others.

re Joshua Kronengold re *Untamed/MDZS Brindlewood* module: Have you seen *Numberless Secrets* (<https://age-of-ravens-games.itch.io/numberless-secrets>)? This does that sort of thing for the broader genre. I do like the angle of "I'm not trying to stir anything up; I just don't want to invite my mother's murderer to my wedding". re SAN rolls: Yes, exactly.

re only GMs, not players, being reviewed: I remember a GM bringing this up, I think, at Origins, though in the context of physical conventions. Specifically, if a GM is regularly a no-show, word gets around, but this isn't true for players. As a GM, he wants to know if he has players less likely to show up because he often has people who couldn't get in asking if he might have space for them. IIRC, he sometimes creates an extra character for this, and he's also said that his first game of the convention usually has everyone showing up (even if it's a very early in the morning slot), but people get less reliable after that.

I'm torn on paid gming. On the one hand, gming is a lot of work, and being on call for a group one doesn't know, one which will make various demands... I can see the logic. On the other hand, it opens up so very many cans of worms. For home games, in theory, I could see players covering food for the GM/facilitator; in practice, I find either that doesn't happen or it's the other way around. (The GM for *Scum & Villainy* preorders food and has thus far turned down offers of compensation.) For conventions, often membership is comped in full or in part, and I don't have an issue with that. I know that some conventions will also cover hotel expenses, but I suspect that's relatively rare. re owlfolk nun warlock PC in *Brindlewood Bay*: I almost want to make that work. I suspect I could do at least the first two parts for Pelgrane Press's forthcoming GUMSHOE game, *Merryshire Detective Club* (<https://pelgranepress.com/2025/08/06/merryshire-detective-club>).

re undungeoning: The Strixhaven campaign, at least, as Stephen Tihor is running it, seems to have made at least a couple of steps in that direction.

MATT STEVENS: re casting *HEROES' FEAST*: The GM brought that upon himself. (I am reminded of a livestream session of *Candela Obscura* where the GM started to describe what the PCs saw, specifically, thieves in a room starting to steal the item the PCs were there to steal. When the players didn't interrupt the description-in-progress, the GM decided that meant that their PCs didn't do anything, which meant the thieves had now gotten the item out the window and were absconding with it. Josh's comment was that if he'd been one of the players, he would have said to the GM, "You are never going to get to finish another sentence.") re the pile of coins: While I consider that reasonable, the player should probably have said, "We take the gold and silver coins", rather than asking if the coins were separated. Odds are, the GM would have noted that they weren't at that point, but perhaps not.

re Avram Grumer re licensed humor comic RPGs: If you consider *CHEW* a humor comic (which you totally could; it's just that the humor is very dark), then the *CHEW* rpg counts.

JOHN REDDEN: re dwarves letting the cleric out of cures be killed: Sounds like the whole killing the goose who lays golden eggs thing. I hope your surgery went well.

ME: re Matt Stevens re starship repair and *Firefly*. SPOILERS FOR OUT OF GAS:

Even in "Out of Gas", the focus is not on repair per se. Everyone except Mal leaves the ship in a shuttle (hoping to either escape dying or find a ship or other means of aid that can go back to *Serenity*), not to be seen until the tail end of the episode, while Mal tries to signal any passing ships.

When a ship arrives, there is nothing that would equate to "roll to repair the ship". Instead, there's a standoff as the other ship's crew tries to hijack *Serenity*, which Mal wins. The second ship and its crew leave, and Mal now has the part, but is too injured to use it to fix the ship. Again, no "roll to repair"; it's "roll to not pass out"—which Mal fails, and the next scene is set after the rest of *Serenity's* crew has returned and done the necessary repair. At no point is there a sequence of actual repair. The story is one of desperate choices and action, as well as flashbacks revealing a lot of backstory. END SPOILERS.

And that pretty much sums up what I want. I'm there for the emotions, the revelation/invention of backstory, desperate choices, and desperate actions. I am not there for watching an hour of actual (simulated) spaceship repair.

Could I be? Sure—*Apollo 13* scratches that itch. And I suppose one could turn that into an rpg session I might

enjoy as a one-off. But for anything longer? I'm generally uninterested.

ATTRONARCH: Releasing the spirit was almost a touching scene. Why did the rations spoil overnight?

MYLES CORCORAN: I'm glad the holiday season was good for you. re igtheme: **giggle** at "Or rather, here it would be if I hadn't got my clothes burnt to a crisp." re Mausritter: It is looking like the mouse accused of committing the crime may actually have committed it. But I am reserving judgment. re Kriegsmesser: Clever thinking on Udo's part to badmouth himself. I love the minotaur bit! Also, excellent teamwork on taking down the woman burglar.

re Roger BW: I think it may have been Jonathan Tweet who described Han Solo and Luke Skywalker that way, perhaps in connection with Everway? re me: Thanks for the clarification on everything. re ticks: A tick, as you may already know, is also a nasty parasite. re footnote about an sf setting where the PCs are decanted from vats: That's pretty close to *Paranoia's* clones.

BRIAN ROGERS: Oof, sympathy on the flu going around! re Knaves of Ridgefield re the reluctance to let go of a single copper coin or share anything they don't have to: **sigh** I can't even call that childish, as far too many adults have played and likely still play that way.

re WEG Star Wars: Ah, that's far more my jam. I love the behind-the-scenes analysis. It doesn't feel like *Cowboy Bebop*, but that's fine. It feels a bit closer to *Leverage*, but with more action and (obviously) more of a Star Wars feel.

re Hugh and Bozo: My brain isn't sure what it just read. The whole issue of scale is so very surreal. I'll be over here with the totally normal space monks. re Mark Wilson re good maintenance = good business: IIRC, back in our previous apartment, the superintendent often had to explain that to the landlord (aka the superintendent's father), and had at least some success in this. Or rather, it wasn't the maintenance that he had to explain so much as the overly budget-conscious decisions the landlord had made years ago that resulted in the necessity for some of the maintenance.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: Habana Horror is amazing, as always. Does Dr. Llerna show up at dinner even if he's dead? If not, how does that part play out? I think some text is missing at the top of the first column of page 14. What does the telegram say?

re the painting: Let me see if I'm following correct: Isabella Varona, a patient at the Mazorra, painted it with toxic paint, and the guard was overcome by the fumes from the paint. The staff presumably didn't know the paint was toxic? Did Varona? Did the director truly

decide to hang it there and intend to show it to the investigators? I like the CPS simplification.

re mementos for Sadie: Aw. re Roger BW: I agree, unsurprisingly, though I would advise making it clear (in any published-as-a-whole version) that the detail you supply is explicitly meant as guidelines, not as mandating any specific no-matter-what (and indicating clearly where the exceptions are, i.e., the weird stuff will definitely arrive at the Mazorra).

re me: When I did a point-build system for pre-7th edition *Call of Cthulhu*, I very much used APP as only APP, and said that it was *not* part of the point-build. Rather, players could freely set APP to whatever they wanted. This meant:

- No one felt obligated to use APP as a dump stat, and I didn't have a party of 3 APP PCs.
- Anyone choosing to set APP to roughly average was signaling they didn't really want it to matter much for their PC.
- Anyone choosing to set it high or low was signaling to me how I should be using it for and against them.

When I ran *Tatters of the King*, one player chose APP 8, wanting someone not memorably ugly, but on the homely side. This made sense for that character, who wound up married to an attractive actress. It was originally a matter of convenience (her looks, his money), but by the end of the campaign, I said that when he returned to her, she was, to her surprise, glad to see him, and the player said that he was also, to his surprise, glad to see her. I later used them as background NPCs in *Eternal Lies*, and the player wrote a couple of in-character letters to the EL PCs. At one point, when one of the EL PCs wanted the Tatters PC to put himself in danger, the player's response was something like "Ask my wife", correctly gauging that she didn't want her husband getting mixed up in more weird dangerous stuff.

re Jim Vassilakos re refusing to see: Yes. Those who haven't been in such an environment often have a hard time understanding how and why people caught in it act and think the way they do.

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND CAMILA

LOURENCO PANHOCA: Wait, if the mirror doesn't tell the queen that Snow White is more beautiful, how does the story end? Or if she doesn't eat the apple? The hunter both murders her *and* hands her over to the police? How does that work? Is he giving the police her dead body?

DYLAN CAPEL: re NGR: Take 10 -) 3D6 -) D20 does sound interesting, as does the relic rule. I suspect the rest of the game isn't as much up my alley. re

Shakespeare as part of a British pantheon that includes King Arthur and Robin Hood: I think you're right. Folk heroes of all kind, fictional or historical, tend to get sorta-deitized, an unacknowledged semi-ancestor worship. This could be combined with NGR! A first folio of Shakespeare or Robin Hood's first bow or last arrow could become relics. re *28 Years Later*: Two films? I thought it was a trilogy of *28 Days Later*, *28 Months Later*, and *28 Years Later*? I've not watched any.

re comments and page counts: I don't think not counting comments is a good idea. A zine in this kind of apa is a gestalt of all its parts—comments, write ups, reviews, recipes, life events, and so on.

re me: I've great respect for Robin Laws, even though I don't think he always understands the consequences of his rules. re Delta Green: I think you misunderstood me. *Delta Green* does NOT have "very speakable" properties. It explicitly advises GMs *not* to do this, never to let the players relax, secure in the knowledge that it's obvious a Deep One that works in a comprehensible way. Delta-Green-the-organization may think it knows what's going on, but it's wrong, despite its use of scientific jargon. Delta-Green-the-game is clear about that.

PATRICK RILEY: re gming tips: Was it you who taught me to write my PC's name on both sides of the character tent? re Skyla not having the concept of personal space and sniffing people: Someone played a larp character that way, making sure to check first with everyone before getting inside their personal space and sniffing, as the *player* understood the concept. I agree that Eridan's player was giving you a green light.

re players assuming Skyla has good reason for what she did: Nod. I'd assume that as well. She's direct, not devious, and as far as I can tell, not malicious. I'm a bit uncertain why Skyla has a problem with werewolves. Unless you have reason to do otherwise, I'd keep them non-sinister in any case. *Giggle* at Millie wondering if the paladin "was just making an excuse" and "Kiss her—no, don't!" I like that refusing to do a murder for the councilman was both correct and prudent.

RAE the fiction. Is it based on anything? re Dylan Capel re the difference between *Vaesen* and *Call of Cthulhu* being that if you express a belief in folklore in *Vaesen*, you're not considered insane: One thing I like about the Cthulhu Invictus era of CoC is that this is true there, to a point. Sure, babbling about weird monsters and sorcerers might get someone dismissed as insane (or executed as a sorcerer), but it's also perfectly viable to go to one's patron and say, "Someone threw curse tablets onto your roof and buried them around your house. We're going to the best curse tablet maker to get them to make a counter-curse-tablet", and one's

patron will accept this as good common sense. (and, hopefully, cover the cost of the counter-curse tablets).

re me: I don't recall whether *Necrobiotic* covers what powers the dead. I think it must be some kind of energy, as the whole thing has a dieselpunk feel to it. re *Unknown Armies*: I think I've played in games of it run by Todd Furler or Lori Piper. re WRS: Thanks for the clarification. re *Monsterhearts*: Entirely reasonable. re Jim Vassilakos re me re realism: Yes, exactly. Fr'ex, while I'm not enamoured of *Scum & Villainy*, there's a simple mechanic for general "stuff happens, stuff breaks, and there's entropy" between missions that boils down to "It costs X moneys or comes with Y complications tbd." re rpg classroom with some number of students who are unimportant background NPCs: I'm hearing them talking like the adults in the Peanuts cartoons.

CLARK TIMMINS: re Players always win: Vincent Baker said of his game *Dogs in the Vineyard* that the players will win 75% of the conflicts, and the GM's job is to make them work for that and to make them decide which 75% they want most. The thing is, unless you're going full-on illusionism (which is not necessarily bad, though also not necessarily to my taste), for victory to be meaningful, failure needs to be possible.

This does not apply to all rpgs, of course. If you're playing *Call of Cthulhu* (or some other Lovecraftian game), it might or might not apply. For *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, I want the players to have a good chance at success and at least some chance of failure. For the one-hour demo *Cthulhu Live* larp I played in years ago, the GMs wanted the players to have a good time, and this meant they definitely favored players winning. For the harrowing scenario "Setting Sun, Rising Tide", I don't think winning is possible, and I'm fine with that, as that isn't what the scenario is about. For the game *Bluebeard's Bride*, there is no winning; yet, I have enjoyed the games I played of it.

ROGER BW: re Day After Ragnarok: Oh, I love the idea of recruiting a newly hatched pre-lingual serpent shapeshifter! re Mask of Yhtill: Is this an adventure I could purchase, or is it one you've created from scratch—or both? re 2nd ed Doctor Who: If I were to run this, whichever edition (or system) I used, I'd want to focus on something like Paternoster Investigations, i.e., something where none of the PCs are Time Lords. It wouldn't solve all problems, but it might help with scale. I see you've also thought of this. I see I have both editions from pdf bundles; based on your recommendations, I'd likely use 1st edition.

re gming tips: Ah yes, the tactical toilet break. Many a GM has made good use of this. I like the chronometers idea, but why did the guard die of old age and starvation? re attitude: Nod. That's a good position. re

Matt Stevens re original *7th Sea*: Yes, that is exactly my issue! The NPCs were the Cool Kids, when those should've been the PCs! I don't know how good or bad 2nd edition is, but a 3rd edition will be kickstarting soon: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/agate/7th-sea-ttrpg-a-new-journey>

re Dylan Capel re progressive encounters: I like the concept. I'm not entirely sure about the logistics because the more different initial entries you have, the higher the odds of any one of them progressing, correct? re me re *Last Sentinels*: It's not just a matter of not talking to each other, though yes, that's part of it. It's also what seem to be contradictions in what happened (on the meta level) leading to a certain amount of confusion on at least this reader's part.

re *Necrobiotic*: To be strictly fair, there is a sample scenario, and in that particular one, it seems clear that the PCs are intended to be willing to be troubleshooters for the status quo, I think? But that doesn't address a campaign, nor the question of why certain character types would be part of such a group.

re having someone run one of your scenarios from the draft while listening in: For the 2024 Metatopia (iirc), Tristan Zimmerman did this with *Ballad Hunters*. Russell Collins ran it for the rest of us while Tristan watched. re *Masks of Nyarlathotep* and Peru: Thanks. The last time I ran MoN (pre-7th edition), I used the *MoN Companion*, which had a non-supernatural adventure to establish the PCs bonding with Jackson Elias. This worked really well. re CoC Luck: In the end, all I can say is that it works for me in play, at least, as a player. I should try gming 7th ed and see if I still feel the same way. re Joshua Kronengold re campaign centered around the invention of the printing press: That could be fun.

MICHAEL CULE: I'm glad the Icebreaker scenario went well. That said, it seems to me that denying Roger a chance to geek out in character by giving him a character who wouldn't know what he knows seems akin to the larp GMs having a dance in their larp while giving one of the folks most interested in dancing a character who, the GMs wrote, didn't dance. re body-shrinking injections: Good luck with those.

re Glamour write up: re calculating time: I care about that, too, as a GM, but I try not to have to. Fr'ex, in *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, calculating when the various moon phases are is totally doable, but sticking to them as THE dates when cultist ceremonies happen is not really viable (and that's before we get into players who refuse to stop investigating and let time pass).

re Vostor grouching that he was woken up in the morning for a noon proclamation: I sympathize. (Also, shades of Albert's totally cool facade in *Count of Monte*

Cristo.) Should I ask what a woggle is? I love the note that the Chief Overseer wrote. Huzzah on the final defeat of the Giant Chaos Spider! re gming tips: Another advocate of the tactical toilet break!

GABRIEL ROARK: re TOEE campaign: Using one's petrified companion as a way to keep a trap door from opening is inspired. re captured brigands: What? I thought they were all killed, per the last sentence on page 2 ("The brigands were all killed before the spells ended."). Is there some other group of brigands I lost track of?

AVRAM GRUMER: re Ada Palmer: She's also a filker and song writer, and wrote *Sundown*, a Norse musical/mystery play (in the same sense as Christian mystery plays), as well as *Inventing the Renaissance*, which I've barely started. (It's shorter than *Count of Monte Cristo*!) re *The Masquerade*: I clicked on the link for Euler's Identity, but I don't think I'm any more enlightened about what it is, why it matters, and what the metaphysical implications are.

re *Impro*: I may or may not have owned a copy at some point, but I don't think I have one now, although I do have *Improv for Gamers*, a completely different book. I've a lot of stuff on various aspects of gaming, mostly unread, naturally. Do you think I'd like *Impro*?

re gender & roleplay: Yes, I often play male PCs, and Josh often plays female PCs. There are exceptions, such as the convention game of *Luther Arkwright*, where Josh played John Steed and I played Emma Peele, even though this isn't how we usually do it. And there are plenty of times, I am sure, where I play someone whose de-facto gender is Adventurer or PC. I've been trying to get better with non-binary PCs, specifically, remembering to either stick to they/them pronouns or, at the very least, not defaulting to he/him.

As a larp player, I've got a couple of binders. I use one when playing someone male or enby. It does not, I think, make me look either, but it does, at least, flatten my chest enough to aid in the suspension of disbelief. Sometimes, if I'm playing a man, I'll run through a song or two, trying to shift my voice at least a little deeper.

As a larp co-writer, we have a couple of amnesia games where gender is up to the player. (Originally, I'd have said it was "whatever the player's is", and we used to ask players what their gender was. Currently, we don't care; what we need to know is what genders they're willing to play, and what genders they're willing to romance.) Nevertheless, it's very clear to us, and quite likely to folks who've played these larps, that we've mentally gendered many of the characters.

These larps were written over 17 years ago, and I hope we've gotten a bit better about that since then.

17 years ago, we (me, Josh, Beth, Julian, and Stephen) wrote a game called *Ghost Fu*. The characters all had specific genders, I think 17 men and 5 women, based on our understanding of the demographics of Intercon, and thus, our potential pool of players. We re-ran it 2 years later.

We're going to rerun it for Intercon X, in 2 weeks as I type this. The demographics have shifted, and our "buckets" are now 5 female, 5 male, 12 flex (plus 4 horde, to take care of playing a variety of NPCs). I'm not utterly sure that these numbers are set, rather than More Like Guidelines. This run, 14 characters are male, and 8 female. (Of course, the larp is also dated in other ways, and Josh has gone through 14 of the 22 characters thus far, making them better. As always, we'd like an extra week or two that we don't have.)

re cross-gender play weakening the pull of me-ness: Often, yes. One exception for myself that comes to mind is when I played *Mars 244: The Liberation of Sisyphus: A Martian Fugitive Tragedy*, by Rachel E. S. Walton, a game inspired by *Montseigneur 1244*. Everyone plays 2 of the pre-generated characters and chooses one as their primary character, there are few mechanics, and the story is on rails. I chose as my characters the android, which I played as a somewhat creepy innocent who presented more-or-less male, very much in my wheelhouse—and made the other one my primary character, because I wanted to stretch.

The other character was a Black woman who was a revolutionary and also, iirc, addicted to some drug or other (I forget whether it was one that exists in our world or something invented for the setting). This proved a bit too much of a stretch for me, I think for multiple reasons. I don't think I messed up or played her "wrong"; just that I didn't do a great job of playing her particularly dynamically. I'll see if I can find a write up for this, but the point is that this character had less me-ness than the male-presenting-but-mostly-sexless android. re Powered by a Pack of Cards: This is a fascinating idea, and I'm sure it would work.

re Monsterhearts write up: On the one hand, trying to get a clue via OOC social engineering that the GM may not want to give you feels a bit like cheating, though, as the Jaegers in *Girl Genius* would say, perhaps the Good Kind of Cheating. On the other, I am not sure it's not cheating for the GM to keep sending the characters into Darkest Self, and on the third tentacle, the GM wants the players to try to solve the mystery, so it's probably fine.

re the students being blamed for OpenAI pulling out: Is this because of all the chaos in school from the last 2

sessions? re meeting after school: I'm confused. Mike flubbed Drake's roll, which meant that Drake and Blue could leave? How does that work? re Logan leaving his boot behind: Nice use of the rules, if I am remembering them correctly.

I'm glad folks are checking in with each other. re dice doing their part to contribute to the tension: Yup. Nice illustration. re Ernie failing to warn the PCs about the cops: Was he in a position to do so? re how you knowing you can get your character out of dying means the players are free to act with passion: It's part of why safety tools exist. When folks feel sufficiently safe, they are willing to act with passion and encourage others to do so. Or, to put it another way, when I'm gm'ing for folks who feel comfortable, they are often meaner to their PCs than I'd ever dare to be. (This is also true when one flips the screen. I once suggested that if I failed a climactic roll, not only would my (female) PC fail to rescue someone from the dystopian school folks were trying to escape from, but also, while she (successfully) escaped, the (male) NPC adversary would grope her as she fled. The (male) GM would never have suggested that one to me.)

It doesn't kill immersion, I find. Heck, I remember a *Dread* game at a convention where I looked at the questionnaire, thought of one very dark place I could take the character, asked myself if I was going to go there, and decided that, yes, I was. And once I'd made that decision, it was easy to keep that darkness in mind enough for sufficient immersion that it was clear to me what my character would do or say at certain points.

Similarly, I've found that pre-planning, or if one prefers, shifting to author stance, neither kills immersion nor makes playing the scene out boring or routine. There's still room for surprise.

re it being more fun if someone finds your PC's phone: Agreed! In my first *Monsterhearts* game, a convention one-shot, my Queen had a little black book of contacts, and it naturally wound up in the hands of the Witch, who disliked her. This definitely increased the drama!

The werewolf is "supposed to be a cruel bully"? Says who? This is news to me. The werewolf is "supposed" to be what their player makes of them. I've played the Infernal as a bit of an innocent (in certain matters). I decided to play a Vampire as happy and cheerful, as I was tired of all those Ose and Morose vampires. When I ran *Monsterhearts*, the Werewolf was, um, complicated. I'm not sure I'd have used the word "bully" to describe her.

Josh said to me that the Werewolf's issue is loss of control. That's not something I associate with being a bully per se, perhaps because I think of a bully as being in control. I've played the Werewolf in a couple

of convention games, and I'd say the characters I played were more socially awkward than bullies. I've seen another gamer play an utterly cheerful, happy Werewolf, because circumstances in the game meant the character was a sports star in school and also either had sex in game or was promised sex, I forget which. In theory, that character could've been a bully, but in practice, there was neither reason nor opportunity for that.

re Johnni saying that Steffan lost the "Blue holds my leash" Condition: Good call by the player. I love Drake's "Wait--rewind". re Stephan failing to find his phone: As he should. I'm a bit surprised Blue didn't discover it, though it falling into the cops' hands is likely more interesting. Yes, paying more attention to the fiction than to the rules is generally the correct call, although it's a good idea to keep half an eye on the rules so as to make best use of them.

re choosing Unstable as your advance: If a player did this, that is the point at which, as GM, I would absolutely try to nudge their PC into Darkest Self as much as possible, because that's what the player's signalling to me. Here, you're trying to follow the GM's lead, which is totally legit. I confess I'm curious about how often the character will go into Darkest Self from this point forward; Josh pointed out to me that it is easy for the Werewolf to both enter and leave that state.

The flashback episode idea was inspired! You had enough from the first three sessions to make it click nicely. re what a failure on the roll for Blue to pull themselves out of the well would mean: I'd play fast and loose with this sort of thing because there's a clear endpoint (aka the first session of play) and I'm not interested in being overly convoluted about getting there. So, I would probably say that Blue got out of the well, but maybe something nasty followed them, like an evil(er) twin, or maybe something's hunting them. Or maybe they only sent their spirit out, so they're intangible and somehow have to get folks to get their body out, which... is kinda like the Ghost's Darkest Self move, isn't it?

re \$100 in the game = \$30 your senior year at high school, which was my junior year: \$30 was a lot to me then. It was what TSR was charging for *World of Greyhawk*, I think, something I wanted then, but which was far too expensive! (Now, of course, however much or little it costs, I've no interest in it.) re Blue's suggested alternatives to drugging Byron: Wow. These make the drugging sound much more reasonable.

re Blue continuing to lunge after Byron: I've had something in that very broad ballpark happen (the Werewolf continually trying to run away), and it can get a bit awkward because the player winds up rolling

the dice multiple times to keep trying the same action. I sort of feel like the situation should have changed such that this doesn't happen, but a) I don't know if I'm correct about that and b) I don't know how one would set that up, not even primarily in terms of mechanics (though that is part of it), but also so it made sense in the fiction. How did this feel in play?

re dividing 2 beers into lots of shotglasses so everyone's just a little calm: Like when the love potion in Cthulhupunk got sufficiently diluted we all agreed it was more of a like potion. Does that work in reality, with the Xanax, do you think? I love that Logan's first wish, to be sober, means he quickly realizes what a bad idea the whole thing was (or does he?).

Reincorporation and preincorporation are both great. I never did run any kind of Time Commandos game, though at one time, I thought *Primetime Adventures* could handle it. *Time Watch* obviously could, but I might want something more loosey-goosey.

re *Scum and Villainy*: I don't think I realized there was a bonus for Mendicants in the area. I loved the irony of realizing that Valsi could easily have scored an invitation to the conference if they'd refrained from doing the memory wiping. I'd forgotten the space cockroaches. I agree re the use of "Crew". It's terrible.

re Patrick Riley re part of you not doing much in-character stuff being because you were walking the rest of us through the mechanics: I think you're right. re Roger BW re the lack of sex in the Monsterhearts game: I wonder how much of that is because it's a campaign, not a one-shot. I remember talking to Aviatrix after a convention one-shot, and she said that if it had been a campaign, she'd have toned down how she played her character rather than charging directly at everything. I wonder how much of it is the stuff the GM's been emphasizing. There's totally space for sex; Briar's not cutting that off. It's more that there's a lot of other stuff going on.

re me re the Monsterhearts characters having goals from the start and the Scum and Villainy group not: Some of that's endemic to the games, some probably is on me, some on the GMs, and some of the gestalt of all of it. In *Scum and Villainy*, the plot is always Your Mission of the Week. In *Monsterhearts*, even when the GM steers it (which I have done when running the game), the characters *are* the plot. Being passionate and chewing scenery doesn't feel like it gets in the way of what the game is about the way it might in *Scum and Villainy*.

I don't always remember to give my Monsterhearts characters long and short term goals. I really should, although whether I enjoy any given Monsterhearts game doesn't seem to map neatly onto whether I do. I

do remember playtesting *Blades in the Dark* shortly before it came out. This was at Metatopia, and the session was "Queers in the Dark". We made very queer characters who were very, very gray, and definitely had Wants and Needs that added up to goals. They were part of a complicated family that had emigrated to Duskvol for Reasons, and there was definitely some roleplay. Come to think of it, it had a bit of a *Monsterhearts* feel. I need to think about this.

re no move in *Monsterhearts* to avoid damage once a fight begins: This is definitely true in *Urban Shadows* as well, and 2nd edition leans into that. If you Turn to Violence, you are extremely likely to get hurt, and I know that was a deliberate design decision. For Turn Someone On, as I recall, the point is that we don't get to choose what does and doesn't turn us on, but we do get to choose what to do about it, at least broadly.

re premise vs setting: It also depends on how you define the two. Fr'ex, consider the traditional 7 modules that are G1-3, D1-3, and Q1. You could certainly say that these are about setting—3 different castles of giants, 3 locations in the underworld, and Lolth's home plane. However, they also have a strong premise. The PCs are expected to investigate / deal with the giants, one castle at a time in the G modules. The giants are the Enemy. But behind them... are the Drow! And behind the Drow is Lolth! I can also point at various *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns that have a clear premise (Avenge Jackson Elias! Make your name in an Antarctic Expedition For Science!) but also place heavy emphasis on the setting.

re Joshua Kronengold: You are correct. Mike Rubin's PC rigged a building to explode, temporarily killing Patricia. The shooting a big bad into space was something an NPC did offstage to tidy up some of my plot tendrils.

PAUL HOLMAN: Sympathy on the health and transportation issues. I hope you're doing better and that transport has sorted itself out. Thanks for the recommendation of ReadEra. I'll give it a try.

PATRICK ZOCH: re gming tips re the +1 bonus: Ah, good old-fashioned bribery. In this context, I highly approve. re Saltmarsh write up: Why did no one want to serve aboard the captain's vessel? What did they have against the Solmor family? re best and worst moments: You did Roses and Thorns for the players to answer in character? That's a fun trick I should try.

re John Redden: I'm so glad you got your back pay! re Avram Grumer re *Monsterhearts*: While I suspect you're correct that you wouldn't enjoy it, bear in mind that there's a wide variety in the kinds of games one gets.

re Location. Location. Location.: The extremely quick character creation for *Over the Edge* (certainly for 1st/2nd edition, and I think also for 3rd) includes "Why are you on the island of Al Amarja?" I remember Avram Grumer (I think) musing about a one-shot or campaign opener where everyone needed a reason for their PCs to be on an early morning flight from (I think) Washington DC to NYC or vice versa. At Origins one year, I played in a *Call of Cthulhu* game set in Mussolini's Italy. The PCs are a group of out of work entertainers who are given a work order and travel permits and sent to a small village to put on a show.

JIM ECKMAN: Sympathy on the burnout, as well as running for players who decide to make their PCs rebels because they don't get to boss the world around. re me: C-dramas I've enjoyed include *Fairy Loves Devil*, *Maiden Holmes*, *Sleuth of the Ming Dynasty*, *Word of Honor*, and *The Untamed*, which comes from the web novel *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, while *Word of Honor* comes from *Faraway Wanderers*, although I prefer the prequel novel, *Lord Seventh* (as a novel—the show *Word of Honor* is fantastic, if a bit bumpy, because they had to cram a bit too much plot into a bit too few episodes). The anime *Heaven Official's Blessing* is good. I enjoyed the web novel *Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know*.

HEATH ROW: It looks like the gaming scene in Portugal is robust. I have *Oh Captain, My Captain* and would like to play it at some point. re me: I'm glad things went well thus far, and I hope they continue to do so.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re Matt Stevens re *7th Sea*: Technically, it was (paraphrasing): "Don't do anything to this NPC! In two weeks, he returns home, and then, this seemingly insignificant peasant becomes the pebble that starts the Montaigne Revolution!" There was also the starting adventure, which has the PCs meet a Great General in Ussura, where they're invited to stay with his army, iirc. And that's where the adventure ends. But AEG, the company which published *7th Sea* at the time, had already decided exactly what would happen next with the army, even though they wouldn't publish that for months. In other words, if the players agree to have their PCs join the Great General, and the GM starts, you know, running more of the game. then they lose the opportunity to play in the authors' sandbox, which some groups actively want to do.

re Solaris: I believe you meant "Polaris". I blame spell check. re different colored dice: Oh yes. I remember Beth, Julian, and us making use of a gatcha (aka one of those containers from the bubblegum/toy machines one buys with coins) for a variety of d6s:

- 1 of one color, 2 of another, and 3 of a third for *Over the Edge*, letting us roll anywhere from 1-6 dice and be able to assign specific dice as bonus or penalty dice as needed
- 1 each of 3 different colors for *Feng Shui*, iirc
- 1 for something like *Polaris* (or anything else only using 1D6, such as most of the GUMSHOE games)
- And, finally, an empty bubble for *Amber Diceless*

re Patrick Riley re one of us doing something "just because it's funny": I can think of one case where I did, but I'm not sure it's what either of you meant. During the rules brief for the larp *And Thunder Shall Roll*, I said, "Don't shoot the piano player" because I had it perfectly timed to be funny. However, this was an out of character statement made before the game proper began.

A better example, I think, is when I was playing in the *Blue Rose* larp. We were forming study groups with our characters, and I asked one player if it were okay for her character to be in the group I was in, as this group had some characters of a type her character didn't trust (I forget what type—perhaps mages?), and her response was, "My character wouldn't want to, but I think it's hilarious! Let's do it!"

re not playing it safe all the time so as to keep the game more fun overall: I remember playing "The Bad Man" for *Don't Rest Your Head* the first time (not the time I played with you) and realizing, to my delight, that it was fine for my character to do the stupid thing (run away, thus isolating herself from the safety of the rest of the group) because this was a 6-year-old child who was scared and stressed. Similarly, when trying to decide between two equally attractive-to-me options (get info or get distracted by Professor Dreamy Eyes but get a Stability refresh), I decided this by realizing I was playing a 16-year-old student, and voted with her hormones.

re "and then you roleplay" being implied, not stated: I think it needs to be stated, as it is clear that many people look for and fail to find the spaces in which to roleplay. (I also think that some of the games that don't state this may be written by authors who don't think there needs to be as much of what we consider roleplay as we want, but that's another matter.)

re zine length: IIRC, Lee generally did *not* loan me your extra pages. I think she allowed this once or twice when we were doing a collaboration story? But in general, she didn't do this. re Roger BW re why 2nd ed *Fiasco* changed from dice to cards: See <https://www.tabletopgaming.co.uk/news/fiasco-ditches-dice-for-cards-in-the-rpgs-second-edition-but-only-if-you-want-to> for the initial explanation, and see <https://gnomestew.com/fiasco-review> for a positive review. Also, see me if you want to get me to take it

off my shelf and, you know, actually play it with you and a couple other people.

re yourrpgtable.com: If we work on this, I'm wondering if a) you could design something I'd actually enjoy using and b) if you could design something that had not just a tutorial I'd feel comfortable with / after, but also some way to set it for various levels of expertise such as "Give me the D&D option", "Show me a few possibilities to do X", "Walk me through everything", "I don't need training wheels", and so on.

re Michael Cule re Amber Diceless: It uses numbers as well as karma. If my PC using Warfare against a PC or NPC with Warfare, the character with the highest Warfare wins. re me re that Monsterhearts game where the Witch's player should have had to roll to Hold Steady: Looking over my write up, I'm not sure whether or not the player did roll. I wrote: "I think Robin's player said that Mercy should have to roll to Hold Steady, rather than automatically succeeding, and I think the GM agreed. Certainly, someone rolled a 3 to Hold Steady."

re BESM: Yup, in practice, it does *not* work the way you say it ought. The person trying to play the Driver-but-also-Mad-Scientist hears "Sure, that's fine, but Drivers are the Best, and the Driving skill The MOST IMPORTANT", while the person who focuses on Memorizing Maps does not get enough support from the rules, so must convince the GM to let them use Memorizing Maps for as much as possible. Same thing for types of cars or styles of lightsaber fighting—your idea is fine, but isn't what the game pushes for.

re not realizing when your Kickstarter files are there: I've done that. I try to review the long list o'things I've backed from time to time to catch that sort of thing. This paid off at Metatopia, because it turned out that I never received *The Wolf King's Son*, even though Vincent Baker sent it out months before. He brought a replacement copy for me to the convention.

re you not yet rolling Vary's dot in Attune, so not knowing how goof Vary is: Good enough to really mess up or have a fluke success, the latter of which would be much harder without that dot. re PCs trying to throw Evil Treasure in a bag and forget about it: Or hand it off to someone else, like our Harlem Unbound characters did with the dynamite.

re Avram Grumer: Belonging Outside Belonging does not descend from *Brindlewood Bay*, as the text seems to imply (though I doubt that's your intent), but from *Dream Askew / Dream Apart*, which I'm pretty sure predate it. But the general "inspired by" idea is correct. We have Powered by the Apocalypse, Forged in the Dark, Carved from Brindlewood, Descended from the

Queen, and Penned to Good Society, and probably others I've forgotten or not heard of.

re Monsterhearts write ups: I don't think I'd say "it gets worse" so much as "it escalates, and that may work against the GM's goal of having players engage with the ticking plot". re Turn Someone On never failing: I'm not convinced. Certainly, Shut Someone Down, IMO, does not never fail, and the move's name follows the same pattern.

PLANKWELL COLLECTIVE: re code word "distraction" vs "distracting": In one larp, I was a spy and had a code phrase and counter-response. Additionally, my character already knew who her contact was. Her sheet noted that sometimes, accidents happen, and code phrases don't get exchanged correctly, and that was not a problem, as she was quite good at winging it.

JIM VASSILAKOS: re me re Dungeon HOA: We neither wrote nor ran this. It was one of several ideas we discussed, but folks wound up writing another larp. (I think this was the all-cat larp.) In addition to what Josh and I already wrote in the apa, I think folks riffed on the Wrong Sort of Neighbors. Why, this group of... **adventurers**... wanted to move in. Such violent people, adventurers! The Medusa was very concerned, because her kids wanted to hang out with them and would no doubt pick up bad habits.

re having one of the players play the opposition in combat: That worked really well years ago in a DresdenFiles game. My character was in a duel, and the GM asked one of the players to play the opponent. It was definitely a much harder fight than if the GM had played the NPC, and very satisfying when:

- My character won, BUT
- The NPC cheated, trying to addict my character to his (vampire) blood.
- The GM noted that this was absolutely in keeping with the source material and joked that one would think the arbiter of the duel would expect this by now.
- My character avoided addiction by using magic to freeze his own blood. This worked because he served the Winter Court—but also meant he took a serious consequence, iirc.

That said, apparently, some players will abuse the group's trust and play the opposition as if they're loyal fans of the PCs. At least, that was the case in the 1990s, and I have no reason to think it never happens now. I don't recall where I read an extreme example of this, a player who decided that the NPC he was playing would commit suicide, crashing their cybered-up plane into a wall rather than attack the PCs.

re relationships between the various NPCs: Despite my issues with early World of Darkness books, I loved their NPC relationship maps.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: re me re 45 well-deserved minutes of summarizing *The Count of Monte Cristo*: Yes! re *Camelot*: I'm more likely to hum "The Seven Deadly Virtues".

Igtheme for Issue #9 – February 21st: City Building for Fun and Adventure: what do you need and where do you start?

While I tend to use either published material or real world locations, I have spent more time than necessary looking up details about NYC and trying to make Google Maps give me something that doesn't look too 21st century.

Second edition Urban Shadows introduces the concept of Hubs, neighborhoods which can each serve as the location of everything important in a "season" of the game. We decided to go with Chelsea, one of the many neighborhoods in Manhattan.

Here's the link to the map we created:
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1PG9f2Kgd7pH-jl2tyJiU3c3BvbPESMg&ll=40.74141917763579%2C-73.9975866&z=14>

The shaded area is Chelsea. As this is an area we all more or less knew, the only things we added at the start were locations immediately relevant to the characters. These included:

- Foreshadowing: This was the Oracle's (Jonathan) palm/tarot/horoscope reading shop, above "The rainbow station".
- The Sultry Serpent: The Tainted's (Toni) bar and cabaret
- The Imp's (Lett) apartment
- Serengeti: Lett's Atelier
- Magic Beans: The Wizard's (Xela) coffee shop. Xela lived and had her wizard's sanctum/workshop above the shop.
- Daisy: Lett's favorite spa
- Patsy's Place/Dead Cow District: The Veteran's (Patsy) artificer's studio/workshop and home
- The Low Line: A supernatural hangout in a disused subway station, named in homage to the High Line

The first session involved heisty shenanigans, and we picked a nearby museum as a setting, I think the Whitney Museum of American Art?

Interestingly, this area is near the one I set the first scenario in *Our Ladies of Sorrow*, a Call of Cthulhu campaign that, by default, doesn't use the Cthulhu

mythos, but rather, draws inspiration from Dario Argento's film trilogy *The Three Mothers*, which was itself inspired by Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria De Profundis*. The opening scenario was set in the then-current year of 2009 (I think), and could be set in any town or city large enough to have two used bookstores and a university, iirc. I set it in Manhattan, NYC, in July 1963.

It became clear to me that the author wasn't picturing NYC as the setting, but that wasn't a problem. I used actual used bookstores in the area where the characters lived, and was convinced that, yes, I really should put the key apartment building at 177A Bleeker Street. I also spent far too long confirming the boundary for the police precinct; none of the players would have cared if I handwaved the details. But it mattered to me, and I was happy that the entire area I made the focus was in a single precinct so that the same NPCs would handle everything.

I'll attach three of the maps. They all use the same key; it's just that I couldn't fit everything readably on any single version.

1. **The Three Sisters, 177A Bleeker Street:** The location of the apartment building that features heavily in the scenario. One of the player characters lived there.
2. **Lady D's, 29 Carmine Street:** Gay bar owned by one of the player characters, fictional.
3. **Stonewall Place:** Location of a famous gay bar, non-fictional.
4. **357 Sixth Avenue:** Two of the player characters lived on the second floor and ran an antiques shop on the first (ground) floor. One of the players chose this address because a fellow gamers lived there at the time, and we knew what the area looked like, and also because it was close to the other key locations in the scenario.
5. **The Bitter End:** NYC's oldest rock club, non-fictional.
6. **St. Vincent's Hospital:** The girlfriend of one of the player characters worked there.
7. **Nagel's Books, 206 Mercer Street:** Used bookstore, and while the name and other details are from the scenario, it's the actual location of Mercer Street Books & Records.
8. **New York City Police Department—6th Precinct,** non-fictional
9. **New York University,** non-fictional
10. **Strand Bookstore,** non-fictional
11. **Hotel Chelsea, 222 West 23rd Street,** non-fictional. I think the character who owned the bar lived her.
12. **Delmonico's,** non-fictional
13. **79th Street Boat Basin,** where the character who owned the bar had a boat

14. **S. Jenner, 973 Fifth Avenue:** Samuel Jenner was the ex of one of the player characters.
15. **The City College of New York,** non-fictional.
16. **Mount Richmond Cemetery,** non-fictional.
17. **Idlewild Airport,** non-fictional, soon to be renamed John F. Kennedy Airport.

The second and third scenarios took place elsewhere, set later in the 60s. The coda/epilogue scenario didn't fit because of how the third scenario ended. I used *Shepherd of Moths* instead (<https://legacy.drivethrurpg.com/product/286871/Shepherd-of-Moths--a-Zgrozy-scenario>), and decided that it had to be set during the Stonewall riots. By now, the player characters had moved out of Manhattan, although the two present for the scenario had reason to visit. I made a new map of the area, and I see I've confusingly labeled it both as the 1969 coda map and as the 1963 map. Some versions I have show as much as possible from both times, including a couple of places not shown in the earlier maps, such as the office of one of the player characters and the home of a couple of NPCs. I have a dozen different versions, but am only including one.

OLoS NYC 1963 Simple Atlas Style

1963 OLoS Map

1

The Three Sisters: 177a
Bleecker St

2

Lady D's, 29 Carmine St

3

Stonewall Place

4

357 Sixth Ave

5

The Bitter End

6

St. Vincent's Hospital, W 11th
St & 7th Ave S

7

Nagel's Books, 206 Mercer St

8

New York City Police
Department - 6th Precinct

9

New York University

10

Strand Bookstore

11

Hotel Chelsea, 222 W 23rd
Street

12

Delmonico's

13

79th Street Boat Basin

14

S. Jenner, 973 5th Ave

15

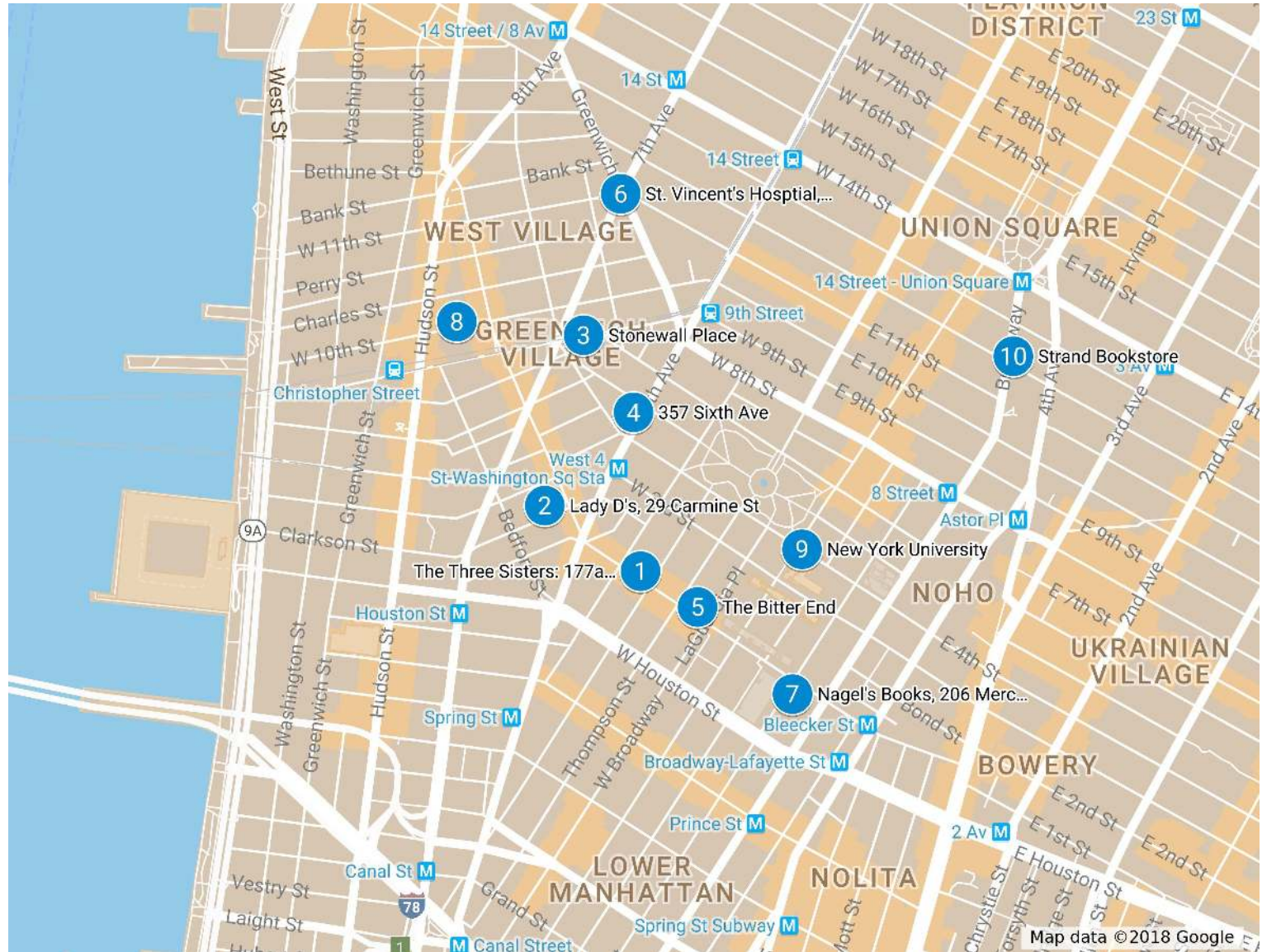
The City College of New York

16

Mount Richmond Cemetery

17

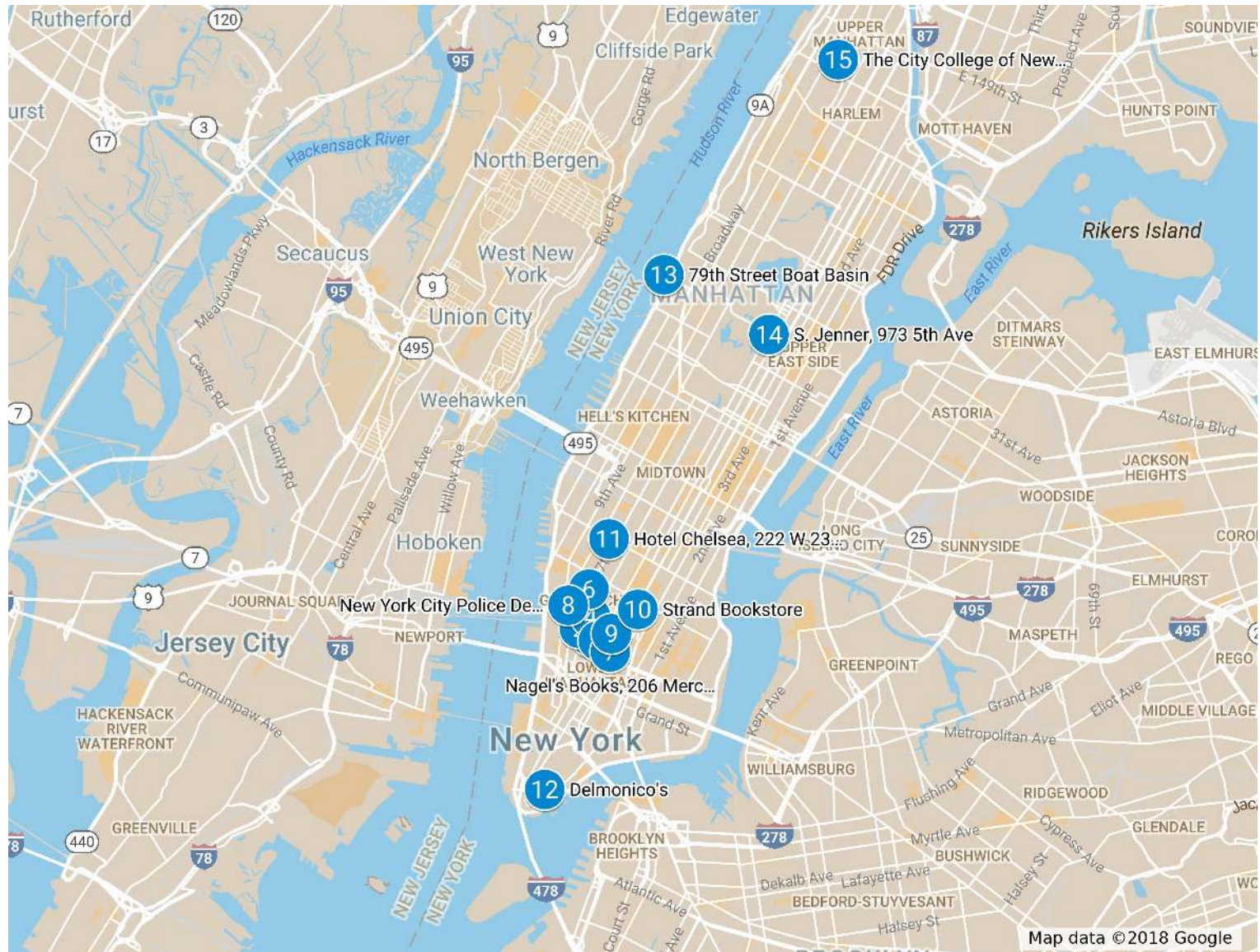
Idlewild Airport



OLoS NYC 1963 Simple Atlas Style

1963 OLoS Map

- 1 The Three Sisters: 177a Bleecker St
- 2 Lady D's, 29 Carmine St
- 3 Stonewall Place
- 4 357 Sixth Ave
- 5 The Bitter End
- 6
- 7 St. Vincent's Hospital, W 11th St & 7th Ave S
- 8
- 9 Nagel's Books, 206 Mercer St
- 10
- 11 New York City Police Department - 6th Precinct
- 12 New York University
- 13 Strand Bookstore
- 14 Hotel Chelsea, 222 W 23rd Street
- 15 Delmonico's
- 16 79th Street Boat Basin
- 17 S. Jenner, 973 5th Ave
- 18 The City College of New York
- 19 Mount Richmond Cemetery
- 20 Idlewild Airport



OLoS NYC 1963 Simple Atlas Style

1963 OLoS Map

1

The Three Sisters: 177a
Bleecker St

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Lady D's, 29 Carmine St

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St & 7th Ave S

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Nagel's Books, 206 Mercer St

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Department - 6th Precinct

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79th Street Boat Basin

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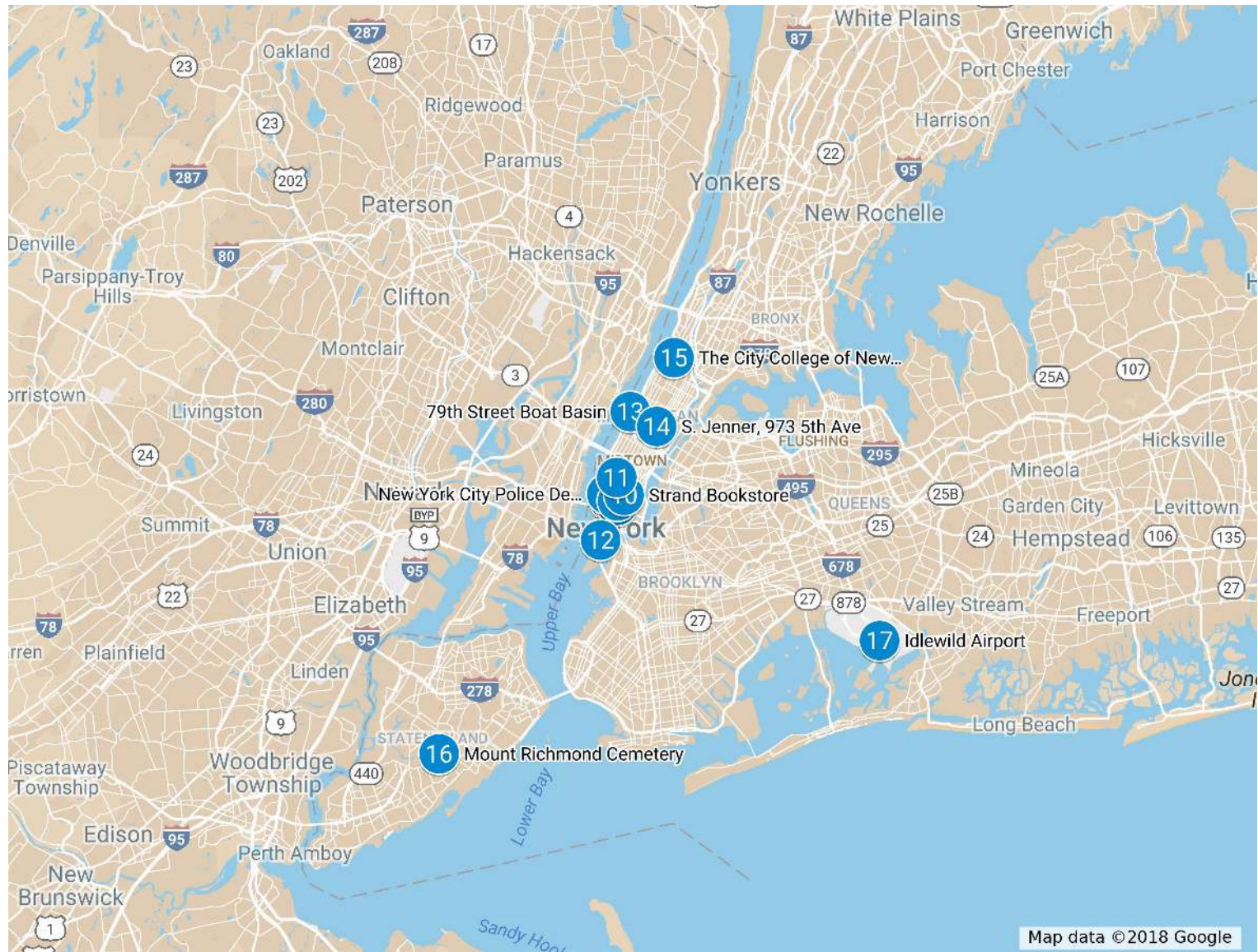
The City College of New York

16

Mount Richmond Cemetery

17

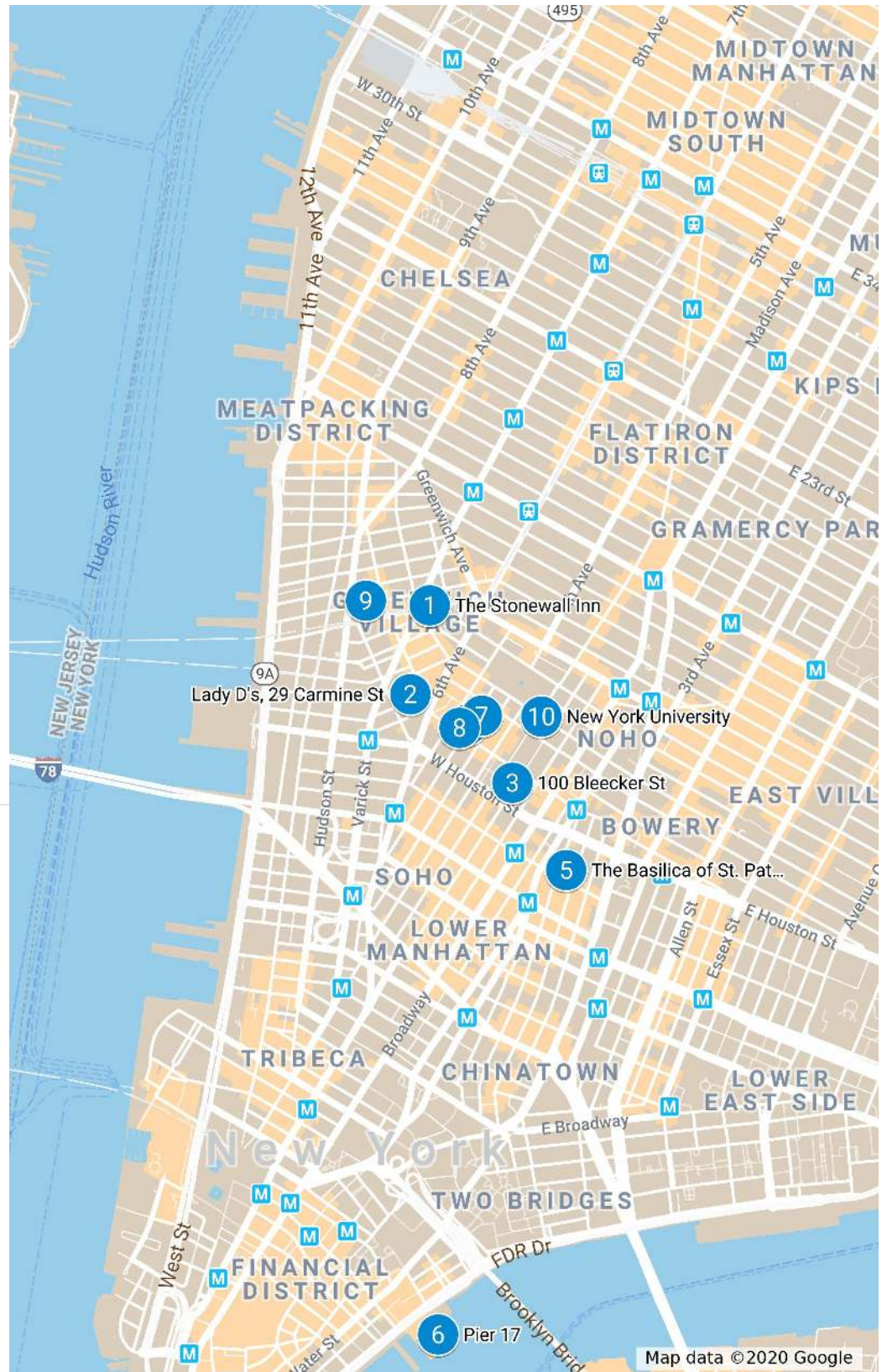
Idlewild Airport



OLoS NYC 1969 Basic Coda Simple Atlas Style

1963 OLoS Map

- 1 The Stonewall Inn
- 2 Lady D's, 29 Carmine St
- 3 100 Bleecker St
- 4 Triangle Social Club, 208 Sullivan St
- 5 The Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral
- 6 Pier 17
- 7 225 Sullivan St
- 8 The Three Sisters: 177a Bleecker St
- 9 New York City Police Department - 6th Precinct
- 10 New York University
- 11 The City College of New York



Cowman Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA #5

TRAPPED IN A WORLD HE NEVER MADE!

BY MATT STEVENS

8 HILLSIDE AVENUE, GOLDENS BRIDGE, NY 10526

KENT.ALLARD.JR@GMAIL.COM

ART BY VIRGIL FINLAY, ME AND J.B. HANDLES MAN



I liked Calibri's look, so I'm sticking with it. I thought last issue's section titles were confusingly formatted, though, so I'm going with underlines this time. (There are no bold or italic options for the font.)

HARTLAND CITY MEMORIES (IGTHEME)

I've only created one city in any detail: Hartland City, the setting for my pulp campaign in the late 90s/early 2000s.

I started working on it while I was living in Manhattan. **Brian Misiaszek's** essay in A&E had inspired me to look into the pulps, and I borrowed Todd Goldstone's *Pulp* from Columbia's library. *Pulp* had a huge color insert of cover art, and I remember viewing it with horrified fascination. I saw a horror show, with endless cover images of scantily-clad women menaced by mad scientists, mobsters and tentacled BEMs.¹

So when it was time to design a setting, I imagined a city like Depression-era New York, menaced by sinister outside forces. My first conception was something like *Dark City*, which was odd because I had never heard of *Dark City*; just a case of great minds thinking alike, I guess. I imagined a city surrounded by impenetrable fog, without government or history, which PCs would pop into without any memory of how they got there.

While I quickly dropped that idea, traces of it lingered for years. Utterly unreal buildings -- like 400-story department stores -- remained in the introductory material. And while Hartland City was made part of a broader world, not left isolated in a gothic demi-plane, it initially wasn't on Earth, but on an Earth analogue called "Argon." Eventually I realized this was all unnecessary and brought it back to Earth where it belonged.

What was left? A New York replica, run by an elaborate coalition of gangsters and with a couple supervillains thrown in. What I had found, reading all those pulps, was that I loved the noirish stories of Hammett and Chandler; I really liked Doc Savage; and there were a few other writers I enjoyed; but I was no longer interested in the rest of it. I made up a lot of details about the city -- it'd be hard not to after years of gaming! -- but I'd have to look up most of them.

¹ Years later, when publishers were reviewing *Two-Fisted Tales*, they said pulp gaming could be a "nostalgic" antidote to the "dark and gritty" fashions of the 90s. I was boggled. Who could be nostalgic for all those monstrous terrors?

When *Two-Fisted Tales* was published I considered making Hartland City its “official” setting, and releasing a supplement to the game. My plan was to have different plot hooks for different setting assumptions: Some would be labelled “magic,” others “weird science,” while the gangster and mystery stories would be available for any campaign. The book never got off the ground, though.

THE SURPRISING ORIGIN OF THE CLERIC

Original D&D featured three character classes: Fighters, Magic-Users, and Clerics. (Thieves came with *Greyhawk*.) The first two were imported from *Chainmail*, but Clerics were new. Where did they come from?

It’s a tough question. After all, there were nothing like clerics in *The Lord of the Rings*; they were almost never the heroes of myth or folklore; at best you’d find villainous cult leaders in Conan or Cthulhu Mythos stories. Gary Gygax said clerics were modelled after Archbishop Turpin in *The Song of Roland* and other fighting clerics of the Middle Ages. But those guys were straightforward fighters, without weapon restrictions or many accounts of spells or miracles. They didn’t fit the class well at all.



There’s a good reason for this: The original cleric wasn’t based on Archbishop Turpin at all; he was based on Van Helsing. You see, in the Blackmoor campaign, one of the PCs had become a vampire lord, Sir Fang, and Dave Arneson felt it could unbalance the game. So when Mike Carr joined, Arneson made him the first cleric, Bishop Carr, and gave him Turn Undead and healing spells.

If it wasn’t for Sir Fang, there may have never been a Cleric class, at least not for PCs. Maybe it’s more appropriate to see them as anomalous, like Monks, also introduced for Blackmoor-specific reasons (one of Arneson’s players was a Bruce Lee fan). Many early FRPGs -- such as *Tunnels and Trolls* and *The Fantasy Trip* -- dropped Clerics entirely; they must have felt there was something “off” about them. (*RuneQuest* took the opposite approach and let “clerics” take over the game.)

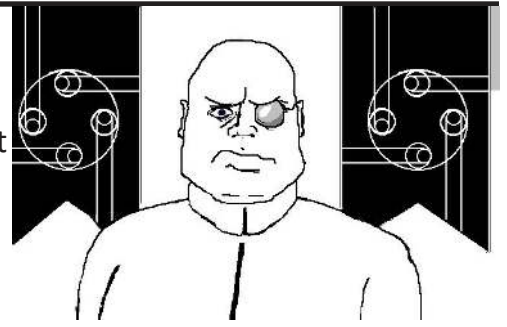
So it’s worth asking if we need Clerics as an FRP PC class, and if so, should we stick with the D&D model? In my D&D replacement (see last issue), Clerics will be temple managers. They can perform rituals, and they receive some divine protection (killing one might lose you Divine Favor), but they won’t be a vital part of an adventuring party. Will this work? I don’t know.

NO POLITICS? SORT OF.

There’s a common rule in gaming forums: “no politics.” Even E&A has a mild version of this policy. We all know why it exists, because we’re familiar with tedious zines that were nothing but long, angry, partisan rants. There were many in A&E’s long history.

There’s also a common response: “Everything is political,” so a completely “politics free zone”

wouldn't have anything to say. I respect this claim, and have seen perfectly legitimate topics suppressed for being "political."² But IMO the reasoning is a little too black-and-white. Is *Mouse Guard* just as "political" as *Racial Holy War: The Roleplaying Game*? (Don't look up the second one.) It seems like we're throwing out important distinctions for a polemical point.



In any event, I'm sure we can agree that the boundary between "political" and "non-political" is a fuzzy one. I think the issue isn't "political" content *per se*, it's the way political content is presented. A lot of political writing is *bad*, and the worst political zines have common traits:

1. *Polemics over persuasion*. They're full of angry rants that only appeal to the already convinced.
2. *Obsessively monomaniacal*. Their politics lead them to simple heuristics that they bring up constantly, making for tedious writing.
3. *Off-topic*. They don't recognize that there are better forums for their private obsessions.
4. *Insulting*. They are patronizing, preachy, smug, self-righteous, or treat readers with sneering contempt in other ways.

This is, undoubtedly, an incomplete list, and I'm happy to hear suggestions for more. (I'll also cop to committing the same sins I condemn!) The point, though, is that if you're not happy with a ban on "politics," you can at least look for the pitfalls that give "political" posting a bad rep.

COMMENTS E & A # 8

Man, writing comments was hard for me this issue, which is why this is squeaking in right before the deadline. I know comments are like the cocktail party of the APA, but I *don't like* cocktail parties! I don't want to be anti-social, though, so here it goes.

General

I see that most of the bookmarks for our zines are accompanied with game systems. Mine, for example, says "Cowman Baloney Face # 4 -- Matt Stevens (D&D 3E)." Hey **Jim**, what determines these? I guess 3E is the first system I mentioned in that issue, but the last games I ran were in 5E, and the system I'm most associated with is *Two-Fisted Tales*. Not a big deal in any event -- I'm happy with any bookmarks at all! -- but I'm curious.

Mark A. Wilson

Sympathy on job search horrors. I lost my long-term, full-time job in 2011. (Just short of the 10 years I needed for a small pension, too. Damn.) I had hoped the Internet would allow for a smooth, frictionless labor market, and instead I found a wasteland of fake listings and mislabeled jobs. It doesn't look as if it's gotten much better.

² My go-to example is from a *Traveller* FB group. One member asked if Earth's coastlines would be different, in the official *Traveller* universe, due to global warming. Another member demanded the post be struck down for being "political." My response was that *Traveller* has FTL, psionics and genetically engineered dog-men. Couldn't a conservative accept the *possibility* of climate change by 5750 AD?

Erika Frank

Hello! I *have* been interested in *Leverage* for a while, if only because the setup seems perfect for modern-day PCs: Action types who fight for good causes, and aren't law enforcement, but who can't blithely ignore the law, either.

The OSR: "More about not wanting mechanics to get in the way of the 'convince the GM that you have a Clever Plan' approach to problem-solving." I understand the intention, but I don't see how old versions of D&D further that goal. In the old games you couldn't sneak up on someone unless you were a Thief! (Or a Thief-adjacent class.) Admittedly part of the reason I haven't bought OSR products is I have old versions of D&D on my shelf, and see no reason to buy an archaic D&D-clone when I have the originals. Also, 5E works just as well as older editions did IMO.

Lisa Padol

"If you told that story in a room of indie gamers, odds are that at least one would decide that their next game had to be about Whale Whores. This, in turn, might inspire a Whale Whores game design jam on itch.io." It's funny, I respect the DIY spirit, but I ask, *Why would you need a whole new system?* Unless it's for the "whoring" part, which I associate with notorious games like *F.A.T.A.L.* and their tables for dick and asshole sizes. (Do not want!)

Glad you liked the *Top Secret* diagram. As I noted, I'm hoping to integrate it into the "scenario creation system" of 2FT, although that might require genericizing it a bit. My current thinking is that all missions have "investigation," "resolution" and "complication" phases, but some of those are extremely long, others extremely short, depending on their type. A murder mystery, for example, is almost all "investigation"; the "resolution" is simply arresting the murderer.

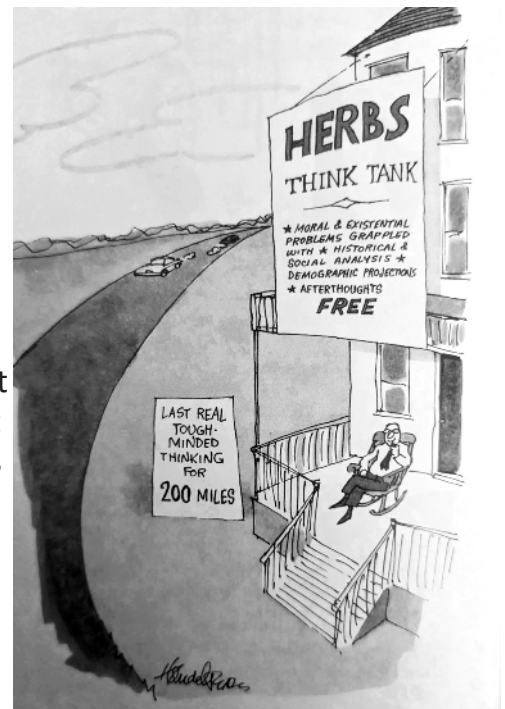
Starship (and other vehicle) Repair: I don't think there's much real disagreement here; all I meant was that starship repair rules can be more complicated than "I shoot him." It depends on the genre, too. *Two-Fisted Tales* had somewhat involved repair rules because of *Tarzan* stories: Tarzan flew planes, and every time he got in a plane, it crashed, usually next to some Lost World in the African jungle. So I had rules for repairing vehicles with jury-rigged materials and without modern technology.

Myles Corcoran

"Flaggerbastard": "We were unable to continue with the session due to laughter and loss of a suitable mood for horror." My God, how could you run a campaign that way?! If we ended sessions every time someone told a joke games wouldn't last 10 minutes. It's why I felt you wouldn't need rules to add humor to *Ghostbusters*: Most PC groups are filled with Peter Venkmans from the start.

Patrick Riley

Interesting findings with 2d6 and bonus dice. I wonder if there's some mathematical law at work. IIRC if you generate two random, continuous numbers between 0 and 1, and take the higher value, the average is about .71, i.e., the square root of .5. Can this be generalized and applied to discrete distributions?



I also work with Google Sheets when working out dice probabilities. Actually, you (or anyone else in E&A) can check out my [Statistical Primer for RPG Developers](#), a work in progress. Comes with an extremely intimidating probability formula that could prove useful for gaming stat nerds.

Roger Bell-West

7th Sea: Yeah, **Lisa** ran the rulebook's sample scenario, and we all got our asses kicked by a single NPC. I remember *lots* of problems with that adventure. For example, we had to get somewhere, we looked at a map and saw it could be easily reached by boat. The book insisted we go through the Evil Forest, though, and since it was a formal play test, Lisa had to say "Well, the plot hits you all on the head and pushes you into the Evil Forest." Great design guys!

Michael Cule

Wow, I'm always impressed how much you guys know about American politics. (I follow the basics of it in the UK, enough to know that Keir Starmer's been awful, but not the reasons why.) Yes, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act. They also smacked down an attempt to restrict partisan gerrymandering, and have talked about repealing the "one person, one vote" principle of *Baker v. Carr*.

Avram Grumer

Looks great! Task vs. Goal-Based Resolution: I realize that comic you reprinted on BlueSky used a goal-based resolution system. I wonder, though, how a goal system would work with something like this from *The Usual Suspects*. (Spoiler warning, but the movie's 30 years old by now.)

GM: Kaiser Soze tells you to break into the ship and destroy the cocaine.

Keaton: I make a Search roll to find the cocaine and destroy it. (rolls) Critical success!

GM: Great. There's no cocaine on the boat.

My impression from the cartoon is that this would be a rules violation. Is that true? Admittedly *The Usual Suspects* would make for a very frustrating RPG (talk about railroading...), but I wouldn't want this totally banned from the GM's arsenal.

Joshua Kronengold

OMG that font size! My old eyes cry for mercy.

Another feature of many newer games, in addition to high contact rules, is that for all their simplicity they tend to be very *wordy*. I was looking over **Lee Gold's** *Land of the Rising Sun* the other day. Lee's game was based on *Chivalry & Sorcery*, and while she simplified it a little bit it was still complex. Nevertheless it covered a ton of detail, and came in a mere 152 pages. *Blades in the Dark*, by comparison, is more than double that length.

SEE YOU ALL NEXT ISSUE!



SMR Issue #5 for E&A #9, Mar 2026

[Erica L Frank](#) (call me Elf); [Eris Lord Freedom@itch.io](mailto:Eris.Lord.Freedom@itch.io)

Gaming Database Grumbles

There are now 84 bundles in my game-bundles list, on its way to being a database as soon as I, sigh, learn how to database. (Volunteers welcome, with the warning that I have attempted to drag in help several times, and this results in a few hours of discussion as I try to explain the scope and background and it stalls out under the practical side of “how do I add new items” and “how do I set up search/reports so I can review the stuff I have (and easily make additions/changes to individual items)?”)

My most recent large bundle (#83) is **No ICE in Minnesota**: itch.io/b/3484/no-ice-in-minnesota; 1,439 items for \$10 – the largest charity bundle at itch.io since the original Racial Justice Bundle in 2020. This one’s heavier on TTRPGs than that one was.

Bundle 84 is [AAA4 Fundraiser](#), which is neither a charity nor a shared-group bundle; a few of my bundles are single-creator sales, and that’s what this is. I’ve been looking at their magazine for a while and decided that \$10 for 4 of them was a fine price. “Erotica in gaming” is a topic that deserves more attention and I’m glad they’re talking about it, even if their focus is video games. They also very much cover game *writing*, which is relevant to TTRPGs.

Back to the database woes. I have a spreadsheet. Excel is not fond of complex spreadsheets with more than 15,000 rows. (I’m at about 20,000.) I am getting twitchy about making a database soon, because I’m just barely in the range of “I could, actually, open every single item and collect data manually if needed” and I will lose that soon. (I may need to. One of the data-bits I don’t have is “price,” because I got all of

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these in bundles so had no way to even collect the individual prices. But I should have those, when they’re available. Sometimes they’re not because the items have since been removed.)

Two tabs: One with a list of bundles, which will import very neatly into MS Access (the closest thing to a database program I can operate), and one with a list of games/items, which needs to be split into multiple tables for best database functionality.

I need one table of “All the unique items” with info like URLs (game & creator), description, category (is this a video game, TTRPG, supplement, fiction ebook, sprites for your video games, an album, etc.), and ideally, price & original tag set on itch, which I don’t have yet.

I need another table of “which items are in which bundles?” because some are duplicated. Some are duplicated a lot; I think I have one that’s in 12 bundles; several are in 3-6 bundles. And I want that one to indicate the order of the items in the itch bundle listing. (Because that can be useful in finding them again, when weird stuff happens to them.)

Complicating the process: Details change. The creator names can change, which also changes the game URL. Sometimes following the previous link works; sometimes it doesn’t. The game title can change – most commonly, this is something like “added ‘(Classic)’ to the end” or “removed ‘BETA VERSION’ now that it’s complete.” But sometimes it’s Um. It took me several searches to figure out that the game I first downloaded as “How does that work, you’re a bicycle,” is now called “Metalepsis.”

¹ I have 12 main categories and most of them have subcategories. I am deeply, deeply annoyed that the “literature” category is not limited to “fiction” and “nonfiction.” Nor “fiction,” “nonfiction,” and “poetry.” Also I need to talk to someone who speaks Art to

figure out how to sort/categorize multiple types of art things. One of the categories is “other” because “cross-stitch patterns” does not fit into any of the rest.

(How to tell it is the same game: The game bundle list now lists this version instead of the other one. The URL may have changed, but it's still part of the bundle. Not my job to figure out how itch tracks game IDs.)

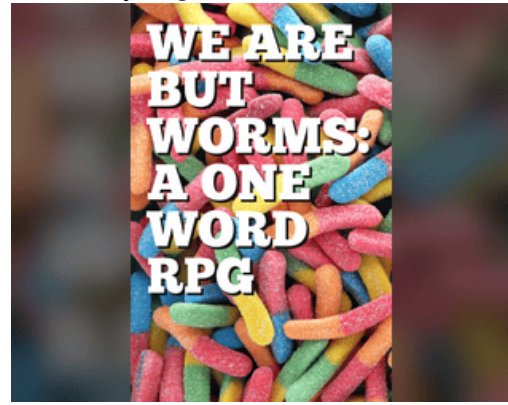
I eventually decided that I don't need to track the history of changes and I can just update to whatever the newest version is. (Entertaining changes like the aforementioned may deserve a blog post but they're not being kept in the database.) But I still need a way to identify "I already have this game but it is listed under a different title/creator/description" so I don't create a second listing for a game.

TTRPG has three main categories: TTRPG, Adventure Module (labeled "T-Adventure"), and other TTRPG resources (labeled "T-Resources"). Adventure modules can include entire world settings, but many [campaign settings](#) wind up under "resources" because they don't have specific adventures, just maybe a list of adventure seeds/prompts. T-Resources also includes [collections of NPCs](#), randomizers (like a [polearm-generator list](#)), [maps](#), [races](#) & classes/[playbooks](#) for existing games, and essays and sometimes [magazines](#). "Resources" is a broad category.

Resources should have subcategories but currently doesn't, because I haven't put any real time into figuring out what they are. But they'll split nicely into some categories (as mentioned above) and probably need a catch-all "[other](#)" as well. The biggest issue is whether to use "categories" (one per item) or "tags" (multiple per item; more complex to set up.)

TTRPG subcategories has a problem: What I'm using currently is "solo/2-player/1-2 players/can be solo/gm-less" and then everything else. Those shouldn't be subcategories; those should be a field for # of players (or rather: a field for min players, and a field for max players), and GM-or-not, and is-GM-optional. Subcategories should be... I dunno. Genre? Scope? I want to somehow mark the difference between "this is a 350 page rulebook with a complex original system and a whole world attached" and "this is a 2-page throwaway idea that would make a nice blog post to giggle over, and technically I guess you can call it a playable game." (And that's before we get into "lyric games." "Lyric" is definitely going to be a subcategory once "solo" gets shuffled off into a different field, but right now, most of the lyric games are solo games.) ([Lyric ttrpgs](#): An art form with many traits common to TTRPGs. Something like poetry, often. Generally not intended to be played. If it is, the results are not intended to be "you go on adventures and tell stories of valour.")

This is a lyric game:



I don't own this one. It costs a whole dollar on its own. I have not run out of other weird-looking game-like things to explore. It's on the list to maybe pick up someday.

Figuring out TTRPG subcategories probably needs more than one brainstorming session with people who play multiple types of games. It's hard to even discuss the issue because if you haven't crawled through some of the TTRPG bundles on itch.io, you probably cannot imagine the scope of diversity involved.

...There was a whole game jam for 12-word TTRPGs. I have a small collection of TTRPGs that involve fire. (As in. You set things on fire as part of the game.) (Okay, it's usually candles, sometimes just used for ambiance.) There are games designed to be played on Discord. There are games that are hacks of ("based on/ inspired by") other games, that are hacks of other games, that are hacks of other games. There are games that fit on business cards or bookmarks. (There are games that tie to one specific book.) It is very much not as simple as "Fantasy/SciFi/Spy-Thriller/Superhero/Horror/Paranormal Historical."

...I might want a "genre" field as well, but there's so many weird crossovers that I don't know where to start.

Anyway. Someday I will have a game-bundle database. In the meantime, the MN No-ICE bundle has been added to the Bundle Browser at <https://randombundlegame.com/> (which is very nice, but does not contain the metadata I want).

...Maybe next month I will find time to go into the utter fiasco that is the Neopets TTRPG. (Short version: The Kickstarter funded with nearly half a million dollars. They released the beta version – and it's a barely reskinned variant of D&D 5e. Players are Not Happy. Also there was internal drama in the beta release.)

Solo Play: Cage of Sand, part 2

Game link: <https://lucillaes.itch.io/cage-of-sand>

Setup recap

Protagonist: Ace of Cups. Anni Joutsen.

Setting: Queen of Cups. Oceanside town of Baysheer, in a high fantasy D&D-esque world.

Time of year: Four of Wands. August. Late summer, harvest season, warm, sometimes very hot.

Circumstances that bring the characters together: Ace of Wands. A Royal contest for artisans.

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

First Loop

Act 1: Awakening

Awake from a nightmare with recurring details

Act 2: Interactions

3 minor, 2 major per loop. 1st loop: Remi, Maritha, Elenwen minor; Bari & Phoebe major (the prompt cards have specific game effects in addition to the card itself, and the interactions are more meaningful.)

Inciting Event

The Magician – The opening ceremony of the arts pavilion the next morning.

Act 3, The Turn (New stuff starts here.)

Shuffle the character deck & draw 6 cards for the corpses you discover. Reveal 1-3 at a time and draw a prompt card for each discovery.

For this first Act 3, I'm planning on going slow - 1, 1, 2, 1, 1 - I'm assuming she doesn't find the bodies all together (save for the ones in the middle), and the first loop should have the most buildup.

1st death: 4 of Swords, Stregori Zrin, the mage. Anni hasn't met him.

Prompt card: 2 of Cups: "another character reacts strangely to the murder."

Anni returns from a brief walk around the nearby booths and finds the mage's body behind one of the duchess's tapestries. She almost trips over him, trying to move around behind Her Grace's booth and back into her own space; her foot catches on cloth, and first she thought one of the tapestries had slipped, but the color was wrong, and there was someone caught in the fabric, a bronze chalice of wine spilled near his open, unmoving hand -

She shrieked. The noise caught the attention of Bari Bristlegrog - and the duchess.

Bari pulled Anni out of the way, frowned, and called over a couple of his assistants to help move the - Anni gulped - the body out of the pavilion. The Duchess glanced at him, sniffed, and said "must not have been much of a mage, if that's the best chalice he could afford. Probably not even a poison drink, just bad metal." She turned back to her tapestries, shifting the ones on top again, so that visitors who'd been by before would see different ones if they passed by again.

Bari knelt down, touched the wine, and sniffed it. "No, it's poisoned. I'll need to find out where he got his wine..." he stood, and talked briefly to another of his assistants.

"Mages," the duchess huffed. "Couldn't he have had the decency to fall somewhere else?" She looked annoyed at the crowd of Bari's assistants, who were now blocking viewers and visitors from seeing the displays in this area.

Anni just stared at her, in shock. A man... a man died, not five feet from her table, and she just... insults him? Anni gathers up her display items - it looks like this section will be shut down for a while - and walks away to think. She gets dinner before returning to the pavilion, and is overwhelmed by the chatter and gossip.

Someone recognizes her as being from the same area where he was found, and she's barraged with questions.

No, she didn't know him; had never met him.

No, he wasn't stabbed; there was no blood. A small wine stain only.

No, the Duchess didn't kill him; don't be ridiculous.

No, she didn't know when services would be held for him.

No, she didn't know if anything had changed about the faire, or the contest.

No, she didn't know who they should ask.

By the time she finished her meal and was ready to go home, she had a splitting headache.

2nd Death: Six of Cups - Lady Phoebe, Age 6

Prompt card: The Tower – as a major arcana card, the murder is unusually gruesome, showy or ritualistic.

(awww. I knew there'd be a problem with one of the characters being a small child. I'd forgotten this was an "everyone dies" time loop game.)

Anni returns to the pavilion to see how things are going and whether the arts faire will be open in the morning. She finds the duchess is one of the last people with her wares still on display; most have packed up and left, either for the night or altogether.

Bari and the other officials are nowhere to be seen, probably off talking with constables somewhere. A few people are floating around, looking at the art, possibly trying to catch the last bits of gossip before the pavilion closes for the evening. Anni cautiously approaches the duchess, intending to ask if she knows if the faire will continue as usual tomorrow.

She's startled when the duchess speaks to her.

"You there. Seamstress," she says abruptly.

Anni curtseys deeply. "Yes, Your Grace?"

"You were speaking with Phoebe earlier - have you seen her?"

Anni shakes her head, and looks around to see if she spots her. "No, Your Grace. Not since the morning, before... Before."

The duchess looks around impatiently. "She can't have gone far. Go find her."

"M-me?"

"Of course, you. She knows you. I can't leave my tapestries; obviously the guards in this place are worthless."

She makes a 'go away' gesture, and Anni shrugs and starts looking around the pavilion.

She doesn't see Phoebe in the walkways between the tables and art stands. Doesn't see her behind anyone's table, although Anni knows she can't fully see everything and a small child can hide in a small space.

She makes a wide circle around the edge of the pavilion, stopping to look behind a large stack of boxes and crates. Several of them look big enough for a child to hide in, so Anni takes a closer look. As she steps up to the boxes - stacked higher than her head - she thinks she sees Phoebe's shoe kicking from behind the middle of the stack; she must've climbed up higher than she could safely climb down from.

She steps forward to take Phoebe's foot... and discovers it is not attached to Phoebe's leg. Anni is left holding a child's severed foot, bleeding, and she drops it in shock. She jumps back, jostling the other boxes, and they come crashing down, with Phoebe's arms and legs mixed in with the crates, her head rolling across the floor, thankfully not facing Anni.

Anni starts screaming. The duchess rushes over to see why - and joins her, yelling "my baby, my baby" and "who did this?"

Bari and his guards must not have been too far away, because they quickly appear.

The duchess alternates between shrieks, sobs, and accusations. Anni backs away until she bumps into something (one of the poles supporting the pavilion) and collapses to her knees, breathing heavily.

After some time, one of the guards offers to walk her home, and she accepts.

3rd and 4th deaths: 5 of Swords; The Empress - Vamirelion & Lady Maritha. V has not yet made an appearance; Anni knows him, or at least knows who he is.

Prompt card: The Hermit - another gory or ritualistic killing.

Short description (it's late; I'm tired) - On the way home, Anni and her guard see a lantern flickering in the lone house on the hilltop, the one owned by the elf, far from any other buildings. It's odd, because he doesn't use lanterns; his elvensight works late into the night. Anni doesn't know Vamirelion well (nobody does, really) but she's always admired his

craftsmanship. She's worried that maybe he's being robbed, so convinces the guard to accompany her to visit him.

When they arrive, they find him and the duchess - who Anni saw, not long ago! Dismembered, chopped into pieces and strewn around the house, with most of Vamirelion's carvings thrown onto the floor and many now stained with blood.

Anni has a breakdown while the guard leaves her to fetch help.

5th Death: Seven of Swords Remi Longfoot, the hobbit

Prompt Card: Two of Wand; Wands means the time or cause of death or the identity of the victim(s) is hidden

On her way home, hoping to finally get some sleep (knowing she'll have nightmares),

(Or maybe the next morning?) She stumbles across the still, cold body of the little hobbit she met before the faire began. He looks almost peaceful, like sleep... but he's very dead. She can't see any marks on him, no sign of struggle, no bloody wounds, no sign of poison. Just his body; his pouches are still tied to his waist. He hasn't been robbed.

6th Death: Knight of Pentacles - Sir Godfrey of the Ocean

Prompt card: The Fool (more major arcana, more dismemberings. Sigh.)

She finds him at the bottom of a cliff overhanging the ocean, and it would look like he fell, except his head, arms, and legs have been cut off but his clothing has been sewn in a way that keeps the body parts together, his hat stitched with long thread to the neck of his shirt to hold his head on. The blood has been washed away by the surf; his body is broken over rocks (and one leg is hanging weirdly loose, which is how she noticed the dismembering.)

(Stop for the night, because I'm tired and obviously rather rushing through these. Although that may be what's actually intended rather than the detailed descriptions with dialogue. I am 750 words into a 2000-ish word set of game rules.)

Side note: This all takes forever. It takes 15-20 minutes to setup each session, because I don't have a table where I can leave the cards spread out for days, so they get packed away in the box between sessions. Then I have to unpack them and lay them out again to start, and remember which partial stacks were for what.

IgTheme: City Building for Fun and Adventure

I attempted to join "[Septopolis](#)" last September - a Bluesky prompt-month for "build a ttrpg city." I dropped out about a week in; got behind and couldn't catch up.

I was trying to work on "capital city from my old (old old) D&D gameworld," the shared gameworld from my teen years. I discovered that

- 1) Wow, we had a lot of very generic ideas about D&D cities. And cities in general.
- 2) Also our capital city and the country had the same name (we had an in-joke about this but it doesn't work for more serious worldbuilding)
- 3) I was/we were missing a whole lot of details about "how the hell does this actually work?"
- 4) It was a lot of fun to create the history & background to match the (vague) details we had in the "present," but it was really hard to do 1 per day.

Septopolis prompt list (I got up to day 9 before dropping out - September was busy for me.)

- 1) Intro & Goals
- 2) Purpose to Plot
- 3) Inspiration Sources
- 4) Geographical Location
- 5) Natural Resources
- 6) Natural Landmarks
- 7) Reason for Establishment
- 8) Founders
- 9) Name and Origin
- 10) Demographics
- 11) Languages
- 12) Attitudes, Beliefs, Values
- 13) Technology or Magic
- 14) Cuisine
- 15) Religion
- 16) Size & Shape
- 17) Building Design
- 18) Manmade Landmarks
- 19) Economy
- 20) Public Spaces/Third Places
- 21) Of Interest to Outsiders
- 22) Local Government Structure
- 23) Crime
- 24) Relationships with Neighbors
- 25) Festivals/Public Holidays
- 26) Unusual Activity
- 27) Who's Working Towards Change?
- 28) Non-Text Item (Postcard, flyer, map, etc.)
- 29) Shout Out to Someone Else
- 30) Free Space

Example prompt:



The Septopolis prompts/discussions are now incredibly hard to find. Google doesn't turn them up (maybe bksy blocks Google?) and bksy's internal search is terrible. The initial posts by the creator/host seem to be mostly gone. (The links I saved don't work.) They're still all around, and at some point I want to go round them all up & put them in a doc.

Comments on E&A #8

I will be reading most of #8 over the next week or two. I had to send in my FAPA zine this month, and I am leaving for a fanfic convention tomorrow ([Escapade](#), which is in its 36th year), so I haven't had as much time as I'd like to read & comment.

An Unlooked For Zine #7 – Lisa Padol

Both the Wanderhome and Pirate Flag games are not currently running. Wanderhome hit "we're kinda enjoying this but it's... not really going anywhere?" and two of our regulars weren't into it, so it's shelved as "we can pick this up between other games later."

Pirate Flags is on hold because one of our (four) people is currently unavailable.

They're both Belonging-Outside-Belonging games, which are roughly based on PBTA games; the structure is about the same, with tokens instead of dice.

I've looked for playthroughs of GMless games, and they were less GMless than I'd hoped. (I did not look extensively and I may try again.)

Twisting the Rope #8 – Myles Corcoran

I host the current version of the Glitch wiki (https://glitchen.org/w/Main_Page) although it's got weird issues and sometimes won't load. I need to find my login info and make some adjustments. (Like. It'd be nice to be able to activate accounts again. We turned that off to avoid the spambots.)

I got up to about 20 locations in my "Explore Ur in Wanderhome" writeups, and I may go back to add more. (I had to add ports. Glitch didn't have ports,

but obviously we are jumping around between islands and probably not swimming between Groddle and the Firebogs, so...)

It'd be nice to write up a coherent world-space usable for Wanderhome. I am hampered by the lack of a high-resolution map of Ur. A real artist could take the region maps, remove the streets, and patch them together. I am not that artist. I pieced together something from the "Soundscapes of Ur" soundtrack art, but I really wish we had a higher-res version of the extended world map.

The Dragon's Beard #93 – Patrick Zoch

Re gaining XP by investing: We're all waiting for the newest edition of Papers & Paychecks, with "INVEST! The Official Stock Market Expansion."

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 53 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader

Apparently everyone loves the bureaucrats. I will have to find ways to drag them into other games.

Everyone else

RAEBNC. Or will read & expect to enjoy but no comments at this time.

Game Jam: Go Weave a Basket

<https://itch.io/jam/go-weave-a-basket>

There's a month and a half left; make a TTRPG (or TTRPG-something) inspired by Neopets, because we can do better than adding 5e combat to Neopets.

The purpose of this jam is to design a tabletop roleplaying game inspired in some part by Neopets—the world, the game, the memories, or just the vibe. Games of any size or completion level are allowed, including hacks, one-pagers, ashcans, WIPs, or sprawling systems. If you want to use this jam as an excuse to pick a WIP back up, be my guest. While I have no intention to be coy, depending on how much you respect copyright and/or fear a DMCA, you can make your game explicitly based upon Neopets, name and all, or otherwise choose to make something only inspired by Neopets.

...I am making a Fate Accelerated variant. Core stats: Gather; Risk; Explore; Solve; Conquer; Charm... this gives us the helpful abbreviation of GRESCoCh.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 3 · MARCH 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 present four session reports from the *Conquering the Barbarian Altanis* Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Adventurers hunt the glowing hunters. Then they revisit an old favourite, which goes as every time before that.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

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

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

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

ATTRIBUTIONS

Text copyright © Attronarch, 2026.

Centuria, *Spider Abomination*, *Spider Appendages*, and *Rope Piper* illustrations by IdleDoodler.

Old Crus, *Map*, *Spear Trap*, and *Poke the Sentry* illustrations by Kickmaniac.

Typeset in L^AT_EX with Charter, a print-friendly typeface.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 99

Adventurers

Ambros, cleric level 4. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

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

Darius, cleric level 4. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 3. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

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

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

Meadowlark 12th, Waterday

“Round of drinks for everyone!” Ambros announced to loud cheers of Hog’s Head inn patrons—a motley assortment of local miners, villagers, and seven adventurers.

The party arrived at Ironburg earlier today, fetching a ride on a river barge from Hara. This small hamlet owes its existence to the local iron mine as well as great Wizard Crus whom had driven a vampire from the local tower.

“Uh-oh, do you remember the locals mentioning vampires? And Tagoler just hand-waving that as empty rumours?”

Either way, the party was here to speak to the Wizard, for they were led to believe Old Crus might know more about the skull-adorned weapons they had recovered from a dungeon atop the Midnight Goddess Hills.

Given that his tower was roughly a mile away from Ironburg, adventurers decided to have a good night’s rest before seeking audience. No doubt the man would be demanding.

Meadowlark 13th, Earthday

“What?! What?! Can’t you give old man time to come?!”

Old creaky voice shouted from the other side of large double doors. Rorik just knocked the second time on them, after waiting for ten or so minutes.

“Who are you? What do you want?!” the voice continued.

Rorik and Ambros spoke in turns, going to great lengths to appear both polite and capable.

“Adventurers?! List your names, professions, and accomplishments!” the voice demanded.

Now all had to speak, in turns. Alas, two failed to say anything, prompting the Wizard on the other side of the doors to bang his head in frustration.

“How could I help someone who can’t even follow the simplest of instructions!”

Stragglers quickly introduced themselves as well.

Doors slowly creaked open. An old man with long gray beard, weathered face, and bushy eyebrows squinted at the party. He was dressed in silk robe, and was holding an exquisite wooden staff.

He scanned the men in front of him.

“Which one of you said he was tested by Bachontoi and given another chance at life?”

“That’d be me!” Tarkus perked up proudly.



“Good, good. Temple of Greed, now that’s a Bachontoi classic.”

“I never said it was a Temple of Greed.” Tarkus raised his eyebrow.

“Those who know, know.”

Old man turned around, and slowly walked into a great round chamber, obviously serving as both kitchen and common chambers. Although he hasn’t waved the visitors in, he also hasn’t closed the doors.

Adventurers followed cautiously. Then they stood until the old man sat in chair. Only then did they join him around large wooden table.

“Now, how can Old Crus help you, young adventurers?”

Once again, Rorik and Ambros took the lead, with Darius, Tarkus, and Beorg interjecting here and there. Crus would interrupt the conversation from time to time and inquire more about specific individual’s accomplishments.

For example, he cut Ambros off and demanded to know more about his dungeoneering experience. “Everything you said is very abstract! Speak in specific details!” he’d demand. Conversation was long and arduous, going for hours. Partly because Crus was a slow speaker, partly because he would take long breaks between questions, and partly because he would doze off here and there.

But it was all well worth it, for adventurers learned a great deal about the dangers they are facing. First, the creatures they fought at the spider farm are most likely shadow goblins. These were creatures from deep, deep darkness, and it was uncommon to encounter them on the surface. Crus would like their little bodies, dead or alive.

Second, the four-armed spiderfolk they encountered are a slave race of deep, pale elves. They too are rarely seen so close to the surface, so whatever is driving them up must be something truly fascinating. Crus would like their little bodies too, dead or alive.

"I'm the greatest scholar of Woelands in the Wilderlands!"

Third, judging by the weapons they have recovered, Crus believes it is a long forgotten temple built as a sort of prison for a powerful artefact called Foundingstone. When Rt was formed seven unnamed gods stole fragments of its virgin stone crust. Imbued with cosmic powers and gift of life, these stone fragments are capable of materialising dreams of anyone touching it. Foundingstone is one of such fragments. Alas, this one has been perverted and abused to such extent that it only spews forth nightmares and horrors of those that surround it. It was buried deep, deep underground. Crus would like a piece of it, or at least a drawing, as well as drawings of the whole complex.

"Hey, one day you might be great adventurers too!"

Fourth, the "glowing hunters" should be perfectly killable. "Just don't get entangled in their webs. They are sticky, and will melt your flesh away. Oh and they will paralyse you. But you will still feel everything. But you won't be able to scream. Just don't get entangled and you'll be fine." Crus would like their medium-sized bodies too, dead or alive.

Armed with all this new knowledge, as well as potential of a new, powerful ally, the adventurers set out and headed back to the dungeon.

Meadowlark 16th, Airday

"Blue haze is back. . ."

Investigating the entry chamber confirmed that the cloaks jamming dragon's nostrils have been removed, filling the chamber with blue mist spewing out of them. Spiderman's corpse was also removed.

Tarkus nearly fell into a pit trap, saved only by his colleagues who had been here before. And good save was it, for this pit also had spikes in it.

The party tied a rope around the south door's handle, and pulled it open with ease. Then they anchored an improvised rope-rail along the wall, so they had something to hold to as they passed around the open pit trap.

They found themselves in a long corridor, darkness on both sides. Straight across them were stone doors. Listening revealed nothing. Forcing them open revealed another dark corridor. Up ahead was rubble and debris. Wooden doors flanked the entrance. One were slightly ajar. Sickly green light emanated from the room behind.

Peeking in revealed a chamber with strings of greenish glowing rope. Happy put his big boys pants on, and walked in confidently.

Nothing.

Empty chamber, bathed in sickly green light from the webbing. But there was plenty of space to move freely. So Happy went through the archway into another illuminated chamber.

Nothing.

Except bloated wooden doors on the west wall. Party assumed battle formation. A rope was tied around the handle. A burning oil flask was prepared. Doors were pulled open with great

force. Flask was chucked. Weapons were drawn.

Nothing.

Peeking out revealed yet another corridor. A junction was to their right, two doors to their left, and one doors just across them.

"Wait. . ."

Foxglove picked up on a mix of clicking and clucking sounds.

Listening attentively, he realised they were coming from one of the two doors to their left. The ones that were slightly ajar that is.

The party slowly approached, ready for violence.

Now they could also hear flapping sounds.

Bursting the doors open revealed a chamber full of ridiculous creatures that were a mix of a spider, pigeon, and hen. Their bodies were approximately cat-sized, and they were flapping around chaotically, creating a confusing mess.

Adventurers stepped in and hacked them without mercy.

In last ditch attempt, few surviving monsters dive bombed two adventurers, covering them in webs. Alas, in doing so the monsters became easy targets for the remaining party members, and were briefly dealt with.

Investigating the room uncovered two dwarfish corpses in advanced stage of decomposition. Both had their rib cages wide open, and looked like they were nibbled from the inside.

Foxglove found a skull-topped scroll case made of bone. He opened it and read the scroll inside. It was a bit difficult to read since it was scribbled in Auld Common. Lo and behold, it was a scroll of Protection from Evil.

Will the party resume their hunt?

Or will they become the hunted?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 100

Adventurers

Ambros, cleric level 4. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

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

Darius, cleric level 4. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

Bairstowbury the Chaotic, halfling level 1. Remarkably muscular for a halfling.

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

Meadowlark 16th, Airday

“Get me out of this mess!”

The party had just slain a dozen spider-hen-pigeon-cat mutants. Two of the adventurers get tangled up in the webs, but without any opposition, they were soon out. Tarkus, Berg, and Happy stuffed three monster corpses in a sack and went to the surface to rest and wait for others to come out. Bairstowbury and Centuria, the new recruit, switched with them and joined the party in the dungeon.



“Let’s head up north to ensure nothing comes from behind. Also, there might be a loop leading to the lair of the spider-folk.”

Hundred feet long corridor was flanked by several empty rooms. One was completely barren, one had tattered remains of glowing rope, and one had a weathered, cracked, and faded fresco of skull biting a stone in the shape of infinity symbol.

There were also two unicorn statues, each in its respective alcove. First they encountered had broken off horn and front left leg. Second was intact, and if Foxglove was correct, its horn looked like it could be rotated. A human male corpse was balled up in cowering position, sitting behind the second statue. The man looked youthful, even in his death. Ignoring the bright red cracked lips, taut, dehydrated look, and rigor mortis, that is.

With the help of divine magic, Darius discovered that the ceiling of the alcove is trapped. The party swiftly backed out, and then backtracked to the chamber with blue mist. From there they followed the long corridor east, taking two right and one left turn. They passed three doors, all emanating sickly green light. Two of them were brighter than the rest.

Adventurers arranged themselves in front of the first bright doors. Bairstowbury stepped forth, as the strongest of the six, and pulled on the doors. The party was almost blinded by the light—whole chamber was full of glowing webs. There was sufficient space alongside the floor, but humans would have to crawl.

Human corpse was suspended from the ceiling, its huge, bloated belly sagging downwards. Its face was taut, as if something or someone had pulled it over the cheekbones. It was a frozen image of excruciating pain. Man’s teeth were crooked and his hair was

thin. Glowing webs had melted the flesh away and were tightly wrapped around the exposed bones.

Something moved in the darkness.

Bairstowbury slammed the doors shut.

Something forced the doors open.

A large, spider-like creature was hanging upside down from the web. It had six spider appendages, as well as a pair of deformed human legs and arms hanging from its thorax. It’s head was a misshapen atrocity of human face drawn over insectoid shape.

Ensuing scuffle was brief and violent. The monster bit Foxglove, injecting him with vicious wasting venom. Adventurers discovered that creature was partly incorporeal, as their weapons passed right through its body. Rorik was able to strike it though, using a blade with skull in the pommel, which they recovered earlier in this dungeon. Ambros, in moment of desperation—or inspiration—called upon his deity to banish the monster.

It worked! to surprise of everyone involved.

“Very interesting.” Darius muttered, stroking his chin.

Mutant spider crawled up the wall, on the ceiling, and fled. But not before the party cut off three of its limbs and caused significant damage to it. Bairstowbury quickly stowed the appendages in his sack.





“Remember how they said these monsters procreate by inseminating corpses? Maybe we should hack that one up?”

Without volunteer to enter the chamber, the party decided to resort to true and tested method of burning everything. They oiled the bloated corpse and then set it on fire. Flesh caught fire, but webs remained intact.

Rorik observed, sword pulled out, ready to hack down any horror that might emerge.

The corpse burst open, spilling forth black ichor. A black mass with thin, long appendages fell to the ground, twitching and thrashing about chaotically. It burned away and melted into an oily slick, seeping into the ground through the cracks in the flagstone.

As this was happening, all but Darius, heard a loud shrill. So loud and so protracted that it felt like someone had driven a knife straight into their brain. The pain was such that thinking and acting was nearly impossible;

even mere orientation and moving in the desired direction took significant effort.

Darius the Piper went to considerable lengths to ensure his colleagues exit the dungeon safely. He had to herd them like sheep, instruct them like little kids, and, eventually, just lead them by the rope. But he got them out intact.

“Let’s go to Hara and rest there. That’s where the home is.”

Longgrass 1st, Airday

“Your sick friends must drink clean water and eat nothing but fresh fruits and vegetables. Strict bed rest is in order. No adventuring nor lollygagging about town.”

Such was the advice given to Hagar by the priest of Poseidon. Foxglove was still alive, but barely looking like it since the bite.

Rorik, Darius, Bairstowbury, and Centuria collected the monster remains and set off to Ironburg via river barge. They wanted to share all the new information with Old Crus.

Hagar and others remained in Hara. Dwarven hero was considered to be the de facto leader of this adventuring party—or at least that’s how people of Hara had seen him.

Longgrass 5th, Spiritday

Hagar finally managed to commission master sculptor Dragespius of Onhir. They agreed on 25 feet tall marble statue, to be made in Ahyf, facing the sea. Details to be arranged, as well as payment of 3 125 gold pieces.

Rorik, Darius, Bairstowbury, and Centuria had returned from their meeting with Crus.

They learned that spider-hen chimeras are called webbirds, and are basically bred for food by the creatures of the Woelands. They were also frustrated at the other information shared by him, considering it to be vapid academic bloviation of little practical application.

Rorik shared with him hand drawn map of the explored area. In fact, Rorik was the only one of the adventurers that Crus had shown any remote sign of affection for.



“One day, one day, you will be a great adventurer. Just you keep listening to me. As you grow in power I will reveal new things to you. Trust me, trust me. One day! But not today!”

Full party was now reunited in Hara.

Fresh mercenaries begun trickling in. The word must have spread.

After all, war breeds war.



CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 101

Adventurers

Hagar the Hewer, dwarf level 4. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

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

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

Darius, cleric level 4. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

Riker, magic-user level 2. A magic-user seeking glory or death.

Longgrass 11th, Airday

Following a day-long deliberation on what to do that will take less than ten days in total, the party had decided to revisit a ruined tower some ten miles south-west of Hara.

The one where they recovered valuable silver orbs from.

The one where they lost one entire party.

Spending a full watch scouting the surroundings for any changes, the adventurers determined nothing much changed. And thus they descended down.

Hagar took the lead since he had been here before. They went through the secret passageway under the stairs, then left in the pendulum room, and then through north-west doors. From there they went forth, left, and then right.

“Locked. Can’t find the mechanism!”

Foxglove played with stone doors preventing their further progress. It had three holes, each in different shape: a five-point star, a six-point star, and an equilateral triangle.

They backtracked and moved into an unexplored corridor, then right turn, then more than hundred feet forward, left turn, and then through stone doors into a mostly empty chamber. A set of rusted bear traps were piled in one corner. Some were open, some were closed.

Finding nothing of value they proceeded through south doors, and down another long corridor. Alas, the moment they turned into the corridor a sliding stone slab prevented their return.

“I don’t understand this dungeon. Is this to prevent something from coming out? Or us from retreating?” one of the adventurers wondered.

“Step aside, I’ll smash it.” Hagar stepped forth with a sledgehammer.

An hour later and all he had to show was a fingernail-sized chip.

“I guess we head down the corridor then!”

Another hundred or so feet, a left turn, and stone doors, and the party entered another chamber. This one was peculiar since it had a long stone bench running along north, west, and south wall. The bench was low, and comfortable for dwarf to sit on. It had no legs and underneath was nothing but empty clearance. It felt pleasant to the bum.

South-east doors led into a large circular chamber with a swirling pattern carved into the floor. Grooves were obvious even to non-dwarves.

“Uh-huh, this is a trap.”

Foxglove went in by himself, tied with a rope, and carefully explored everything. Alas, nothing much. Unwilling to risk finding out what the trap might be, the party backtracked into trapped corridor and spent significant time investigating every portion of wall. Alas, nothing.

Once the full party entered the round chamber the ground shook and spiral fell down, turning the floor into a downward slide. Ready for this, the party tumbled in a relatively controlled manner.

Lighting up extinguished torches, the party scanned the chamber they fell into. It was a similar circular chamber like the one they were moments ago. Stone doors were to south, and open archway to north. They chose the latter direction.

Navigating the maze-like corridors led them to portcullis with loud snoring, a direction which was immediately abandoned. Moving opposite, down the corridor led to two dead ends.

The north one had a skeleton pinned to the wall. What they thought to be javelins turned out to be long iron quills.

Foxglove plundered the skeleton’s sack for some gems, and coins.

Peeking into a chamber filled with skeletons was sufficient to shut the doors and abandon that route as well. Backtracking the maze and following northern route led the party to stone doors flanked with holes, another obvious trap.

Adventurers triggered the trap with tenfoot pole, forcing five spears to launch out of the wall. Then they used the grappling hook with rope to bend each one of them.

Following that Hagar and Rorik forced the doors open. Alas, Rorik failed to synchronise with the beefy dwarf, and went straight through open doors. He stepped on the trap on the other side of the door, and triggered it.

He evaded two spears, deflected one, and got cut by two.



The chamber had several human-sized skeletons laying on the ground, all facing down. Many had broken bones. The floor was full of small holes.

“Rorik! Rorik! We’ll get to you!”

The fighter leaned back, making sure he doesn’t step further into the chamber. Five iron spears just behind his back prevented his exit.

“Come on! Pull!”

Bending each spear took around ten minutes.

They could see Rorik sit down.

“Pull! Pull! We are coming for you! Hold in there!”

Rorik could feel his blood burn.

Rorik could feel his flesh ache.

Rorik could feel his heart racing.

Until Rorik could feel no more.

Darius closed the warrior’s eyes.

And then two freshly recruited men-at-arms were turned into corpse porters.

Backtracking once more, the party retreated into the round chamber. There they camped and rested as long as it took six torches to burn.

Longrass 12th, Waterday

The adventurers now explored eastern set of corridors. Bunch of dead

ends, one with gas trap that left Darius and Riker injured, and one hireling dead. The last one was left behind.

“How about we check the south doors?”

This led them into a five hundred feet long winding corridor. They passed one dead end with robed corpse gripping a staff. Naturally they took the staff. The corridor terminated with an archway opening up in a wide chamber.

Three corpses with blast marked were prostrated on the floor. These ones actually had some flesh on them, unlike ancient skeletons they had found thus far.

“Careful there. . .”

Will the party manage to escape this time?

Or will they suffer the same fate as the party that went missing?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 102

Adventurers

Hagar the Hwer, dwarf level 4. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

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

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

Darius, cleric level 4. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Riker, magic-user level 2. A magic-user seeking glory or death.

Araggouk, dwarf level 1. A skinny dwarf with patches of hair lost from stress.

Longrass 12th, Waterday

“They look like they’ve been murdered by Magic Missile or similar. . .”

Three rotting corpses with blast-marks lied prostrate in the chamber ahead of the party. The one to the right laid on its back, arms as if to protect the face. Said face was missing as well as its palms. The one straight ahead was lying on its left side, facing the party. Left side of the head was blasted, and right side was torn open, exposing festering flesh and broken ribcage. The one to the left was on its belly, and had a gaping hole instead of an abdomen.

The adventurers did not fall for the obvious trap. Whatever they threw into the chamber was immediately blasted to pieces by rapidly flying glowing orbs.

They would flash on impact, destroying whatever they hit. Ingenious combination of torch on a tenfoot pole and judicious use of Find Traps spell, the party had identified four floating silver spheres, one in each corner of the room.

Shooting them yielded no result. The party reasoned there must be some sort of pattern one has to follow in order to cross the chamber safely. So they picked up Rorik’s corpse—carried by the sole surviving hireling—and chucked it on a square in front of them. Rorik was blasted and reduce to half of what he used to be. Spheres rotated and retracted into the ceiling.

“I think they are recharging! We should just run!”

“No, let’s take it slow, maybe this is another trick.”

With that they picked Rorik's remains and threw him forward once more.

Nothing.

The fighter served in death as much as he did in life.

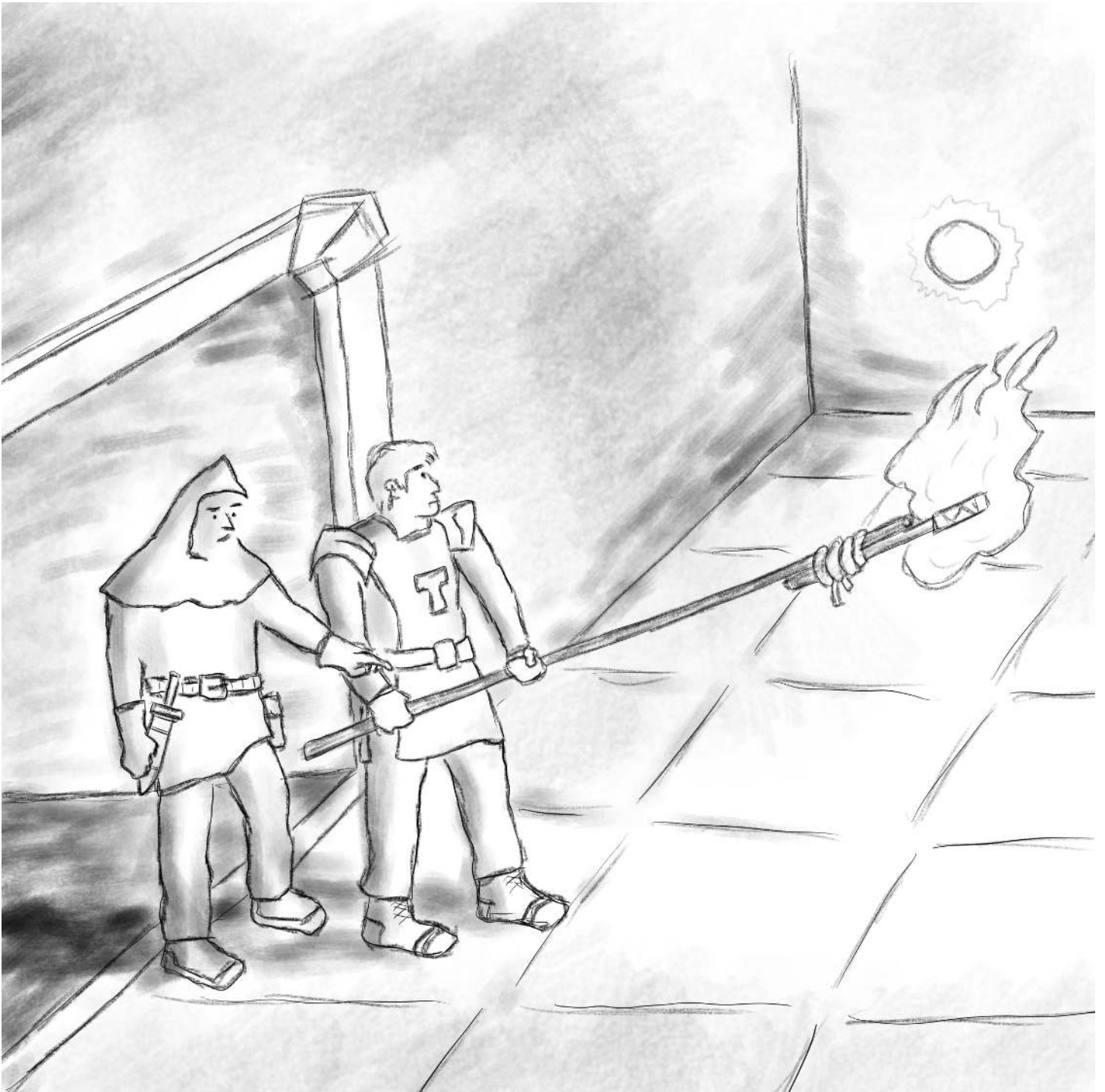
"Run!"

Darting through north-east doors led the party into another corridor maze.

There they found foul and soiled dwarf named Araggouk. Unfortunate soul got lost in the dungeon more than a week ago.

He holed up in one of the dead ends and was biding his time until the rescue party arrived.

Reinforced by the smelly dwarf, adventurers explored the winding corridors. One route took them to suspicious elevated platforms.



Roughly forming the shape of three broad stairs, a stone chest was resting atop the final one. It was flanked by two stone heads some ten feet above the ground. Both were roughly reptilian shaped, with fanged mouth stretched agape.

Thorough investigation revealed no visible traps, or rather triggers. After all, it was obvious even to the least experienced in the party that this chest must be trapped. Some horrors will surely come out of the gargoyle heads!

Araggouk successfully convinced others to help him open the stone chest, for he was too weak to lift the stone lid all by himself. Foxglove stepped forth selflessly.

Oh, how wonderful its contents were! Thousands of shiny gold and silver coins! And two fist sized jewels resting on top of the pile!

Alas, their wonder was cut short by two snakes the fell down their necks from above. By the time Riker had finished casting Sleep, Foxglove was bitten twice. Araggouk's skin had proven too thick, or too nasty even for a snake.

Ambros ran to the thief, looking for ways to help. He knew damn well what needs to be done. He was woeefully aware of his inability to cast miracles like Bishops of his order. Foxglove went pale, and then collapsed into cleric's arms.

"The pulse is still there, but weak. . ."

Tiberias was upgraded from corpse-porter to almost-dead-porter. He approved of that and was happy to of-flood Rorik's mutilated corpse to Riker. Adventurers snatched the gems and continued seeking exit.

Avoiding traps, they reached a large rectangular chamber. In fact, it was so large it took them good time just to walk it. Dwarves marvelled at its geometrically perfect lines. Moving on, the adventurers correctly identified and avoided two more traps, lifted

a portcullis and reached stairs leading up. "I don't believe it. . ." Darius mouthed, dejected.

Indeed, the party spirit was so low that they even debated if they'd take the stairs leading up or continue looking elsewhere.

Courage prevailed and they went up. And up. And up. Finally they ran into a t-shaped junction. To their right were closed stone doors and portcullis to the left. Behind the doors was an empty chamber with nothing but large mask carved in the east wall. Its smiling mouth was wide open, presenting an inviting darkness.

The invitation was not accepted by any of the adventurers.

Raising portcullis led them into a square chamber with doors in the south-west corner. That in turn led into a wide chamber with new doors to interact with. Opening north doors led into a hexagonal chamber with low stone column in the center. On it stood a stone vessel with an opening on top.

Ambros, desperate to save the thief, took the vessel and brought it to Foxglove's lips.

"No, stop!"

Hagar prevented a possible tragedy, for the liquid seemed like mercury and not some antidote or similar helpful concoction.

Darius and Ambros studied the vessel, liquid, and pillar. It is possible that this is a divine mercury used in barbarian rituals to summon a god. The diviner would be granted a single simple question, that deity would answer with a word or phrase if they felt generous, or simple yes or no if they felt neutral. And better run for your life should they be in ill mood.

Feeling tiredness setting in their muscles and bones, the party retreated into an adjoining chamber. Three strong men were needed to lift the portcullis.

Riker placed a glass vial so it shatters in case someone or something lifts it while the party rests.

Longgrass 13th, Earthday

Relatively well rested, the party returned to the hexagonal chamber. The room had three egresses: stone doors to the south, portcullis to the west, and framed stone slab to the north. The last one was interesting because it looked like regular stone doors from afar, but once up close it was nothing but a stone slab framed as doors.

With thorough investigation, the dwarves surmised the slab ought to be pushed. Doing so revealed two rectangular openings on the sides; one to the left and one to the right. Hagar remembered similar mechanism elsewhere in this dungeon. Last time they opened it by placing a palm in each of the openings. So they did the same this time. And it worked!

The chamber was stained yellow; filthy yellow. Sticky gas rolled around it; driving the adventurers to tears. Four disgusting abominations stood in the center of the chamber. They had fat, rotund bodies, and comically long, spindly arms and legs. Their head were nothing but folds of fat with slobbering jaws.

Whatever these creatures were, the party had surprised them. Tired and suffering sofuckitis, the adventurers charged the monsters head on. Yellow demons responded by beating on their fat bellies, causing an unpleasant cacophony and releasing yellow gas.

Hagar, Ambros, and Araggouk cut into two of them, slashing and smashing. Monsters oozed yellow pus. They cried and banged their bellies, and created so much fog that one couldn't see further than their own nose.

And then the noise stopped.

Blinded and nauseous, the party braced themselves for whatever is about to come next.

EXEDRA

Comments and responses to previous issues of Ever & Anon.

E&A 6

RE: Reddened Stars number 4 / John Redden Thank you, John! That'd be an apt song for some of the sessions for sure.

RE: Bugbears & Ballyhoo #44 / Gabriel Roark Castilho has some great pieces—I got it by supporting their Ink Potion Studios. I recommend checking them out; great stockart. A lot of people stress about Raise Dead, Reincarnation, Wish, etc. I don't, because I know my players will find ways to re-deaden their characters.

RE: An Unlooked For Zine #5 / Lisa Padol All the scrolls with Raise Dead spell have so far been recovered from various dungeons and ruins. I don't mind players leveraging their wealth. It just happens to be that places where they go usually don't care about coin that much.

RE: Accidental Recall #5 / Joshua Kronengold Your observation is accurate. There was a brief moment when most of the active players were more into heroics and doing the right thing.

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson Thank you both!

E&A 7

RE: Firedrake's Hoard Number 5 / Roger BW I try to be flexible. Sometimes it is easy to work characters in and out. Our operating assumptions is that will be possible. I always give heads up when that is not possible. I also warn people if they want to parachute character into action that is likely to end with many dead.

RE: Reddened Stars number 5 / John Redden I hope you find them worth your time!

RE: The Phoenix Nest / Michael Cule Interesting work flow, thank you for sharing.

RE: An Unlooked For Zine #6 / Lisa Padol From top of mind, here are some things I do differently with big groups:

- Depending on how big the group is, I might divide them into teams. When I need a decision I tell each team they have a minute or two to discuss and then report their plan.
- Rapid resolution to creative solutions. I try to avoid "mother-may-I" and negotiations about what could be done to improve the odds by 1–3%. Instead I outright say what could be automatically be achieved or state the odds on 2d6 (I default to "beat an 8" inspired by classic Traveller and then modify for creativity and gear).
- No-roll initiative. Keeps everything going fast. I am using attribute score ranks from OD&D.
- Everybody rolls their own stuff. If we are in combat you roll your to hit and damage, report the former to me, and I tell you if you hit, in which case you report the latter roll to me as well.
- No fuss deaths. Your character died? Here is a new one, just exiting from the insides of the purple worm that killed you. Let's keep rolling!

– High-energy pace. I "activate" players every in-game turn, discussion, and decision. Doesn't matter if their decision is "keep doing X," what matters is that they are active and involved.

– No breaks. Anyone can get up and leave to do whatever they want. Just inform the player next to you to take care of your character.

I am sure there are more things I do differently, but I'd need to reflect further on it first.

RE: Accidental Recall #6 / Joshua Kronengold Haha, classic high-level wizardry shenanigans! I'll make sure to include at least on such wizard into our campaign. Probably not in Barbarian Altanis though, but somewhere else.

E&A 8

RE: Reddened Stars number 6 / John Redden Thank you, John! Yes, I like Beorg too. While I was studying I wished to get a student job as a gravedigger. Got one in a tortellini factory instead.

RE: Age of Menace #245 / Brian Christopher Misiaszek Unbelievable, right?! I am waiting for us to hit session 200 (we are at 164 as of writing this zine), and then I'll crunch the numbers again.

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Jim Vassilakos Worse than the seven deadly sins

IN NEXT ISSUE

Three side adventures.



Twisting the Rope #9

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If the Winds Don't Catch You, I Will

A shorter submission this month as I've let February get away from me, I'm fighting with a cold and painful sore throat, and to top it off our gas boiler died about 10 days ago and left us without ready hot water or central heating, and looking at a bill of about €4000 to replace it

On the plus side it prompts me to share one of my favourite jokes of the last year:

A man jumps out of a plane, but his parachute doesn't open. Panicking, he pulls the cord for the reserve chute... snap! that one's broken too. He's plummeting toward the ground like a rock.

By pure chance, as he's falling, he sees another man coming upwards from the ground at incredible speed. The falling man seizes the moment and yells:

"Hey! Do you know anything about parachutes?"

The other man shouts back: "No! Do you know anything about gas boilers?"

In family news, Rowan has moved out temporarily to sub-let a house-share from a college friend while they spend 6 months on an Erasmus exchange in Hungary. Rowan was originally hoping to go on an Erasmus exchange too, but college admin let him down so he wasn't able to get a place in Tampere, Finland as he wished. Given the current state of the political scene in Hungary I'm glad he decided not to take a spot there. So instead he's spreading his wings to share a house with two other art school students in a terraced house literally a 3 minute walk from the college. He's back in the ancestral pile most weekends, so it's not like we don't see him. It's still a new experience for him and his parents after 22 years living under the same roof.

Mutterings

The workplace board games club continues to provide fun and to buoy my spirits. We have also managed to spin off some role-playing sessions for those RPG fans in the club. I've run a couple of sessions of *Mausritter* with 5 players, with much laughter and mousey antics, using "The Estate" campaign frame¹. I've also got to play a session as a knight in *Mythic Bastionland*. I really hope the GM can manage to continue with this game as I enjoyed it and find *Mythic Bastionland* a lovely piece of game design.

And lastly, for the moment, I'm going to play *Vaesen*, the Nordic folk horror investigation game from Free League, in March, with the hope that it too will run for several sessions. The *Vaesen* GM has big plans, with a proposal for an 80's retrospective for the group,

¹ <https://losing-games.itch.io/mausritter-the-estate-adventure-collection>

with hopes of running at least one-shots of the big name games from the 80's. It's partly nostalgia and partly to expose the youngsters in the group to how games were 'back in the day'

Comments on E&A #8

General comments: No write-ups this month as I'm pressed for time and short of spoons.

Avram Grumer: Lovely layout and design for "Going to Ad-Libbed" #6.

Re Reading: I started *Too Like the Lightning* by Ada Palmer but it never grabbed me. I can't really say why, as all the elements usually appeal to me. I remember James Wallis beating the drum for Johnstone's *Impro* around the time that *Interactive Fantasy*² came out in 1994. I haven't read Johnstone's later work, *Impro for Storytellers*.

RYCT Matt Stevens on the Equipment Allotment and Sales as underwear brief: "Really, Bond," said M, "this is not what I meant by a quick brief."

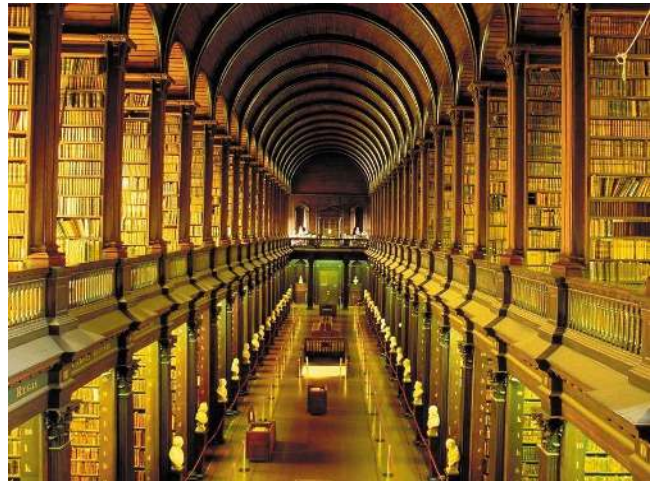
Glad *Recluse* and the "offworlders-workshop" pointers were helpful. I had forgotten that I was still in the Discord group.

Re Jennell Jaquays: I admire Jennell for her many contributions to the gaming hobby, but also as an inspiration to anyone trying to find their true self despite whatever roadblocks one's upbringing might throw in the way.

Re Simulationnisme et Simulation: Thanks for linking to Sandra Snan's RISS. I enjoyed reading it. I'd come across Sandra's description of Blorb³ previously but didn't realise it was part of a larger model.

Blasted Heath Row: The gastric issues have receded, thank you. It sounds like Portugal is working out nicely for you and your wife. I'm impressed with the number of gaming events in just the few months since your arrival. There must be a lively gaming culture to support so many events, waiting for you to sample.

Re photos of bookshelves: Tim, you and I all share a delight in bookshelves, and we're not alone. There are at least two bibliophile sub-Reddits [/r/bookshelves](https://www.reddit.com/r/bookshelves) and [/r/bookshelf](https://www.reddit.com/r/bookshelf) where people share their glorious book collections on a variety of shelves. I also find photos of libraries absorbing. Here's one of the Long Room in Trinity College Dublin, my alma mater.



² Available through DriveThruRPG apparently at <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/388989/interactive-fantasy-issues-1-4-all-issues>

³ <https://idiomdrottning.org/blorb-principles>

Brian Misiaszek: I hope you enjoy(ed) *Blindsight*. Peter Watts can be a bit hard to stomach on occasion, and rarely has what I'd regard as sympathetic protagonists, but I did enjoy the truly alien aliens.

I'm glad you're enjoying the *Kriegsmesser* write-ups. I did a bit of background reading on the Thirty Years War before the game but for the most part I was winging it. As the campaign progressed it becomes apparent that magic or the occult is more real than any of the PCs thought at the beginning, but the players managed to pull off skepticism mixed with reason and faith pretty well.

Re *Traveller Solo*: I did go back to the crew of the Trip Hazard to pick it up again, so maybe one day I'll continue their tale in these pages.

Brian Rogers: Sorry to hear your household had the flu over the Christmas break. My Thursday night group has had an up and down year with many missed sessions due to illness.

I love the image of *Sculpt Elements* freeing petrified guards who (mostly) sign up as henchmen. I can only guess at what was said that angered the third guard.

Re Hugh Hazzard and Bozo the Robot: Once again the bizarre creativity of the pre-Comics Code Authority period amazes me. Apparently Grant Morrison wanted to update Bozo the Robot as a character called Gonzo the Mechanical Bastard⁴ but it mutated in the writing and editing into something different.

Dylan Capel: We got *Heat* to the gaming table in a recent club games night. I'd only played it once before, but picked it up again easily. It's a fun game I'd happily play again.

I also got the Kickstarter copy of *Cosmic Dark* though I haven't read all of it yet. I have the impression that it's very much a teach-by-playing sort of rules, all encapsulated in the series of scenarios, which would make it harder to use as a reference for future play once the original scenarios are explored.

Re *Kriegsmesser*: I used the rules in the pamphlet: roll d6 equal to skill (+1d6 if acting with an advantage from environment or assistance) and hope to roll at least one '6'. A roll with at least one '4' or '5' gets a success with a twist, a graceful way to back out, or a progress towards the goal without complete success. All '3's or lower and it's the nasty GM fun time. I ignored the optional combat rules and just doled out wounds as seemed appropriate. The players quickly learned to fight dirty and take advantage of ambushes.

The tone was definitely not as dark as Gregor Vuga's suggestions in the book, but my group will never let an obvious joke go unmentioned (and I'm as guilty as any of them) so a lighter tone was an easy choice for me.

We as a group had played *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* and a long campaign of Tudor super-powered agents of the Queen previously so the historical setting (with additions) wasn't unusual for us. I enjoy historical settings so long as I'm not badgered by players more expert in the subject matter tutting and saying 'well, actually.'

Re *Mausritter*: I'm not too worried about scale in play. Both mice and frogs can jump quite well, so they shot up the stairs without anyone blinking an eye. I've filed the

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bozo_the_Iron_Man#Influence

inventory system under too-OSR for me and ignored it. I'm sure it works for some people but it's too fiddly for my tastes. As the adventures I've run to date with Mausritter have been more mysteries and less dungeon crawls, the resource management element isn't often called upon.

I wondered about the mis-jump chance in the *Traveller* solo but I went with my gut and enjoyed the twists in the story line the dice threw at me. I wanted a Traveller-like setting but I didn't feel beholden to Imperium setting details I didn't want to use.

Erica Frank (Elf): Re Tarot decks: Years ago in A&E there was a brief flourishing of contributors proposing alternative Fortune Decks, inspired by Jonathan Tweet's *Everway* and its Fortune Deck, a game-friendly reimagining of the traditional Tarot.

I enjoyed your *Cage of Sand* write-up, though I was taken by surprise by the announcement at the end that everyone dies. After a few pages of pleasant mundane events I'd forgotten the game was billed as a time-loop horror.

RYCT to Roger BW re AI and copyright: You are right of course. The law (in the States at least) doesn't prohibit the ingestion of copyrighted text to an LLM. Given that various court cases representing authors' rights have got settlements or similar suggest that it's not all done and dusted yet however.

Good luck reaching the fabled state of a tidy room and a good workspace for solo gaming.

RYCT Avram Grumer on superhero sex: In the X-Men fandom it's essential canon that the mutants are getting it on practically all the time and in all the possible combinations, just mostly off page.

Jim Vassilakos and Timothy Collinson: (Jim): Re Alfonzo grabbing a body and escaping at speed in *Kriegsmesser*: Alfonzo was a gravedigger and I found the Looney Tunes whirl of spinning feet an amusing image.

(Tim) Glad you enjoyed the Solo Traveller-adjacent write-up.

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT me: I love crows (and most corvids) so I find the crow's pronunciation of my name very appropriate. Re *Everway*: Given the size of the two volumes, I suspect learning through osmosis is a smart way to approach it. Continued best wishes with the job hunt.

RYCT Brian Rogers re a *Villains & Vigilantes* compilation: Seconded!

RYC about the cover: "... it would be nice to get contributions of fart..." I'll give that cover a miss⁵.

RYCT Patrick Riley re YOLO in rpgs: I agree, and wish I could convey the same sense of 'risk taking can be fun' to some of my regular players, who are often far more risk-adverse than the setting or the PCs' power in the setting warrant.

⁵ Unless 'fart' is a contraction of fan-art that I'm unaware of.

I found your typeface in #8 right on the edge for comfortable reading. The weight felt too light and thin to me, even when I blew up to a single column at a time in a PDF reader.

RYCT Lisa Padol: I haven't tried playing *Over the Edge* 3rd edition, though I own a copy. I wasn't convinced that the change in mechanics was necessary.

Are the changes to *Unknown Armies* in its 3rd edition substantial? It certainly weighs in like a heavy-weight, at three core hardback books and two additional in the deluxe version. Do those 3 core books incorporate a lot of material previously published in the 1st and 2nd edition supplements or is there a lot of new stuff?

Lisa Padol: Re *Kriegsmesser*: I think Sam rolled well for Udo and I had Simon down as a simple man who wanted to do good but had been led astray by his current master.

Re Traveller-adjacent solo: I actually picked it up to continue with recently, but I haven't progressed much. Stupid life getting in the way of gaming.

Your understanding of Jennell Jaquays's plans for *Central Casting* match my own.

Re Human Resources/Personnel/People & Culture: I doubt my suggestions of "meatware developers" or "staff wranglers" would catch on.

RYCT Jim Eckman re Kipling: That reminds me of Spike Milligan's story of a Sergeant Major announcing an 'improving lecture from one of the officers, that required mandatory attendance. "A lecture about Keats! And I bet not one of you horrible lot knows what a keat is!"

I read a synopsis of "God's Teeth" and, while it looks like an amazing work, I can't see any group I've played with recently would want to tackle it.

I enjoyed your collection of GMing tips and tricks from various sources. It makes a good set of advice to think about.

Mark A. Wilson: Good to hear you found a job in December. Your description of the modern job application rigamarole is saddening.

Matt Stevens: Re the party in Ping's game slaying an ancient white dragon: Some of those 3rd ed spells were ridiculous. I love when my players short circuit an encounter or challenge with clever thinking, but not so much with a spell of "I Win."

Michael Cule: RYCT Jim Vassilakos re *Traveller* misjumps: I'm with you on this one. Even if it is established in setting that misjumps sometimes drop a ship in the void never to be heard of again, I'm perfectly fine leaving sudden death on a poor roll to the character generation phase. I left my simulationist roots to wither long ago.

Thank you for protecting my name from malicious mages. It's too good a cover up to quibble with.

Patrick Riley: I enjoyed your short story, "An Unlikely Circumstance." Thanks for sharing it.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos re realism: I agree with you. Detail doesn't equate to realism, and usually I'm striving for verisimilitude or the feel of a genre in a game.

I'm reminded of one of my favourite "What's New with Phil and Dixie" comic strips from *Dragon* magazine back in the day where they flipped the script and gave examples how to simulate in real life the things that regularly occurred in a fantasy RPG. The one that always sticks in my mind is the picture of a man with concrete blocks strapped to his body, walking down a city street, as an approximation of wearing full plate mail all day long. The poor fellow's thought bubble reads "This wouldn't be too bad — if it wasn't for my swimming lesson."

Patrick Zoch: Your GM tip of the +1 bonus for players who were ready to go when their turns came is genius.

Pum (Paul Holman): Stabcon sounds fun. That's an impressive list of big games you played.

Roger BW: Re drive relaxation: Definitely from the school that gave us coinages like "rapid unscheduled disassembly."

Re Chaosium: Some of the new-Chaosium people are survivors of the Runequest Renaissance in the 1990s like Michael O'Brien, who created wonderful stuff like "Sun County" that built on Stafford's work instead of recycling it. What I've heard and read about the new stuff is that the adventures are mostly really good, but I can't see many newcomers getting past the long rule book and endless cults books. Glorantha has, for a long time, been a favourite haunt for pedants and lore-obsessed folk and I think that puts people off. I have little or no experience of *Call of Cthulhu* releases in the last 20 years, so you may well be right about the re-release treadmill for CoC.

Scribble M. Horror: Notekeeping and records of our campaigns is something of a bugbear for me. I like to take notes, and they form the basis for my write-ups as well as keeping me on track when trying to remember what nonsense I threw at the players in previous sessions. I do find it hard to write and GM at the same time, and my notes are maddeningly cryptic at times as a result. I have tried once or twice to record play and recreate notes from the recording but I find it both tiresome and difficult to decipher clearly enough to make good notes.

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De Ludis Elficis Fictis

by Pum (AKA Paul Holman), Harrow, ENGLAND.

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February 2026

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Recently I have mostly been ...

... playing in Michael Cule's Wednesday evening GURPS campaign with the High Wycombe RPG group. We are all beginner mages who have been "recruited" into the Institute of Magic in the city of Aegis, the city now of two thousand gates. We have settled in and begun the first term. I missed one more session due to being away on holiday.

This month, Mrs Pum and I went to Venice for a week and a half. Much sightseeing of old buildings slowly sinking into a marsh (they said they were mad to build a city in a swamp, but they built it anyway), and many people wandering the town in wonderful costumes, as it is Venice Carnival time.

I have been working on a hack of Night's Black Agents to a more old school style of system, as I'd really like to play it, and the people I have to play it with, and pretty much myself, are very much old school traditionalist style players. I am trying to keep the changes as minimal as possible, in order to remain as compatible as possible with published scenarios. So far, the main change I am trying is to treat most of the abilities as fixed skill bonuses instead of resource pools to spend, mostly by dividing General Abilities points by three — Investigative Abilities remain pretty much the same scale. Some consequent tweaks to the way abilities work are then necessary, but I'm keeping those to as little as possible. And some abilities, that feel very much like resources that you spend, will remain resource pools. I'm hoping to get a first playtest done soon. I realise that this may be heresy to some people, but I hope you don't find it too offensive 😊

Comments

#8 Mark A. Wilson: oh, a magical city powered by portals to elemental planes in the basement — nice!

re "Lonny, the Fart God", see my comment to Jim last issue: "Don't grow up, it's a trap!"

RYC about Curse of Strahd shenanigans, the very occasional falling out within the party can be entertaining. In my fantasy campaign, the player characters had a falling out over the treatment of some captives that came to resemble the closing scene of Reservoir Dogs, but with crossbows, which we all recall with mirth to this day.

I like *Twilight Struggle* a lot, but I'm not sure if it is entirely a game — it can feel almost like an exercise in collaborative alternate history story-telling, rather than a competitive game of expertise. Like *Quartermaster General*, it can feel like the cards you happen to get dealt determine much of the course of the game, maybe more than your tactical decisions. Nevertheless, I enjoy both games a lot.

Pass the Pig — a blast from the past! When we discovered it in the early 1980s at the university games club it quickly took off.

#8 Scribble M. Horror: your "Seasonal Report" was strangely evocative, considering the dry factualness of the content.

#8 Lisa Padol: thanx for the sympathy on back pain, which has mostly gone away for the last month or so.

RYCTM re confusion about the demon destroying dirt: yes, some NPCs, in a Judges Guild campaign setting, were running a scam of selling "demon destroying dirt" (really just ordinary dirt) for 1 copper piece a bucket. My PCs along with some others, stumbled across the scam and bought some buckets, which we sold on to another high level PC for 10,000 gp per bucket. High level PC then tried to destroy a demon with it, causing him much embarrassment, and consequently traced our PCs and killed them.

Re hyphen joins words, en-dash joins numbers, and em-dash joins clauses — nicely put. Hopefully I've got it now, thanx.

#8 Myles Corcoran: I've had half an eye on *Irish Gauge*. I love a train game and hoped to try it at StabCon but the opportunity did not come up. Another game I saw at Stabcon that really caught my eye was *Hegemony: Lead Your Class to Victory*. I didn't get a chance to play it at Stabcon, but a friend from the Monday evening board games club has a copy and we have arranged a Sunday game in a few weeks.

Yay mousey adventures!

RYCT Brian Rogers re HR to People and Culture, I always hated the term Human Resources, I think because, to me, it sounded pretentious and also implied we, the other staff were mere "resources" — anonymous counters on the game board of the company — rather than people, with individual identities, feelings and personalities. People and

Culture doesn't have those overtones, and sounds less pretentious, to me.

I fondly recall the write ups of your Tudor Talents game.

#8 Dylan Capel: re *Heat* racing game, racing games really appeal to me, but never quite feel like they work completely. *Formula De* works fairly well, as does *Snow Tails* and *Rallyman*. The best motor racing game I'd found before *Heat* was *Das Motorsportspiel*, unless you include *RoboRally*.

#8 Roger BW: interesting thoughts on Doctor Who 2e.

Re "tactical toilet break", yes, good one I also have picked up off Mr Cule.

Re "have fun as part of their heroic story", absolutely.

Re Morocco language scripts, reminds me of Japanese, which now has four different scripts, if you include Romanji.

Re Blades in the Dark felt like role-playing with training wheels: well put, I agree. Not that I mind playing a simple RPG occasionally, but BitD, especially the resistance rolls, grates on me a bit. Dungeon World I like a lot.

RYCT Patrick Riley re Torg tech axiom and how humans presumably work on Magic or Spirit: ooh, like instead of electromagnetism, I presume – nice concept. Maybe magic fulfills the role that electromagnetism fulfills in the real world plus it can be used to do magical effects. Or maybe magic is just the ability to manipulate electromagnetic force with will, which is the same thing but with the labels switched. Interesting ponderings.

Re recording and transcription: yep, just record the noises your computer is making by something like OBS; I've even got very acceptable recordings by just putting my digital audio recording device in front of a PC speaker. Which reminds me: Michael Cule, how are you getting on with your Tascam DR-05?

Re progressive encounter system: nice – I must try to remember and use something like that a bit, thanx.

RYCT Avram Grumer: the first rule of Typst Conspiracy is deny there is a Typst Conspiracy? ;)

Re die roller for Jitsi: or use a shared online one that already exists, such as www.rolldicewithfriends.com or rolz.org that the Wednesday evening group used during lockdown.

#8 Michael Cule: yay interdimensional icebreaker shenanigans!

All dragons are grey when immature and a colour chooses them at maturity: nice — very flavourful, I

must try to remember to nick that for when it might come in useful.

#8 Avram Grumer: Cross-gender play weakens the tendency to just play yourself — interesting hypothesis. I can kind of see how that would work, and feel I have maybe experienced it.

#8 Patrick Zoch: RYCTM re Orloj: The Prague Astronomical Clock, to be fair, there were other people at the convention that claimed they really liked the game, but we found it too long to learn and too complex, at least first play, but I'm not interested in a game that I have to play badly a few times just to learn how to play. YMMV. If you get the chance to play someone else's copy, with someone that can explain the game quickly, then maybe it'll work well.

#8 Joshua Kronengold: re job seeking and rejection letters — a highly expert friend of mine recently had a similar experience, except he mostly didn't even get rejection letters. He eventually got a job via a friend.

#8 Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Patrick Riley on being curious to learn what other methods people have found for addressing the problem of player absence, I have often played absent PCs as NPCs, keeping them to low risk / low impact background activity with the rule (mainly unspoken) that you don't kill absent players' PCs.

RYCT Myles Corcoran, reminds me of the saying: a friend will help you move. A *good* friend will help you move a body.

RYCTM re money back guarantee on demon destroying dirt, now you mention it I recall we made much fuss about that for great amusement. Our PCs clearly understood that it was just dirt and that something funny was going on, but the GM played it so well that we got quite caught up in the fun of it, which is what attracted our buyer's attention.

RYCTM re Variant Rules for D&D Combat & Hit Points, I envisaged Hit Points as a mish-mash of luck, dodging, rolling with blows, fatigue and all the other vague intangibles of combat. Re knowing they need more healing, if you really want to rationalise it within the game reality, I suppose they still feel fatigued and sub-par, but it's really pushing the limit of such a simulation.

—====### Everyone else, RAEBNC ###====—

Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #9

City Building for Fun and Adventure: what do you need and where do you start?

When it comes to city building or world building in general, I only need the thin veneer that the PCs will interact with plus just enough backing that I can make stuff up as they're needed.

The home base for my current *D&D 5e* (2024) campaign is in the city of Islingford-upon-Orlin. At the start, all I really knew was the basic geography: it was on the river Orlin, surrounded by farmland and a few villages within a day's travel and there was a druid conclave nearby (where the PC druid's player pointed to on the map). I had a very basic hex map.

Recently, I thought it would be *Fun* for there to be a Temple of Set in town to act as an irritant to the PC cleric of Hathor, so I added it. Early on in the campaign, the *Adventure*¹ included a clan of wererats whose lair was in the city sewers, so the city had them.

Nothing was planned in advance. Who founded the city? Don't care, though I think I commented that one of the NPC nobles they met was from one of the founding families. It was an improvised detail that tumbled out of my mouth as I was talking. Who's on the city council currently? I only know the name of one of the council members because the PCs interacted with him.

This is how I do world building in general. As the campaign shifts from being based in Islingford and the PCs explore more of the world, I'll be filling in the details as they go along.

I do have some admiration for fully detailed game worlds and cities (like *Ptolus*) with hundreds of pages of information, but I run into two problems. The primary issue is that I find them boring and a slog to get through. Even if they are enjoyable (like *Uresia*), my second issue is not being able to remember or incorporate any of this rich information into my games. I'm better at making things up on the fly than recalling what I read or looking it up in the book (assuming the information is there).

¹ A quest submitted to the Adventurers Guild and taken up by the PCs.

Narration versus Roleplaying

I was writing a response to Avram (and Josh) on the topic of where roleplaying happens within a procedural rpg in which scenes are narrated and the response got long and rambly enough to break out of the comments section of this zine.

Fundamentally, I want to play make-believe. I don't want to game through a story. For me, roleplaying is pretending to be someone else and improvising within the defined constraints of the game.²

When the rules say to *narrate* a scene, I interpret this to be similar to the narration of a story as one would do when reading a story aloud (except improvising, of course).³ It's very distinct from the rules saying to *roleplay* a scene or *play out* a scene.

This is the crux of what I was trying to convey a couple zines back. Maybe it is just my issue of being too hung up on definitions and taking terms literally. Perhaps everyone else assumes that narration includes roleplaying, but this points to the difficulty of conveying the intent of the author/designer when their assumptions do not match those of the reader.

From a purely practical perspective, we are forced to use narration to describe the actions we take as our characters. I have no issue with this, but one of my roleplaying mantras is, "Don't tell me what your character is saying [narration]; say it as your character [roleplaying]."

Here are examples of some modes of play. The PCs enter a bar looking for a particular NPC. The GM gives a brief description of the place and mentions a bartender behind the counter.

² As in "a playful activity or amusement." [Wiktionary]

³ While some films use a first-person narrator who tells the tale from their perspective and in their voice, this is incredibly irritating when done at a gaming table. It's fine for a journaling solo rpg, but I don't want to hear it (as the GM or a fellow player).

Gaming only: “I roll for interrogation on the bartender about the guy we’re looking for. I got a 27.” [Let’s not condense everything down into its raw mechanical implementation, m’kay?]

Narration only: “My character asks the bartender if that dude came in last night.”

Better Narration only: “My character walks up to the bar, puts a 20 cred chip on the counter, holding it down with his index finger, and asks the bartender if a tall, blonde bloke in a Red Fang jacket came in last night.” [This could also have been narrated in the first person.]

Roleplaying only: “Hey barkeep, did a tall, blonde bloke in a Red Fang jacket come in last night?”

Roleplaying with Narration: “I walk up to the bar, and put a 20 cred chip on the counter, holding it down with my index finger. [I might mimic the action by placing my finger on the game table.] ‘Hey barkeep, did a tall, blonde bloke in a Red Fang jacket come in last night?’”

(Through the power of having time to think about it and editing, this comes across much better on the page than it does at the table.)

At the end of the day, I want to play make-believe. I want to pretend to be my character. I don’t want to pretend to be a screen writer, director, or narrator. And when the rule book tells me to narrate, there is a mismatch of desires and expectations. It is particularly bothersome when I’m at a gaming table with a bunch of people who bring their own desires and expectations that may run counter to each other. Worse, the more we have to talk about it, the less we’re roleplaying.

Lastly, as a roleplayer, I struggle with being put on the spot. I often don’t know what I’m going to say or when I’m going to say it until I do. Sometimes I surprise myself with the words I say and how I say it. It is all very spontaneous. The more I stay in-character, the easier it becomes.

When the game system says, “We’re done setting the scene, now roleplay,” (like a director calling, “Action!”) I have to shift my brain into gear. Just like trying to get a car with a manual transmission to go after sitting at a red light, there can be some grinding and whincing involved—and sometimes you just stall the engine by letting the clutch out too quickly.⁴

⁴ Contrary to what you might think from this analogy, I can drive stick.

D&D Rambling

The Preramble

The following was inspired by a few folks here talking about D&D, mainly Brian and Matt, but our OSR folks as well. Also, I was making a couple of characters in case I got into bring-your-own-character D&D games at the upcoming DunDraCon; the process highlighted a few things that I wanted to ~~rant~~ ramble about.

The Proper Ramble

The aspect of (A)D&D that bothered me the most back in the day was that only the Thief class could Move Silently, Hide in Shadows, etc. Once D&D 3e⁵ introduced a proper skill system, this issue went away, but it put the Thief Rogue class in an identity crisis. And so, Sneak Attack was codified as the main thing⁶ that Rogues do that distinguishes them from the Fighters who could now have Stealth and Sleight of Hand as skills.

The Fighter vs. Rogue distinction paralleled the tanks vs. strikers model found in computer games. The rules also codified when Sneak Attack could be used, as opposed to the squishy definition of Backstabbing in previous editions. The concept of Flanking necessitated presenting the battle on a grid—a battlemap. D&D 5e removed the strict flanking requirement and made it easier to use without a battlemap; this was a good design decision. [I have no idea if this is the actual train of thought and development the designers went through, but it’s how I imagine it could have gone.]

Classes present a simple to understand template for character roles and abilities. Fighters fight. Magic-users use magic. Thieves sneak and steal. Clerics heal and turn undead.⁷ I’m not a fan of class-based systems, but I understand their appeal and usefulness. There is a reason why they persist.

The history of D&D is the history of adding new classes, sub-classes, abilities, and so on⁸ until things get reset with a new edition before the cycle starts again. Rare are those who can be happy with the way things

⁵ I should note that I know next to nothing about *D&D* 4e and will not be referencing it here.

⁶ In addition to trapfinding, more skill points in general, and other less central abilities.

⁷ Clerics also fight reasonably well, making them my favorite class in B/X *D&D*.

⁸ I’m specifically ignoring races/species/ancestries in this rambling but you can lump those in as well.

are—there always has to be more. One could blame market forces and the need to sell more supplements for this, but I blame the gamers who make the market by demanding more stuff. I turned off *AD&D 2e* when the kit books came out. The system had jumped the shark for me.

In this light, OSR is a type of reset but instead of the expansion of character options, we see an expansion of OSR versions. Everyone is reinventing the wheel or putting new tread on old wheels. Roll on.

Don't get me wrong—I like playing characters with cool abilities that other characters don't have. The act of building a character by navigating a labyrinth of options is fun (up to a point—I'm talking to you, *Pathfinder 2e*). But in my soul, I'm a minimalist who looks for elegance and symmetry. This means that I want to smooth out all the rough edges and knobby bits that many gamers hang their love of *D&D* on. A rule, like rolling a 1 (or 2 of you're an elf) on a d6 to find a secret door, that OSR folks find quaint and fun, I find odd and annoying.

Let's look at Druids. In *AD&D*, they were nature clerics with a weird progression. In *D&D 5e* (but starting with 3e), they are shapeshifters (though some use their allotment of daily uses for other things). You could just make Wild Shape a spell (like they did with Find Familiar, undoing the change from *D&D 3e*) or an ability tied to Channel Divinity the same way Clerics of War can use Guided Strike. Rangers don't have a Favored Enemy ability (though it is called that); rather, they have uses of the Hunter's Mark spell (a spell only Rangers can get, mind you). If Hunter's Mark is a spell, why isn't Wild Shape. Why isn't Hunter's Mark just a class ability not tied to a spell?

There are other class abilities that are similar to, but don't quite align with certain Feats, such as Poisoner, Telepathy, and War Caster. What these correspond to is left as an exercise for the reader.

I appreciate that many (most?) *D&D* players find fun in the ways that each class is different and don't feel samey. Even so, there are parallels between how classes work that these differences (especially for basic attacks—cantrips vs weapons) sometimes are no more than window dressing. The new *Dragon Slayers* RPG takes the “every class should have its own rules” idea to

an interesting extreme.⁹ As a student of the Standard Model in physics, I'm more inclined to advance a unified theory of classes than embrace a hodge-podge model of class design.

I could take or leave (Dis)Advantage as *D&D 5e* has popularized. It does a good job of having a distinct, easy-to-implement bonus or penalty without the onesie-tuosie plusses and minuses that lurked in *D&D 3e*. But this particular game mechanism has been over exposed and frankly, I'm bored of it.

The *D&D* paradigm of armor class used to annoy me. Now I just have an “it is what it is” attitude. Same with hit points and what they are supposed to represent. Loss of hit points due to falls, drowning, and/or poison breaks most definitions of hit points that are focused on combat applications.

D&D 5e, especially the 2024 edition, seems rather inconsistent regarding when a poisoned attack does additional damage or applies the poisoned condition or both. The poisoned condition seems straight out of a computer RPG since it often only lasts a round. The effect, having Disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks, sounds more like being concussed. *Savage Worlds* has Vulnerable (bonus to others to do stuff against you) and Distracted (penalty on you do to stuff) conditions which cover most of what's needed.

Alignment has been relegated to the 2nd page of the official character sheet and appears below equipment. In other words, it's an afterthought.

D&D 5e does something clever with proficiencies. Being proficient in a skill, saving throw, or tool just means you get to add your level-based proficiency bonus to the roll. Everything is just an ability check—the only question is if you add your proficiency bonus. This also means the system can have a bunch of different tools, including gaming sets, that characters can be proficient in without needing a skill for each of those things. Since the proficiency bonus is just a flat number, you don't have to worry about individually-assigned skill ranks and it's just easier to manage. Except for a few situations where there is both a tool and a skill proficiency (in which case, you add your proficiency and get Advantage—it feels more like a shrug than a deliberate design choice). But the range for proficiency

⁹ I got it on Kickstarter and will talk about it once I've actually played it.

bonuses is a bit too small for skills, so that begets the Expertise feature that doubles the bonus for specific skills or tools.

Why is Great Weapon Fighting a Fighting Style Feat but Great Weapon Master not? While I appreciate that there are Medium and Heavy Armor Proficiency feats as well as the Martial Weapon Training feat, does anyone use them?

A classic question from the early days of *D&D* was, “Why can’t a Magic-user use a sword?” The *5e* means of answering that question is to say that Wizards are not proficient in martial weapons which is not a bad answer, even if their distinction between simple and martial weapons is a bit arbitrary. Plus, Seems like a waste of a feat to let your Wizard use a sword.

My *D&D* Heartbreaker

Speaking purely from system design aesthetics, the following are how I would design my own version of *D&D*. It’s more about the foundation and structure than the particulars—it’s just the framing before the plumbing and electrical go in.

Dice

It has to be d20-based at its core with other dice being used for damage. If I were doing a lighter version, I’d do everything with 2d6. The core mechanism would be $d20 + \text{ability modifier} + \text{other modifiers}$ vs an Armor Class for physical combat or a Difficulty Class for other things.

Classes

I will stick with the class-and-level approach not because I prefer this structure, but because I prefer it for something pretending to be *D&D*.

I would have 3 or 4 base classes: Warrior, Mage, Cleric, and maybe Rogue (but I’ll assume not for now). Each class has a number of Specializations.

Warriors have fighting styles. Options include heavy weapons, weapon-and-shield, archery, dual weapons, and so on. Berzerking and unarmed fighting (more like MMA than a *D&D* Monk) are also on the list. These fighting styles have their own “Feat trees” (to borrow a *D&D 3e* term). The big question is if Rogues are their own class or if “sneak attack” is a fighting style.

Mages have schools of magic. Maybe not the 8 from *D&D*, but along those lines. Yes, this means I’m axing Sorcerer and Warlock as options, but Mages aren’t

necessarily spellbook-carrying Wizards; perhaps there could be options with trade-offs.

Clerics have domains. I like using White (Good/Life), Black (Evil/Death), and Green (Nature). I could maybe see a Red (War) and others based on particular gods. While White Clerics might turn undead and Black Clerics control undead, Green Clerics might instead befriend beasts.

If there was a separate Rogue class, what would their subspecializations be? What makes sense that couldn’t be done more simply with skill selection?

There is multiclassing. Paladins and Rangers are Warrior+Cleric. Paladins can be White or Black (or Red); Rangers are Green. A Mage+Cleric is a Mystic. An Eldritch Knight (and some flavors of Warlock) is a Warrior+Mage. Could there be a Warrior+Mage+Cleric? If I don’t make it, someone will. :)

Feats

There are generic and class-based Feats (for lack of a better term) that characters get as they level up. All special abilities (beyond spellcasting) are defined through Feats (similar to the *True20* approach). A Feat is how one would get a familiar, animal companion, or mount.

Rather than allow characters to “dip” into other classes, I’d want a way to take Feats that may belong to other classes.

Abilities

I think the classic 6 ability scores are fine, but I’m not married to them. I like the Might & Agility plus Will & Intelligence quartet, though it strongly hints at a class distinction between Might-based and Agility-based Warriors (Rogues?). Wisdom and Charisma (social presence and divine gift) are subsumed into Will. Having 4 stats makes it easier to map into 4 saving throws (which are really just stat checks). Because it is a *D&D*-based design, there will probably be means to roll for stats (and hit points), but I would never use them.

I am perfectly happy ditching ability scores as separate from ability modifiers and just using modifiers. I’m assuming a system based on roll 1d20+mods versus Difficulty.

Skills

There have to be skills (unless there is a satisfactory way to do the same thing with Feats), but only a handful (closer to the list from 5e than 3e). I definitely want there to be Stealth (see first paragraph, above), Survival (for my Rangers), Perception (for finding secret doors and opposing Stealth checks), Athletics (climbing, swimming, etc.), and a skill to cover traps and locks. Having multiple knowledge-based skills and a few social skills would probably be best to have a balanced list. I often dither about Animal Handling and/or Riding. Disguise is another oddball skill that probably should be a Feat.

Skills are explicitly de-linked from stats so that you can do a Might-based Athletics check for climbing or an Agility-based Athletics check for balance. Intimidation (my favorite example) could be Might- or Will-based (or even Intelligence-based if you want to use academic intimidation).

Races Species Ancestries

A character's ancestry is a layer that gets added on top of all this class-feat-skill structure. I'd use the classic 4: human, elf, dwarf, and halfling. This choice doesn't affect stat scores (in the same way that gender doesn't) but each ancestry has some special abilities or traits. The GM is free to put in ability guidelines or caps, but I wouldn't want to tell a player they can't play a female halfling with an 18 Strength while there is far more gonzo stuff running around in your typical *D&D* world.

Alignment

Nah.

Magic

First of all, one of the factors that I know would prevent me from ever developing these ideas into a real system is that I would hate to come up with a list of spells. Secondly, I always thought the spell memorization thing from *D&D* was silly, though I'm fine with the concept of preparing spells.

I like the idea, touched on by Josh awhile back in *A&E*, that spells can come in different levels and have bigger effects as you put more oomph (spell slots or power points) into it. You can also have variations on a theme. For example, Misty Step and Teleport are really the same spell, but cast at different levels. See also *Spell Law for Rolemaster*.

Having on-the-fly spell shaping such as adding range, making an area effect, adding damage, and so on (not unlike *RuneQuest* Sorcery) would also be cool, though metamagic feats in *D&D 3e* and Sorcerers in *5e* never clicked with me. Having run a lot of *Savage Worlds* in a fantasy setting, I appreciate that it uses the same mechanics and the same powers for cleric-types and mage-types (as well as psionic-types). It also has some of the per-casting customization. On the other hand, it gets a bit bland and samey. I appreciate the depth of options and weirdness that *D&D* spells bring to the table.

Nailing down the magic system requires more work than I'm willing to do and would happily contract that out to someone else.

Weapons and Armor

D&D removes weapons and armor from their historical context,¹⁰ so what prevents players from always just picking the best weapons and armor? Cost is a factor, but not once the characters get a bit of treasure. You can just encode it into the system for certain classes (outright bans or restricting proficiency) and/or class abilities ("While unarmored or only wearing light armor and not carrying a shield..."). You could chuck it and say characters do so much damage and get so much protection based on their class and level and their choice of weapon and armor is merely cosmetic. You could try to balance out each weapon with certain advantages or give heavier armor disadvantages that may never matter in play. Maybe create a complicated matrix of how each weapon type fares against each type of armor. Or just ignore this whole issue.

Yes, I do have a tendency to overthink RPG systems. And yes, I've slipped back into rambling mode.

For my version of *D&D*, I lean towards having armor categorized as light, medium, or heavy and weapons as small/light, medium, or large/heavy.

Just because it's *D&D*, I would not change how Armor Class works (at least compared to 3e onward), but I would like to have some damage reduction factor, perhaps as a Fighter ability.

¹⁰ Shout out to Scholagladiatoria.

DunDraCon 2026

This was the 49th DunDraCon. It wasn't the best con for me, but it was good to spend four days (plus the Thursday before the convention that I took off from work) not worrying about the state of the world and the bleak future we're barreling towards. As an added bonus, I got inspiration of what to run for my next convention (Kublacon in May).

Boardgames Played

I come to conventions for roleplaying games, but board games are a good way to fill the gaps in the schedule.

Terraforming Mars (with Venus Next)

I have played this so many times that it's almost a "cozy" game for me at this point. It was the first thing I played at the con and was a good warmup for the weekend. I did terribly in the game, finishing last on a tiebreak, because I couldn't get my card draws to cooperate, but I still enjoyed the experience of playing.

Libertalia: Winds of Galecrest

This was a new game to me and half the table. I hadn't played the original Libertalia, but this is a wholly different game built upon the same pirate theme and simultaneous role selection mechanism. It is quite a procedural game, but the host/instructor did not do a great job explaining and ensuring that the procedure was followed, leading to a "oh, we've been this wrong" moment three-quarters of the way through the game. The players who knew or grasped the procedure better than I did well whereas I did quite poorly. I would play again.

Cartegena

I dropped in on this game as I was walking through open gaming looking for something to do. I have good memories of this game from days gone by. This time, however, it was a miserable slog with a horrible starting hand, last in turn order, and a host who would not shut up about offering advice to the other players crossing the line from "helping newbies learn the game" to "telling newbies how to play." Fortunately, they did not seem to be annoyed by it.

Qwinto

The same group, plus 2 new players who walked up, followed Cartegena up with this simple roll-and-write game. It was fine. It is a decent filler.

Alien Frontiers

I was then recruited away from that table to fill in the fourth seat for Alien Frontiers, a game I quite enjoyed in the past. Back then, I remember getting into the rut of almost always playing with the same goals and approach, but I had forgotten what those were, so I just did what seemed good in the moment. I ended up playing kingmaker and finishing last, but it was enjoyable to return to this old friend. Still has the best written rulebook of any boardgame that answers every question (either explicitly or through the examples given).

Roleplaying Games Played

I wish the sessions were better than they were. I can't say I didn't have fun, but I can say I didn't have as much fun as I could have had. They weren't so bad that I had to find my own fun (see last year's writeup in *A&E*)

Hollow Earth Expedition

The GM compensated for not having Ubiquity Dice¹¹ by having a huge selection of pregenerated characters. The players came up with reasonably good reasons why we were after a stolen relic and the lost expedition that set out before us. There was a secret code to found in a Yucatan cenote, deadly encounters with Nazis and dinosaurs¹² on the eastern, jungle-covered slopes of the Andes, and a negotiation with an offshoot of ancient Rome living under the unconquered sun of the Hollow Earth. The scenario needed either a tightened plot (and a 4-hour run time rather than 6) or an expanded plot to eliminate the faffing about we did.

GrymmSpork

A silly little game about a cadre of goblins questing for a dog stolen by a witch. They saved a village plagued by zombies, ventured through a dungeon in the underworld, and confronted the witch first in her tower and then in her mech. As pointed out by my roommate who was also in the game, "Being silly does not make it funny."

Welcome to Night Vale

I was unfamiliar with the podcast this is based on and that proved to be a bit of a hindrance because the setting is so weird that assumptions about what's possible and what's reasonable go right out the window. For example, in the climatic scene of the game,

¹¹ Unnecessary to play the game, but I just think they're really cool.

¹² But not Nazi dinosaurs, unfortunately.

having to wrangle and convince a recalcitrant, untamed antique record player to correctly play a vinyl record that refused to be played forward. But the GM and a couple of in-the-know players did a good job of translating and fun was had by all. The Essence20 system is fine, but I wouldn't use it.

Derailment at St. Faustina Station

I ran this game on Monday, as I usually do, but I was frustrated that some games I was really interested in playing were also happening on Monday.

I was worried that my description was a bit lacking and that I wouldn't get players, but I had a full table of 6.

After a deadly subway accident, several strangers find themselves in a chthonian labyrinth. To reach their next destination, they must overcome numerous trials, defeat formidable monsters, and confront their own demons.

I used my *Wildcard Roleplaying System* but this wasn't a system-reliant game. There were some checks needed for some of the trials, but otherwise, it could have been done completely freeform. After the playtest I ran for my home group, I pulled back on the "formidable monsters" and made the demon confrontation less literal and more narrative.

The following is a copy of my notes for running the game. The scenario is inspired by *Squid Games*, *Alice in Borderland*, *Cube* (1997 film), and *The Good Place*. Despite the first two references, there is no PvP conflict (though nothing precludes it, there is no reason for it). It is basically a 59-room dungeon (aka **The Labyrinth**) bookended with a PCs-in-Purgatory framing device. I don't have enough room in this issue to describe the dungeon, but I can include the framing.

I included a lot more "boxed text" than I usually do, but the details of the scenes were too important to chance forgetting something if I improvised. For example, while I was roleplaying Marvin (see below), I forgot to read the correct number, ages, and names of his kids. These facts didn't matter, but others could make a huge difference.

An important note for The Grand Station end sequence is that the PCs will have gained a subway token (possibly two) by the time they arrive. One side says "GOOD FOR ONE FARE" while the other says "NO CASH VALUE".

Derailment at St. Faustina Station

Pregenerated PCs

These are not required for the scenario, but I find it better for convention games to have pregens.

Because this is a "strangers on a train" setup, I did not have my usual character name tent cards (see last issue). Also, I had the players pick their characters by profession alone, but in secret. The first player (chosen by the order they entered the room) saw all the options. Successive players saw a diminishing selection so that even everyone's profession was mostly unknown.

The players could also fill in their ability scores, distributing 5 points among Physical, Mental, Social, and Spiritual (though each started with 1 point already, so a total of 9 points).

Each PC came with a brief blurb and 5 questions for the players to fill out. Question 2-5 were:

- How do others perceive you?
- How do you perceive yourself?
- What is your family situation?
- Why were you on the midtown subway this fateful night?

These were mostly to help the players roleplay and have a better mental impression of their characters. The first question, though, was tailored to each PC and did have a thematic effect on the scenario.

Tech Hustler

From meme coins to meme stocks, you've made bank working the system and manipulating fools. You've done pump and dumps and rugpulls and it ain't your fault they didn't see it coming. Now you're using AI to generate content and get clicks. You have multiple channels on the major platforms with AI influencers raking in endorsement dollars. Passive income FTFW, baby! You live in a lux condo, own three supercars and a yacht, and get bottle service in the VIP lounge multiple nights a week.

So why do you feel so hollow inside?

Sex Worker

Your job may not be mainstream and you have to be careful in whose company you discuss it, but it pays the bills just fine. You set your own hours, take regular vacations, and answer to no one. You are not selling yourself, but a fantasy and an experience; you provide a

service that may be out of the ordinary, but it has value and so do you. Your professionalism has afforded you the ability to curate your client list, removing the creeps and those who take things too far.

So why did you let a regular, sweetheart of a client die, only calling 911 when it was too late?

Charity Fundraiser

You don't need to work—you come from a family of privilege—but you have the education and skills to make the world a better place. You enjoy raising money for good causes, connecting the people with money to the organizations that need it, and you are good at it. You now head the charitable giving organization that was founded by your family and was once run by your mother, a woman of impeccable style and grace, warmth and compassion, and uncompromising faith.

So why did you let her die alone and suffering?

Personal Chef

Food connects people with each other, their families, their cultures, and their community. It is an honored craft but a grueling profession and a cutthroat business. Despite the unrelenting hours and tremendous pressure, it warms your heart when your food is enjoyed and appreciated. You mentored under a beloved Michelin star chef who took you under their wing, treated you with kindness, and provided both professional personal advice that you've found invaluable as you advance your career.

So why did you purposely ruin their reputation?

Nursing Student

You have been working as a nurse's assistant since you graduated high school because you love helping people. You have decided to take your career to the next level and get an advanced nursing degree, so you have been going to school during the day and working the night shift. You come home to a loving partner who does the cooking, laundry, and everything else so that you can focus on your dream, despite having a career of their own (and covering rent and other expenses). You love them dearly. So why do you keep cheating on them (without their knowledge or permission and with multiple people)?

Middle School Teacher

Being a teacher is not about the begrudging recognition or sporadic admiration, and certainly not about the lousy pay. Despite the overbearing administrators, odious parents, and obnoxious students, you can't see

yourself doing anything else. Your calling is not only to help kids not only learn and expand their horizons, but also to navigate the treacherous waters between childhood and adulthood. Nothing brings you joy more than when your students overcome adversity and excel.

So why did you goad a star student to commit self-harm?

Opening

The scenario opens with a cinematic description of the PCs on board the train, the death of the driver, and the derailment. Though not stated explicitly, there should be no mystery to the players that their PCs are dead and that they have reached some transitional afterlife.

The camera catches a subway train as it lumbers past through a dimly-lit tunnel. The display on the front of the train says "Midtown - St. Faustina." After the train passes, the camera enters the train and passes through the cars one by one. We see a myriad of passengers until it slows down in one particular car holding 6 passengers.

The players describe their PCs: what they look like, what they are wearing, and what they are doing (sitting, standing, knitting, dancing...). If there are fewer than 6 PCs, fill in the descriptions with NPCs.

The camera continues through the rest of the train and then enters the operator's cab, looking over his shoulder. His hands are at the controls. A signal light and sign in the tunnel ahead says to slow. The train does not slow. Instead, we see the driver come into view, his body slumping forward and pressing on the throttle to go faster.

St. Faustina Station

You are now standing on the platform looking at the twisted and torn subway cars derailed on the track that lies between the northbound and southbound platforms. First responders—firefighters, paramedics, and police pull survivors and bodies from the wreckage, attending to those they can save and setting aside those they cannot. The sign on the platform reads, "St. Faustina Station."

As the PCs encounter the pandemonium of the station, they will not be able to get anyone's attention. Physically interacting with any people will result in them passing right through them, but they interact with the physical environment as if it were solid. They exist in a space between worlds. The tunnel is blocked by the

derailed train and they cannot reach the platform on the far side.

There is a stairway clogged with people staggering or being carried up and paramedics coming down carrying stretchers and medical packs. Tucked in the corner there is a narrow stairwell that everyone is ignoring.

If the PCs investigate the narrow stairs, they will see an impatient-looking crow on a landing about ten steps up; this is Pete. Should a PC try to leave by the busy exit, Pete will discourage them, saying *"That exit is not for you. Use the other stairs."* If they persist in climbing the wrong stairs, the PCs will find it like stepping through molasses until they can not make any progress and never fully exit the station.

If they linger too long, Pete will fly down from the exit and say, *"You're the last ones to leave. Get a move on. You don't want to become one of The Lost, do you?"* Also, *"C'mon folks. We're on the clock here. Vamoose."* All of the other deceased passengers and, importantly, Marvin the driver, have already ascended the stairs.

Pete

Pete is a psychopomp who can take any animal form, but usually prefers that of a crow or a rat. He is reluctant, at first, to speak to the PCs and will not do so unless he thinks it either necessary (to move them along) or amusing. He will answer questions only if it will expedite moving things along without depriving them the opportunity to figure things out for themselves.

Entering the Labyrinth

As you climb the stairs, the cacophony behind you dies down and you enter a series of twisting, tiled corridors. The tiles are dingy and the fluorescent lights flicker uncomfortably. You eventually come to a heavy metal door with a pushbar. A sign on the door reads "Exit Door. Do Not Block."

Beyond the door lies the entry room, G1. See the preview at the end of this zine.

The Grand Station

You walk up a short flight of stairs. At the top are 6 waist-high turnstiles and just beyond is a grand station. The station has a rich interior with a tile floor, cathedral ceiling, and stained glass windows. The archways, fixtures, and benches are of dark wood. It feels at once cavernous and intimate. The center piece is a pole with a four-faced analog clock giving the time as a quarter to

twelve. A kiosk under the clock is selling coffee and tea, snacks, and newspapers.

On the left side of the station, the Downtown exit is a broad archway and stairs leading down. An upward draft rustles a binbag mounted to the wall.

Across from that, on the right side of the station, the Uptown exit consists of 3 one-way, full height turnstiles framed in gold and pearlescent white tile leading to a stair leading upwards. There are 3 transit guards, each with a dog on a leash, scrutinizing anyone who approaches.

Furthest from the entrance on the far side of the station is the Midtown exit. It has 5 one-way, waist-high turnstiles beyond which is a long, dark corridor. A sign on each turnstile says, "Token Entry." A couple of transit guards scan the crowd.

A few dozen other people are here as well. A group of seven are gathered between the kiosk and the Midtown exit and are engaged in an animated debate. A busker with a guitar and harmonica plays softly near the Downtown exit. A person in a transit worker uniform sits on a bench, elbows on knees, staring blankly down into the paper coffee cup in his hands. An elderly man and woman sit on a bench reading a newspaper he is holding up while she leans on his shoulder. A group of four are in a small circle holding hands and facing each other, heads bowed and eyes closed; they pray softly together. A smartly-dressed woman fidgets erratically while mumbling to herself.

What do you want to do?

All the exits are one-way, though they may not appear as such initially. The Uptown exit is clearly a one-way turnstile. The Downtown exit looks open, but no one ever comes up the stairs and once someone crosses the threshold, they will be trapped on the other side.

The kiosk is operated by an older gentleman with middle eastern descent. He has grey in his beard and kind eyes. There are many different newspapers from all over the world, but they all show the date corresponding to the PC's yesterday. The snacks sold are small bags of generic junk food. The coffee and tea is mediocre and filled into paper cups from one of two dispensers. The proprietor will have friendly conversation with the PCs but not be able to answer any of their questions. If asked about the station, he will note that *"People come, people go. Some stay a while, but*

eventually everyone completes their journey. Don't stay too long, else you may miss your train."

The guards are not talkative and will not answer any questions and will ask the PCs to move along if they linger. If a PC becomes belligerent or even violent, more guards will appear and take the offending PC Downtown.

All the other NPCs in the station are souls in transit—just like the PCs themselves. Their emotions range from melancholy to mournful to anxious. Those who linger in the station are those who are unable to come to terms with their situation and cannot move on. The PCs can interact with them, but are unlikely to get any guidance.

The group of 7 has a token and is arguing over who should get it. The group is from a different car of the PCs' train, so they won't recognize them unless they make a Social check. They are talking over each other, pleading their cases, but there is no resolution forthcoming. They try to play rock-paper-scissors, but with 7 hands, they can't figure out who won and they return to debating. At one point, a young man from the group of 7 will rush toward the Midtown turnstile and try to jump over only to be tased by one of the guards. The officers remain at their station and make no attempt to help the offender or to take them away. A similar fate will befall anyone who attempts to tailgate their way through.

If they watch the unguarded Downtown exit, the PCs will notice a few people who go in that direction. One pauses at the exit, looks back, sighs, and then goes down the stairs. Another just walks down with hands in their pockets, head hung low and never looking up.

Anyone who gets close to the Updown turnstiles will be inspected by one of the guard dogs who sniffs at their person. If the person is carrying a token (or a piece of a token), the guard will growl and alert its handler. The guard will demand that they turn over the token before proceeding. If there is no token, the dog will retreat slightly and sit down next to its handler, letting the person pass through the turnstiles.

The transit worker on the bench is Marvin whom they will recognize as a train driver (though not necessarily their train driver). Marvin Carter is an experienced subway operator of 13 years. He lives in a very modest home with his wife of 8 years and two step-kids (age 10 and 13). Ruth is a dispatcher for a trucking company.

The father of her children is currently in jail pending trial for a home invasion. On the fateful day, Marvin suffers an arterial rupture due to a congenital defect while driving the train. He collapses within moments and fails to slow the train, causing it to derail around a curve. He dies alone in the cabin.

If they give the token to Marvin, he will return to earth at the moment of his death and not die, thus preventing the train from derailing and saving all their lives. Once Marvin has the token, it triggers the narration below. Importantly, anyone who took the Downtown or Uptown exits will have lost their opportunity to return to Midtown and if Marvin was given the token, those PCs will die on the train from "natural causes."

Going Downtown

As you pass under the archway and take your first steps down, you can feel the warm breeze and hear the rumbling and squealing wheels of a subway train far below. Each step you take brings a sense of foreboding but also resolution. You lose count of the number of steps you have taken until the noises of the subway become the roar of flames and the tormented screams of the damned. Your train awaits.

If they attempt to turn back at any time, the stairs become impossibly slick. They fall and slide roughly and helplessly down the stairs. Anyone watching from the station only sees the person walking down normally.

Going Uptown

The turnstile slides effortlessly as you walk through. Buoyed by a sense of optimism, each step up becomes lighter until you practically float up the stairs. As you ascend, you begin to see sunlight beaming down from above. You exit the subway under a wide blue sky. The warmth of the sun wraps you gently. Fresh air fills your lungs, as if for the first time in your life.

Going to Midtown

If one of the PCs has the token and goes to Midtown. The other PCs will see them walk down the corridor and then out of view. Resolve what the remaining PCs will do. Read this description last.

The token slides into the slot and the turnstile unlocks and you walk through it smoothly. The corridor ahead is long and moderately lit with fluorescent tubes buzzing and attracting the occasional wayward moth or fly. As you continue, you begin to hear the cacophonous sounds of a crowd. The lights and noises grow in

intensity until you can barely see or hear. It becomes so painful that you need to cover your eyes and ears. Your heart is racing as you find it impossible to do both. The world tumbles under your feet, losing all sense of direction. Then darkness and silence.

A flash of light directly into your pupils brings you to consciousness. Someone is directly in front of you—no, over you as you seem to be lying down—asks, “What is your name?” You start to sit up, but are overtaken by pain and vertigo and the person gently sets you back down. “Easy there. You have been in an accident. You have a concussion and other severe injuries. You’ll be taken to the hospital shortly.”

The camera pulls back to show the subway station after the derailment. Paramedics are attending to the wounded and counting the dead. A cover is pulled over the lifeless body of <pick a different PC>. The camera continues to pull back and then fades to black.

Marvin is Given the Token

If the PCs give Marvin the token, read this description. Any actions the PCs might want to take at this point are moot and will be preempted by this resolution.

Embarrassed by your generosity, the train driver nervously but joyfully proceeds to the Midtown exit, inserts the token into the turnstile, and walks through. He turns back with a gleeful, almost childlike smile and gives a short wave before proceeding down the tunnel.

The camera returns to the opening scene. It enters the drivers cab and we see him at the controls. He winces in pain, squeezing his eyes shut, and places his fist against his chest. The pain passes. A speed warning light flashes and he slows the train down a bit too quickly.

Inside your car, the deceleration pulls you forward, knocking you off balance and perhaps spilling your drink.

If any of the PCs had taken the Downtown or Uptown exits, they appear to be asleep. When knocked forward, they simply fall over, lifeless.

Several seconds pass and the train pulls into the station. The doors open. Passengers embark and disembark. A busker with a guitar and harmonica plays softly and a passer-by drops a couple of coins into his guitar case.

Fade to black.

Comments on E&A Issue #8

Roger BW

RYCT Matt, what killed *7th Sea* for me was the map. It fell into the uncanny valley of obviously being based on Earth without actually being Earth. If you’re going to do not-Earth, make it more distinct. If you don’t want to do a historical setting, you could do an alternate historical setting. And if you’re avoiding a historical setting so that historical events do not limit player agency, don’t then create a metaplot that limits player agency to shape history.

RYCT me, “excessively negative” is not my middle name, but my subtitle. I once had a general manager tell me (during an exit interview) that I was too much of an Eeyore. People often think I’m a pessimist, but I’m actually a disillusioned romantic.

FYI, I was aware of your WWII campaign from IRTWD and my allusion to it was deliberate. :)

RYCT Avram, *D&D 3e* required tactical maps to make rogue sneak attacks work. There were preceding non-*D&D* games that required tactical maps, but since *D&D* has the widest reach, it set the tone.

RYCT Jim, a fantasy world can have a simplistic order to the planes and deities because they are demonstrably real. The religious power struggles and bloodshed we experience are precisely because this isn’t the case. One can create a fantasy world which has a messy religious and divine landscape, but that ain’t *D&D*.

Dylan Capel

I don’t understand how your stepped test system is supposed to work. Taking 10, 3d6, and d20 doesn’t sound like an escalation—more of a shifting sideways.

You could easily incorporate possessions becoming relics when a critical (like a “nat 20”) are rolled in appropriately epic circumstances. This could be open to player knowledge or something the GM keeps tracks of secretly.

Stranger Things evolved from horror to action with each successive season. Compare the deaths of Barb in season 1 versus Eddie in season 4. My guilty pleasure of season 5 was Karen Wheeler becoming a badass and facing off a demogorgon with a wine bottle. [But I have a weakness for badass women. I also loved that she didn’t hide her scars in the closing scenes. On the other

hand, they probably should have killed her off, but that's indicative of the tone of the season.]

I haven't seen *28 Years Later* or *The Bone Temple*, but I've been a Ralph Fiennes fan since *Schindler's List*. What made Robert Kirkman's "humans are the real monsters," tedious was that he kept saying it over and over and over to the point of tedium.

Regarding page counts, if we make an exception for comments, Lisa's zines would be 32 pages long! :D Seriously, if you look at the contributors who don't bother commenting, they aren't at the 16-page limit.

Another way to look at page counts is to start with how many total pages each issue should be. Issue #8 had 25 zines at an average of roughly 8 pages per zine. If the average length goes up because folks blow past the 16-page limit, your overall page count goes up. Folks are already starting to complain that 200 pages is too long to get through in a month. Plus, having issues dominated by a few ~~verbose~~ enthusiastic contributors can also have a chilling/alienating effect. I'd rather have shorter zines from more contributors than the opposite. And I definitely want every contributor to include comments.

Myles Corcoran

RAE the Mausritter write-up. I did catch an instance where you used "man" instead of "mouse" (or "guard" could have worked as well). Cruel of you to leave it with unanswered questions. In particular, why did Horace lie about the pouch and why didn't he come forward as an eye-witness to the murder?

RYCT Roger, in *Mekton*, you could pick to be a veteran with more skill points or a rookie with fewer points but you gained new points faster. If you played long enough, eventually the rookie would pass the veteran.

RYCT Mike and *Mausritter*, I think many games have rules that don't really get used but are included anyway because they're expected, just in case someone needs them, or it came up that one time in playtesting. I also think game designers may worry about completeness and being called out if they leave a gap in the system.

Michael Cule

RYCT Avram, the truly pretentious games are those with colons or subtitles.

Elf

RYCT me, of the 4 styles, I'm definitely a "b" with enough self-awareness to have the game flow and story shape some of my roleplaying and narrative choices.

Understanding the "rhythm of the game" is a significant barrier to my understanding of most indie games. Every game author carries a lot of assumptions that either do not make it on the page or fail to get past the reader's assumptions. Often, I want to roleplay and the rules are telling me to construct a story and it throws me off.

RYCT Brian, for a superhero game with some FATE genes, I recommend *ICONS*.

Regarding paid GMs, my short answer is that I don't want the relationship between GM and player to be transactional. GMs are not providing a service; rather, they are playing a game with the other players and the only difference is what their sphere of responsibility is. My snarky answer is, "If you want me to pay you to play in your game, I want you to pay me to play in your game." The GM needs the player as much as they need a GM. The argument that the GM has so much more work to do and should be compensated holds no traction with this GM. Lastly, I wouldn't want to play with GMs who thought so highly of themselves that they felt they deserved compensation.

Regarding dungeons, I will note that the difference between grave robbing and archaeology is time. Many rpg genres, not just dungeon crawling, place PCs into situations where violence is not only an option, but expected. Look at the violence in pulp stories of the early 20th century—you can't blame dungeons for that.

Avram Grumer

On Gender & Roleplaying, I find myself playing female PCs quite often—easily over half and probably two-thirds or more. The vague visual image of the character, including their gender expression, comes very early in my creative process. Why are most of these women? I don't have a good answer.

Many years ago, I encountered a player who was overly invested in his female PC and telling others about her. It seemed to me that he was playing a character that he wanted to have sex with. This has tainted my initial, knee-jerk reaction when male players talk about playing female characters.

If *Monsterhearts* has characters hurting one another, that's worse than PvP! I get anxious just thinking about

it. I absorb the emotions of my PCs too easily. I'm all for emotionally-charged roleplaying, but I'm not an emotional masochist begging to be abused.

RYCT me, as I see it, task-based versus goal-based resolution is a matter of scale. You could boil down the entire adventure to one "solve the mystery" roll or an entire fight into one "who wins?" roll, but that's boring, so we break it down into smaller chunks and more rolls. The only question is at what level of resolution do you stop? Forcing the player to individually search the closet, the filing cabinet, the desk, the air vent, under the rug, etc. is fine for a point-and-click adventure game, but probably a bit tedious for a tabletop rpg.

I see die rolls as aids to the decision-making process regarding what happens in the game. When to use those aids and in what context can vary depending on what's happening in the game and what kind of decision needs to be made.

When I'm describing my character's actions, I prefer a mode where I say, "I [try to] do X" and the dice tell me how well my PC did. If we have to pause to discuss stakes, outcomes, or consequences before the roll, it distracts from my roleplaying experience.

For your quipu idea to have full effect, it would be cool to actually make the physical object for the players to puzzle out. It does decrease the likelihood that they'll throw it away by shining a light on it. Now I really want to do it for a convention game.

RYCT Josh, Baker's noun-based versus verb-based talk sounds like a load of horseshit. *D&D*, as an example of an "old RPG," is all about modeling character actions. Granted, most of those involve fighting, casting spells, and disarming traps in a dungeon, but all those are verbs. But then, I find the moves of *PbtA* games rather counterproductive to immersion. Just replace them with ability checks without pretentious names and they become character-focused rather than story-focused. Same mechanic, different vibe.

Joshua Kronengold

You could have bumped up the font size given the extra space at the end of the zine and coming in under half of the page limit. I liked the choice of font, but I had to zoom in too much.

RYCT John, with so much of the US agriculture (especially vegetables, nuts, and fruit) based in California, invasive pests are a major concern. It's not

just Hawaii, but [some crops](#) (mainly citrus) cannot be legally imported into California from specific states or even any state.

RYCT Mike, given how *D&D* defines demons and devils, I definitely would not expect them "to interact a lot." To a lawful evil devil, a chaotic evil demon is just as abhorrent as a lawful good celestial.

RYCT Lisa, long ago, I wrote about how you can focus in on specialized sub-skills based on the focus of the game. I think my example was volleyball. However, you can run into the problem with players wanting to be good at every aspect of the core activity and sinking all their points there rather than traits that are good for rounding out characters but are superfluous for the game's focus. The system either has to force them to make trade-offs or give a separate pool that can only be used for non-core skills (neither of which *BESM* did).

In my current campaign, the PCs have accumulated a number of potions that they just don't use. Cool stuff like clairvoyance or gaseous form. I even gave them cards with the magic item picture and description to remind them, but the cards end up being tucked away in a folder or lost under character sheets and spell lists. I'm actively working against my default stinginess when it comes to magic items and it seems I need not have bothered.

Lisa Padol

RYCT me, I generally like how kin are defined in *Nightlife*. I don't know what system I'd use. My main issue is that I want to do *something*, but the brain worm is weak and not even hinted at a plot.

At the "oasis," what attacked the party was the oasis itself. Everything in the image I included (except the sand around the outside) was the monster. You can think of it as a huge mimic.

RYCT Roger, when playing with strangers, it can be easier to open up, be vulnerable, and/or do something embarrassing under the notion that you'll never see them again.¹³ With people you know and meet regularly and even consider to be friends, it can be harder to be open, even if they insist you are in a safe space.

RYCT Josh on narrowly-focused games that "allow for roleplay in ways *D&D* doesn't," please expand on this. Is it because they present situations and character

¹³ ...until you see them at the next con. <cringe>

dynamics not typical of *D&D*? Is it because *D&D* somehow curtails roleplaying whereas these games encourage it? Or something else entirely?

John Redden

RYCT Roger, if your Traveller GM is using GURPS rules, what makes it “Mongoose Traveller”? Do you just mean using the Traveller setting/source books published by Mongoose?

RYCT Mike, my wife had carpal tunnel surgery and she was thrilled that they let her watch while they did it.

Brian Rogers

RAE the Star Wars writeup. I appreciated the introspective footnotes.

Matt Stevens

Regarding your *D&D* replacement, if you are going to redefine the standard six stats from their *D&D* usage, why not rename them? Strength could become Brawn, Dexterity Fighting, and Charisma Divine Favor.

Someone with an 8 in any stat can’t have a 17 Strength?

RYCT Mike, as a tourist, sometimes the climate and weather are the most important things to note first so that you know how to dress and what to pack.

RYCT Josh, I don’t “get” GM-less play. It’s a lack of appeal that leads to a lack of exposure and a lack of appreciation gained over time. I could say the same thing about jazz (or hip-hop or most musical genres, actually).

Clark B. Timmins

I see “fail forward” as coming from a different thought process and concern than “players always win.” It is narrative momentum versus story resolution. Players can fail forward their way to a loss.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT me, I have too much to do as a GM than to try to NPC the PC of an absent player. Nor would I ask a player to play 2 characters. Not only does it add more load to the player (most of whom already struggle with playing their single character), but I have a distaste for trying to roleplay 2 PCs at once. Whomever plays the PC of a missing player, I would also feel terrible if that PC was killed.

Back in my high school (or maybe it was on a college break, but this was definitely with my gaming buddies in

high school), I joined a campaign as a one-session guest player. I took over the PC of an absent player. During the session, I was told I played the character better than the original player because I actually roleplayed.

RYCT Roger, when I played DC Heroes, the initiative declaration system was fine. To me, it didn’t really add anything to the experience except maybe slow it down. At times there were eight players, so that didn’t help. Every system suffers from the problem that characters should act simultaneously, but players need to act sequentially (if the GM is to have any hope of running the game smoothly).

Mark A. Wilson

I enjoyed the first-person perspective of the campaign write-up. I also appreciate the out-of-character observations and opinions.

RYCT Lisa, I concur with your observations. California law requires that job postings have realistic salary ranges, but sometimes they are ridiculously broad.

RYCT me, I don’t think any game system is perfect, much less *D&D* (any edition). For my purposes, *D&D* has the advantage in finding players and having limitless fan-created resources for it.

RYCT Josh, I concur with your thoughts on rangers in *D&D*. In *AD&D*, they had a cool vibe, but now every class is designed to have a cool vibe. When they designated rangers as strikers back in *D&D* 3e, I think it robbed them of their mystique.

Preview for next issue:



BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #47

February 20, 2026, for Ever & Anon #9

Gabriel Roark

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- In Closing

COMMENTS ON E&A #8

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To **Jim Vassilakos, Brian Christopher Misiaszek, & other distinguished readers of E&A**: Indeed, air shark bladders are filled with hydrogen, not helium. I can only plead the haste with which I typed lastish; I did not conduct an editorial read after completion of the zine. Oddly enough, when I was playing D&D 5e on February 15, one of my friends made the same error when talking about Arduinian air sharks with us.

Scribbles and Horrors (Scribble M. Horror): I am also a fan of the Rythlondar campaign notes & now your Redux Seasonal Report. My gaming groups would relish contributing to the various statistics & recalling their escapades. The seasonal report is a very useful contribution. Thank you!

Reddened Stars No. 6 (John Redden): RYCT that the Temple of Elemental Evil Campaign is an organized campaign, the players of the Frog Leg Gang are a big help. Tim keeps notes on his tablet as we go, which are useful for filling in gaps in my handwritten records. The group enjoys even the metagaming aspects of Advanced D&D. It is very much a collective effort.

Attacks of Opportunity 7 (Dylan Capel): I appreciate your capsule review of *Neoclassical Geek Revival* (NGR). The first place that I saw the game was at <https://spearwitch.com> & misread the title as “Neoclassical Greek Revival”. The conceits that you covered sound like they would enrich almost any fantasy game. As you stated, NGR’s relic rule is flavorful & ripe with roleplaying opportunities. The importance of holy ground is something that I might incorporate into our AD&D campaign because it seems like clerics serving the deities of the Temple of Elemental Evil should have some kind of edge when casting divine spells within the temple. Perhaps temple clerics cast spells as though one level higher & receive +1 on their saving throws within the temple.

Ossuary Wraith & Grave Sovereign (Clark B. Timmins): Clark snuck some IgTheme thoughts into his zine. I like the idea of the “thread tracker” to populate a campaign with unsolved mysteries, neglected plot hooks, & NPC motivations.

Firedrake’s Hoard No. 6 (Roger BW): Roger also dropped John Dallman’s wisdom on the matter of playing NPCs that are supposed to be cleverer than the referee. Lee Gold liked knowing the motivations of her NPCs as a guide to action. I think a Gold-Dallman combination of conversance with an NPC’s goals & a few predetermined strategies would be a strong hand.

Going to Be Ad-Libbed #6 (Avram Grumer): Bwahaha at your conceptual “We Didn’t Start the Fire” scenario. I’d play in that!

The Dragon’s Beard 93 (Patrick Zoch): I commiserate on the gold/experience woes of your gaming group. The longer that I run AD&D, the more I realize how abstruse many of the rules are. Gygax really did Frankenstein the system together & seems to have assumed that end users had knowledge of how Original D&D was played as well. It is easy to see how competing or deleterious rulings proliferate.

Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman): I look forward to the emergence of *Wanderer*, Jim.

Wahflestopper #9 (Blasted Heath Row): Hello, Heath! It’s good to hear that your return to Holmes’s sample dungeon was a better solo playing experience this time around.

Accidental Recall #7 (Joshua Kronengold): Thank you for defining *isekai*. I concur with your observation & sentiments about the “OSR/hippie-game split” in E&A.

IGTHEME

City-building for fun & adventure: what do I need & where do I start? This depends on the type of game that I am running, which is usually fantasy or science fantasy

adventure. In my campaigns, cities or other settlements are almost always home bases for PCs or places for them to equip, seek information, & train. Minimally, I am going to need to have an idea about where the PCs can obtain goods & what is on offer, the degree to which the city's offerings are centralized or dispersed (almost always dispersed in a city), whether the city has specific information brokers, & who can provide what kind of training for character advancement. I think of the city-building problem as having three broad pieces. First, who & what is in the city? Second, how much detail do I need to provide the PCs? Third, how the heck do I run a city when the PCs go there?

When running a published adventure or campaign like Advanced D&D's Temple of Elemental Evil (ToEE) modules, I am sometimes furnished with a ready-made settlement (although Homklet & Nulb are much smaller than a city). The ToEE modules provide much detail on the "village" of Homklet, the Frog Leg Gang's initial base in the southern marches of the viscounty. Homklet is hamlet-sized & the adventure characterizes & stats major NPCs in the settlement; describes every constituent building & structure, as well as their occupants; & identifies important relationships & possessions. The module does not provide names for all the NPCs. Nevertheless, the presentation is very useful. If I need to invent another small settlement, I would use Homklet as a template.

I also like to mine other gaming products for city details. Here, game system does not matter as much as having some good street maps, NPC descriptions, & sketched institutions; it is a simple matter to ignore game statistics that are incompatible with the system that our table is using. In our ToEE campaign, for instance, I base the town of Verbobonc on Chaosium's *Thieves World* box set. Although Chaosium provided AD&D statistics for NPCs (among other systems), the real draw was the maps, simple algorithm for generating businesses in the various town quarters, & relationships among NPCs.

Zak Smith's *Vornheim City Kit* (Lamentations of the Flame Princess) has served me well in running city adventures, especially defining NPC relationships & personalities on the fly.

A LOOK AT ARDUIN'S PORTAL TO ADVENTURE

Arduin's Portal to Adventure is a Kickstarter campaign that Emperors Choice Games (Empcho) brought forth (and that I backed) in October 2025. Many contributors & perhaps readers of *Alarums & Excursions* might recall that I am a fan of David Hargrave's Arduin Grimoire family of games & adventures. As far as Arduin material goes, Arduin's Portal to Adventure does not have any Arduin material that I do not already possess. That said, I like to preserve my original Arduin volumes & prefer to read & game with physical volumes, so the opportunity to obtain additional digest-sized Arduin Grimoire books was compelling for me. In addition to Arduin materials, Empcho worked with Matthew Tapp & the Fellowship of the Thing to offer distinct but compatible games as part of the Portal to Adventure. So, what did backing Arduin's Portal to Adventure get me? A whole lot of gaming goodness—so much so that I think I will require a few issues of "Bugbears & Ballyhoo" to provide decent reading review of the thing. Let's take this as an overview of what lurks behind the Portal to Adventure.

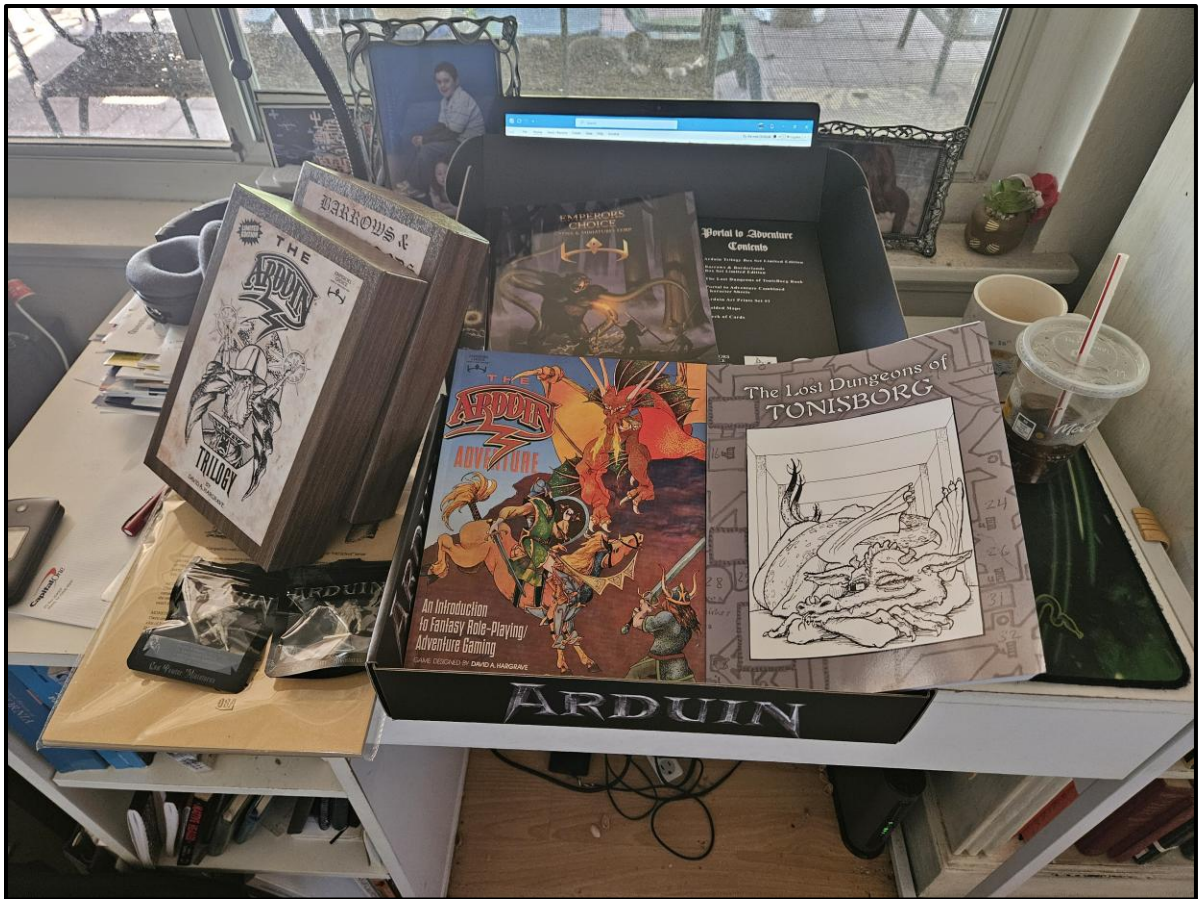
Arduin's Portal to Adventure consists of materials from the Arduin Grimoire, Barrow & Borderlands, & Lost Dungeons of Tonisborg. Arduin gaming products consist of the

Legendary Arduin Trilogy Box Set Limited Edition (five volumes), The Arduin Adventure, 72 cut your own card set sheets, four Arduin character sheets, a Monster & Magik Item Card, four Arduin art prints, two maps of the continent of Khaora (large & small sizes), & two decks of the *Swords & Dragons Card Game*. As add-ons to the Kickstarter, I ordered five unpainted Arduin pewter miniatures: a black phraint with heavy gun, human wizard, doomguard with gem, windego, & two sluggoths.

In addition, the Portal to Adventure contains the Barrow & Borderlands Box Set Limited Edition (six volumes) and four B&B Character Sheets. The historic Lost Dungeons of Tonisborg is a complete mega-dungeon module with OSR rules. The Portal to Adventure box set also came with two sets of polyhedral dice, five Portal to Adventure Combined Character Sheets, & an Arduin, Bloody Arduin backscratcher.

Here are a few pictures of the box set & contents:





In Closing

Celeste & I finished & passed our Pre-Alpha class in the Ice Sports Industry Learn-to-Skate program at the end of January. We started the Alpha class on January 30 & find it very challenging. Our coach is working the class on forward crossovers & learning how to skate a one-foot glide backward. We continue to avoid injury.

January 27 marked four years since Emma was taken from us. Legal proceedings against the accused are like the photo-finish of glacial moraine formation. Against this circumstance, we are grateful for our newfound ice-skating hobby.

In the next issue of B&B, I will begin an in-depth look at the Arduin Portal to Adventure. Most likely, the series will begin with the contents of the *Barrows & Borderlands* boxed set. With the Winter Olympics closing shortly after this writing, I expect to bring out longer zines.

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 7: 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.



Recent Games

2300AD / Bayern: group 1 (Whartson Hall) continues to poke at the Pleiades anomalies, but comes to the (correct) conclusion that there isn't much more they can learn and this might well be a job for a specialist mission prepared to stay on site for some years. But they do help their captain to be found temporarily unfit for duty so that she can be relieved of command and enter the node herself without abandoning her post.

(Captain Setai Zwelethini is my own NPC, captain of the *Entdecker* in both campaigns since no player wanted to take that job. She had a solid career in the Azanian Navy, then transferred to the exploration service when the Navy wanted to put her behind a desk.)

“She’s been in the Azanian Navy pretty much since there *was* an Azanian Navy, it’s quite new as a spacefaring power, and they got most of their initial training from the Royal Navy, so they’re kind of... hardcore about a captain’s duties.”

“Zulus, sir! Just one, but she’s *really* hacked off.”

We’ve moved on to the Hyades, where the group is poking at the million-year-dead ruins of an alien civilisation and wondering what happened to them — and whether it might happen again. A variety of evidence (the

gathering of which is briefly interrupted by murder scorpions) points to a place where a star used to be.

Group 2 (monthly) has caught up and briefly overtaken, tracking down the ex-star by occlusion and sending in a probe (stutterwarp ships can’t get close enough, and while some ships of the flotilla have enough reaction drive capacity it’s a bit hazardous to risk them). Sure enough, there’s a sphere of electron-degenerate matter, not enough mass to form a neutron star or a black hole. A cold star like this is both impossible by current theories and clearly the result of deliberate action, but there’s not much more to learn here.

And Group 1 has overtaken back, and gone on to the next stage, an emergency beacon on a planet. An Earth emergency beacon. Way out here where nobody has ever been before.

I’m still very much enjoying this campaign, though some of it gives the feeling of having been written in haste by someone who knew a fair bit but didn’t have a chance to do much research. There’s a monument inscription in the Hyades section which simply makes no sense as described; I’ve had to reinvent it from scratch.

Amazing Adventures / The Heart of Yhtill: We casually skip the planned act 2, because it seems like an obvious red herring,



Strand Magazine, 1892

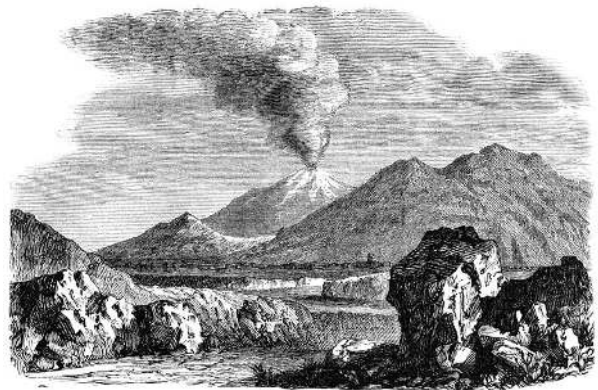
and follow the missing husband to Arabia, where he appears to have become possessed by an ancient evil. (Good solid case for divorce there.) We are all trying to be determinedly non-racist in the face of e.g. repeated references to “temples” rather than “mosques”; I guess that’s how OSR rolls. Personally if I sent my PCs to Saudi Arabia in 1935 I’d note that it’s only *been* Saudi since 1932 and there’s still a lot of state paranoia about someone either seceding or overthrowing Ibn Saud, but while the GM’s doing a good job of patching over the gaps this is clearly not the level of setting that the scenario was trying for. This was a much more lightweight session than most of ours, which are pretty lightweight to start with, as we were all variously feeling a bit tired or low, so we had a good friendly natter as well as playing the game. (This is why we are not, and don’t want to be, the next Critical Role.)

(Also we’ve put this on hold because all of us in the Whartson Hall group are fairly busy and it’s easier to pick up where we were after a one-week gap than switching games back and forth and playing each once a fortnight. So we’ll finish the current tranche of *Bayern*, then return to this.)

The Day After Ragnarok: Inside the lab building on the covert Japanese base, there’s some sort of cave fisher that picks off one of the wounded ex-Japanese soldiers, and then turns its tentacles on us. It doesn’t like megajoules of microwave energy, though. When it falls out of the shadowy rafters it proves to be some sort of human-octopus composite. The evacuating Japanese soldiers are a bit reluctant to come back towards the gunfire, and we have a couple of minutes to search the lab. They have indeed been working on shark-men and an “octopus angel”, and Don has severe doubts about whether it’s worth taking *anything* from here.

“Or maybe they just looked at *The Fisherman’s Wife* waaay too much. What? I’m cultured.”

We retreat to our landing point and call boats for pickup, then take cover in an attempt to ambush the pursuers, which doesn’t go as one-sidedly as we might like; but we get away mostly unscathed and leave the island before the volcano explodes.



Mont Hecla. oldbookillustrations.com

Unknown artist, 1891

Next we set off to Macau to assess and perhaps “acquire” a lost artifact that’s coming onto the local black market, the “Jade Scroll”, supposedly from the Chinese Bronze Age though its provenance before the last two hundred years seems to be quite shaky. We go in mildly

undercover (no Marconi guns!), and after a convoluted route intended to elude any followers arrive in what's currently an uneasy outpost of Portugese-Spanish administration on the coast of land contested between China and Japan.

Non-roleplaying news: my copy of *Sentinels of the Multiverse: Disparation* has finally arrived (crowdfunded in March 2023, originally expected in mid 2024). Given various shenanigans this may be the last expansion, but it's a good one. I now have a total of 24 heroes (and 68 variants), 32 villains (each with two variants), and 16 environments to have fights in.

And I've completed my collection of *Ashes Reborn: Return of the Phoenixborn*. For those who don't know, this is a deck-construction duelling game like *Magic*, but with fixed boxes (you always know what you're buying) and, I at least think, rather better rules. Also the community is *much* more welcoming to a filthy casual player like me.

Getting Heirs in Pendragon

Why are there still averagely wealthy knights in *Pendragon*?

I will assume one opportunity to get an heir each year (i.e. just one wife or mistress).

Table 5-5 Childbirth:¹ on a d20 of 12 or 14-20, a child is born. On a 13, twins. So that's 8/20 one child, 1/20 two, for an expected mean of one child per two years. (I will ignore the chance of the mother dying as it doesn't affect anything later.) Cut that in half for the possibility of a female child.

¹Those references are to the 5.1 core rulebook, the latest I have, but the odds are the same in the versions 3, 4 and 5.0 that I have readily to hand.

Then the child gets 15 years of 5-6 Child Survival Table, and dies on a 1-2. So 90% chance of survival! Per year. 90% to the power of 15 is more like 20-21%. So overall:

$$\frac{10}{20} \times \frac{1}{2} \times \left(\frac{18}{20}\right)^{15} \cong 5.15\%$$

For each reproductive year you have something like one chance in 19 of having a male child who will live to adulthood. But also in each reproductive year you stand a non-trivial chance of getting killed or maimed on an adventure: this is an old school system and it's quite happy to kill you off. (Also, ideally you want that child to be old enough to take over as a PC, i.e. have made it all the way to adulthood, by the time you die or become unable to adventure, or it's time for guardians, previously-unknown distant cousins, etc.)

Your character shouldn't necessarily *want* to be a wealthy knight, depending on where you sit on the Pious-Worldly axis, but if you want your line to continue you pretty much have to try. Those numbers are for an knight of Ordinary wealth. The Rich knight gets +3 to childbirth (mean of 13/20) and +1 to child survival (95%), which raises that 1 in 19 to more like 1 in 6.6. The Superlative knight gets +5 on Childbirth and +1 on survival, 1 in 5.8. Though the chance of the mother dying never changes. (Meanwhile the Poor knight is at -3/-3, 7/20 children per year and 75% annual chance of survival, which pushes his yearly chance of a surviving heir down to about 1 in 430. Let's not even think about the Impoverished.) The Average-wealth knights should be dying out, and their estates redistributed to their richer cousins.

In other words the game is forcing you to act out of character and try to get to at least Rich, if



John Everett Millais, 1861

you want to participate in the dynastic game which is one of the main elements that raises *Pendragon* out of the pack of fantasy games. (Or, I suppose, try to get lots of bastards, but then you need to be out on the Lustful axis instead and the same problems of characterisation arise.)

And that's the basic tension, and my main problem with the game. I could enjoy playing a grungy manor micromanagement game in which I'm building beehives and finding good marriages for my children, and I could enjoy playing a game of heroic knights in which I'm off questing against monsters, magicians, and women... but trying to do both with the same character has always felt like a wrench. In Malory's world, even the lowliest knight aspiring to join the Round Table some day doesn't worry about where his next charger is going to come from, unless he's The Impoverished Knight and that's a part of his story. But in *Pendragon* every game seems to

have a Dead Horse Mire (under where you built the stables, obviously) and unless you get a steady flow of rewards beyond regular manorial income you're simply going to run out of money and your family will die out.

City Building for Fun and Adventure

(what do you need and where do you start?)

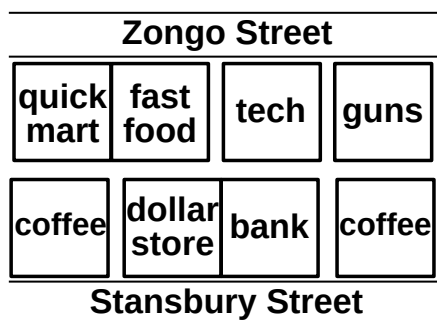
For me a good city book does two things, which overlap a bit. It gives you geographical information, and it tells you about people and power structures.

I've seen comprehensive geographical city books, as in "you're on this street, what things do you see"... but I've never used them in play. I do very much like the idea; when I was living in London, I'd use streets I knew, and drop in an extra business or two of adventuring relevance. But somehow it's never seemed appropriate in other settings.

The *Night City Sourcebook* for *Cyberpunk 2020* (1991) has about the worst interface for this I've seen. For the overall city area, there's a series of "flash maps" for things like Colleges & Fine Arts, Hotels & Lodgings, Clubs & Nightlife, etc.; then there's a series of full-page maps each covering a roughly 3x4 block area, but labelled *only* with numbers, so you end up saying "OK, that building on the left is number 3, (flip flip) Continental Detective Agency, they'll be closed now, and over the other side is 17, (flip flip) Social Services Agency, it's a Mafia-run brothel..." Since each full-page map only has about 20-30 locations, there would be plenty of room to label them with names. There are no street names on any of this. Oh, and some of the locations on the flash maps don't appear at all on the zoomed-in maps, and vice versa even

if it seems they should. There was also a large fold-out map tucked into the book, the zoomed-in maps all tiled together and prettied up, with as far as I remember *no labels at all*.

So from that I can learn that what I actually want from a geographical city book is a map with named streets and named buildings along them, while an index tells me where to find each building and each street by name. So step one is that the PCs plan to go to location X, so I find that in the index and look it up on the map; step two, something inevitably goes awry, what's nearby that might be interesting? I don't demand a full-size tactical map; "street with buildings along it" doesn't usually have that much variation. But I'd like a representative diagram, something like this. (I'm not going to make up lots of names for this example, but in theory they would all be specific organisations. Usual disclaimer, I am not a graphic design guy.)



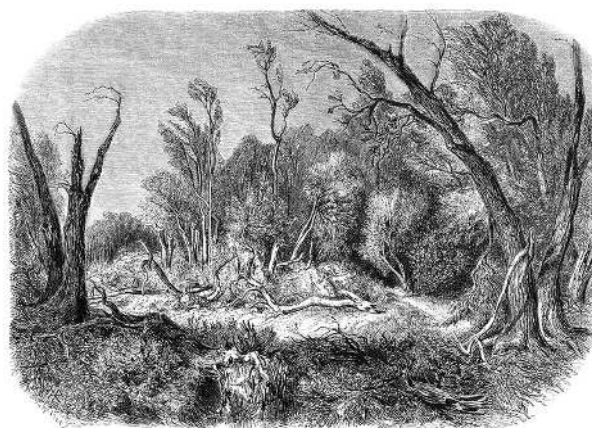
RogerBW, AI0-BY-NC-SA-1.0 2026

"You come out of the tech shop, and you hear gunshots from somewhere around the back, and an alarm's going off in the same direction. What are you going to do?"

In my *Hurricane Season* campaign a few years ago,² I used the real-world Jacksonville map,

²Basically *GURPS Monster Hunters* set in the Weird Florida of Carl Hiaasen and Tim Dorsey, with a lot of petty crooks with large-calibre guns and poor impulse control.

and built a list of locations with latitudes and longitudes as an overlay onto it.³ [The campaign web site](https://tekeli.li/hurricane-season/) (https://tekeli.li/hurricane-season/) is still available. The great thing about this for me as a GM was that I could glance over it and immediately see the locations of significant events in previous adventures, and that gave a feeling of depth: oh, this firefight is happening just a couple of blocks over from where the sewer shark ate your car that time.



Auguste Cardone, 1857

I did flirt briefly with the realm management system that made its debut in the *Kingmaker* adventures for *Pathfinder*, in which you drop buildings into your capital city's desperately ahistorical grid layout, most of them quarter-block squares but some larger, and these have various positive or negative effects on the realm's various economic and governance numbers: e.g. a graveyard costs 4 build points and gives you +1 to Economy and Loyalty, while for the same cost a brothel gives you +1 Economy, +2 Loyalty, and +1 Unrest. I don't think any of us in that group was terribly impressed; one player in particular found a way to set up a

³Google Maps used to be able to display this sort of thing, but now you have to sign in, and I won't have a Google account, so I did it with OpenStreetMap and leaflet.js.

realm with zero taxation that nonetheless constantly produced a surplus of funds (even without the PCs' topping it up from loot, though they did that too).

I'm very slowly working on a writeup of Oldcastle, the notional Scottish city more or less on the site of Montrose that's used in some of Stuart MacBride's tartan noir stories. A friend of mine has done this adaptation already for their World of Darkness games, but I want to make a version that's a bit more focused on the material from the books, without the supernaturalism. It's a city of mostly corrupt and a few honest cops, untouchable crime lords, tawdry nightclubs, and a lot of desperate people... not to mention more serial killers than the rest of Scotland put together. (Maybe something to do with the poison gas that was made here during the War.) Sadly I can't include it in any final product,⁴ but one of the books has a city centre map (in the style of an A-Z, a British city atlas series) in its endpapers, which is a great start.

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 8

Cover/Aaron Cornelius: I'm not a big Art Guy but I do appreciate this style. Do not disturb the cat or you'll *really* be in trouble.

Mark A. Wilson: my immediate thought is whether the city's time shenanigans might be tied to the state of its nominal ruler.

RYCT Lisa Padol/6: I've only once actually been informed that I *hadn't* got a job, and that was from the BBC, a generally stodgy and old-fashioned organisation.

⁴There's no artist credit, but I have to assume the book's copyright covers it.



Frederick Sandys, 1861

Re *Skull Queen*: I think this suffers from the publisher giving it a title connecting it to the unrelated *Skull King*. I agree, it's a very pleasing game in its own right.

Scribble M. Horror: I tend to feel that the ultimate output of RPGs is good memories and the occasional anecdote.

Elf: I have some very specific feelings about certain tarot cards for my own use⁵ but I find that using a deck with symbolism that *doesn't* suit me well is a good way of jarring loose different inspiration from the usual. For example, Norbert Lősche's Cosmic Tarot, which has a gallimaufry of influences but for me comes down to a mix of Egyptian motifs with a very 1920s style of interpretation of the human form that isn't at all consonant with my usual approach, gets a completely different adventure from the one I'd write if I'd used my usual St Petersburg Tarot. Rider-Waite-Colman has so

⁵e.g. the Hanged Man also has the aspect of the crow, who wins it all by playing the long game.

much baggage attached to its imagery now that it's hard to separate early intent from what's been accreted since.

Agreed on extra/variant cards too — painting a tarot deck for me seems like Oulipo, accepting a deliberate constraint in order to produce better art, and if you can't take the constraint don't call it tarot.

I'm working very slowly on an NPC personality system based on tarot cards, loosely derived from the GDW NPC system (for which you'd draw two cards, and e.g. clubs would indicate a tendency to violence, hearts a tendency to sociability, etc.). Clearly a full spread for each NPC would be too much, though I keep being tempted.

RYCTM: I am aware that the AI-mongers won't pay any attention to the licences I use any more than they do to anyone else's, and they will get away with it because they have persuaded many suckers to give them lots of money. It's just a statement of my preferences.

Re RPG dating: style would be a huge component for me. I'm very much in the “nerts to combat optimisation, I want my character to do what they would do if I weren't here to prompt them” school. Which is fine if players and GM feel the same way, but doesn't work well with a mixture.

And re dungeons, yeah, well, see my conversation with Jim V on “evil” gods and races, and pretty much this is why I don't do dungeons. (Also worth noting how it shares the colonialist narrative of “empty” and “unclaimed” space with the Western story, not surprising given pulp fantasy's ancestry.)

Matt Stevens: In Daniel Keyes Moran's *The Long Run* the time zone you set your clock to in

space is a political statement (UN-standard New York time, older national colonies on GMT, or Belters with the ten-hour “screw Earth” metric day). Fonts to me already do a perfectly good job of carrying emotional context without adding political weight too. So I applaud your continued decision to use whatever you like.

RYCT Avram Grumer: My dim recollection is that *Toon* scooped up pretty much all of the comic-RPG market until *Paranoia* came along. *Ghostbusters* had a little enthusiasm, but I never heard of anyone playing it more than once or writing their own material for it the way I did for the other two.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: there is this ongoing narrative out there in social media space that GMing is very hard and unrewarding, and nobody wants to do it, and the people who do want to do it are bad at it. I see this being used to push GM-less games, and GM improvement Patreons, and such like. But it's absolutely not in keeping with my own experience.

John Redden: RYCTM oh sure, quantum computing is a real thing, and one day it may get somewhere useful. But the same BS merchants who used to push cryptocurrency, and have recently been pushing AI, are starting to push quantum computing ready for when the AI bubble bursts.

RYCT Brian Rogers, in Portugese *lua* is the Moon, which is what inspired the programming language of that name. I will have to remember the Hawai'ian meaning next time I write it.

Lisa Padol: As I understand it (and you probably already know) the Shakespearean concept of disguise was accepted because in the outside society clothes were very much specific to one's status — and even when it would have



The Strand Magazine, 1891

been legal, too expensive to use different ones for casual disguise. So if you meet someone dressed as a priest, or as a young aristocratic man, you assume that that's what they are because that's what people dressed like that have *always* been before.

RYCT Matt Stevens on starship repair: in a recent Mastodon conversation in which someone was saying they didn't get on with *Traveller* because in their experience it often got into sale price modifiers and ship maintenance and generally "space accountancy", I replied: "If you have one player who enjoys space accountancy, you can hand it all off to them and just ask them 'which planet should we go to next'. Often that player is me." (In Mike's *Traveller* game in 2023, my merchant character invited the other PCs to invest in his speculative trade fund, and doubled its value over the course of the campaign.)

"Lots of people tried to kill us. You didn't warn us that would happen. It was terrifying. To think I said I wanted excitement." (Harri, merchant captain)

"Lots of people tried to kill us. You didn't warn us that would happen. It was great! There's life in the old war-dog yet." (Rafe, retired Imperial Marine)

RYCTM: not-Steve hasn't wrestled a sea monster *yet*. The campaign is young.

RYCT Myles Corcoran re Jennell Jacquays and *Central Casting*: I believe a friend of hers was hoping to finish and release the revision (perhaps to be called "Central Casting: Legendary Heroes"?) that she had been working on, which had got as far as art (from Jeff Dee) and presumably layout, but I haven't heard anything about it lately.

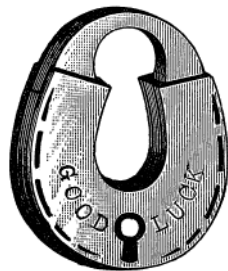
RYCT Michael Cule: what I like **GURPS** players to tell me is "passed by *N*" or "failed by *M*", because they know I may not have told them all the modifiers that apply. (In return I will sometimes say "you did nothing wrong, that should have worked, but..." as a clue that there's more going on than they know about.)

Re IgTheme/7 and "take care of him": in the 1928 film *Lights of New York* (which IMO has a better claim to "first real talkie" than *The Jazz Singer* since it has dialogue all the way through, but the actors are still using the silent-film stagey style) there's a lovely moment when the crime boss is telling his henchmen to "take [the hero] for a *ride*" and they really aren't getting it.

Re IgTheme, if I want the PCs to start off captured and without equipment, or whatever, I just *tell the players* that that's what I want to do. I've known GMs who would try to rig a combat to lead to this, as famously in the transition between modules A3 *Assault on the Aerie of the Slave Lords* and A4 *In the Dungeons of the Slave Lords*, but I'd rather just say explicitly that this next bit of adventure is about the escape from the dungeon and we can flash back later to how

you all got here if we need to. That requires the players to be able to trust the GM not to mess them about excessively, of course.

I am very often inclined to turn a success roll into a time or quality roll instead. Yeah, you picked the lock, but you took ages over it and now a guard has just turned the corner. Or you did it really clumsily and left scratches all over it that the cops will be able to read. In other words, less “you can’t go that way” and more “yes, but”, like a milder version of the *Gumshoe* “you always get the clue”.



Myles Corcoran: big fan of *Extra Pepper*. I don’t use it when I’m introducing the game, but otherwise it’s in every play.

RYCT Michael Cule: I’m reminded of *GURPS Gulliver*, a third-party labour of love for third edition to let you have PCs on completely different size scales from each other. It’s impressive and complex... and the vast majority of size-bending games would be better served by simply saying “OK, the default scale for this game is ‘mouse’, if you fight a cat we’ll treat it as a giant”.

RYCT Brian Misiaszek: also I thought the opening chapters of *Nettle and Bone* were very much in Kingfisher’s horror register, even though it shifted to fantasy later.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: I’m afraid those new illustrations now look to me like stills from a modern TV show; modern actors simply

cannot properly replicate the look of actual people of the 1930s, and this system is clearly trained on a mixture of images.

On the other hand, I very much like the atmosphere of suppressed horror here, where everyone knows something and everyone knows that everyone else knows, but nobody will speak. That is real horror for me, that sense of tension waiting for someone to crack, much more than a monster that goes “rar”.

And at this point I suspect some of the more nervous of the staff may start to become obviously on edge, leaving them potentially vulnerable to an observant and manipulative PC.

RYCTM, my goodness I wouldn’t want to try this in Pulp mode! (Though as you say, one could.)

Dylan Capel: I think that *D&D*’s generic magic items (“Sword, +1” etc.) did a great disservice to the concept; to me, if magic is just another reproducible technology, why not play with technology instead? In a world with many many adventurers, fair enough, but I prefer any magic item to be something a bit special, with its own history/legend.

Meta: yes, you can have a default named parameter. Here’s a trivial example:

```
#let foo(a: "bar") = {  
  strong(a)  
}
```

```
#foo() // "bar"
```

```
#foo(a: "baz") // "baz"
```

I’ve been doing [the Weekly Challenge](https://theweeklychallenge.org/) (https://theweeklychallenge.org/) weekly programming problems in Typst among other languages, and it’s been a good way to get the hang of it as a

programming language as distinct from the layout side.

RYCTM: I wish more game designers would do (or borrow) probability calculations rather than just saying “that feels about right”.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold I’m also using emacs as my main editor, though not in a terribly hardcore way (i.e. only as an editor, not for news, mail, calendaring, etc.).

Patrick Riley: regarding name cards, in the *Space: 1999* game at Stabcon that I mentioned lastish the GM had little chalkboards with wooden stands for us to write our character names on. These are apparently used for restaurant place settings and such like, and can be had quite cheaply. I’m tempted, though I don’t run a lot of face-to-face games any more.

Re *An Unlikely Circumstance*: have you read Olivia Waite’s *Murder By Memory*? Not the same idea, but a similar atmosphere.

RYCTM: yes, heretic. 😊

Clark B. Timmins: By definition, whatever the players have fixated on is something they find interesting. It doesn’t feel like my place as GM to say “no, that’s a bad thing, be interested in this instead”.

Michael Cule: Well yes, combining being the only player who *could* with the only character who *couldn’t* geek out about nuclear icebreakers was mildly frustrating. And yes, the adventure was somewhat on rails, but I think a convention game often should be.



Sole survivors of the Second Furthest Foot, eh? Ooh, you lads are going to be on *show* as the brave soldiers who can take the worst the barbarians can dish out and sneer at it. Make your wills now.

Of course, if you were doing it more *Brazil* style, since the paperwork says the Legion was wiped out to the last man, sorry chaps, got to keep the records accurate...

Re IgTheme: I know some of the weirder *Monster Manual* entries (like the bulette and the owlbear) have been traced to a specific bag of plastic toys, but I don’t think the gelatinous cube was one of them; for a start it appeared back in White Box *D&D*.

RYCT Matt Stevens: when there was still a Staples near you, they’d print A1 colour and A0 monochrome for quite reasonable prices.

RYCTM: I have a preference for actually planning, and so do most of the people I play with, but I know some players don’t feel this way.

Gabriel Roark: I find it particularly interesting that several of your PCs have names suggesting they’re relatives of each other. Is this something that comes out much in play?

Avram Grumer: I like to play cross-gender sometimes, probably more than most people I’ve played with, but I think that’s mostly a wish

to explore the full gamut of character possibilities more than anything else. I also sometimes like to play religious people, or casually violent people, and I'm not either of those things.



Arthur Boyd Houghton, 1866

Re Scum and Villainy: I particularly like the way you've been able to integrate soap-operatic elements. I've never been a soap fan, but I think they have a lot that RPGing can usefully steal from them.

RYCTM: Newton was born on 25 December 1642 according to the Julian calendar in use in England at the time (it changed to Gregorian in 1752). If I needed an exact number of days since that moment, I'd use the converted date of 4 January 1643 as you say; but during his life, his birthday was on what everyone around him called 25 December, so that's how I choose to celebrate it now.

RYCT Lisa Padol RHCTM: there's a transition I noticed particularly in my *Irresponsible & Right* campaign (occult WWII), which started off as very much agency-based (your mission this time is to...) but, particularly towards the end by which point the PCs had become quite powerful within the world, tended to start with

the players deciding what ongoing problem they wanted to tackle.

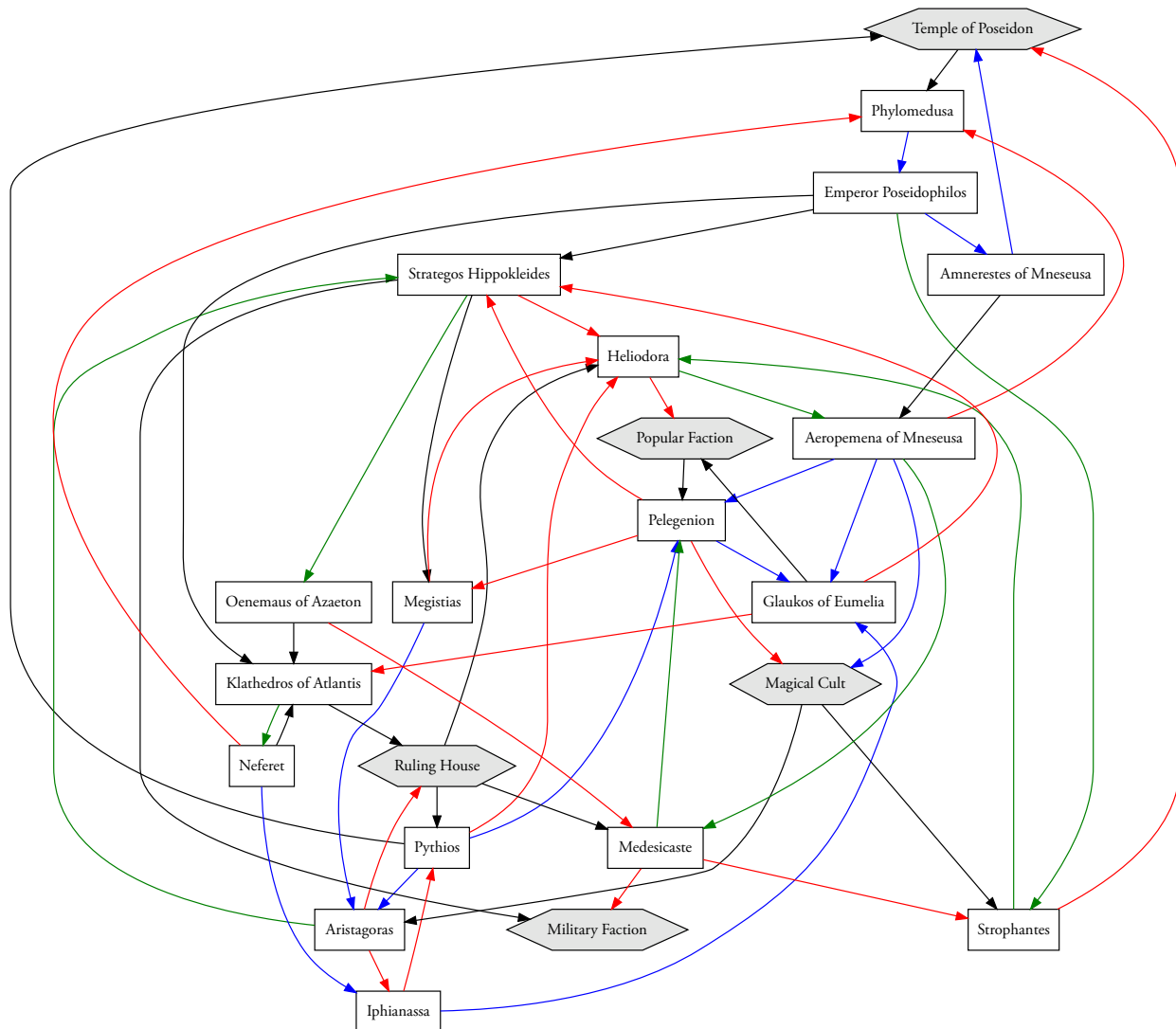
One thing that helps me make this shift as a player is a lush background: lots of NPCs and organisations and generally fiddly little details that I can interact with. That gets me ideas and feelings, and I may well brew up my own conflicts out of wanting to help some people and hinder others. Of course if that's not compatible with what the GM wants to do in-session it can be set aside, or dealt with in downtime.

(A small tech note: I've used the Graphviz software to do relationship diagrams, such as the one on the next page from my *Last Days of Atlantis* in 2005-6. Black arrows are command, blue friendship, red espionage and green attempted protection. I'm not sure how useful it was, in the end, but it certainly helped me keep things straight in the early days when I was trying to remember which NPC was which.)

RYCT Joshua Kronengold RHCT Patrick Riley: and a coherent design language can make a game easier to learn and play, even if it's as simple as "everything you try to do will be resolved by *this* mechanic", compared with a new mechanic for each special thing as in early *D&D*.

Re copyfitting: my primary goal in the layout of my zines here (and everything I lay out, for that matter) is to make something that the intended audience will find easy and pleasant to read. This is a thing I find it helpful to remind myself of every once in a while.

Patrick Zoch: re the "Your Turn" marker, it feels like bribery, but fair enough if it works! Most crucially, I think it's important to frame it this way, as "if you do this thing to help you get a bonus", rather than inverted as "if you aren't



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ready you get punished”: it’s mechanically the same effect, but psychologically positive versus negative.

RYCT Elf: I think one could also make a case that what characters spend money on for advancement would vary by character: a barbarian would spend it all on wine, women and song because that’s what a barbarian *should* do, while a paladin feeds the hungry, a thief tactically loses at cards to get in with the guild boss, etc.

Re Location³, I think this is even more important in games that have diegetically negative outcomes. *Why* do you risk your life and your sanity tracking down tentacled beasties? (An early innovation which I think was codified in *Trail of Cthulhu* was to make this part of character generation, getting the players to create characters who *will* do that rather than sit safe at home given the option, because that kind of sustained motivation can be a real problem in horror games and this gets them to buy into the idea up front.)

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT Patrick Riley, one particular consideration regarding the intersection of role-playing and combat for me is the question of when one side surrenders or runs away. In the real world, this is often as early as when 1/3 of a force is out of action or when one side is clearly outmatched, but dungeon tradition makes every fight a fight to the death; when I was running my *GURPS* / *Pathfinder* hybrid campaign this was explicitly noted in the *Kingmaker* modules. If I have fairly rational NPC opposition and the PCs have made it clear that there *are* ways out other than that fight to the death, often the NPCs will take the option that doesn't involve dying. (But I'm not playing games in which the fight to the death is what we all came for; fair enough for groups that are doing that.)



Gustave Doré, 1854

RYCTM: sorry I was unclear, I do understand the mechanics of the *Fiasco* end-game resolution; I just don't see *why* having come off badly in all my attempts to do anything during the game should lead to a better outcome than having come off well in some and badly in others. What, diegetically, does this represent? If the answer is "Roger, you just don't get the genre," well, fair enough.

RYCT Michael Cule: also a successful bandit group is expecting to ambush a group of travellers then retreat to lick their wounds and divvy up the loot, maybe taking a week or two before the next ambush, while the PCs probably have to go through rather more violent events between chances to heal up naturally. And as with piracy,⁶ what the bandits want is a quick surrender much more than a fight, and especially not a fair fight. (My canonical thing for bandits to say when ambushing what turns out to be PCs: "Oh, sorry, I thought you were someone else. Nice day, isn't it?")

Jim Vassilakos: RYCTM I think the *DC Heroes* system may be the same idea as what Brian Rogers mentions in #8 for *Star Wars*: "declare up, act down". I don't remember ever having actually played it, though. The thing that immediately strikes me as tricky is the need to keep track of what everyone has declared while one unwinds the stack in the resolution phase — not just an initiative order which can be fiddly enough, but a planned action for each character. Probably a dry-erase board would help.

RYCT Pum: in a collaborative writing exercise *-cum-* USENET newsgroup I was involved with a few years back, there was a stall on the way up to the dragon's cave where you could buy salve of protection from dragon fire: **guaranteed!** Indeed, if it didn't protect you your heirs would get the (not exorbitant) cost back. It may have smelled quite strongly of garlic butter...

Timothy Collinson: I'm glad the table was useful! (Of course, if anyone would like the CSV file, or the code I used to generate it, just drop me a line.)

⁶Thus the prevalence of hourglasses and skulls in the Jolly Roger: the message is "you don't have a chance, surrender now and we'll go relatively easy on you".

The PHOENIX NEST



BUILDING MY LEGACY

This burst of egotism is the latest handout in the AEGS: THE INSTITUTE campaign.

&-&-&-&

THE BURNED OVER DISTRICT

This Information is extracted from Chronicle Master Jaeger's book: THE GREAT FIRE AND THE POLITICS OF NEGLECT.

The Great Fire happened in the Third Year of the Ninth Expansion. YC 4125. Every child in the City is taught that date. They mostly know the heroic tales of the fire-fighters and the sacrifice of the mages. The political consequences are less commonly taught.

The wave of immigration (mostly refugees from the Colonial Wars) had finally pushed the City into the Ninth Expansion but finding a place for those immigrants did not happen instantly. The new lands had to be surveyed, the money had to be found. They huddled in the City because that was where they could get a roof over their heads.

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Most people did not wish to take up a life in tents and temporary structures out on the fringes even if it was the way to claim public lands for future generations.

There was tension between the newly arrived and the long established. The Crowded Quarter was fuller than it had ever been and the frankly slum-standard buildings were overcrowded. Those who could not find a place to live there spread into the Seeker's Block, the section to the East of Temple Street between the Second and third Circles. Called Seekers because that was where the lesser religions and smaller communities had their core and their places of worship if they couldn't afford the rent on a front on Temple Street. If you were looking for a religion to suit you that was where you went. And then the Fire broke out. The Temple of the Lord of Fire (supposedly built by the perhaps legendary King Rigel of Hyneria) held ceremonies that involved huge fire pits and tests of firewalking. On an evening in the Seventh Month, those fires got out of control despite the elaborate precautions the City authorities had insisted on. It was said later that the fire had raged as if it were an intelligent thing and some mystics claimed to have sense 'a presence' in the

flames but the mages shrugged and the Gods of the Fane said nothing.

There was widespread panic as people tried to rescue what little they had or their sacred treasures. The streets around the block were clogged with fleeing people and (more shamefully) with gawkers and fools. The limited fire service could not get through and the water mains proved inadequate due to the reservoirs being low in the summer.

By the time the Magicians Guild had gathered a squad of their most powerful elementalists the fire was too strong. Several of the oldest and most powerful mages gave their lives preventing the fire from spreading across the streets. The transformation of the Guild into the Institute was born of those losses.

After three days, the fire was over and the block was ashes. Then the real trouble started.

The political parties and factions, the Civil and Diplomatic Services, the remnants of the Army were all concerned with the disaster that had been the Colonial Wars. The revolutionary fervour of the Liberators was still strong and it was feared would spread to the City. They had yet to accept their defeat and it had strained the political consensus to allow the admission of the waves of refugees from the Loyalist factions that had been ousted from the former Colony Worlds.

Now a part of the heart of the City was ashes and there was no clear agreement about what to do. The problem of how to rebuild was referred to a Commission (which reported ten years later: the proposed redevelopment was a masterpiece of urban planning). And in the meantime people with nowhere else to go went back to the sites they had some claim on (or to ones no-one had any clear claim on or to ones where they could terrorise the people who had a real claim), cleared the rubble and started to rebuild.

Which leads to the peculiar winding streets of the Burned District. To the mixture of styles and the general inconvenience of the place. The

plumbing and the power lines are notoriously haphazard and it retains a reputation for housing the best eateries and the worst public health in the City.

Every so often a motion comes before the government to rebuild it in part or in whole. This never gets anywhere.

Things might have been different if the Gods of the City had not chosen to withdraw from active manifestation at this time. No one knows the reasons for this.

The mess of the Reconstruction of the City centre and the forced resettlement of the Loyalist Exiles to the edge of the Eight Expansion (where they're doing very well but still resent what was done) led to the establishment of the first Control Of Immigration Act.

&_&_&_&

That's the political theme of the campaign firmly introduced. The idea of the Colonial Wars came to me in the writing and will be expanded later on.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

The result of me jabbing myself once a week has been... ambiguous.

I have experienced for the first time in a long, long time the sensation of looking at my supper and thinking 'I can't finish this'. I understand this is what it's supposed to do.

And I've taken my bradawl¹ out of the tool box and punched a new hole in the belt on my jeans to ensure they don't fall down.

But actual weight loss has been less stunning. I will continue the course in the hope that larger doses will finally be enough to have some effect.

¹ A tool for making small holes in things.

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS

Player Characters:

Alan as ESHAN, a Seven Mothers worshipping Nobleman with a lot of social skills

Graham as VOSTOR a worshipper of the Lunar war god Yanafal Tarnils with a dark secret.

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

Martin as SANDENE, a (female) scout/sniper because some people have to be different. But still worships YT. But not as different as...

Pum as KEANUS another heavy infantryman who worships Humakt just to prove the tolerance of the Red Goddess.

Non Player Characters In this Episode

VISHI: A High Llama rider and a slave in Vostor's family since he was five. Sent to keep an eye on the Young Master and not let him put his foot in the politics. Too late for that,

THE JANITRIX A retired military hero, now the manager of the Insula the squad is living with.

GREGORY A chaos sniffing nomad child.

GREGORY's dad a nomad immigrant.

JOMES THE BARMAN

PHARNASTES:THE CHIEF OVERSEER: A very important (and much overburdened) investigator.

SENATOR PAULUS LONGVALE the Master of Circuses.

SENATOR JAXARTE WHYDED An Architect.

FALERIA AGGARIA, the Senator's daughter

SENATOR FALERIUS AGGARIUS her dad.

A squad of Grey Guards. A Middle Aged Female Secretary, Servants and Bodyguards

And A Very Important Person

AID TO THE CIVIL POWER ²

GM: I am now going to bring Pum up to date. Please correct me if there is anything wrong from what you remember.

(Sarcastic Laughter)

GRAHAM: We found some stuff, we hit some stuff. It died. The End.

As you will remember I had kidnapped Pum's character to give the others something to do. He had been snatched while consuming large amounts of booze to drown his sorrow at the death of his Legion.

GM: Alcoholic mourning is a custom among many peoples. You went off with this woman, you vaguely recall and then you woke up with a bag over your head hanging upside down and in considerable pain.

KEANUS: This wasn't part of the fantasy I paid for.

Keanus was then interrogated by someone who regarded their friend the Senator as a traitor. He resisted nobly, mostly because he didn't know anything even when they applied hot irons to his extremities.

GRAVELLY VOICED

INTERROGATOR: And what is the Bright One doing among you?

KEANUS: Bright One?

GVI: Why is he hanging around with this bunch of minor military functionaries?

Keanus didn't know but thought Jarathir was likely the one being talked about. (Pum-The-Player knew that Drak's character was edging towards Illumination. But not Keanus.)

KEANUS He's a soldier like me? Not even a sergeant?

At Alan's suggestion, I asked Pum to make and INT roll to see if he could deduce something from the voice he heard. He rolled an 03.

GM: You have heard that voice before when he raided the home of the Senator....

DRAK: It's the ManBat!

PUM: I wasn't there for that...

GM: Ah.³ Then you don't know that but you will recognise that voice again. He's got an unusual about his vowel sounds. He's not using standard capital dialect.

I unwisely tried using Newcastle vs Received Pronunciation as an example.

MARTIN: Are you suggesting that Newcastle is a provincial city....

DRAK: Full of violent barbarians...

GM: Ummm....

PUM: Wearing t-shirts in the middle of winter.

GM: He's trying to do a proper Capital accent and not quite making it. Like me when my vowel sounds go all Northern.

GVI: I can't feed you to the one I want to feed you to. It would be noticed. But I can have you fed to someone else.

KEANUS: I taste awful....

GVI: I shall feed you to the Spider.

Keanus felt a hand on his chest, two pulses of magic and then darkness took him.

When he came round, he was still tied up but the right way up. Someone was trying to chew their way through his neck. He screamed with the pain.

KEANUS I specified tentacles not mandibles!

Then there was crashing about and thrashing about. Then there was the sound of fight with cries of 'Over here!' and 'Ow!' in familiar voices. Before he passed out again one of his comrades was treating his wounds.

He came around on the couch in the living room of their apartment, heavily bandaged but completely recovered. He and his comrades had a mutual debrief.

JARATHIR Remember the woman who you thought was very beautiful the last time. Head ran away when you chopped it off? Same girl.

KEANUS I had to do important ritual mourning of my fallen comrades. There were so many I had to do a lot of it until I was completely paralytic.

They told him of the Chaos sniffing abilities of the nomad child who lives on the roof.

When Keanus went to thank Gregor and ask him to report any Undead the child might sniff to him, both Vostor and Eshan noticed that Gregor sniffed heavily and sometimes sneezed loudly when Vostor spoke.

Sandene was unconvinced about Gregor having any ability to detect undead.

KEANUS It's just that I hate undead.

SANDENE Well, I hate Praxians but they don't smell bad to him. Vishi doesn't smell bad

³ That is the 'ah' of GM embarrassment.

to you does he?

GREGOR: Oh no. Apart from the lentils.

VISHI: Would you prefer the black dal?

JARATHIR Isn't that lentils still?

VISHI: Yes, but they're black. And spicier!

The City was quiet. Most of the places of entertainment were shut: street musicians had been Had A Quiet Word With.

GRAHAM: Even the mimes aren't working.

DRAK: People might laugh or feel happiness.

And that is not permitted at this time.

The soldiers were in the bar downstairs having lunch. The bar had cancelled its Happy Hour in respect for the period of mourning.

KEANUS I don't associate Death with not being happy.

JARATHIR The opposite of Death is Fertility. So it's sensual pleasures that are opposed by a high Death Rune. Mind you some people think 'pleasures of the flesh' doesn't mean bonking.

VOSTOR: Look, as long as I keep my Death Rune up I'm allowed one shag for every three things I kill.

JOMES THE BARMAN: Who told you that?

VOSTOR: It's how I deal with it. Just because I'm big on Death doesn't mean I don't....

KEANUS People can enjoy it as long as it hurts.

JARATHIR *(After a moment of silence)* Can you tell a Truth cultist too much information?

A group of Grey Soldiers⁴ turned up asking after 'Eshan, officer of the Furthest Second Foot' and after checking that these were his comrades asked the entire group to accompany them. So they scraped their bar snacks into bits of bread or down their throats and went along.

⁴ I've been calling them the 'Grey Soldiers' but going back to the source material it's actually 'The Grim

The Grey Guards didn't object to their snacking on the way and didn't ask for their weapons which probably indicated this wasn't arrest.

They were led to the Palace of Glad Rejoicing. They were led up a set of stairs well away from the front desk and the long line Eshan had spent time (it only seemed like eternity back then) being very bored in and at the end of which he had been mistakenly arrested. They went up to some impressive rooms on the top floor. Statues and murals of parades and mythical Lunar scenes. Their escort led them past the line of petitioners waiting to see a Very Important Person and presented them to the secretary (Female, middle aged, Dragon subtype) who sent them right in as soon as the last person left the office. There was a grinding of teeth and an outbreak of jealous whispers behind them.

Jarathir looked around for any sign of what they were getting into and being literate had no difficulty in seeing this was the office of the Master of Circuses. He didn't mention this as he was maintaining the fiction that only the Officer could read.

SECRETARY: Please surrender your weapons to the guards.

Within were two gentlemen in their thirties, both dressed in the robes of Imperial Senators. One of them stood and waved them forward.

"Ah, come in, come in.... I've heard a lot about... Oh, stand at ease. I'm the Master of Cicuses, my name is Longvale. I am here to thank you for the work that you have done. The supervisor of the Grey Guards Phranastes is full of your praises. I am here to tell you that you will definitely be featured, possibly quite prominently, in the Emperor's Parade when the period of mourning has come to an

Soldiers'. They're the police force that Chief Overseer Phranastes oversees.

end. And there is consideration being given by the bureaucracy and the political arm to giving you further awards beyond the ones being given for your valour in battle."

VOSTOR: Thank you!

The Senator looked at him as if he had just exposed himself in public: proof that this Senator at least could read rank markings.

"I hope you will not feel that we are putting you in an awkward position but we do want to ensure that your presentation and the presentation of a new standard to be replace the one we assume is lost... That may or may not happen but you will definitely will have a central role in the ceremonies. I have been ordered to design those ceremonies. There will be a rehearsal and a script. Your part in it will mostly be marching and saluting which am sure you can all do properly. Please be aware that your courage...."

DRAK: (To Alan) Please make an Insight Human.

ALAN: (Rolls) Yeah.

DRAK: Several members of your unit are staring at you hoping you will chip in to this conversation. Sir.

ESHAN: Thank you, sir, for the honour being placed upon us.

SENATOR LONGVALE: Your place of honour was considerable before this and events have pushed you to the focus of many peoples' attention. The word has gone out to the Guard that you do in fact exist and instructions have been issued not to bother you. But people do not always obey instructions.

ESHAN: May I ask a question sir? Do we know if there were any survivors from the Second Furthest?

SENATOR LONGVALE: Reason says there must be but confusion is very great. You get that when there's a dragon flying around. We are getting contradictory messages. The

Moonboats have not yet been restarted. The destruction of the nearly completed temple has caused problem up the line of the Temples of the Reaching Moon.

PUM: Will there be a horse and cart replacement service?

He assured them that units were being moved south to rally there and restore order. Fazzur Wideread had been restored to command of the area. "And he will doubtless be delivering his usual excellent service to the Empire and to the Goddess."

He told them there would be a messenger from his office in the next few days to bring them to Inner City for rehearsals of the ceremonial part of the Parade. "It is an honour to be admitted to the Upper City. Please be suitably attired. I would suggest your dress uniforms so they can be inspected at the rehearsal."

He then introduced them to his companion, Senator Paulus Longvale, "He is being commissioned to consider the advisability of constructing a memorial to those who died in the Dragonrise. He may wish to ask you a few questions about your knowledge of the persons involved. I'll leave you to him."

He instructed his secretary to issue them a note each from him saying that they are acting with his authority and were to be given every co-operation in matters related to the Emperor's Parade.

I asked Pum to make a Listen roll which he failed. I then turned to the people who had been in the Senator's mansion during the notable nighttime intrusion. Eshan specialised and none of the rest got close. And at that point Eshan realised that the Master of the Circuses had the same accent as the Man-Bat.

DRAK: Why that's ridiculous! He's some sort of millionaire playboy! Why would he be doing dressing up as some sort of bat-related vigilante?

Eshan for a miracle kept any of this from crossing his face.

JARATHIR We are in no way Imperial City parade ready. Sir.

He suggested lots of practice and consulting a local for tips about how to march in front of the Emperor.

VOSTOR: Tell me if I'm wrong but this chitty⁵ says that people have to assist me in anything regarding the Parade. Does that include *I need Glamour spells to look better.*

SANDENE How long do you think the parade will last and how long will the spell last?

VOSTOR: Just the bit where I'm going past the Emperor?

JARATHIR Do you think the Emperor wouldn't be able to see through it? I think everything that gets ordered on this chitty will eventually come back to matey-boy and when he sees 'Tarting Up Spell For Vostor' he may think "I'm not going to pay for that."

Eshan took the matter of new uniforms and parade practice to the Janitrix. She took the suggestion to heart and volunteered herself to organise a place for practice. Her eyes bulged a little at being shown one of the chitties. They assured her they did not want to abuse the privilege they had been given. Except for Vostor.

JANITRIX: I happen to know where there's a parade ground and indeed an entire camp which suddenly doesn't have anybody in it.

To which Our Heroes said "Oh, yeah!" (See last month's zine.)

She resolved that they would gather the next morning at ten, march to the parade ground and have a day of instruction.

⁵ A British army term for any slip of paper that has been issued officially. A Chitty might allow the .

KEANUS Wonderful! Marching up and down is my favourite thing ⁶

They asked how they should refer to her during the exercise at which point she swore, saying that she just realised someone was going to call her 'First Spear' again which was a thing she hoped she had left behind her.

'First Spear' is the senior NCO in an Imperial Legion.

Faleria Aggaria, the Senator's daughter, turned up that evening saying she had heard they were going to have an honoured place in the parade. She seemed a little nervous and not sure how to talk about the real reason she came around. She asked Eshan for a quiet word. She took him to a booth in the nice restaurant across the street.

She advised him to order the mushrooms and then started talking about Fazzur Wideread being restored to command on the southern front. "Something that my father had been working on for a while. It's sad that it had to happen the way it did. Would you be so kind, when you return to the south, to take a message for him from us?"

DRAK Here is a box. Do not mind the ticking.

When he said, yes, of course, she went into a sincere but doleful thanks and praise for his courage in protecting the trollkin. He modestly pointed out he wasn't there. "Well, no but they are your people and they did very well. I'm not quite sure... There's a lot of excitement in the air and these are times when changes can be made but they are also dangerous times and if you become too closely associated with my father you may find yourself with more enemies than you have at the moment. I don't know how many enemies you have already."

bearer to access services, equipment or leave.

⁶ Not sure if serious.

ESHAN: I don't think I'm important enough to have any enemies at the moment.

FALERIA: You're going to be parading in front of the Emperor. That will give you reputation and that brings enemies.

ESHAN: Umm, how much do you know about the person who goes about dressed as a Bat?

FALERIA: Well, he's obviously a very disturbed person. Let's talk about that after we finish our meal.

After the meal on the way back to the Insula she said her family believed the Man-Bat was part of the Cult of The Crimson Bat. "He is probably a Feeder. I don't know if you know but there was a loss of the entire upper hierarchy of the Cult of the Crimson Bat when it was slain. First they sacrifice others and then they sacrifice their own people and it was not enough to repair the Bat and keep it in this world. So there was a call put out for someone to volunteer to become the new Priesthood. And there as a volunteer for the rank of Chief Feeder. But the name has been withheld. There are disturbing rumours... You have seen this fellow going about the rooftops taking those he regards as criminals. The rumours are that this is part of the attempt to feed the Bat and bring it back to the world."

"When he encountered my father, when you met him, he seemed to be convinced my father was a traitor. My father is loyal to the Empire and to the Goddess but politics is a murky affair. I do not know if the fellow is sane or not. You'd *have* to be mad to volunteer to be part of the Cult Of the Crimson Bat."

Eshan, shared the information that Keanus had given him about the distinctive accent of both Senator Longvale and the person who had kidnapped and tortured him and which the Man-Bat had exhibited.

And then she did a quick impersonation of that accent and then said that was the accent of a hill barbarian from the border of Dorastor

DRAK: A Lunar Wales!

GM: Yes, even more wet and miserable!

ESHAN: I hope that information is useful.

FALERIA: That information is terrifying!

The more so when she heard that Keanus had been a captive of the Man-Bat and interrogated about 'the traitors'.

FALERIA: (*About Senator Longvale*) He is known to be a wit. He is a very charming person.

She resolved to see what she could find out.

In the middle of the night, Jarathir had to get up and go to the loo. Sandene was awake, knitting and polishing armour. Vishi was asleep on the sofa snoring.

On the ground floor, he paused and heard a cry coming from the yurt on the roof where the Char-Un family were squatting.

Jarathir looked up and saw something obscuring the stars and plunging down towards him. The thing was winged and its eyes were glowing red.

Sandene was oblivious and continued knitting socks.

He got out of the way and saw the humanoid figure recover from the dive and head up again. It had bat like wings, a military breastplate and brass knuckles. That was about all that could be seen in the imperfect light. Except for the frustration rage and puzzlement on the face.

It flew upwards and out of the insula. Jarathir rushed up the stairs trying to catch up to him... But failed.

Sandene did hear the sound of feet pounding up the stairs and found Jarathir panting and pointing upwards. Sandene looked up and saw

the bat wing thing pass in front of the moon. Jarathir managed to get off a Disrupt spell and Sandene whipped out a sling and called upon the power of Death.... Which just clipped the ears of its helmet

Jarathir went up to the roof and found the paterfamilias who was the one who had spotted the bat-thing. He wondered if the creature was specifically after Jarathir but reflected 'everybody look same from above in middle of night'.

The fellow asked if his son had been annoying them and on being told he had been very useful said: "Does not seem likely. He is strange boy."

Jarathir went down to the ground floor and had 'a really, really good piss'.

The conversation over breakfast had at least something other than what Vishi had done with beans for their meal.

The GM asked for suggestions as to which skill should be involved in 'marching up and down a bit'. Worship Yanafal Tarnils was one, Battle another. Graham suggested Herd which Drak said the Janitrix would be using.

Eventually, I went for her instructing them in Customs.

They went off to the parade ground. and spent the day being shouted at her and being dazzled by her shiny armour and enormous number of decorations.

She grudgingly said that they now looked a little better and by following her instructions on what else they should buy to augment their dress uniforms they might just get by.

At that point, there was the sound of a horse drawn carriage coming up.

It was Senator Falerius Aggarius. Night was falling.

SENATOR: Have you seen my daughter?

KEANUS Not since last night.

JARATHIR That could have been phrased better. Not since she visited the officer yesterday evening, sir.

SENATOR: She said she had words with you yesterday and that you gave her some information that she wanted to follow up today. She left early and I have not seen her since. I am worried, she is normally home by now...

Eshan told him what they had discussed the night before.

SENATOR: She has a tendency towards overconfidence. I think she has gone and poked into something...

ESHAN: She has gone and spoken to the Senator, probably.

SENATOR: That would be a bad thing.

ESHAN: Is he the most powerful...

SENATOR: No, no. He is someone In Favour.⁷ He is generally reckoned to be a dilettante scholar and half a barbarian himself. His family are all semi-lunarised barbarians out in Dorastor. But he is currently in favour with the Imperial Court. I must appeal to you. If she has gone to... I need to go to a Temple.

JARATHIR Do you wish us to accompany you, sir.

SENATOR: I wish you to ready yourselves. But yes, would you escort me.

He went to the Temple of the Emperor and when he emerged said that he could not get a clear answer to where his daughter was, merely a vision of the Bat.

JARATHIR She is on the Moon?

SENATOR: She is in a place sacred to the Bat.

⁷ In Favour With Moonson is understood here.

JARATHIR I thought the Bat wasn't allowed in the centre of the Empire.

SENATOR: There is a rumour that there has been a change in policy about Bat feeding. There is a rumour that the new Chief Feeder is turning to those who offend against the law.

His best guess given the information he feared very much that she was in the mansion of the Master of Circuses.

There was a moment of silence. Eshan said that of course they would help.

KEANUS We need to go and talk to him about the parade.

JARATHIR He gave us a piece of paper authorising us.

SANDENE Are we going to go and demand her back?

KEANUS We need her for the Parade.

SENATOR: You might be able to use that to get into his presence. What happens after that I don't know.

SANDENE Who would you normally report an abduction to in the City?

KEANUS The Grey Guard.

JARATHIR We've been ordered to report to him⁸ before we do anything stupid. No slur on the Senator's plan but it comes under the category of things we're supposed to report.

So, they woke up the Chief Overseer from his nap. Standing in the courtyard at the Grey Soldiers' barracks in their best uniforms with all of the fancy bits. And the Janitrix in all her glory.

CHIEF OVERSEER PHRANTES I don't actually have the authority to arrest a Senator.

VOSTOR: Surely another Senator does?

COP: No. Chairman of the Senate.

SENATOR: Ah.

SENATOR: Do you know what his favourite charity is. Orphanages. Because he himself

was an orphan. His parents were killed in front of his eyes. By a street criminal when he was quite young.

GRAHAM: That's Graham laughing. Not Vostor. What's going through Vostor's mind is orphanages being useful places to find people to sacrifice to the Bat.

COP: I suggest you go as the Senator's escort. That might get you through the gates. *(They showed him one of the chitties)* How useful. I'd like one of those.

Vostor tried giving him his but they gently explained that the writing on it had his name included.

JARATHIR It's the mystery of writing.

Eshan was the one who had to persuade the person at the gate of the Master of Circuses to let them in. He went with Charm (boosted with Honour) and showing them the chitty.

Once inside the courtyard, the chap at the gate went to fetch the Senator.

GM: They're not going to let you into the house.

DRAK: Looking around for obvious prisons....{RATTLE} You know I've been rolling lots of zero somethings? Zero-Zero!

The rest of them gave it a go. There were signs of an archway and Sandene Had A Thought. There was an archway that indicated to her practiced eye that there was a waterway running under the building. A subterranean channel ideal for getting people into and away from the place surreptitiously.

The soldiers broke ranks and started nosing about. They could hear (and smell) the water behind the elaborate barred archway. They discussed greasing up the officer and slipping him through.

⁸ Meaning Chief Overseer Phranastes

At this point the Master of Circuses came out, all languid curiosity on seeing his Senatorial colleague.

LONGVALE: Are these chaps with you?

SENATOR: They've been staying at one of my insulae. I've found them very reliable.

LONGVALE: Indeed.

Jarathir stared (perhaps a little alarmingly intense) at the face of the Master of Circuses. Was that, he wondered, the same face he had seen in the night, distorted with emotion and half masked? The line of the jaw was the same, the nose was the same. The eyes... well the eyes weren't glowing at that moment so it was hard to tell. There were no wings but the height and the shoulders were right.

Keanus listened carefully to the languid voice. Different tone, no rasping but the way he pronounced his 'e's and his 'a's was exactly the same.

SENATOR: Have you seen my daughter today? I understand she called on you.

LONGVALE: She called on me earlier today. She wanted to ask me some questions about people I may have known back in my homeland. I was not able to help her and she went away again.

The group decided (based on their Insight Human skills) that he was lying through his teeth and waiting to see where this encounter was going to go.

Jarathir muttered to the officer that he was convinced that this was the figure he saw in the night.

Keanus decided to be more proactive and murmured (loud enough for Longvale to hear) "She's probably hung upside down with a bag over her head."

Eshan muttered to the Senator "He's definitely the Man Bat."

And then Vostor decided to ready his sword because there's nothing like that for clarifying a situation.

GRAHAM: We did say we were going to do something stupid.

PUM: If you're going to chop his head off be sure to say "I'm doing something stupid, sir!"

I decided it was combat time. And it was confusion and blood for a short while. Longvale used Rune Magic and sprouted wings. He really should have put up Shield because in the next moment Vostor took off one of his legs and the Senator fell to the ground, incapacitated and bleeding. The other Senator cried out in shock as blood from the wound splattered his toga. A bat fluttered down from the eaves but neither the fallen Senator nor his familiar could get the attention of their patron deity.

So it was just as well that Jarathir aborted his attack and knelt to try to heal the fallen bat worshipper.

GRAHAM: Do you shout "I am doing something stupid" first. I had to.

DRAK: No, this isn't stupid.

Servants and guards came towards where their employer had fallen.

Vostor, sword still dripping with blood, grabbed someone and demanded to know where the girl was. That didn't work when the chap he had grabbed tried to poke him in the eye with a knife he took out his frustrations on him.

Keanus headed towards the entrance that Longvale had come out of to find out what he could.

Jarathir stood over 'the prisoner' and by their Senator keeping guard of both.

Keanus found himself in a magnificent tiled entranceway. Of the three people there only

one was saying "You can't come in here!" The others had more sense than to say that to a fully armed soldier. Keanus hated Chaos because his grandfather had been eaten by the Bat so he let all his wrath at the current situation boil up as he roared "Out of my way!"

The butler though unarmed and unarmoured said "Go away you nasty person! The Master doesn't want you here!"

MARTIN: You even did a British accent.

*GM: That's **my** British accent. I'm not doing Alfred or anything.*

ALAN: Alfred would be more effective.

I had to explain to Pum that he couldn't use his Detect Enemy spell to find the Senator's daughter because she was not in fact his enemy.

He then knocked 'Alfred' away with his shield and started a search.

Outside the Senator was looking at Vostor with disgust but he started to project his voice in a manner likely to make him heard across the Senate floor.

"Bring me my daughter and I will not slaughter the lot of you!"

He winced at the internal rhyme but he none the less managed to intimidate one of the servants into revealing that the daughter was being held in an underground chamber.

Keanus was ahead of and already searching. But had not a single idea in his head of how to find what he insisted on calling the Bat-Cave.

Then the others came in, leaving the Janitrix to guard the fallen Senator. She did not even draw her sword but just took up a guard stance over the unconscious nobleman.

Some of the servants by now were getting the hell out of Dodge. The intimidated servant

was begging not to be slaughtered. He led them to a strongly reinforced door which nonetheless yielded to an improvised battering ram in the shape of a pillar that used to have a statue on it.

Beyond the door were some stairs leading down to a damp cave with bats hanging from the ceiling.

DRAK: I want to know what the Bronze Age equivalent of a bank of computers is/

GM: There's a large set of scrolls...

PUM: There's a Bat Abacus.

GM: The equivalent of the Bat-Mobile is a large gondola on the river. It has the design of the Crimson Bat on it.

DRAK: Is there a stand with a set of armour?

GM: Yes, a set of iron armour.

They found the daughter unconscious, tied up and having been tortured. The Senator carried her out of the cave snarling at the servants.

Vostor was making to steal the iron armour until the Senator pointed out it was the property of an Imperial Cult. "You do not want to rob the Crimson Bat now do you?"

VOSTOR: Are you saying leave it here because it's evidence.

SENATOR: I'm saying leave it here and you will be safe from the bits of the wrath of the Crimson Bat you haven't already aroused. You are helping me enforce the law. Do not go around looting.

JARATHIR This is not a battlefield.

VOSTOR: Can you designate it a battlefield?

JANITRIX: You got her then? Not too much trouble? I called a little bit of help.

Then they heard on the nighttime breeze the sound of a semi-amateur marching band playing very enthusiastically. There were glockenspiels involved.

And then the Marching Band of the Cult of the Great Sister entered the courtyard. Behind it on a palanquin was the Great Sister, Divine Goddess of the Imperial Economy (amongst other things).

SANDENE Short of getting the Emperor around I think that will do.

JARATHIR We needed an authority.

GREAT SISTER: *(To the Janitrix)* Report!

And then it only remained to grant them considerable rewards in the form of a burgeoning Reputation stat and an extra point of Charisma for just being known to be awesome. (“You’re the guy who chopped the leg off a Senator? Let me buy you a drink!” “You’re the guy who raided the Temple of Uleria? Are you some sort of puritan?”)

DISTRACTIONS:

Whether DIE HARD was a Christmas movie and whether SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE was a feel good movie.

GM: Pum has lost faith in Google!

EVIDENCE OF GM MEGALOMANIA

GM: I am the Secretary! I disavow all knowledge!

GM: Reality intrudes only as much as I allow it to.

JANITRIX: Do you have a use for a bucket of dung?

JARATHIR Never, ever ask someone like Vostor if they have a use for a bucket of dung. The answer is yes and you don't want to know what it is.

The story of the undead, Frankensteinian whale in the Upland Marsh. GM: It took an

awful lot of stitching together. Transported in barrels, pickled!

IGGY'S THEME: CITY PLANNING

Some useful things to have when you start planning a city.

A map. At least a sketch map. I promised the players a map in the first session. I am not noticeably more advanced on this now than I was then. It doesn't help that my city has a peculiar outline of concentric circles caused by the Expansions of the City. It's not something standard fantasy map generators seem suited for except perhaps CAMPAIGN CARTOGRAPHER.

I would suggest creating the map along with your players. There are actual gaming frameworks for doing this of which I might mention the recently published POLIS.⁹

I am not doing this but am putting down individual locations as they are needed. I didn't know that the old Temple of The Fire God is now the Central Fish Market until this last week. I also created the Yellow Plaques that the City puts up to mark historic locations so that I could stick one on it. (They are like the London Blue Plaques but yellow and in a rounded oblong like the symbol for a TV screen rather than a circle.)

You might also look at things like MICROSCOPE and its relatives to generate history. I didn't do this but using the history as it already existed in my head and in a lot of random notes. I'm making it up as I go along in order to make sense of the present day City and to hide some secrets about it where the characters can fall over them.

Oh, and you also need a Mythical background and a Theme. This is at the core of the creation and the purpose of your city. This is where you decide what the point of the campaign is and what you are creating the City to make possible.

⁹ THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF E&A: Which you haven't tried out yet. ME: Yeah, but it wasn't really suitable for AEGIS either.

It's possible to do that collectively.... But that isn't mostly my style of gaming. I think you need a tone and a focus for the campaign before you scribble your first note, before you pitch it to the players. I wanted to do a Magical School Story and I decided to put it in a place that I already knew something about, a place that straddled worlds. I was partly saving myself work and partly resolving that my magical school would not be isolated from non-magical society but involved with it. I found the way Hogwarts and the magical world were separated from mundane Britain a strain and resolved to do something different.

Your methods may vary. I think it would be more possible to do co-creation of a city if you were in a definite fantasy genre. I have a dozen products that will flesh out a DnDish city and even old products like the CITY BOOKS that could be dissected and dropped in as needed. But this time I'm doing something different.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 8

I like the change in cover style! I also liked the earlier ones!

MARK A. WILSON RYCT LISA PADOL:

I got very used to hearing nothing on jobs I applied for, often not even an acknowledgement of receiving my application. Towards the end of my search for work, perhaps as a result of just getting old and venerable, things started to change and I even got (once or twice) feedback about why I hadn't succeeded. They seemed surprised that I was surprised to hear from them.

Scams were more common when I was a fresh faced young actor. People claiming to be agents who only existed to con you into buying photos done by a friend of theirs which had none of the defects of the photos you came to the interview with.

And then there were the people who wanted me to work for nothing. I was never rich enough to have an acting career I fear.

SCRIBBLE M. HORROR: Welcome, welcome Mr Horror. (Or is it Ms?) // "the main function of DnD rules is to produce interesting character obituaries." I think ROLEMASTER or maybe HARNMASTER is the champion at that. The first has the most detailed and ridiculous critical hit tables and the second has no hitpoints but only descriptions of injuries. Whereas DnD always boils down to: And then they ran out of HP...// The idea of a 'goal-tracking system' strikes me as something I could really use and simultaneously something I would never get around to creating. // The Tarot driven game looks interesting. I have a Waite-Ryder deck and a copy of Alfred Douglas' book for Penguin: THE TAROT which I use when I want to find a Tarot reading writing prompt. // I have a somewhat disapproving feeling about using AI to create character portraits that I don't get from using my collection of 90s fantasy art collectible cards (gathered for EVERWAY). May just be Old Guy's Reflexive Disapproval.

JOHN REDDEN: RYCT Me The needles are itsy-bitsy short needles that just have to go into my general flesh and flab. Not the Ruddy Great Needles that they used to use...¹⁰

LISA PADOL: : RYCT Me: Thank you for assuming I was using a variant spelling rather than just getting it wrong. And thanks for the kind words about the zine, **RYCT**

AVRAM GRUMER: I think we used to split the difference on FORGED IN THE DARK games. I wanted and I think the players wanted enough of a planning session to have a general discussion about the approach to the game and enough information to set up that all-important first scene. The players eventually mostly got over their tendency to want to ultra-plan.

ATTRONARCH: I like the art in your zines.

¹⁰ THE PPOE&A: That's enough! X-Card! TMI

MYLES CORCORAN: RYCT Me: I seem to recall a TRANSHUMAN SPACE (or perhaps it was ECLIPSE PHASE) scenario in which the PCs awake on a space station and gradually discover that they are abandoned clones (or perhaps robot copies) of famous film stars.

PATRICK RILEY: Re Ighme: What form do the 'character signs' on the GM scheme take. What are they written on (presumably dry erase of some sort) and how are they attached. I don't normally put up my GM screen for my favourite systems (GURPS and RQ/BRP) though I probably should for RQ. The current arrangement (mostly to aid my dreadful memory) is a blank plastic standee in front of each player with their name and other things I should remember on them. This isn't ideal because my eye-sight isn't that good either.

One day I will have a VR visor with floating titles above each player's head with their name and their character's name and details. By the time this comes around I may not be able to remember to put on trousers but a man can dream.

RYCT Roger BW: I don't object to a bit of ketchup on the side of the plate but slathering the fish in it is a Bit Too Much.

ROGER BELL_WEST: Re SPACE 1999

I think the existence of this game is evidence that the brains of my generation are being overwhelmed by nostalgia to the detriment of critical thinking. (WHAT FOLLOWS IS EITHER A SPOILER OR ADVICE ABOUT HOW TO RUN THE SCENARIO BETTER OR BOTH) Not only was the mystery on the planet not solvable until you left the planet we didn't have the knowledge to realize that there was an alternative to abandoning the ship trapped in orbit until we had decided to abandon it. If there were clues to be had they had not had Robin Laws' Rule applied to them.

But more than that: SPACE 1999 looked good but made no sense overall and less sense per episode. There are probably good stories to be told about a Moonbase mysteriously careening

through the Galaxy but this isn't one of them. Having to turn my brain off so as not to ask the questions about how all this was happening was too much of a strain. Everyone involved should have known better, starting with Gerry Anderson and the writers.

How would I do it? There's a series by David Weber starting with MUTINEERS MOON in which our moon turns out to be an ancient sapient warship from a destroyed Empire. (If you think that's ridiculous remember the DR WHO episode where the Moon is an egg!) I can see a variant where the ship is moving from world to world on its own without the Moonbase people being able to do anything but follow it and worry. **Re: DR WHO** In some NuWho the Doctor is not so weakly godlike. // I don't think logarithms are ever going to be an easy mechanic to sell. // Not having your mathematical bent (nor anybody else's mathematical bent) I found the advancement system and the long term management and development of the characters which bent my brain. I found the system good enough for one offs but not something I want to use long term. **RYCT Me:** At the moment (and this may change in the future) Aegis can mostly feed itself by the farming towns away from the centre (I must put a scenario there some time soon) with a little bit of help from imports. The City's exports probably centre on magical materials including Alchemy. I may change this if when I flesh things out it seems obviously implausible. // You must show me how to set up that sort of recording some day. **RYCT Lisa:** Life in a world with active and changeable gods must be exciting in a soap-opera-that-can-cause-earthquakes sort of way. I praise the wisdom of Greg Stafford in mostly freezing the gods in the pre-Time reality while allowing slight modifications by history and Heroquesters.

AVRAM GRUMER: Nice looking zine!// Would you actually want to 'bounce out of the worst timeline' if it suddenly meant all your memories were inaccurate? There's a character in my Yrth game LICTORS who everyone thought was crazy until they realised, he isn't affected by timeline shifts and can remember from before the last big rewrite. (One of the PCs

has also developed such a trait but has only seen one small hiccup so far.) He eventually got recruited by the Ministry that looks after extra-dimensional intrusions. I can see that there's a certain appeal to being the only one who remembers President Trump but then it would be your responsibility to shuffle around madly telling people of the dangers of populism. Re **GENDER & ROLEPLAYING: THE MARCH NORTH** and its sequels to which I keep returning is set in a society where it is impolite to use gendered pronouns for someone unless you are in a relationship with them. He and she are lovers' terms. I found out a lot about my assumptions about which gender my brain assumes fills which roles by reading the series and being annoyed by it. The leading characters Blossom and Dove (later Fire) are in fact female but that isn't clear until partway into the second book. I still don't know what gender Captain Crinoline is. // It would be interesting to run game set on Gethen, the world of **THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS** or some other place where gender is undetermined until needed. And then there's the Time Lords of course. A graduation ball at the Time Lord Academy must be an interesting experience. ("You were female last year: it's my turn now!") Re **POWERED BY A PACK OF CARDS**. I think the design fails because all rolls are done by players and they never want to roll low. I would also allow the player to draw a fresh hand from the table deck rather than from his old hand. **RYCT Roger:** I can see some fun and hijinks at being a group of researchers from **THE JOURNAL OF THE TRAVELLER'S AID SOCIETY** updating the information on worlds that haven't been visited for a while.

PATRICK ZOCH: Ah the 'You bain't from around these parts, be you stranger' problem. If I want the characters to go to diverse parts of the world and do it on foot, horse and camel back and ship then I'm going to write a reason to undertake the journey into the campaign rather than into the individual scenario. The Command of the Ruler works as does Religious Pilgrimage. The Voyage of Discovery and Making Lots of Money is probably best for going to places no-one at home has ever heard from. Language if realistically modelled is going to be the biggest

problem which is one of the reasons the City has translator stones as gifts from the Gods.

HEATH ROW: I'm a little confused. Are you saying that *Wahflestomper* expands to fill all publications available to it?

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: I've read and enjoyed several series of isekai-into-a-game world or lit-rpg but I've never finished one because I want to know why the world is like that and the writers want to keep from explaining that until they have no choice. I often think they have no real idea about what's behind it all. **RYCT Me:** I was thinking the question we had to answer was 'why only this group in the world' not 'why only properly organised adventurers'.

JIM VASSILAKOS: RYCT Me: THE BOOK OF etc etc has only three abilities: Firstly to turn to the right page if the question has been asked and answered before, secondly to sound a loud trumpet if it is a *new* Stupid Question. And thirdly to record the reply of a member of staff to any new questions.

MY LAST WORD FOR THIS ISSUE:
Beaver (also Bavière, Beavor, Beevor)

The part of the armour that protected the lower part of the face, attached to and hinged on either the helmet or the breastplate. It can be raised (or lowered) to allow the wearer to eat and drink. Which sounds like the pointy snout you see on some sorts of armour.

Yes, I'm back delving int A DICTIONARY OF CHIVALRY to try to improve your vocabulary.

Take good care you hodge-podge band of randomly met adventurers!

BUMBLING Through DUNGEONS

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ISSUE #8 (E&A #9)

I will be surprised if my contributions to E&A stay regular. This is not a bad thing, but last month's 12(ish) page extravaganza will not be repeatable. I may limit myself to small updates and responses, at least.

For starters, I'm coming to a head with all of eight board game designs, refining them into "final" forms that I can pitch to publishers. The pitching part is much less time-intensive, and I want to pump the brakes considerably once I'm at that stage with these.

But to get there I am working on rulebooks, components, A/B testing for final tweaks, updating digital modules, physical prototypes, researching publishers, writing pitch video scripts, recording and editing them, creating sell sheets, and trying to maintain a network of designers to act as playtesters (which necessitates playtesting theirs lots too). In Jan. alone something like 12 days had some form of design event, and that's outside of me just sitting at my computer and doing the grunt work.

There's a light at the end of the tunnel - I'm never giving myself this many concurrent projects again. But I need to get there. To let them languish is not acceptable to me either, and it's fulfilling work, albeit a bit too much at once.

My active social life, making time for my partner, and wanting to be active more (physically) than I've been in the last year, are all contributing to this overwhelm as well.

Also, I am picking up some freelance SEO/content marketing consulting work. Because of course I am? It sort of snowballed from a favor to a friend, and I am still sort of only doing it to help her out (yes, I'll be getting paid, but I'm not really looking for additional work at this point). If I can guide her efforts at her company better, to help both the company and her, awesome! But then the owner wants me on retainer for client consultations, and I'm not sure I'm up for that. Regardless, it's more work in the short-term.

And we've started a new D&D campaign, with me running! It's a map-heavy skullduggery (stealing, infiltration, extortion, etc.) campaign. I'm having fun; but it's more prep work on a weekly basis.

All to say...things are good. I just need to help guide the pendulum back toward a less exhausting professional and creative workload. With luck, in about six months, I'll be digging into my movie and reading list and not worrying overmuch about these things.

Gaming Roundup

Some RPG (and adjacent) updates, as well as brief design updates.

D&D Campaign: Skullduggin' in the Deep

I just posted seven session summaries last issue, so I will not be jumping into more as yet. But we're about five sessions deep in this one, in what should be a 25ish session campaign, unless it ends abruptly via TPK or other hurdle.

Criminal campaign, set in the sprawling fantasy city of Waterdeep, a setting I'm intimately familiar with. I've set campaigns, plural, in Waterdeep, so it's like a second home to me.

I've modeled it somewhat closely after the Thief series of video games, which date back to the 90s with the first installment, *Thief: The Dark Project*. Several plotlines, individual missions, map layouts, and the vibe of the whole thing is lifted from those games, which I adored growing up. I've even modeled the voice of their fence and chief informant after Garrett, the protagonist of the Thief series.

The campaign is set up as a series of missions. It's not explicitly linear, but neither is it a sandbox. They have 1-3 mission options to choose from at any given point, and which ones they take, how successful they are at them, etc. all determine which way the campaign goes. How they execute the jobs is the chief draw, and they often have access to building schematics and such to plan their entry and exit.

The missions weave in and out of each other a bit, and I expect to prep about 18 missions and run 13-15 of them depending on their choices. The maps are intricate, so while they've been fun to draw, that's been the primary source of work for me. I'll post some pics of them here at some point, I'm sure.

The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen (1998)

Storytelling game, somewhere in the liminal space between a roleplaying game and what some might consider a board game or simple improvisational exercise. I notice a **Michael Cule** in the credits to this one, so I believe one of E&A's own had some hand in assisting the designer.

The rulebook - all 140+ pages of it! - is a marvel, and hilarious besides. The game itself could be taught in 3-4 pages, and indeed at one point it is in the book. The rest is an extended excuse for the author(s) to model the type of fanciful merriment the game is designed to create. It's a riot.

The game itself revolves around tall tales, but one thing that I adore is that the gamified bits of it do not undermine the storytelling in how they incentivize play. Indeed, ending with the most chips/money/whatever just allows you the greatest chance to decide the actual winner (you gift your earnings to whomever you thought told the best story). And interrupting a story is intended to add to both the story and the amusement as you attempt to confound the storyteller in some interesting way.

In both "board" games (*Once Upon a Time* comes to mind) and some RPGs I've played or read, this is not the case, and the mechanics incentivize something other than the quality of the story. Good stories can still happen in such games, but this is sort of *despite* the game, not because of it, and says more about the players than the game in my mind.

All of which to say, I haven't played Munchausen yet. But I'm extremely excited to! I will report back once I have, to see if it lives up to my expectations.

Board Game Design

A publisher has two of my designs currently (well, private digital tables of both for internal playtesting), having played and enjoyed both at a protospiel event in January. We talked afterward and he requested them. Tiny publisher, but we hit it off and seem to value many of the same things in games. Fingers crossed. I've been at this stage a couple times before with publishers, so I am realistic about my chances at actually signing one. But you can't get to further stages without getting to this stage first, so it's progress.

I still have a long publisher list for both to reach out to soon; my eggs are in far more than one basket.

Deep Fun

Bernard (Bernie) DeKoven is a name that will be known to several of you. He was the chief figurehead of the New Games Movement, a 20th century movement that aimed at community building and strengthening via playful experiences.

The movement had a profound impact on physical education for children here in the US and many oblique impacts besides on psychology and sociology.

DeKoven is deceased, but his "Deep Fun" website remains alive and well. It contains hundreds of playful games that Bernie or others in his circles invented through the years.

I've been exploring these and trying them out with willing participants in my friend groups, and it's been good fun. "*A What?*" and "*Syncretics*" are two joyful recent finds (links below) and I have others to try. I even invented a variant of *A What?* that I tried once and hope to play again.

I find myself drawn a bit away from traditional board gaming by these experiences, which highlight some nebulous but tangible gap in the exuberance and empathetic playfulness that clearly informed their creation. As I watch hobbyists in online spaces go wide-eyed at every new commercial release, conditioned by industry cycles into something resembling a consumerist approach to games, I can't help but feel a divide between this and the social underpinnings of the New Games Movement and the actual games that came out of its mission.

This is not judgment, but observation, and it's occupied no small amount of thought for me in recent weeks.

Links:

A What? : <https://www.deepfun.com/what-again/>

Syncretics: <https://www.deepfun.com/syncretics/>

Of note is that I played Syncretics at three, not two players as it notes. I imagine it would work with nearly any number you might conjure up.

GOING TO BE *Ad-Libbed*

#7



I have completed my five-dozen-th circuit around the sun. It brings me no joy to contemplate this fact, but it's better than the alternative.

ATTENTION CONSERVATION NOTICE

improv class • *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* • *Boundless Space* • *Games People Play* • hot & cool media and D&D & *Traveller* • stats in *PbtA* • point-tracking vocabulary • *Monsterhearts* write-up • rhyming write-up • stance theory • resources in *Fate* • Isaac Newton • jobs info & RPing in *BitD* • plots & moves in *Monsterhearts* • halakhic approach to rules interpretation • *Public Access* • PC bonds in *PbtA* • *Sackbook* • *Satah* podcast

Improving through Improv

[The Brooklyn Brainery](#) is an adult education shop that hosts small classes on a wide variety of subjects for reasonable fees, and is conveniently located just a block from my apartment. I signed up for a two-hour US\$35 “Improv for Communication” class, taught on Feb 10 by [Amanda Melhuish](#). It was fun! Possibly I even learned something. The exercises we did were:

Crazy 8s: Shaking our arms and legs to loosen up.

Last Word, First Word: Pairing off, having pseudo-conversations (they didn't have to actually make sense) where each person speaks a sentence that starts off with the last word of the other person's sentence. The idea here is to train yourself to pay attention to what the other person is saying. Then a second round, where your first word has to start with the last letter of the other person's last word.

Zoom In, Zoom Out: We split the class of ten into two groups of five, and in each group, each person would get two minutes to tell a story, while the rest of the group could ask them to either zoom in (provide more detail) or zoom out (go more general).

Categories: Instructor shouts out a category, we all try to list as many things in that category as we can think of in 30 seconds.

Three-Line Scenes: This was the longest exercise. We split up into pairs, and in each pair, one person would be given a prompt and have to say something using that word, then the other person would have to give a “Yes, and” response, then the first person a “Yes, and” response to that. We did four rounds of that, with each student getting to be the first person twice, and the second person twice. The best scene was one where Amanda gave the prompt “brick,” and the student opened with “You hit my sister with a brick!”

Expert: Each of us had to give a 30-second speech on a different topic. The things we said didn't have to be true; the point was just to act authoritative. I was given the prompt “time travel,” and since the whole exercise kinda reminded me of the old Cheapass Games boardgame [The Big Idea](#), improvised a speech to investors about financing a time-travel machine. The student from the previous exercise, given the prompt “dance,” gave a speech about how she couldn't dance anymore, ever since her sister was hit by a brick. Reincorporation!

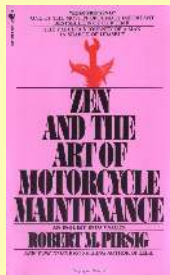
I also learned another new thing: In the *Zoom In, Zoom Out* game, the other group, instead of passing the story-telling around the circle clockwise, did something they called “popcorn turns,” where each story-teller would pick the next person to go. Obviously this is related to “[popcorn initiative](#),” which led me to suspect that someone else in the class had RPG experience. But no, it turns out that “popcorn reading” is a thing some teachers have kids do with class readings, where they read a passage out loud, then pick another kid to read the next passage. That's probably where the gaming term came from.

After the class, I asked Amanda if she had any tips to help me keep from freezing up. She asked what was going on in my head when I froze up, and I said that it's because I'm trying to think of something good to respond with, and she suggested I just loosen up and go with whatever pops into my head. This is very similar to the advice Johnstone gives in *Impro*. (See E&A #8.)

Recent Reading

These book cover thumbnails are obviously not my own artwork.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert Pirsig



My reading of Impro last month got me thinking about where ideas come from, which inspired me to re-read this 1974 work of philosophy and metaphysical questioning.

I first encountered this as an assigned book in college, and didn't really get it, or so I thought. On rereading, I notice that a lot of it stayed with me, concepts showing up in thoughts I have been having over the years, even down to the level of specific metaphors, without my having remembered where they'd come from.

This is especially apt, since the book tells the story of a man whose memories and personality were altered by electroshock therapy, experiencing the gradual return of his old personality. (Not that I've had any kind of extreme therapy like electroshock; just the passage of years.)

The latter portion of the book has the narrator describing the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, and explaining how his previous self knew his explorations outside of *mythos* would drive him insane, and it's hard to read a first-person narrative along those lines without thinking it might turn into a Call of Cthulhu scenario.

Boundless Space by Galen Pejeau



Remember that Boundless game I talked about a few issues back (E&A #6)? They're playtesting a sci-fi version called Boundless Space. I haven't played it, but I did submit a couple of requests for rule clarifications, so I feel like I've justified downloading the rules. If you're thinking of trying it out, be aware that some of the rules are only found in the character or

ship sheets.

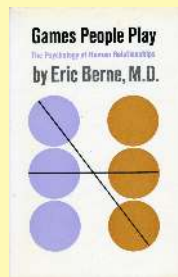
Despite the title, the space here is definitely bounded – the game takes place in an arc of an asteroid belt in a distant star system, after a devastating war has wrecked interstellar civilization.

There's a cute little trading system where you use playing cards to generate the cargo available at each port – suits tell you cargo type, rank gives the value, and face cards represent passengers (sadly ignored for this playtest; I'd love to see this particular bit fleshed out). It'd need to be tweaked a bit for an open-ended setting like Traveller's, where different worlds produce and need different things.

An odd thing about the Boundless games is that, while they're obviously derived from Forged in the Dark

games, they use a binary resolution system, abandoning the partial-success result that FitD inherited from its Powered by the Apocalypse ancestor, in favor of bringing back difficulty. Part of the reason for this might be that Boundless is designed to be usable for solo play, and the FitD requirement to decide on position and effect seems like a dialectical process, one that needs back-and-forth between two or more participants. (The most recent version of Boundless includes a Position mechanic, but it's just a mechanical difficulty rating, rather than a guide to fictional outcomes as in FitD.)

Games People Play by Eric Berne, MD

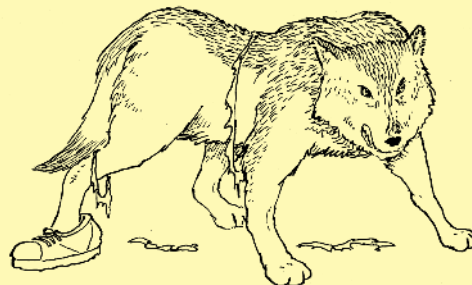


I read this 1964 book when I was in my teens or twenties, thinking it had something to do with games in the conventional sense of the word. Turned out it was just a book about psychology and behavior.

Berne's model holds that people interacting with each other switch among three ego states: Parent, Adult, and Child, similar to Freud's Id, Ego, and Superego. (Berne was a Freudian. I'm ignoring the stuff about anal fixations and castration anxiety.) Some of these interactions involve a double layer of interaction, where an exchange might seem like Adult-to-Adult on the social level, when its motivation might really be, say, Child-to-Parent on the psychological level. (I'm massively over-simplifying, but it's interesting that the division Berne draws between social action and psychological motive parallels the division between character and player desires in Author Stance.) It was reading about status games in Johnstone's Impro last month (see E&A #8) that reminded me of this, and made me think that the dysfunctional mind-games might make good inspiration for teenaged Monsterhearts dramatic shenanigans. (Dramanigans?)

The book lays out Berne's theory in extraordinarily dry prose, and then lists a bunch of the mind-games, most of which have cute names reminiscent of the spells from Tunnels & Trolls. It might be interesting to develop an RPG where the reward mechanics model the psychological reward mechanisms of some of Berne's mind-games.

The section on Sexual Games is, um, very obviously pre-Stonewall and predates the seventh printing of DSM-II. (Heck, it predates the first printing!)



Recent Musing

Some thoughts that continue upon ideas I've expressed in earlier issues:

Hot & Cool

(...in the **McLuhan** sense, not the **Monsterhearts** sense):

Back in the early days of D&D there was a lot of fan activity devoted to producing new character classes. The Bard, Ranger, and Illusionist classes were all first introduced in articles in *The Strategic Review*, written by readers, and then later promoted to "official" classes.

It seems to me that Marc Miller intended *Traveller* to be a customizable game, with the military career paths in the Little Black Books as an example to inspire GMs to make up their own careers. But I don't think this happened. It looks like the player community just waited for GDW to produce official material expanding upon the original, and while this might be due to the fact that GDW didn't get around to putting out *The Journal of the Travellers Aid Society* until two years after *Traveller* was published (while *The Strategic Review* was launched the year after D&D), another possibility is the relatively polished appearance of *Traveller's* Little Black Books (typeset text, sophisticated graphic design treatment for the covers), compared to the crude appearance of D&D's Little Brown Books (type-written text, **artwork traced from a Doctor Strange comic**), which looked like the kind of thing any teenager could knock out on their parents' typewriter.

Hot & Cool

(...in the **Monsterhearts** sense, not the **McLuhan** sense):

I've been thinking about what a *Powered by the Apocalypse* game would look like that took the light touch of *Monsterhearts* and applied it to a more generic set of situations. The set of stats that came to me is these:

- ◆ **Smooth:** charm, slickness, sneakiness
- ◆ **Rough:** toughness, endurance, physical brute force, up-close personal violence
- ◆ **Sharp:** cleverness, quickness, at-range violence
- ◆ **Soft:** empathy, care, caution, openness

I don't really have anywhere to go with these. I've got a vague notion of a PbtA game with multiple sets of moves, each dependent on a different context (possibly with playbook moves that let you swap contexts), but I dunno, it feels overly complicated.

Too Many Lightning-Bugs

[T]he difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – 'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.

– Mark Twain, 1888 letter to George Bainton

I've written before (see E&A #4) about lazy and unclear

writing in RPG rules. Here's a bit of prescriptive advice to prevent something that's been bugging me.

When it comes to keeping track of fluctuating numerical scores in RPGs, there are a couple of popular approaches. One might treat these scores as a pool of *points* to be added to or subtracted from, or one might treat them as a row of *boxes* to be filled or cleared.

If you're a programmer, you might think this is a distinction with no meaning. After all, both of these systems can be implemented with the same underlying code base, just by slapping a different user interface on top. But if you're an ordinary human being, looking at an unfamiliar set of rules, trying to turn these words into something that makes sense in your brain, then mixing these things up makes the rules unclear.

Consider this example from *Scum and Villainy*: Your character has a Stress track, a row of boxes on your character sheet that keep track of how much Stress (a form of short-term minor damage) they've accumulated. Each time you take Stress, you mark a box, and when you do something that removes Stress, you erase some of those marks. Pretty clear, right? Taking Stress damage is expressed in additive terms, and relieving Stress is expressed as subtraction. This is expressed clearly on page 13 of the rules, where a character who returns from being taken out of action by Trauma has a cleared Stress track, which is described as having "o stress."

But on the previous page, page 12, the Pushing Yourself rules talk about the things you can do "if you have the stress available." So, wait, if a character with a cleared Stress track has zero Stress, then obviously they have no Stress available, right? That's the clear meaning of those terms in ordinary English – zero means you have none, and having some available means you have more than none. (And yeah, I'm capitalizing *Stress* to indicate that it's a game-mechanical term, which the rules don't do.)

How do you keep from making those kinds of mistakes? For each resource in your game, decide whether you're going to describe it as a *point total* to be added to or subtracted from, or a *track of boxes* to be filled in or cleared. Then use language that fits that description, and avoid using the language that goes with the other description. This table here isn't meant to be exhaustive, but it gives you some obvious terminology:

	Points	Boxes
Increase	add, gain	mark, fill
Decrease	subtract, lose	clear, erase
Exhaust	run out of, reach zero	fill, mark last
Replenish	regain all, restore to max value	fully clear, erase all
Availability	points remaining, above zero	unmarked boxes, space on track

Recent Gaming

I was expecting to have three games to write up this ish, but then the Park Slope group's scheduled Feb 1 *Monsterhearts* game got cancelled. Too many people sick, traveling, or work-laden. And then the Feb 8 *Scum and Villainy* session got axed in favor of just meeting up for dim sum. So maybe this zine will be a reasonable length this month.

Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 4

Because there is so little opportunity for intimacy in daily life, and because some forms of intimacy (especially if intense) are psychologically impossible for most people, the bulk of the time in serious social life is taken up with playing games.

— Eric Berne, MD, *Games People Play* (1964)

- ◆ **MC:** Briar (she), who also hosted
- ◆ **Blue** (he, maybe?), the **Hollow** (Johnni, they/she)
- ◆ **Drake Kennedy** (he), the **Queen** (Mike, he)
- ◆ **Laeli Vahad** (she), the **Mortal** (NJ, she)
- ◆ **Logan Caldwell Collins** (he), the **Infernal** (Erica, she)
- ◆ **Steffan Mactire** (he), the **Werewolf** (me, he)

Feb 15, another really good session! I feel like I'm starting to get my feet under me. In contrast with Session 3, when the dice hated me, they loved me this session. Possibly because I was one dot short of filling my experience track.

Figuring I need to set goals for my character, I hatched a plan during the long gap between sessions 3 & 4: Steffan's got 2 Harm, and the Healing move lets you clear 1 Harm per session by tending to your wounds, 2 if someone helps you, tending to your wounds intimately. I think Blue's also got some Harm sitting around, and if I can arrange an intimate scene between them, we can clear our Harm, make Laeli jealous (more drama!), and maybe I can embark upon a longer-term project of trying to accommodate Blue to corporeal existence. This doesn't quite wind up happening, but having the plan gives me things to move towards, so I don't freeze up when I'm asked what I'm doing.

We start off, as usual, with Ok Cowgirl's "Larry David," the lyrics of which start off with the words "Everything sucks!" (You'll understand later why I'm pointing this out.) Briar's opening narration draws our attention to the well again, then shifts to the boathouse, where the city's entire police department (all three of them) are gathered. The PCs (except for Blue, who's still hiding under the dock in the boathouse), plus Pete and Kenny, emerge. Erica couldn't make it to this session, so her character, Logan, wanders off. It's Wednesday afternoon, the second day of the school year.

Drake wants all the PCs to gather to talk about what

the heck is going on. Steffan has a plan to get Blue out of the boathouse — he hands Laeli his jacket (this is the best day of Laeli's life!), jumps into the inlet that the boathouse is on, swims underwater till he sees Blue's legs, pops up. (Steffan: "Do you breathe?" Blue: "Sorta.") Steffan guides Blue underwater, back to the group. Blue (who seems to have settled on he/him pronouns, at least for now) plays up like he's too weak to walk, and needs Steffan to carry him, just to mess with Laeli. (Laeli has meanwhile stashed Steffan's jacket in the trunk of Drake's car.) Drake also gives new phones to Blue and Steffan; he apparently has a compartment in his car where he keeps spare phones.

We have a brief convo about the weird stuff. Drake's still trying to wrap his head around the fact of the supernatural. Werewolves, demons, maybe zombies? Steffan points out that vampires must exist, because their history teacher said Afghanistan is "the graveyard of vampires," and then I have to explain the joke. We decide to return to the school to investigate. Briar calls for Drake (who seems to have become the de facto party leader) to make a Keep Your Cool roll to get us all in without being noticed; it's a partial success, so we're warned that we're too big a group to go unnoticed, and decide to split up: Drake with Blue, and Steffan with Laeli, since Steffan and Blue are the most sensitive to the weird influence. (I think we kinda lost track of the NPCs Pete and Kenny. I'm sure they're fine.) The idea is that Blue and Steffan have the strongest sensitivity to the weirdness, so they're basically weirdness detectors.

Blue: I'll be a canary; Steffan, you'll be a canary...

Steffan: Didn't they close the cannery down?

Blue: <sighs> Yes, Steffan.

Drake and Blue wander the halls. Blue (who's also trying to track down Anna, the DJ from the party over the summer where the riot broke out — see E&A #8), picking up a general vibe of apathy and depression. All schools have an air of apathy and depression, but this is noticeably (to someone with the right paranormal senses) worse than typical. They find a classroom where Anna is, along with some of their other homeroom classmates, and Blue senses various kinds of emotional turmoil from them, but not from Anna. Drake texts Anna, who steps out of the classroom for a bathroom break. He and Anna chat, while Blue tries texting the ELIZA AI about teen depression. He doesn't get any useful answers.

Laeli convinces Steffan to go to the bleachers and make out, instead of going to the school. Steffan's still unsure about Laeli, but he's also not thrilled with the possibility of getting werewolf-triggered in the school, so he goes along with her. (Best day of Laeli's life!) They run into the Principal, who asks why they aren't in bio class, and Laeli spins him a lie about being sent out to get something. They head off to the bleachers, which are locked, but Steffan impresses Laeli by showing her a secret way to

get in. Instead of jumping straight to the makeouts, they talk for a bit, and she makes some kind of joke about how they should either making out or thumb wrestling, and I suggest thumb wrestling, which NJ interprets as Steffan rejecting Laeli until I point out that it's an excuse to lean their bodies closer and look into each other's eyes, so they do that, and since NJ and I are sitting next to each other, we actually thumb wrestle. Laeli lets Steffan win.

Usually NJ and I are on opposite sides of the table; this week, she's in Erica's usual spot. It's tempting to wonder whether the player-level proximity aided the character-level intimacy, but it probably didn't in this case. Still, as a more general matter, sitting next to someone makes various types of subtle, out-of-band interactions (note-passing is an obvious example) easier. If you're in a game with player-vs-player scheming, you might want to pay attention to seating arrangements. (Subtly, for advantage over your rival schemers.)

Johnni has Blue Gaze Into the Abyss, and detects dark emotions coming from Debbie, Troy, Scottie, and especially Byron, who has a dark intensity within him. Blue enters Darkest Self, and starts intensely hating his body.

Drake talks to Anna about the summer party, asking why it turned out like that. (I think there might have been some kind of move here, but I didn't catch what it was.) She says it was Scottie's drugs, but Drake senses that she's covering something up. He pushes, and she admits that it had to do with energy that was already there. He asks about the school's energy, and she's obviously nervous. She turns to go back into class, just as Byron comes out. Blue tries to slam Byron against a wall, but flubs the Lash Out Physically roll, and winds up phasing through Byron and the door, stumbling into the classroom. He shoves all the stuff off the teacher's desk, shouts "I'm so depressed! I need therapy! We all need therapy!" and starts a walkout. Eight students follow.

Blue's walkout grows as it moves down the hallway. Blue escalates, makes things violent, calls for people to hit him to get their frustrations out. We treat this as a Lash Out Physically move *against himself*, and Blue takes 2 more Harm (on top of the 1 he'd been carrying from an earlier session, for a total of 3 – one more could kill him!) before Scottie grabs him and drags him out of the melee.

Oh, remember that MAGA protest from last session, outside the school, led by CJ's karate teacher, Mr Peterson, calling for students to be armed? Still there, since it's still Wednesday. Drake tries to quiet Peterson, yells something at him, a Shut Someone Down move, but it fails. Someone in the crowd flings fruit into Drake's face, and calls him a gentrifier, which becomes a Condition. Byron drags Drake off, to Drake's car.

Scottie has hustled Blue into his car, and he's playing heavy metal music while Blue rages out and slams himself against various surfaces. Briar puts on [Limp Bizkit's "Break Stuff"](#), which contains the line "Everything is

fucked, everybody sucks," tying in nicely with the theme established by our opening song, "Larry David." Drake's car pulls up next to them, and Byron has a creepy discussion with Drake about "breaking" Laeli. Drake tries to bring him around to a discussion of the general situation:

Drake: Why is everything so fucked up?

Byron: It doesn't matter, because we're the fuckers.

Drake: <wiping fruit off his face> Then why isn't it fun?

Byron: Embrace it. Tell me the worst thing you've ever done, your deepest fantasy.

Drake walks out of the car. Drake, Blue, and Scottie go off to smoke weed together. Not sure what happens to Byron; maybe he takes an Uber home.

(One of the things going on in the above scene is that Blue is still in Darkest Self, and the thing that would snap him out of it is learning that someone else is more trapped than he is. Mike is trying to establish that Drake is trapped by his circumstances, but it's not quite gelling. I'm not sure why, and that question – *Why do some things convince the table, and others don't?* – seems to deserve further exploration.

Also, Briar only really started developing Byron as a character during last month's flashback session, which Mike missed, so this is Mike's first exposure to creepy-manipulator Byron, as opposed to background-NPC-without-dialog Byron. This is serving to give the PCs an enemy to unite against.)

Blue's deep in self-hatred, pulling out his own fingernails, trying to goad people into inflicting that last point of Harm that'll kill him. Scottie injects him with some ketamine (consensually – Blue never turns down drugs), which projects him into a dream of being free from his physical body, and then drawn down to the well on Blackwell Island.

Steffan and Laeli hear the noise of the protest and walk-out, and break into the first aid room near the bleachers (my idea – I'm still working on healing that Harm), where there's stuff to treat sports injuries. They start to make out, but Steffan is hurt, so he takes his shirt off and Laeli tenderly treats his injuries (best day of Laeli's life!), and I get to erase the 2 Harm Steffan's been carrying since last session. Laeli's also got 1 Harm, so we take care of that as well. They don't actually have sex, so we don't trigger Laeli's Sex Move, which would have activated Steffan's Darkest Self. (The characters don't know this, but we players do. Or at least I do.)

They hear sirens, as the cops show up (again!), and they sneak off and ride away on Steffan's bike. Laeli gets to ride behind him with her arms around him. Laeli texts Drake to find out where he and the others are, and they meet up at The Strip, the street of touristy shops near the New Pier, in the rich people part of town.

(It doesn't occur to me until the next day: I forgot to bring those X-cards I made. I don't think any of us

even thought about them. I also forgot to bring my iPad Mini, which has a copy of the *Monsterhearts* rulebook. I keep the cards in a slot on [the iPad's carrying case](#). I do recall noticing at the time that the game table seemed less cluttered than usual, so I guess there's a mystery solved.)

So we all wind up at Drake's place. Drake notices that Steffan and Laeli seem to have some sweetheart energy going on between them. Drake talks with Scottie about the summer party – Scottie has been widely blamed for the riot, and it's been hurting his sales. Steffan mentions the high-pitched grating sound that accompanies the trouble events, and learns that nobody else can hear it. Scottie suggests that maybe Talia's parents have a high-end security system with cameras, and might have recorded Anna's DJ session. If there's an unusual sound, maybe it's in the recordings.

So the next step becomes getting that information out of Talia's family's security system. Steffan asks if any of us are computer hackers who can break in remotely, but no, we're the remedial homeroom, remember? So we try to figure out how to get to Talia, and Laeli mentions that Talia likes Pete, which reminds me of the note that Talia passed to Steffan, for Pete, at the start of the first session. It's still in his jacket pocket! Which means it got soaked when Steffan was pushed into the water in the third session. Briar says the ink has run, but Steffan's superior eyesight can read it. (We look over Steffan's Heightened Senses move, but then Briar declares that he can just read it, probably realizing that a failed roll could leave us without an obvious way forward.)

The note asks Pete if he wants to go see a beautiful cove that Talia knows about. Laeli suggests writing a note back, pretending to be Pete, suggesting they meet at the cove, to get her out of the house, but Steffan asks how Pete would know where the cove is. (Drake says he's uncomfortable with how smart Steffan's being. I point out that Steffan's not book-smart, but he knows how traps work.)

I think at some point there's also some discussion of Byron's fixation on Laeli. Steffan points out that Laeli had been in the hospital when Byron fixated on her, and predators try to take advantage of wounded prey. (I'm enjoying getting comedic value out of playing Steffan as basically a dope, but then unexpectedly smart about stuff that relates to his beast nature.)

Drake takes the direct approach: borrows Blue's phone (Blue and Talia are on good terms) and asks if she wants to get together and "get fucked up." Talia's game. The plan is they get in, ply her with drugs till she passes out, and then go for the security system.

The problem with this plan is that Blue is in terrible shape – not just emotionally (still in Darkest Self), but physically beaten and bruised (black eye, swollen lip, missing tooth, no fingernails). We leave her in the car with Laeli, while Drake, Scottie, and Steffan go and knock on

her door.

As you may recall from the first session (which was just yesterday, in-world time), Talia asked for an invitation to Drake's upcoming party, and he turned her down, calling her a slut, and she slapped him. Now here he is, the very next day, offering to do drugs with her?! And where's Blue? And she's also pissed off at Scottie (we later learn that she's been asking to get in touch with his drug contacts, and he's been refusing). So she grabs the offered ketamine, invites Steffan in, and slams the door in the other twos' faces.

Steffan and Talia talk while doing k – she takes about twice as much as he does – and they agree that he'll talk to Pete for her, and she'll help him screw over Byron. Talia used to be head of the social hierarchy at school, until she was caught sleeping with a teacher. (Logan was the one who found out, and told people, but Talia doesn't know this.) She's trying to climb back to the top of the heap. That's what the party was for, that's why she's trying to get with Pete (star of the basketball team), and that's why she wants Scottie's drug connections (to score drugs for her old friends). She passes out, and Steffan opens the door for Drake.

They find the password to the security system, so Drake can get into it through his phone. Steffan identifies the spot where the grating noise starts, and Drake rewinds a bit to find out what track was playing. (Briar plays us a sample: ["Prada/Rakata" by Arca](#).) Drake then pushes his luck too far: he goes up to unconscious Talia, and tries to ask her questions about Anna, hoping she'll answer them in her sleep. Talia wakes up, and throws us out. Now she's pissed off at all of us, not just at Drake!

Then we get a bit of feeling guilty about Talia. Laeli deletes the nasty porn Instagram page she made about Talia back when she thought Talia had designs on Steffan. Blue texts Talia with a screenshot of the empty Instagram page, and I think maybe some apologies. Talia texts back that she's very disappointed, and can't trust Blue anymore, and Blue realizes that Talia's even more trapped than he is, and breaks out of Darkest Self, which is a relief to all of us. Laeli gives Blue some gloves to cover and protect his raw fingertips.

(I stopped writing notes at this point, so now I'm just going by memory.)

So we head out for pizza, Drake's treat! There's some chat about the well, and Blackwell Island, and what happened with CJ there. (Blue wanted help investigating the well. CJ wasn't cooperating, and Blue got over-excited and hurt her.) Blue explains a bit about what his deal is: he's a poltergeist, summoned when an abused young person is feeling anguish and depression. Blue then intensifies that anguish until the young person kills their family. Then Blue gets to stop existing for a while, which is a relief to him. But now he's somehow incarnated in a physical body, has no idea who has summoned him, and is worried that

the person he's supposed to torment to death might be himself.

Agatha comes in, and we invite her to sit down and have some pizza. She mentions that she's been using the ELIZA AI a lot, and it's really been helping her. Drake wants to get her reaction to the weird anxiety track, so he plays it for her. (Steffan covers his ears.) She doesn't seem to be affected by it. I roll Heightened Senses, to see if Steffan can pick something up about her behavior in her scent or body language, and it's the first roll I fail this session! That fills my experience track, so I take +1 to Volatile. Briar says that Steffan somehow picks up on the weird grating noise even though his ears are covered, and feels his transformation starting. Steffan briefly locks eyes with Drake, then runs off to the restroom. (Also, I get to check off another experience box, because I had previously taken the move that gives me experience for entering Darkest Self.)

This turns out to be a bad idea. Getting away from the noise doesn't stop the transformation. And the bathroom has no window. Steffan tears out of his clothes and becomes a wolf, with heightened senses, in a stinky pizza

joint restroom with filthy sticky floors!

Drake figures out what that glance meant, and wedges the door shut with a chair, playing it off as a prank. After a few minutes, he cracks the door open a bit. Steffanwolf lunges for the opening, desperate to escape! Drake's in the way, so this is a Lash Out Physically move, and Drake gets knocked over and takes 1 Harm. We have a brief discussion about whether Steffan cares enough about Drake for this to take him out of Darkest Self ("when you wound someone you really care about"), and decide sure, it does, so Drake winds up on the floor with a naked human Steffan on top of him. "Should I be rolling Turn Someone On," I ask. Oh yeah! Drake gets turned on. Blue and Agatha, coming over to help, also get turned on. Agatha seems to be suggesting maybe a three-way with Drake and Steffan, and Drake suggests maybe at the party this weekend, and Steffan doesn't say no. Laeli freaks out about all this, and heads off to the graveyard. (Worst day of Laeli's life!)

We break there. Maybe there'll be a scene at the graveyard with Laeli and Logan next session, but Briar kinda wants us to be done with Wednesday.

Since I have some room this issue, here's that poem I mentioned last month, posted to the gaming group's Discord, summarizing the first *Monsterhearts* session (written up in E&A #7).

Scene is set: Vermilion City

Music: [Ok Cowgirl ditty](#)

Homeroom filled with reprobates,

Low performers, and their mates.

Drake and Logan, getting vexed, do

Argue 'bout who they'll sit next to.

Talia passes, not discreet,

A note to Steffan, meant for Pete.

Laeli, Steffan's would-be honey,

Sees, and thinks it far from funny.

Interruption: A gendarme

To pat us down in case we're armed.

(It's a serious thing, darn-tootin';

Tenleytown just had a shootin'!)

CJ, with a pistol tucked,

Appeals to Laeli. "Nope, you're fucked!"

Blue attempts to help her out,

But CJ pulls back, having doubts.

Steffan, who's a werewolf himbo,

Panics and flees out a window,

Lest he come out all hirsute.

The cop heads after, in pursuit,

Leaving all in disarray.

At least it's not a boring day!

Logan is by Ernie taunted,

Roasts him back more than he wanted.

Laeli, mistress of pretenses,

Asks to leave, to treat her menses.

Blue and CJ, pleading same,

Do tag along, with unclear aim.

Logan heads to the library

Contemplating something scary;

Texts to Ernie to atone,

And tempt him to the Danger Zone.

Logan has clandestine goals:

His Master wants to harvest souls!

Laeli, Blue, and CJ wander

Out the school to look and ponder.

Blue feeds CJ agitprop,

Urging her to shoot the cop.

Laeli heads online; for what?

To portray Talia as a slut.

After they have had some fun,

Laeli carries CJ's gun.

Drake and Logan meet to barter

(We'll see which of them is smarter)

Might an introduction letter

Buy a classroom spot that's better?

They arrive at an agreement;

Time will tell what Drake's esteem meant.

Back at school, things get exciting:

Lots of students wind up fighting.

Drake hands Steff an invitation,

Steffan flees in consternation.

(He can feel the wolf emerging;

Heads to bathroom, hoping, urging;

Slow the pulse in vena cava,

And like [Modern Hiawatha](#)

Keep his skin-side on the outside

And his fur-side on the inside.)

Lunchroom fills with open brawling,

Blue can feel that tension calling,

Jumps into the tussle, scrapping.

Steff returns, as if done crapping,

Sees his teammates fighting, failing,

Jumps on Blue and starts a-whaling.

Laeli tries to intervene;

Steffan slaps her (which seems mean).

In addition to the shock, it

Knocks the gun from out her pocket.

Pistol lands at Logan's feet.

He kicks it, and it shoots at Pete!

(Also, Logan threw a knife

At Drake, which did not take his life.

I don't recall exactly when

This happened, but it happened then.)

Cops show up, break up the row,

Haul us off to the hoosegow.

Briar wonders how we got

This situation from her plot.

Disentangling all this messin'

Will take longer than two sessions,

So our schedule gets amended:

This campaign is open-ended.

Comments on E&A #8

Aaron Cornelius

Cool cover illo!

Scribble M Horror

RE “the main function of OD&D rules themselves is to produce interesting character obituaries” ⇒ There’s a strong truth there! I’ve often thought that the best measure of the worth of any RPG campaign is whether it provides you with fun anecdotes you can tell years later.

Elf

YCT **Patrick Riley** RE [Prokopetz’s four stances](#) ⇒ His four stances resemble [Ron Edwards’s four stances](#), but don’t match up exactly. The Prokopetz stances are all about how a player makes decisions, while the Edwards stances are about what parts of the game the player has authority to make decisions about.

RE the [Fantasy Name Generator](#) ⇒ That’s fun to play with, but I don’t know if I can trust the output. The Biblical Names generator gave me Jewish names like *Jeshiah*, Christian names like *Stephen*, and Roman names like *Julius*, but yeah, all of those do appear in the Bible, so I guess that’s legit. The Old West generator, on the other hand, handed out names like *Phesley Jelkyl* and *Braxton Tidd*, which have a real [Bobson Dugnut quality](#) to them. (I’m aware that you didn’t make the generator; I just wanted an excuse to bring up those wacky Old West names.)

RE *Blades in the Dark* and RPing the Engagement Roll ⇒ Think of it as a scene-framing roll. You’re supposed to skip over all the introductory bits, and fast-forward right to the bit where it’s interesting. If it turns out there’s something else you needed to do, you can role-play that *retroactively* in a flashback. (Our group’s *Scum and Villainy* flashbacks have been skimping on the in-character role-play, just going for abstract narration, but you can role-play them out if you want.)

I’m coming to the conclusion that while mechanics *influence* the amount of role-playing that goes on, the actual result comes from a complex alchemy of player engagement, GM prompting, and setting grabbiness.

YCT **Limli** RE no resource-tracking in *Fate* ⇒ You can totally do this! For an example, see [Diaspora](#), which uses a Wealth Stress track and an Assets Skill. [Bulldogs! Fate Core Edition](#) also uses a Stress track for money (Credits), but the [pre-Fate Core version of Fate Bulldogs!](#) has a Resources Skill, and special Wealth Aspects that can’t be used for anything but buying stuff, and only last for one use.

Matt Stevens

RE Calibri ⇒ In the early days of the Nazi party, the party published all of its materials in Fraktur blackletter type-

faces, feeling that they were more Germanic than Roman-style Antiqua faces, and denounced the newspapers that used Antiqua for doing so under “Jewish influence.” Hitler himself preferred Antiqua type, but went along with Fraktur for a while. In 1941, Martin Bormann issued an edict calling for the use of Antiqua type, and calling Fraktur type “Judenlettern” (Jewish letters).

We’re seeing that same thing play out today. The Trump administration denouncing Calibri as a DEI font is just history repeating itself, but both times as farce. It shows how the Trumpists are just tossing the term “DEI” around like the Nazis did “Jewish,” as a grunt indicating that they dislike something.

John Redden

YCT **Roger BW** RE Lee Gold celebrating Newton’s birthday by hanging apples from the ceiling ⇒ Other ways of celebrating could include practicing alchemy, infiltrating gangs of counterfeiters, distorting the shape of your own eyeball with a blunt bodkin, and secretly questioning Trinitarianism.

Dylan Capel

RE [Neoclassical Geek Revival](#) ⇒ I agree about how it’s a collection of cool ideas, but just too darn much. The pie-slice method of letting you assemble a character class from bits, the three resolution systems, the conflict rules which can be used for both social conflicts and stealth, the traits, the group templates, the morality system, etc. Worth getting for the sake of grafting bits of it into another D&D-like system, I think, but overwhelming as a whole.

The bit about relics reminds me of a blog post by Joshua McCrowell I read some time ago about [treating The Hobbit as a game setting](#). (Not Middle Earth in general – just *The Hobbit*, as if *Lord of the Rings* had never been written.) One of his ideas is that if you score a critical success, you can spend some XP to give yourself a byname or to name one of your items, and this gives you a +1 on relevant rolls.

Lisa Padol

YCT **Limli** RE save vs poison ⇒ Yeah, [Old School Essentials](#) uses the old pre-rationalized saving throws: vs Death/Poison, vs Wands, vs Paralysis/Petrification, vs Breath Attack, vs Spells/Rods/Staves.

YCT **me** RE Briar’s “complaint” ⇒ It was a bemused observation in the popular genre of GM astonishment at just how far a group of PCs can stray from expectations. There was no actual sense of grievance or serious objection in it.

Also keep in mind that we originally planned this as a two-session game, so that’s probably why Briar pushed hard from the start. There were implicit plot elements established by the players during the Session 0: The planned data center threatens the graveyard where Logan goes to converse with his Patron, and Laeli goes to relax.

Blue has a mystery associated with their incarnation that Johnni set up and probably wants resolved. (Johnni's played *Monsterhearts* before, and presumably knows that Blue could just Gaze Into the Abyss about it, and is choosing to figure it out the hard way.)

I did notice Briar dropping a couple of pieces of plot-bait during the flashback session – the well, and the DJ. I expect we'll get around to following up on those eventually.

Hmm. Looking over the Season rules (*Monsterhearts*, 2nd ed, pages 51–56), I see that, yeah, a plot-arc-like structure is supposed to emerge from play that's not formally plotted. This looks like support for my belief that the OSR movement (which often talks about “emergent story”) and the Forge-style storygame movement (“play to find out”) both developed as reactions against the heavily-plotted railroad gaming style that was popular in the late 1980s and '90s.

I also see what looks like an odd quirk in the advancement rules: The Season Advances are unlocked when any player takes their fifth regular Advance, and the season goes for just one more session. Since Season Advances are bought with experience, that means the PC who unlocks the Season Advances is the least likely to be able to get one.

RE Steffan eating the rabbit ⇒ Oh, that wasn't because of the failed roll. I was planning to have him do that anyway. Feeling ill afterwards was the failure consequence; the rabbit was sick or tainted somehow. We established during Session 0 that Steffan hunts in the mountains at night, and hasn't eaten any people. Yet.

YCT **me** RE jobs in *Scum and Villainy* ⇒ Looking over the Jobs section in the rules, I'm not seeing anything about denying the PCs basic info. Maybe this is just a peculiarity of Gaylord's, and we should ask him about it.

Joshua Kronengold

Is that 7½ point body type? Was there a smallest font competition?

YCT **John Redden** RE *Everway* vs *Amber* ⇒ Wait, what keeps an *Amber* GM from using Drama resolution?

YCT **me** RE the Turn Someone On move never failing ⇒ The example on page 19 (*Monsterhearts*, 2nd ed) says “The players agree that Cassidy **is trying to** Turn Someone On, so Cody picks up two dice and rolls.” (My emphasis.)

Is the never-fails-to-turn-them-on interpretation actually stated somewhere in the rules that I missed? Or is it an extra-textual declaration from Avery Alder, or a widely-held interpretation from the community of frequent players, or something else? (This isn't a question about the general PbtA principle that failed rolls should have interesting outcomes; it's a question about the scope of possible outcomes, and about the move's trigger.) (**Note:**

Josh and I already talked this out in person, over dim sum, but I'm leaving it in place for the edification of the readers. It turned out to be a community-of-frequent-players thing, I think.)

I admire the heck out of the elegant fundamental design of these rules, but, like every other RPG book, it would have benefited from at least one more round of copy editing.

It's also a bit funny that the categories of rules-authority that I outlined above have close parallels in sources of *halakhah* (Jewish religious practices): *mitzvot d'oraita* (commandments from the Torah), which includes *Torah Shebikhtav* (The Written Torah) and *Torah Shebe'al Peh* (The Oral Torah); *mitzvot d'rabbanan* (laws established by the rabbis); and *minhag* (custom). When I was a kid I thought my parents were wasting money sending me to Hebrew school, but here I am, using Talmudic reasoning to decipher RPG rules, and able to comfortably read unflipped manga thanks to having learned a right-to-left language in my youth. (This paragraph might be the result of my nostalgia for [the old rec.arts.sf.fandom newsgroup](#).)

Miscellaneous Links

- ◆ [Video review of *Public Access*](#), a horror game using the [Brimblewood Bay](#) system. It's an hour-long video, more time than I usually like to spend staring at YouTube, but once you get past the first few minutes, it's pretty great.
- ◆ [Blog post by Isabelle Ruebsaat](#) about how various PbtA and PbtA-derived games handle creating bonds among PCs, classifying them by how they're established, what types of mechanical effects they have (if any), whether they're phrased as statements or questions, and what kind of thing they establish (relationships, worldbuilding, etc).
- ◆ [Sackbook!](#)
- ◆ I also really enjoyed [this Campaign Spotlight podcast with Satrah](#), “Game Mechanics as a Poem Structure,” which discusses a whole lot of cool stuff, but particularly the dividing line between RPGing and just plain old fiction-writing.

Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #9

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
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IRL

Busy. I've been looking thru Traveller in all of its variations!

Reactions to Issue #8

Shiny Math Rocks #4 – Erica Frank Re: Third Generation, thinking about it you're correct. Third wave would be better. 1st would be D&D, Empire of the Petal Throne and Warlock (pirate D&D), 2nd fixes and supplements, Chivalry and Sorcery, Arduin Grimoire? 3rd Original game systems, Traveller, Runequest, etc.

Reddened Stars #6 – John Redden *If the empire of our current Emperor (sic, President), declines, will [there] be feudalism?* If democracy collapses we may indeed become micro-serfs to our tech lords.

An Unlooked For Zine #7 – Lisa Padol I'm still a bit confused what OSR is. Does playing white box D&D in 2026 make the game OSR? Bushido has dangerous combat that plays like a skirmish wargame, all but the simplest encounter requires miniatures and terrain. Initiative rarely changes, spells and some combat results will change it. But those are rare.

Denizens of the Library #7 – Brian Rogers *you use "Molding Age" lovingly, right?* Until recently I had many older pulp magazines which have a subtle odor of decay and yellowing paper. So partly a joke. I do prefer many of the pre-code comics to what followed. However there are some that should be left undisturbed in their rot.

The Phoenix Nest #8 – Michael Cule Re: Bushido It took me some time to get accustomed to the wide variety that the system allows. It's not simple to generate characters and the rules on combat are hard to understand. There may be better systems out there, I'm just not aware of them. I don't count D&D, I did write up a Samurai class back in the dark ages.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 53 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader - *How do you keep the players on-script?* They usually mobility issues, no spaceship, surrounded by hostiles, or a need to escape etc. *What happens if they do something the script didn't anticipate?* Hope that I can fix it on the fly!

Everyone else: RAEBNC

Next issue

Hopefully some world generation info.

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 8, Dylan Capel

Reading

Tower Dungeon Volume 2

Spoilers ahead...

Having really enjoyed the first volume of this collected English translation I almost went back to back on the second volume and... I really didn't enjoy it.

In some ways I felt I was reading something very different to what I was previously enjoying. I wonder if that is the effect of the collated volumes and maybe the changes would not have been as noticeable when reading it serialised.

Our protagonists return from the floating tower to the bastion that was their base only to find it a bustling centre in the process of being rebuilt and refurbished. An inn has opened with ale and hearty fare! The Lilicen, sister of Yuva (the central character,) is working in the inn! They are reunited!

But wasn't there a blight on the crops that the villagers were hoping would be dispelled? And minutes after being re-introduced Lilicen is being murdered by a mysterious creature lurking in the inn's basement.

That's okay though because we still have the Panacea around and after revealing that the creature is also a noble who is avoiding justice for their serial murders (King Charles can be perhaps grateful for some restraint on the part of his brother) Lilicen is restored to perfect health.

The noble subplot carries on through the volume with various super powered members of the realm interacting and failing to rescue the princess. All of which is frankly boring. And having a cure-all just makes the stakes low like resurrection in fantasy games. At one point the protagonists witness a dragon impaled on tree and almost literally shrug and move on saying to one another that eventually someone is just going to heal what would initially seem to be a pretty mortal wound.

Not only that but we discover that the tower levels have a numbering scheme which means each chamber actually has a unique room id. Something that was strange and mysterious is now being reduced to being a German office building with a particularly out there interior designer at work.

We also discover that there are a form of people living in the tower who are desperate to obtain salt to season their children's food. The whole point of the tower is that previously it was other worldly and monstrous. Now I'm asking what they were doing for countless years when the dungeon was isolated in the sky cut off from the ground. Also if some of the inhabitants are just people in desperate need then where is the line between them and the creatures that the characters are killing?

The book ends with an ambush by deserters from the Royal Guard and I'm worried that we're in Robert Kirkman territory and that we're about to be beaten over the head with the fact that the real monsters are human beings.

The third volume was being released round about the time I finished the second volume after Christmas and I wanted to give it another chance despite being disappointed. Volume 3 was much more to my taste and I'll write it up next time.

Crawling Chaos

This is a very Cthulhu game that is very similar to *Lovecraftesque 1e* in that it features a single protagonist and multiple GMs with the protagonist heading for a shattering encounter with cosmic horror.

There are a few random tables for generating ideas and situations but I'm not sure that is a fantastic idea for games like this. You can do a bit of random generation for the starting situation but generally these games work best when people are reincorporating and building quite tightly on the narrative that is generated so far.

Unlike *Lovecraftesque* which uses a fixed structure to drive its overall narrative arc here the character has a pool of points that are depleted as they interact with the horrors they encounter. When they are out of points then the game finishes and the protagonist succumbs to whatever aspect of challenge they failed, going insane, getting eaten or becoming terminally enlightened.

It also gives fixed roles to the players so one player is the Narrator, the protagonists and all the other players are Architects (of Doom). Rotation is a bit more conventional here so its interesting to see whether it is easier to play when you're inhabiting a role for longer.

It feels like the game owes a lot to its predecessors (and *Polaris* feels very much in background) and yet its stats and dice mechanics resulting a feeling of an inconsistent design with too much going on.

Playing

I had the chance to get in a game of *Twilight 2000* recently. It was a bit of nostalgic pleasure and while a lot has moved on in terms of game design since the first edition and the Ukrainian war means everything is quite close to home it was a reminder of what an interesting setting it is and how so much of what the system does is interesting for campaign play.

There is obviously the resource sub-game of food, water, injuries, equipment wear and tear, ammunition and fuel. The overall structure of the default game with its pressure on the group to keep moving west keeps a constant pressure on the characters. The lack of information fuels a paranoia and gives value to finding friendly people with working communications. There's also a bit of asymmetric power where a band of committed soldiers are often going to be much more powerful than most of the opposition they encountered but bigger, more organised bands are more powerful again and ambushes can be devastating to a small groups.

Small losses often matter, when to spend limited resources are key questions.

The game has a hesitation mechanism that really differentiates veteran soldiers and scared civilians. Each turn is split into six rounds and you may have to lose up to four of your rounds as you hesitate. Grizzled veterans obviously never hesitate and therefore are able to fire, reload and run rings around less experienced opponents.

This again creates a little sub-game: do you immediately act and try and disable your opponents or do you hesitate at the start because you think you're in cover or that at the range your opponents aren't going to be on target? Or maybe you take little bursts of action. There's probably some game theory in here but there's a lot of gameplay and satisfaction when you catch opponents out of position.

I was happy to have someone else run the game because the rules are as fussy and weird as I remembered them. If I wanted to run something myself I would want something a bit simpler. If I wanted to retain the lifepath system then maybe adapting Traveller would be the

answer as much of the skills and careers map quite strongly with only the combat needing some changes to make it feel right.

I looked at the new edition of *Twilight 2000* and I think it quite crunchy and still heavy on GM prep. Again I'd probably be happy to play in someone else's game but I'm not sure I've got the time to run something.

If I was just focusing on the feel then I think a variation of *24xx* might be the right choice with its use of archetype, broad skills and potential for high lethality.

Dungeons of Hinterberg

The easiest way to describe this is that it is “cozy dungeoneering”. A young lawyer from Vienna finds her life at an impasse having chased a responsible career and finding herself unfulfilled by her demanding job and housemate. So instead she takes a holiday to an Alpine resort where magical dungeons have appeared filled with strange creatures taking mythological forms.

Each day you can explore the nearby mountains, visit the spa or the cinema, hang out with fellow tourists or the locals, hike around the trails and enjoy the beauty spots. But in addition to this holiday simulator you also get to explore dungeons and fight arena battles.

There's a bit of a meta-plot emerging so maybe the game is going to take me in a different direction but I definitely think this is a very different take on the ideal of dungeoneering.

The game does try very hard to persuade you that the monsters are expressions of what might be described as ectoplasm and therefore you shouldn't feel bad about cutting them in half with your sword. Making the violence inherent in a lot of dungeon crawlers acceptable is generally a challenge but this goes double when it is being done to offset a young person's ennui.

Later in the game there's a suggestion that the force that creates the dungeons wants you to solve the puzzles and fights in the dungeon and that maybe the dungeoneer and dungeon are in engaged in a kind of symbiotic or ritual existence.

What if a dungeon isn't looted? Does it really exist?

Links

- Dungeons of Hinterberg: <https://www.dungeonsbehindhinterberg.com/>
- Crawling Chaos: <https://planetsmashergames.itch.io/the-crawling-chaos>

Comments

Amazing cover, nothing else to say but that I loved it.

February seemed a mighty short month and I will admit that while I skim read everything I didn't have the chance to come back and read some of the pieces I was curious about in the depth I had hoped to.

Plankwell Collective

I'm enjoying the way that the psi-powers are now turning the ship into a soap opera. I also second the idea of why is the Imperium so opposed to the Zhodani. Presumably because they say the quiet part out loud.

Lisa Padol

I definitely enjoyed and did not regret repeat plays of *Psychodungeon* and *Swords without Master* remains a favourite and now has lots of alternative ways to play thanks to the Kickstarter and associated playtesting. It's probably one of my all-time favourite games. As with a lot of other campaign games you often get sick of the rules systems before you tire of the company or the story being told.

I haven't actually run *Vaesan* or read it properly but I agree that outlining a situation rather than trying to plot a path through it to resolution sounds a lot better. I do sometimes wonder if a lot of *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios would be better as replays or game writeups or even very short stories.

I enjoyed your write up of "overwriting" mechanics and found all the examples interesting in terms of how one can approach the idea of characters in flux and inevitably moving towards a dark fate. The shifting name in *Memento Mori* was my favourite and helps answer how a NPC comes to be known as "The Dread Necromancer". *1000 year old vampier* and *Freemarket* have similar ideas (less dark) with the idea of memories where at some point your immortal character ends up having to let go of cherished memories to hold on to newer experiences. Very bittersweet.

Attronarch

I have to confess that I am one of those people who have been seeing "Barbarian Atlantis" in your session headings. It has been colouring the way I read some of the writeups.

Jim Vassilakos

I found your comments about the relationship between temporal power and dungeons. Generally I think the fiction solves this by having the treasures in a dungeon be substantial for an individual but less significant to a state than taxes. Rather like gold prospecting, better to tax the result than run it yourself. I think the Lunars may explicit tax entry and exit from the Big Rubble in Prax for example.

Other times the dungeon is the result of these conflicts between state and dungeon, like the sealed Temple of Elemental Evil.

The magical dungeons like Undermountain and Castle Greyhawk potentially simply scale depending on who enters them, go in with an army, encounter an army. I've definitely read a bit about wargames in dungeons from the early days of *Dungeons and Dragons* where the adventuring parties are hundreds strong and I've read something in *Knock!* magazine about trying to recreate that experience.

Better left Buried has the idea of "companies" besieging dungeons, using the power of numbers to learn, scout, map and share information about a dungeon while also potentially winning a war of attrition against the inhabitants (although often monsters in that game are quite supernatural and therefore prone to not being killable in a conventional sense).

Tower Dungeon manages the situation through a combination of asymmetry (the state desires the return of its ruler, not treasures) and politics (the state cannot commit its full power to the invasion of the dungeon).

The comic does begin to answer some of the questions you have but I'm not sure that necessarily a good thing.

All interesting thoughts though as to the implications of certain fantasy conceits. I might try and write up a synopsis of the comic *Raiders* where dungeons are an integrated part of the power and economic structures of its setting.

Joshua Kronengold

I like the layout with the sidebar title but that is an aggressively small font. I wasn't really aware of the isakai genre before but I essentially took away that being immortal is pretty good and that there are multiple ways you can respond to that?

Michael Cule

I agree about the *Mausritter* metaphor, almost exactly what the person was proposing but with a Tetris twist by having awkward shaped blocks to represent awkward thoughts or emotions (like knowledge of cosmically indifferent beings). I also found the physical inventory fiddly in practice and I've wondered if a system using sticky notes might be easier or whether it maybe works better online.

Roger BW

I think *Rogue Trader* might be able to play the parody of right-wing culture card but not really Bryan Ansell interpretation. It is clear that a lot of 80s alternative culture was a source of discomfort to the Nottingham crowd.

I take your point on EPUB as a format, fixing one problem (columns) but introducing others. Maybe HTML/CSS is ultimately the best for accessibility.

I do like your multiple entry table (I've also used this before) and sometimes I feel it works best with multiple session games where it may take a bit of time to see the development in the random encounter.

Patrick Riley

I see what you're saying about *Vaesan* but if you're talking to a detective in a mortuary where clearly the corpse contains non-human organs than how mad is it really to say that aliens implanted them? Maybe its the difference between traditional Lovecraft stories where disbelief is part of the aienation of the protagonist and *Delta Green* where you blow up Innsmouth.

Myles Corcoran

Enjoying the new *Mausritter* tale and what seems to be the cursed ring. For a system that leans into the idea of an amorphous character see *Roll for Boots* which is really a great system for jumping into play.



THE DRAGON'S BEARD

MARCH 2026

© PATRICK ZOCH

I can be found as pdzoch at
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CITY BUILDING

First thing I consider when building a city is purpose and location. The default purpose is often agrarian settlement, which requires a suitable location. The prime feature for any location is fresh water, usually from a river. It is the start of any city I create – where is the water?

The purpose for some towns can necessitate a sacrifice for convenient fresh water. I still need to consider where fresh water is coming from, whether it is from an underground water source, diverted or sourced from a distant lake or river, or supplied by benefactor and driver of a settlement's purpose. What purpose would compel a town to build far from water? Military settlements to guard a pass, economic to mine or harvest nearby resources, cultural to revere a sacred site or traditions, or strategic to influence activities and decisions at another settlement.

As I envision the growth and expansion of a town, I envision what drew them to the settlement. It often starts with others joining in on the purpose and enjoying the mutual protection of close cohabitation in the same community. However, I have to ask if such a purpose is enough to sustain continued growth or is another purpose or industry needed to sustain continued growth. Depending on what is added, it changes how the city grows. Industries like mines and factories need workers. Military posts need soldiers and logistics. Schools need teachers and students. Hospitals need doctors (and patients). Some towns can diversify as they grow to become a well rounded and resilient community, or they can specialize and become very good at an important function that sustains it as long as their function is in demand.

People make up the city, but I have gotten past the tendency to want to identify every building and resident in a city. It may be possible and necessary in small villages. But larger towns and cities need not have all those details. Important NPCs, those that make the city or communities/neighborhoods function, need to be identified: mayors, council members, kings, and other influential community members like wealthy patrons, industry leaders, faith leaders,

and the like. The player characters might not encounter these NPCs, but they will hear about them from time to time. NPCs to represent a sample of people the player characters will encounter will also need to be identified. In some cases, I have specific NPCs who will be the specific proprietor of specific stores and services the player characters will encounter. e.g. Moe runs *that* tavern, but *Sam* runs that one. This is done when I expect players to make a choice based on the attributes associated with each of those establishments, attributes that will reflect on the type of experience the players will have by that choice. e.g. *That* tavern is seedy, while *that* tavern is exclusive. Other NPCs will be for a general service that are singular or not expecting options to be considered. e.g. Emma runs the *only* laundry service or the *local* laundry service the player character visit (no matter which one they actually visited).

The number of competition and luxuries (expensive items, non-necessities, or entertainment) depends on the size of the city. Small settlements focus on necessities and basics. As the town grows, more necessities are added before competition. The first competition is usually in the basic – foods and general goods. The town market usually serves as the first competition area. Later, simple luxuries – decorative items, entertainment, fairs – emerge. As the town grows and money becomes more prevalent, the more luxuries emerge, and the more uneven the wealth distribution occurs – poor section and wealthy section become established, and thus crime increases, and the larger the policing force.

Much of this occurs in my head as I look upon a blank sheet of paper. As soon as I draw the town's first river, the vision for the town is already drafted. I just have to put it on the paper.

My shortcut is to model campaign world towns on real world cities, often as a specific period in time, then revise it to fit the campaign theme. My favorite exercise of this was my Buda-Pest city I created for the Girl Genius GURPS game (that never made it to launch) that was based on 1848 Budapest. Buda was the seat of the royal household and the Jäger army. Pest was the merchant and academic side, and also where the rail station connected. Despite the commerce in Pest, Buda has the wealthy and powerful.

Between the two, a river.



SALTMARSH TIMES TWO

So, I decided to run a second *Ghost of Saltmarsh* campaign on Fantasy Grounds. How hard could that that be? No where as easy as running a second game at the tabletop. But, in the end, both games will be better.

First, this is the first time I've considered running two groups of the same campaign. In my mind, I envisioned it being easier than running two separate adventure paths. I would not complicate matters by making the two groups playing in the same campaign world. It would be the same adventure path, but each would have their own campaign world identical at the start. I thought I would be saving some prep time. While I expect the groups to eventually be taking different approaches to the story, even to the point of divergent games no longer similar to each other, I felt that my prep for the game would be economized, at least at first. Each group's game would be a rehearsal for the other groups game. I would be learning from each group where the campaign needed refining, polishing, and further development. And by the time the two groups became very different from each other, I would have a full fleshed out campaign world that would benefit both groups and I would feel well rehearsed. That is a lot to expect, especially of myself and my haphazard way of documenting my notes for a game. While I still over prepare for a game, I under-document. My game is mostly stored in my head, supported by a bevy of note cards, tables, and diagrams. I'm not sure how I would really manage two different groups in the same adventure path, especially as they started to diverge. However, I think my ability to launch two groups at the same time would be easy with my outline system.

Well, it is not quite so easy on a virtual table top. First, a lot more prep ahead of time is needed because of the pre-building needed to enable the software platform to support running the game. The platform can handle a lot of the mathematics and heavy lifting in the game management IF the DM gets all the information in the right place for execution. Images, line of sight layers, encounters build with token identified and pre-placed on the map for activation, NPCs identified and stated out (with images and tokens if needed), treasure and loot pre-built for awarding, etc (not to mention double checking software updates that change coding and impacts any mods added to manage the game better but now no longer function with the new update).

But, if you knew that you were going to run two groups through the same adventure path

ahead of time, it would be fairly easy. All that work would go into a "Master Campaign." Then the GM would export the campaign files into a module that could be imported to any number of individual campaigns, each running their own course but having the same source data.

Unfortunately, I had already started the first group and I could not use it as the Master Campaign for the other. The solution wasn't difficult conceptually, but the execution was not without its trials and tribulations. The solution was to export my first groups campaign into a "Master Campaign" file, then load it into a "Master Campaign" as the seed data. To ensure I did not loose any information, I would also copy the campaign files from the first game to the master campaign file folders. Then I simply retcon the campaign data in the "Master Campaign", resetting information and effects to their starting position.

If you are starting to lose track of things and getting confused, you can see where this was going. I wanted all three game to have the same parameters and setting in Fantasy Grounds to avoid any conflicts between the master files and the two group game files. Unfortunately, that also meant that I would forget which game I was in when editing and double checking data. Once, after I had done a lot of work in the "Master Campaign" file, I went to check how it loaded into the other two games. While in one of the group game file, I lost track of which game I was actually in. Thinking I was in the Master Campaign file, I exported the current game data to the Master Campaign file, only to later discover that I had overwritten the Master Campaign file and erased hours of work on the campaign. To prevent this in the future, I have a logo label on my Master Game labeling it as such.

While the export feature is a powerful function, it does not export everything. Some things are group campaign specific. Because I copied all original groups files to the master campaign file, I did not notice which information was not part of the exported module. When I double checked Master Campaign imports to the original group's game, everything looked fine. But when I checked the new group's game, it was missing image files from the folders, which also did not show up in the encounter builds. I was baffled at first, because SOME of the images appeared, but some did not. Also, none of the campaign tokens were exported, nor were any of the campaign portraits. However, some of the campaign tokens did show up. All of it was very confusing, which I am sure is confusing some of you. There was a logical reason why they did not show up and a logical reason why everything seemed inconsistent with exporting. Short answer: it was because I was inconsistent in my own file management in my original

campaign and I copied that same mismanaged files over to the Master Campaign file folder, which masked my mismanagement and hid indicators of missing data in an export file.

So, what do I mean? Well, FGU campaigns are self contained. As a groups plays a published adventure, the published adventure is a module file that is not edited. So it can be run again by another group without corruptions of the files by a previous game. However, the active campaign creates a separate set of campaign files unique to that group to reflect the progress, experience, and developments in the game. If a portrait for an NPC is needed, the GM can quickly import one for the group, but it stays only in that group's campaign file. The same goes for tokens. Neither portraits nor tokens are exported with a campaign file.

So how did some campaign tokens show up in my exported Master Campaign file, but not others? Well, because I create numerous custom creature tokens for the game, and I want to use those custom tokens for all games in that rule set, I save them in as a separate token module I load with FGU. Those token were never part of the Master Campaign filer export, even though copies of them were in the campaign token folder. So, I will continue that practice of saving common tokens into a seprate token module for use in all games. Only the player tokens and any unique group tokens will be created in the local group token folder.

So, what was the deal with the portraits? I had copied them from the portrait folder in my first group to the Master Campaign folder, so they were never in my export file in the first place. The solution was simple – I just moved them all to the image folder in the Master Campaign folder and they are included in an Master export. I had to rebuild some player aids and encounter maps, but nothing onnerous once I realized what was happening.

The hardest thing I had to rebuild was my keyed map of Saltmarsh. I had to rebuild (create copy, move copy to campaign master folder, delete "copy" from each entry) the 165 story entries for locations on the Saltmarsh map and then relink each story entry as a key to the new map. But now that I got that fixed, any changes or corrections I need to make to the game, I can make once to fix two games.

One last thing I learned, not to reload the Master Campaign file into the Master Campaign. The Master Campaign already has the data. Loading it again, a habit from opening the other two games, only creates duplicate entries.

Great thing about the Master Campaign module is that if I make an edit in a group game, Fantasy Grounds provides a marker to show that

it is an edited entry and I am given the option to revert to the Master Campaign file. If I make changes to the Master Campaign file, Fantasy Grounds also provide the same marker to let me know in each group which data in the group campaign is different from the Master Campaign file, so I can simply click the button to load the new update.

Some functions and features in the Master Campaign file can not be edited, even in a group campaign file unless it is duplicated first and retained as a local campaign file. While this seems a hassle at first, it actually works very well. First example, I can create market places listing products available for purchase at a store in Saltmarsh. In my Master Campaign, I can establish the baseline inventory for the game. In the local group campaign, the stores will eventually become depleted, but simply hitting the revert to Master Campaign file immediately restocks the store back to its original inventory.

Once I got past the first many headaches of the building a Master Campaign file for two games, I found myself already seeing a time savings in building the game for the two groups. If you are ever looking to do the same yourself on Fantasy Grounds, feel free to hit me up on Discord and I will be happy to walk you through the process and hopefully save you headaches I went through fixing my files and building my Master Campaign.

I already have plans to invest some of the time saved in prepping two games to build other enhancements in Fantasy Grounds and find creative uses for the tools already available in the game to make a better, and hopefully more fluid and immersive, experience for the players. It still won't beat the experience and feel of playing face to face at the table, but I am sure I can make the experience on FGU better for the players and me.

Wish me luck.



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 1st level Sorcerer
Merchant



Bareas Wilhelm (Sarah)
Dwarf Marine
1st level Rogue



BoB (Chris)
Dwarf Soldier
1st level Barbarian



Cassian Dawneguard (Kevin)
Human Soldier
1st level Paladin



Frocaryn Stonegather (Delia)
Halfling Guide
1st level Cleric



Juan Quixote (Christie)
Halfling Noble
1st level Fighter



Lux Cantata (Jackie)
Aasimar Artisan
1st level Bard

Session 3 & 4: The Haunted House

- Prologue -

Last session report also included session 2, which concluded with the initial exploration of a haunted house north of Saltmarsh. The party was requested by the town council, at the recommendation of Anders Solmor, to investigate the house, the location of the last time a young girl recently found dead was seen alive.

- Scene 1 - Creepy Crawlies!

We return to the western wing of the so-called "haunted house," believed to be the

residence of a famous alchemist. Continuing to explore the estate, the party exited to a back garden, where an ornate well graces an overgrown pathway. The garden was clearly shown tender care once upon a time, but has long since been abandoned. They followed the perimeter of the house eastward, coming to an old well. With a frayed rope signaling no way of testing the water, Lux tossed a pebble down the stone orifice and was greeted with dead silence.

Cassian, seeing a door to the unexplored northern wing of the house, threw caution to the wind and entered to the rear hallway, where, with unfounded confidence and enthusiasm, he swung open the first door he laid eyes on. An old kitchen lay before him, covered by creeping damp moss and shattered dishes. Iron cookware adorned the corner of the room, and a broken sink and wooden cupboards lined the wall next to it. Stairs along the far wall clearly lead up to a second floor, and a door upon the right wall remains closed. Lux, Juan and Arael followed Cassian closely, filling the door frame and hallway. An eerie skittering noise filled the room, emanating from the rusted pipes protruding from underneath the sink. Four giant centipedes emerged from the various crevices, and the party found itself under siege.

Cassian and Juan were taken by surprise, and one centipede shot forward to bite at Juan, rendering him unconscious as he succumbed to the poison. Arael, taking quick action, immediately shot a *fire bolt* at the attacker, narrowly missing at the close range. Shocked by the vile creatures, Lux attempted to put two of them to *sleep*, only succeeding at putting one down. Juan's attacker took an attack of opportunity to poison her as well, sending her to the ground.

Crowded in the doorway, the rest of the party sprung into action: Frocaryn cast *Cure Wounds* to revive Juan, and Bareas put a well-placed bolt right between the primary attacker's beady eyes (thereby sending it to whatever great beyond giant evil centipedes may belong to). BoB, rightfully enraged at having been forced to wait in the hallway, raged through the doorway, striking down a second centipede. Cassian, having recovered from his surprise, struck down a third centipede, and the final centipede was laid to rest by Juan, who had mostly recovered from his wounds.

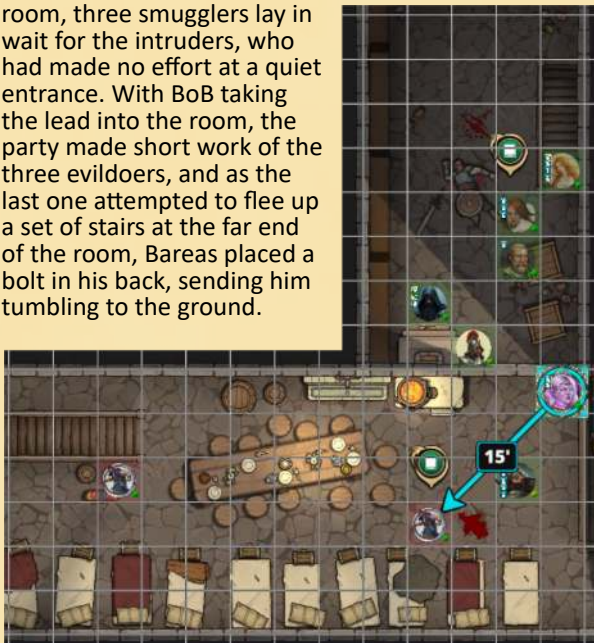
The party surreptitiously opened the door on the right side of the room to find another rotting staircase, this one leading down into a darkened cellar area. In the first cellar room, the party found a decomposing corpse laid in the center of the room, clad in plate armor and adventuring gear. The man (or, rather, what remained of him) was clearly the victim of a vicious attack, and his insides are now home to several swarms of rot

grubs, which scurry to feast on their new victims.

The party set to work: BoB, Bareas and Cassian started beating them mercilessly, while Frocaryn cast *Sacred Flame* (to no avail) and Arael sent a *Fire Bolt* (with greater success). One swarm set upon Bareas, with several grubs burrowing into the dwarf's flesh. Lux casted *Dissonant Whispers* upon Bareas' new friends, forcing them away from the wounded dwarf. Juan exchanged fierce attacks with the other swarm, and Frocaryn attempted *Sacred Flames* once again, showering the swarm with divine fire and leaving nothing but ashen remnants littering the floor. Cassian and Bareas set upon the remaining grub, finishing them off quickly.

- Scene 2 - The Living Quarters

Following the combat, the party took anything useful from the corpse, as he would likely not need the items any more. Among other things, Cassian equipped a nice new set of plate mail. Exploring the room further, Arael discovered footprints cutting through the dust towards the southern wall, where there was no clear entrance. Investigating further, Bareas found a hidden handle set into the wall. The party lined up at the door, and threw it open to find a living quarters; bed rolls and chests line the back wall, with a table covered in fresh food sitting in the middle of the room. Around the room, three smugglers lay in wait for the intruders, who had made no effort at a quiet entrance. With BoB taking the lead into the room, the party made short work of the three evildoers, and as the last one attempted to flee up a set of stairs at the far end of the room, Bareas placed a bolt in his back, sending him tumbling to the ground.



While the others looted the various chests and bodies adorning the room, BoB and Cassian posted up around the room. Two closed doors grace the southeastern corner of the room where Cassian waited, deliberating his options. On one hand, the door to his left gave no omen

of ruin. On the other hand, the door to his right is barred with various pieces of sturdy wood, and the word "DANGER" is scratched violently into its surface. A difficult decision, surely. Opening the unmarred door, Cassian entered a comfortably furnished room, perhaps along the lines of an officer's quarters. A bed and a large chest were against the back wall, while the right wall was home to a large wardrobe and a fine writing desk. Searching these various hidey-holes and containers, the party found an intriguing assortment of items: a fine oilskin coat lined with silk, a naval almanac, a treatise to some demigod containing Goblin command words, a tinderbox, candles, a shuttered lantern, and a piece of parchment that Lux determines to be a lantern-based signaling code.

Back in the main living quarters, the group decided to head up the stairs at the far end of the room, curious as to where the smuggler would have escaped to. They opened the trapdoor upwards, and found themselves back in the western wing, where they had first heard the spooky noises. After some debate, they decided to clear the rest of the ground floor before continuing.

- Scene 3 - More Exploration! (and More Creepy Crawlies)

In the eastern wing of the house, Arael and Cassian found an odd room; an old fireplace adorned the wall, with nothing else in the room but an odd semicircle of wood-growing fungi surrounding it. Arael and Lux checked the mushrooms, but the best either could figure is that they're probably safe to eat (a conclusion that BoB immediately fact-checked). Cassian, having found the formation of the mushrooms odd, checked the fireplace and found a hidden cavity, acquiring a leather bag of blue quartz chunks.

In the next few rooms in the eastern and northern wings, the party found very little of note. BoB insisted on investigating every fireplace in sight, having taken a decorated interest in the stonework. In the final room of the northern wing, BoB took this interest just a little too far, and several swarms of insects attacked the party once again.

BoB, quick to react, swatted at them with his maul, dealing quite a bit of damage. Arael followed up with a well-placed *Ray of Frost*, and the swarmed attacked Bareas and BoB, digging into their flesh. Following a *Starry Wisp* from Lux and a *Sacred Flame* from Frocaryn, Cassian finally squeezed into the room, tanking an attack of opportunity and landing a healthy blow. With a clean stab of his lance, Juan put one swarm into the dirt.

The other swarm still covered Bareas. The

dwarf dealt a heavy blow to them, and the party followed up with their next set of attacks: Frocaryn cast *Sacred Flame* once again, now frying a great many of the insects, and Arael clambered into the crowded room to cast another Ray of Frost. Cassian dealt another heavy blow, and Bareas again beat the final few bugs to death. The party, overwhelmed with joy at having killed some bugs, emerged victorious.

After some conversing, the party decided to explore the upper level of the house.

In the first room, they found a pile of worn clothes, a sack of dirty clothes, and a chest of, you guessed it, dirty clothes. In the next room, another fireplace is investigated (BoB and Bareas, dwarves that they are, must concern themselves with such things). The following room contained yet another fireplace and a wardrobe (both of which are, inexplicably, perceived by the dwarves once again). In the wardrobe, Bareas found an old cloak with an ivy leaf pattern. Opening the cloak, the dwarf was surrounded by a cloud of yellow mold spores. He and Arael, who was observing nearby, were able to overcome the effect of the spores. Juan, who was just behind them, immediately collapsed. In a bit of a panic, the party used its final healing potion to revive him, and he overcame the remnants of the poison shortly after.

In the next room, another fireplace was investigated (to a total of twelve) as the party finished searching the western corridor. Proceeding to the eastern corridor, the party entered the first room, a rather barren room containing another fireplace, with a shiny object glinting from the ashes. Before they were able to search the fireplace, swarms of spiders emerged from the ceiling and covered Cassian and

Lux.



Bareas quickly attacked one of the swarms, but it was not enough. The swarm covered Cassian, crawling through the crevices of his armor and feasting on his flesh from within. Overwhelmed by the searing critical pain, Cassian fell to the ground unconscious. Afterwards, the party leaped into action: Lux launched a *Starry Wisp*, Arael *Thunderclapped* both swarms (and Lux), Frocaryn narrowly missed a *Sacred Flame*, and Juan rode in and struck at a swarm with his warhammer.

With a sudden surge of strength, Cassian woke from the throes of death, rising from the floor to thunderously smite his attackers and send them flying into the wall opposite him. BoB narrowly missed an attack, but began a new round by killing one of the swarms with another strike as the other swarm felled Lux. Cassian turned to this second foe to once again smite them, and Frocaryn finished them off with *Toll the Dead*. The party once again emerged victorious over their arachnid foes, and set to work stabilizing the wounded.

- End of Session -

From the Players:

“What has been the scariest thing you’ve encountered in the ‘Haunted House’?”

Arael: Definitely the maggots.

Lux: Bugs.

Bareas: Yeah, the maggots were the worst. We’ll need some thicker gloves next time.

Cassian: Those damn spiders... I can still feel them crawling on me. Being eaten alive from inside my armor was NOT a pleasant experience.

Juan: That mold.

BoB: Scared? Never!

“What is the worst thing you expect to happen next as you investigate the house further?”

Arael: Probably we all screw up and die.

Lux: Bugs.

Cassian: I can’t stand being left behind during fights, can’t move as fast as I used to. Worst case, my armor is for nothing and I watch my comrades die as I fail to be their shield.

Juan: I have a feeling we can look forward to some undead in the basement...

BoB: Calming down before I get to fight more bad guys!





COMMENTS ON #8

Aaron Cornelius – Wow! What a cover!

Lisa Padol – Re: Saltmarsh. Garum is an excellent suggestion. I got to remember that there is also a market for all sizes of fish and that fishermen specialized in their fishing markets. Different techniques and equipment are needed to catch small fish in large batches versus the larger fish. And of courses there is the filtering of unwanted fish from a batch. The fishermen may try to offload a bycatch as a delicacy, but it might not be worth the effort and require discarding (not much desire for skates, starfish, urchins, turtles, and eel). Which reminds me, my daughter in Sicily has a local fish monger who offers seasonal fish daily (catch of the day, if you will). During late fall, the fish monger had several bream fish for sale which the locals warned her not to get at that time of the year. This was the same fish – the sarpa sarpa (aka Dream Fish) – that I wrote about in the E&A #3. The late algae bloom in the Mediterranean makes for large portion of the bream diet that fuels its hallucinogenic effect when eaten. I was surprised that, for one, my daughter encountered a fish that I had only just described as a possible RPG hazard, but I was also surprised, for two, that the bream was actually being sold on the local market and the local KNEW of its hazards. I wonder if the locals actually eat it for the known effects or if there were special processes to prepare the food safely, like fugu from the puffer fish. Re: bosses setting earlier deadlines due to pressure from their bosses. This reminds me of habit in the Army that often extends to the point of ridiculousness. To ensure that everything is ready when it needs to be ready, leaders in the Army like to collect all the required personnel and equipment early to allow time to fix any shortfalls, especially when it is in service to a higher level command. The brigade commander wants to assemble the brigade for a motivational talk at 9 am. The battalion assembles at 8 am. The companies assemble at 7 am. The platoon assembles at 6 am. The squads assemble at 5 am. And the sections hold their first formation at 4 am, so they can make the 9 am on time! Then the commander is late and the events starts an hour later!

Brian Christopher Misiaszek – Re: paint markers. I picked up one of those, too. I only got a single black one to try, but I am not sure what I would do with it. I think I had intended it as a line marker or a means to write letters and script on a miniature, but I already use a ultra fine point micropoint marker for that. I've seen videos where someone painted a horse with the marker, but I could see the marker streaks on the mini, so it does not appeal to me for that purpose, though it may be useful for base coating. The color was deep and rich, so that was nice,

though I like the flow of liquid paint to fill into cracks and crevices for the base coat. Some corners were hard to reach with the marker in the video. I saw another painter use the paint marker with some thinner to serve as a panel liner and wash, which was impressive but seems an advanced technique that more experience with marker paints would be needed. My painting activities tend to come in fits and starts. I may get a whole month of mad feverish painting done, but it is usually only a weekend. And even then, those painting sessions can be anywhere from months to over a year between sessions. My gray shame is huge.

Dylan Capel – I am glad you enjoyed my Dice Tower Retreat session report. The board game hobby is huge and there are more and more games published every year. I'm amazed at many of the subjects and topics that have been made into a game. While I generally have a favorite theme and mechanic, I love trying out new themes and implementations. I am constantly surprised by games I did not expect to enjoy or disliked. Almost anything can be made into a game. [Tzolk'in: The Mayan Calendar](#) has a series of interlocking gears, decorated in the Mayan motif, that represent the passing of time during the game. [Holi: Festival of Colors](#) is a game about the Hindu Festival of Colors and love in spring where the players throw colors (colored powders called gula). [Turing Machine](#) is a logic puzzle game that uses punch cards like the old computer punch cards to deduce a code. I'm not any good at it, but the implementation is fascinating. There is even a game converted from a work flow management process called [Kanban EV](#). Every time I think that there can't be any more new game ideas, I am proven wrong. The only problem, I can't play them all. My visits to the Dice Tower Retreat each year is heavily skewed towards new games, but I also always include older games that that I have never got to play before. It was only this year that I finally got to play [Power Grid](#), a top 100 game for the past 20 years.

Patrick Riley – Re: Saltmarsh setting. You're right about a pinata store. The setting being non-gunpowder did not have anything to do with its inclusion. For me, it was about theme, tone, and market demand. I did not envision Saltmarsh to be a particularly festive town. The hard life of a fisherman did not seem to incline itself in parties involving pinatas. And if any pinatas were involved in the few parties celebrated in town, I did not envision enough of theme to warrant such a specialized store. I did include tea-like drinks. Local teas are tisanes or herbal infusions from the local flowers and herbs. True teas are imported. I agree that the salts should be harvested instead of mined. I'll probably set up a few operations outside of town like the local farms. As for the apartments, I'm not a fan of how they were described in

GrnHrtBrwnThmb's document. It is still brilliant work, but it felt more like a shortcut to explain away a large building and provide location for mass residents. I prefer the residents of stores and shops to live above their stores, unless they are very successful, then they have a separate residence. Consolidated living spaces like an apartment did not seem to fit the vision I had for Saltmarsh. The apartments, as the idea conveyed by GrnHrtBrwnThmb, were a residence only and the "landlord" relied on collected rents as the purpose for building the apartment. I prefer a work block premise for the buildings, in that they were built by an industry owner for the expressed purpose of housing their workers closer to their factory. I think each shipping or fishing company may have their own "apartment" to house their sailors, fishers, marines, dockworkers, etc. Rents conveniently deducted from pay, of course.

Roger BW – Re: Gunpowder in D&D. Like you, I don't like saying no to players. However, I think gunpowder is a different issue. I recently ask the RPGG forum about gunpowder and magic coexisting in a game like D&D. The discussion was very interesting. Much of the discussion was about balance. Some of the discussion was about theme consistency. I personally liked the discussion about access to "things that go boom." Magic was more powerful and rare, but harder to learn and manage. Gunpowder required less effort and cost, but was plentiful and not as powerful. Both still involved risks. For me, it was about shortcuts and exploits. D&D offers rules for firearms and there is the Artificer class that firearm building capability (build a firearm (though it is an arcane firearm)). My problem with firearms in D&D is that it ignores the evolution of gunpowder. It was over 300 years between developing a weapon to use gunpowder (a cannon) to a point it could be used as a musket or pistol. In between, there were "rockets", fire lances, and other primitive incendiary devices. The first primitive hand cannon appeared in the 13th century and it wasn't until the arquebus, built over 200 years later, that handguns were even remotely reliable and portable. It would be another 100 years before pistols would make the scene. Pirate themed games seem to beg for the inclusion of pistols and cannons, but I think that is just the influence of media portrayal of the pirates only from the Golden Age of Piracy in the 17th century. What is missing is all the gunpowder weapons before hand. There appears to be no rise of gunpowder era in the game, no development of various gunpowder weapons, no rise of industry to create firearms. Instead, it is as if they miraculously appeared. But it also seems exploitative, too. Gunpowder weapons are powerful. So why doesn't everyone have one? Why bother with armor, and a gunpowder weapon renders it ineffective (which is a dynamic seen in history – arquebus were fielded to defeat

armor, once armor became obsolete, arquebus started to fade from the field. Focus shifted to mass fire and cannon fire). I hear there are good rules out there for including gunpowder weapons in the game, but I think its inclusion would start resulting in the elimination of other weapons prevalent in the game of D&D.

Michael Cule – Re: Aiiee! That's about right. Keeping seven players engaged will be a challenge. Another Aiiee for running a second game of the same campaign. That group will only have four players. I'll have to make adjustments in the encounters to account for the strength differences between the two groups. I have to make sure my lessons learned from one group are actually applicable to the other. They are going to have different pacing. The larger size in one group also doesn't mean everything will be easier. I remember my days of teaching college and one class was twice the size of the other. They did not finish assignments at the same time, even when I was leading the instruction. I suspect the same will happen with my two groups. Aiiee!

Jim Vassilakos – "One advantage of getting it in a little bit early is that I'm more likely to notice some mistake (usually a formatting error) and let the contributor know about it so they can get it corrected before the deadline." Guilty! Thank for all that you do.

Everyone Else – RAEBNC. The issues are huge and there is a lot to digest. I read the pages and nod along in agreement, take notes of good ideas, raise an eyebrow or two at surprises, laugh at the funny bits, and promise myself I would write longer comments for these issues because you all deserve them.

Matter – I gave my wife couples dancing lessons for a Christmas gift. Surprisingly, it has gone well and the marriage is still intact. A much better outing than our first effort when we were still dating. She has liked them so much, we signed up for more. I'm not ready to dance in public yet, but at least we know what we are doing ... sometimes.

Accidental Recall #8

For Ever & Anon 9 © 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 fun excitement of the week: I'm currently in a hospital (in Morristown because I was in town for Dreamation; I did not get to enjoy much Dreamation), because of unexplained bleeding into my GI tract. This is worrisome but the bleeding seems to have run (slowly or it would have been more of a problem) from maybe 11AM to 7pm (or a bit earlier) and then stopped. That said, they'd like to go in and poke around to find out what was bleeding, and doing so requires that they actually have the team that does that work who quite reasonably work M-F jobs, so it probably won't happen until Monday and they'll keep me here for observation until then.

Anyway, enough with the medical details.

So, we started a NOLA (New Orleans) trip right after the E&A deadline, which went a bit out of hand (as we knew it might)—given the snowstorm, our flights were canceled and we didn't get back until four days after, thus spending a full week in the city. Which was frustrating (and a bit cold; we didn't find the blankets for a night and the house's heating isn't as efficient as we're used to) but meant we got to see a bit more of NOLA than usual, especially since our Jetblue got delayed a bit more than everyone else's flights. Highlights were the pharmacy tour (a super old pharmacy turned museum, that showcases medicine throughout the 19th century which moved very quickly from complete nonsense to something notably resembling modern medicine) and getting to do some blues dancing to a nice live band. And the food, of course; always the food.

We've also spent much time working on our larp for Intercon, Ghost Fu. This is a game we wrote 17 years ago, in 2008, so it needed some updating. The oddest bit of not-updating is that in 2008 our understanding of Chinese media was mostly restricted to movies (but we'd watched a lot of movies) while since then we've watched quite a lot of dramas as well, which have a different feel and also have a more magical feel than most of the movies available. Which dates our game set in the Chinese ghostly/spiritual world, but not entirely in the ways one might think. Hopefully I'll be discharged early enough to help run this game!

Comments on Ever & Anon 8

Cover: I think that ritual might be leaking. But yeah, really nice looking cover by Aaron Cornelius, and the three panel/floor layout was quite nice and original!

Mark A Wilson: The adventure writeup was quite a bit of fun to read, and yeah, Rynn seems effective albeit in a fairly self-directed, isolated way that is mitigated by you being obviously a team player and could have some interesting development over time. I think monks are somewhat *less* combat specialist than fighters, who have very few non-combat uses other than their subclasses (although 5e does give them the ability to turn a Sudden Wind die into a d10 bonus on a skill check, which is a nice extra, and, of course, they get enough feats that they can use some to gain some non-combat ability if the player so chooses), but without a high Charisma, and in this party being

outclassed in Dex skills by the rogue, I can see why you went with that kind of personality.

I read your comments to Lisa above, and they certainly echo, but I'll try to tone down job search venting here. In the end, you keep rolling the dice (and trying to dodge scams) and hopefully something will drop eventually.

I wouldn't say that Cheapass Games failed, exactly, given that it was never intended to become a behemoth that would dominate the industry. Instead, it was acquired, if I remember correctly, not once but twice, but the buyers didn't know exactly what to do with a distinctly indie business model and eventually it ended up back in Ernest's hands as part of Crab Lab Games, which is still publishing. In all honesty, I think James and Andy both have big advantages and failings as designers—Andy does a good job of iterating his designs but tends towards the superficial (not that there's anything wrong with that); Ernest's designs are often wildly original but could also often use a bit of extra time in the oven after they're "baked"—several Cheapass titles were broken off the jump and only became long term playable, if they did, via hacks that were added on later. But I've enjoyed quite a number of games from both over the years, even if neither is likely to ever produce a deep Euro-style game (Homeworlds, in many ways the most successful pyramid game, has its own depths and can be a brain-burner, but is hardly Euro).

I agree that the Eternals was charming; that said, it was certainly not successful, and the ways in which it was best (setting up deep cosmology in the MCU) both clash weirdly with the other films and seem unlikely to be built upon in the near future.

I have weird feelings wrt the prior Marvel shows vs the Disney+ ones. On the one hand, the earlier shows were of inconsistent quality *and* quickly diverged from the MCU as it became more obvious to creators that the relationship would only go one way, with big shifts in shows (particularly Agents of Shield) having no effect on the MCU even if it would make sense for stuff to leak. Despite misses like Inhumans (I liked Secret Invasion more than you did, mostly), the short and sweet approach to the Disney+ shows often lets them have a bigger impact, and in concept, I like the fact that as they're still actually part of the MCU, events in Disney+ shows are expected to translate to the large screen rather than being conveniently forgotten. But of course there will be some misses, and having a "big universe" also has a big downside—particularly with Dr Strange vs Wanda (or whatever it's called) and The Marvels, where arguably too much of the movie was set up by the shows (how many people, aside from me, have watched all of Secret Invasion AND Wanda AND Ms Marvel to enjoy the Marvels properly? No wonder it didn't do that well!) to the point where it loses a lot of relevance and coherence with a larger audience that doesn't watch the shows.

Quite a lot of the charm of the classic comic book was that everything loosely joined together into a single big universe that was made more compelling the more you could see the connections over 30+ books and many years, but also that almost any given comic book was

comprehensible on its own and designed to be appreciated even if you started one or two issues at a time. I'm not convinced that's happening successful with the current, tightly coupled MCU.

That comedy of errors D&D resurrection/reincarnation: Sounds delightful! It's interesting that every version of Reincarnate, from AD&D at least (I haven't checked white box!) to the current one, requires the original body, given that it creates an entirely new body for the person to live in. One wonders how *much* of the original body is needed; would a head be sufficient? A hand? The largest part that's left? Very much a GM call.

re games: Twilight Struggle is a classic game, of course (and I'm surprised you didn't play Pass the Pigs before!) I own several Pairs decks but haven't played that many different games and should give the ones you recommend a try (speaking of James Ernest games).

Scribble M Horror: E&A's AI policy is something of a compromise, and very much a matter of threading a difficult needle given how many people are using, and how many are hating current generative AI. One justification of the imagery policy is that as a non-profit entity, the use of AI imagery isn't doing the kind of harm that for-profit companies using AI rather than hiring artists can do, and that like as not, people are and will continue to use genAI to make images for use in their game where an artist's work isn't economical, so it's more important to make sure it's credited than banned. But yeah, the fact that we are communicating in writing makes AI-generated text potentially harmful in a way that having some AI-generated art included (that isn't on the cover) isn't.

As you advertised in your preface, your statistical writeup of your Redux campaign is interesting and deeper than it appears, starting with pretty standard D&D metrics—rooms, characters, hirelings (establishing an OSR-ish assumption), deaths (and survival rate), treasure, etc, but spirals interestingly as you go into the aspirational stats—charters, lawsuits (against whom?), domains, construction projects, Records Requests (interesting that that was non-zero), and finally the summary of plot lines/leads, with curious 0s on 4 leads and a single addressed failure (so far?) on “find god”.

Erica Frank: Re Tarot, I don't find changes to the deck from Rider to be a particular red flag (I mean, in terms of divination decks the regular playing card deck has a far longer history, with Rider basically invented from whole cloth (atop the playing card deck) in the 19th century and fundamentally unchanged afterwards. So there's nothing sacred (pun intended) about it. That said, yeah, if someone's going to use Rider but change some things/add or swap some cards I'd like to see their thought process.

Re Tarot deck images being mainly men: That argues that specifically for storygame purposes, one wants to seek out decks that have a more even gender balance (including some gender-ambiguous figures). I haven't done any work on looking at this, but I suspect someone on the internet has looked at it. Honestly I can see an argument to have a more balanced deck for divination, too, but there are more concerns overall there.

Re your flipping a widow from a character with a prominent beard: Maybe her last human husband was trans-masculine and wore a beard, and she's wearing it (while traveling, anyway) for warmth and in memory of him.

I like how your narrate this interesting pastoral, before dropping the mother lode...that all the characters die in each loop (I had, in fact, not parsed that this was a horror game)! That certainly ups the stakes!

Very astute that the big focus of a lot of OSR design is not so much nostalgic mechanics as cleaving to older mechanics in order to center the “Convince the GM that you have a clever plan” move in play.

This, more than anything, is what I think puts OSR play in opposition to the Storygame movement where “convince the GM that you are clever” is often minimized in favor of having play that is emotional and mechanics that map fair results onto creative play.

Re liking fun dice but not clicking with Cortex: Might be worth checking out Faith Corps (as in Demon Hunters)—it's a really interesting cross of Cortex and Fate which in my experience can be a bit more accessible than Cortex+ itself.

Re “I can't hit a skeleton, that's disrespectful to the dead” that brings up a lot of questions of what the world is actually like anyway. In a D&D-like game world where undead are relatively common dangers and extremely dangerous undead are a known if rare threat, fervent respect of the undead to the point of being unwilling to fight undead would seem to violate the text of the world. But in a modern setting, it could be entirely reasonable until and unless the character got new information (or lost enough sanity that they could justify bending this particular rule).

I feel like Blades, like a lot of more novel games, benefits a lot from watching live plays or playing with people already comfortable in the system. For me, the Engagement Roll (the single roll that says how well the plan is going so far) is a mechanization for a cut—you've played out any prep scenes that seemed to apply, and we're cutting forwards to the first action scene, so lets make a roll to see how exciting the scene will be! Since everything before and after that cut is roleplayed out fairly normally, the mechanization of a single long cut doesn't bother me that much, personally (especially since you can use flashbacks to fill in the details if it seems useful). The flow of the engagement roll is a whole thing, though—the worse the engagement roll is, the more dire the situation you cut forwards to is, but depending on how people want to play it that could mean that a worse engagement roll means you jump ahead further! After all, if the plan is to infiltrate the casino, chat up the manager, get one member of the team in as a high roller, then loop the security sensors and send a two-person team down a shaft before they break into a secure vault while the security sensors show an entirely false vision of what is really happening to the manager (guided by the plant), a good roll could mean you're playing out some of those early softball infiltration scenes and they're going fine, other than the manager being someone who knows and recognizes you (but doesn't hate you), but a BAD roll could mean you're cutting right to the shaft-hanging scene and things are going disastrously wrong with someone stuck and the wires fraying...but that presumes that all the previous scenes went basically OK (and you'll flash back to them if you need to establish something specific about them to help the heist go off).

Re AI and copyright: Yeah, that's the gripping question: Whether the output of a Gen AI device is a “derivative work”. If it always is, then clearly novel uses incur massive liability; if it never is, then direct copies of copy-written work that were churned out of an AI potentially lose protected status, so my guess (but only a guess) is that the eventual court law will rest somewhere in the middle.

Re **Wake Up Dead Man**, yeah, I was also really impressed with this movie. The ways it contrasts Father Jud's honest faith with Blanc's atheism and Wicks's cruelty and cynicism give it a depth and emotional complexity that few films manage.

Re superheroes and romance: Only modern/post Dark Knight Batman depictions are that hung up. Campy Adam West Batman's type was like you described Superman's as, but less picky about the major crime thing.

Re BoB: I mean, that 2022 post is pretty out of date given that Yazeba's, which is surprisingly popular for BoB, isn't on it (it probably came out later in 2022).

Re players needing to be on board with building a theory as they go: Yes, absolutely. Particularly with the odd moves that let players add new clues themselves, if they aren't maintaining a sense of the mystery those will tend to be chaos vectors rather than powerful moves that can help them steer the mystery in new directions they are interested in.

MZMZ Brindlewood Bay sounds like a hoot! Of course, if it's set in a Wuxia world the PCs are also probably retired martial artists or the like, so that adds an extra aspect to it.

Re sanity rolls: I mean, I agree that it's a stretch. But sanity rolls are a little different than other rolls in that there are often automatic penalties for failing them. Of course, if there are no such listed penalties (that is, you lose no San if the roll isn't successful) then one has to wonder what the roll even is for if not to see whether you succeed at the task or not, but if there's a san loss associated (and if you're making a san loss there often *is* a san loss on failure), it might be a valid question. If I encountered: "The door handle is slimy and moves as if alive. If the investigators attempt to open the door, they must make a sanity roll and take 1d6 SAN on failure," I'd probably default despite the word "attempt" to assuming the door opening is successful regardless of the sanity roll, but there's a san loss on failure. That said, the specifics matter—and also why does the player know the exact wording of the passage? Did the GM read it aloud? (I mean, maybe)

Owlfolk nun warlock in Brindlewood Bay...oh, dear.

Re the D&D paradigm and its inherent instability: Well, obviously. It makes some sense in a "gold rush" approach where despite ethical problems, an area is attracting treasure seekers who explicitly aren't the best of people, just treasure-mad, but it doesn't make for very sympathetic PCs. That said, I've played in a surprisingly large number of games where the PCs (or the bulk of the PCs)...just didn't murder-hobo. Give the PCs motivations for adventure, make any danger they encounter in exploration clearly "we went into a clearly abandoned area and then someone who was NOT a person whose home we were in just attacked us", and you can get sympathetic PCs even with a D&D mode of play—but you have to see the problem and work for it.

Matt Stevens: The new system seems interesting, and I see seeds of your other designs in it. Not sure whether there's play in a "watcher" being a new role vs something that is attached to existing roles (though knowing lore and thus being able to speculate on a monster's weaknesses might be a bard-like thing).

WRT "storygame mechanics", I'm not convinced they exist. Storygames are, after all, merely a superset of TTRPG—leaving out some "ttrpg" things that don't have players play a character at all, but coined to allow things that are, like your standard roleplaying game, a "story game" where play often generates a story, but where the mode of play is different enough that it doesn't look like a standard RPG, like Microscope. So when we're looking at novel games, we can see a lot of mechanics of different types—some are, of course, GM-division mechanics that spread decisions for what happens in a game away from the titular GM, but others are mechanics that are compatible or even common in more gamist and/or simulationist games—clocks, for instance, are just a mechanic that keeps track of progress towards a goal or event, with the first TTRPG clock likely being the hit point track. As such, using clocks doesn't make a game less simulationist; if anything, it makes it more simulationist as players have a mechanic to be able to see, as much as their characters do, progress towards an event (for simulationist play one might want partially secret clocks but that's just clock+). Reward mechanics are also quite common in narrativist games, but those, too, are an age-old mechanic originally soured out of D&D, with D&D before 2nd ed AD&D giving rewards for killing monsters and finding treasure (hardly a particularly realistic reward system), and 2nd ed AD&D giving secondary rewards for class-

specific stuff instead. It's hardly more novel to deliberately choose different rewards if that's what is going to be happening in a game rather than killing and looting.

And honestly, those are the two mechanics I saw most missing in our brief "just normal people" game. The characters were fine; the GMing was fine, the situations and goals were fine. And yeah, I think the plot was fine, actually. But without mechanics to support that play, it didn't feel compelling, which might be why there wasn't a lot of taste to return to that group of characters despite there being nothing wrong with their story—there just wasn't that much to hold on to on a game level. Or not, but turning to Good Society, which certainly *can* be used for "just normal people" play, the mechanics can be divided into "mechanics that make a GM-less game work" and "mechanics that support social play." Not very well since often they're the same mechanic, but the first approach is mostly wrapped around the consent/token mechanics, while the second is handled by giving the PCs and NPCs (well, connections) distinct goals that often run at cross purposes, plus the reputation system that encourages players to do things taking into account how they'll be seen by Society, as well as the reputation conditions that suggest Events that happen when a character is seen very positively, very negatively, or both. Even shifting towards a more GMed play and dropping a lot of the consent/players playing NPCs mechanics, its the reputation and rep conditions that really tend to support a game where characters feel pulled between their desires and society, and it would be much harder to get that kind of feel with something like GURPS or even Over the Edge.

With respect to GMless play, well, obviously it's not for everyone. But it's also easier. Which may seem counter-intuitive, I don't know, but the effort needed to be a productive player in a GM-less game is more than that of being a productive player in a GMed game, sure, but far, far less than that of becoming a competent GM. So even aside from the way people who make or like running GMless games often talk about them (as in "well, everyone's creative so I want to see everyone's creativity, not just the GM's), it can in many situations be easier to find 5 people who enjoy GMless play (or less GMed play) than a single person to step up to GM. If this isn't true for everyone, then, well, it isn't; people can do trad GM-ed games as well.

John Redden: The Ticket image looks like Kid Ticket, the simplified version I have as an app on my computer, where you always have three tickets to work on and draw a new one whenever you finish one. If it was and the world version was a variant of full ticket, I'm not surprised if it was much harder!

Re PCs letting their cleric be killed because he was out of cures: And then what happened?

OSRIC was a game someone else in the APA was playing; my impression was that it was reimplemented AD&D. HOA is a home owner's association; not a particularly gaming specific term.

Lisa Padol: Dice vs Roleplay for negotiation: I mean, I always pick both, but if I have to choose, obviously talking because why are we even roleplaying if not to talk in character? But dice/skills mean there's a reason to not have the same player (the one who could sell sunblock to bats) do all the negotiation, so yeah, both.

Re Everway vs Amber: Everway always felt like a response to Amber—it's similarly diceless, but by giving the GM a choice between Karma (Everway's system, mor or less), Drama (story wins), and Fortune (pull a card and interpret it), it builds on the idea to establish that you only go with the random answer if you don't have a better answers already but it's still an option. It uses a point system for PCs, but rather than using 100+ points, it uses 20 points with the novel "more points in the same place act multiplicatively" approach which can encourage concentration and is balanced by having any weakness in core stats

come with its own penalties. And it even uses group character creation, as Amber does, but while Amber's group character creation is competitive, Everway's is collaborative and discursive. (when I was working on this, Lisa commented that Amber also has a discursive character creation script, but there it's just the GM that does the asking while in Everway all the players do it)

Re my conflating incidents in Cthulhupunk: Yeah, I definitely did. Oh, right, the "shot a villain into space" plan was part of the icosahedron plot!

Re Feng Shui: I think Pam played an abomination or some other Seeds of the New Flesh type, and Dave played a Transformed Cop.

Re my also pointing out rules errors if the GM is not acting in good faith or I think it matters enough: Well, yeah. When I let things slide it's usually where people are having fun and I think the fun will go down if I correct the error; I might bring it up AFTER the session but I try to keep my rules-memorizing ass from being a downer if there isn't a really good reason.

Re hyper-specialized games vs "full roleplaying games": I'm specifically using full roleplaying games to refer to something hyper-specialized games aren't—a game where you aren't locked into a genre and where the game follows the players rather than the other way around (even if it favors a genre as many games do). As you say, you can get a lot out of a hyper-specialized game and there are many reasons to play one—but they also (deliberately) have limitations a game like *Over the Edge*, *Fate*, or even D&D won't have in terms of following the players' story around rather than the other way around. They might indeed be roleplaying games (rather than non-roleplaying game storygames; see my comment to Matt above on my hierarchy there), but they're not "full" in the sense I mean. And as I've mentioned before, while modern D&D can follow players around pretty easily even if it's hardly that *suit*ed for play outside the dungeon or dungeon-like environments, early D&D did have a structure that, while not as constrained as *Bluebeard's Bride*, channeled play into specific modes, with the assumptions that play was "in a dungeon", "in the wilderness", or "between adventures."

Re another player picking up my character sheet to find out what my character was good at: I'd certainly forgotten that! But yeah, it just feels rude to walk over and peruse someone's sheet in a way it doesn't to, say, slide over and read someone's sheet on D&D *Beyond* (and certainly either way to react to that sheet in character).

Attronarch: I don't know if it feels different on your side, but more recent adventure writeups, with more of the PCs surviving and often coherent quests (helped by said survival), and engaging repeat NPCs, just feel more enjoyable to read.

Myles Corcoran: Re the "brightest mind of his generation" not thinking twice before walking through a trap that feels warm to the touch: I mean, that could mean anything; it could be a nice place! It does tell that *Psyche* means mental/magical strength more than intelligence (which in Amber is more represented by how you play). Did the players ever find out where the trap card came from?

Re Everway Powers and Magic: I liked Powers but found that it was hard as a GM to correctly balance powers vs just spending the points on stats. I used Magic a lot, and there it was harder; GMing (or playing) magic to be sufficiently good given the investment (someone might spend as much as 6 points on magic without having a stat below 3!) without making magic overpowering was its own challenge, but boy it's fun playing a mage in Everway, particularly since your related stat (Air, Water, Fire, or Earth for those not heavily Everway-familiar) does inspire different ideas about how magic works. That said, I think Magic was really where the game needed more clarity, and the way the newer edition gives guidelines for how many specific capabilities

a mage should have based on how many points are invested (thus also letting you make a narrower but still capable mage with a lower investment) is a distinct improvement over 1995 Everway.

Re Ptery: For those who don't know, Terry Pratchett was one of the relatively small number of authors who joined up to the nascent Internet of the early 90s (along with SF authors who made the hop from FidoNet or Delphi), interacting actively in his own newsgroup with fans for years. So yeah, nickname!

Brian Rogers: Fiend Folio monsters are the epitome of the weird! Classic, really, even if I first encountered the trope in **Order of the Stick**.

Loved the breakdown of your plans for the SW game...and what actually happened. I do feel like some of the group might be influenced by a largely D&D background (but at least they didn't kill the kids!); still, missed opportunities are opportunities for the GM.

Hmm. With hindsight, I wonder if a way to handle the failed pilot roll at the end of the session (other than not call for a roll, which yes was ideal) might be to turn it into an option select. Obviously the pilot roll happened three hours ago when the repair finished and KT tried to turn over the engine, so what happened afterwards? Clearly, KT had to come up with another plan for evac, whether it was hiring the pirates to do evac or something wilder.

Looking at that robot with the propeller beanie, I see it was a simple enough time that aerodynamics took a fourth fiddle to the robot looking really dorky but still being able to fly super fast. 400mph with a tiny propeller like that, wow.

Re it being ridiculous for an "Iron Skull" solve his problems by hitting them with his head: Indeed. If you want someone who does that they should be called something like *The Bull* or *The Head Butt Hero*.

Re my 3.5 treasure ensurement/snaking subgame: I mean, in fairness, while Stephen was absolutely playing his intelligent NPCs as bastards who would try to teleport out of a fight with all their treasure, or sneak invisibly into the PCs camp to try to retrieve the treasure left by a fallen ally while they were sleeping, he was also *amazingly* generous with the treasure we managed to get. Sure, we had to wait until we got a really big payday to catch up to (and surpass) the wealth by level chart, but this was also the campaign that had a unique Sword of stonecutting at a cheap price on a shelf in magic shop, and also had utterly wack items like a box (used to store captured villagers since the campaign's inciting event was evil forces attacking the PCs village and capturing nearly everyone, which acted as the framing device for the entire campaign with the PCs eventually realizing that their village had been attacked because it was a home for retired heroes, and disparate villains wanted them and their students (the PCs) off the board for their different Villain Plans, so when the PCs had finally rescued everyone they turned to thwarting the plans of remaining villains) that made shrink spells cast on people placed inside the box afterwards be permanent until dispelled and have double effect (party spellcasters had a field day with this when used on party members), and there were also busted items like a chess set with use once level 20 summons (one per piece; the pieces also had some minor continuous abilities until used but disappeared afterwards), and eventually a "Harp of Creation" which when played by a bard would....try to make whatever song was sung literally true, with the usual Wish caveats. So while the GM was willing to steal "the PCs treasure" if they didn't guard it, he was also absolutely making extra effort they took to get it (or, in some cases, just unlock it; I know we found some treasure that had ludicrously dangerous looking magical trap defenses and eventually I had my Arcane Trickster candidate PC invest ludicrous numbers of skill points in *Disable Device* (in fairness, the ranks 7 I needed to even qualify for Arcane Trickster were a great start) so I could get all of that

done safely)) worthwhile. But yeah, it was a pretty crazy campaign, and the GM also let NPCs use positively unfair tactics in order to inspire the PCs to do the same; I remember one encounter with a flyby enemy that kept flying out and attacking, then flying behind cover (good lesson in how to ready actions), and also an enemy infantry line that took advantage of narrow corridors and troop rotation in some interesting ways...

Brian Misiaszek: Oh, I love the role of Esperanza—a competent, ethical foe who still acts as active, extremely subtle opposition for the PCs because she assumes their motives must be vile until repeatedly proven otherwise. A great way to reward PCs for acting like protagonists, and if handled well they’ll likely never catch on; just have their luck turn just when things start getting iffy.

Pedro Panhoca: da Silva: Re Snow White and the Seven Versions: Hee! Yeah, false interactivity are pretty common even in more complicated works—with even “Choose your own adventure” novels often only having a small number of fully worked out paths, with most other endings being short “bad ends.” On the other hand, I’ve played Visual Novels (VNs) that had multiple quite long endings (although often very little branching once you’ve selected an ending)—Zero Escape: Virtue’s Last Reward (the only one of the games I’ve played to conclusion; I should get back to my run of one of the others at some point) has some shortish endings and some quite long ones, but the structure makes almost every path valuable as you can’t get the best ending until you’ve got every or almost every ending, and some endings contain information you need to progress in other paths (you eventually find out why this makes sense in the fiction). Another full-length VN I’ve played (although not to all endings; the endings are quite long), “Code: Realize **Guardian of Rebirth**”, has an interesting “gamebook” like structure—you make a number of choices in the story that contribute to your attachment to the different main characters, but which route afterwords (presuming you avoid a bad end, though bad ends are fairly rare if I remember correctly) you’ll take depends on which of them you are most attached to after you leave the central story section. There are certain branches that will give you more contact with one character or another and take you down certain story paths earlier, but which long endgame storyline you’ll follow is at least partially going to be rooted in which accumulation of smaller choices you built up. Except for, I think, the Arsene Lupin route, which I think requires finishing all the other main routes at least once (I never did play that one; I think I played 3 of the four other routes since each route involves a lot of text to read through in the endgame). There’s also an anime adaption, of course, but I expect that the anime adaption just picks one route and follows it to the ending. (yeah, looked it up and it follows one ending but weaves in facts from the other endings to make a fuller story).

Dylan Capel: Re parameters in Typst: I was already using a json file for some configuration (zine #, issue #, year, and target APA #), so using the same file for the same reasons in my typst setup was pretty smooth. But I haven’t tried any explicit programming in typst as yet of course.

Disregarding comments for page count in an APA is a novel and interesting idea, actually, and I say this as someone who has been skeptical of letting zines be larger. If we dropped the max page count (sans comments) to 8 I could absolutely see doing so; it would allow zines that were half comments to proceed unchanged and limit how much “root” text there was for comments to work on, while letting the APA grow naturally and not having contributors have to choose between contributing *any* original content or fully commenting the APA.

Re vi and emacs: I bounced off vi hard when I started exploring Unix-style utilities (that struggle even leaving the editor especially with pre-vim vi not giving you instructions on how to even exit is

traumatic), and adopted Emacs even before linux became available (I was an early adopter with .94 I think, though I had unix accounts in school and on bbses before that), using it as an editor, email reader, etc. But eventually I adapted to the convenience of having a fast in-line editor that came pre-installed on basically any command line I could be logged into, so I use vi/vim when time calls for it and emacs for programming and general text editing. I’ve never had much success/enjoyment of more recent editors, since the convenience of home key navigation is so good for me that editors that demand that you use a mouse don’t do it for me when I have access to a full keyboard.

Re handling initiative order in D&D by ordering the players (and NPCs) yeah, that’s a key trick; I started doing it in D&D4 which was the first D&D where it became clear that the actual number didn’t matter, just the ordering, so I’d write people’s names on index cards and just leaf through the initiative as players took their turn. We do run into one situation where absolute number does matter these days—lair actions happen at initiative 0, of course, but also if a player logs in as the combat goes (we have a lot of players with lives and a regular start/end time for Thursday games, so you can’t demand all players show up on time and it would just lose us players we want to have for those games) you need to figure out where to put them. That said, you can just have a card for init 0, and honestly the best place to put a player as they log in is throw their card on the stack as soon as they’re ready to act. One Thursday GM does do a countdown which is way slower than just having a queue, but we’ve also had some combats using the new D&DBeyond tool which does a good job of keeping track of initiative and showing you who’s next. And yeah, always write your PC name/pronouns on both sides of the tent, for so many reasons!

Patrick Riley: Scyla biting the suspicious adventurers: If a werewolf bites you you might contract lycanthropy. So what if you bite them? I assume this was a hint at their heritage, though, as she was picking up “bite everyone in sight” from them? Although since she’s canonically a snaggletooth person that fits too.

Huh. So after Millie fainted and the party abandoned her, she woke up in the temple of Set, and then...rejoined the party? Or was she teleported away unconscious with the rest of the group and then sent to clerical help?

Huh. So what was the legality of what amounted to a private feud between the two dwarves? It seems like adventurers doing murder to prevent further attacks (including one that gravely wounded (or killed? Waking up in a temple that that is ambiguous even if the GM says that the character isn’t dead, but I’m not sure what system you’re using for this) one of their own would be out of bounds, so Argenta presumably hasn’t committed any capital crimes despite being openly and actively involved in a feud the point of a golem attack?

Good point that the difference between folklore and a lot of wacky belief systems is that by definition, folklore has or had some people who believe it, so it’s not that out there to believe.

I’m not so convinced that more people aren’t interested in longer games; certainly I tend to get a lot out of them as you get to really dig into a character, story, and group. But things happen and there are so many things that will result in longer aspirational games being interrupted or disrupted before they get that far.

Yes, agreed that in practice, D&D usually doesn’t have medieval culture and attitudes in play; it has modern players playing it and they usually bring modern baggage with them (which tends to make the veneer of those things even thinner). That said, I think it can be improved to an extent by putting some more medieval/Renn stuff back in, to make it feel less like our world with less tech and more magic.

FWIW, I've only once seen "battle lines" in *Monster Hearts* and it was in a fairly weak convention game. At its best, they're teens that do horrible things to one another, yes, but they're teens first, monsters second.

Clark Timmins: I don't think "the players always win" is that controversial. Of course, there are always exceptions—part of the point of games like *Call of Cthulhu*, of *Bluebeard's Bride*, and often of other horror games is that the players don't always win—and the same is true of games where the real possibility of loss is one of the things players sign on for. But a lot of games, random PC death or TPKs aren't something that should be on the table, whether it's prevented by fudging, by the GM not playing that hard, or by the rules not even putting it on the table unless someone forces it there (stakes setting, et cetera). Fail forward isn't quite this, but it's similar—it's the idea that a "failure" on the dice might not be a failure in the fiction, but instead a bad consequence with the plot moving forwards. So it's a version of the idea that the *plot* shouldn't ever stall, but not that the *players* shouldn't suffer a loss.

Re your homebrew undead: One potential issue I see with the *Grave Sovereign* is that its *Command the Dead* raises 3 dead creatures as *Possessed Hosts* for *Command the Dead*. But *Possessed Hosts* don't act independently, so as read even though they're under the sovereign's control they won't do anything (this isn't the case with *Sovereign* or *Wraith's* possession since the monster is acting from within a *Possessed Host* so it's not independent).

Also, you don't state that once an undead is destroyed it doesn't leave a usable corpse, but this seems implied.

Mass Grave Awakening is really interesting since it's potentially very scary, but it also makes all the corpses left inapplicable for *Husk* possession—they're undead zombies, not corpses or husks, so they can't be possessed, once they're destroyed they don't leave a corpse, and since it raises everything there's nothing left for possession abilities to work on any more. It's a good late-fight way to make things more exciting, but used too early it weakens the *Sovereign* and any *Ossuary Wraiths* in the encounter severely.

Roger BW: Re *7th Sea*: Yup! I had a lot of problems with *7th Sea* in 1st edition, mostly in that it gave you a limited set of points to buy stats and skills, but every stat is designated as crucial, you're only given enough points to buy every stat at 2 plus a bit extra to get one or two at 3, maxed out at 3 (except for whatever one you get a one level bump at from your home region), and if you want to start out as a swordsman or sorcerer, there went the rest of your creation points. Boosting regular skills is cheap and effective, but you're maxed out at 3 as a starting character. On top of that, the ship skills are uncommonly expensive for even one point, so you can spend a pile of points to have gone to sword school or have magic powers, or you can spend the same pool of points to be a novice sailor I guess, your choice. And like a lot of the games in the era it was coming off of, the improvement costs are completely different from character creation costs, and if you look them up you see that stats, which are the most effective things for your character to have, are expensive but actually *less* expensive relative to other things (like new skills) after character creation, so starting with a 1 in a stat that is *less* important to you will make you feel like a chump for session after session but will save you points if you don't quit (you'll quit). Anyway, that's enough ranting.

Re the new *Chaosium* crew: Honestly, I don't know what to think of them. On the one hand, there are a lot of things I've heard about them that puts me off. On the other, well, whatever one says about it, *7e* has some really interesting and valuable design ideas and doesn't in any way feel like someone going by the numbers; the same for *Pulp Cthulhu*. And in addition to re-releases of old adventures and

supplements (and yeah, Lisa worked on at least one, albeit for *Golden Goblin Press*, not *Chaosium*), they've also OKed cool new stuff like *Harlem Unbound*. But they clearly would like to make money, yes.

Re having someone else run an adventure (or game) blind while you're watching: Yeah, I've been involved in someone doing that too—I got to play at a blind run of *Ballad Hunters*. Probably harder to do this with an adventure just because of prep time but certainly not impossible.

Re *Dudle vs Doodle*: Glad to hear there's a free/OSS alternative, thanks for mentioning it.

Re maps and RPGS: Yeah, I got through *HS D&D* without even really seeing a map (except in the secret room at the *Strat* I guess), but *D&D 3.5* (I skipped 2 and 3.0) had almost everyone using maps and figures.

Re magical printing press and it becoming a whole Thing: Very true. Or it could be completely ignored and the PCs are just reporters or acquiring agents or whatever; it depends on what kind of game you're playing (and if this is actually the first printing press).

Michael Cule: Your anniversary *Uncle* adventure sounds mad cool/wacky/fun!

Good luck on the body-shrinking injections! I had more side effects than I liked so am trying to do useless work to shrink my body (very slowly) instead.

Ooh, more *Lictors*! Looking forwards to it.

Re 90s game rewrites: Indeed. I've also seen interesting-looking rewrites that I've never gotten around to really trying because I'm busy playing other games (*Over the Edge 3e* and *Unknown Armies 2e* I'm looking straight at you). I can't even judge the new versions because I haven't played them, and they certainly don't seem bad, but they're also quite different.

Gabriel Roark: The DMG does certainly say that players can't earn more XP until they train after they return to a haven. I remember playing with the level+1-1xp rule but thought we'd taken it from an earlier edition; if you have chapter and verse I'd like to see it so I can find it. In any case, honestly both rules are functional enough; the main issue with the level+1-1xp rule is that it semi-automatically puts players in a situation where (if they have enough gold to afford training or you ignore that rule for reasons) as soon as they train and have a single encounter they want to go back home and train again. Which argues for letting them gain xp up to level+1 flat and if they can train for two levels at once, then let them. But barring that it's fine.

Avram Grumer: Ooh, pretty layout!

Re gender: I think that's part of it. Most of my more interesting character ideas end up being not-my-gender, so I play not-my-gender a lot. Are characters that are my gender closer to me in personality? Maybe!

I don't think of the *Monster Hearts* werewolf as a bully. (for that, look at the ghost, queen, vampire). Their primary themes are violence, and wildness (including their tendency to turn darkest self more often than other playbooks). It's true that the *Primal Dominance* and *Scent of Blood* moves can push them towards bullying behavior, though I mostly see them in terms of violence in general, and you can just not take those moves if you don't want to explore those themes.

Re moves that avoid dying in *Monster Hearts*. Very true, although the amount of time these characters spend in *Darkest self* makes me nervous, as you cannot use the "avoid dying" move if you're already in *darkest self* (one possible cost) and have no strings on others (lose all strings others is the other possible cost). Still, I think at this point *Stephan* isn't in *darkest self*, so...no problem?

I like that after the first time or two, the “darkest self” noise became something you could avoid—a threat (particularly since it’s Stephan whose Darkest Self is most in the fiction), not as hard a move as just flat out changing him.

Hee! I want to see that Monster Hearts poem!

Re not having any sex 3 sessions into the Monsters Hearts game: Clearly. They’ve been too busy trying to kill, expose, or humiliate one another.

Re BESM musing and skill cost: My ideas on the subject do similar things without hard divisions. More important skills get divided up into smaller skills that you can’t and probably don’t want to master all of, so maxing out every related skill doesn’t make sense and would be horrifically expensive. Less important skills don’t get that treatment, and might also be compressed, with half as many ranks (in BESM, 3 of6) giving you all the benefits you can get out of the skill. The result is that players can invest in some “hobby” skills while still having points to spend on the big important skills, but also that rather than having who cares about Swordsmanship maxing out Swordsmanship, instead you’ll have some people who focus on parries, combat movement, and speed attacks, while others focus on counter-attacks, seizing advantage, and pressure.

Re Puerto Rico retheme: Yeah, the 2022 retheme is at least an improvement, though it can still feel too close for some people.

Re Cthulhupunk traps: Lisa got it right.

Re noun-based games vs verb-based. Yeah. world of Dungeons mostly makes up for being a noun-based game that is (to an extent) PbtA by also being a one-page game, but it certainly means it doesn’t work the way a normal PbtA game does.

It’s worth noting that Brindlewood Bay is establishing what’s important by wrapping up its vague moves. Dangerous moves are important because they’re dangerous; it’s not specifically stood out what the danger is because you can work that out, or how you plan to solve it. Find-the-clue moves are important because they’re an attempt to progress the mystery, but again, it doesn’t matter how in a general case. Doing so avoids binding specific key game actions to specific stats, which has advantages and disadvantages; one could argue it would be a flaw to have one of the detectives in Brindlewood be better at finding clues.

Re mixing landscape and portrait: Yes, exactly. For print, just having everything be portrait (and if something is sideways in portrait and actually formatted in landscape mode, that’s fine) is best. But digital-lyk, it’s best if everything is formatted so “down” is the same direction so you don’t have to figure out how to flip the bits or your monitor.

Patrick Zoch: Oh, a +1 bonus (on a d20) for being aware and ready when your turn comes up is inspired.

So far, the feel for the Saltmarch game seems very clean; looking forward to what happens next!

I’d think that what travelers get for not being grounded in the local area is that they have experience in other places and cultures. Which should be less useful for much of the campaign than local grounding, but if the group meets another person from the far off place a traveler comes from, or even has a need to travel to that location in turn, it should pay off with some nice spotlight moments. For instance, in Stephen’s Twelve Kingdoms game, I opted to play a Ranger from the desert southern Continent, who had come to explore the “barbarian north” (which was closer to fantasy medieval Europe; this was a funnier joke when she was built as a dex-focused barbarian, before the class progressed in playtest and that build became much less interesting overall); this meant she didn’t know much at all about the Twelve

Kingdoms, but she did have the kinds of knowledge a dedicated explorer would have (some came with Ranger, some did not, like map-making). And the campaign, as a globe trotting quest, did eventually reach the Southern Continent, she got some nice spotlight moments as a native guide.

I think if you want the group traveling hither and yon, you need to provide a motivation that isn’t treasure seeking; as said you can always find treasure closer to hand. But if they’re a university archeological team, a trading crew who own their own ship, a diplomatic embassy, or on dedicated to a quest that requires specific components that may not be accessible locally, they’ll make those trips, especially if the motivation also includes some funding to cover the travel.

This also can reduce the impulse to murder-hoboing almost as much (or more) than connecting the group to a place. If you’re traders, you’re not going to rob local merchants just because you can; you might need to trade with them later!

Jim Eckman: Honestly a bunch of characters becoming demon fighters working for the Taira while the rest of the group served the emperor and took them down one by one sounds pretty epic, even though their motives were quite suspicious.

I can’t quit make out what’s happening in your illustration (other than the figures between the cliffs, of course), but it looks interesting.

Heath Row: Wahflestopper manifesto: Pure chaos! Sounds like fun, and certainly true to fanzine history even if the letters of comment often didn’t get saved the same way fanzines did (as, obviously, you are aware, see “The Usual”, and also given the source)

It’s interesting how Events have resulted in so many US roleplayers moving elsewhere. I have to wonder if, in addition to people learning local languages and developing new friends, we’ll also see US expat roleplaying (and other) communities spring up, as people make connections with fellow exiles.

Re climbing trees: I remember, when the 3.5 D&D campaign I mention above started, the first thing my 1st level Elven rogue (without, yet, a level of wizard) did was to climb a tree for a more advantageous position vs enemies. And, promptly fell out of said tree again, as I rolled a 1 on my Climb check. For at least the next two years of play, people would regularly make jokes about elves falling/dropping out of trees.

Myself: I like my zine’s new look (even if the characters are quite small; I’ll lower the margins a bit this and increase the font size, but the reason for the small font size in 7 was trying to approximately get as many characters per page as my previous format did), but I certainly made some errors. The “—,” issue was part of my struggle to figure out how typst lets you follow an item of markup (I could use Unicode mdash, but choose not to) with a non-space character. As I did not figure out until after Lisa pointed out the above error, the ways to do so are either to end the keyword with a semicolon (NOT a comma) or to instead surround it with braces.

Jim Vassilakos: Nice Lesbian Sheep scene; I hope they figure it out eventually!

One way to handle a player being absent for one or more sessions is to have them be captured by an opposing force (particularly if their absence is known ahead of time). That way, a rescue can be performed once the player returns, and you can even split attention so the player gets a bit of focus time as a captive before rescue (whether they rescue themselves or are rescued from outside).

Re mechanical arguments vs purely role-played: Obviously, role-played is ideal—when the results are good for everyone. But they aren’t, always, so people develop other methods. Mind, you and Matt aren’t

the only ones skeptical about some of these methods—regardless of Dogs in the Vineyard being a compelling example of mechanized arguments (if an interesting one since you know when making an argument how successful it is likely to be as dice are rolled first), I’ve seen Meguay Baker get positively skeptical on “treating an argument like a fight”—and in fact while there are some mechanical features in PbtA games she had a hand in that affect argument, they never displace the actual role-playing part (why would they?). Still, Robin and others have a point that roleplayed debates can go on and on and on, and having some mechanical incentive to not do that can be quite valuable.

Back to PCs phasing out of existence: I’ve personally never had a problem with the PCs of absent players being largely irrelevant when their players aren’t there. Of course, the PC isn’t simply “phasing out of existence”—but they can plausibly be distracted by something, or if a fight starts obviously they’re handling another part of the fight that’s not getting played out. Doing so, making it explicitly about focus, handles vagaries of real life and play in a reasonable way without overthinking it. As to when a PC of an absent player’s abilities might be critical in a situation, well, sometimes it’s easier to just let the absent PC act. Of course, a compromise if the way the player would roleplay the situation is important (which it might be) is to say “Absent Sue’s PC handles the problem” and next session you flash back and play out the scene. After all, with some players, watching them work is half the fun.

Re persuade in Scum and Villainy: Obviously you need a basic approach to even roll a persuade (or socialize) check to change someone’s mind. Still, some of the point of such a thing is not to have to play out every line of dialogue, any more that you’d avoid cuts in a one hour TV show. We know what Von’s basic approach was (something like “Now, if you try to confiscate a private ownership ship, you’re going to make a big mess. Other ships will stop visiting, lest they also get confiscated, and you might lose your job. [and given the Devil’s Bargain] now, as an alternative that we might all be happy with, how about you take quick tour of the ship, which I voluntarily offer.” Not that I know or remember what his approach was or into what detail he went; some players will ham this stuff up a lot more than others and tbh that’s fine.

That said, this is why, if one is rolling for social rolls, “fortune in the middle” can be such a good technique. Avram describes this as when the player makes some extra decisions after the roll, but it can also be when the player saves detailed descriptions for after the roll. So for the classic “fortune in the middle” rolled dialogue, first the sides describe what they’re going for and their basic approach. Then you roll up the result so they know how much they’re likely to get (with or without mechanics like Fortune in the Middle). And then they roleplay out the conversation, steering it in the general direction of where the dice went, but with as much elaboration as they’re comfortable with. That way, the characters can be more or less socially skillful than their players, but people still get the joy of seeing conversations and roleplay happen. If the players aren’t entirely up to the challenge, they might allow suggestions from the audience to spice things up.

Re Head of Vecna: Obviously presuming Elf was closer to the incident, she has a better idea how how it works, but my impression from having read other accounts of the incident: 1. The rumor was actually spread by another party in the same campaign. 2. The idea wasn’t to bring Vecna back to life, but to, like the Eye and Hand, gain a measure of Vecna’s power while having a chance at keeping your own personality. Never mind how unlikely that would be if you replaced your **head** with Vecna’s (but maybe personality really resides in the gullet!). I don’t know about the *last* party member, but what I heard involves the druid from the party who had set up the whole scam, but the druid hadn’t been involved and decided to try it. So he commanded his ape servants

to cut his head off and put the (fake) “head of Vecna” in its place! Obviously, had it been a real artifact, putting it on someone’s headless stump would have done *something* but apparently at one point they were convinced that they’d let a corpse wait too long before they tried it, so they did it again!

re Dungeon HOA: We did take pictures of the bulletin board we were writing ideas on, though I’m sure they weren’t fully fleshed out. As to the dragon’s hoarding problem, well obviously hoarding is natural, but in addition to the ratty carpet he simply won’t get rid of, he has a bed of thousands of copper pieces! Utterly valueless, and spilling into other occupant’s lairs, plus it’s not like he’s a Copper or Bronze dragon; at least then it would make sense.

Re trade: Yes, highly simplified is the rule. We ran the Starjammer game on trade for around a year (longer in character as ship travel takes time) and mostly the decisions we’d make would be “ok, so we’re on X planet. What does X planet produce that other people might want to buy who live in the general direction we want to go, and are we ok going to the right planet to sell it?”

Work stuff: I’ve continued to send out resumes and had some online interviews. Here’s hoping, and thanks for all the good wishes!

Igtheme (game worlds): I don’t tend to build full worlds even when I run stuff. For larps, I’ll build a minimum needed to run the larp and then let it expand until all the characters we want fit. For ttrpg, it’s not dissimilar: I’ll stay a few steps ahead of the players and hope things work out in the end. And, of course, for improvised worlds like Monster Hearts (which I’ve never run) and Dangerous Refuge (which I have), it’s all about keeping track of the world the players have outlined and then elaborating on it a bit, whether as facilitator or player.

Witch and Cat Inspired by my experiences with The Letter Game, I wrote a tiny formal letter game a few years ago which got released to a few play-testers.

The core concept is that players take on roles of the “witch” (an experienced practitioner, generally willing to give council and advice on both life and craft), and the other the “cat” (in fact, a prospective apprentice, curious and asking for advice.

The two protagonists have never met; instead the game begins with a cold letter from the “cat” asking for advice.

As a twist, one can play “witch and catfish” instead, where zero, one, or both, of the witch and cat are secretly not what they seem and wish the other ill.

The protocol for this is written, free-form, and should work well. That said, adding tables still seems like a good idea.

Example:

“Setting (roll a d6 and consult this table)”	
1	Contemporary
2	Idealized Pastoral
3	A specific time and place in world history; witch chooses time, cat chooses place
4	Generic (or less generic) fantasy world
5	Steampunk or Gaslamp Fantasy
6	Roll/pick twice, once for the Witch, once for the Cat (could be very different cultures, or time travel!). If you roll this again, one of the cultures (or both) are actually science fiction/far future



Issue 246

Age of Menace



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

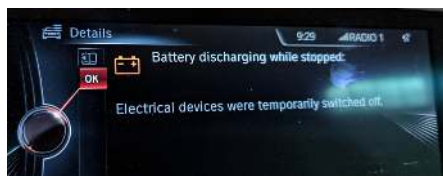
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From Our Last Episode

It's been a long, grey-beige & miserable winter of deep snow, bitter cold, & persistent electrical gremlins discharging my car's battery (killing two). My 2014 BMW has been in the shop more than on the road these past 2 months. It's frustrating since I *like* my car & it's tiresome to hear everyone say just to buy a new one.



World & more local events have been mind-numbingly awful of late, too many to list. One of the few bright sparks Canadian PM Mark Carney's masterclass special address to the *World Economic Forum*. I strongly recommend everyone to spend 15 minutes watching it on [YouTube](#); it earned him a standing ovation and his blunt yet hopeful speech for third powers went viral.

I've done little online Zoom role-gaming, & solo Fallout New Vegas. I have not done any minis painting in a while nor have I used my 3D printer to make new ones.

Habana Horror: *The Mazorra (part 7)*

BASEMENT LEVEL, M1 HOSPITAL & ASSESSMENT CLINIC, MAZORRA MEN'S DEPT

This is M1's utility area & contains critical infrastructure & support services securely away from patient facing care areas. They include:

Generator Room: Diesel generator mounted on a raised concrete base. Fuel drums and maintenance tools nearby. This unit provides emergency electrical power to essential hospital systems, such as lighting & air conditioning to operating theatres and to fluoroscopes when municipal service fails; ~1 minute delay

Mechanical Plant: Primary heat & steam for the hospital are supplied by oil-fired boilers located here; the old coal system has not been used in years but the old furnace, chimney & feed chute remain in working condition. Sabotage to this can affect hot water & sterilization,

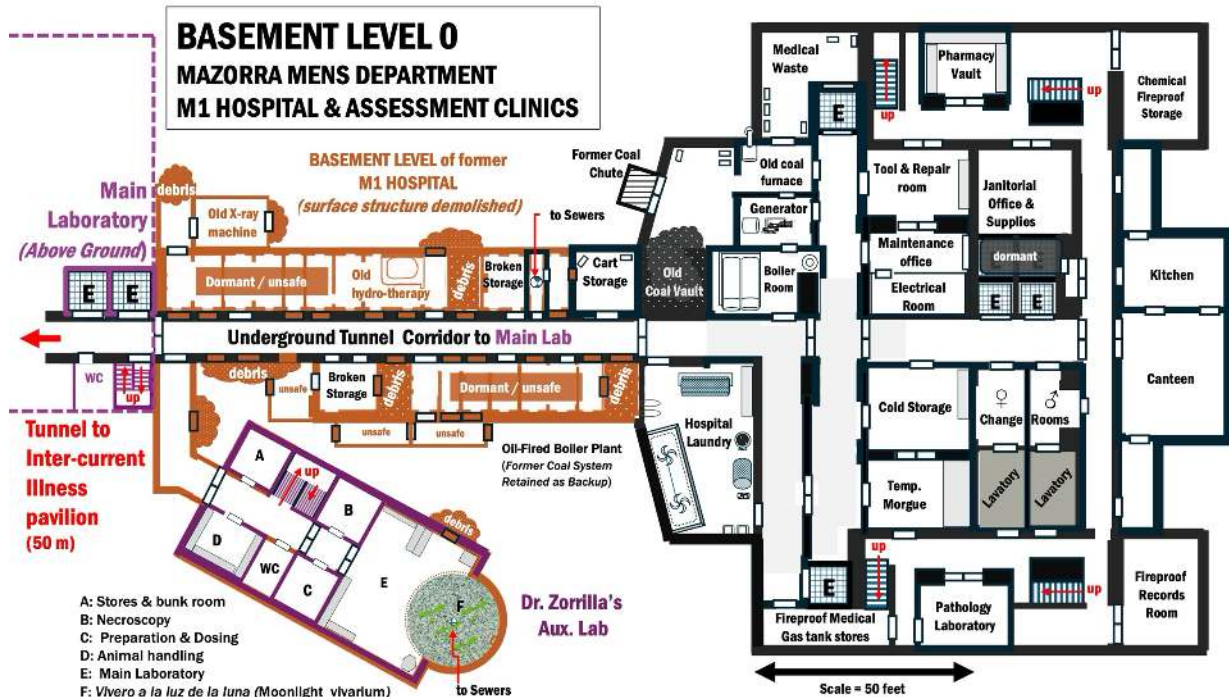
Coal Vault: Former coal storage with overhead chute access now used to remove medical waste and hospital garbage. Coal dust foot prints track out easy.

Medical Waste: Galvanized lidded garbage cans lined with newspapers were used for biological refuse and stored until incineration with Mazorra's own incinerator. Other waste was mixed in with trash to be carted out and buried in landfills. Occasional rat activity detected. Limited ventilation.

Tool & Repair Room: Maintenance equipment, wiring spools, spare pipe fittings. Carts with tools for maintenance staff to make repairs to plumbing & electrical equipment. A locked fire-proof cabinet contains welding equipment & portable blow torches.

Janitorial Office & Supplies: Cleaning chemicals (carbolic acid, bleach), brooms, mops, buckets. Lost & found is here.

Electrical Room: Large room filled with dial meters, fuses, relays, knife switches. Smells of ozone. Connected to the mains and controls all power to the hospital & adjacent tunnel access. Electrical shock and fire risk if tampered without training. *Electrical*



Repair (Regular) can find evidence of *parasitation* of power by unknown drain source (*Extreme*) can trace.

Temporary Morgue: Tile-lined room with steel table & floor drain; limited autopsies only. 4 refrigerated bodies can be held here before mortuary transfer.

Laundry Room: Steam steam pipes, soak tubs, washing drum, & mangle (wringer) for cleaning & sterilizing of hospital linens. Drying area & ironing boards west wall Drainsv→ sewers & storm drains.

(Note: Other basement room descriptions trimmed for space consideration).

MAIN HOSPITAL TUNNEL (Mazorra Men’s Dept.)



This is an underground service tunnel passage linking Active M1 → Former M1 ruins (Dr. Zorrilla’s lab is in here) → Main Hospital Laboratory → Intercurrent Illness Pavilion (see map; tunnel **green**). Elevators and

stairwells provide vertical access to those main hospital structures. Lighting is functional and regularly maintained; only alternate bulbs lit at night. The floor is clean, level & dry.

This corridor occupies the surviving foundation of the original built 1899 M1 hospital. After the 1926 hurricane, damaged surface structures such as the old hospital were demolished & rebuilt. Portions of the older substructure and foundations were retained, repurposed & reinforced, or filled with rubble & earth to prevent subsidence.



Many doorways here are bricked up else have door with warning placards **PELIGRO PROHIBIDO EL PASO** (Danger Keep Out). A handful remain accessible and serve as storage for hospital carts, broken hospital equipment and furniture. One unmarked locked door leads to Zorrilla’s Auxillary Lab (see below).

Most of the old rooms off this tunnel are condemned or so unsafe they should be. These once housed hydrotherapy suites, treatment rooms, storage lockers, coal furnaces, & the old X-ray department (and many areas at deeper levels are not shown on this map) Access is possible, but movement requires caution and there is no lighting. Rooms have support beams exposed, masonry fractured, & rusted pipes protruding from walls. Gaps allow lateral and vertical movement between rooms without using doors. Ceilings sag in places, plaster fallen, & debris shifts underfoot. Vermin activity from rats is present & bats roost in voids with access to the surface.

Keeper's Note: When Investigators deliberately search an unsafe ward section for at least 10 minutes, roll 1d6.

DORMANT/UNSAFE WARD FINDINGS

1. Old Patient Ledger Fragment: Partially legible admission notes from the 1899 hospital. One name matches a current Mazorra surname (Keeper's choice) which may be a clue.
2. Sealed Medicine Crate (expired): Morphine ampoules & chloral hydrate. 1d6 usable doses.
3. Surgical Kit: Rusting but intact. Grants Bonus to First Aid *once* before degrading.
4. Hidden Crawl Passage: Leads sideways to adjacent room or concealed void. Bypass opportunity.
5. Tambor's Bolt-hole: This chronic in-patient has made a cosy nest here; bed, lights, supplies, even a small working refrigerator. Contains a brief sketch map of this area revealing safe and unsafe rooms & passages.
6. Structural Weak Point: Roll **STRUCTURAL INCIDENT** immediately (*see below*).

Entering an unsafe ward section (i.e. bricked up doorway adjacent marked in orange on map above) requires a Regular *Spot Hidden*. Failure calls for *Luck*; if failed roll 1d6 on the **STRUCTURAL INCIDENT** table below:

1. Falling masonry/sharp rubble injury 1d2 damage.
2. Ceiling drop; *Dodge* or 1d6 damage.
3. Floor gives way; *DEX* or 1d6 damage.
4. Steam or foul water burst; CON or lose next action.
5. *Vermin surge* (bats or rats, Keeper's choice). When they appear, *DEX* or fall prone & SAN 0/1.
6. Major collapse; all roll *Dodge* or 1d6 damage and pinned. Passage blocked. Backtracking requires STR or Mechanical Repair and 2d10 minutes.

DR. ZORRILLA'S AUXILIARY LABORATORY (Basement Level 0, Former 1899 M1)

The part of the former hospital basement is accessed from the main east-west corridor via a sloped service tunnel. Originally constructed as an air plenum and later adapted for bariatric pressure experiments, the space has been quietly repurposed for clandestine pre-clinical & (unauthorized) clinical research on the positive effects of ethnobotanicals on severe mental illness by Dr. Ramon Zorrilla; he has another more conventional lab in the Main Hospital Building. Plumbing, heating, air conditioning & electrical service remain functional. Power consumption exceeds

recorded maintenance levels but is tolerated through selective bribery. A narrow stairwell zag-zigs ~30 feet to a disguised surface hatch concealed within a masonry ventilation structure screened by shrubbery; the external grill is locked but operable from within. The air here carries smell of antiseptics, animal musk, & plant exotic flower perfumes.

Keeper's Note: Locating the Aux. Lab. This is not marked on any official plan, but the old hospital construction blueprints are in the Library of *La Oficina*. It may be found through electrical irregularities, unexplained animal deliveries, bribed maintenance staff, structural exploration of dormant wards, or observation of unusual nocturnal activity near the concealed surface hatch. Trailing someone heading here would be easiest.

A: Archive & Overnight Room. Shelves have hundreds of boxed microscope slides, botanical sketches, & plant presses with labelled specimens in Latin and Spanish. A made-up folding cot with blanket & pillow is here for night experiments, along with spare clothing, a hot plate and coffee maker.

B: Necropsy & Preservation Chamber: Refrigerated cold room with zinc-topped examination tables and drainage channels. Sections prepared for comparative neural and organ pathology. Dissecting microscopes. Routine post-exposure analysis is conducted here.

C: Preparation & Dosing Room: Balances, scales mortar & pestle, alcohol burners, filtration columns, glass funnels, measuring flasks, eye-droppers, sterilized syringes & needle.) are neatly racked here. Locked cabinets hold hundreds of vials of alkaloid extracts with hand-written labels.

D: Animal Handling Room



Former storeroom converted for controlled animal exposure studies. Dozens & dozens of glass containers house white mice. Labelled rat cages designate control & exposed cohorts. Larger hutches contain a dozen guinea pigs and rabbits for systemic toxicity and circulatory observation. All the animals appear well kept and healthy. Feed, bedding, and extra water bottles distilled water stored along rear wall, and on the main table is an animal weigh scale.

E: Main Laboratory Long wooden tables support glassware, distillation rigs, microscopes, & glass slides. A fume hood is one corner. Pinned charts correlate lunar phase with alkaloid concentration in harvested samples. A velvet-lined tray holds hypodermic syringes and calibrated glass pipettes. Each bears handwritten names & dose markings (Medicine to decipher the writing, it's that bad). On one table is a rotating drum apparatus for endurance testing. In another corner is a water maze board for rodent cognition trials. There is apparatus with electric clockwork timers connected from glass tubing to glass retorts and Bunsen burners obviously used to regulating exposure intervals to any substances heated in the retorts. Hectographed charts on the tables both blank and filled record such things as 'Response latency', 'Motor coordination', 'Respiratory rate', 'Recovery interval' & 'Resistance/augmentation to experimental ethnobotanical alkaloid'.

Keeper's Note: This lab equipment can be later re-purposed to help Investigators to track down a source of a conventional contagious outbreak. If a minimum 1 hour is spent going over the notebooks here successful *Library Use* reveals escalating interest in circadian modulation & cross-species behavioural excitation. Notes reference limited human trials conducted under signed consent, framed as experimental therapy for severe psychiatric illness (i.e. Zorrilla bends ethics but is not a monster or a mad scientist).

F: VIVERO A LA LUZ DE LA LUNA (Moonlight Vivarium):



F. Vivarium (Lunar Growth Chamber): This A 20-ft circular chamber adjoining the Main Lab, perpetually lit in an eerie grey-blue glow.

Structure: Former ventilation plenum. From the lab side, the curved wall is a woven metal partition with a large mesh door (currently unbolted). The room widens at the base and narrows into a 30-ft chimney above. Adjustable upper vents (chain-controlled) regulate airflow and admit moth and bat pollinators. Iron trellises anchored into concrete walls are climbable. Floor drain leads to the sewer.

Flora: Dense nocturnal ethnobotanicals bloom under simulated moonlight: Nicotiana, Night Phlox, Night Gladiolus, Evening Primrose, Night-blooming Jasmine, plus rarer Cuban and Haitian ritual plants used for Dr. Zorrilla's alkaloid extractions. Growth is lush and layered; anything smaller than a large trunk can be concealed. Timed mist discharges every quarter hour. Nectar dishes encourage pollinators.

Fauna: Moths and small fruit bats are drawn in through the vents and encouraged by shallow dishes of sugared water placed among the beds.

Lighting: Modified arc-lamp with rotating polarized filters simulates a 28-day lunar cycle via clockwork regulator. Blackout curtains isolate lab lighting. Lamp emits faint buzz and intermittent flicker.

Environment: High humidity. Damp soil scent mixed with faint ozone. Organic debris accumulates between cleanings. Maintained, but never pristine.

Horrors of the Mazorra:

A 1930s Pulp Cthulhu scenario (cont.)

Re-cap AoM #245: *The Investigators' evening at Mazorra began with a reception at the Director's Manse, where Director Machado's genial authority seemed more of a performance. The façade fractured when the injured Dr. Llerena appeared and was swiftly removed before he could speak freely. Shortly after, an unsettling painting was unveiled and a guard was found collapsed inside the locked room. A mysterious telegram led to Director ordering Capt. Gandia to begin the emergency evacuation of a Pavilion. Guests and visitors hastily withdrew for the night. The disrupted dinner however grants the Investigators a rare advantage: with security distracted, they were no longer under constant watch.*

Keeper's Note: Rest & Fatigue - Unless actively interrupted, Investigators can secure ~6-7 hours of rest between ~01:00 & ~07:00. Disturbed rest imposes narrative pressure, not mechanical penalties, unless the Keeper wishes otherwise, in which case they can impose a Penalty Die for all Cognitive and Athletics rolls.

The Mysterious Telegram

Ordinarily, "Director's Eyes Only" telegrams are delivered directly to Director Machado and shown to no one, not even Esperanza. They are briefly logged at the switchboard for verification; the carbon copy is then destroyed and the entry removed from the register. To Esperanza, who accidentally was given and read this one before it was sealed, and to any Investigators who later recover the crumpled sheet Machado discarded, the Spanish text appears routine: delivery timing and

maintenance access at the Santa Bárbara Pavilion. Why, then, is it restricted? Why destroy all copies? It's because this message is not ciphered but steganographic: pre-arranged terms carry secondary meanings understood only by President Machado and his correspondents. The number in the first line indicates the hour. "Library" or "Santa Bárbara" refers to the vault beneath the pavilion. "Fumigate" signals the need for a secured two-hour window. "No visitors" orders the building cleared. "Second cousin" identifies President Machado as sender.



Taken together, the telegram is an extraction order. It directs Director Machado to clear and secure the Santa Bárbara vault at a specified hour in preparation for removal of sensitive materials, in this case the withdrawal of ill-gotten funds from President Gerardo Machado's concealed Mazorra vault.

Only Director Machado understands the full meaning. He instructs Captain Gandía to evacuate the pavilion under a fabricated pretext. Gandía passes along a different explanation to his men. Each level receives only what it must. In light of current events, the implication is unmistakable. This is not routine administration but a final retrieval. Director Machado quietly begins packing personal papers, cash, and valuables from his own safe, preparing for immediate departure by chauffeur-driven car to Havana and likely beyond.

Esperanza at first cannot reconcile the harmless wording with the Director's sudden talk of bomb threats & evacuation. Only after his flight does she realize that the telegram meant something else entirely.

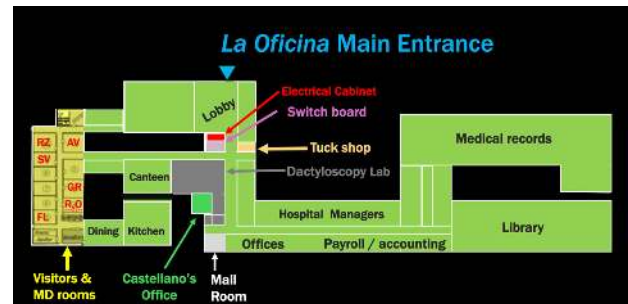
10:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m.: After Hours at La Oficina Unobserved

SIDE-BAR: CONCURRENT NOCTURNAL INVESTIGATIONS Think of this night as up to six parallel lanes of investigations, up to one for each Investigator, each having a different degree of danger and payoff. There is also always the option where Investigators can go off into the night do the completely unexpected.

After the Mazorra guards unlock *La Oficina's* front doors, they usher the group into the darkened lobby and depart with visible haste. No guards remain. The Investigators and their companions are left unobserved. The lobby clock reads 10:40 p.m.¹

- **Dr. Arturo Viela & Dra. Elda Real**, excuse themselves early, citing morning duties.
- **Lt. Col. Francisco Vives** also retires early, saying he must write letters and pack before catching the 8 a.m. train to Habana.
- **Dra. Gilda Ramagosa** can be *Persuaded* to talk. She adds she can make big urn of coffee, having missed this at their dinner and have it in the Dining Room at *La Oficina*
- **Ricky Morales**, can also *Persuaded* but says he has to checking in at the Switchboard for something; he has taken over an empty second-floor room in the Visitors' Quarters.
- **Israel Castellanos**, camera case in hand, plans to photograph fingerprints and complete paperwork, inviting Flash to join him in the *Dactyloscopic Laboratory* darkroom; says he will have coffee first too
- **Dr. Prats** is absent, having earlier left by ambulance with **Dr. Llerena & RN Yániz**.

With the guards withdrawn and dinner formalities over, the mood is looser. NPCs are more forthcoming, especially in one-on-one exchanges.



NPC AVAILABILITY & INFORMATION

Senor Othello Romero y Barbero (*Tuck Shop Mgr. & former Bruja*)

Shutters are up & the shop dark. But a phonograph player is murmuring Cuban music. The slowly pulsing red glow in the back is his cigar; he says sleeps on a mattress behind the counter to deter recent theft attempts. If vouched for by Mons. Aurelio and shown the loaned crucifix, Othello speaks politely & offers rum in a teacups & cigars.

- Former *Santería* practitioner; ceased after losing his sight. Still knows the *Orisha* traditions.

¹ This clock is always ~10 minutes fast.

- Speaks of *Palo Mayombe*, a darker current invoking *nkitas*, spirits of the dead, for personal ends. No Baron stands at its head
- Assists only if convinced Baron Kriminal threatens balance or innocents. Authority, haste, or coercion silence him.
- He'll pass over a matchbox; inside is the **Glass Eye of Elegguá**, a crystalline Cowry shell he will loan. [details omitted for space] Failure to return = dire consequences.

Lic. Israel Castellanos (*Dactyloscopic Lab*)

- Develops Flash's film; comment on odd images
- Says Police HQ radio facsimile traffic from Havana ceased yesterday, but the carrier signal remains open. "This is the beginning of the end. Wiser to leave...but a perfect moment for a photo-journalist to make a lifetime scoop"
- If trust is earned, says fingerprinted all Staff & Investigators. One is not who they claim to be (will not say; *Keeper's Choice* if not a PC).
- Also, if trusts, says he knows which evidence files are missing for the two patients sought; retains secret microfilm copies. Shares copies freely; does not know who removed originals.

Ricky Morales

- Knows which telegram log entries the Director ordered falsified after messages from "Your Second Cousin."
- Intends to review the Switchboard log before it is altered again overnight; will either persuade or bribe Teresa Pacheco to access the log.
- Wary of Lt. Col. Vives. "He asks the wrong questions about certain patients... and sends too many telegrams overseas about them."

Dra. Gilda Ramagosa (*in her La Oficina room* [GR])

- Guarded before colleagues; avoids speculation.
- Knows Zorrilla's lab lies off the westbound main tunnel, not directly beneath M1; Evelio Gil assists his work & usually lives in town
- She can be Persuaded to escort them to see Isabela Varona, the artist of that even's painting.
- In private 1:1 admits her contingency plan to extract vulnerable women if collapse begins.

Dra. Elda Real y Oro & Dr. Arturo Viela

- No response at Viela's [AV] door; no light within; bobby trap gun has been reset.
- A typed English note on Elda's door [R_yO] reads: *For our safety we are remaining inside. I have Arturo's pistol and will use it if forced. Do not knock. Do not enter.*
- *Listen* can hear Elda's voice singing softly *Guantanamera* over & over like a mantra.

Lt. Col. Francisco Vives (*secretly slipped off to meet Yaniz in his cottage to plot a scheme to help CEDA*).

No answer to knocking. Light visible beneath door & transom but his room is silent & empty until he returns to his room [FV] ~ 04:00 a.m. If searched:

- Locked briefcase (Hard difficulty to pick) has Eugenics File. Inside is a report "*Extraordinary Cognitive Manifestations in Colonial Youth Populations*" written by Dr. A. Viela.
- Also photos of 6 Children's Pavilion inmates, and handwritten reports on each. IQ sheets (Dra. Real's). Notes on "atavistic resilience." Marginalia: "*Aptos para traslado discreto.*" Hermes & Solita are marked for discreet *transfer* to Spain; **not** adoption.
- If room searched, he will know this on his return.

Sra. Teresa Pacheco (Switchboard until 07:00)

In her booth, an island in the darkness of the corridor; is on headset and plugging in local Mazorra calls and connecting outside calls too. She responds to *Persuade* if legitimacy, not urgency. *Fast Talk* risks shutdown; *Intimidate* backfires. Shares only if irregularities threaten institution.

- Prats in M1 Doctors' Lounge tonight.
- Zorrilla paid privately for a 200' telephone line installed to his Aux lab under M1
- From eavesdropped or logged* calls:
 - 22:05: ~~URGENTE / SOLO PARA LOS OJOS Y OÍDOS DEL DIRECTOR*~~
 - 22:50: Machado's chauffeur phones Main Gate re pending departure.
 - 23:35: Gate guard leaves message for Capt. Gandía; Director Machado left for Habana.
 - 00:00: Gate reports 2 scheduled visiting vehicles w/ 4 motorcycle guards.
 - 00:15 No response Gandía's call to Manse
 - 01:38: all 6 visiting vehicles have left.

Keeper's Note: 23:00 La Oficina Dining Kitchen Eavesdropping. A light is visible through the cracks in the door & servants can easily be heard in the kitchen dropping off baskets of soiled dinnerplates & cutlery.

- A successful *Listen* roll catches Esperanza instructing staff to secure perishables, leave washing up to morning, and then retire immediately to the servants' barracks per Capt. Gandía's orders.
- Esperanza will notice if someone is in the Dining Room if lights are on (The service doors have small wired-glass observation panes). or persons heard speaking via a brass speaking tube connects the Dining Room to the kitchen corridor (n.b Investigators who inspect the Dining room may attempt *Hard Spot Hidden* to notice the tube, or *Hard Listen* to detect someone using it).
- If Esperanza listens via the tube, she hears normal conversation without a roll. Whispered speech requires an opposed *Listen* roll. If both sides are actively listening, resolve with opposed *Listen* rolls. Both may succeed. What Esperanza hears shapes her later interactions, particularly if their remarks suggest altruism rather than self-interest.

Other NPCs Requiring Effort to Reach

Some conversations require leaving *La Oficina*. Ricky Morales can indicate locations on a map for RN Beatriz Montalvo, Mons. Aurelio, & the TB pav.

Mons. Aurelio (*found praying in Mazorra Chapel until midnight; then retires to adjacent quarters.*)

- Explains Cuban Santería centers on the Orishas, such as *Obatalá*, *Changó*, & *Oshún*, and reverence for ancestral spirits, the *Egún*.
- Notes that while death spirits exist in Afro-Caribbean traditions, the Haitian loa Baron Kriminal is not part of mainstream *Cuban Santería*.
- Identifies Othello as the most reliable source on *Santería* practice within the Mazorra.
- Will loan a silver crucifix and provide a vial of holy water if respectfully asked.

Director Machado (inside his Manse until 23:25)

- **22:25–22:55** Retires upstairs; empties safe, removes cash and bearer bonds, burns incriminating papers; one telegram only charred
- **23:25** Chauffeur quietly summoned; luggage loaded.
- **23:30** Departs Mazorra via main gate. Gate notifies switchboard; later informs Gandía.

Senorita Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato

22:25–23:00 Supervises post-dinner clean-up at the Director’s Manse.

23:00–23:55 At *La Oficina* kitchen, inventories perishables; dismisses staff early.

00:00 Returns to the Manse. Finds the study disturbed, safe emptied, fireplace warm with paper ash. Director Machado gone. Most suits, luggage, even shaving kit removed. A brief note was left:

“Espe, urgent matters require my presence in Habana. Remain at your post and speak to no one. I will send for you. — M.”



Midnight Actions: Esperanza removes her earrings and necklace, places them in a jeweller’s case, & begins selecting travel-worthy dresses without changing out of evening attire. She methodically packs clothing, jewellery, and sturdy shoes.

Armed with a two-shot .22 derringer in her purse, she exits via the rear, crosses Avenida Álvarez-Cerice, notes the arrival of a Porra vehicle, and quietly moves her 1932 Packard Light Eight Convertible Coupe from the closed garage. The car is fuelled. She parks briefly in front of the Manse, loads luggage, then returns it to the garage and locks it. Time: 00:25. She misses Capt. Gandía’s 00:15 call to the Director. She retires to her room, takes a bromide, and attempts sleep.

Demeanour: If encountered that night or the following day amid collapse, Esperanza is composed but strained. Machado’s flight has shaken her. She feels abandoned, exposed, and quietly furious. Loyalty fractures into calculation. She does not panic. She reassesses.

SIDE-BAR Esperanza Recalculates. Beneath perfume and poise, Esperanza is deciding whom to survive with. If treated with respect, she may reveal:

- Machado gave no hint of departure before the telegram.
- If not already taken, she retains the original telegram & will share its contents once trust is established.
- His “evacuation” story was rehearsed, not improvised.
- Machado was corrupt, but not gratuitously cruel; not Porra.
- She names Gandía, Yániz, Llerena, & others (all Porra) far worse; she retains discrete blackmail material as insurance.
- If confronted about abandonment, she says, “He always said Cuba required sacrifice. I did not expect to be the offering.”

If pressed or threatened she retreats into cool disdain & denial.

RN Beatriz Montalvo (*In her private cottage.*)

No cap; hair down, streaked grey. Revolver within reach. Speaks plainly.

- Saw Sra. Violet del Sangaria’s after she was murdered. Ligation marks inconsistent with “accident” claimed by Persian; only he could have killed her; Capt. Gandía knew & tolerated it. Yoboma is a “useful tool.”. Beatriz has both a copy of the original & later falsified death certificate (MD left for the US).
- Deputy Chief RN Yániz has hosted foreign visitors, including Lt. Col. Vives, late at night in his cottage.

LONGER ENCOUNTERS:

NPC	See Section	Location
Mateo Derosiers	The Dying Bokor	TB Pavilion
Capt. Gandía	<i>Santa Bárbara</i> Pav.	<i>Santa Bárbara</i> / Supt. Manse
Lic. Evelio Gil	The Man in the Painting	Aux Lab / Outside M2
Dr. Llerena	Returning to M1	M1 third floor room
Dr. Santiago Prats	Returning to M1	M1 Doctors’ Lounge
<u>Señora</u> Varona	<i>La Pintora</i>	Women’s Pavilion B

Encounter with the Dying Bokor

The TB Pavilion sits at the far western wall, near the cemetery to the south and west gate to the north. The ward smells of disinfectant, damp linen, and rusty iron (old blood). Curtains hang between beds like shrouds. Masked nurses move quietly (2 by day, 1 at night). When asked, they are directed to one bed, but are admonished not to speak loudly or long because of the other patients.

Behind one curtain lies the failing body of **Mateo Derosiers**. He is cachectic, almost skeletal beneath blankets, and his chest rattling with each breath. Bloody rags are folded neatly at hand. He watches with clear, intelligent eyes and murmurs in French to the air just above his shoulder.



When addressed, he is calm and direct. “I am not mad,” he says in English with a French accent. “I am dying.”

He admits to being a **Bokor**, a sorcerer who served the loa “with both hands,” meaning he practiced both healing and selfish magics. “Houngans and mambos tend toward restoration”, he explains; “bokors occupy a necessary, darker place in our spiritual order”. He claims he filled that role with dignity, and only at the request of others. Until now. “

Here in Cuba, faith becomes illness when it belongs to the wrong people. I whispered to the Baron not for rescue, but because when one is half-dead, one thinks carefully about what should be done when one is fully dead.”

He does not threaten the Investigators. Instead, he asks who now commands the Mazorra, who disappears quietly, and whether cruelty has truly faltered of late, or merely grown more discreet.

If Asked About Baron Kriminel (BK)

- Mateo corrects gently: “Not who. Not even what.”
- He describes the Baron as “the part of Death that remembers injustice. He is not evil, nor is he good. He is.”
- Says Baron Kriminel is not summoned, only *recognized* and allowed *passage*
- “This Baron appears when a death is denied meaning: hope extinguished, a cry for help ignored, and a corrupt lie made unchallenged and so official.”

If Asked How Many Porra Must Die

- Mateo appears puzzled. “I did not ask for a number. Only that the debt be balanced. The Baron does not count score with bodies.

If Asked where the Baron is right now

- Mateo appears puzzled and looks again above his left shoulder “He is here right now. Silent. Listening. Judging. He judges you, right now. Not by your words but by your deeds. The Baron does

not know your motivations, nor does he care, only your deeds.”

If Asked What Happens When Mateo Dies

- This unsettles him. “The promise was not made to *me*. I was only convenient to open the way.”
- “If balance is not restored as promised, the Baron continues faithfully, without judgment. Think of the Baron as like a spiritual hurricane that will tear the roof off a house to get to one that must die. But as the house collapses others in that house may also die.”

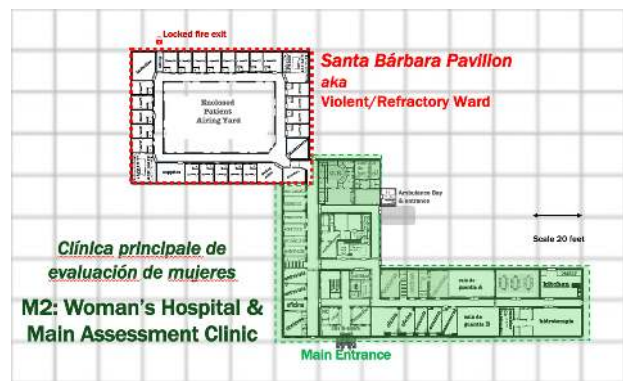
If the Investigators linger, & just as the Duty RN motions them to leave)

- “If you truly wish the Baron to stop, do not hunt him. Name the injustice. Name the truth. Name the dead. Make lies impossible. Pull those out who deserve to die out into the open less the whole Mazorra be flattened.”
- He coughs, and folds the red stained cloth and closes his eyes. Still closed, he murmurs “Monsters end when secrets do.”

Encounters At Santa Bárbara Pavilion

23:15–23:40 Pre-Midnight Evacuation

- At 23:15 Capt. Gandía orders the Women’s Violent/Refractory aka *Santa Bárbara Pavilion* cleared under the pretext of a sewer gas leak. Five orderlies and eleven guards escort thirty-six women out the fire exit and across Avenida Álvarez-Cerice. They range in age from 20 to 67 and all are wearing grey hospital smocks with their hospital ID numbers stencilled across the front. Two Night Duty RNs assist. By 23:40 Santa Bárbara stands empty.



- Gandía quietly orders several guards to lock interior access from M2’s north-south corridor toward the Violent/Refractory ward.
- Each woman is issued a blanket. Some are sedated. Most are not. They sit or lie along the sidewalk and narrow verge beneath dim lamplight and brighter moonlight. The unfamiliar exposure heighten agitation and

one laughs uncontrollably. Another claws at unseen pressure and is struck down. Murmurs spread.

- They all await the “Experts from Habana.”



00:00 The Midnight Arrival

- Two dark armoured limousines enter, escorted by four Federal Police guards on motorcycles. Engines cut but headlights remain on.
- Four crewmen exit the cars; they wear overalls and have rope and mining helmets. Two riders carry automatic pistols; two openly carry submachine guns.
- The brigade leader, in overalls and steel mining helmet, presents sealed Presidential authorization to Captain Gandía. “I am with the *Brigada de Desactivación de Explosivos* (i.e. ‘Bomb Squad’). “Credible intelligence suggests multiple A.B.C. explosives devices are hidden beneath the Santa Bárbara airing yard set to go off at dawn. So many of teams on high alert we are borrowing cars from the Ministry.” Gandía notes that staff and patients were told it was sewer gas. The leader nods.
- Four heavy duty laundry carts are requested.
- Heavy metal cases are unloaded. The squad refuses exterior access and proceeds through M2 interior corridors. Gandía mentions locked doors; the leader requests the keys.
- Gandía attempts to follow them. A moustachioed motorcycle Federal Policeman blocks him and presents the seal again. Gandía withdraws, checks his watch: 00:10 a.m.

Keeper’s Note: Investigators observing outside must make an opposed Stealth roll against Gandía’s Spot Hidden (55%, see AoM #241). Several (1d6) bored in-patients are hypervigilant. At the Keeper’s discretion they may also roll *Spot Hidden* or *Listen*. Use the highest successful result against the Investigators’ Stealth. If the in-patient succeeds at a Hard or Extreme level, they cry out, drawing immediate attention.

00:10–01:25 Waiting

- Gandía stations himself across the street. The women sit in loose rows. He orders silence.
- From beyond M2 faint metallic impacts and chain movement carry across the yard.

- At 00:22 a harsh metallic squeal cuts through the night, followed by the unmistakable rush of water; hydrants run for ~50 minutes
- 01:19 the interior doors open. Carts emerge; pushed by four crewmen soaking wet in their overalls with the other two guards; across the street the loads appear heavy.
- At 01:25, the leader, after removing sodden overalls & towelling off his face, approaches Gandía; he reports multiple devices rendered safe. From a soaked canvas satchel, he produces a scorched metal cylinder with exposed wiring.
- When Gandía reaches for it, the leader withdraws it slightly. “Fingerprint analysis needed but typical A.B.C. design” He adds that “...counter-blast sandbags were deployed and became saturated once hydrants were opened. The *Brigada* recovers its own materials...double sifted sand is safest. Our inspection is complete-”

01:28–01:35 Perimeter Break



He is interrupted when a lone figure, a man, approaching from the west steps into the headlight glare wearing a lab coat. His skin appears spotted, mottled, and in the Moonlight these shimmering flecks seems to glow faintly iridescent -like Measles? Chicken Pox?

- A patient close to him screams, “¡Tiene la peste!”²
- Another shrieks, “¡Se está derritiendo!”³
- Panic erupts; Guards lose control instantly.
- One motorcycle guard fires a machine gun burst into the air. The effect is immediate; patients scream/scatter into the road & shrubbery.
- The figure staggers and runs west. Several women claw at him. His glasses are knocked askew. His lab coat tears, exposing further mottled and flecked with a glittery unnatural sheen when seen by Moonlight.
- Suddenly the two armoured limousines engines roar to life, & four motorcycles do likewise. The convoy of vehicles make a slow U-turn through the crowd of panicking patients & the cursing guards.

² -he has the plague!

³ -He is melting!

SIDE-BAR: MAZORRA VAULT EXTRACTION TIMETABLE

00:20 – Yard Entry: Four Porra loyalists & Army engineers, enter the 50×30 ft airing yard via M2 with 4 hospital carts carrying fake bomb-disposal equipment. Two motorcycle guards are with them. The central 4×4 ft storm grate is unlocked.

00:22 – Simulated Cloudburst: All four hydrants are opened fully; 3000 gallons/min pours out. A stopwatch is started as water sheets across all sides of the yard & starts falling into the junction chamber 20' below. This chamber links the modern 8-ft east–west trunk to a square ~1900 north–south culvert. A two-stage flood regulator controls access. The lower south slide gate opens first under rising head. The north gate remains latched, controlled by a float in a non-visible stilling well. As the water begins gushing into the yard, the 6 Porra methodically dump their sandbags and build a low horseshoe berm around three sides of the grate, leaving one open throat so runoff streams along a single wall and into the stilling-well intake. The concentrated flow raises the float in the stilling well to release height, unlatching the north flood gates & lifting it in its grooves. The north route is now open to their passage, but only while hydrants run and the directing sand-bag berm fools the flood control system to keep the north gate open. Practical hydraulic window: 30–40 minutes, hence the stop watches.

00:24 – Descent: While the two motor-cycle guards remain on top to assemble the hoist frame, rope & pulleys, by headlamp-light the 4-man Porra team descends iron rungs into the junction chamber, water flowing down the north side of the opening. Into the bottom with a roar. They duck under the lip of the north gate and move north up a slightly rising 7' square brick tunnel. After ~50 yards they reach a disused east–west brick sewer interceptor 6' square. They go west & twenty-five yards farther, past two unused sewer side tunnel intersections, they find timber hoarding wall with placards marked **PELIGRO – PROHIBIDO EL PASO**, one of several they passed. Behind one placard a concealed lock opens the false barrier, revealing a reinforced bulkhead beneath the dormant old Laundry Pavilion.

(~00:35–01:05 am) Vault Accessed: The bulkhead opens onto a reinforced chamber faced by a 6-ft circular bank vault door of 2-ft thick WWI-era battleship steel, installed during post-1926 reconstruction. A central dial and four keyed locks sit at cardinal points. Each Loyalist carries one key and knows only one dial position and turn in the required sequence. As each number is reached, the corresponding key is inserted and turned. When the final sequence completes, the counterweighted hingeless door pivots inward. Inside a chaotically pile of crates and boxes. deposited from above via a concealed one-way steel night-deposit chute hidden in the abandoned Laundry Pavilion. Reverse access is impossible. One wooden case has ruptured; 400 oz ingots of gold bullion had spilled loose. Two hand carts & two long dollies they brought along are used to pile on cases selected to meet vehicle payload limits (~1,000 lb / vehicle beyond driver weight).

Vault Withdrawal (~01:10 am): In 2 trips, ~2,000 lb total is carted past the north gate to the storm chamber while hydrants continue to run. Before 2nd trip they reseal the Vault. Once the 2nd load clears the gate, the carts/dollies are abandoned in an old sewer construction hoarding. The motorcycle guards remain topside assist with hoisting crates by rope and pulley.

Reset (~01:20 am): Hydrants are closed gradually. As runoff subsides, the float drops, the 2 slide gates re-seats & the north one latches shut. Sodden sandbags are slashed & kicked inward to fall below into the chamber. The grate is replaced and locked. The four Porra loyalists emerge soaked & exhausted. With assistance from the two dry motorcycle guards, they push the 4 heavily laden laundry carts away to the exit. If uninterrupted, extraction leaves little evidence beyond a sodden airing yard.

Keeper's Choice: Further complications In addition to chaos triggered by the 1:30 a.m. unexpected arrival of Evelio Gil (see below), you can have:

Extraction Delay Chaos. A cart fails, a crate falls/splits, and 400 oz. Gold bullion 'bricks' or bundled notes spill. Delay 1d6 × 5 minutes. If occurs on surface and seen by Guards, patients, Gandia, staff, rumours spread at once & Gil's riot will ignite earlier and wider. If anyone tries to stop them or grabbed spilled bullion or paper money, the Porra Loyalists may begin a gun-fight with the Mazorra Guards, only 2 of which are armed with firearms, along with Capt. Gandia himself.

A Subterranean Traffic Jam of Witnesses. The Porra team is observed in the old sewers or new & old storm drains by one or more of Tambor, Jeremias "Executioner" Yohama, Claudio Rivera y Zayas, or any snoopy Investigators on hand. Claudio confronts intruders if necessary. Tambor learns route and timing. Jeremias 'The Executioner' Yohama may attempt interference & attack the team.

Shadow In The Vault. Pulp heavy Investigators with exceptional *Stealth* may also trail the team, observe the exact combination sequence, & even steal keys. They may be seen by the extraction team or other subterranean witnesses. They may get in, but can they get out after the resealing of the sewer gate; their own escape is left to each Keeper to decide.

The Baron's Icy Hand. *Baron Kriminal* may manifest & corrode the vault mechanism (locking open or closed) if the Investigators have earned his wrath. Or he could sabotage the Porra Loyalists limousine brakes just before the convoy departure. they fail on a downhill river bend, all vehicles are lost; there would be no Porra survivors & ~1 million pesos of Machado's money vanish, as does all evidence after the hurricane days later.

01:35–02:00 Violent Re-containment

- The midnight 'expert visitors' convoy hits no one, but keeps driving to the Mazorra's main gate without assisting Capt. Gandia for the chaos they caused. The east gate is opened, & the vehicles drive off along the Boyeros Road.
- Whistles blow. Lanterns rise & batons used freely.
- Most female patients are escorted or dragged back inside M2. One guard is bitten.
- By 02:00 a.m.:
 - Just four patients still unaccounted for
 - Five minor injuries; one broken wrist

02:00–03:00 Patient Round-up & Suppression

- Three patients are caught; one remains loose.
- Inside the Santa Bárbara Pavilion:
 - The most agitated patients are sedated
 - Multiple patients insist intruder was "not human" & describing *spotted shimmering* in Moonlight; they are isolated & strait-jacketed
 - Rumours spread among the now muttering guards; Gandia shuts them down too, threatening with a snarl strait-jackets for anyone to mentions this too.

03:00–04:00 An Uneasy Quiet

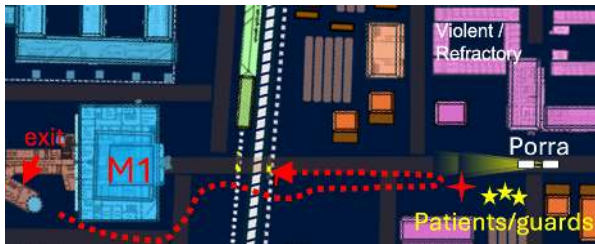
- The Pavilion is resealed; water drains from yard.
- Headcount confirms one patient still missing: Señorita Dolores García, *La Bella Asesina* <see AoM #240 in E&A #3>.
- Gandía delays further search until the 07:00 shift change and dog handlers arrive.
- Two guards remove gloves and notice faint discoloration and irritation. These are dismissed as friction or chemical exposure.
- As Gandía returns to his own Manse ~04:00 a.m., details from the night trouble him:
- Armoured limousines, not service lorries
- Equipment heavier than on return
- Refusal of assistance from his men in searching for any A.B.C. bomb
- That was no Brigada team he decided; who were they and what did they get?

The Man in the Painting Encounter

SIDE-BAR RECAP: Since 17:00 Lic. Evelio Gil has been resting in the auxiliary laboratory following his 16:00 exposure to the spring-loaded finger-bone vial taken from Brujo Matteo Derosiers. Dr. Zorrilla presumed alkaloid toxicity and administered physostigmine and bromide, promising to return by midnight. He did not. Flow that follows: Outside panic → Gil flees → re-enters Auxiliary Lab → barricades after his return.

01:00 to 0131: The Contagion Spreads

Shortly after 01:00 am Gil wakes up alone in the bunk room of the Aux. Lab. He notes headache, dry mouth, and itching skin. Raised patches on cheek and forearm appear smooth and uninflamed; he does not study them closely. Concerned that Dr. Zorrilla has not returned because he is ill himself, Gil leaves the lab via the concealed ventilation kiosk and heads west along *Avenida Álvarez-Cerice* beneath a gibbous Moon.



At ~01:30 he encounters two black cars with their lights on, four motorcycles nearby. Then at the same time he sees a mass of evacuated female patients seated under guard, a flashlight beam strikes his face. A patient recoils, screaming in Spanish that he is “melting.” Panic spreads. Guards shout. The night is shredded by the sound of a tommy gun firing. Patients scream and flee in all directions, and as he tries to do the same, some of the female patients point at him, grabbing at him, touching/clawing at his lab coat & other clothing. In the blundering confusion, the now Twsha contagious

Gil manages to tear free, seeming to hear following footsteps running after him.

01:43 Gil’s Return to the Auxiliary Laboratory

Shaken, Gil re-enters the concealed lab beneath M1. In the washroom mirror the changes are no longer ambiguous. Irregular patches across forearms, neck, and one side of the face are faintly translucent. Beneath the skin, musculature and vessels are visible as if seen through frosted glass that is gradually clearing.

He does not appear wounded. He’s *hollowing out!* He staggers out and to the Main Lab.

Keeper’s Note: Body Horror Realization: Gil must make an immediate SAN roll (1D3 / 1D6). He begins with SAN 67. If he loses 5+ SAN he suffers a Bout of Madness **Psychosomatic Hallucination** where he becomes convinced:

- his organs are already visible
- others can see *through* him
- something is moving *under his skin*

If no Bout is triggered, he immediately develops a compulsive coping behaviour:

- Bandaging areas tightly “Invisible Man-like”
- Applied makeup to obscure
- Repeated skin checking under magnification

Daily SAN rolls begin immediately thereafter (1D4 / 1D6 at Keeper discretion as stress continues).

Encountering Gil in Dr. Zorrilla’s Laboratory

If not discovered by tracking Gil after the 01:30 a.m. disturbance & following him down the concealed stairs, there are other ways the lab can be found via prior clues, or *Spot Hidden*, *Electrical Repair*, etc.

- New 200’ telephone cable branching from M1 electrical room’s telephone junction box west along the tunnel ceiling & then disappearing inside south wall at the obscure door
- heavy-gauge electrical cables following the above path with abnormal high & late-night current draw
- scattered feed pellets before that same door

The door to the *Aux. Lab* is industrial steel, fire-rated in weight and construction with reinforced hinges. Newer mortar around the frame. It is locked (Hard).

Entrance & Past the Barricade (after 02:00 a.m.)

If door opened & after 02:00 the lower access of the sloped tunnel is barricaded from within using hospital carts, broken tables, and stacked animal cages. A sign taped to the outer door reads: ¡CUARENTENA! NO ENTRAR.

White rats shift inside the cages stacked in a hasty barracade. In low light their eyes reflect light like rubies. If the Investigators force entry, they pass through a corridor, then several sets of double doors past it (see prior room descriptions) & find themselves in the Main Laboratory.

In the centre of the floor sits a man in his forties, dishevelled, lab coat torn, bow tie loose. He closely resembles the figure from Varona’s painting based on Solita’s account.

Across his exposed skin are irregular strange flecks.



Keeper’s Note: SAN Guidance to seeing Gil

- First view at distance: no roll
- Close examination of the flecks show they are not marks but portions of translucent skin where internal structures are weirdly visible: 0/1D4 SAN
- If translucence visibly spreads or shifts during the scene: 1/1D6 SAN

Contagion Risk Gil is infectious by contact, not airborne.

Transmission occurs via:

- Prolonged skin contact
- Moisture or visible residue
- Open wounds

Precautions:

- Gloves, masks or cloth barriers prevent exposure
 - Alcohol cleansing within minutes allows CON roll to resist infection
 - Open wound exposure requires Hard CON
- Failure initiates Stage 1 infection within 12–24 hours.
Observing translucence in plants or bat: 1/1D4 SAN.

Behind him stands a screened cylindrical vivarium. Plants within are bathed in blue-grey light from a suspended silver-spectrum arc lamp. Several leaves show blistering and partial translucence. A bat with faint iridescent spotting darts within the enclosure. It does not appear entirely opaque

Dr. Evelio Gil (Stage 2 Twsha Transformation)

Gil (lucid but shaken): “Ramon asked me to open an artifact built into an old metacarpal bone. The X-ray showed it was hollow, with a glass vial inside and a brass cap. I wore gloves but must have set the screws wrong. It was trapped. Something black came out, the thinnest jet of rope-like threads, not really a spray, onto my wrist. I flung the bone while shaking it off. Luckily most of the black substance seemed come off the skin, and the rest to shrivel away but burned.”

Keeper’s Notes: Lab as described before, except

- In the fume hood: a large charred mass and a partly opened bottle of sulphuric acid (burned clothing).
- The bone finger elixir vial is NOT present; however, *Spot Hidden* finds across the room under a table small clutter of tiny knurled brass fittings next to a shattered glass vial.

SIDE-BAR: OPTIONAL COMPLICATIONS:

- *Senorita Dolores García* (“Beautiful Murderess”) is hiding out in the Vivarium. After her escape she followed Gil inside down into the lab and donned men’s clothing found here. Her smock is rolled up and concealed under leaves.
- In the Vivarium, something resembling a pale, bony centipede moves beneath the artificial moonlight. It is the **missing metacarpal bone** that once held the vial. But it has altered due to Twsha exposure: thin filamented projections emerge along its sides, and its surface shows a faint nacreous iridescence

He is fully aware something bad is happening to him and is terrified. He believes isolation will prevent contagion, hence the barricade. He (wisely) resists being touched, warning the Investigators back “...for their sake.” He answers questions quietly and with effort. He asks repeatedly whether Dr. Zorrilla is safe. He requests the first-aid box from the washroom and begins wrapping his hands and forearms tightly in bandages. He avoids eye contact. If observed closely, he becomes agitated. He states he is exhausted and needs sleep. He closes his eyes, and while shut weakly says; “*Alguien tiene que dar de comer a los conejillos de Indias por la mañana.*”⁴ Then falls asleep.

Encounter with Dr. Ramón Zorrilla

SIDE-BAR RECAP: DR. Z’S BAD DAY: 16:00 – Brujo/Bokor Mateo Derosier’s vial discharges in Gil’s hands, but a bit of the Twsha elixir lands on his bare skin too. Zorrilla assumes alkaloid contamination & performs decontamination. Notes mild tremor in himself. Before dinner, his secret romantic companion RN Yolanda Heres observes pallor & macular patches at forearms and collar. Under lamplight they appear subtly translucent at certain angles. Zorrilla dismisses this as *toxin urticaria*. She helps apply make-up she to make him look more presentable, then has to leave to start her **19:00** night duty RN shift at M1; she is not infected. (yet). He misses cocktails & grimly attends dinner at **20:00** but at **21:00** – Withdraws from dinner citing fatigue and abdominal discomfort.

⁴ “Oh! Someone has to feed the guinea pigs in the morning.”

If he is approached between 23:00 and midnight, Zorrilla answers sleepily through the door. If persuaded, he opens it only a few inches.



He appears exhausted and irritable. Ashen pallor, patchy discoloration at temples and wrists, sweating, and fine tremor are evident.

He reports vivid dreams, headaches “behind the eyes,” palpitations, and poorly regulated temperature. He attributes everything to malaria worsened by stress, though he admits the fever pattern is “wrong” and poorly responsive to quinine.

He ends the conversation firmly and requests to be left alone to rest. He will **not** open his door after midnight.

Keeper’s Note: Keeper Notes: Zorrilla is in early Twsha colonization (Stage 0.7). No visible transparenting as yet & not contagious. *Medicine* (Regular); Symptoms could be a toxin exposure but **not** malaria.

Encounter with *La Pintora*:

Investigators are led down by Gilda Ramagosa (the only MD who can grant this permission) a quiet corridor in Pavilion B to a room smelling of paint & turpentine. *Isabella Domínguez Varona* sits beneath a light, painting with steady concentration. She looks up &, before anyone speaks, addresses them all in careful English touched with Spanish cadence.



“Before you say anything... I am an artist. Not an oracle. No *adivinación*⁵.” She gestures to the canvas. “I paint what people describe. Like a police artist. The witness corrects me until it is right. That is all.”

At the Children’s Pavilion fence she met a little girl named Solita. She described a bad dream: a spotted old

man in a long white coat with round glasses running past the women’s buildings with his mouth open. There was a ‘cookie bite Moon’ above, cars, motorcycles, and people sitting down. The spots were stab marks from glass knives snapped off; you could see inside where he blood was. Isabel sketched & Solita corrected her until the image was exact.

“So I painted. All morning. All afternoon. A nurse saw it; others came; the canvas was taken away to show while still tacky. Art lovers are foolish that way.”

If pressed about prophecy, she remains firm. “I did not see the future. I only listened. The child did not know who the man was or why it would happen, only that she had seen it clearly.” She said Solita also mentioned another child had tried to draw her dream in purple crayon. “Not as good,” Solita said. “She didn’t ‘see’ it properly.”

After Varona left, she turned and noticed that a strange man approached the girl inside the fence. He did not touch her, only crouched and spoke quietly. The child answered without hesitation, then gathered her things and followed him out of sight. If asked, Varona produces a sketch of the man and allows the Investigators to keep it.



Keeper’s Note: The sketch (see handout image above) depicts Spanish embassy’s military attaché **Lt. Col Francisco Vives**. The sketch is a good likeness if they have met him before and would be recognized with a simple *Spot Hidden* roll. Varona also sketched the CEDA lapel pin most accurately.

If asked who admires her work: “Senior staff, like Director Machado, Deputy Chief RN Yániz, & sometimes Dr. Llerena, linger longest. They bring better brushes, fresh canvas, and ask leading questions. They never tell me what to paint. Only what might be... interesting.”

Asked about her toxic pigments: Varona shrugs. “Well, I don’t eat them, nor should anyone else.” If the Investigators press she asks quietly: “Are you here to

⁵ One who uses divination.

observe, to fix, or to decide?” She requests better light, proper canvas. And she asks that Solita be left alone. “She didn’t ask to be interesting. She only wanted the bad picture not to come next.”

If President Machado’s name is spoken: the room changes. Varona stiffens; her brush pauses mid-stroke; her gaze fixes beyond the canvas. Dtr Ramagusa interjects quickly: “We do not say that name here!” Varona resumes painting, but the rhythm has altered, is tighter (n.b. she has delusion he is in love with her).

Encounters Returning to M1



Investigators may return to M1 to question Dr. Prats in person, locate Zorrilla’s laboratory, track Evelio Gil after the 1:30 a.m. performance, guard Dr. Llerena against further attack, examine the OR corpse, or seek urgent care in the Infirmary. Any of these places them inside M1 before midnight.

M1 itself is unusually quiet. The main entrance is locked, but the south Infirmary entrance remains open. They can hear odd sounds of laughter past the curtains here. Inside looking up as the door opens:

- Dra. Marta Pérez, junior interne
- Srta. Herminia Gómez, Night RN
- Sr. Fausto Sotolongo, porter

They are playing cards in the Infirmary with their sole patient [**Keeper’s aside**; Sr. Amadeo Moran, janitor, who fainted after being ordered to clean the blood in the North Operating Theatre & struck his head. He is being kept for observation until midnight. They are playing the card game *Brisca*, at Moran’s bedside.].

If asked, they’ll say that there are no Mazorra guards remaining inside M1. A two-person cleaning crew & one late-duty RN on rotation upstairs. They said they saw Dr. Prats & RN Yániz early with an unknown VIP patient with private paperwork. Dr. Prats is still somewhere upstairs, but Yániz came down & left M1 ~11:00 pm.

Encounter with Dr. Santiago Prats (*Rooms in town; bunking in the M1 Doctors’ Lounge 2nd floor tonight*)

If they phone Dr. Prats: “Sorry señor/senorita, this line is NOT private. Right Teresa?” & a female gasp is heard then a click. He quietly hangs up on the call if pressed.

Visitors to the M1 Doctor’s Lounge however are allowed in after speaking through door and convincing Prat (*Persuade*) the door is unlocked. Lamp low, his coat still on; he is doing paperwork. He is tired but more candid without his colleagues present to judge him.

Re OR manifestation: “Yes. It was... not explicable by ordinary means. Supernatural is the right word. But if we permit the word *supernatural* to enter discussion, panic will complete what the event itself began.”

Re Llerena: “Llerena is confined to a private room on the third floor here. “In his sleep he repeats over & over: *No era humano... no era humano...*”⁶

Re Zorrilla: “He is not conventionally ill; it’s not malaria. I have not seen him since the dinner’s... disruption. He pursues certain ethnopharmacological interests. Discreetly. But he confuses pharmacology with folklore. His laboratory is somewhere beneath M1.” “He is... personally involved with Nurse Yolanda Heres.”

Re Gil: “Gil? Yes. The laboratory technician. He assists Dr. Zorrilla. He is competent. Very meticulous.”



Keeper’s Note: If told Mazorra guards are gone (and this is before the **Midnight Manifestation** event, see below), Prats stiffens. “Containment depends on armed guards AND locked doors. Only other patients there are The Executioner & Urrutia, shackled to a bed. I must check upstairs on Francisco.” He retrieves lab coat and discreetly arms himself with a revolver from his satchel on the floor, saying “There are rooms in this building I prefer not to go unarmed. And still others not at all.”

If while talking with the Investigators & the **Midnight Manifestation** is heard upstairs, Prat does not speak immediately. He counts the seconds between impacts.

⁶ — *It was not human.*

Then quietly, “That was not normal. We go upstairs. Together.” He again discretely arms and dresses himself as before, & brings his syringe case & M.D. bag.

Midnight Manifestation (M1 3rd Floor Event)

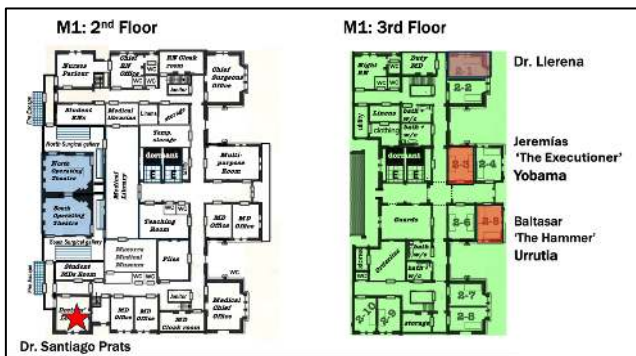
At midnight metallic concussion erupts from the 3rd floor. Or rather, in rapid succession the crash of four heavy metal clad cell doors striking corridor floor within 3 seconds of each other. No patient screaming, only iron reverberation.

And then prolonged silence. Silence. Silence.



At precisely midnight *Baron Kriminal* invisibly manifests along with a chill on the 3rd floor of M1. Facing the 4 centre rooms, the Death Loa accelerates metal decay using his supernatural *Ritual Corrosion*. Much of the steel in Rooms 2-3 through 2-6 corrodes to dust. Hinges fail. Doors crash outwards onto the floor. The concussion carries down the stairwell.

Only three in-patients occupy this section of the third floor of M1 this evening: Jeremias ‘The Persian’ or ‘The Executioner’ Yobama in 2-3, Baltasar ‘The Hammer’ Urrutia in 2-5 (see write ups AoM 240 in E&A #3) & Dr. Llerena in 2-1. See map below.



Jeremias was sullenly moved here for Dr. Zorrilla’s tour; Urrutia was moved here and shackled due to his savage beating of a fellow patient (a sadistic torturer). Security posts were reduced earlier in the evening, so no guards are present. One night RN covers the ward alone & she is on a break (**Yolanda Heres**). When the metallic crash erupts Urrutia must rolls POW (fail = stunned 1D6, success = stunned 1D3).

Jeremias leaves his room immediately. Like the leopards he worships, he prowls silently the corridor of the third floor. He notices no guards, and further along enters Room 2-1 at 12:15. Llerena lies sedated.

He does not awake ever again. For Jeremias, this killing is deliberate and personal.

Yolanda arrives moments later and sees the aftermath of his cold-blooded murder: she screams & screams again as Jeremias turns toward her, teeth filed and bared and bloodied.

She faints.

Jeremias only realizes Urrutia is nearby when the nearly seven-foot Afro-Cuban former heavyweight launches forward, bare fists driving into him with concussive force.

The murderous cannibal Leopard Man Cult shaman is hurled against the wall, his head and shoulders striking plaster with a wet impact.



The Hammer’s own shackles had powdered into metal flakes also with the *Ritual Corrosion*, and he had shaken off being corrosively stunned for 1 round from the loud noise of the four falling doors.

Keeper’s Note: Jeremias Yobama (18 HP)

Jeremias has taken one monster blow from Urrutia (1D6+2D6); likely suffering a Major Wound if reduced below 9 HP (CON 80; on success remains conscious; may spend Luck [30] to do this). The blow had staggered him clear of the nightstand. Resolution depends on Investigator arrival.

No Investigators Present

The brass bedside bell overturns and rings sharply. Urrutia rolls POW:

- Fail: panic incapacity 1D6 rounds; crouches, covers head, non-responsive.
- Success: disoriented 1 round.

While Urrutia is impaired, J. flees. Yolanda alive/unconscious; Llerena dead. Prats will arrive as J. flees to M1 basement, enters the new storm drains via hospital laundry, & heads toward the dormant Laundry Pavilion (secret Leopard Man cult temple).

Investigators Arrive During First Exchange (Before Bell Falls)

Urrutia & Jeremias fighting; Yolanda unconscious.

- If uninterrupted, Urrutia lands second decisive blow (J. likely → ~0 HP). Outcome: captured & badly injured.
- If Urrutia distracted/stopped, J. attempts to break contact (Opposed Brawl/Grapple).
 - Success: gains 1 round movement; once out of sight

may roll Stealth (70%) to flee out stairs/window
– Failure: remains engaged.

- If a body collides with the nightstand (*Brawl* or violent shove), the bell tips, falls, & rings; Urrutia rolls POW as above (note can only be affected when not in panic).
- Outcomes: J. escapes wounded or *Brawls* for 2 rounds; he claws with his hands, will bite with his sharpened teeth, twist dodges, sideways slips only to whirl, circling low seeking openings, then leaping with leopard-like hyperkinesis.

Investigators Arrive After Bell Rings

On entry: Llerena dead*, Yolanda unconscious, Urrutia incapacitated (failed POW) or disoriented (success).

- Two options A) J. has fled with Yolanda, but is slow. B) He remains briefly 1d3 rounds to complete a Blood Rite (Keeper's choice). If still present, he crouches over Llerena's body, bloodied, removing heart or liver*; witnessing: active cannibalism SAN 0/1D4; witnessing the aftermath is only 0/1D2.
- Bloodied but mobile, J. attempts to break contact (Opposed *Brawl*); if free, Stealth (70%) to flee; 20% attacks isolated PC; 10% seizes Yolanda as hostage and escapes into the storm drains; leaving a trail of rust, iron dust & blood and possibly dropping Yolanda who slows him down 50%. He flees to the Old Laundry pavilion to lick his & makes a vow to deal with the Investigators & Urrutia both within 48 hours.

SIDEBAR: The Baron's Inevitable Due Investigators cannot prevent Baron Kriminal's Ritual Corrosion. If Llerena dies in their presence, the Death Loa de-manifests in peals of ghostly laughter. If they are absent, Llerena dies regardless. However, if present and actively guarding him, they may avert his death. Doing so provokes the Baron; his next manifestation will involve them directly.



COMMENTS

E&A #8

MYLES CORCORAN: Snerk re 'flaggerbastard'. RAE *Mausritter* write-up; I love you mouse mystery; echoes of *Basil of Baker Street* series. RYQTM: I liked 'What Stalks the Deep' better than the second book but less so than the first.

RYCTM on Mazorra maps: I make these myself, by what is probably the kludgiest method imaginable. I begin by hunting online for vintage plans or period images that feel right. I screenshot several, drop them into a blank *PowerPoint* slide, & assemble them like a digital cut-and-paste collage: copying, flipping, resizing, overlapping, and adjusting transparency until something plausible emerges. Once it looks convincing, I screenshot the composite & trace over it directly in *PowerPoint* using rectangles, lines, and simple shapes. I block out walls, carve open spaces, patch over what I want to ignore, and add doors and corridors by hand. It is less drafting than architectural collage.

DYLAN CAPEL: I am in favour of comments *not* counting against the 16-page limit for submissions for

E&A. This would allow myself for example to provide more comments and even intermix images with them

ELF: *re cardboard worth its weight in gold:* It's sobering to realize what collectors will pay for MTG cards and adjacent role-gaming ephemera.

LISA PADOL: See my DM I had so many replies Lisa! I also picked up 'Tales of the Caribbean.'

JOSH KRONENGOLD: All the best re your job hunt! After your formatting comments I made some changes.

MARK A. WILSON: *RYCT Lisa Padol on job hunt revelations:* woah what a bleak & demoralizing gauntlet of unethical and sleazy tactics you experienced! My sympathies. Thanks for your comments to me about Sadie & improv fiddle playing.

BRIAN ROGERS: Sympathies re the combo Christmas holiday + household-illness (w)interlude Bri.

JOHN REDDEN: Thanks for your kind words, John. I never played *Ticket to Ride* on a map of San Francisco; it looks like fun! RAE rest of write-up too.

MICHAEL CULE: That's quite the bonkers scenario idea, set in Canadian waters no less (which somehow reminds me of a off-brand of bottled water). But I want to know more about that *Ghost Ice Breaker* you met at Dave Langford's place 50 years ago now.

CLARK B. TIMMINS: Your *Ossuary Wraith* & the *Grave Sovereign* should be suing each other for IP violations for stealing each other's look & feel! RAE.

MATT STEVENS: Thanks Matt; I don't think we will get another dog for a very long time, if ever. :(

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA & CAMILA LOURENÇO PANHOCA: re your remarks that *Sleeping Beauties* and *Some Awake* & *Snow White and the Seven Versions*, a "false sense of interactivity": I agree. As the authors themselves explain (YouTube), the stories follow a linear spine; all "choices" either end the tale outright (a side dead end off spine) or let the usual story continue. The result feels less like a guided tour of IF than a gimmick. Original or unfamiliar stories might allow for more genuine divergence, but where are they?

JIM VASSILAKOS: *Re minor characters:* Thanks Jim! I'm writing all this up about the Mazorra not only to be used for role-gaming by others but also being a bit fun to self-experiment in creative writing as well.

Everyone Else: Thanks all for your sympathies for our late Sadie; and for everyone else **RAEBNC**

Feb 21st 2026. BCM

Traveller Play-By-Email

Plankwell Campaign, Ch 54: Secrets Revealed

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader

The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese

“I don’t have any cadet stories,” Kosy said, “but I do have one from my first year of residency.”

“I hope it doesn’t involve medical malpractice,” Maz replied.

“Oh, only if a fellow intern impersonating a corpse qualifies as malpractice. I swear, I’ve never jumped so far in my life.”

As she began going into the details, I focused on Maz’s eyes while he looked at her diagonally across the dinner table. Sitting as I was, at the head of the table, it wasn’t at all difficult reaching out with my psionic tendril while his attention was on her.

At first, I felt some resistance, like I was bumping into an invisible barrier, but then his curtain opened. Josefeen was rubbing her ankle against his, playing footsies, in effect, beneath the table.

«*What are you doing after this is over?*» I could sense her telepathically asking.

«*I thought you were angry with me,*» Maz replied.

«*Anger is like zinc,*» she shot back, ever the flirt.

Distraction, indeed.

With his attention divided between Josefeen and Kosy, I was able to tiptoe right into his mind, and as with Reggie’s, once I was inside, a vast network of connections stretched before me. It was like a spider’s web, each strand I touched yielding a memory. But where to focus? I glided my psychic tendril from one strand to the next, procuring flashes in my own mind, mostly images of people and fish.

«*There’s something I don’t understand,*» Maz was sending to Josefeen.

«*There’s a lot you don’t understand.*»

«*Why is it I’m no longer able to get into your Captain’s head, when back at the reception, I had no problem?*»

«*His skullcap was on the fritz.*»

A skullcap was a subdermal psi-shield¹, basically what that lawyer had. She’d anticipated his question and so had her answer ready to deliver without a moment’s hesitation, and I could even sense that he believed her. But I was still rather annoyed. Here I’d thought I could trust Maz to shield us from psions during that reception, never imagining that he himself was one. It made me want to rip out a few of his neural connections, like I’d done to Reggie, but I stuffed that errant thought back where it belonged, imagining how bad it would look if the SPA Director face-planted on the table.

1 See the 3rd footnote in Chapter 48.

Therefore, I remained careful as I gently brushed my psionic tendril across more of his neural threads, each time eliciting additional memories. Then I found one that interested me: a sign that read “Doggy Style”. It was that vargr nightclub, the one that burned down.

But what was it doing here?

In the memory, he was walking into the club and asking to speak with someone named Lerza.

“Let me get this straight,” Maz said to the vargr once they were alone. “You actually think you can blackmail me with this garbage?”

Lerza was a vargr of rather impressive girth. He owned the club, and they were in his office, a room where he’d sexually assaulted countless dancers, a fact Maz knew because he was inside Lerza’s mind, just as I was inside his.

“Blackmail’s a strong word,” Lerza replied with a toothy grin. “Think of it instead as you rub my belly, and I’ll rub yours.”

“No offense, but I don’t need a belly rub. Whatever Vardok told you is rubbish.” That was a bold-faced lie, but Lerza wasn’t telepathic so far as Maz could tell.

“So then you didn’t ask him to procure a kilo Psychobenethal?”

“I have no idea what that is. Whatever he told you, I’m sure he was probably drunk at the time.”

“I’m sure, then, you won’t mind me passing this information along to the proper authorities.”

“I could care less.” Maz shrugged, inwardly terrified.

Psychobenethal, after all, was a known psionic performance enhancer, one that had been produced long before the Suppressions², and as with most old inventions, the patent containing its formula had fallen into the public domain. Furthermore, although it couldn’t be made with common substances, there were plenty of worlds where those substances existed in great enough quantities that its manufacture was difficult to control. In any case, Maz had been fishing around for a new source, which was how he’d located Vardok in the first place.

“Does the Starport Governor know you’re a psion, trading in psi-enhancing chemicals?”

“Utterly false and defamatory. If you ever spread such slander, I’ll sue you so hard you’ll wish I killed you instead.”

The vargr behind the desk sniffed the air for a moment, making Maz wonder if Lerza could smell his fear.

2 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Psionics_Suppressions

“Wouldn’t it be easier for you to just do me a favor?”
Lerza asked.

“Favor?”

“All I want is for the HPSS to get off my back.”

Apparently, the police had been charging Lerza protection money ever since his business had fallen under joint Imperial/local jurisdiction. The beat cops initially told him he could continue with the gambling and prostitution, but he’d have to pay them to look the other way. Since then, however, they’d kept raising their take. Unfortunately for him, Maz had no control over the HPSS, and as High Port Director, he had no business going to the Starport Governor to ask him to intervene in some minor dirtside corruption. If he did, it would only lead Lerza to assume that Vardok was telling the truth, which stupid, drunk vargrs had the tendency to do.

The most that Maz could do for himself would be to buy some time. According to what he’d seen in Lerza’s mind, there was a recording of Vardok shooting off his mouth, which was sitting on a local data cell just down the hallway behind a locked door. Lerza didn’t back up the data offsite, because that would make all the prostitution and so forth open to hackers, especially those working for the government. So all Maz had to do was to find someone willing to go into that room and destroy the data storage unit. Then he’d deal with Vardok.

“Look,” Maz said. “What Vardok said to you... he’s either mistaken or he’s lying. I don’t know which. But for the sake of not having to deal with you, I’ll see if I can pull any strings. But I’ll need some time.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Lerza said.

Maz, finally noticing my unblinking gaze, turned to look at me, and as per Josefeen’s instructions, I immediately closed my psychic curtain and rubbed my eyes, severing the telepathic link. Josefeen’s gaze met mine as I looked up again, and she gave me a quick wink, Maz grinning from ear to ear as though amused by whatever telepathic conversation they were presently having.

“Are you fascinated by my aide, Maz?” I asked.

“Fascinated?”

“I’m sorry, but I have first claim on her. Forbidden to transfer off the ship too.”

“The Captain is very protective of me,” Josefeen said, “as I am of him.”

“Well, I do wish someone would be protective of me,” Maz said.

“I’ll be your protector,” Kosy said with a grin. “Stop picking on him, you two.”

I smiled or at least tried to. Onneri, meanwhile, glanced around the table with a smile that looked about as genuine as my own.

“So,” I said, “it appears the Countess is changing up unit assignments down below, moving the Navy out and the Army in. Any thoughts on that you’d like to share?”

“Oh, that,” Maz said. “They haven’t roped you into the latest political intrigue, have they?”

“They’re trying.”

“Well, do your best to stay out of it. The Countess...”

He went momentarily silent as the door slid open and the steward returned with our meals.

“...she and Admiral Karneticky... their relationship is a bit... I don’t know the word I’m looking for. Let’s just say... things could be better. A lot better.”

“So it’s entirely personal?” Josefeen asked.

“No, no,” he shook his head as the serving robot put our plates in front of us and refreshed our drinks. “A little over a century ago and going back several centuries prior, Plankwell Naval Base was out in the desert. It was the Army and the Scouts that shared the Imperial reserve south of Heron. The reason was civic unrest, riots mostly over environmental degradation. This had been an ongoing issue for centuries, so it was deemed necessary to have the Army right on Heron’s outskirts to quell uprisings. Of course, a good portion of the population looked upon the Army as an occupying force.”

“And what about now?” Kosy asked.

“Nobody remembers Jewell as it used to be. All those people are dead and gone. And since the bases switched places, there have been two more invasions. The last siege lasted somewhere in the neighborhood of three years. The local fleet got a bit of black eye over that.”

The local fleet had been decisively beaten by the Zhodani’s 6th Fleet of the 1st Rank. Not only had I studied the invasion, but I’d talked to several of those who were there. For them, it was either retreat or be destroyed.

“So Jewell’s population is holding a grudge?” I asked.

“No, of course not. But the Navy is not quite so well regarded as it once was. However, it’s apparently cheaper to service craft with the base closer to the city.”

“So then why does the Countess want to switch it back?” Josefeen asked.

He paused for a moment, perhaps thinking about that fire that his people no doubt caused when they went into the Doggy Style to destroy Lerza’s onsite computer.

“There have been several incidents,” he finally said, “incidents involving Navy personnel, and likewise, the local fleet’s performance, which I already mentioned... less than stellar... but I think it’s more that Jewellians no longer fear the Imperial Army. Indeed, people have complained the Army can’t do much to protect Heron being all the way out in the desert. The Navy, by contrast, might be more effective out in the desert. The base out there is much larger, from what I understand, and there’s room for all sorts of secret projects.” He smiled. “I envy you, you know. We don’t get to have any secret projects in the Starport Authority.”

“You and I could start our own secret project,” Josefeen suggested.

“What sort of secret project?” Maz asked.

“If I told you, then it wouldn’t be a secret, now would it?”

As Josefeen and Maz openly flirted back and forth, I started my main course, still pondering the state of things. This wasn’t just about the decaying relationship between the Admiral and the Countess, although that may have been the final straw. Yet allowing personal preferences to seep into the decision-making process regarding such matters was sheer madness, at least in my opinion, although nobody was asking me. Except, well, they kind of did, and I kind of told them so... during a party held in my honor, no less. I tried to imagine what I’d say if it came up at my next Promotions and Review Board. Well, I hadn’t expressed anything I didn’t believe, and what little I did say was doctrinally sound, at least to the best of my knowledge, but it was impolitic to criticize the nobility, even when they were being stridently wrong. The higher up you went, the more important that became. I guess I had not fully internalized that yet, but this tour was turning into a crash course in Navy/Noble relations, with an emphasis on the crash.

“How’s the soup, Maz?” I asked, still keeping my curtain tightly closed. It didn’t require great effort, but it did require some. The difficulty lay in the constancy.

“Oh, I’ve certainly had worse,” he said with a smile.

He’d ordered a bowl of the Imperial Navy’s famous mushroom soup. It was an old standby that went back to the Civil War, ubiquitous to the point Navy personnel were sometimes called shroom-slurpers. Despite the derogatory nickname, however, Navy Shroom became a popular soup, and so there were numerous competing brands, each with a different blend of herbs and spices.

My own seared protein analog was quite good, along with the veg medley and mashed potuns. The doctor was focused on her green salad, and as for Onneri...

“What is that you ordered there, Onneri?”

“A SPIM omelette, sir.”

“Ah.”

SPIM stood for *Specially Processed Imperial Meat*, although some would say the S stood for *Suspiciously*. It was the cultured meat equivalent of genitalia and sphincters scraped off the slaughterhouse floor.³ Copious quantities of salt were added to mask the actual flavor. To each his own.

After much talk, as we found ourselves finishing our desserts, I noticed Onneri fidgeting. Letting my psychic curtain come open for a moment, I could sense he was wondering how he could get out of leading this walking tour of the ship Nizlich insisted he suggest. As the Chief

3 Conrad commented out of character, “I for one am an aficionado of SoloRim SPIM, especially musubi and loco moco,” and I have to agree, as for myself, SPAM is a bit of a forbidden pleasure, but Conrad has so far portrayed Plankwell as being such a high-class foodie that I assumed Gus would harbor some strong opinions against various foods.

Engineer, he was, of course, the most logical choice to lead it, but how was he supposed to get me to go back to the Fighter Pod only a couple of days after I’d inspected it? I couldn’t help but smile to myself as I considered the prospect of making them go through the whole ordeal of persuading me to join them. But then Josefeen beat everyone to the punch.

“So Maz,” she said, “as much as I’d like to take you back to my quarters for a discussion about our aforementioned secret project, I’m guessing the Captain intends to give you a tour of the ship.”

“Oh, a tour? How nice. Yes, I’d like that very much. As for the... uh... secret project, perhaps later?”

“Don’t get your hopes up.”

“A tour sounds like an excellent idea,” I said, ignoring Maz’s slumping shoulders. “Although I really like the Jackie, the fighters will always be my pride and joy. As luck would have it, one of my old squadron mates is onboard. Let’s start the tour over there. Who knows? They might even be more interested in ‘secret plans’ than Josefeen.”

At that, Josefeen cocked an eyebrow in my general direction. No doubt, she was trying to reach out to me telepathically, probably a warning about how life was harder for pimps than for captains, but sadly, I’d already shut my psychic curtain again, so whatever snarky comment she had in mind would have to wait.

* * *

I’d always disliked parties. For as long as I could remember, I’d had to dress up for these big, Plankwell family gatherings, and when I say big, what I actually mean is *enormous*. There were enough Plankwells on Rhylanor to fill a stadium. Over time, I got to know a few of them, but most remained these odd strangers, people I’d meet, hug uncomfortably, and then never see again. As weird as it was, at least it was equally weird for everyone. Much worse were the recitals, simulations, and amateur theatricals, little incubators of Plankwell fever.

“Do I have to go?” I once asked my father. That got me a stern lecture, one about duty to the Imperium and to upholding the honor of the Plankwell name.

“It’s important you know where you come from,” he’d said. “People either love us or hate us.”

People hated us?

I was just a kid. What did I know about Olav beyond all the good I’d been told he’d done? But Dad was right. As I got older, I encountered people who were either jealous of me or thought of Olav as history’s greatest unsung villain.

“The only reason you think you’re so important,” a classmate once sneered, “is because once upon a time some guy strangled a lady.”

“Olav saved the Imperium!” I retorted, immediately shutting down his friends’ laughter. “If it wasn’t for him, you’d all be speaking Zdet!”

“Oh, please.”

“Be careful what you say!”

His statement was dangerously close to *lèse-majesté*. To denigrate Olav was to imply the illegitimacy of Arbellatra as well as the entire Alkhalikoi dynasty. I was thinking of reporting him, which might have earned him a demerit, but a mutual classmate intervened.

“He was just messing with you,” she said. “Don’t make a big deal of it. It’ll make you look weak.”

Look weak? For defending my family name? But she was cute, so I decided to let it go. Some time later, she introduced me to the subversive literature that got me into such trouble with Dad. It explained in excruciating detail how Olav had triggered the Civil War, which in turn led to more wars, the Second Frontier War and the Denebian Bad War⁴ to name only two.

So I went into the Navy, which took me far from Rhylanor and all these parties, and now I was heading into my second party of the day. At the first, I’d alienated the Countess of all people, and that was before inadvertently injecting some of my pent-up rage into her daughter’s brain. What *faux pas* would I manage to commit at this one?

From its entrance, the fighter bay seemed unusually dark, and I braced myself as we entered.

“*Surprise!*” the darkness erupted. Indeed it would have been if I hadn’t been expecting it. Instead of the lights coming on, there was live video of my reaction projected onto three different bulkheads — no, make that four — the crew cheering, some chants of “Olav, Olav”, and a vast assortment of happy birthdays called out, at least one of them in Gvegh, followed by a nice, long howl. I squinted, looking around, my eyes still adjusting to the dim, reflected light. Someone, probably several someones, had gone all out, as they’d cleared the fighter bay and built an extra tier using maintenance lifts and the plascrete panels intended for emergency shelters. And was that a live band in the corner?

They began playing the first strains of “From the Dark to the Stars,” the semi-official hymn of the Imperial Navy Fighter Corps. And, yes, it looked like they were going to intermix the instrumentation with a choral performance as well, as three fighter wings worth of crew began singing the opening verse. Everyone else waited for the chorus, which was easier on the vocal cords.

*In the cold, cold space between
There we brave few are seen
Riding the torches bright and free
In front we shall always be*

4 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Denebian_Bad_War

The projections of me looking completely unsurprised switched to video footage from my career, both snippets of the official feeds — promotion ceremonies and such — as well as more candid shots. There I was, a much younger me, graduating from the academy, then arms deep in some maintenance frame, then getting my service medal after the Battle of Sting. Oh, and there was one of my favorite fighters followed by an image of Spooky and I drinking something on shore leave. They had shots of me coming aboard, talking with Nizlich during the first inspections. Oh, and they even pulled the footage from the memorial. Fa’Linto must have cooperated in this, because there was a feed from what I could only assume to be one of his marines. I appeared to be giving orders, two little perforations on my dress uniform’s tunic, while in the background, the two HPSS officers were laying on the floor, their hands cuffed to each other’s feet in a posture that defied common decency.

*From the Dark to the Stars
We rise
From the Dark to the Stars
We ride
From the Stars to the Dark
They fall
From the Stars to the Light
We burn*

I could feel a smile tugging at my lips as the projection returned to a live shot of me before transitioning to the Imperial sunbursts of the Navy and Marines, the lights finally coming on.

Maz, I noticed, was looking at me as though hoping my non-existent skullcap would malfunction once more. It was a visual reminder to keep my psychic curtain firmly in place despite the wave of surprise I’d thought I’d prepared myself for.

This crew was something else. They barely knew me, and already they were showing me that they saw and accepted me. That more than made up for the previous irritation. Indeed, how could I have expected anything on this scale? This showed resourcefulness, a certain disregard of protocol, and most of all, teamwork in pursuit of a common goal. They may have been battered and suffered a defeat, but they were rallying, and someone had used me and my reputation to accelerate that process.

As the choral group finished their closing notes, bringing the hymn to an end, I thought back over everything that had happened since arriving on board. Yes, I felt good about this crew.

I raised my arm, and the NCOs, though scattered through the crowd, called the crew to attention. Stefani, meanwhile, leaving nothing to chance, appeared out of nowhere and offered me a microphone.

“Happy birthday, sir. Would you like to say a few words to the crew?”

“Well done, Commander,” I said, accepting the mic. It had a little red button on the side. I pressed it.

“Attention to orders,” I said, my voice magnified over the PA. “On this day, I hereby bequeath two days of reduced duty. And in recognition of the extreme effort I see before me, I add an extra day. It is to my honor that I accept this celebration. It is to your honor in creating it. At ease.”

The bay, though still silent, became noticeably more relaxed.

“I have been making my own judgment of the quality of this crew since arriving,” I continued, “and I have to say, I have not found you wanting in any respect. I will also thank you for not playing the Plankwell March.”

“Aw, sheezit!” a distant voice rang out. “Kill it from the playlist!” Laughter rolled through the crowd.

I fully smiled at that. “Ah, well... learning curves for everyone. I know you all expect a speech, and maybe you’ll get one after I sample the cake. I salute you, crew of the Jaqueline, my shipmates, my crew in arms. You really know how to make a captain feel welcome. Enough from me. Let the party continue.”

The bosun’s call to fall out was immediately followed by the drummer’s commanding beat, telling everyone it was time to shake a leg and get this party into gear.

Handing the microphone back to Stef, I turned to Maz and said, “Well, let’s find the cake shall we?”

“This vay, sir,” Stef said.

The cake was awe inspiring. Sculpted into a scale model representation of the Jaqueline, there were allergen barriers between its various sections, the color patterns of the frosting corresponding to INS food service safe-eat guidelines. They’d even projected a guide sheet on the bulkhead behind the table from where it was being served explaining the types of cakes composing each section. Apparently the forward section included dentani tree nuts with sweet milk frosting, a personal favorite.

After fielding several greetings from command staff as well as crew members I hadn’t yet met, I ended up at one of the small tables situated in the corner furthest from the band, a generous serving of the bridge on my plate and a cup of what the spacehand pouring it assured me was an entirely passable grog. A small sip ensured I would not be finishing the rest of it, at least not if I wanted to keep my wits about me.

“You’re not having any?” I asked Stef as I dug into my cake.

“No, sir. I don’t eat sweets.”

“And no grog?”

“On occasion,” she replied with a smile. “But tonight I think I will abstain.”

“Hello,” Dr. Willin said, sitting down beside us with a half-empty cup of her own. “Mission Accomplished,” she added, looking at Stef.

“Obviously.”

“Why do I get the feeling there was an attempt to maneuver me?” I asked. “Was I really so upset about the idea of a party?” I attempted a mischievous smile that, judging from their sidelong expressions, seemed to fool absolutely no one. I’d have been curious to know what Maz would have made of this, were he present.

Where was he, anyway? Oh, there he was talking to Josefeen, chatting her up and probably hoping she’d renew her invitation for them to undertake their little secret project. I’d already had a taste of psi-sex, so I could understand his impulse.

And there was Bim Marshall, my IISS liaison. The delay caused by the replacement of the exploration pod had shut down my hopes for any sort of near-term exit from Jewell. It was all very understandable, but I’d given him authority to act on my behalf, and now I was wondering if it was the right thing to do. Since Maz was presently occupied, I decided to risk letting my psychic curtain fall open in order to extend a telepathic tendril. Noticing my stare, Bim smiled and waved, thinking, “*Captain Bim or Captain Marshall?*” as he approached.

“Happy birthday, sir. I want to let you know that everything is going quite well, but the new pod’s installation will take some time.”

“So I am given to understand,” I said. He was telling the truth, but there was definitely something else going on in his head. Unfortunately, I had no time to get beneath the surface, as I had to respond, or the whole encounter would seem quite odd to everyone present. “Scout Marshall, did it occur to you to check in with me when you initiated a major refit operation that would ultimately change our readiness status and departure scheduling?”

I could feel Stefani tensing up, but I kept my focus on Bim, and perhaps due to this, I could sense he’d rehearsed his next words in advance.

“I’m sorry, sir. You’re quite right. I should have warned you about that earlier, but judging from the most recent inspection, there was never a choice. One way or another, for the safety of the ship and crew, the old pod has to be replaced. I’m sure you above all people would agree.”

“Replaced, yes, but on a timeline I approve. I am sure there would be questions from the Scout Service were I forced to leave you, the pod and the entire scout complement behind due to your failure to confirm the upgrade with our revised timetable.”

I could sense my words hitting him like a punch to the gut, but to his credit, he retained full control over his composure, showing no sign of the now knotting muscles in his stomach. Instead, he nodded.

“Sir,” he said, “I wouldn’t blame you one bit. I was hoping to talk to you about it at the Imperial Palace, but you’d left so quickly. By the way, sir,” he said, “I just want to say I thought the way you comported yourself at the palace was... well, it was absolutely perfect, including how you handled the apology. It was at once magnanimous, yet it also conveyed strength under professional self-restraint. In short, no one could have done better.”

This wasn’t the first time he’d complimented me to curry favor, but while I’d initially been impressed by his audacity, now he was laying it on a bit thick.

“What do you want, Bim?” I asked as I reached out with my telepathy, this time trying to fully dive into his mind.

“I... uh... well, I want the same thing you want, sir.”

He wanted his own command. He wanted his own ship. It hit me as a flash of insight, like I was downloading knowledge from his subconscious and laying it out on top of my own conscious mind to be instantly understood.

“Do as I’m telling you, Bim,” Scout Leader Ruurin had told him, “and I’ll make sure you’re on the short list for a surplus Scout Courier when you decide to retire.”

That was to be his reward for helping the IISS pull one over on the Navy. The pod we were in the process of ripping out was slated to be stripped for useful parts by General Products with the remainder to be scrapped. However, Martinsen was right. It wasn’t so damaged that it couldn’t be repaired, and so that’s what GP would end up doing. But in order to make it all work, they needed Bim to turn a blind eye to the fact that the Navy was letting go of a pod still worth, even in its current state, well over half a billion credits. Thanks to the documents that I’d given him the power to sign, as well as the IISS inspection report, the pod would be considered a near-complete loss. But with a little bit elbow grease, it would be repaired and would eventually be repurchased by the Navy at a later date. Of course, General Products wouldn’t charge the Navy full price as if it were brand new. That would be unethical. The Navy would receive a small discount due to the inclusion of “refurbished components”.

In other words, everything would be done legally. Nonetheless, IISS and GP were clearly scheming behind the Navy’s back. But the upshot for Bim was that he’d end up with his own ship, albeit on loan, whenever he decided to muster out. The IISS would even service it for him. It was every scout’s dream, and here it was being offered to him on a silver platter. How could he possibly refuse?

“I’ll talk to GP and put pressure on them, sir, and I promise you, I’ll speed things up. In the end, sir, we all want the same thing.”

I shut down my probe and closed my psychic curtain, considering my Scout Liaison for a long moment.

“I doubt very much you want what I want, Bim. Commander Nizlich, we are going to reassess the need for scouts on this ship. Halt the purchase of the new pod.

Inform GP that they are to continue dismantling the one they are working on. If you receive any attitude, assure them that the captain has come across a worrying development and is taking steps to correct the issue.”

“I don’t understand,” Bim said, flush-faced. “What worrying development?”

“You, Scout Marshall, are the worrying development. You are dismissed from the ship, you will have to the end of the shift to clear your personal items and remove yourself. Failure to do so will result in more formal measures, including an accounting audit with the Quartermaster’s Office.”

I was fairly sure I was within my rights, I could dismiss anyone from the ship. Navy and Marine personnel could challenge it, but Scouts could not, serving entirely at the pleasure of the Navy. I was displeased that my attempt to develop better relations with the other service was undercut by simple greed and avarice.

Bim, his bottom lip trembling, managed a salute before turning and making a hasty exit.

Download the consolidated Plankwell write-up:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

Past zines available at:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

Jim’s Comments on E&A #8:

Job Hunting:

Mark A. Wilson (E&A #8, pg. 14): “unprofessionalism of companies in the job hunt...”

Somewhat shocked at the litany of questionable behaviors as well as outright scams you described. Also wondering if any of them can be applied to roleplaying: The king puts out a call for adventurers, but then asks each of them their compensation expectations as well as how much they’ve made in the past. They later find out there was no actual job. They were just being identified for a planned tax on adventurers passing through the kingdom.

Great Moments in Roleplaying History:

Mark A. Wilson (E&A #8, pg. 16): “Our long-dead father sprang to life, surrounded by his now-adult children, one of them a lich (!), and flanked by a ritual casting over a bathtub with the corpse of a human soaking in butter and olive oil. The pandemonium of the rest of the session can barely be described.”

To the GM: Well done! To the players: Well done! This right here is what it’s all about.

Shareable Subject Matter:

Scribble (E&A #8, pg. 19): “The games we are playing can be considered text-producing procedures.”

Well, the whole point of RPGs is to create stories, right? Speaking of which, I’m curious to read about the giant, sentient, radioactive banana.

Use of Tarot in RPGs:

Elf (E&A #8, pg. 24): “Tarot Decks for Gaming...”

The Guildsman #6⁵ has an article, “Tarot for Prophecy in Roleplaying”, that may interest you. Personally, I’ve used the Thoth deck for brainstorming.

The Ethics of Dungeons:

Elf (E&A #8, pg. 36): “*Sick of These Fucking Dungeons*⁶ (...) He nicely articulates what I’ve felt for years but hadn’t figured out how to say – that there is something innately disturbing about the whole dungeon-crawl focus of most fantasy games, that it does not survive consideration as an ethical lifestyle.”

I’d encourage you to read Brian Misiaszek’s essays “Are RPGs Racist?” in A&E #358 & “Flight to Modernity: a new role for RPGs?” in A&E #355, and I’d assume he can send you copies of these if you contact him directly. As for myself... yeah, I haven’t GMed a dungeon crawl for a very long time now, but not so much due to ethics. It’s just that I’m more interested in characters than combat. If I were to GM another dungeon crawl, it would somehow need to be character-focused.

Monster Economy:

Matt Stevens (E&A #8, pg. 37): “DM (Ping): “Oh, the cave is filled with Orcs now.” // Lemec (Wyeth): “What about the treasure?” // DM: “I’m afraid it’s gone.” // Lemec: “How?! The pit was 100’ deep!! What did they spend it on!?” // DM: “Eh, furniture, art, knick knacks, that sort of thing.” (We imagined black velvet paintings of sad Orc clowns.)”

It does raise the question of what monsters spend their treasure on, or do they just hoard it in the hope of being attacked by adventurers? Oh, and by the way, I didn’t know we were doing a *Dungeon Master as Dick* IgTheme. Are you suggesting it?

Denial of the Supernatural in Call of Cthulhu:

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #6, pg. 160): “Perversely, Dr. Llerena’s reaction at being saved by foreigners is one of

5 <https://jimvassilakos.com/guildsman/guildsman06.pdf>

6 <https://radmad.substack.com/p/sick-of-these-fucking-dungeons>

furious humiliation. He blames everyone except himself and immediately starts claiming the PCs ‘interfered’ and ‘contaminated the sterile field.’”

Jim Vassilakos (E&A #7, pg. 209): “Here’s a doctor being effectively attacked by a dead patient’s intestines, and yet he somehow manages to convince himself that... I don’t even know how to describe what he’s thinking.”

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #8, pg. 116): “What Dr. Llerena says aloud is not what he believes. He knows that something profoundly wrong and otherworldly happened in that operating theatre. What he also knows is the cost of acknowledging it. In 1930s Cuba, truth does not determine speech; survival does.”

Interesting idea, but this explanation raises a few more questions. First, how familiar is Llerena with this sort of event? It seems to me that we’re caught in a bit of conundrum, as if it were entirely unexpected, he wouldn’t have had the presence of mind to act so deceitfully right after being attacked with such force that he suffered “crushed cartilage”, presumably in his neck, whereas if it were a relatively common occurrence, then it would be something everyone would have to learn to deal with, in which case deceit wouldn’t be necessary.

So what I’d suggest is that Llerena should initially be confused and horrified to the point that he can barely speak. Moreover, everyone in the operating theatre saw what happened, so everyone, as they begin to compose themselves, would be trying to confirm if everyone else saw what they saw.

I think it would only be later, after careful reflection, that someone (possibly the Director) would propose the only conceivable scientific explanation, which is that some form of mass hallucination or shared delusion had been caused by the presumably accidental exposure of the medical staff and investigators to mind-affecting chemicals, and therefore all of the witness testimony has to be thrown out due to the extreme suggestibility caused by these chemicals. At which point, people may hunt for someone of low status to blame. Or, better yet, blame the investigators, since they’ll be leaving soon anyway.

That seems to me far more likely than Llerena, immediately after having been attacked by a corpse’s intestines, blaming the people who just saved his life. After all, it seems like such a devious, calculating, career-minded thing to do, and most everyone there would see right through it. Furthermore, any sane person would be running for the hills, because no job is worth dying for. At least, that’s how I see it.

But feel free to disregard this entire analysis if it doesn’t fit how things are supposed to work in CoC. Like I said, I’m not well acquainted with the game or its conventions. Also, I’ve never lived under a dictatorship where people disappear

for saying the wrong thing, so it could be that I'm just not seeing things from Llerena's point of view.

Also, it appears as if something is missing between pages 13 & 14, and I noticed several minor mistakes that could have been corrected with another round of editing. If you'd like to put a preliminary version of future zines online for people to proofread, I included instructions for this in E&A #3 (pgs. 158-159) and would be happy to pitch in so long as there's sufficient time.

Monster Write-ups:

Clark B. Timmins (E&A #8, pg. 133): "Ossuary Wraith & Grave Sovereign..."

I sort of miss the introductory blurb explaining what the monster is, where it comes from, and that sort of thing. Also, the pictures for these two critters appear essentially identical, so maybe include some sort of descriptive language to help adventurers tell them apart.

Unreliable Memory & Refusing to See Reality in CoC:

Roger BW (E&A #8, pg. 152): "...the closest thing we have in the real world to people seeing sudden Lovecraftian horrors is probably close-up witnesses to injurious incidents (plane crashes, terrorist bombs, road accidents, etc.) Ask any copper who's had to deal with those and they'll tell you how quickly and how much the witness statements start to change as people rewrite their own horrific memories into something they can live with."

I get this, but Brian's claiming that Llerena knows what he's doing, that it's calculated. See my comment to him above.

Threefold (GDS) Model⁷ vs. GNS Theory⁸ vs. RISS⁹:

Avram Grumer (E&A #8, pg. 183): "An RPG that sacrifices what-would-really-happen-if in favor of here's-how-it-works-in-the-genre falls into the Drama branch of the Threefold Model, but the Simulationism branch of GNS Theory."

I suppose the term "Simulation" can mean different things to different people. Are we simulating a genre or simulating reality? Also, thanks for mentioning RISS (initially Rails, Improv, Skills, and Sandbox), although I'm a little confused by it.

FWIW, in the late 1980s I wrote up a questionnaire for new members of the recently resuscitated university gamers' guild wherein I asked them what sort of player they considered themselves to be.¹⁰

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Threefold_model

8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNS_theory

9 <https://idiomdrottning.org/riss>

10 See A&E #514.

- Adventurer = Hack & Slash. Like the feeling of danger as well as new and interesting action situations.
- Tinker = Puzzles, riddles, traps. Like things you have to analyze and think through.
- Character = Roleplaying a personality. Like "getting into character" and acting. Like heavy PC & NPC-PC verbal interaction.

Note, this wasn't an attempt to describe roleplaying games. I was just trying to help like-minded players and GMs connect with each other.

Personally, I found myself even then leaning heavily toward the last of these categories (Character), which would place me in the drama camp of the Threefold Model and the narrativist camp of GNS. As for RISS, I find myself leaning toward Improv (Nitfol) over Rails (Gnusto) and Sandbox (Blorb) over Skills (Frotz), although, like I said, I'm not entirely clear on this model, and its updated terminology doesn't help.

Speeding up Combat:

Patrick Zoch (E&A #8, pg. 185): "I applied a carrot for players to be ready when their turn came up. (...) I gave a +1 bonus to whatever roll they made that turn."

I've previously mentioned some of the steps I'd taken to speed up combat in AD&D¹¹, but one I'd glossed over was putting all the monsters on the same initiative roll. This, combined with the decision to only roll initiative once per combat, meant that the very idea of combat segments receded into the background, and for the majority of the combat, it was simply the two sides trading blows. I'd roll for the monster(s), delivering damage, and once that was done, it was the party's turn, and it didn't matter too much in what order they went, so they could all basically roll their attacks simultaneously, telling me if they hit and how much damage they did, and whether or not there were any special conditions, such as a crit, a fumble, or spell failure. The spell failure part was the most cumbersome, but I'd written a program that created spell failure charts for each player, which helped to speed things up.¹² All in all, the combats that I ran seemed to me to be much faster than those in other games I visited, but this was only possible because I was running very much theatre-of-the-mind, staying away from battlemaps as much as I reasonably could, and, of course, AD&D allowed this. Once 3rd edition came out, the combat rules (and the combat feats, in particular) were such that I knew that this method I'd developed would not work under the new rules. This was yet another reason I refused to make the switch.

11 See my comments to Nick Smith in A&E #567, particularly the last paragraph of the 1st column of page 8.

12 See *magic\min\spelfail.exe* in the campaign archive at <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/camp.html>

Timothy's Comments on E&A #8:

TC notes: I didn't think I had many comments this time round, but it turns out that with a 216 page APA even a 'few' is quite enough! Anyway, as I've mentioned my reMarkable here before, there might be interest in just how impressed I am with their customer service. My PaperPro developed a fault after about 13 months and I finally got round to getting in touch with them and then packing it up to send it back to Hong Kong. I prepared myself for several weeks of wait while it shipped back, they reviewed it and then returned/replaced it. But it turned out they'd not only sent a new one the day I posted mine, but both must have gone via airmail rather than sea as it was only six days I was without a device. Very impressed; very pleased – I'd not realised how much I was 'compensating' for the glitch and not quite enjoying using as much. That's gone now. Which is good news as reading *Ever & Anon* is one of my best uses for it!

John Redden – Reddened Stars

RYCT to Roger W about your Traveller Referee using Mongoose Traveller with GURPS. I understand that to be two rule sets rather than a rule set and a setting so do you mean that he mixes the two rule sets (somehow)? Or uses one with smatterings of t'other (and which way round)? Or uses Mongoose's version of Charted Space – which I confess I treat as identical with classic and GURPS – with GURPS rules? Or...

(Just curious. I'm not suggesting it shouldn't be so!)

Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine

Thanks for your link to the Pelgrane video on 5 minute game prep. That was actually quite useful.

Attronarch – Overlord's Annals

Loved the artwork on p.4 (or p.65 of E&A PDF). Something about it just seemed to capture the moment.

Roger Bell-West – Firedrake's Hoard

Liked your GM tip from John Dallman. I'm hopeless at thinking on my feet and come up with the best lines for my NPCs about 34 minutes *after* the session has finished. Every time. <sigh>

[Nice Tardis!]

RYCTM about the skills set 'negotiation' – yes, that's the way I like it done.

Regarding Footnote #17 and the 22 y.o. Traveller character with only Ship's Boat – yes, but that's the *fun* (challenge) of the game! But I take your point. I recently played a subsidized merchant captain who was *very average* except for Admin 2 and relied on his crew who were all much more skilled in every area. As they got killed off and it was just he and the Chief Engineer trying to save

the passengers, the ref was quite impressed with just how inventive I could be in applying Admin skill. REF: "The passengers are panicking and you need to calm them down." ME: "Hmm, I don't have Persuade or Diplomacy or Leadership or even a high Social Standing. Hang on... I create a three-point PowerPoint slide outlining why they need to calm down with lots of distracting fonts and animations..." (I think I got a bonus on an otherwise tricky roll just for cheek.)

Michael Cule – The Phoenix Nest

Your GM tip on making the players come up with background details was a tip I learned from the great Dom M at TravCon. We'd enter a room or something, in this case a skyscraper office and he had me describe the view. I hardly did anything but really felt a part of that scene and more engaged with the adventure. It was even better when he'd then fold something about it back into the adventure. Brilliant!

Avram Grumer – Going to be Ad Libbed

Your note on Gender & Roleplaying struck a chord as one of "my" players was known for *always* playing a female engineer – even at conventions if at all possible. We understood a little more why when she transitioned (m-t-f) and found out it had been a way of testing the waters before social and medical commitment.

RYCT to Patrick R on quipu – I had my eroctopi use knotted seaweed for record keeping as they live underwater.¹³

RYCT to Roger BW on a Traveller *Hitchhiker's Guide* RPG – I'm relatively confident it's not been done. But it should be! I would love this. Please, please write it!

Patrick Zoch – Dragon's Beard

Thank you for your thoughts on Location, Location, Location. Interesting to cogitate on.

(Though player backgrounds can be a double-edged sword. I recall in one my very earliest Refereeing experiences – late 70s! – having a player really rebel against my use of a 'connection'. I thought I'd handled it well. Apparently not.)

Joshua Kronengold – Accidental Recall

RYCTM on having some form of 'contest' to establish skill level: nice!

LAST WORD: Always worth dialling down our GMing/Refereeing 'sensitivity' immediately after running a session. Both because of others' (perhaps thoughtless) comments and our own harsh self-criticism.

¹³ <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/culture/societies/erocropi.html> (see under "Technology")