

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

APRIL

#593

The Last Issue of A&E



A FEW ~~WORDS~~ PARAGRAPHS FROM THE EDITOR (Lee Gold)

This is the last issue of A&E

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E-DITION ISSUES by email: #1-#587.pdf scans at \$2 each (thanks to Dan Shimizu for starting the project):

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TANTIVY

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ANNOUNCEMENT: This is the last issue of A&E. My eyesight has abruptly grown much worse, and I don't expect it to get any better.

I'm sorry to have to tell you such annoying news.

This problem also means I won't be selling any more back issues of A&E.

I plan to refund your A&E balance by a) PayPal or by check when I email or snailmail your copies of this issue.

Natter

Our neighborhood of Mar Vista (a couple of miles east of the ocean, in the flatlands eight miles south of the Santa Monica Mountains) has only had 5.58" of rain since July 1st. That's not surprising. It's a La Nina year (a dry year), not an El Nino year (a wet year).

Purim will be the full moon of March, celebrating the story of Mordecai and Esther. We've invited six guests, two diabetic. I used to buy non-sugar hamantashen, but that bakery died a couple of years ago. Barry says we can buy croissants (which don't have any sugar), and I can buy non-sugar raspberry and apricot jam. We can buy regular sugared hamantashen filled with poppy, prunes, apricot (and various other fruits) and chocolate.

Good wishes to any Muslims celebrating Ramadan through March 390th.

IgTheme: When do your PCs (or NPCs) go to the police and when don't they?

On one occasion in a Japanese campaign, the PCs learned that a bandit gang planned to attack road traffic in a village. The PCs decided that this fight might be dangerous — and, worse yet, might be boring. So they notified the local police about the danger and then stood by to see if the police needed help.

Cover: Thanks, Spike Y Jones.

Tantivy: The D&D rules rewarded PCs for dealing personally with villains rather than turning them over to police or other socially acceptable groups. // We were burgled once and learned that we couldn't ask our insurance company to compensate us for losses unless we reported the crime to the police

and could give the insurance company a copy of the police report.

John Redden don't want anyone to have personal relations with the Aesir because he thinks this is boring. He's going to have to cope with other players whose PCs are shamans and so will want to have personal relations with Freya or Odin in order to get information.

The players interested in recovering the ship (and loot) stolen by pirates will need to put together a revenge raid (which means one or more ships and crews / fighters). The Althing is a good place for them to meet people who can help them do this, both PCs and NPCs.

John's original idea was that his PC had lost his ship due to a volcanic eruption, which had also created a new island. I told him that Icelandic history didn't record any such event and he'd have to be content to having lost his ship (but none of his crew) due to pirates. No, I don't know why John decided his starting PC wouldn't have a ship.

Barry's first version of 592Condensed didn't include John Redden's commentzine. John alerted me to this, and I had Barry add the zine (at the end of the file) and post the complete APA on the Web. Then I emailed all the email subscribers to go back to the Web and download the complete issue.

Latin *sic* (thus) was probably the source of Spanish *si*. The French word for "yes" isn't just *oui*. There's also *si*. Google explains "Si is used to say 'yes' in response to a negative question. For example, if the question is in the negative but the answer is affirmative, you would use *si* instead of *oui*." I vaguely recall from my 1960-61 French class at UCLA that French *si* was defined as an intense form of "yes."

re Isaiah, speaking for God (chapter 45) calling King Cyrus "messiah": Cyrus was a Zoroastrian who believed in one (good) God plus a rival / parallel evil supernatural power (who would eventually be defeated).

Michael Cule: Congratulations on your new boiler system. I hope you can have a new bathroom installed without bothering you or your cat.

I hope that this month Barry uses a webpage that does a better job of turning Word pages into pdf pages for the Condensed issue.

Two miles away from the ocean is a significant difference from being across the street from the ocean. Being on flatland about 20 feet over sea

level is a significant difference from being on top of a mountain chain that's about 3,500 feet high.

re "level drain": I also disliked D&D "levels". I am now wondering about a "skill drain" which would cause someone to forget details of a language they hadn't used recently, a weapon or defense they hadn't used recently, etc. Five years or so ago I found that I embarrassingly couldn't remember the name of poet Michael Drayton or the name of his poem "Nimphidia, the Court of Faery." I got out my collection of Tudor poetry (bought for a class I took in 1965) and now can remember the poet's name (but not all the full title of the poem).

I like your analysis of "Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" (and of why Shaw liked it). < Then again I remember that when I saw *Hamlet* on the stage (back when I was 10-15 years old, put on by the Young Vic), the actor did "To be or not to be" while playing with his unsheathed dagger, running the blade back and forth across his wrist or up and down his arm between the wrist and the elbow. I found this chilling, not "introverted."

I agree on the importance of having a backup.

re guilds: I liked the guild of beggars in the Robin Hood stories. I also liked the thieves guild in Leiber's Fafhrd & Gray Mouser stories. < I once read Polly Adler's *A House Is Not a Home* about her experience in managing a brothel. One of her rules was that she wouldn't take any "girl" who had a lover or pimp. // My father belonged to the American Dental Association which bargained with insurance companies to lower the cost of malpractice insurance. It had its own retirement fund (until a federal law was passed that said dentists were covered by Social Security — and put the ADA retirement fund's capital into Social Security).

I think most books are better than the TV or film version, but there are exceptions, like *Roger Rabbit*. I read *Gone with the Wind* and remember that the heroine "went to bed a girl and woke up a woman" twice, a hundred or more pages apart.

Pedro Panhoca da Silver & Maira Zucco-lotto: RAEBNC

Lisa Padol: I saw Olivier's movie of *Hamlet*. I didn't like his interpretation of "To be or not to be" and I hated his whispered (!) "Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I." // I'm fond of Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad." // I sometimes think of *The Count of Monte Cristo* as a Byronic hero.

"The Devil is easy to identify. He appears when you're terribly tired and makes a very reasonable request which you shouldn't grant." — Fiorello H. La Guardia

I don't like any sorts of jelly beans.

I read WRG Ancients (wargame rules) when I wrote *Land of the Rising Sun* and dislike having panicking people able to run faster than a galloping horse.

Spike Y Jones: When Barry had to wear a security badge with his photo at work, he had to get a new badge when they noticed that he shaved off his beard.

re multi-continent wars (from Google): Ethiopia fought Mussolini's Italy for awhile but ended up being run by Italy for a while.

re "David, Abraham, Hannah, Moses, and Jacob" as people who challenged God's judgment or tried to bargain with God: I wish you'd listed these people chronologically.

Patrick Riley: My husband Barry's *father* cut his arm while trying to slice a bagel. Barry's never had any problem due to slicing a bagel. I didn't have a tape measure to be sure of the length of the cut on Barry's father's arm, but it started a couple of inches above the wrist and went up to near the shoulder. He said he did it when a steak knife slipped.

There was once an actress named Spring Byington.

Attronarch: RAEBNC

Spike Y Jones: I was sorry to read that you caught flu or COVID. (I couldn't tell which from what you wrote. Sorry.)

When we look up at the night sky at our home, we typically just see clouds. It's the price we pay for living two miles from the ocean and having lower summer temperature than people who live farther east.

re things going around: Barry was horribly shocked when I told him that I preferred the flu (high fever but easy breathing) to a cold (medium fever but difficult / noisy breathing). He told me that a flu *always* included muscle aches and wasn't convinced that I (and my mother) never had any illness with muscle aches -- until he caught the flu (which gave *him* muscle aches) from me.

Pum: RAEBNC

Jim Vassilakos: RAEBNC

Timothy: When Barry did indexes for my games, I asked him to start an entry by boldfacing the section where the term was defined and then list other sections where the term was used significantly.

John Redden Stories: Interesting.

Patrick Zoch: re creating NPCs as a player: I gave a personality to my dwarf Disa's high Ego sword.

Joshua Kronengold: Most of the (Chinese) restaurants we used to eat at had tables a yard or two from one another in an open room. Nowadays we get takeout from them. A large soup and two entrees feed us for Friday through Sunday. There is a Japanese restaurant we ate at in person last year for a special occasion, which has tables separated by an aisle and by wooden walls. And there's the British restaurant where we went last year for high tea where there was only one other table of people in the room.

re sneaky stuff: For some reason this reminds me of the (Latino) US embassy guard captured in Iran who wrote on his jail cell wall "*Viva la Roja, la Blanca, y el Azul.*" I think he told the prison guards that it was a religious slogan. Nobody publicly mentioned this inscription or its actual meaning until the prisoners were returned to the US..

We haven't had any trouble so far with any of our credit cards.

I don't know how Russia treated all the nations it conquered and claimed were now part of Russia, but I've heard that during the time that Lithuania (and perhaps Latvia and Estonia) were officially part of Russia, a lot of ethnic Russians were sent to settle there. These Russian families (who spoke Russian, not the local country's language) stayed there from the 1920s through the 1980s and came to think they were living in their homeland, but now that Lithuania (and perhaps Latvia and Estonia) are officially countries again, the Russian-speakers are treated as foreigners who speak a foreign language.

Craig Kamber: I tend to think of Winter (for people who don't live in coastal California from San Diego to San Francisco) as persisting until Passover. I hope your family has continued to survive the Cold Weather.

I was glad to read that your wife is now shingleless (i.e. over shingles) and can drive again. I hope that your family has now been able to move to the New Place and the dog is respecting the Dog Fence. <> I had to ask Google to show me a "pallet jack." // re "Never buy anything you cannot move": Umm, when we bought this house, we spent several weeks moving stuff here, the last weekend with friends loading up a rental van at our old (rental) home and then unloading the stuff here. On Monday, the professional movers brought the six-foot long buffet, the then-queen-sized bed and the twin bed, the highboy, and the lowboy. I washed and dried sheets and pillowcases and put them on our beds — and then, when everything had been put away, I crawled into bed and announced that I'd be staying in bed (except for brief visits to the bathroom) for at least three days.

Barry and I were both born in Los Angeles and hope to be able to stay here. Our Mar Vista neighborhood (two miles from the beach) isn't very hot, but we use the air conditioner when the outside temperature gets over 75 degrees.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: Barry and I voted for Harris as did most Californians, so we don't feel responsible for Mr. Trump's actions. I found what looks like a trustworthy article on "How Does Fentanyl Reach the United States" which says, "China and Mexico, two countries that see elements of fentanyl traffic to the United States, have stepped up measures to contain the flow of the drug. Canada has done the same, despite it being responsible for almost none of the fentanyl that winds up inside U.S. borders." // I was sorry to read that "the Canadian dollar has gone into a tailspin."

If Canada actually became "the 51st state," the US House of Representatives would have to be reallocated, with more low population states only having one Representative — and Canada having more Representatives than California. // Trump's recent statement that English is the official language of the US probably also offended Quebec.

After giving all your money to the taxi driver who took you to the cemetery, how did you get back to your hotel?

Our home neighborhood of Mar Vista hasn't gotten any intense winds, just 10 mph light breezes: nothing like the weather in the Santa Monica Mountains.

I bought our first copy of Original D&D which came in a beige box. Barry bought his own copy a few months later (so he could GM a game in the front bedroom while I ran one in the living room) and Barry's copy came in the later white box.

Barry's father's dementia a couple of decades ago was attributed to Alzheimer's but we were later told it was more likely to have been caused by many small strokes, possibly related to his decades of smoking a couple of packs of cigarettes a day.

Mark Nemeth: I don't think any area in the Los Angeles flatland is in any danger from a mountain wildfire. That's based on eighty years of living in Los Angeles. <> We did read that perhaps the northern flatland of Santa Monica (just south of the mountains) had gotten a lot of smoke for a couple of days, but no, the wildfire didn't spread down into this region. Our flatland neighborhood is also in no danger of mudslides (which may hit the burned areas and the lands below).

re "attunement to your sword": Do you mean using a high Ego magic sword which means that the fighter and the sword have to cooperate? Or does "attunement" have a special definition in the New

Rules? // As a GM I'd rule that it would be difficult for someone to hold & fight with a sword in one hand and summon magic with an amulet in the other hand (and unless this is a three-handed character, he won't be able to use a shield). Then again if "using the sword" doesn't mean Fighting but only using a sword with magic powers (like detecting hidden doors or sloping passages or understanding someone speaking a foreign language).... But it still might be very difficult to use a sword's magic abilities and simultaneously use an amulet's magic abilities, unless the sword and amulet were both enhancing the same skill.

Can you give an example of a "gimmicky character who is supposed to be deep or well-rounded"?

The Jewish Bible (Torah, Prophets, Writings) isn't set in one era but in many eras, during many centuries.

re your dislike of "humanoids with animal heads": How do you feel about animals with humanoid human heads (like centaurs)?

I was taught that God didn't care what religion people were. He only cared if the people were using their intelligence and compassion to try to lead a good life of justice and mercy and study.

You ask if there would be any police in a fantasy setting. Umm, I think the ancient Chinese investigative judicial system (as depicted in the Judge Dee novels by van Gulik) could be easily used in a fantasy setting. You may want to read the Wikipedia article on "Police" about other ancient justice systems.

Heath Row: We chose not to attend Loscon in 2024 because its website didn't specify its anti-COVID rules, and we're seniors (so we ought to take special care not to catch the plague).

If you email me questions about my memories of Los Angeles (1940s up through the present), I'll be happy to send you answers.

Gabriel Roark: I hope your mother is now out of the hospital and back home without any infections. // I hope that the court session last month went well.

Umm, I won't be doing writeups of the new Icelandic campaign. Joshua Kronengold, Lisa Padol, John Redden are all welcome to do so. I think the gaming is less tense now that I've dropped Rick Schwall a a player. He objected to anyone else speak- ing at the same time as he did and sometimes dropped out of the game if he felt offended. // The PCs include a shaman who told them they could locate the pirates who'd stolen John Redden's PC's ship. The pirates were visiting Trondheim to sell the loot in the PC's captured ship — and

perhaps to sell the ship. If the PCs want to help John's PC regain his ship, they'll need a ship or two them- selves plus experienced fighters. And that means that John's PC will probably need to share his victory by rewarding his allies.

Wikipedia has a good article on the "Seven Laws of Noah" which forbid worshipping idols, cursing God, murder, adultery & sexual immorality, theft, eating flesh torn from a living animal, as well as the obligation to establish courts of justice.

Jewish tradition saythat s God will give a good place in the World to Come to non-Jews who observe the Seven Laws of Noah or repent breaking them, // I learned about the Noahic Laws in (Reform Jewish) Sunday School.

Nitpick: Originally "decimate" meant to kill 10% of a group of people as a punishment. I was in the 10th grade when I read Caesar's accounts of his Gallic Wars and first encountered this word. I know that nowadays "decimate" has a far nastier meaning but I still imprinted on its original meaning.

re Jim Vassilakos's rule that it takes three minutes for the soul to leave the body: When my husband Barry had a heart attack (due to an embolism) in his mid-30s, four decades ago, his heart stopped and they had to defibrillate him. I don't know how long he spent without his heart beating on its own, but it might have been over three minutes if I can trust the old TV series *Emergency*.

Random Access #306

For A&E #593

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Natter

Intercon happened; we ran two games; Three To One (which Lisa was playing a game during) went brilliantly and I'm looking forwards to running it again.

The new Breakthru game ran well for some players and less well for others; some of that is us running out of time for a bit of final work, but some is not having enough space which is at least partially on the con; we could easily have used twice the space they gave us and it would have been much less loud.

Meanwhile, Lisa and I have continued watching the Steed

and Gale Avengers. It's a lot of fun, particularly because Gale's character is very informed by several of her scripts having been written for the male lead of the first season, so she knows many, many things (and is a monster in a hand to hand fight and expert at taking on roles, which I think is specific to that character). One RPG-notable aspect is that they expand her skillset along areas of knowledge—her first appearance has her having been in Africa, and in fact they feel free to give her new Africa skills at any time, like mysticism and big game hunting.

Comments on A&E #591, part 1

Lee Gold: I expect that since you're now sending out links to the APA rather than the entire APA, that the restrictions you hit on sending large emails during busy hours are less of an issue if you encountered the issue when you were sending out quite large emails.

On the other hand, it's obviously wise to not mess with what works.

I haven't worn a mask outside (except occasionally in VERY crowded situations like Times Square) for years. It was shown very early in the pandemic that the odds of contagion in unenclosed areas were close to nil, with no proven cases of transmission that way. Of course, enclosed areas are another matter.

Re killing sleeping people (and your idea that you should only get 5% EP for doing so): I mean, assuming you sent them to sleep with magic in the first place, they weren't asleep when you first encountered them; I don't see how it's different than killing/defeating them with any other magic—dominating them into killing one another, or polymorphing them into a very small animal and then drowning them before they recover, etc. If "unfair" means of killing someone don't count, it doesn't seem like Magic Users would be able to get any XP at all.

That said, I also tend to favor non-fatal means of dealing with enemies when plausible; it makes characters more fun to play and also makes the world the characters live in feel less brutal and awful and like there might be some semblance of rule of law even if it often makes exceptions for the PCs antics (it also means you sometimes have enemies that become friends, or enemies that become entertaining repeating villains, something that doesn't happen when PCs always kill defeated foes).

Re combat: My feeling is that it should take as long as it takes—which for a large group could easily be longer than a half hour, but might be shorter. For a short, lopsided combat, you want a lead-in and then the first blow could end it. For a normal length combat with drama and a build up of tension and maybe a reversal or two, it's not so much how long it takes in real life (shorter is better but other things are more important) but how many rounds there are; for a nice meaty combat that feels satisfying, 3 rounds (enough time for everyone or nearly everyone to take 3 actions) tends to be about right; that way, the

PCs can establish their basic tactics, the enemy can take initiative by responding with why that's not going to work this time, and the PCs can adjust their tactics or reveal surprises and (hopefully) win despite the setbacks.

Big groups with 3 round combats tend to take too long; our D&D5 combats will tend to go pretty quickly, but an hour (in a 3 hour session) is still pretty short, particularly for the larger, 8+ player groups. For the big groups, well, sometimes only a larger combat will work, but if you ask me I'd rather have the group split into smaller fights like a battle anime manga does, where each protagonist faces off, either with a partner or alone, against one or two enemies; that way you can have a nice give and take for the currently on-screen fight before we switch to the next group, but we don't have to take account tactics of 7 or more people on a side with resulting chaos. I'd say we rarely actually get that in play, though, not least because you need a system where many characters can fight and it's assumed they are built for solo combat more than team combat, which isn't any system I'm using regularly (though Lands of Adventure could handle it, I think, and Fate's ok for that sort of thing).

Re Barry's father's bagel accident: Kitchen/kitchen tool accidents are a surprisingly large proportion of serious accidents, particularly around holidays where people who don't frequently cook are using kitchen knives.

No question that Death is in the top echelon of Pratchett's best characters. I'm also fond of his granddaughter, Susan.

ryct Lisa on alignment: When I'm not playing D&D, I won't generally use alignment at all, at least unless the system has its own alignment system. When playing D&D, I'll try to feel out what the character is like, and then try to slap a label on it with the alignment system. Good/Evil is pretty easy to get a handle on, but there's still some ambiguity—does the character have a strong sense of good and evil coupled with intolerance/ruthlessness? Are they fairly amoral, but kind in practice? Do they adhere to standard "good" practice and magics, or do they draw on magics and practices largely considered "evil" (like necromancy or lovecraftian/abberant magic, blood magic, etc), regardless of their moral compass? But law/chaos is actually a description of multiple axes—whether it's about internal honor, or whether the character values personal choices vs societal consistency, or for that matter whether they just align to an

external source of judgement that defines themselves as lawful/chaotic, but I'll try to find the best fit and stick with it for a bit.

Spike Y Jones: Pre-funeral viewings and Jewish funerals: Jewish funerals are by custom closed casket. Of course, there are customs around volunteers watching the body before it goes into a coffin, but in Jewish cultures I'm familiar with, there's no practice of body being visible during the funeral—possibly because a visible body would generally mean having a funeral home prepare it to look much as it did in life, and Jewish custom also specifies that the body should be left unmodified as much as possible—allowed to decompose normally, wrapped in nothing but a cloth and with a plain wooden coffin.

Re D&D groups having battlemats in the 70s: I mean, some groups did. We didn't have battlemats the entire way through high school (86-90); we used mats for Battletech and Car Wars, but our AD&D was entirely Theater of the Mind; enough so that it didn't even occur to us to do otherwise.

Re D&D5 and optimal attacks: Yes, you're quite right that D&D5, despite being "easy" compared to other games, can have a too-high barrier to entry. Despite the many problems with it, this was something I liked about 4th edition—there was a strong assumption that most classes would be based around a single stat. So, if you were playing a cleric, you'd max wisdom, and then wisdom would be the stat you'd use for both melee attacks and spells; there was a bit of hinkiness in basic attacks (which would use strength but you could take attacks that "counted as a basic" to fix this). The exception being, I *think* Paladins which had both Strength and Charisma builds but had no options for Strength builds in the original book, so they had to wait for the splatbook before they had any choices.

In comparison, 5e is far simpler, but with many spells being worse at low levels than weapon attacks for classes that have good weapon access, it can be on-obvious what attacks Bards, Druids, and Clerics (in particular) should use. Regardless, I find that the game works best when players more experienced with the system help out new players to pick things that will be as effective as they imagine they will be (or see options that they were overlooking).

Re the campaign becoming either epic or satire: I see no problems here.

Re: Wizards, D&D, and translation: They stopped licensing translations in 2022, I think, which makes some sense—it meant they owned the translation rights which meant that since they also own the predominant online platform, that they could support DNDBeyond in supported languages as well.

In 2024 they announced that the numbers weren't holding up in house for Portuguese; the costs of producing the game in Portuguese weren't supported by demand. Which, well, nobody outside of Wizards can check their numbers, but I can see it.

What would be good is if they would license rights for copies of the game outside their core 6 languages. After all, so much of the world doesn't speak English (or French, German, Italian, Japanese, or Spanish) natively. But, it's not that they went from licensing Portuguese to not doing so; they went from licensing Portuguese (and 5 other languages) to producing them in house, and then dropped Portuguese as not worth it in-house.

Re using the High House (or the many other modern fantasy stories that use law/chaos; see also PS238 and Sandman) as a model for D&D: I think you lost track of the plot; you had previously said that modern people would be uninterested in using Law and Chaos rather than good and evil because most of them hadn't read Moorcock any more. It explicitly wasn't about original D&D or fantasy during the 70s.

Re switching between CNN and Fox: We don't watch any TV news, but when I've seen bits of Fox when it's being played at a restaurant or other establishment, it's indeed like looking into another universe—Fox presents an entirely divergent view of the world than "traditional" media, and it's hard not to see that the

two now hyper-diverse views produce viewers who can't even agree on the basic rules of reality.

Jerry Stratton: Re editions of D&D: Coming back in with 5e is a good choice. Of course it would be impossible without the innovations of 3e, 3.5, and 4th edition, all of which advanced the art in measurable ways and have their bones in 5th edition.

But also, while I can't recommend people play the intermediate editions at this age, per se, 3e and 4e both have some neat aspects that aren't really replicatable by anything in 5th edition; at least not yet. 3e (and honestly original 3rd edition was probably the best of the 3rd edition flavors, as I say without having ever played it; sure, it avoided the sanitization and rebalancing that they did with 3.5...but by the same token, that meant it avoided having a massive set of "required" magic items for optimization and more possible combinations than ever before or since seen in D&D, between dozens of books of spells and items and dizzying stacking rules) was the last edition that attempted to build a "world"—NPCs were built on class levels and hit dice, just like the PCs (it's just that the more monstrous enemies tended to have more hit dice and the PCs often none), and NPCs would have one feat every three levels, just like a PC. So there was a certain beauty to it, and until it collapsed under its own weight, an interesting asymmetry to the various things you could do and counters to them, ad infinitum.

4th edition's main virtues were in the sheer imagination the game included and enabled, at least if one ignores a lot of the issues with how it played (especially at high levels; at low levels it was really fun if a little over-mechanical unless you expanded on the structure). Even single-classing, you got to make a lot of meaty choices—choosing powers for each level let you customize a character's style, and if too many powers were identical to other powers, well, nobody's perfect; a lot really weren't, and there was a lot of fun to a fighter who would suck the enemy in by seeming vulnerable only to become a nigh-invincible trap, a swordmage who would go teleporting around the battlefield and magically locking on to enemies, narrowing their focus such that the moment the enemy moved against their allies, the swordmage was back in their face threatening retribution, and a paladin who would square up against a foe and, as is traditional, deal out terrific damage intermixed with healing their friends as they took hits. (and all of those were defender-types). And that's before one gets to the two extra tiers of play, which really diversified play in ways that haven't been replicated in D&D5 as yet—at 11th level you'd choose a paragon path, which would set a theme and direction for a character in ways similar to picking up a new class (and while level-based multiclassing wasn't in that system, you could spend feats to take powers outside your class and could pick up a paragon path of another class if you were already multiclassing which was a neat way of picking up a lot of another class's flavor without sacrificing much beyond an in-class paragon path). And at 21st level you'd pick up an "epic destiny", which the "epic boons" of 5e are a mere shadow; a Destiny would be some big thematic direction for where your character was going to go when they stopped adventuring and became a power in the world, whether it was to become a god, a powerful undead, a great hero, or something weirder, and would come with thematic ways for a character to come back from the dead a few times a day, among other things. I'm sure someone has tried to come out with a sourcebook for bringing that kind of "extra" play into 5e, but if any attempt has been successful I haven't seen it yet.

What worked for us playing 5e without a grid (within the last year our games have moved to mostly using owlbear rodeo or the D&Dbeyond map tool for the bigger combats, but that's a recent development) was just having players describe their intent. That way the GM could decide whether or not there was an option like the one they wanted and then the action would move forward; there might be a back and forth as a player

weighed how many allies they were willing to hit with their own fireball to hit more enemies, but it wasn't a huge deal. Even playing with the map tools, we don't use a "grid"; the rules no longer include grid movement at all, so if a character is sitting between two "squares" on the map, or you can hit a few more enemies by moving a fireball a few pixels over (with some guidelines for how much of a figure needs to be covered by an effect's template for them to be hit), then you do. We mostly handled the issues with monks by not playing monks, but the 2024 rules actually make monks a lot more fun.

Re waking up, estaranged, after an injury or illness: yeah, I had a similar experience after my seizure. Just mainly confusion, then more confusion as people explain what happened and why I'm suddenly somewhere different than I last remember.

Jim Vassilokos (et alia): I thought this episode flowed very well, with a sequence of literal shipboard life, with hints (the psychic stuff, the lawyer) of the plot poking in on the edges.

Mark Nemeth: I'm glad you like attunement better with 5 max attunements rather than 3. I'd be pretty happy with an adjusted rule that scaled up to eventually having 6 attuned items at 20th level (with Artificers attuning up to 9 items), scaling up at, say, 7th, 12th, and 17th character level.

Dan, one of our regular Thursday GMs, expressed frustration this week that players focus on whether items require attunement rather than the story and narrative and history implied in items. But for my money, it's a bit of both—items that are emeshed with history and religion tend to be turn-offs for players unless the players are already quite invested in that story (and in fact we have a fair bit of both in his game—one player, an air genasi who has been revealed to be one of the many children of the now-absent monarch of air, has been collecting bits of the King's regalia on the theory that even if she's not a top contender to be the next ruler of the element, it's better for her to be in a strong position than a weak one, for instance).

But when the PCs defeat yet another mess of worshipers of the Old True Gods who are trying to bring back some forgotten powers to sweep away the current world in favor of those who have been erased from the world, the PCs will generally either try to get rid of whatever god-focused items they were carrying, or will use them with a very skeptical eye, particularly if they are very powerful (including having a useful effect that doesn't require attunement). It doesn't help that some PCs and important NPCs honor gods that are *not* among the main True Old Gods, of course.

I love the idea of combining items experimentally, particularly if the GM allows that to produce synergistic effects, both good and bad. Big Powerful Items can make or break a D&D game.

I think one can construct a viewpoint in which RPGs are fine in general but shouldn't be played by prisoners; I just don't agree. For instance, RPGs usually involve dice which can also be used for gambling; Prisoners should not be allowed to gamble because it continues their association with underground and criminal activities. RPGs often involve imagined violence against foes it is fine to hurt, rob from, and murder. Criminals, who are far too likely to have already done these things in real life, shouldn't be encouraged to do so in their play activities, but

instead should be encouraged to do play activities that don't involve violence.

That former reason is AFAIK one of the main reasons RPGs are often made difficult but not actually banned in many prisons. Even if TTRPGs aren't per se banned, because of gambling, the use or possession of dice often is, so prisoners who play TTRPG games need to use alternative randomization means, like writing numbers on paper chits to pull randomly.

Since we can make a case that tieflings are more likely to be evil than genpop but also a case that they're more likely to be good, it makes sense to in a vacuum assume that they have equivalent to others in their culture to be either evil or good. Of course, culture matters; if you want there to be a lot of evil tieflings in your game world that's easy to justify (by, say, having secret cults that tie them directly to their infernal or abyssal hierarchies, or having them be outcasts who often join criminal gangs when left without a lot of other options), and the same for having a lot of good tieflings. But that means that it's a culture/world specific thing, and still justifies not having an alignment tag associated with the PC version of the species.

Re clutter: I do think we're moving into a future where a home could still be entirely livable with very little physical clutter—online shopping makes it much easier to buy stuff you need seldomly, and digital delivery lets you have a host of things you can do to occupy your time without having a lot of physical books/games/DVDs lying around. That said, I'm happy having an apartment with lots of things in it; we do need to trim down, if for no other reason than so we can fit more things in. And, of course, I *like* reading physical books.

Re getting 120 hours of job done in 80 hours: The key is to triple your estimate before anyone else sees it. That way, if it takes only twice as long as you thought you're 33% below budget instead of 100% above.

While it's not in the core rules, I seem to remember there being experimentation with some attunement rules for "special" items in 4th edition D&D, at least late in the edition (and similarly for item sets, which sadly haven't made their way into D&D5, I think because their presence implies having far more items than the developers want PCs regularly carting around or relying on).

Re audio: I'm glad my suggestions helped! I find that they can cause many, many more ways for things to go wrong, but by the same token when things are going well it's overall a better setup than the naive one—and you do have a lot of tools for fixing things when they go wrong (I was already pretty well attuned to avoiding high pitched feedback before I had a mixer set up, so fortunately immediate feedback has never been a frequent zoom problem for me...though I did get feedback when I tried to experiment with latency-less voice chat using overtuned whisper—but in that case I think it was because the approach was so successful that the person I was testing with lacked enough isolation between their mic and speaker, which resulted in disaster. Echo feedback is always an issue, of course, but having a manual gain does make it much easier to filter it out).

Honestly the Raybearer protagonist is a lot more Byronic in the sequel, though possibly not to your standards. I have mixed feelings about the books but I did like a lot of stuff in the sequel. Of course, the world is still built to make things work out, but she certainly makes some bold choices in Redemptor.

Natter, part 2

After Lee had to cancel last month's zine, I resolved to add more to my zine and hopefully catch up.

Sadly, it was not to be, as I found many things during the month quite distracting. But I've managed to catch up a -little-, at least, I hope without causing Lee too much extra trouble.

Igtheme: In general, I'm not inclined to have the PCs go to the

police in an adventure, but I'm also interested in playing the PCs plausibly. Which means that unless they're defined as bounty hunters who take the law into their own hands, they're probably going to want to do citizens arrests on criminals, not just exact punishment with their own hands, and also when it seems like the enemy involves cops, are going to want to at least *attempt* to give themselves cover of law, rather than risk committing major

crimes and go to jail for a good long time after their first adventure.

The core is to balance the needs of some amount of realism (enough that the players and GMs can believe it, anyway) with those of protagonism—that the PCs are the ones doing the heroic and interesting things (and going into danger), not NPCs.

Comments on A&E #591, part 2

Patrick Riley: Re: NPC's built like PCs: I think you can justify having NPC have reduced abilities compared to PCs, due to NPC's not showcasing all of their abilities within a single fight. You only need to stat out what they will use.

Of course mirror match NPC's really should be built with full stats, but that's a rare case; in most fights, the PCs should have a significant edge.

Re character motives: Hear hear on greed being an easy and effective motivation...but a shallow one. I really like the Gumshoe Drive concept—give each PC at least one motivation (or similar character quirk) that's nearly guaranteed to pull the character into danger when invoked. Of course, as designed, this was to be used on semi-scripted adventures, but the mechanic works for anything. If one PC's Drive is The Unknown, one is Duty (saving people), and two PCs have, say, a Treasure drive, it's not too hard to hook the entire group with a tomb full of secrets and treasure where someone was rumored to have disappeared.

Howard's Conan is actually quite smart. Brutal, yes, and not "civilized". But his dislike for magic (which is translated in early D&D with an antipathy between barbarians and wizards) comes not from ignorance, but experience; the Cimmerians are a people with a long history facing magic, and Conan is both partially resistant and knowledgeable on the best ways to avoid and counter a wizard's spells and tricks. And as for being non-verbal...well, for the first example I looked at, in Rogues in the House, the seventh Conan story, sure, he at first responds to being captured with grunts and monosyllabic answers. And then he says this mouthful: "Take off these cursed chains now," demanded the Cimmerian. "And have the guard bring me food. By Crom, I have lived on moldy bread and water for a whole day, and I am nigh to famishing." Way more Doctor Strange than the brute that Arnold plays (<https://freeread.com.au/@RGLibrary/RobertEHoward/REH-Conan/RoguesInTheHouse.html>)

Re circles and factions: In Urban Shadows, it can work well—even if weakly defined, the circles are lenses. As for the factions, nothing about the game breaks if a PC is unaffiliated with or only loosely associated with a faction. Particularly since PCs are not expected to be from the same factions, but different ones, clashing with or teaming up with mild cross purposes as they attempt to navigate their way through the world.

Re familiars: Yeah, I agree that you want to boost them to the level of an animal companion and have them scale up nicely (and make sure any downside is manageable by means other than doing without them); having them be at this level also lets you have alternative class features be comparatively powerful, like the 5e artificer, whose good options either involve powerful companions (artillerist) or powerful basic attacks and boosted defense (armorsmith) or both (battlesmith). Of course, having a wizard be stronger means having to boost non-wizard classes more a bit, but recent editions already rein them in a lot. At my suggestion, one PC in our Spelljammer game who was complaining about many misses and his wizard PC feeling weak has taken advantage of a bit of 5e tech—that you can cast Flame Breath on your familiar, and, since this isn't an attack, proceed to have it fly about the battlefield blasting foes while you do something else (at risk that someone will target your now fire-breathing familiar). The other wizard player (and I, playing a sorcerer who could have managed a familiar by now if I really wanted to), not wanting to stomp on the players's fun, have *not* used the trick, but honestly it puts familiars about where they

So when the PCs do do the sensible thing and call the police (or other emergency services) it's important that the GM know they're not trying to give the adventure to NPCs...and keep themselves open to possibilities of making sure the PCs are still very involved and called to action.

should be—as magic-wielding extensions of the wizard's will who can Do Things, rather than just being an easily snuffed out source of remote presence...but only for a tiny subset of spells that Clerics are better at than Wizards.

Re AI referees: Having real intelligence refereeing a combat doesn't just burden the GM—it also enables creative actions an AI might have trouble with. But yes, for some, having an AI handle the basic rules and interactions can free the GM to focus on running the enemies...and if the GM needs to take over for a tricky call, that seems easy enough to manage. Heck, we do this now with VTTs, where the VTT can handle movement, visibility, initiative, and potentially die rolling and keeping track of damage; don't need an AI for that—just a glorified spreadsheet with a pretty interface and that includes a map.

I could see appeal to training AIs to play NPCs, but it would have to be at the publisher level, not the individual GM level. Training AIs to play NPCs for a few hundred games, particularly if the game is somewhat larp-like? Sure; it means you don't need to play every NPC in a very parallel game or hire/recruit NPC players for those roles. An individual GM going through that work for one game? Hell no, even for a larp; far easier to just tell NPC players what they need to do.

Re 5e 2024 backgrounds and wanting a point system and player justification: This is basically how I play D&D5—I'm not sure I've ever gone with a stock background rather than just rolling my own. It's trickier with 2024 by a lot (2014, you could just click "custom background" and choose a feature, two skills and two proficiencies, but in 2024, you have to make a homebrew background which can technically be much more powerful or weaker than a standard background if you're not careful; this is entirely D&Dbeyond being worse though), but the principle remains the same.

Re RSVP elf/horse marriages vs same-sex ones: in fairness, the game last ran in 1992. The GMs might have been pretty open to same sex marriages at the time, but they weren't by any means supported by law yet. But in 2025? Your point remains.

Lisa Padol: Re scrolls and your (literal) dream larp: Merav, as a practicing conservative Jew, would of course think about scrolls=mezuzot and houses and maybe thresholds, but I wouldn't expect you to, nor your subconscious. Of course in your dream the scrolls were about game information, just dressed up to more fit the period; no envelopes in Arthurian Britain.

Re Billionaires: I suspect that by "cash" what's meant is "liquid", not actual cash. Money in a bank or otherwise spendable would count; money held up in stocks or other property wouldn't. And, of course, a billionaire might have stuff that didn't add up to 100% simply. They might for instance have 100% of their wealth in stocks, plus -20% in debt, 10% in cash, and 10% in durable property that they use. That still adds up to 100%...technically.

Re Redden on RSVP an horse marriages: The key thing to keep in mind wrt this larp event is that the GMs didn't have to care how anything worked. The game had a romance mechanic, and also had a marriage mechanic. So when the players playing a horse and an elfen PC went up to them and said "we've done the romance mechanic and we'd like to get married, can we?" they went..."ok, sure." And then later, when a player (playing an elf) used the same mechanic to marry their NPC horse, well, that happened and it was now clear what they said about elves. *How*

the marriages worked in the game world was a player question, not a GM issue.

Re our electric mayhem act: Yes, the first time was at a marriage, the second at Consonance, since Merav was the Interfilk Guest and we were there to support her.

Re throwing a fencing blade on the ground: It won't damage the blade much but you will want to check the bend afterwards. But also, it's Just Rude. A hazard I suppose of having high schoolers do high school fencing.

Ryct Michael Cule: using Disguise/piggy backing to disguise yourself as someone with a different body type: Clearly, the key tech is different piggy backing PCs standing/riding on one another's shoulders in a large coat.

Re a player objecting to the treasure czar's divisions in a D&D 3.5 game: Anecdotaly, the player in question was one of the two players who inspired the RPG Paranoia...because the GM (Dan Gelber) didn't want to just kill them by fiat, and so instead came up with a setting that would inspire them to have their characters kill one another.

Re mark Nemeth re class fit: I'd probably just mark many of the subclasses "rare" (after all, just because PCs can take a subclass doesn't mean it's common in the setting) and leave it up to the players to justify a subclass they want to take that is rare. Players are smart and can probably come up with something even if it's a significant re-chrome.

Re older Discworld vs newer: I mean, in fairness we haven't spent much time looking at the newer game. But for the time its published, yes, I think the older version's art is more progressive.

Re High House trilogy: I'd...forgotten that there was a third book. Should read it.

Re US (Urban Shadows): I like the idea that Power is about the Big Picture (or just The Future), while Mortalis is about the small stuff (or The Present). You I think wrote Power when you meant wild, but the idea that Night does things for very straightforwards reasons while Wild does stuff for oblique reasons makes sense, but doesn't make them that easy to play. I don't remember whether I expressed my time ideas, but another approach is to just say that the Circles are all about when they're active, with there being some associations but the primary split being that you're not interacting as much with others not active at the same time you are (metaphorically or literally). Night is active most at the depth of night, when nightlife happens—and crime and other things hidden by the dark. Mortalis is most active during the day, when the darkest things are hiding away and anything you do might be seen and examined. Wild operates on the thresholds—dawn and twilight, the border of one time (or place) and the next, and is concerned by that borderland and what lies beyond. And as for Power, they operate best at the times of power and significance—noon and midnight, when things are most at their height or depth. Well, something like that, anyway. This would tend to mean that Power and Wild didn't interact with one another much unless they deliberately stepped into one another's domains, and the same for Mortalis and Night, which had a natural border between them...which isn't wrong.

Yeah, agreed that the authors of Urban Shadows 2e are trying to make circles both abstract and concrete...and that it doesn't work well. They'd be much better off building a faction map that made the connections between things more concrete, and leaving the circles pretty abstract.

I don't think getting rid of circles would work well in US—the whole point of the way circles work is that they abstract the distinctions between the factions, letting you get rewards for diversity of experience without having to give stats for each faction. Get rid of them and you end up having to replace them with something. That said, if carefully handled it could be a fun hack. Now, *my* main problem with the circle approach in US is

that they confusingly use the circles for three completely different things on your character sheet. Is something affecting/affected by your Wild circle, or caring about your knowledge of Wild? That's the stat on your sheet, which tends to shift up and down during play with numbers remaining roughly balanced. Is it affecting/affected by your Wild -status-? That's a completely different stat, and one that's quite hard to raise above 1. Is it instead you marking an xp for interacting with someone from the Wild circle? Well, that, aagin, is a completely different stat. This is easier to differentiate when looking at the actual character sheet templates (well, playbooks) than the Google Sheets character keeper we're using, but honestly it's mostly just hard to keep track of. I've internalized it, but I think *none* of the other players have done so (maybe Gareth), and no shade on them for that.

That said, mega-factions make sense; different factiosn in a mega-faction would squabble for power, but they'd actually share a goal, unlike different Power factions (that are more likely to fight than they are to fight other Circles) or different Mortalis factions (that would have all the complexity of real life mortals but share the goal of "not be messed with by all the other factions"). Then again, the complexity of the factions with circles being lenses is part of what makes Urban Shadows interesting, so there's that.

Re hitting the snooze button on the apocalypse: In all fairness, that does emphasize the horror of a setting where that's the best option. You can't stop the doom—the best you can do is kick it down the road and hope that trick can be repeated next time.

re Doc Cross re rules Lawyering: I find that sometimes bringing chapter and verse into a game makes it easier/clearer, not harder. But a lot of the time, especially if a GM has already made a ruling, I'll sit on my hands, and then bring up the actual rule between sessions, so the GM can consider the issue at their leisure.

Re Ascellan Conspiracy: Interesting! It looks like you got two stunts that affect the same roll—both Microjump and Sixth Sense grant +4 to defend against direct attacks. That's normally verboten, But since they're corruption stunts (which expressly can ignore some limits on how stunts work) I see how that would be entirely legit. // You wrote 9 (Mediocre) for one failure result so I'm guessing that 9 was a typo for the normal mediocre result in Fate/Fudge of....probably 2, not 9 (legendary+1). I have never liked the Fudge attribute scale, but I'll admit that in this case it operated as a parity bit. I'm used to Legendary being 7, I think, but your writeup makes it clear that the game was using, I think, Poor (0), Fair, Mediocre, Good, Great, Superb, Fantastic, Epic, Legendary (8). // re your lamenting you weren't playing Gumshoe: I think you might have sepcifically ben thinking about Time Watch, where you can use preparedness to do "I already did the thing" time tricks? Of course, the main issue with that in FoC is that time travel is a Big Thing there. But I could see justifying it if the game in fact featured multiple jumps—take some corruption for a "promise" to set up a situation after the group's *next* jump backwards. This wouldn't involve any extra jumps (beyond the ones that a campaign frame was expecting) but that kind of setup would still be a big thing I'd expect to be paid for.

Mark A Wilson: Re AI: Yeah, simulated intelligence is pretty good.

The costumes are really neat!

Michael Cule: Rob died? Ooof. I can see why this series of writeups have been a bitter-sweet pleasure indeed. Good writeups, though.

Re theater of the mind combat and initiative: I mean, you can combine the two. Don't need strike ranks or even Feng Shui initiative (which we totally ran as theater of the mind, as Robin

intended, with plastic beads keeping track of Shots left); while it's in some ways overly tactical, Balsera ("hand-off") initiative (where you hand off the initiative to the next person, PC or NPC to go, with a proviso that everyone has to go in each cycle) can work well. Of course, Blades, like PbtA, has no initiative and NPCs go as reactions to PCs, not on turns, but there's no reason not to make everyone take a turn before someone goes twice in more crowded sequences; as you imply, the initiative-less approach works well in normal play, particularly when PCs are split up. But if things have gone down to a battle scene? Best to let everyone do something (the same for Masks, though sometimes the initiative-less approach helps you, like letting someone roll Defend in response to an enemy action even if they went recently); the "main" actions should still go around the table.

Part of the thing re turn order in general is that there's a lot of value to letting people go where they want....but also it loses you a sense of who is getting too much time. A lot of modern gaming is not so much losing things as deliberately choosing mechanics to do what you want—for this kind of thing, I wouldn't necessarily want to add initiative back in, but even just having people take counters whenever they act during a session would make it easier to look around the table and see who hasn't gotten enough spotlight recently.

The Declaration of Independence is certainly not a Law of the US. But it is part of the Myths and can be considered a Founding Document of sorts.

Re Swords of the Serpentine/Gumshoe: The biggest barrier to any group enjoying Gumshoe, in my experience, is them embracing the "spend points to automatically succeed at stuff" aspect rather than fighting it. As long as they're fighting it, they'll hold points back, disappointingly fail at stuff, and then run out of points despite hoarding them, and get the "I guess I'm bad at stuff" aspect as well.

But embrace the automatic successes, and it's more "be awesome, succeed at stuff, then run out of points in one aspect and (usually) switch to something else you're not trash at yet", which may be limiting in some ways but is much less disappointing.

Re engagement roll: Ah, gotcha. I have some familiarity with Blades but not that much experience overall.

Craig Kamber: Who is Joshua Kronenberg? I don't remember there ever being an A&Eer by that name.

Re jellybean reroll: Oh, man, that's awful and terrible. In all sympathies to the DM, you could have not chosen to reroll at all, but still!

Heath Row: I couldn't imagine Alarums and Excurions or an attempted successor surviving as a wiki—the periodicity of it is

essential and what differentiates it from countless real-time blogs. But I've thought a lot about how to translate what makes APAs work in hopefully labor-saving fully online formats. Ideally, you'd have a period of "ddraft" submissions so volunteer editors could suggest edits and typo fixes (and moderation) before a given "issue" was considered fully baked and released to subscribers and contributors alike. An APA is, basically, a shared blog—but it's a shared blog that is distinguished by its periodical nature, with contributor contributions all appearing on a regular schedule, complete with internal conversations and tangents.

I should reread Changeling and Madwand! I read them in reverse order many years ago, now, and have never revisited them, though obviously I still remember the basics of the setup.

Patrick Zoch: Not wanting sex in your games is a very valid choice, but I find it curious that you don't want romance, either. Of course, most games shouldn't be primarily romantic (the exception being the ones where that's the draw), but if I play a character long enough I'm going to wonder who they're in to or planning to end up with—and that might also include some "fade to black" hanky panky. What irritates me is when people are so tied into their characters being extensions of themselves that they insist on their character romancing whoever is played by someone they are real life involved with. It warps play and can create mountains of drama out of molehills. But different strokes, different folks.

City of Gods and Coffee Traders both sound really fun! I'll have to keep an eye out for them and see if I can get an opportunity to learn them.

Re Trickerion; I find myself not that interested in the RPG, but the board game is coming back for a new edition with the kickstarter running this month, so that's fun and presumably an opportunity to pick up an affordable "good" version of the game with all the expansions. I'm fine contributing to the fancy new edition (probably; we'll see what the pricing is like); less so paying a markup for the remaining copies of the original Kickstarter.

Clark Timmins: FLGS: I was unsurprised that a shop stayed around almost entirely via food service—it's obvious that your regular customers are generally going to be happy playing games they already own (except for magic, the gathering and other CCGs, which is a predatory model and can make you very dependent on those companies). I'm sure the owner of the store tried to convince the buyer that food service was an absolute must and it wouldn't be viable without it...and predictably, they ignore it and ran it into the ground.

Re me: I didn't make it as clear as I could, but my response to the filler was *my* response to the filler. Of course the filler on the second half of the last page of my zine was not mine at all.

I'm reading a novel about indigenous people. In the novel, each extended family group has a type of holy man who prepares bundles of materials that they believe confer supernatural advantages.

Looking over Wikipedia, I see that numerous types of cultures have similar concepts, known by various names – sacred bundle, tlaquimilolli, medicine bag, gris-gris, good-luck charm, mojo bag, toby, nation sack, conjure hand, juju bag, jomo, or trick bag. These vary in the details, but in aggregate they have similar properties. I'll use the term "trick bag" from here on, because (at least to me) it's the least fraught with cultural attachment – and I'm interested in the concept, not the specifics.

Magical amulets, of course, are nothing new in gaming. *Dungeons & Dragons*, especially, has featured a litany of magical amulets, talismans, etc., over the various editions. Some periodical articles have expanded on the basic concept. In general, however, the *D&D* amulet is an expensive magical item that, when worn, offers a specific advantage or grants a specific ability.

In the novel I'm reading, however, there are some differences from a gaming "magic item" that might provide a subtle texture to a campaign. The differences, as I see them, are noted below.

Cost. Magic items are expensive. Usually very expensive. Characters might save considerable resources over prolonged periods to amass enough wealth to purchase a certain amulet. In contrast, the trick bag contains only relatively common materials. In effect, the trick bag is free.

Disposal. Magic items that are no longer needed usually can be resold, often for about

the same price that they were purchased. Trick bags, however, have no value once they are no longer needed.

Scarcity. Magic items are rare. The better the item, the rarer it is. The trick bag is common. Almost everybody has one almost all the time.

Additive. Magic items proliferate in most campaigns. Characters simultaneously will have and use multiple magic items, each conferring some distinct (occasionally 'stacking') advantage. There is no advantage to having more than one trick bag. In fact, it may well be detrimental to have more than one.

Construction materials. Magic items typically are made of rare, exotic, or expensive materials. Trick bags are made of common items. Sticks, rocks, teeth, leaves, hair, or other small and common items that have some type of personal significance to the trick bag owner.

Creation possibility. Magic items – especially in *Dungeons & Dragons* – may not be possible to create within the rules. Trick bags mostly are created by assembly – a personal but relatively simple process.

Creation time. Magic items often have some type of exotic ritual that is prolonged and difficult. Often this involves considerable time. Trick bags, in contrast, are relatively simple to create. True, a shaman type usually does some step in the creating. It usually only takes a few hours or a day, however.

Duration. Magic items tend to be of three types: single use, charged, or permanent. Single-use items, like a potion, are good only once. Charged items, like a wand, are good for n uses. Permanent items typically last (and confer benefits) forever unless destroyed. Trick bags

are most like permanent items, except they don't last forever. They may last only for the duration of a certain season, a specified time, or a specific task. After that, they would usually be replaced by a new trick bag.

Universal effect. Most magic items will work for anybody, though some are restricted to certain alignments, classes, or body sizes. Trick bags, however, work only for the specific individual for which they were made.

Community. Almost anybody can pick up a magic item and use it immediately (though some require 'attunement'). Trick bags are usually available only to members of a community – a family group, tribe, or similar. This means that 'murder-hobo' style campaign characters would normally not have access to the community stability that would be required to have a trick bag.

Summary. I find the idea of a trick bag interesting because they offer an inexpensive, personalized magic item that's of value only to the original owner, though they may be a curiosity to others. I think this offers several avenues for exploration in a campaign.

Often, some opponent group (let's say boogeymen to avoid the apparent problem with 'evil' humanoids that is today's gaming *zeitgeist*) that is pitted against the characters becomes too easy to defeat as the characters gain experience. Obviously, giving all the boogeymen a +1 sword would raise the ante. It also wouldn't make sense (where do boogeymen acquire piles of magic swords?) and disturb the campaign ("these swords are worth a lot of money!"). Not so with a trick bag. Each boogeyman can have a trick bag that confers some advantage – stiffening the opposition – without raising questions of availability or even disturbing the campaign.

Advancement through *D&D*'s 'Tier 1' can feel slow and too-early magical items can be

disruptive to a campaign. Trick bags might offer a transient solution. They're not the permanent +1 sword that can be sold for a tidy pile of coin – in fact, they're only good for, say, one adventure and aren't worth anything after that. More than a potion, less than a +1 weapon.

Trick bags can be specifically conditional. Perhaps they offer a +1 advantage when hunting. But not in combat. Or a +n advantage on endurance. But not in healing. This lets them be unique and keyed to a specific area in which the character seeks an advantage.

Obtaining a paladin's warhorse and similar tasks are interesting – but they also can be disruptive to the game (not the whole party is involved; some players may not care). Trick bag construction could be a between-session activity. The players consider what small items they would consider for the trick bag, and a brief note of why. The DM might review the list and make a quick determination. This yields a customized benefit without taking up game time.

Trick bags also have that sort of 'it's *my* secret power' feel. A fighter wants +1 damage an adventure. OK. But maybe the other fighter wants a +1 initiative. Or +1 to dancing skill. And that can switch around as the campaign develops.

Several online game commentators are – once again – predicting the imminent demise of Dungeons & Dragons. This is based on recent sales figures for the 2024/5 three Core Rulebook revisions that are claimed to indicate quite poor performance. Coupled this with Hasbro's stated goal to drive the game online and monetize by requiring monthly subscription, these commentators suggest D&D is on the way out and 'TTRPG' is on the way in. The reasons have changed over 50 years, but the prophecy is always the same – D&D is just about to die. I'll believe it when I see it. My own experience is that D&D is everywhere, including on the tabletop. And most newer players I know don't seem to mind the transition to online.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 4 · ISSUE 4 · APRIL 2025

In this issue...

April issue of the OVERLORD'S ANNALS covers two session reports from the *Conquering the Barbarian Altanis* Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

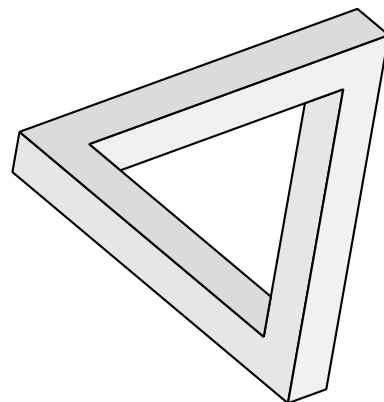
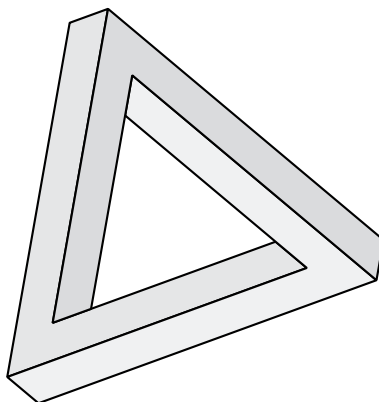
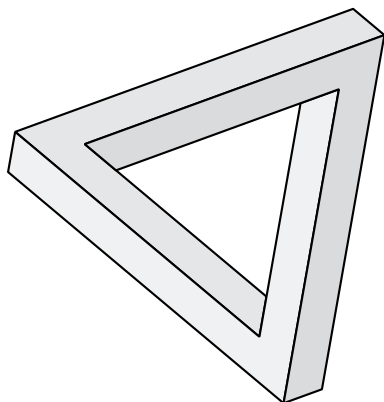
Adventurers get to feel the *real* wrath of Zarifa.

I'm running a weekly online D&D B/X game focused on hexcrawling and dungeon delving in the Wilderlands of High Fantasy Barbarian Altanis—a hostile land filled with ancient riches and antediluvian evils.

We are using Discord for chat and voice, Owlbear Rodeo for mapping, and Google Slides for character

sheets. You can find all other campaign resources, active characters, and session reports at the following page: <https://attronarch.com/wilderlands>

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



Conquering the Barbarian Altanis: Session 74

Adventurers

Rashomon, *elf level 2*. A dangerous looking elf.

Llyfed, *elf level 3*. Thin and balding elf whom also happens to be Rashomon's friend.

Tarkus the Promising, *cleric level 1*. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Beorg the Gravedigger, *fighter level 1*. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

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

Galepurse the Hapless, *cleric level 1*. Woefully unsuited for life of adventuring but desperately needs coin to grow his following.

Coldrain 20th, Spiritday

"Drugs in Hara?! Not on our watch!"

Tarkus the Promising found another issue to fixate on—getting to the root of Red Dragon, a drug very few know anything about. He learned about it from his adventuring friends whom had told him everything about old drug den where it was found first.

Being the type of guy to cleanse first and ask questions later, he quickly mustered forces to head to the den on the first occasion. Veterans Rashomon and Llyfed were up to it. New recruits included Beorg the Gravedigger, Bairstowbury the Chaotic, and Galepurse the Hapless.

The party set out in the morning; they arrived by nightfall of the following day.



Shadowrath 1st, Airday

"Should we camp and wait for the morning?"

"No, let's head straight in!"

"What's the worst that could happen? Previous expeditions did the same as well—so they told us."

Not one member of the party had been to this place; they had to work with information they've been given by other adventurers. Despite this handicap, they managed to find poorly concealed entrance. Down they went.

Bell shaped entrance chamber was just like described: smelly, littered with animal bones and carcasses. Two decaying pig-faced humanoids were propped on spears. Third laid slumped on the ground.

Moving straight, exploring sole corridor yet undisturbed by previous parties, they ran into four-way junction. Following the left hand path led them to closed doors. Forcing them open with ease led them into large, dust-caked chamber.

Three-story bunk beds were lined alongside all four walls. A footlocker rested at the base of each. A simple stone altar stood in the center of the room; on it a symbol with three crossed swords. Vertical one pointed with blade down, two crossed ones forming an X pointed up with blades. Around the altar were six round desks, around each were four simple chairs.

Chamber had solemn atmosphere to it; as if it was oblivious to all the changes and transformations that transpired in other parts of this place. Inspecting the ceiling yielded a surprising discovery: a huge circular symbol of three crossed swords, just like the one on altar.

Tarkus and Rashomon did their best to guess its provenance. "The best" as in staring intently and hoping to get some sort of divine revelation. Nothing of the kind came.

Convinced there must be something else of value here (else they just spent two hours on an empty room), the party scoured the walls. Lo and behold! Elves had found a door-shaped outline hidden behind one of the bunk-beds leaning against the west wall.

As it is to be expected, they proceeded to over-analyse the situation, gently prodding at the wall, then taking out a small hammer to tap it, then taking out iron spike to chisel the wall...

Bairstowbury had enough and went straight at the wall.



Success!

He pushed and wall rotated, opening up into a long corridor.

The party spiked the secret passageway open, and then rotated one of the bunk beds to create an improvised barrier.

Moving on they came to a T-shaped junction, took a turn to the left, came to the four-way junction, explored all directions, and decided to go for the doors on their right.

After a bit of forcing, they managed to break into a most surprising room.

All the walls were covered with floor-to-ceiling tapestries depicting larger-than-life figure dressed in purple robe with pointy hat defeating hordes of enemies.

The worst offender was tapestry straight across from them.

On it the mage-like figure was as huge as titans of legend. It held a sword in left hand and staff in right. Countless number of demonic corpses were piled beneath his sandaled feet. One of the demons was on its knees, apparently begging for life.

“Hohum, do you know whom this place belonged to? Who was the previous owner, before the drug things and so?” Galepurse asked.

No answer.

No one bothered to ask.

Ever.

Prodding all the tapestries was natural first step.

West one had some give. Pushing it indicated there was no hard surface behind it.

One of the elves lifted part of it in the southwest corner.

Tarkus lit up the torch and bent, while Bairstowbury got down on his knees and peeked beyond.

All he could see is dark chamber with something white-silvery on the ground. Halfling tied end of the rope and threw it onto the marking on the ground. That disturbed the chalky marks, but nothing stuck to the rope.

“What now?”

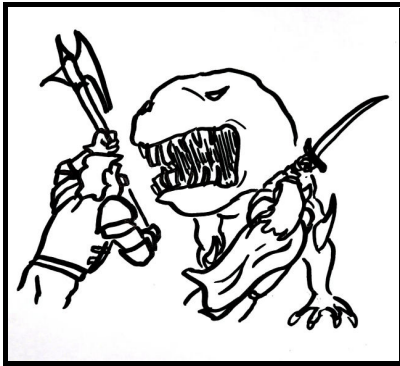


As the party discussed their plan for ten or so minutes, Tarkus could spot a hoof appearing from darkness. It was attached to a bright red leg. Bent hook protruded from its knee. The hoof moved left and right, erasing parts of the white-silvery material.

Adventurers dropped the tapestry.

That didn't do anything to contain the monstrosity that charged through it, ripping it to shreds, and trampling several of the adventurers in the process.

A horse-shaped bright red monstrosity was now prancing between them. Hooks pointed from its knees, spikes dotted its spine, and countless razor-sharp teeth poked from its mouth. There were no obvious eyes on its bulbous head, except two pitch-black slits.



The monster thrashed around, surrounded, but with little success. Party quickly took it down through combination of magic missiles and cold, hard steel.

Smell of roasting ham filled the room once the creature had been slain. Inspecting the corpse revealed that it was burning out from the inside.

Party spent nearly an hour collecting silver shavings that once formed a circle on the ground beyond the tapestry. They collected them into makeshift sacks made from pieces of the tapestry.

Backtracking to T-shaped junction, they moved to explore further west. Two doors; one locked with large padlock and horizontal bar, one unlocked but stuck. The latter was chosen.

Another bewildering room!

This one was full of cages, big and small, hanging from the ceiling. Some were almost touching the floor, some were quite high up. The only clear path was forward.

"This is a trap, if I had seen any!"

Half an hour later the party had reached other side of the chamber, unharmed.

Another stuck doors that fell victim to impressive muscle of this indomitable bunch.

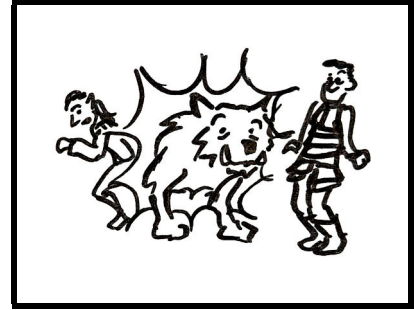
"Hey, look at this..."

One of the elves had spotted a sconce with a torch in it. On the sconce was a small, almost invisible symbol with three crossed swords. Everybody readied their weapons as the elf pulled on it...

Revealing an empty twenty by twenty chamber with a single burning torch resting in another sconce. The latter was in the middle of the north wall.

The party poured into the secret chamber and readied themselves once more.

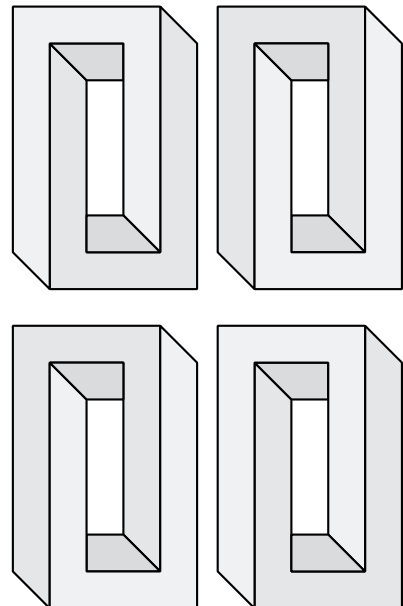
Torch did not emanate any heat nor smell. It did provide light though. Elf pulled on it and two loud clangs could be heard. A large wolf appeared in the middle of the room.



It didn't even get the chance to growl! That's how quickly the party chopped it down, with Rashomon delivering the killing blow.

Recovering the magic torch proved to be a fruitless effort. The party opted to explore south, instead of north whenceforth the clanging sounds could be heard from. They found a closet with bunch of spades, few long corridors, a chamber with portrait of smug magic-user reading nine books at once, and that's it.

Running low on torches, they decided to retreat, and return some other day.



Conquering the Barbarian Altanis: Session 75

Adventurers

Rashomon, *elf level 2*. A dangerous looking elf.

Llyfed, *elf level 3*. Thin and balding elf whom also happens to be Rashomon's friend.

Hagar the Hearer, *dwarf level 1*. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Nolmbork, *dwarf level 1*. Portly, bald, red bearded, with an epic nose. On a mission to have a drink in every settlement in Wilderlands.

Orist, *fighter level 1*. An elf.

Rangar the Bull, *fighter level 1*. Titanic, dark-skinned figure wearing bull-headed helmet and a harness with countless weapons strapped to it.

Shamar, *fighter level 1*. Tall and slender man with magnificent black mane and a fancy looking sword. Absolutely inept at fighting.

Coldrain 20th, Spiritday

"God damn it." Tamren muttered.

Dear reader, this letter is intended for the named thereafter: Derennan the Dwarf, Hagar the Dwarf, Nolmbork the Dwarf, and Tamren the Helmeted. Please forward it to them at your earliest convenience.

If you are one of the named, then I have to inform you with heavy heart that a client has retained our services to ensure your untimely termination. Rest assured that that we will execute our clients' wishes regarding your passing in the finest details. We take pride in our professionalism and art.

With that being said, as mandated by the Queen, everyone must be

given an opportunity to purchase their right to live. Therefore, I am delighted to invite you to bid for your life no later than ten days after delivery of this letter. Should you fail to appear, we will consider that as refusal of our offer.

*With love,
Zenon Coke
Headmaster of the Assassins' Guild*

Portraits of Nolmbork, Hagar, and Tamren have just been delivered to their house—together with the above letter. Few weeks ago Zarifa invited them all, alongside Derennan, to pose for a portrait to "award them for their bravery" in returning Barad's corpse.

Hagar's and Nolmbork's portraits accurately depicted their pensive poses with two small modifications. First, their eyes and lips were crossed out with red paint. Second, both were disemboweled, with spear stuck in their belly.

Tamren's portrait showed his stoic position accurately as well. Red frown was added to his helmet, as were three tiny eye drops next to each eye slit. There was a tight noose around his neck added as well.

"Saw this one coming." Derennan muttered.

Shadowrath 5th, Spiritday

"We must head to the guild and get this sorted."

Llyfed the Diplomat, Nolmbork, Ranger the Wounded and Banded, and Hagar the Framed spent the day negotiating terms in the windowless stone building at the north side of Hara. Like them, so have I, the humble scribe, sworn to secrecy. What I can tell

you though, is that they left the Assassins' Guild with certain ease to their gait. Soon they returned with sacks full of coin, and then they left with an even more bravado than the last time.

"What did he say? We are safe until end of Dewsnap next year?"

"So it sounded, yeah."

Shadowrath 11th, Airday

The wounded rested until they were back into full fighting fit. New adventurers joined the party as well: boisterous Shamar, accompanied by his two retainers Alf and Falf.

"We have been organising expeditions to the drug den. We are seeking evidence of a drug called the Red Dragon. So far we've been creamed a few times, but I have a feeling we are at the cusp of something great..."

And so a new expedition was formed: Rashomon, Hagar, Nolmbork, Orist, Rangar the Bull, Shamar and his two retainers.

The party reached den by end of Shadowrath 11th; they went down as night fell.

They went straight to their left, through the chamber with a mountain of rotting orc corpses, past the junction with stairs leading down, and right at the junction with a loong corridor leading north.

"Watch out!"

The passage suddenly turned cold and a number of incorporeal skeletal hands emerged from the walls. They tried to reach adventurers, but luckily missed. Well, mostly missed. Two grabbed Nolmbork and he dropped down to the ground as a brick.

Party retreated, dragging the fallen dwarf with them.

“He is still breathing!”

“What do we do now?”

“Slap him a bit!”

“It isn't helping!”

“Let's get out...”

Noticeably slower now that they were carrying a fully armoured dwarf, the party took nearly an hour to get out.

“Can you believe it? Can you hear him snore? Incredible!”

Indeed, Nolmbork seemed like he was having quite a pleasant dream.

With little left to do, the party found a safe spot some thirty minutes away from the den entrance and camped for the night.

Shadowrath 12th, Water-day

“Let's go different way this time!”

The party headed straight through the archway, then left at the junction into the large chamber with bunk beds and altar with three crossed swords, then left through the secret doors, past the junction and to doors reinforced with iron bars and thick bar running across it. There was a large padlock on the right hand side.

Ultimately the party decided to head south, through the chamber with hanging cages, and into the secret room with a burning torch in a single scone. The large wolf they killed last time was still rotting here.

Everyone stood in the circle as one of the adventurers pulled on the torch. As before, two loud clangs could be heard and a large wolf materialised in the room. The creature was hacked to pieces before it could even react. Rashomon was the one whom had delivered the killing blow.

From that moment the party had spent nearly three hours discussing what to do next. They pulled on the torch many times—to no effect—tried getting it out of the scone—to no effect—and exclaimed how flabbergasted they are—also to no effect.

Finally, Orist or Nolmbork spoke up and suggested the party checks the cage room. Maybe something moved there? Nothing. Maybe let's go check the locked doors then?

Lo and behold!

The bar and padlock were gone!

One of them pushed the doors open...

And a lavishly decorated room presented itself!

Sumptuous purple curtains lined all the walls. Large wooden chest with gilded elements stood on the plinth in the centre of the room. Fabulously looking suit of plate mail was propped in the north-west corner. Two crossed swords and a purple shield were hung on the north wall. A small round table with eighteen candles, few still burning, was in the south-east corner.

After making sure nothing was waiting in ambush for them (as well as precautionary shooting of curtains, just to check for yellow mould), the party threw themselves at the treasure with child-like glee.

Chest was indeed safe and untrapped. It was chock full of coins, as well as few shiny gems. Suit of armour was dwarven platemail of unknown origin, but obviously of the finest make. Two swords had unfamiliar writing on them. That was soon elucidated by a timely use of spell known as Read Languages. One was called “Lucky” the other “Doomed.” The shield had a barely visible dragon motif.

As the party investigated the goods, Rashomon stood guard at the south side of the room. It was him whom had noticed that candles were slowly going out, one by one.

“Folks, I think we should get out soon!”

Indeed everyone got out with the valuable as quickly as they could. Hagar and Rangar, being the strongest members, carried the chest. Rashomon quickly grabbed “Doomed,” arguing that it could be named so because it brings doom to others. As soon as he grabbed it he was hit with visions of doom and gloom and nearly lost all will to live.

But it was not everyone who got out! Shamar stayed behind, together with Alf and Falf, to cut out as much of curtains as they could. They looked too valuable to leave behind!

“Last candle is to go out! Run!”

The trio carried seven heavy rolls of top quality cloth.

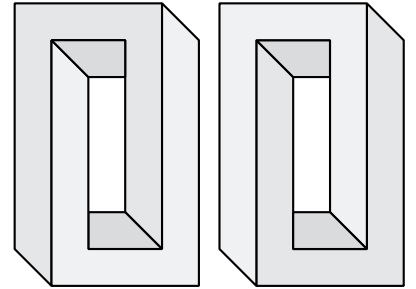
Shamar was the last to charge out as doors slam shut behind him, an iron bar flew out of the wall, and padlock emerged from the bar itself, as sort of liquid iron, and locked itself with a loud clang.

“We are loaded! Straight to Hara!”

Heavily encumbered, the party had reached Hara four days later.

On their way they had counted 1 247 gold coins, 101 platinum coins, and three gems.

No amount of coins had brought any joy to Rashomon.



In next issue...

Den, den, and more den.

Credits

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Session 74 illustrations by IdleDoodler. Session 75 illustration by kickmaniac.

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



After a long time, more specifically 2000, when the Mini-GURPS *No Coração dos Deuses* (“In the Heart of the Gods”, in free translation) was released – an adventure in the legendary Mina dos Martírios at the time of the explorers – Brazil was presented with a new gamebook focusing on Brazilian history: *O porão* (“The Basement”, in free translation) (2024). This gamebook is based on the period of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), specifically its most difficult phase: the publication of Institutional Act No. 5¹ of December 13, 1968. The launch of this gamebook has come to touch a sore spot of Brazil, given that the country is going through a time of intense political polarization, which since 2018 has divided the people between the left and the extreme right².

The two authors of *O porão* are competent. Vítor Soares is a history teacher and host of the podcast *História em meia hora*³ (“History in half an hour”, in free translation), while Giovanni Arceno is a writer. The story takes place in São Paulo and the reader-player is Samantha, a young woman looking for Cecília, her girlfriend, who has been arrested by the DEOPS⁴ for doing something considered “criminal”. Samantha is accompanied by her brother Camilo. Once again, the female protagonist is well used and shows that she is

gaining ground in Brazilian RPGs and games, since Samantha’s role could not simply be replaced by Camilo or any other male character: women suffered a lot at the hands of the military, who exchanged favors and information for sex and money.

The adventure is very simple, with just 111 paragraphs that take the reader-player through the labyrinthine old DEOPS building in the center of São Paulo. Corruption, abuse of authority, among other themes, are dealt with here for an immersive experience of a suicide rescue mission.

The game system is very similar to the first Brazilian gamebook prototype *O herói da copa* (*The world cup hero*, in free translation) (1994): the dice roll is only used to decide the choices randomly, differentiating them from voluntary choices. In addition, the character sheet already informs the reader-player of all the items they might find during the adventure, simply by marking an “x” on what they find, which takes away some of the surprise. However, the character sheet in the format of a criminal record of the time, imitating a typewritten register, helps to immerse the reader in the plot.

Carlos Sekko’s illustrations are simple and dark, depicting the places and scenes of the time well. The cover art itself, when touched, gives the impression of feeling like sandpaper on the reader-player’s hand, arousing discomfort from the moment of visual contact.

One of the novelties that this gamebook brought was the historical care that its authors took beyond the narrative itself. At the end of the text there is a section called “References”, which acts as a mixture of glossary and revelation of the authors’ creative process. It explains what actually existed in the narrative (such as the letter delivered by a prisoner to his wife, which was never delivered to her but was recovered), what was modified (the original building had six floors, but was reduced to three in order to make the adventure more dynamic) and what was fictitious (such as the protagonists Samantha, Cecília and Camilo).

1 During this period, the military was given carte blanche to persecute all opponents of the regime, expanding repression and torture of individuals.

2 The extreme right supports former president Jair Bolsonaro, while the left supports current president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/@historiaemmeiahora>

4 Departamento de Ordem Política e Social (“Department of Political and Social Order”, in free translation), a Brazilian government agency that was used to repress social and popular movements. In practice, it was a torture center whose main victims were militants from left-wing parties. Today, the first floor houses the São Paulo Resistance Memorial, “[...] a cultural institution dedicated to human rights through the preservation and musealization of memories of political resistance and repression in republican Brazil”. More information at <https://memorialdaresistencia.org.br/lugares/deops-sp/>

O Porão can be considered an experimental gamebook, since “historical gamebooks” are rare, but it fulfills its function of memory, education and information well. It was published by Record, one of Brazil’s largest publishing houses, and for this reason it may have been the most popular Brazilian gamebook. Another confirmation of this was an article published in the *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper – Brazil’s largest news paper – on July 6, 2024, which informed readers of the return of gamebooks and their current diversity, taking advantage of the launch of *O porão*.

If there is a label for contemporary Brazilian literature, it could be “diversity”. And it seems that the same is happening with gamebooks.

Photos from the newspaper article about *O porão*:



PS: Even though I studied a master’s and doctorate in gamebooks, I didn’t expect to be interviewed for this article, since interviewing publishers and authors is more media-oriented.

COMMENTS #592

LEE GOLD: I agree that all these suggestions are valid, but in a gamebook the space is limited for so many monsters. There will always miss too many ☹️

LISA PADOL: It’s as if you were a “sub-narrator”. The narrator is the gamebook itself and you accompany Master Arsenal. Although he makes these decisions, the reader-player doesn’t control him, because “nobody controls him”. It’s less immersive, and I particularly didn’t like the mechanics of being a “ghost next to the protagonista”.

JIM VASSILAKOS & TIMOTHY

COLLINSON: Thanks, but I don’t know what “RYQT” means...

Traveller Play-By-Email

Plankwell Campaign, Ch 45: Food for Thought

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader

The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese

The Special Galley was nicely turned out for dinner guests with a tablecloth, dishes bearing the ship's crest, condiment dispensers, and even a floral decoration. Everything had magnets, of course, except for the dishes and flatware, but those had ferromagnetic cores. To qualify as spaceworthy, dishes had to be shatterproof, and they had to stay where they were put, even if gravity went sideways. Only non-spacers, such as the Canon, were intrigued by such things, although anyone who'd done any traveling outside of a low berth would be familiar with the concept.

I was in my standard uniform, and Josefeen, seated across from me, was dressed even more casually, given that she was technically off-duty, but she wore uniform trousers and a draped top covering her... uh... assets. The fact that I could detect her mental snigger at my observation while she was engaged in conversation with the Canon was more proof that our durable psychic bond had survived her entering the Intel Pod, a psi-shielded area, but the bond had clearly diminished, as I hadn't noticed when she'd come back out, and, indeed, it wasn't until she and the Canon were nearly on the other side of the door that I sensed her presence.

They were talking about the additives used with alcohol to forestall liver failure, which had killed so many members of his order back in its early days.

"The problem still exists," he said, "but nowadays we grow backup livers, although mine is bionic. I burned through my backups some years ago."

"I didn't realize religious life is so hazardous," Josefeen remarked.

"Oh, the real problem is the brain. There's no backup for that, although who's to say what the future will bring?"

"You have problems with your brain?"

"Well, as the brain ages, things start to go wrong."

"Oh?" Josefeen gazed with focus, trying to discern exactly what he knew about psionic orbs. As it happened, she was his elder, but being the beneficiary of anagathics, she'd managed to sidestep the ravages of time.

"We were never intended to live as long as we do," he said. "Our minds are designed to retain only so much information, only so many memories, and after a certain point, dysfunction inevitably occurs. Some accept this gracefully, but others... not so much."

The door slid open, and Nizlich entered.

"Canon, may I introduce my Executive Officer, Commander Stefani Nizlich." I motioned with one hand as she approached the table. "Commander, Canon Regimath Forklinbrass."

"Your Grace," Nizlich nodded.

"The Captain's right hand," he said with a grin as Nizlich sat in the only available chair, which just so happened to be on my right.

"More like my entire arm," I said.

She smiled, but as she glanced at me, I could sense a certain unease. Somewhere, perhaps long ago, she'd learned to distrust the effusive compliments of men, though she wanted to believe mine. Ever since our exchange of call signs and my recognition of her as a soldier of note¹, she'd felt a certain warmth toward me. But she also suspected I'd studied her service jacket prior to that conversation, and though it was true that I had, albeit in a cursory way, I'd not noticed her call sign nor connected the dry facts of where and when she'd served with the semi-famous exploits of *Sauerkraut*, semi-famous at least to those of us who served in fighter squadrons during the war.

"That is very kind of you, sir," she said as Ensign Urdud entered the room followed by a small gravcart.

"Dinner is served," Urdud announced, parking the cart and bringing out our respective dinners.

Given the turbulence of the past few days, I'd decided to indulge, so on my plate were a trio of folded cracker shells stuffed with marinated mycoprotein, which had been chopped and mixed with a variety of spicy vegetables and melted cheese and finally topped with a pungent sauce.² As for the beverage, I'd stuck with some fruit-flavored carbonated water. Urdud also placed a bowl of dried mushroom dippers and some of the dipping sauces from my personal stash on the table.

As usual, I was observing and evaluating. Urdud had correctly ascertained the pairing of the snacks with my dinner order. He'd used the correct kind of bowls for plating the sauces, and the dippers were just the right level of crisp. He had done his research and served the right combinations to enhance my dinner and offer me the opportunity to share with my table if

1 See the 3rd page of Chapter 14 in A&E #562.

2 Traveller Tacos.

I so chose. He was definitely going to get a merit commendation for this.

«*You missed your calling.*» Josefeen rolled her eyes. «*You should have been a restaurant critic.*»

«*I attended a prep school where the juniors served the seniors, and I learned to appreciate getting preferences right to avoid demerits and beatings. In any case, good service is always appreciated, and while I would accept less, it pleases me to see people invested in their responsibilities. They also serve, who keep the stomachs full.*»

The Canon smiled as his dinner was put before him, a steaming heap of seaweed in a citrus sauce served over a bed of green rice, but in his eyes, I could sense anxiety, as he didn't want to bring up the Eye of God to anyone but me and, possibly, Josefeen. Yet if speaking of it could have unforeseen consequences, touching it, which was his main desire, could wreck his mind to a degree that decades of drugs and alcohol had somehow failed to accomplish. This, however, was his last chance at wisdom. But he wasn't sure what would happen if he should mention it in front of Commander Nizlich.

«*Uh-oh,*» Josefeen telepathically voiced «*You shouldn't have invited her. He's going to start yapping about the psi orb, and how are we supposed to brain-rape him with her in the room?*»

I hid a brief moue of disgust in a cough.

«*We are not brain-raping anybody. Keep a civil thought in your head, please. I need Stefani here to serve as a control and to cover my ass. I'm not letting you get me alone again.*»

In the back of my head, I was still thinking of the fateful speeder ride that had made me an unwilling Naval Intelligence asset.

«*We're both on the same team, Gus.*»

«*I'm aware. However, you are training me to be a covert psionic asset, so train me. Can I plant thoughts in Reggie's head... or send visions?*»

«*You can try, but until you've been properly trained, you won't know what you're doing. My boss indicated you would be seeking a Psionic Master; a Khouzkhoug Kanrrae living in Pitfall. That's another reason we were both surprised by your decision to run away from Jewell.*»

«*I'm not running away from Jewell. I am expediting a departure on my original orders. I realize Navy Intelligence can cut orders removing me from command, but that would be kind of overt for Intel. In any case, I was going to reach out to this Kanrrae this evening, after dinner.*»

By now, Urdud was finished serving the meals.

“Sir, is there anything else you or your guests require?”

The Canon and Nizlich, to my left and right, shrugged and shook their heads, but Josefeen, across the table, kept her gaze fixed on me, her expression a deadpan so blank it was at the cusp of boredom.

“This looks excellent,” the Canon said. “Thank you very much.”

“It is truly a pleasure to return the hospitality you showed to a stranger in a time of need.” I smiled. “I am pleased to offer the thanks of the Navy for the kindness you’ve shown to one of its officers. That the officer offering the thanks is also the one who received the kindness is just one of the little ironies of command.”

“Speaking of irony, before we eat,” the Canon said, “may I be permitted a brief conversation with the universe? Let us hold hands and pray.”

I shouldn't have been startled, but there was a little shiver in the base of my spine. The phrase, *conversation with the universe*, struck a nerve. I reached out to take Regimath's hand, felt Stefani take mine, and closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to react to the dead eyes of my Intel liaison.

“Oh, you who are nameless and whose ways are powerful and beyond our comprehension, thank you for your generous sustenance, and please allow me the honor to beseech you for your favor for Captain Plankwell and his crew. May they do what is right, and may they do it well, no matter the cost. Amen.”

«*What in Cleon's left ear is this dude all about?*»

«*Some people are sincere in their beliefs. Comes from living at the bottom of a well, or so I hear.*»

Spacers came in all varieties, but many ascribed odd beliefs to the phenomenon of living in natural gravity wells, a.k.a. planets. There were some odd beliefs around natural vs. artificial gravity and its effects on human psychology.

“I thank you as well, Captain,” the Canon said, grabbing his chopsticks. “And I hope my prayer met with your approval.”

Nizlich smiled as she dug into her salad, thinking it cute that he'd asked.

“Contrary to popular opinion,” I said, “the captain's preference is not the be-all and end-all rule on Navy ships.” There was a quiet cough from across the table. “Yes, on some of them to be sure, but unless the captain has a monster of an ego, it's just too much work to pronounce on all the various preferences and permissions that sprout up. As long as it does not interfere with operational readiness, I prefer to simply experience it all and let the universe decide things.”

“That's a commendable attitude.” The Canon nodded. “Now, don't feel you have to answer this, but are any of you religious?”

We all looked at one another. Josefeen, I was pretty sure, believed in only two things: duty and pleasure. And, fortunately, they were not necessarily mutually exclusive. As for Nizlich, well, I looked to her, raising an eyebrow as though daring her to answer first.

"I'm technically Aesirian³," she said. "I'm not a Sword Vorlder, mind you, but I descended from members of the Gram Fleet who first settled Caladbolg, and I grew up in Broken Stone."

"Broken stone?"

"It's an asteroid belt."

That explained, at least in part, why she did so well in the Navy. She was already accustomed to living in space.

"And why do you say *technically*?" Regimath asked.

Nizlich momentarily pressed her lips together.

"There are two broad groups, devout Aesirians and cultural Aesirians."⁴

"Ah, I see. But do you have a patron deity?" he asked.

"Frigg. She's the goddess of wisdom.⁵ But I don't pray to her, at least not as you pray."

"You've never tried?"

"Not for a long time." Nizlich smiled. "We refer to these figures as the *gods-that-vere*. They are heroes... a source of inspiration, but we do not think of them as... vell... as beings who would listen to us or care about our problems."

"You never know," the Canon said. "A little faith can work wonders. Would it be all right with you if we sent a message to Frigg?"

"Right now?"

"There's no time like the present," he said. "Oh, Frigg, please forgive this intrusion, but we could all benefit from your wisdom, if you would be so kind as to grant it. Amen."

"That's it?" Nizlich asked.

"As you speak to her, so too will you speak to the universe."

"And how do you know Frigg's not too busy with her own affairs?" Josefeen asked with a smirk. "Being a goddess isn't easy."

"And you know this for a fact?" the Canon asked.

3 GURPS Traveller calls them Aesirians, while Mongoose Traveller refers to them as Aesirists. For the purposes of this campaign, I'm going to assume these two names are interchangeable.

4 Mongoose Traveller: Sword Worlds (2020), page 21.

5 GURPS Traveller: Sword Worlds (2004), page 74.

"From personal experience."

As I listened to their conversation, I dipped and chewed on one of my dippers and sent a tendril out to Regimath to see if I could establish a connection. I then placed the image of the orb in his mind and sent the thought: «*It is real.*»

He stopped chewing his food and just sat there for a moment, looking at me. He had heard my voice in his mind, and now he was wondering how I'd spoken

without moving my lips. Did he truly hear that, he wondered, or was it merely the slow creep of drug-induced insanity?

I sent the thought again, this time with more emphasis. «*It is real! Do not fear.*»

He looked at me rather intently, as Nizlich and Josefeen went back and forth about the social life of goddesses. *Of course*, he reasoned. *It was all so obvious. But are they all psions?* He glanced toward Nizlich and Josefeen. We were obviously not Zhodani agents.

He blinked for a moment, adjusting to this new reality.

"Is your food okay?" Nizlich asked him.

"Ah... yes," he nodded. "I'm just... preoccupied."

"Vith vhat?"

"An epiphany," he said. "A semi-private one, I'm afraid. I still need to work out the details."

"A semi-private epiphany?" Nizlich wondered out loud. "Sent by Frigg?"

"Perhaps," he replied.

"That was quick."

"I don't like epiphanies," Josefeen said.

"Why is that?" the Canon asked, taking the bait.

"Because they usually mean either I screwed up something so long ago it can't be fixed or some religious dude drugged me, and I'm on a magic sofa ride I never requested."

"Does that happen often?"

"No, but it happened recently."

"Did I miss something?" Nizlich asked.

"People are often resentful at their fate," the Canon said, "though in your case your wish for a *Get Out of Jail* card was granted and rather expeditiously. The universe is apparently keeping an especially close eye on you," he said, thinking again about the Eye of God. "You should feel blessed."

"I don't feel blessed," she said. "I feel tricked and used."

What goes around comes around, I thought to myself.



“Don’t take it personally,” the Canon replied. “The universe tricks and uses us all. It may seem capricious, but there is usually an underlying reason.”

Josefeen, of course, could say nothing to this, as she knew exactly what he was talking about, even though he had no idea. But then that was the very essence of faith, to believe without knowing. During all this, I extended a telepathic tendril over to Stefani, to see if I could get another perspective and see what she was uneasy about, and as our minds touched, she glanced up from her salad and noticed my unblinking stare.

Uh-oh, she thought, and quickly resumed eating.

But there was something more, the memory of someone she’d caught staring at her a few times back in Officer Candidate School. He was in her class, a competent pilot, and for a while she thought she could trust him, but then he made sexual advances.

OCS was the hardest challenge she’d ever undertaken as well as the greatest opportunity of her life, and she didn’t want to mess it up by starting a romance. “Oh, I’m cool with FWB⁶,” he’d said with a grin. Her response was not as diplomatic as it might have been.

In any case, he turned on her, began calling her *Sauerkraut*, and it stuck. There was a process for complaining to the higher-ups, and this included a process for contesting an insulting call sign, but to do so would have gone against Navy tradition, and, in any case, she rather liked it in a perverse sort of way, as sourness wasn’t so bad — not really — as it was excellent protection against people like him.

She looked up and caught me staring again.

“Sir?”

I blinked.

“I’m terribly sorry, Commander. I was taken by a thought about the universe. I was thinking about when I discovered that you were *Sauerkraut*, and how I’d felt like I’d been given a gift, an unforeseen discovery about someone whose career I had been impressed by, someone whose actions I had appreciated, and then to find out it was you?”

I turned to the Canon.

“You asked if I was religious, and I don’t think I am terribly so. Certainly I have outgrown the spiritual upbringing that I had, but I have seen the infinite and the dark.”

I turned a little more, facing him fully.

“I really don’t think there is a higher power looking out for me, but there is a terrible emptiness that is naturally hostile to us, the dark between the stars, and in jumpspace, there is the unknowable

6 Friends with benefits: a sexual relationship without the romance.

unknown. Earlier you called on the universe to favor me and my crew. While I respect and appreciate the sentiment, the universe I know will take us when we let down our guard. We may think we have a good command of living in space and using jumpspace, but it requires constant vigilance. I recently suffered and survived a misjump, and count myself lucky to be here at all.”

“Being here, as we are presently, is an unlikelihood of imponderable complexity, and yet here we are, and so we make the best of it,” Reggie said, and there was again that feeling of the universe as a conscious entity.

“That’s my conundrum. Happy coincidences like Commander Nizlich being on my crew against the terrible emptiness of the dark. I think my solace comes from simply living in the face of a hostile environment and being ornery enough to figure out how to survive so I can be pleasantly surprised when something nice happens.”

I worried for a moment that I might be rambling, so I decided to smile and sip my drink.

Reggie smiled in return. “An ancient Solomani philosopher once said — to summarize him somewhat hazardingly — the meaning of life is the pursuit of the highest good, but that because reality, in and of itself, is unknowable, we can only hope the universe designed the innate structure of our minds in such a way that universal morality can be revealed to us, so that we may act accordingly and within the will of the divine.”⁷

Needless to say, I didn’t quite know how to respond.

“Not to change the subject,” I said, “but I was hoping to ask you about Jewell.”

“What about it?”

“What’s your favorite natural feature?”

“Favorite natural feature? Of Jewell?” He rubbed his chin. “Speaking personally, I’d have to say Mushroom Valley, but it’s dangerous to visit. Even the guided tours, which are careful about when they go, are not without risk, so I don’t suggest it.”

“Any other places?”

7 This is an exceedingly loose and perhaps somewhat biased take on the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. He did not merely hope but rather assumed that moral principles are accessible to all rational beings and that, being grounded in rationality and autonomy, they don’t depend on divine will. Although, to be fair, his idea that the existence of a universal morality is suggestive of the existence of God does lend itself to the Canon’s interpretation. But, of course, we must take into account the social mores of the time and place in which Kant lived. 18th-century Königsberg was not exactly a hotbed of atheism.

We talked for a while about various natural features of Jewell as well as the relative merits of the Navy life vs. merchant spacing. As dinner passed, I kept my connection to Reggie quiescent. Josefeen, however, was growing impatient with the polite banter and began staring at him, unblinking, as she tried gleaning memories off the surface of his mind. In this way, I could sense that he was still thinking about the psi orb, wondering when would be the most appropriate time to inquire about it.

Never, she thought to herself.

I was too engaged in the conversation to join her on her telepathic journey, although I could sense he had a cluttered mind. Every time I tried to get in, however, it'd be my turn to say something, which broke my concentration.

«*See if you can get him talking to Stef,*» Josefeen sent.

“Commander, you’ve been rather quiet,” I said. “What do you think about all this?”

Nizlich looked stunned for a moment, and I suddenly realized she was preoccupied with matters related to running the ship and had barely been listening.

“Have you ever been on a merchant ship?” I asked, throwing her a lifeline.

“I’ve been on many, but I’ve never served on one.”

“Go on.”

As she described various details of what she’d observed, I nodded along as if I were listening and followed Josefeen into the Canon’s mind. Both of us now stared at him intently, although he failed to notice, as he was focused on Commander Nizlich, who was sitting directly across the table from him, and although she noticed us, she was the one talking, and so she, at least initially, paid us little mind.

The Canon’s mind, however, I could now see was a spider’s web of aged threads on the verge of collapsing into dust.

«*You could probably do a lot of damage in here, if you wanted to,*» Josefeen sent. «*Memory-editing is something that, as an obviously powerful manipulator, you can probably learn to do. Although, not all manipulators have this ability. Some can only influence people emotionally, causing them to, for example, shut down when they’re being verbally assaulted. It’s a great way to win an argument. Cheating, for sure, but very effective, although the degree of humiliation is such that the victim will usually harbor a very deep grudge, so that’s something to watch out for. In any case, if you want to learn how to do all this stuff and discover the scope of your talents, you need to go find Khouzkhoug Kanrrae or some other psionic master. Thinking of*

which, I may know another, but... you might not want to get trained by him.»

«*Why not?*»

«*It’s Olav.*»

Olav? Olav was dead. *Wait.* «*You mean the alpha version?*»

«*We have a Model X in the Intel Pod.*» That’s the model of computer Zeenye was using to run the Olav simulation.⁸ Presumably, somewhere there was a backup of the original version.

«*I told the alpha version there was no way it was going to make its way onto a Navy ship, and that means double for you. What even makes you think...*»

I paused, horrified at the implications. Had I been going about this all wrong? Was the Admiral a catspaw for Navy Intel? Were they responsible for the tech being made available to Zeenye? And the records of *all* of Olav’s history?

Of course, being psychically linked to a possible conspirator in this scheme was terribly bad for internal security. I could feel my tenuous trust in Josefeen slipping away like sand under a wave. Damn but this psi enhancer was elevating my paranoia.

I gathered what little will I had in holding the connection and asked in as polite a telepathic voice as I could muster, «*Is that what you want?*»

«*I want to get you trained, and the Model X is compartmentalized, so that’s not an issue, but I don’t know about this alpha version of Olav and if it’s really up to the task. All I know is if we’re really leaving in three days, we don’t have a lot of choices.*»

The upshot was that I needed to be trained by a master manipulator. In the meantime, of course, I could do some experimentation in the Canon’s mind. But given its state of decay, it would be inherently risky, at least for him. Looking wasn’t a problem, but trying to modify a memory was another matter entirely. I might accidentally sever its connection to his consciousness and leave a dangling thread. Insofar as Josefeen understood it, that could cause all sorts of mental problems, possibly even leading to dementia, delusions, or even derangement.

Of course, given his age and professional habits, a mental collapse would hardly be unexpected, but what gave me the right?

«*Go ahead,*» Josefeen sent.

That was the reason psionics has been suppressed. The Imperial government realized it needed to get psionics under control or it would inevitably take over Imperial society, turning the Imperium into another version of the Zhodani Consulate.

Josefeen, being a psion...

8 This was mentioned in Chapters 8 and 12.

«*Stop reading me and read him!*» “I agree,” she added to Nizlich, “but tell us more about that.”

Back in her early training, when Josefeen had first learned about telepathy, she’d also learned about the excesses of the Zhodani and how basing a whole society’s leadership on psionic potential relegated every other form of leadership potential essentially useless. That, she was convinced, was detrimental for a whole host of reasons, economic, political and otherwise, and would inevitably lead to a form of tyranny much heavier than that alleged by even the Imperium’s worst critics.

«*We can go over the Psi-Wars later, but right now you need to focus on what’s in front of you.*»

Did I need to say something?

«*No. In the old fart’s brain.*»

I looked at the spider’s web and touched one of the threads. It was a sermon he’d given years ago, decades perhaps. In his church, the sermons were often more like lectures, and the congregation was invited to ask questions, to essentially interrupt whenever the priest said something confusing. Due to this way of conducting sermons, they were often constructed with the parishioners in mind, even with specific parishioners, for example those who had fallen into sin.

One such case was of a man who’d committed adultery and would likely do so again. It was complicated, in his mind, by the fact that his wife had refused him sex for many years, so he was going to a particular establishment to satisfy his cravings, and since he was the one who paid the bills in their relationship, it was unlikely she’d ever find out.

“If you don’t think you’re doing anything wrong,” Reggie had asked him, “why bring it up in a confessional?”

“Am I doing something wrong?”

“What do you think?”

“I’m keeping it secret from her,” he said.

“Why.”

“Because it *feels* shameful.”

“Rejoice in that feeling. That’s your conscience, your link to the soul of the universe, and the only thing that can ultimately give you the wisdom to save yourself.”

“Save myself from what?”

“From yourself,” Reggie said.

The man, of course, was mystified.

“Just tell me, what should I do?”

“You have two choices. You can tell her and continue, or you can tell her and stop.”

“I’m not going to tell her.”

“Then you won’t do as you should.”

“But I can stop. I can just stop and never mention it.”

“If you don’t have the will to reveal the truth, you probably don’t have the will to stop, and, in any case, the betrayal is not the sex so much as the deceit.”

Of course, standing in front of the congregation, Reggie couldn’t say any of this. Confessions were a private matter. If people did not come to their senses privately, within their own hearts, then no amount of teaching could save them. Ultimately, every person had to save themselves. All the universe could do was prod.

“What is pleasure?” Reggie asked the congregation. “From where does it derive?”

Various people put forward their own propositions, calling them out for all to hear, but the man remained silent, sensing this would be about him. In truth, it would only partially be about him, for he was not the only one who was cheating on their spouse, nor was infidelity the only issue Reggie wanted to address.

The upshot was that pleasure and pain were mere feelings, and more to the point, they were fundamentally subjective. They could be felt but not understood. But right and wrong could be understood, although not with absolute certainty. But they could be sensed internally.

Shame existed for a reason, and when informed by universal morality, it contained a degree of objectivity, perhaps not as much as we would like, but enough to sense when something was wrong. It was therefore of greater value than purely subjective feelings and could even be used for self-training and the ultimate mastery, mastery over pride. But not everyone felt shame, at least not to the same degree, and even for those who did, pleasure beckoned.

“When you trade one for the other,” he said at the end, “pleasure for innocence, it’s like trading away a piece of your soul, a strand of your connection to the universe. Now you have to keep a secret from yourself, a regret you don’t want to think about anymore. Over time, it may become like a shard of glass in your mind. Look upon it and see the path to self-hatred, but if that is the price of wisdom, so be it. You will be blessed to receive it. You will be blessed to bleed.”

You’re reading my mind, aren’t you? Regimath thought to himself, as Nizlich went on about the chief differences between merchant and Navy craft. Rather than allow his eyes to glaze over while he was looking at her, he’d stifled a yawn and glanced to the side, finding my gaze fixed upon him, upon his eyes to be more specific. *Have you found what it is you’re looking for?*

Jim's Comments on A&E #592:

Patrick Riley re DunDraCon: In my opinion, the only good thing about **convention games** is that you might learn something, such as getting a feel for an unfamiliar RPG or getting some insights into the art of GMing by experiencing (from the player perspective) either good or bad GMing. However, the WRS game you ran sounded both unique and quite interesting. I like your take on the urban fantasy / horror genre. // Re not wanting to NPC PCs of players who can't show up, I'm wondering if maybe each player should designate another player to play their character. Granted, the might be a bit miffed to find out their character died while being used as cannon fodder.

Spike Jones: Weirdly, Lee appears to have republished your previous zine this month (at least in the PDF version of A&E; Mermelicon #461 appears a few zines after Mermelicon #462), and so it gave me a second chance to consider replying to your comment about roleplayers who don't like board gaming, and despite my comment to **Patrick Zoch** last issue, I have to admit there is a class of board game by which I find myself somewhat intrigued, and that's the sort of game where something is created, such as a dungeon complete with a history of its construction and successive waves of inhabitation or a regional map complete with a history of its conflicts and traumas.⁹ I haven't actually played such games, nor do I even know if they truly qualify as being board games, but I seem to remember people talking about them in A&E, and they sounded like something I should try.

Pum RYCTM: My feeling on **game vs. story** is that the game is in service of the story, not the other

way around. Having said that, the game is still an essential part of the process, and I think enhancing player involvement is key both in terms making the game more fun and in terms of facilitating the creation of an interesting story. I've written a lot about this. One essay that pops to mind is the one in A&E #365. Thanks for your comment.

Gabriel Roark RYCTM: I personally find minute-long rounds to be somewhat unrealistic, so I redefined combat rounds in my AD&D campaign to be six seconds long.

John Redden: IBIS was previously mentioned in Chapter 13 (A&E #561) and is ultimately traceable to *The Dragon* #35, page 7.

Jerry Stratton: Ah, yes. Fusion has been imminent ever since I'd heard about it, probably due to Traveller.

Michael Cule: I was amused by the description of the general's spymaster and how her

romantic hints have supposedly gone unnoticed. Also, I have doubts that pirates can be pre-bribed, at least not with any certainty that they'll make good on their promises. It's sort of like dealing with insurance companies or timeshares. They'll happily take your money, but....

Craig Kamber: I like the idea of serving an injunction against the party for unlawful plundering. Likewise, having the dungeon's insurance company bribe them to go away until the current policy expires sounds fun. Maybe they could also sell the party some resurrection/reincarnation insurance? Or maybe a level drain policy? Make sure the read the fine print!

Patrick Zoch: Liked your essay on NPCs. I've heard good things about DCC and its extensive use of random tables, and using one to establish a familiar's personality sounds like a good example of this. Also, using players to play NPCs in Red Markets seems like an inspired choice on the part of the game's designers.



9 http://www.clanwebsite.org/games/rpg/Dawn_of_Worlds_game_1_0Final.pdf

Timothy's Comments on A&E #592:

Lisa Padol – This Isn't the Zine...

RYCTM on the reMarkable 2... noted. I believe my friend has been using it but is now giving a Kindle Scribe a serious go for comparison. So it will be interesting to see what conclusions he comes to. I'll keep you posted. (Though I'd have imagined that it must surely be cheaper to find a second hand one there in the US rather than ship one over the Atlantic!)

Laughed at YCT Craig K about minimaxers and handguns. Exactly my attitude! (I once had to play the gunbunny of a Traveller group and steadfastly refused to care about specifics of weapons etc – see next comment).

Patrick Riley – Sinister Things

I was amused by your 'find your own fun' at DunDraCon and sorry you had a lousy Traveller ref. Though I mined what I could from your report to try and learn how I can be better at such things. (I'd like to think I wouldn't have done what your GM did.) I must confess to a tiny bit of the kind of subversion you describe myself in trying to find 'non-standard' fun when I'm dealt a character or situation I'm not overly struck on. (Such as my gunbunny that decided he needed to be more fashionable and made several trips to malls or shops with another crew member advising him on what he might wear. She was happy to spend his money.)

RYCT to Mark N about the fatal flaw in your 'solution': oh dear! But I know that feeling. I've even had it running Traveller when I think I've been clever and just such a fatal flaw comes to me just after it's too late. Or worse, a player points it out... <sigh>

Dylan Capel – The Silent Temple

Very interested to read about your solo Traveller and hope that we hear more. Just out of interest, are you using any particular ruleset or book? Your balkanized world sounds like a great place for adventure and I definitely want to know more.

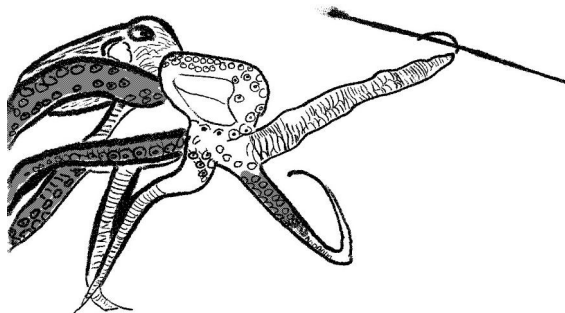
Spike Jones – Mermecolion at a Picnic

RYCT to Michael C: I'm not sure where God not being "sure about Job's faith" is coming from? I don't read it in the versions I'm looking at. (I think Michael C says much the same in his zine.)

Jim Vassilakos – Plankwell Campaign

RYC about there needing to be parents protecting and nurturing and teaching over an extended duration (which then leads to sense of love and duty). This

gave me pause for thought. What about a culture springing from the kind of creatures on Earth which essentially have/lay millions of young/eggs which have to fend for themselves (and don't always survive in great numbers). I think I can imagine a sophont culture based on that where the society 'raises' (but maybe not as directly as familial groups) the next generation where such things are passed on but not by parents. Indeed, the eroctopi I invented for the adventure *Spindrift* are much along those lines. <https://mail.freelancetraveller.com/features/advents/spindrift.html>



Joshua Kronengold – Random Access

RYCT to Spike J: Jib and Jive are of course pronounced entirely differently. ;-) But your imagined 'pin' and 'pen' dialect is alive and well in New Zealand where they're pretty indistinguishable.

RYCT on me about Catherynne Valente – many thanks for that – interesting! It sounds like you've met which must have been also interesting.

Brian Misiaszek – Age of Menace

I'm awestruck by your recreation of the Colón Cemetery. That is some piece of work, thanks for sharing. (And congrats on Lauren's Showcase Dance – more creativity I can never aspire to but admire from afar.)

John Redden – Reddened Stars

IBIS – Interstellar Bureau of Internal Security - https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Bureau_of_Internal_Security

Glad you're enjoying Josefeen – an NPC that seems to stand out from many I create.

Download the consolidated Plankwell write-up:
<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

Past A&E zines available at: <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>

The Silent Temple

Issue 42, by Dylan Capel, London (UK), silent.temple@tutanota.com, CC BY-NC-SA

The Situation

It is tempting to ignore the current firestorm in global politics but reading Brian Misiaszek's comments on the disgusting treatment of Canada and then seeing the betrayal of Ukraine and the tearing up of the Budapest agreement make it hard to pretend that nothing is happening. I'll confess to doom-scrolling and find it harder to focus energy on more productive uses of my time such as writing up the zine or gaming.

It is clear that the UK and Europe are going to have to find a future independent of the US and that part of that sovereignty is going to have to be independent nuclear weapons. This feels like a crazier version of the Cold War where you need to worry about both the superpowers and Russia as well. I don't think nuclear proliferation helps any nation's safety.

I won't say much more but the world is now much more dangerous for everyone. I struggle to believe how we've squandered the opportunity to step away from the 20th Century but here we are.

Watching

We went to see *Mickey 17* at the cinema, I could see why its reception has been mixed but it has some great performances and really if it trusted its audience and the performers a bit more it would be a punchier film. I felt there was a producer's note demanding that things be made clear in every scene.

I also caught the *Hundreds of Beavers* tour and I really don't understand why this hasn't picked up a distribution deal. It is a surreal black and white film packed with references to classic cinema and early animation but it feels like the kind of goofy fun that mainstream cinema lacks.

I also saw *The People's Joker* which as something that is closer to the arthouse is perhaps more understandable as not having a distribution deal. On the other hand it is one of the best things I've seen in the cinema for a long time. It's many, many things but it is mainly a trans coming of age story framed around Saturday Night Live

and all transposed to the *Batman* universe. It is both crazy and moving.

At the other end of the scale I also saw *Black Bag* which is a cracking spy genre film and well worth watching (although it will probably work just as well on the small screen as the big).

Reading

I have really been enjoying the collected edition of *The Wrenchies* comic, it is a bit hard to describe as its a kind of surreal, child-focused horror. I've also been re-reading *Kill Six Billion Demons* for some planar inspiration. My local library seems to have a larger edition than my original copy and the detail in some of the landscapes seems much better.

I've been re-reading the *Electrum Archive* zines but I'm not sure how to pitch a game yet.

Comments on #592

Plankwell Collective

I was just wondering what had happened to Kaz, this little sub-plot is an interesting insight into the pros and cons of dallying with interstellar sailors...

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Your miniature Cuban cemetery was a bit mind-blowing, I loved all the pictures of the real thing and the recreation.

Jim Vassilakos

Thanks for the feedback on the *Doomed Pilgrim* piece, I usually just stop and ask a question whenever I'm stuck for inspiration. I hadn't particularly thought about the pilgrim's relationship with the legion, I just wanted to come back to the idea of this war wracked world and that everyone must have some relationship to that.

Lisa Padol

Wikipedia says there are 19 English volumes of *Chainsaw Man* so far. The first story arc (which was the one I enjoyed) has 11 volumes.

The Silent Temple

Lee Gold

I think your comment to me was meant for
Craig Kamber but I too have sympathy for
Craig's wife.

This Isn't the Zine You're Looking For #402

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CONVENTION PLANS: We hope to do Summer Larpin', DexLite, Metatopia, and the Seattle WorldCon. All of this is, of course, subject to the usual caveats. We plan to do Intercon X next year, but I want a year off writing larps. Josh has pointed out that this is not the same as a year off running larps and has floated the idea of rerunning our Ghost Fu larp.

NATTER

Posted in the various larp spaces after Intercon W, with extra commentary:

Roll Call: I was

* At the hotel on Wednesday

We rode up, arriving fairly late, and grabbing food in an odd, friendly, if not particularly spectacular place en route. To our delight, we were given a room on the first floor. I don't believe we requested this. We noted a decorated room door at the beginning of the hallway and correctly guessed that it was the room of the woman who'd chaired Intercon U, the amazing Alison Joy Schafer.

* Panels, tasting, and powerpoint presentations on Thursday

Also meeting a fellow gamer in person for the first time.

Breakthru GM Friday morning, also playing Fac Parum, GRIMTRUC, and the Water God as NPCs (room too small -- at least two players needed to leave to do self care after the noise got to them)

We think the players who didn't leave early enjoyed the game, and such feedback as we got had only one big criticism: the size of the room. Alas, we didn't have a sense of the size vs the number of players (35) before the day of the larp and the convention committee found that there were a lot of larps, which they liked because there were a lot of attendees, but this meant space was at a premium. Next year, I gather, we'll have the largest ballroom, and that can be subdivided into several large spaces.

We had a lot of returning players, and some lovely praise. Our Red String Brigade brought their own red string and created a conspiracy board that was fairly accurate. A sentient AI and its creator had become friends, working to find a way forward to learn what it was to be human.

* Grannie Maim in Addams Family Thursday Afternoon (same room as above)

No canonical Addamses were in the game. Gaylord, who drove us up, was playing one of Maim's sons, Rotti, who was also the father of the bride, and he spent some of the ride up to the convention talking about how he could play the man as not merely a good father, but a good *Addams* father.

The game was played in 4 episodes, with a break after each one. First, the couple informed their respective relatives about their engagement. Next, the Carmichaels hosted a dinner for both families at an Italian restaurant. Then, the Addams welcomed the Carmichaels into their home. Finally, the wedding and its aftermath happened.

My favorite bit::

Curacao, my character's other son, explains that he's going to be living his best bisexual life and running the cemetery and side assassination business (as his lovers/partners explain that the assassination business is very much on the QT).

Me: Does this mean you want the undertaker's house? (Finding someone to live there was one of my game goals.)

Curacao: Mummy? You're *giving me the undertaker's house*?!

Me: Now, it is a bit of a dump, so you'll have to renova--
Curacao: It's a *dump*?! (spreads arms wide for a hug)

MUMMY!

I also enjoyed being lieutenant to Desdemona as warlord (she was the matriarch, even though she looked a lot younger than I was), forming a polycule with Barbara and Eunice (both Carmichaels) and planning to go traveling through Europe with them, deciding I liked Simon (the groom, who shared an interest in mushrooms with Maim) and his father (because the man *got* why Rotti, the bride's father, was pointing a sword at Simon, saying that if he'd had a daughter, he'd be pointing a shotgun at any man who came courting while they had The Talk, and that a sword was very, very bold, and he approved), the utter deadpan perfect delivery of my fellow Addamses

(Me: My dear dead husband had a fatal accident involving a trumpet, a mountain goat, and an avalanche. Fellow Addams: Ah, that reminds me of Cousin Ophelia. (leans a casual arm on my shoulder) She went scuba diving and had an accident involving sharks. It was tragic. And bloody. We were all quite envious.), the brain surgery bit ("Just squeeze open her head..."),

Rotti as best father (player worked hard pre-game to figure out how to be not just a good father but a good *ADDAMS* father), and Rotti's great offense at being called a *doctor* when he was a *hobbyist* and not a mere professional!

Additionally, each family was told to come up with the announcement they *thought* one side of the happy couple was about to make. We quickly decided that young Vendetta was about to announce her very first murder committed outside the house! Desdemona was quite confused when Vendetta spoke of a man she was planning to marry.

Desdemona: Vendetta, dear, you're using the wrong word. You mean "murder".

Vendetta was quite clear that she did not, and we thought perhaps she and this Simon fellow had committed murder together! No? But how could they know if it were true love if they hadn't? Wait, they'd robbed a bank together? Well, that was... something... but apparently, Simon didn't know? But he drove the getaway car? Fast? Apparently so, as they were fleeing police. (I still have no idea exactly what happened.)

* Asleep Friday evening

It's possible I could have gotten into a larp, but I was wiped.

In 3 back-to-back heavy emotion and negotiation games Saturday with only one hour breaks between for full costume change AND meal (am fine with longer games, even 5-8 hour games, but not so much with a one hour dinner break)

* Willow in Pondflower Inn Saturday Morning

This is a game inspired by the anime *Delicious in Dungeon* and the game *In Stars and Time*. Everyone's at a lovely, safe, pastoral inn. Everyone is safe. Sure, there's no door in the tavern, but that's fine. Everything's fine.

If you think that perhaps everything is not fine, you would be correct, but to say more would be telling. We all knew the kind of game we were getting into, and the GM emphasized that this was not a game about solving puzzles. A door would open near the end of the game, and the characters had a short time to decide whether or not to take it and leave the inn.

Oh yes, they would also remember things during the game. If they chose to remember, that is. Perhaps they might not want

to. And yes, they could always decide to forget them afterwards. Should there be anyone who perhaps had not forgotten anything that they might remember during the game, they would get a sheet of paper with Lorem Ipsum on it, just to allow them to make it look like they were just like everyone else.

I knew what to expect, and I was not disappointed. I also got cast near two amazing larpers, and the rest of the group was amazing as well. This was a game about feelings, and we leaned into the feelings. This included my staring hot daggers at one player who returned the favor, some intense conversations, and a surprise in-character hug from another player. We all did some OOC hugging afterwards. I should see if that's a game the authors are willing to distribute for love or money.

* Phineas Mei in Owlsborough Saturday Afternoon

This one is not so easily spoilable, since, as with Breakthru, the characters are at least partly bespoke. The premise is that there is a monarch who intends to unlock the gate to faerie at the end of the ball, various human noble houses whose members have Opinions about that, and a few fae who also have Opinions, one of whom is rumored to be planning to bestow a wish upon one lucky mortal.

There is one fae who is the trickster unseelie Magpie King, and I flat out asked for that role. I gave a few other options as well, and the GMs handed me the Magpie King, posing as Phineas Mei. Throughout the game, folks visited the shrine to the Magpie King if they wanted something from him, writing down what they wanted and what they offered in return.

Josh got cast off the waitlist, and the GM, who had never gamed with him before, said that, while the character was a woman (created according to the desires of a woman who, I gather, couldn't make the convention or something), they could change that. Josh told them not to change a thing, as this was a woman in the military in a society where that was not the Done Thing, and that the character's gender was a core part of the game. The GM was relieved and delighted. Gaylord let Josh borrow a large black foam sword, which made it easy to remember that his character was carrying a cold-forged iron sword, and I handed over some bits of costuming I'd bought on a just-in-case basis. He also got to have an in-character sword duel, which his character handily won.

It is rare that, after a larp ends, I think I should have been a shade or two less subtle, but that is what I thought after this larp. As the hour of opening the gate approached, I realized that no one had seen through my disguise, and that therefore, if I were to be unmasked -- and I should be, as IMO, secrets like that should come out -- I would have to do it myself. Fortunately, I had a good opening.

The confrontation I started was one of the highlights of my game. Other highlights included various dealings with mortals, even though most didn't know I was the Magpie King. There were a couple of times I took IC boggle damage as other people, including the person I was most furious at, were doing my work for me, if unintentionally.

At one point, I let someone who owed the Magpie King know I was his messenger, and I conveyed his instructions to learn some things. Later:

Her: So, I found out this stuff as best I could.

Me: I actually found out more about it. But no worries. You've done well, and the Magpie King says you no longer owe him any service.

Her: ... you're sure I don't owe any service?

Me (firmly, because, hey, I get humans are scared of me, and they're not wrong, but she's done good): Yes.

Her: ... Do I have to be done with my service?

Me: ... Are you saying you want to keep serving? Are you sure this is what you want? Do you understand what you are asking?

Her: Look at all these horrible people around us! (insert rant about horrid nobility here, as the player had come to the conclusion that the character was going to go full anarchist)

Magpie King so proud! So touched!

I had purchased a fair bit of magpie jewelry, nothing expensive. This included several tiny crowns that I threaded into a mass of cord to pull out during my reveal, representing the crowns of monarchs I'd broken. It also included 20 small magpie charms that I distributed to folks in game, and later after the game if they wanted, as I'd brought enough for all who did.

But for this person? I pulled out a somewhat fancier charm I'd been wearing on a cord, under my shirt, and gave it to them, formally accepting them into my service, and hopefully making it clear that I was the Magpie King. They returned it after the larp, but accepted one of the less fancy charms to keep.

Later, the GM approached me to say that another character had made a request: That the Magpie King give the noble he'd just accepted into his service enough gold that the noble would never want for money in their life, and in return, the petitioner would publicly confront a different noble over some offense of other, and if that noble continued to lie about what they'd done, the petitioner would kill them.

Me: ...

Magpie King's Thought Balloon: I like that noble and have taken her into my service but ... I have a huge debt to collect from this other noble and I think I like his values... but maybe he has done something despicable... hm... I have to know, and also mischief, and I do like the noble I've taken into my service....

Me to the GM: Oh, what the heck, tell her yes.

GM: You'll do it?

Me: Yes! Humans are WEIRD!

The promised confrontation happened. Murder did not, and the noble basically admitted to whatever they were accused of by the petitioner and said they'd done what they could to make up for it. This left the petitioner unimpressed, and they asked at least twice "What good is that to me?"

After the reveal, the monarch named various ambassadors from the human realm to the four seasonal courts of the fae, and there was an argument when they named the ambassador to the Spring court, as apparently someone else had been promised the position, and neither would back down. (Okay, in one case, that person might have, but their mother would not allow it.)

Me: I'll just point out here that I can appoint an ambassador as well.

One of the potential ambassadors: I will be happy to be the ambassador *to the Spring Court!*

Someone else (I think the person who petitioned for gold in exchange for a dramatic confrontation): I'll be your ambassador!

Me: ... (It was great egoboo that someone who was outside the whole conflict WANTED to be MY AMBASSADOR! Very happy Magpie King.)

Magpie King's Thought Balloon: Humans. I don't understand them, but I love them.

The monarch appointed one of the original petitioners, the one who'd spoken, to the position of ambassador and repeated what others had said, that they could certainly have staff, and perhaps they'd consider taking the other contender. Both contenders agreed to this, and with that out of the way, I appointed the person who'd volunteered to be *my* ambassador to the position.

After the game, the person playing the monarch apologized, as they'd genuinely forgotten whom they had promised what

to. The rest of the players involved assured them that it was fine and that the resulting drama was great. The rest of us agreed.

The person whose character had been appointed to the Spring Court apologized to me, explaining that they'd somehow missed (despite my reveal) that I was the Magpie King, and if they'd realized that, they would absolutely have taken me up on the offer. I assured them that it was fine, as I had a volunteer, and I was happy to have been able to give the volunteer the position.

* **Lady Liberty in Modern Gods Saturday Evening**

And after all that, I had an hour to do a full costume change and eat dinner.

GM 1: Not a problem -- you know you start the game unconscious. You'll wake up whenever you get there.

GM 2: How cute. You think we'll actually start on time?

GM 2 was correct. I arrived to a very, very crowded room with time to spare. The game was fun, but would have been better in a bigger room. Out of context out of character quote: At least Hell was a little quieter. (Hell was the underworld, which I think was shared by all the active pantheons.)

There's not a lot I can say that isn't a spoiler. The various gods who lived in New York City had been having some disagreements, and, among other things, there was going to a divine mayoral election, which included candidates such as Dracula and Hercules. Hercules's motto was "A vote for Hercules is a vote for Hercules!" and the person who played him was perfect for the role. I bought a lot of NYC charms for this game, finding it a perfect excuse to do so.

* **Drinking, dancing, and chatting after that**

I'd met up with Josh who had just helped Gaylord run one of the two larps the three of us had worked on, Three to One. He was talking with 6 of the 8 players 20 minutes after the game had ended, which meant folks enjoyed it a great deal.

* **Orson Lynch-Waters, film witch, also spinning, in Craft Circle on Sunday Morning**

I'd brought a drop spindle, stuff to spin, and some crochet hooks. We were cast by choosing one of the many witches who had one sentence descriptions. We'd been given access to the full list weeks earlier. The larp was set in the present day. The idea was that there had been a wild sabbat the night before, and now all the covens were chilling, doing crafts, and trying to come up with an idea for a project that would offend the fewest people. It was a nice, low key, silly larp.

We formed into covens based on where we wound up sitting, and chatted in character. In addition to covens, we all had a rival / confidante / both-in-one-person. I was a bit slow to find someone, and a friend walked in a bit late, so we paired up. They decided to play the witch who did string magic and saw conspiracies and interconnections everywhere, and after some discussion, we agreed that we were friends, not rivals. Orson, you see, was the film witch, and firmly believed that anyone who didn't think movies were magic hadn't seen the right movies, and the GMs agreed that films and conspiracies went hand in hand.

One of the "witches" was Jerry, although the GMs created several different types, including Dzheri-with-a-D, which was the one picked by the person who'd played Desdemona in the Addams family larp. Dzheri wasn't actually a witch, but had wandered into the wrong meeting months, perhaps years, ago. It had been too awkward to explain, and, well, the company was good and the cleaning tips better, and now it would *really* be awkward to explain.

I'm not sure if this particular Dzheri had been part of the witch community for that long, as the character was played as if just learning. When I explained that "warlock" meant "horse

thief" (I had been told this once, and I genuinely didn't recall if it were true, but hey, Orson believed it), they were mortified and profusely apologetic. I've no idea if they'd even used the term; I was just in Explain Stuff mode.

The player needed to leave early, and I think wisely left a lot of time for goodbyes. Certainly, they didn't argue when they were told they had to perform the Proper and Polite Goodbye Rituals for every coven in the room.

My coven was SLAPA-BOCA-FI. Folks weren't sure how to name it, so I suggested combining a syllable from each of our specialties. The FI was for film, BO for books, CA for cats, and I think PA for pastries. I'm not sure what SLA stood for, but the remaining witch did letter writing.

Our idea for Project Least Likely to Offend Anyone was book jackets. Jackets like dinner jackets, and the style would follow the genre of the book. Like spacesuits for sf or Regency coats for Regency romances. Or bodices for bodice rippers. When we made our presentation, a witch from another coven asked if we were giving the books arms. If not, surely they were more like book vests?

We agreed that they had a point and renamed our creation Book Djackets-with-a-D in honor of the now-departed Dzheri (whose player was thrilled when I told them about this). And unlike the first couple of ideas, only two people raised their hands when the GMs / elder witches asked if anyone found the idea offensive.

We weren't sure what their objection was, given we'd modified the idea in response to the constructive criticism we'd received. But it was a good showing, and we quietly realized that we could guarantee we won as long as we all raised our hands to signal offense at all the remaining ideas.

I didn't think that was in good faith, so I didn't, but we still won, to my mild surprise. Specifically, I think the picnic idea was great -- and no one in my coven could bring ourselves to vote against it. Heck, they'd consulted our very own pastry witch about menus! I have no idea why that one didn't win.

One of the GMs noted that "half the projects" resembled Shark Tank pitches, and someone noted that only one (not ours) technically counted as Crafts.

GM as Nan Goggins: What the heck's a Power-point? Some kinda crystal bullshit?

Yeah, Nan Goggins was a bit behind the times.

Nan Goggins: Gonna ask again, what the heck's a Bobross?

* **Ice cream social**, chatting, napping, and initial core of more chatting in suite Sunday evening

* **On the road Monday morning:** With an extra passenger for the first hour, as we were giving a lift to someone who hadn't been able to get other transportation.

* **Home Monday afternoon**

* **Exhausted Monday evening**

COMMENTS ON #592

LEE GOLD: re Iceland game: I've been very much enjoying this. I like the process of inventing law via case precedent, even though I know that the decisions we made will lead to complications. re Spike re *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*: The movie is fine, but I prefer the stage play version. re me re keeping cash in the house: What you do makes sense to me. I am trying to wrap my head around what it might mean for a billionaire to keep large-to-me piles of cash in their home.

re Heath Row re Robin Hood: While not all versions include this, the "standard" version goes like this: He is wounded and goes to a nearby convent for help. The abbess, for whatever Reason, decides to kill him instead, and she does this by pretending to bleed him per the pre-modern medical treatment. Possibly she binds him as well; I forget. He manages to get free if so, and in any case, gets to a window and manages to fire his

final arrow, either as a warning or to signal to his band where he is. In some versions, the Abbess is his cousin. I think it may be Marion in one. In the odd play we read aloud with friends, the Abbess had been replaced by the Evil Queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, who murdered him out of! among other reasons, thwarted lust!

MICHAEL CULE: I'm glad the boiler replacement happened. Has your hardback of *The Oxford History of England* turned up? re Orphans of the Broken Sky: I am not sure how I could run such an arc the would result in at least one PC not wanting a promotion to divinity. Sure, that could happen depending on players, but that wouldn't be because I was putting my metaphorical thumb on the scale. I am intrigued by GURPS Monster Hunter, but I understand the NDA keeps you from elaborating.

re The Mountain Is High: The Emperor Is Far Away: Intriguing setting. I'm not sure if, as a player, I'd know that snatching the documents out of the fire is an option. Did anyone do that?

Also, I'm a bit confused. This is something you ran as a one shot? How many times? Is it also something you are running as a campaign, or is it something you're pondering running as a campaign? "1w" = 1 mastery, correct?

re sexual elements in the Spy and Old Sage: FWIW, they did not offend me. The Old Sage pays for companionship. Okay. So long as he's treating the companions decently, I don't see a problem. And his companions could be spies or otherwise working for the group's enemies and frenemies. As for the Spy, it's actually an interesting contrast because the General is something of a foil to the Old Sage.

That said, as you note, a one-shot isn't the same as a campaign, especially when the former is a convention game and the latter is a home campaign. Certainly, unless the Old Sage's companions or the Spy's frustrated affections / desires / ambitions are relevant to the plot, you can cut them without losing anything.

The assassin and the spy do have a lot of overlap. I'm glad the assassin's player got to do something cool. But unless you can differentiate them more, I'd go with having the group contain either the spy or the assassin, not both.

re Lee re the problem with level drain being that it takes an abstract game mechanic and makes it a concrete thing: Phoenix Dawn Command handles this (when it comes up at all) in an interesting (to me) way.

Phoenix Dawn Command is a roleplaying game that uses small decks of custom cards, one per PC (as well as a larger one for the GM to draw specific cards out for various combats). To "level up", a PC dies and comes back more powerful, having learned a lesson in a liminal space. Each lesson is represented by a card explaining the mechanical effect. When the group fought a particular foe, one of their attacks was to drain knowledge from the PCs, represented by handing the GM one of the lesson cards. We could then no longer access it. This was not permanent. I think, in theory, it could have been, but I'm not sure. In practice, the group came to an accommodation with this person, and eventually, everyone got their memories / lessons / lesson cards back.

This felt less abstract than losing a "level", though I'm not entirely sure why. Perhaps it's because "level" is more abstract than "the lesson that lets you do this particular combat tactic with this particular effect / bonus". Perhaps it's because of who the person draining memories was and why they could do that.

re Shaw: I suspect I prefer the "rogue and peasant slave" monologue because of my own cultural biases, so take this with a grain of salt: That monologue fits what's actually happening in the play, while "To be or not to be" feels like a set piece that could just as easily be plunked down in another play.

re me: I forgot to update the CONVENTION PLANS text. Intercon W was this year, 27 February - 2 March. I trust this

makes my franticness more comprehensible. re Human Torch: Ah -- Johnny Storm, says Wikipedia, was a reworking of the original concept for the character (which was, indeed, an android). Thanks for the explanation about the two princesses in the campaign.

re SotS: So far, I've found both combat and magic straightforward, although I've not played or gm'd a lot of the game. But I've been running a lot of Gumshoe games, and this is one of the easier ones, especially in comparison to all the bells and whistles of NBA. Setting-wise, yes, NBA benefits from the real world setting. I like the SotS setting, but I can totally see why it looks "soupy" to you.

PEDRO PANTHOCA DA SILVA AND MAIRA ZUCO-

LOTTO: re legacy gamebook: Interesting. re replacement characters: The lecturer is "magnate"? I'm not sure what you mean. When I look up the word I get "a wealthy and influential person". Is that correct? The genre does sound up my alley, and I'd probably buy an English translation of it, if one existed. It sounds a little like Call of the Sea, which I gather was a video game and will soon be a backerkit project, a new *Call of Cthulhu* campaign, subtitled The Everhart Expedition. re me: Ah! Thanks for the clarification. That makes sense.

ME: The reality of the Dreamation schedule matched the theoretical, and we received useful and positive feedback on Dangerous Refuge. Similarly, my Intercon schedule went as expected.

re Mark Nemeth re full-on Byronic heroes: The protagonists of Tamsyn Muir's Locked Tomb books come to mind, but that is an odd enough series that I'm not at all sure it's what Mark had in mind. Also, it's incomplete, so I've no idea whether or not it sticks the landing. Also, the protagonist of the first novel, while delightfully disastrous, is not Byronic. That's more true of the protagonist of the second, and when you get to the third... well... it kind of depends on who you're viewing as the protagonist. Ellen Kushner's Tremontaine stories definitely have Byronic characters, from *Swordpoint* on, but I don't think they'd be to Mark's taste. (MARK NEMETH, if you want to try it, start with *Swordpoint*, and if you bounce off it, no worries.)

re Patrick Riley: "I don't know if the author does" should have been "I don't know if the author thinks it does". re Patrick Zoch re the publisher sending a replacement piece for postage: Something similar happened with a cloak I own. I brought it to Summer Larpin', and loaned it, in character, to someone during the game. I got it back afterwards, and didn't realize until much later that it was missing the piece of fabric that gets buttoned on to close it. The hotel didn't find it, and I didn't worry, as we did get back far more important items.

A few weeks ago, I went to Dreamation, and, as I had hoped, the clothing vendor from whom I bought the cloak was there. She had some of the same fabric at home (and while I didn't care if it was an exact match, she did -- she would have settled for close enough if she'd had to, but she didn't) and made a new closure strip, sending it to me for the price of postage, which I rounded up to the nearest dollar for convenience.

SPIKE JONES: re John Redden: 20 years ago, iirc, I didn't think any kind of book would really work electronically. Then, Josh got a Nook. We've since gone through several tablets, and my gateway drug, as it were, was the Hugo Packet. It now often includes graphic novels, and, while I totally understand wanting to read these in hard copy, I've found that it is often surprisingly easy to read them on my tablet.

It does vary a great deal, of course. A black and white manga, even a detailed one, is easier to read on a tablet than a graphic novel of the format I'm most familiar with. Something like *Locke & Key* or *Saga* or *Monstress* or *DIE* or *Once and Future*? Better read in print -- but I first encountered these via

the Hugo Packet and read them on the tablet. This is how I learned I liked them enough to buy the hard copy.

Something like *Schlock Mercenary*? I very much enjoyed reading it on tablet, but I confess that this hasn't moved me to buy it. I think Josh owns some of the material that wasn't up for a Hugo, but I'm not sure. OTOH, unlike the comics I listed earlier, *Schlock Mercenary* is a web comic, so is probably designed to read well electronically.

re Doc Cross: I find Steve Kenson's assessment accurate. re me re job application forms: Sounds plausible. re player using OOC information: No, I did not consider changing it on the fly to stymie her. This would not have worked. I was using a published scenario, and this was the lead in to the climax of the campaign. Changing the location would have been a pain. Moreover, the issue wasn't the location per se. As I said, the group had already learned where the location was. What she had done was look up some of the facts about the location.

And there was no way in heck I would have changed those facts. The facts were Inconvenient for the PCs. It made their job harder. So saying, "Nope, I've now changed how reality works to make things easier" would have been either rewarding the player or punishing her by denying her a chance to meet the challenges of the location, neither of which I was interested in doing. It would also have messed with the other players, the ones who did not feel the need to instantly look the location up. And deciding to suddenly change the location would have been saying, "Okay, I've decided we're in kindergarden and you're a naught five-year-old." That's a good way to kill a campaign, and I didn't want to do that.

And, as I said, it wasn't a problem. I was literally just about to tell everyone what the player had learned. It did no damage to the game; it merely annoyed me.

re Phoenix Dawn Command Innocents: We would not have been more likely to want them dead. This is a group playing folks who want to save the world. Sure, they'll make nasty decisions, but currently, most of the time? The PCs don't want to kill ordinary humans who are being stupid. You'll also note that the PCs did kill some of the Innocents who kept trying to kill them; they just also allowed survivors to surrender when they clued in that maybe fighting alongside the undead army was not the right choice.

re Kathy Mar not recognizing Merav: I don't think Kathy's face blind. Most of Merav's face was covered by the costuming and makeup. She also moved differently, crouched down. re Sir Percy's height: When he's in disguise, he is sometimes said to be slouching. But I think the key is that the author wants to give the reader a fair chance to spot the person who's secretly the Scarlet Pimpernel. Continued sympathies on the work place situation.

PATRICK RILEY: re DunDraCon: Oof. I'm sorry. re characters working together for a long time: I'd expect the character sheets to have a section about the PC's thoughts about the other PCs and, if not a moment for the players to say who they're playing, then, yes, absolutely, a name placard for everyone!

The Fantasy AGE game took 8 hours? Oof. *Giggle* at your incompetent comms officer in the Traveller game. Whispers and Visions sounds deliciously eerie. I agree that it needed your disclaimer. re that Call of Cthulhu scenario: That sounds like it could have been a good scenario with some work, but I'm not sure that, once the work had been done, it would have still fit into a convention slot. But I'd need to see the GM's notes / scenario. Is the tricky bit the part where the PCs can't confront the Big Bad or that only one PC knew what to do and wasn't sharing? The Kublacon game idea sounds fun.

re Adventurers Guild re the challenges of handling absent players and making each session stand alone: I feel this. I don't know how other GMs do stand alone sessions, particularly of

the type I've seen Aviatrix do when running a Trail of Cthulhu campaign.

ATTRONARCH: re me re sessions written up in A&E being behind the actual campaign: This is generally the case when I do write ups as well.

DYLAN CAPEL: I have my copy of *The Far Roofs* as well. I read about half of *Glitch* a year or more ago, and it felt like translating it as I read. I do want to finish it, though. re *Pendragon*: I played in three one-shot games at various Origins. It was always fun. I don't know if I could do a campaign of it, and certainly, I'd wind up being the GM. In a way, the *Fearful Symmetries* campaign I'm running feels a bit like a surreal version of *Pendragon*, albeit one where everyone is a magician of some kind.

JOHN REDDEN: That is indeed a GM Easy Chair. I find I am enjoying running games where I don't prep a lot and do let the players help make up some of what's going on. Fr'ex, in *Fearful Symmetries* (1930s British mages mostly unaware that magic = Cthulhu Mythos), the session I just ran on 18 Jan 2025, we went, as a group, from

- * Realizing that, no, we hadn't statted out a magic spell folks wanted to try to

- * Having the Doctor try to figure out what was going on with the Artist's two personae with

- * A digression as we rabbit holed to figure out what 1934 alienists would have thought or known to

- * An attempted Intervention for the Artist, which failed, leaving the Artist offended, and causing much psychological pain to the group (i.e., I docked everyone 1 Stability point which is roughly 5 Sanity in CoC terms) to

- * Getting back to the spell question and having the group come up with something completely different from anything I'd vaguely anticipated and really liking their idea to

- * Deciding we now needed to figure out both how the group figured out what spell they needed and where they could find such a spell to

- * Deciding the how they figured it out = some divination spell or other, which I decided to treat as a Core Clue, aka as "you get this for free because it's basically Find the Plot" to

- * Deciding that the easiest place to get the spell from was the Dee version of the Necronomicon

- * Deciding that the person the Dilettante is Fake Dating (neither are particularly interested in marrying, but hey, it keeps the relatives happy to think there's a chance) has a relative or friend with a private library that has it to

- * Figuring out what historical family we could tack this onto and feel satisfied to

- * Figuring out where in England the manor with the library was to

- * Concluding that next time, there will be a Hunting Party! Totally a thing at this time, and women were allowed to do this sort of thing, so all the PCs can join in the antics!

I didn't see any of this coming. It was a fascinating blend of roleplay as a tight knit group started having (purely In Character) interpersonal problems and group world building on a small scale.

That said, I also like running commercially published scenarios and campaigns, and that requires a bit more prep from me. But either way, without players focusing and paying attention, there's no game.

re Lee: I enjoyed the various feasts, though I wish I'd been a bit quicker about figuring out how to push for my character's goals -- they were great networking opportunities. To be fair to myself, it was a largish group, and I think this was before we started using video, which meant that Lee couldn't respond to anything I didn't say.

I used a lot of "and we open with this week's ball" when I ran Kerberos Club Fate. This seemed to work, and I think I had several advantages.

- * It was all in person.

- * I had 4 players. (very occasionally 5, but almost always 4.)

- * I did different prep than Lee does. She presents the world and lets the players decide how to interact with it on a much larger scale than I do. I have people approach the PCs with "And this is your plot of the evening" sort of things. I was using a lot of repurposed commercially published scenarios.

- * Also, I was running Fate, and this was one of the last pre-Fate Core games. This meant that, due to misunderstanding how Compelling an Aspect was meant to work, when I had an NPC say, "Hey, PCs, here's a plot for you for tonight", I would hand everyone a Fate Point for having their PCs go along with this. (To be clear, what the NPC actually said was more on the order of "My brother is acting so very strangely, and I'm worried. Could you find out what is going on with him?") For the current Vikings game, the various cases at the Althing feel a bit like this, and I really like that.

- * The PCs were generally more powerful than the other people at the various balls, so in addition to Plot of the Week, they had ample opportunity to manipulate Society to advance their own plots, such as gradually wearing down Society's resistance to the idea of a wedding between a middle class PC and a member of the aristocracy. (It didn't hurt that, eventually, the Queen knighted the man.)

- * This also meant that the PCs and players could tell me what they wanted. Specifically, they could say "We'd like this person to host the ball this week" or "I really want to speak with Lady X and help her marry Lord Y. Also, I want to take Lord Z down a peg, for he's been very rude to my little sister."

re me: The name of The Awards is The Awards, which I understand is more than a little confusing. The web site is: <https://theawards.games/>. I gather they won't be doing 2025 awards, but plan to do this again in 2026. You now know as much as I do about this. I think I probably learned about this award via Discord or Twitter?

re Clark Timmins: Oh yes, I love that Blade Runner PCs can be replicants or humans. I played a replicant in the DexLite one-shot. re Arkady Martine: She is an excellent writer, though as you noted, it's a bit odd that so much sf has empires, nobles, et cetera.

JERRY STRATTON: re me: I used to resent it when rpg books had very large type and margins, but these days, my eyes are quite relieved.

PAUL HOLMAN: re wanting to play *Night's Black Agents*, but not with "completely vanilla Gumshoe rule systems": What is it you want the rule system to do for you? We created *Agents of the Night* because what we wanted was a Gumshoe rule system with fewer annoying fiddly bits, but I don't think that's what you want. Similarly, while I may well buy *GURPS Monster Hunters* when it's available for purchase, I'm not enamoured of the GURPS rules. re Dirty Dozen style 5e game: I kind of want to play (or maybe run, if I can convert the system to something I like better) *Blue Rose* that way.

re old combat 1gtheme: I want to be able to make choices quickly, and not be bogged down with too many choices or options. I want it more story-based than tactics-based, but these are points on a continuum, so to a degree, both is best.

re me: I pinged Aviatrix to ask how freely or not the rules they gave us can be distributed at this point and was given permission to refer folks to the google doc: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JRc5PqDXKnrss-DGTGPVd1CBuRKGLvQd3cFO6qaDsbw/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.4nwin6v16pje>. Basically, though:

- * We're using Gumshoe's Investigative and General skill rules.

- * One can also use Investigation points to ask the GM questions. Aviatrix's intent was for that to replace the whole Core Clue business, but we agreed that if and when I give it a spin, it should supplement the whole Core Clue business instead, not least because I use commercially published scenarios.

- * Stability remains, but Sanity is replaced by Psyche. The points in Psyche are divided among Occupation, Solace, and Community.

- * Characters have Statements for their Drive, Occupation, and Solace. These can be challenged and rewritten, which is the only way to get experience points.

I think the way it ran for Crown of Creation was a little vague for your group's tastes, but I am not sure. If I run it, it would be less vague because I'd be using Core Clues and likely, commercially published scenarios and campaigns.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Having attempted indexing once myself, I completely believe that it's a skill. I'm sure software can help the human element, but I don't think it's a substitute for it. At the very least, one needs to set the goals of the index. E.g., you want it to be exhaustive.

When I worked at Hagstrom, an index was automatically produced for our folding maps and atlases, and the folks working in Research checked it very, very carefully. This is because a street may pass through several pages or grid squares, but it needs to be indexed based on where the text identifying the street is -- but sometimes, the indexing program chose to index the street where either there was no text and only the tiniest bit of road in a corner or where there was only partial text, not enough to identify the road.

In such cases, they would instruct the folks in Digital to move the text or they would change where the street was indexed, deciding on which option based on the specific situation. This was very time consuming, but no one with the authority to do so was ever willing to tell them in writing to be less conscientious, for which we were all grateful.

PATRICK ZOCH: re NPCs: In my Fearful Symmetries game, the PCs decided to create / summon two fox spirits. The original intent was for them to protect the PCs, like a bit of semi-sentient armor. But they were fox spirits, so I had the first thing they did was to steal small things from the PCs. Naturally, the PCs and the players found this utterly adorable.

From that moment on, no one wanted to have the foxes get hurt. And when they did get hurt during an important, dangerous, and complex ritual, the PCs made sure to heal them. After several sessions, I suggested that the PCs rework the enchantment so that the foxes were no longer bodyguards, but designated tricksters and distractions.

In the Phoenix Dawn Command game, the PCs traveled with a dog that was occasionally possessed by the spirit of what seems to be the archetype Dog. The spirit has now departed from the dog to complete its mission, and while the group very much likes the dog, they don't want to bring it with them on their exceedingly dangerous missions. I think they leave the dog at Dawn Command?

The GM of that game had us each create two NPC members of a ship's crew. The idea was that these were all volunteers for what was probably a suicide mission, as, unlike the Phoenixes, they couldn't come back from the dead. And we all recognized that the GM wanted this buy in so that we wouldn't simply shrug when the NPCs died. (*) And some of them even survived the mission!

We didn't play them once we'd created them, I think. And I know the other players created family and friends for the GM to play, which he's been doing. I haven't, mostly, as my PC's first death was centuries ago. However, one of the cards I put in my deck was "Haunted", and I did give my character a daughter

who died young. She's very much an NPC, and I think as alive in her own way as Lily Kane from the first season of *Veronica Mars*.

(*) This is, after all, one of the GMs / authors of the larp set in Naomi Novik's Scholomance. That larp had 80 index card NPCs, just detailed enough for us to mourn their deaths, and many of them died in the run I played in. I don't think it's possible to have a perfect run (and, indeed, it is understood that there are other NPCs, who are not even named, who will almost certainly die during the graduation run).

re *Call of Cthulhu*: Note that naming significant NPCs as you describe is new to 7th edition. I'm not sure if this is an optional rule or not, and I know there are many GMs who ignore it, especially for convention games. But having one Very Important NPC has a mechanical benefit when it comes to getting Sanity back between sessions.

The relationship between the Magical Kitties and their humans reminds me of the Cathulhu scenario set in the Cthulhu Invictus period. Patron-Client relationships are important there, intended as a hook for human PCs. In this scenario, the cats each have a human patron, although they're more a source of information (and food and skritches) than plot hooks.

re NPCs controlled by other players: Nod. This is done in Good Society. Also, it can be done in *Monsters and Other Childish Things* and in *Sorcerer*. Another function of NPCs, particularly in a game with moderate to high PC lethality, is to be a source of new PCs.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Third season *Avengers* seems to bounce back and forth between weird and almost normal (for early *Avengers*). re Fallen London: Much as I'm looking forward to the rpg, I'm glad I stopped playing the online game.

re Dangerous Refuge: The game went well, as you know. Currently, the magic styles, while useful, don't seem to need to be more tied into the Reputation system. But we need to do the obvious revisions and then reread to see what else occurs to us.

re Lee re Genshin dreams: I've had that experience with chess and with sf conventions. re Spike re someone revealing a skill that had previously been concealed because the player hadn't previously given that skill to the character but now establishes that the character had in all along and how to justify this in the fiction: I was going to say that embarrassment is an absurd and unlikely explanation. However, I have thought of a fictional example. In the manga *Black Butler*, Ciel's fiance reveals, several volumes in, that she is actually a highly skilled sword fighter. Naturally, one wonders why she has never revealed this before.

"Embarrassed" perhaps understates the reason. Ciel's fiance decided, for Reasons, that Ciel needed her to be superfeminine and always cute. By her standards and the standards of Victorian society as depicted in the manga, a woman who can fight well with a sword is unfeminine and is not cute. And it causes her very real, extreme distress to have to reveal this shameful skill to Ciel, even though it is necessary to save both their lives.

re not telling folks everything you can do because that's not generally how people work: True. I can surprise friends by pulling out a square of paper and doing origami, and I may then be surprised by finding out how many of them also know how to do it. re Jerry Stratton re the SafeHouse: IIRC, the entrance we were shown is where folks get hazed unless they have the password, in which case, they don't. re me re Dread: I need to read the rules. I have the electronic text. re Strixhaven backgrounds: Ah, right. I'd forgotten we houseruled that.

re etiquette of googling during an rpg session: Yes, I can list plenty of times where it's totally fine.

* My favorite: Names are hard. Give me a moment, and I'll get to a random name generation site.

* Looking up a historical fact because we all want to know it.

* Looking up a historical fact for color / chrome when it's not being disruptive.

* Looking up historical stuff because it's a kind of laid back game, like Fearful Symmetries. "So, you want to do a big project -- is there a London exhibition in the next year or two? Should we invent one?"

* Looking up historical stuff because we're all kind of doing the plotting, or at the very least, the GM is very open to player suggestion. E.g., Young Centurions, the question of where Tesla was in the game year.

* Looking up historical stuff because we all want to get it right. When was TNT invented? The zipper? Who was the mayor of Los Angeles in 1937?

re Michael Cule re wanting a simpler combat system for non-climactic fights: Some games, at least theoretically, have this. *Shadows of Yesterday* / *Solar System* comes to mind, and I think there may be others.

re Patrick Riley re characters to whom nothing bad can ever happen: *Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine* comes to mind. re Mark Nemeth: Avengers are Sailor Moon? Se had Sailor Moon as a character class and cut it?

CRAIG KAMBER: I'm glad your wife can now drive. I'm glad you were able to find replacement dice. re me: Thanks for the compliment! How much prep one does is partly based on experience, but also on the type of game and on the players. I'm currently running 2 campaigns (and kind of wanting to run a few more, which is not practical). One of these is *Urban Shadows 2e*, where I don't want to overprep, but I do recognize that this is a group that wants to be part of the solution. And typing this, I realize now that part of why I need to prep for that game is that if they are to be part of the solution, that means I need to have problems for them to solve. They want to be generally heroic, good, and kind, which means I need to make sure they have to deal with opposition that is either the opposite of that or that is the same, but defines "heroic, good, and kind" very differently. I think you may have helped me figure out what specifics I should be planning and how -- thank you.

Fearful Symmetries is a very different kind of campaign. It's a setting / framework for *Trail of Cthulhu*, one which presumes that the PCs don't understand that they are in a game of Lovecraftian horror, which means that the players, who do understand this, are in on a lot of the secrets and can enjoy setting their characters up for messiness. I've started a number of sessions with "Okay, what happened last time? Oh yes, that's right. Okay, so given that, what do you all want to do next?"

Basically, the campaign begins (at least, if you use the material in the book) with the PCs doing a magic ritual that works. It also has some consequences which are not their fault, but leaves them with an obvious problem to solve. And because we decided to turn on all the high magic options, as the campaign went on, they learned about more folklore weirdness, solved and caused more problems, and generally found themselves in a position where they could pretty much decide their own agenda. They think they might be the most powerful magicians in England, and they may not be far wrong.

That said, what we decided last time -- that the PCs will try to find a book in a private library in a stately home that they are visiting, ostensibly as part of a hunting party weekend -- means that I actually do have to prep for the next session. I need to decide what NPCs are going to be present and give most of them names and personalities, decide what is likely to happen during the hunting portion of the session, and weave in a couple of extra ideas, including the fact that a government agency that's aware of the existence of magic has a headquarters building a few hours drive away.

re photo: Lovely pictures of your dice!

BRIAN MISIASZEK: re New Age of Menace: I cannot disagree. re domestic natter: Congratulations to Lauren! I don't suppose the performances are available online? re vacation inspirations: That is a fascinatingly creepy angel. How did you get back from the cemetery? Did you walk for 3 hours? I hope you'll say more about using that cemetery in a scenario. re me Thanks for the clarification re "Dying from Alzheimer's".

MARK NEMETH: re federal employment situation: FWIW, you've been in my thoughts. Also, once I type your name in all caps and then a space and "N", my device immediately suggests "NEMETH". (Also, if I type "Masks of N", it correctly suggests "Nyarlatotep".)

re write up: It probably makes more sense in play; the sequence with the hag and genie felt a bit surreal, as if part of a different story. I am confused about why the hag encouraged the group to free the genie she and her covenmates had imprisoned, especially given the genie intends to take vengeance on them. Impressive bow shot and amusing in world explanation of Dudvin's dramatically perfectly timed encouragement. It reminds me of a CoC game where a player forgot to add a bonus for their character's brass knuckles, despite having previously specified the PC had slipped them on. After the combat, we realized the mistake, and the player rolled with it.

Player: I only *thought* I slipped them on. I really slip them on this time, and I check to make sure.

re Lee re Jonah being disappointed by his own success: My SCA brother has often said "Be prepared for the best case scenario." re Jerry Stratton re 3e D&D: I bowed out of a 3e game years ago because the combats took forever and annoyed me. I don't know if 5e combat is objectively better, but it doesn't annoy me. Maybe it's faster. Maybe the players understand it better. Maybe D&D Beyond makes it easier.

re descriptions in contemporary fantasy: Have you read any Katherine Addison? I fell in love with her writing about the city in *Witness for the Dead*. Authors I find work for me when it comes to descriptions -- no guarantee they'll work for you -- include

- * Katherine Addison

- * Lois McMaster Bujold (Her Vorkosigan books, at their best, set everything up in plain sight of the reader, and then deliver a very precise blow that sets things spinning or resolves things, and one realizes one could have seen it coming, yet didn't. The first two Chalion books, while fantasy, pay enough attention to how things work that there are some bits that had me laughing and saying, "Yes! That must have happened at some point in our world!" E.g., in one book, a character is captured during a border war by soldiers who got separated from the main army. The captors search their captive's stuff and rejoice because -- they found maps! Not top secret maps, but maps of the area, so maybe they can get home!)

- * P. Djeli Clark

- * John M. Ford (frustrates the heck out of me because he'd never insult the reader's intelligence by spelling something out, and I'd be okay with the insult in return for understanding some of what I'm missing)

- * Alex Jennings (Specifically, *The Ballad of Perilous Graves*, very unsure it's a book you'd like)

- * Phyllis Ann Karr (Specifically, *At Amberleaf Fair*)

- * Ellen Kushner

- * Victor LaValle (Specifically, *The Changeling*, but be aware that I fell for the descriptions of NYC, and I cannot objectively tell how much is his writing and how much my brain fills in)

- * Tim Powers (Been awhile since I read something by him, but because he does secret history stuff, he sends me running to look up all sorts of historical details.)

- * Ursula Vernon / T. Kingfisher

- * Helene Wecker (Specifically, *The Golem and the Jinni*, and see LaValle above as the same caveat applies)

- * Dorothy Dunnett (Okay, historical fiction, not fantasy, but a lot of fantasy authors we like have definitely been influenced by her. These include Ellen Kushner, Guy Gavriel Kay, and Max Gladstone.)

If you read it, I'm curious to know what you think of N. K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy. IMO, it's at least as good as the first Dune book. (I liked both, but am aware both have flaws.)

re Patrick Riley re vengeance: Vengeance can work as well or as badly as the pursuit of wealth for a motivation. Both show up in Good Society, which, as a collaborative game with a Regency England setting, plays very differently from D&D. Both work as Drives in Gumshoe, as the function of a Drive is to push the PCs towards danger and the plot of the night. Should either goal ever be satisfied, one can either give one's character a new goal or switch to playing a new character.

Also, there's a question of just what vengeance or the pursuit of wealth means to a character. One NPC I played explained that part of what vengeance meant to him was that a particular person he'd rescued from the person he wanted vengeance on would live a long, happy life; marry someone compatible; and have fat, stupid human babies. On being questioned about this, he allowed as how the babies didn't have to be stupid to satisfy his thirst for vengeance.

In one of the larps I played at Intercon, one character combined their desire for money and vengeance, promising that if my character could make sure that the person they cared about had enough gold so that they never had to worry about money again, the petitioner would challenge someone and if that person lied, would kill them. My character was bemused, but granted the petition, which led to a public confrontation, something that can be a lot of fun in larps. (It can also go wrong and annoy people OOC, but this one was fine.)

In *Phoenix Dawn Command*, in theory, my character might want vengeance on a noble, but in practice, their feelings are more complicated. While I think this makes things more interesting than a desire for vengeance would, one must bear in mind that Phoenix Dawn Command is, ultimately, a war story. If I'd been leaning towards vengeance, that would have to be something that could be framed in terms of the larger war story, which is certainly doable, but the premise of the game is that anyone returning from the dead as a Phoenix -- i.e., all of the PCs -- are on board with saving the world. How much nuance this includes is up to the individual group, of course.

re me: While humans do not know better "than someone who deliberately and carefully created the universe", at least, going by God-as-perceived-via-the-Old-Testament, there is a Jewish tradition of not being shy about talking back to God, who can always end the conversation. Abraham bargains with God for Sodom and Gomorrah, and I'm told that this is part of Abraham's growth, particularly when he asks "Shall not the Lord of Justice do what is just?" (Note that I am going by memory of the translation of the line I was given by someone who speaks Hebrew. I do not. If Lee corrects my translation, I would trust her on this.) Side point: The Jewish Satan (The Accuser, the District Attorney) is a very different character than the Christian Satan (the Devil).

Another story often told -- and one we told the friend who drove us to Intercon because he was playing a rabbi in one of the Intercon larps and basically asked me, Josh, and our friend Avram Grumer to more-or-less be Jewish at him (which is amusing because we're mostly secular) -- is about an argument between Rabbi Eliezer and the Sanhedrin (see Wikipedia's The Oven of Akhnai). It culminates in a voice from heaven telling the members of the Sanhedrin that Rabbi Eliezer is right, and another rabbi saying "It is not in heaven", a reference to a passage in the Torah that says that the law was given to scholars on Mount Sinai, no longer kept in Heaven. t. God's

response is to smile and say "My children have triumphed over Me."

You understand that a) I'm simplifying, b) I don't read or speak Hebrew), and c) you're getting this second hand, at best, from me. The main point I'm making is that it's fine to argue with or question God. When God wants the conversation to end, God will make that clear. Job's allowed to ask. God answers as God chooses.

re your correspondence with Mike Philips: I'm now very, very curious to know what you (and he) would think of Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor*, which has at least some of the items you list as fun. So do Ellen Kushner's Riverside books. And Phyllis Ann Karr's *Idylls of the Queen* is interesting here, as it takes the events of various Arthurian tales, does not change them, but bears in mind a) these tales take place over decades and b) a character's actions are effected by their psychology, which is affected by what just happened.

I'm not talking in a Freudian sense, I think. I'm talking about Morgan Le Fay admitting (not a direct quote), "Yes, I over-reacted by sending a poisoned cloak to Arthur, but do remember that he'd just sent my lover's corpse to me, saying it was 'a present'. And really, Merlin didn't have to put it on the woman who delivered it. He could just have told Arthur to throw it into a fire. But yes, I do regret that, not just because I don't really want to kill my brother, but also, I certainly didn't want an innocent woman to get killed because I lost my temper."

I like this kind of psychology because it makes sense and doesn't change the events of the story. Is it not something you consider psychology? Do you consider it character-driven? I'm not sure I'm using terms the same way you are.

Looking at media I know looked at psychology as "What specific psychological theories are hot right now", two come to mind. I thought one, an old black and white film, was called *The Distant Past*, but can't find this online. (It is not *Out of the Past*, which is a very different movie, classic film noir.) There's some criminal or other holding people hostage, and one of these people is a psychologist who makes the criminal realize that his criminal acts all stem from anger at his father. As a result, the criminal can no longer shoot anyone, because he sees his father's face on his potential victim.

I was not impressed. The one or two people I know watched this movie agreed that what would actually happen was that the criminal would transfer his hatred to the psychologist and would kill him.

The other movie is Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. That one's better, though it's not my favorite of Hitchcock's. Of course, the ones that are my favorites (that I've seen) (*Rope*, *Vertigo*, and the remade version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*) as well as a couple that are disturbing or creepy, but still quite good (*Frenzy* and *Rebecca*) probably fall into the category of media using psychology.

HEATH ROW: re Bastions: Josh was explaining them to me. In the Strixhaven game, we decided that the group's Bastion was their dorm house. re beginning in media res, after the rescue: I love it! re me: Thanks! re the Living Crater: Ah, so "defeating" basically meant "escaping alive". That makes sense.

GABRIEL ROARK: I'm glad your folks are doing well, all things considered. re me: Thanks! re xp for journals, drawings, et cetera: I mean for repeated contributions. Basically, if a player did art, journal entries, et cetera in between sessions A & B, they got the reward. If they did more between C & D, they got another reward. And so on.

IGTHOTS:

LEE GOLD: re calling in police to arrest bandits: I don't think of myself as the kind of GM who has NPCs suggest going to

the authorities as a viable solution, but it occurs to me that I did that at least twice, both in my Cthulhupunk world. The first was when a PC was trying to figure out what to do with someone who hired a group to remove a perceived rival from their path, and the other time was in the Strange School pbem, when a couple of PCs captured the vampire who'd non-consensually turned one of them into a vampire. In both cases things had stalled a bit, and the players wanted some resolution that didn't involve their PCs turning into murderous vigilantes. So it made sense for an NPC already on the scene and on their side to say (roughly), "This person committed a crime. Probably several crimes, as this is unlikely to be their first. We can actually hand them over to the authorities."

MICHAEL CULE: These are all good reasons for not going to the authorities. One of the delights of the Cthulhu Invictus setting is that you can go to the authorities -- to a point.

* First of all, you're the PCs, and if the scenario is to continue, you still need to do all the work.

* Second, even in first century Rome, many folks didn't believe in the supernatural.

* Third, one of the things that the game uses is the Patron-Client relationship. The PCs are likely to be the clients sent out to Fix Things (see the first point above).

* Fourth, certain things are illegal, like, oh, sorcery. If you plan to do any of that, don't involve the authorities, or at least give them plausible deniability.

* Fifth, the point about supernatural threats, oh, eating the authorities still applies, as does the point about the authorities possibly being part of the supernatural problem.

* Sixth, the authorities' priorities aren't going to be yours. One scenario discusses how to bring the authorities in, and it isn't by mentioning the supernatural. It's mentioning that the locals seem to be minting their own coins.

* Seventh, you may wind up deputized. This may or may not be a problem, of course. In one 1920s scenario, the PCs were, iirc, contacted by the authorities, as they'd been in Innsmouth. The authorities were planning the canonical raid, and the PCs gave them what information they knew about the town, but declined the invitation to join in on the raid. My PC warned the person in Innsmouth the PCs had been staying with, so he was able to leave town, but otherwise, the PCs stayed out of things.

JERRY STRATTON: Good points about just when, if, and what type of police / cops / the equivalent are available. Cthulhu Invictus scenarios occasionally go into this. I am not convinced that fear of ridicule is the reason people don't speak up. Heck, later in your zine, you note that you didn't report the windshield vandalism.

I did hear an amusing story from someone whose sister used to be a cop. Apparently, the standing instructions for when someone said that their neighbor was beaming psychic rays into their head (and apparently, it happened often enough that there were standing instructions) was to say, "Yes, this happens. What you need to do is to line your hat with tin foil."

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Good point re not wanting to strain credibility / break the suspension of disbelief by letting PCs do whatever they like to authorities without consequences. Indeed, one common question on the Facebook support group for *Masks of Nyarlathotep* is what to do when one or more PCs run afoul of the law. I remember Avram Grumer telling me about a time he was with a group planning walk through Central Park. They were stopped by cops telling them that the path they wanted to take was closed for the night. They nodded and took a different route! as one might expect. Avram noted that in an rpg session, they'd be more likely to either talk back to / push back against the cops, or wait for the cops to move on and then try to sneak in.

CRAIG KAMBER: Very clever move of the Fraternity of Evil. The bit about most police being incompetent reminds me of an issue one player had when I was running the Strange School PBEM. There, the authorities were the teachers, and I had the players each create both a student PC and a teacher or administrative staff PC.

But the primary PCs were the students. This meant there had to be reasons that the teachers and staff didn't solve all problems. Normally, one reason was that the student PCs didn't bring their problems to the teachers. It's not that the teachers were evil or incompetent; it's that most of the players understood the genre conventions, including the understanding present in most rpgs: The PCs need to solve problems, not the NPCs.

so I set up a problem for one particular PC, and figured she'd deal with it. It was right up her alley, playing to her skill sets. It was something she could be heroic about. And the PC immediately phoned one of the teachers. I decided that it went to voice mail or something -- not unreasonable, as the teachers had classes to teach and other duties.

So, iirc, she called another teacher. And the player noted that it was starting to be absurd that the teachers were all so out of the loop or incompetent. I think this is the sort of thing I'd need to have a Session Zero about -- or, if that didn't come up in the Session Zero, because we all assumed we understood how things worked, some kind of collaboration document that we updated as necessary. Indeed, I'm fairly sure the question of the role of cops and other authority figures has come up in some of the games I've played, and we've decided how we want game reality to work.

HEATH ROW: So Sheldon and Renaldo were both PCs, correct? Not all games let the PCs do things the authorities can't, I think.

IGTHEME: Players who need / want NPCs to react to their PCs in particular ways

To a degree, one could say that this includes mechanics. If I hit an NPC in combat, I want them to show evidence of that hit. But that's not really what this igheme is about, I think.

If my PC has followers, I want the NPC followers to, well, follow. To obey and trust the NPC as their abilities and fiction indicates they should. This may mean, as in a couple of *Monsterhearts* games, that I have one loyal incompetent follower, one loyal and competent follower, and one disloyal competent follower.

If my PC goes shopping, I may just want the GM to have me subtract money and add possessions. Or I may want some level of interaction with merchants.

If I interact with a major villain, I may want them to live up to their stature. I may want them to feel inferior to me. I may want both.

If I try to convince an NPC to do something, I usually want this to be a possible task. But if the NPC just gives in, it may not feel satisfying.

If I interact with friends or romantic partners, I presumably want them to act like friends or romantic partners.

All of this seems straightforward to me. But I know that sometimes, a player wants the last word in all conversations, regardless of who the NPC is. And that can stick in the GM's craw.

Sometimes a player wants an NPC fixated on their PC or to fall in with the strangest and most unlikely of schemes and gets annoyed if the GM suggests that perhaps this NPC will not give up their most cherished beliefs just because someone, even if it's a dear friend, asks them to.

Sometimes a player is annoyed if the GM wants to give an NPC a personality or likes and dislikes that mean they're not going to have their life focused on the player's PC. During the Strange School game, one of the players didn't understand why

I wouldn't give an NPC they liked all the same hobbies that one of their characters had -- and that character was in a weird liminal state between PC and NPC, as I was letting players invent NPCs because there were a lot of people at the school and I wanted more personalities than I could come up with. Eventually, we both realized that this supposed NPC was actually a PC, and that I didn't object to. But I didn't want to change the hobbies of the NPC I'd created.

I don't know whether or not I was wrong. In the abstract, it didn't really matter, so why not make it something the player wanted? But there are some players who are very generous in their play, trying to make sure everyone has input and space to play, and there are some players more focused on their own play. The latter aren't generally bad people or bad players. Nevertheless, as a GM, I need to make sure they're not taking over the game. If they want to do that, they should be the GM - and often, such players make excellent GMs.

This is one reason that, even though I get why people may become impatient with safety tools and collaboration and the like, I like it when a gaming table works together, making sure there's space for everyone to have their fun. This is especially true for GM-less games and larps. In games with a GM, it's still true, of course, and indeed, many players who push for more space do so because they assume that if it's a problem, the GM will push back.

And sometimes, the GM will, and it's not a problem. Sometimes, the GM pushes back again and again, and gets tired. But sometimes, the GM won't, and that's a problem for other players. Or signals can get crossed. For example, in the second *Kerberos Club Fate* game I ran, I assumed that when one player had his PC try something extremely experimental, he wanted the PC to succeed, every time. This wasn't the case. He wanted the PC to be challenged. I was doing him a disservice by not pushing back, and we later realized we had miscommunicated.

That said, the answer isn't always "I want precisely x, y, and z" as that can feel more like collaborative writing when one wants a roleplaying game. OTOH, I've seen asking for exactly what one wants and reviewing it in detail before playing it out and then playing it out to work astonishingly well. In the *Butterfly Court* playtest, when we discussed our wishes, what we wanted to make sure happened in game, I said that someone should try to assassinate my character. It was something we'd established early on, and we now had a session or so left, and I wanted that to happen. We discussed how we'd do it. And we did it that way. And there were, somehow, surprises in exactly how it played out.

This doesn't always work. I don't mean that it can fall flat because folks have discussed it to death, although that can also happen. Another player in the Strange School game and I discussed a plot thread involving her character. And when we played it out, it didn't quite click. We muddled through it and reworked things as necessary, but even though we'd discussed it, each of us did things that stymied the other.

Then there are times when one does want an NPC to be predictable and give one exactly what one wants. If I just want to convince an NPC to let me in to a place where Plot is, I really don't want this turn into a big thing, at least, most of the time. And as a GM, I don't generally want to keep the player from having their PC find the Plot. I will work with the player and do my best to give them what they want, which in this case is probably a brief, satisfying scene where their PC is competent and gets the NPC to let them into the Plot. Or I'll give them a convenient NPC guard to overpower so they can steal the NPC's uniform.

In many larps, if there are NPCs to begin with, this is often how they work. In the *Addams Family* larp, we needed an NPC burglar to get caught by the Addamses and ritually murdered. No problem -- a GM immediately filled that role for two minutes. In the *Breakthru* larp, if a PC with bodyguards tells

the GM “I want one of my bodyguards to just keep an eye on what those people over there are doing”, to the degree that’s possible, we’ll do that. In Modern Gods, one of the GMs was The Cabbie, which meant all of the cab drivers in the city. If someone needed a lift to a particular game location, that GM would be our cab driver and take us there.

In one larp, my fellow GMs pulled me aside and said, “Okay, they’ve just resurrected that character’s spouse, and the player would really like to have an in character conversation with the spouse -- go do that!” At that point, my job is to be as satisfying a spouse as I can be for the player, whatever that may mean in context. One of our friends was a GM in a larp where they were told something similar. That is, the PC was trying to bring their spouse back from the dead and the GM was told that the player wanted resolution and to give it to them.

The GM had the spouse tell the player that, no, they did not want to come back. They’d had a lovely life with the PC, loved every minute of it, but that was done, and it was time for them to move on. But they wanted to PC to live their life and enjoy it.

After the game, the GM realized that their fellow GM probably intended for the spouse to agree to come back. But the player loved that scene! It was probably more satisfying than if the spouse had returned.

Something similar happened in a Blue Rose larp I played in. I knew my character’s spouse wasn’t coming back, but I also knew that one of the GMs was prepared to play her if we did a seance. I wasn’t sure I was exactly feeling it, but I didn’t have a problem with that either. There’d be a group of us doing the seance, and hey, even if I just went through the motions, sure, it’d be low key fun. One does not need to be fully immersed every minute of every game.

My not feeling it didn’t survive the seance. In addition to urging my character to keep living and to be open to the possibility of romantic love, the NPC spouse said that they’d been watching my PC and seeing how much good he was doing for all of his fellow students. And I shouted, “They’re so beautiful!”

At that point, I was fully immersed, tears flowing, and I meant every word. My fellow students were all so beautiful. We spoke a bit more, then ended the seance, and I smugly told the NPC who’d done the channeling that she needed to rest more. “My wife says so!”

PumSpeak #131 for A&E #593

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Recently I have mostly been ...

... continuing to play Michael Cule's *GURPS Monster Hunters* campaign with the Wednesday evening group in High Wycombe. This was briefly interrupted by a couple of sessions playtesting a *GURPS Banestorm* scenario. Mike has recently been making certain Runequest mutterings, so we may switch to that at some point.

In our latest *GURPS Monster Hunters* session, my character seems to have encountered a mysterious figure in his personal life. He was at a party or social gathering when a pale skinned, attractive, red-headed woman seemingly accidentally spilt something purple on his suit jacket. He thought nothing much of it at the time, but on visiting the dry cleaners to collect the suit it transpired that the jacket was consumed by a purple fungus whilst in the laundry machine, which also caused the machine to malfunction! He only had time to call the incident into his handler before being called out to a new mission, on which we encountered someone with the same distinct smell (he has Discriminatory Smell advantage, so can recognize specific people, places, and things by their scent.) I think this may be something that should be followed up on at some point.

Comments

#592 Dylan Capel: Re your solo Traveller homeworld, with a population of hundreds of thousands, an industrial world seems to me the most likely fit – mining something particularly valuable, that makes the habitation costs worth it. The aristocratic family might hold the rights to mine the planet, and/or have a traditional expertise in mining the particular mineral. Why am I suddenly thinking of Dune? ;-)

#592 Jerry Stratton: RYC on igttheme going to the police, another reason PCs might not want to do so is because they are also up to illegal stuff. This might make an interesting plot situation where the PCs are doing something illegal, but stumble across something even more illegal that they want or need to report to the authorities, but they will incriminate themselves by doing so.

#592 John Redden: RYCTM about what I think of RuneQuest: I generally like it a lot and think it is a good game. The most recently published edition, 7th, is a very nicely presented volume, which explains the game system pretty well, and has a wealth of

background material and lore to get you into the world of Glorantha.

The world of Glorantha itself is expounded further by several supporting volumes, and I find it to be a rich and fascinating place to adventure, of a quite distinct flavour to other fantasy worlds – of course this may also be in large part due to Mr Cule's fine GMing, as I have almost entirely only played Runequest run by him. This sense of depth serves to enhance the feeling of immersion in the game – it really feels like there is considerable substance to get into and explore that is distinctly Gloranthan, rather than just generic fantasy like – that good old feeling of verisimilitude.

The fantasy world is particularly Bronze Age like by design, rather than the classic Medieval like of many other fantasy games. It is not just the tech level that is Bronze Age though, the culture and religions in the game setting have a very Bronze Age feel to them.

Runes form part of your character's statistics, and thus have a real impact on the gameplay, which I feel further contributes to the feeling of distinctness from other more generic fantasy games, and helps further pull you into the Gloranthan-ness of it all.

The core of the mechanical rules system is pretty much unchanged from at least 2nd edition. At its heart it is the classic Runequest / Call of Cthulhu / Basic Role Playing System, with attributes like Strength, Intelligence, etc, and skills on a percentile scale, which can exceed 100, and which are rolled against on d%. For my money, this is fine, and as good or not as any other old school skill based simulationist system, such as GURPS. The character progression system, where you tick a skill you use successfully, and after the session may roll for a chance to improve it, seems neat at first sight, but can drift a little into an uncomfortable immersion breaking feeling of gaming the system, by "tick farming", where you switch weapons or strategies from something you have got a tick in to something you have not.

Other negative things about Runequest? Well, the combat system has always had a reputation for being brutally dangerous. As I understand it, it always has been about as deadly as it is now, but I think the most recent editions have made healing magic a bit more available and perhaps a little more potent, for starting characters which, in my recent experience, seems to balance the lethality quite well.

—===### Everyone else, RAEBNC ###===—



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Age of Menace

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From Our Last Episode...

Natter: A Night to Remember at 'ArtSci Story'



On the night of Saturday March 15th my wife Caroline and I had the joy of attending the final performance of *ArtSci Story*, McMaster University's Arts & Science program's annual musical. This one was particularly special because our daughter, Lauren, was one of the three scriptwriters for the 2025 production!

She spent a good chunk of last summer crafting this story (mostly solo; she learned bitterly about the division of labour in most group projects), and seeing it come to life on stage was an incredible experience. The show—a clever pastiche of *Romeo & Juliet*, with Art and Science as the rival families—moved along briskly, blending humor, music, and dance with some truly standout performances from the cast.

What struck me most was how much of *her* I could hear in the dialogue. Lauren's voice, her ideas, her wit—woven into the script and spoken by the actors. Sitting near us in the audience, she was grinning ear to ear, soaking in the moment.

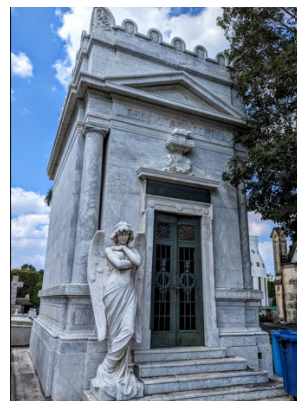
After the show, emotions ran high as the cast, band, crew, and executive team shared heartfelt goodbyes. When Lauren and her fellow scriptwriters were recognized on stage, the applause from the audience, cast and crew was enthusiastic and well-earned.

With this being Lauren's final year at McMaster University, I'm so grateful she got to be part of something so special—creating lasting memories and leaving her mark on a program she loves.

Havana Horror: WIP on the Colón Necropolis

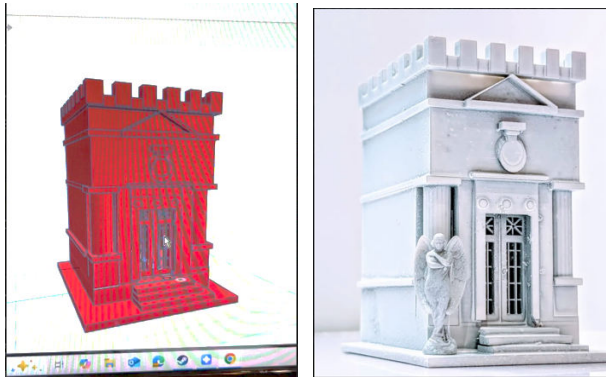
I've been using the free-online computer aided web-based design tool *TinkerCAD* to make some further models for my homebrew corner of the Colón Cemetery. Here are a few things I've made.

1. The Chapel of José Manuel de Cortina y García:
This was the chapel built by one of Cuba's most outstanding orators, whose copy of the *Monteverde Angel* on the steps outside of it got me started on this project. Ironically, he never got a chance to be buried in this beautiful family crypt, being forced to flee to Miami after the 1957 Revolution where he died at the age of 90 in 1970.



I was unhappy with the STL file I printed out using the output of the online *Meshy.ai* tool using my original photo. It looked, well, *blurred and melted*, and there were weird holes I could not repair. I decided to try to make the chapel via *TinkerCad*, a

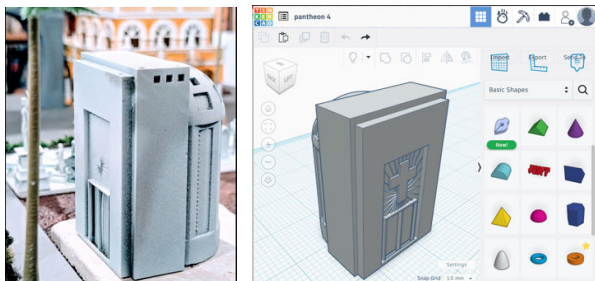
free computer aided design you can sign up and use online. I hadn't used the software since I first signed up for it almost a decade earlier, so I had to go through the tutorials and with much trial and error, came up with this. It still isn't quite right, but it's closer until I try and futz around to generate it again.



2. The Pantheon of Catalina Laslo: This magnificent Art Deco funerary edifice was constructed at a cost of 500,000 Cuban Pesos in 1931, when the Peso was pegged 1:1 to the US dollar; this works out to ~\$12.26 million USD today.



It was erected to house the earthly remains of the very beautiful Catalina Lasa by her millionaire lover, a Cuban sugar baron. The two had run away to Spain due to the publicity of their public affair, but they returned to Havana after 20 years. When she died at the age of 51 in 1932, this was built, and later after his own death her lover's own remains were interned *upright* so he could look on her remains for all eternity



The white marble for the Pantheon's construction came from Bergamo in Italy; the door was of onyx & black granite, with a sliding frame of lumpy bronze,

¹ You can look up his name and see some astoundingly beautiful glass jewelry, furnishings & sculptures.

covered with fine black glass, worked in relief by legendary French Glass-Master *René Lalique*¹ and brought from France to decorate the tomb.



Legend has it that once yearly at a certain time of day the sun's rays penetrate the crystal amethyst slabs installed into the curved rear windows and illuminate the tomb in a peculiar & beautiful way. There were also legends of vast trove of jewels also concealed in this mausoleum in a secret compartment. In 2018 grave-robbers broke in and caused so much damage the remains of the two lovers had to be relocated. Now construction hoarding wraps about the Pantheon while the broke Cuban government figures out what to do. Unfortunately, I designed too thin the cross over the doors and they delaminated and came off right after I printed them. I also had to design the angel-doors separately in in TinkerCad and glue them on.

El Ángel Oscuro: The Tomb Guardian of Havana



By day, Colón Cemetery (aka *El Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón*, or *La Necrópolis de Cristóbal Colón*) is a place of mourning and reverence, where grieving families leave flowers and whispered prayers for the

departed. By night, it is a battleground of shadows, where smugglers, cultists, and graverobbers would wish to prey upon the dead and the emotions of the living.

But lurking among the tombs is something even deadlier than them all—a relentless avenger who ensures that the dead rest undisturbed and that the living pay for their trespasses.

To Havana's poor and oppressed, he is a guardian angel. To criminals who profane the dead, he is a vengeful spirit. To those who whisper his name in fear, he is a curse.

They call him **El Ángel Oscuro**—*The Dark Angel*.



Whispers spread through Havana's underworld of *the Angel's Curse*—a spectral force that drags its victims to unmarked graves. Furtive reports speak of marble funeral angels stirring in the darkness to attack the living. Some claim to have glimpsed a shadowy figure leaping impossibly across the funerary landscape before vanishing. Attempts to lay traps have failed; even tracking dogs refuse to cross certain funerary avenues, trembling in fear of some unseen and unknown presence.

The police dismiss legends of **El Ángel Oscuro** as mere superstition. The *Porra* believe him to be a former revolutionary who has turned his war against the government to include criminals, and prefer to stay away. The old grave-diggers whisper that he was once buried here—only to claw his way back from the grave. A local publisher, sensing opportunity, hired a writer to pen an English-language pulp magazine called *The Angel*, where he is not just a man, but a truly fallen angel seeking redemption. Whatever the truth, one thing is certain: *when the bells of Colón Cemetery's central Chapel toll at midnight, the Angel watches*. And for the wicked, the cemetery offers no peace—only judgment and execution.

Los Hermanos Santillán – The Dark Angels of Colón

But *El Ángel Oscuro* is no ghost. He is flesh and blood, bound by oath and faith to protect Colón Necropolis—and does so with ruthless efficiency.

No one knows the true face of *El Ángel Oscuro*, for he is not one man, but **two**: *Father Ignacio Santillán*, a fallen Jesuit priest who has given himself wholly to the dead, and his younger brother, *Leandro Santillán*, a former circus acrobat now working as a night manager of the glamorous *Hotel Nacional's* American Mafia casino 3 nights a week.

The Santillán brothers' path to their strange and secretive vocation is steeped in tragedy, betrayal, and atonement.



Ignacio was once a devoted Jesuit priest—young, charismatic, and trusted by the powerful. He served at Havana *Cathedral*, ministering to the city's elite while secretly sympathizing with the poor.

One night in early 1930 he overheard a confession—an officer in Cuban president & dictator Gerardo Machado's Secret Police (*Porra*), weeping and seeking absolution. The officer spoke of a planned mass execution for dissidents, their bodies to be disposed of in Colón Cemetery in an unmarked communal vault.

Horried, Ignacio tried to warn one of the rebels, hoping to save lives. But the next day, the *Porra* learning of the leak, retaliated and struck a day early. The rebels were slaughtered, and worse—Ignacio's name was falsely shared as the informant. His church disowned him, and accused of treason by the dissident rebels, he barely escaped with his life after a terrible beating.

And then came the crushing revelation: one of the dissidents killed in the massacre was in fact his own father! *Horacio Santillán* was an influential figure in Havana, being the former Dean of *Havana's Law School*. Not only was his father unbelievably a secret dissident, but he was dead and his remains were buried in secret—now lost among the 800,000+ marked graves in the cemetery.

Ignacio's faith, body, and even mind shattered, and unable to leave the cemetery, he remained. The caretakers, taking pity on the badly bruised broken man, allowed him to unofficially occupy a neglected mausoleum, and helped to find him a job as a kind of private caretaker to clean and mend some of the more than 500 major family mausoleums.

In time, his body healed, and his faith took on a darker colour. When grave-robbers came, Ignacio drove them away not just violently but lethally. When the gangs demanded bribes from families living the remains of their loved ones, Ignacio aggressively fought back on their behalf.

When superstitious whispers spread of a vengeful spirit haunting the cemetery, Ignacio let them believe it, and started wearing clothing that gave himself the semblance of an angel of death.

Thus, over a span of six months, he became *The Dark Angel*. And so, his younger brother Leandro found him.

Leandro Santillán: The Prodigal Acrobat



Leandro had always been the wild one. Grief-stricken after their mother's death when his brother was away studying at the Seminary and he only 16, he stowed away on a tramp freighter and, after reaching Miami, joined an American circus that over-wintered in Florida. Having practiced wall-climbing and rough-housing with his older brother Leandro became a daring acrobat and spent years touring across the U.S. Over time his growing and now perfect command of English helped him navigate the odd circus and carnival world. When he learned belatedly of their father's death and his younger brother's mysterious disappearance 6 months after the fact, he rushed home to Havana.

With their father gone from the now shuttered family home and his brother missing, Leandro found work as a night manager of the glamorous *Hotel Nacional*

Casino, working for American Mafia Boss Meyer Lansky. He was soon rubbing shoulders with American gangsters, foreign diplomats, and visiting film stars. He became involved in casino security—charming but shrewd—watching for cheats, carrying messages for powerful men, and staying just on the right side of danger. But when he discovered that his brother was still alive, hiding among the dead, Leandro tracked him down.

Seeing Ignacio's transformation and hearing his story changed something inside Leandro—a rekindling of love for his brother and hatred for the Porra and their boss, President Dictator Machoda. He began smuggling supplies to Ignacio, then assisting him at night in the search for their father's lost grave. His role grew. Using his position at the Casino, he spied on criminals who used the cemetery for their own dark purposes.

He even helped Ignacio refine his costume—drawing on skills learned sewing circus garments to craft such things as a leather safety harness with muffled hooks and snaps for silent movement, A modified bulletproof halo headpiece to ward off headshots, and wings, one that could be removed and folded into a shield buckler, literally turning faith into armor. Eventually, when Ignacio was injured during one misadventure, it was Leandro who donned the Angel's robes, ensuring the legend never faded.

What began as a deception became a partnership—one brother working from within Havana's corrupt system, the other from outside it. The two brothers do not see themselves as heroes, but are atoning for past sins; **Ignacio**, for the death of their father and six other rebel dissidents, and **Leandro**, for being absent when their father was taken.

By night, either or alone or together they scour the cemetery, chasing whispers of buried secrets, lost crypts, and forgotten sins, as they search relentlessly for their father's grave. But every mausoleum, every shattered headstone, is part of a puzzle no one wants them to solve as they routinely come across other cemetery interlopers profaning the dead, and so they take violent action. And this is a very dangerous game where one mistake means death.

When one haunts the cemetery, the other listens for Havana's whispered confessions. At night, either brother may don the stone-gray robes of El Ángel Oscuro, ensuring the legend never dies. And as rumors of *El Ángel Oscuro* spread, as more criminals vanish, other darker forces take notice..

Father Ignacio Santillán – The Ghost Among the Graves

Age: 36 Occupation: Ex-Jesuit Priest / Cemetery Guardian Nationality: Cuban

Role: The silent protector of Colón Necropolis, a relentless seeker of truth and redemption.

Appearance: Gaunt, hollow-eyed, his once-handsome features are weathered by self-imposed exile. His dark hair is streaked with early gray, & his hands bear the scars from the terrible beating he sustained last spring when falsely accused as a traitor.

Characteristics

- **STR** 50
- **CON** 65
- **SIZ** 50
- **DEX** 55
- **APP** 40 (haggard and gaunt)
- **INT** 75
- **POW** 80
- **EDU** 75

Derived Attributes

- **HP** 11
- **Sanity** 80
- **Luck** 50+3d10
- **Move** 7
- **MP** 16

Skills (*Bold indicates key strengths*)

- **Brawl (50%)** – Can handle self in close combat.
- **Dodge (45%)** – A new life of evading danger has kept him alive.
- **Stealth (70%)** – A ghost among the graves.
- **Occult (60%)** – Knowledge of folklore, *Santería*, and Catholic exorcism rites.
- **Cthulhu Mythos (10%)** Whispers from beyond...
- **Persuade (55%)** – Can still speak with conviction
- **Spot Hidden (70%)** Sees the Cemetery's secrets.
- **Listen (65%)** – The dead tell stories, and so do the living.
- **First Aid (55%)** – Keeps himself patched up.
- **Psychology (50%)** – A confessor's gift for reading the human soul.
- **Library Use (75%)** – Can navigate archives and church records.

Weapons & Gear

- **Machete (50%)** – A practical tool, but deadly when needed. (1d8+1+db)
- **Hidden Dagger (45%)** – Concealed beneath his robes. (1d4+2)
- **Holy Symbol & Prayer Beads** – His last tie to faith.
- **Stone-gray Cloak & Mask** – The garb of *El Ángel Oscuro*.
- **Bamboo Vaulting Poles** (see below)

Pulp Talents (*Optional for Pulp Cthulhu Games*)

1. **Strong Willed** – Grants a +20 bonus to POW rolls against intimidation or mind control.

2. **Second Wind** – Can push through pain and recover 1d6 HP once per game session.

Leandro Santillán – The Acrobat

Age: 32 *Occupation:* Casino Manager, Acrobat, Underworld Contact | *Nationality:* Cuban

Role: The charismatic infiltrator, the eyes and ears of *El Ángel Oscuro* in Havana's high society.

Appearance: Tall, lean, and strikingly handsome, Leandro carries himself with the poise of an aerialist, moving with an almost feline grace. He wears American tailored suits at the Hotel Nacional, blending effortlessly with Havana's elite, but his body still bears the old bruises and calluses of a circus performer. His hair is slicked back, his expression always one of effortless charm hiding sharp calculation.

Characteristics (*Call of Cthulhu 7e/Pulp Cthulhu*)

- **STR** 60
- **CON** 60
- **SIZ** 55
- **DEX** 80
- **APP** 80 (charming and quick-witted)
- **INT** 70
- **POW** 65
- **EDU** 60

Derived Attributes

- **HP** 11
- **Sanity** 65
- **Luck** 50+3d10
- **Move** 9
- **MP** 13

Skills (*Bold indicates key strengths*)

- **Brawl (65%)** – Years of bar fights with circus pals against rubes and training.
- **Dodge (80%)** – Acrobat reflexes = nearly untouchable.
- **Fast Talk (70%)** – Silver tongued.
- **Charm (75%)** – Women, gangsters, and diplomats alike fall for his act.
- **Disguise (50%)** – Can pass as a priest, a soldier, or a wealthy gambler.
- **Sleight of Hand (60%)** – Can pick pockets or palm a card.
- **Stealth (65%)** – Moves like a living shadow.
- **Spot Hidden (60%)** – Can read a poker table and a crime scene alike.
- **Jump (75%)** – Can scale walls & vault fences with ease.
- **Climb (70%)** – An acrobat's gift for heights.
- **Handgun (65%)** – Carries a hidden **Colt 1903 Pocket Hammerless (.32 Auto, 1d8 damage)**.

- **Spanish (Own Language) (75%), English (60%)** – Fluent due to his time in the U.S. circus.

Weapons & Gear

- **Colt 1903 Pocket Hammerless (65%)** – A discreet but deadly pistol. (1d8)
- **Switchblade (55%)** – A gambler's last resort. (1d4+2)
- **Forged ID Papers** – Useful in shady dealings.
- **Fine Suit & Cigar Case** – The tools of a high roller.
- **Stone-gray Cloak & Mask** – When the time comes to become *El Ángel Oscuro*.
- **Bamboo Vaulting Poles** (see below)

Pulp Talents (Optional for Pulp Cthulhu Games)

1. **Acrobat** – Gains a +20 bonus to Climb and Jump rolls.
2. **Hard to Hit** – Gains a +1 penalty die on enemy attacks due to agility.

Shared Abilities & Roleplaying Hooks

- **The Legend of El Ángel Oscuro:** Both brothers wear the cloak and mask at different times, ensuring the legend persists.
- **The Search for Their Father's Grave:** This is their core motivation, driving them deeper into Havana's darkest corners.
- **Opposing Approaches:** Ignacio fights from the shadows, Leandro moves among the living. Together, they protect Colón Necropolis.
- **Atonement & Secrets:** Ignacio is haunted by guilt; Leandro by regret. But neither can stop now.
- **Bamboo Vaulting Poles:**

Weapon	Base Skill	Damage	Range	Special Notes
Bamboo Vaulting Pole	Fighting (Brawl) Fighting (Staff)	1d6+1 (Blunt)	Melee (Long)	Can be used to vault obstacles or trip foes
Bamboo Pole (Spear-like Thrust)	Fighting (Spear)	1d8 (Piercing)	Melee (Long)	Improved spear attack
Bamboo Pole (Defensive Use*)	Fighting (Staff)	Special*	Melee (Long)	May block/parry attacks (DEX roll to avoid breaking)

*Defensive use: A successful **Fighting (Staff)** roll could allow a parry against melee attacks, with a risk of the pole breaking on a fumble.

Additional uses of Bamboo Pole for Gameplay:

1. **Mobility** – The brothers can vault over walls, across rooftops, across grave-slabs, or slide down quickly shepherd-style, making them hard to corner.
2. **Reach Advantage** – A long pole allows them to strike from a distance, keeping foes at bay.
3. **Non-Lethal Option** – The blunt end of the pole can be used for stunning blows or disarming enemies rather than killing.
4. **Improvised Tool** – It can also be used as a pry bar, a trap trigger, to tip over a distant statue, or as a balancing tool on narrow ledges & walls.

A Secret War Against the Profaners

The two brothers who have adopted the mantle of *El Ángel Oscuro*'s often encounter:

- **Grave-Robbers & Corpse Thieves:** Criminals who steal the dead for ransom, occult rituals, or medical cadavers face brutal judgment. Some White Slavers drug young women into a deathlike state before sealing them in crypts, intending to remove and sell them to the highest bidder.
- **Protection Racket Gangs:** Extortionists who demand money from grieving families—pay up, or your loved ones' remains will disappear. *El Ángel Oscuro* hunts these men like a phantom of vengeance.
- **Secret Society Plotters:** Masonic lodges, occult brotherhoods, and political dissidents often meet in the cemetery, using its vastness for secrecy. Some work for Cuba's freedom (e.g. ABC secret society, or the banned Student Directory) and are ignored or even helped by the two brothers, others have darker ambitions which are either frightened away else ruthlessly stamped out.
- **Smugglers among the Dead:** Gun-runners, Rum runners & revolutionaries hide weapons other contraband in crypts, using the cemetery as an armory for the coming war against President Machado. Some may even think to use the storm-drains under the cemetery, to their peril.
- **Evil Cultists:** Perverted Santería priests and forbidden cults steal bodies for rituals, trying to summon spirits or worse. But something old and unspeakable stirs in the depths, and even *El Ángel Oscuro* fears what might be awakened.

Tactics of El Ángel Oscuro

- Both brothers can wear the armoured robes & wings like a stone angel design and sewn by Leandro, their leather fabric painted to look like weathered marble. One wing can slip off and become a bullet-proof shield buckler. It's the perfect camouflage to blend amongst all the

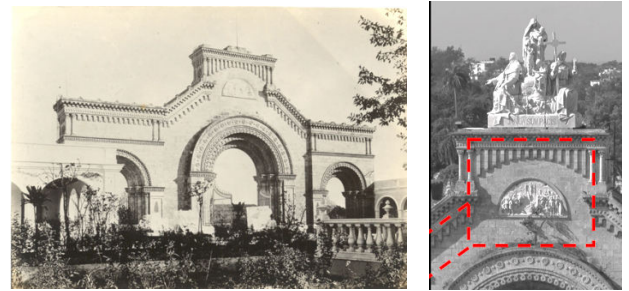
funeral statuary only at night or during rainstorms early am or evening.

- Throughout the graveyard, long, flexible poles disguised as weathered iron rods or bamboo stalks are scattered about and can allow the *El Ángel Oscuro*'s to pole-vault over mausoleums and crumbling graves, or to lower and/or shepherd-slide down from higher places, such as the cemetery walls or after clambering up one side of a mausoleum, to escape pursuers with inhuman speed.
- To evade tracking dogs, the Santillán brothers mask their scent by rubbing their clothing with a mixture of ossuary dust, lime, and formaldehyde, while also coating hiding in plain sight vaulting poles with the same repellent and caustic substances.
- Additionally, Ignacio has befriended and secretly trained some of the cemetery's many stray dogs, turning them into unpredictable obstacles that can mislead or even turn on trackers at a signal.
- While no one is buried underground in Colón Cemetery, the storm drains running beneath the main avenues and rectangular streets create an underground labyrinth of wide tunnels, meant to prevent floods but now repurposed as hidden escape routes. *El Ángel Oscuro* uses them to move unseen, emerge where least expected, and vanish like mist when pursued.
- Ignacio rarely leaves the cemetery, but when he does, he has legitimate reasons (delivering headstones, repairing graves, etc.) allowing him to be ignored by the authorities and other grave-workers and so hide in plain sight. No one questions why Ignacio is in the cemetery odd hours because they think he's just working
- Ignacio's cover story as a privately hired caretaker has also allowed him to secretly install periscopes that start in the storm drain tunnels that extend up and into various the mausoleums grave-slabs, and statues look out onto the streets at strategic location. These, along with building secret doors from a few empty mausoleums to the tunnels below allows him or together with his brother Leandro to quickly disappear first in one location and later reappear at a far distant location inside the cemetery with no one knowing how he could move so quickly
- Leandro, working at the casino, helps supply food, clothing, and tools for Ignacio's cover story.
- With practiced identical handwriting, both can forge paperwork & signatures to create alibis for each other when needed. .
- Both wear black livery, making it easy for one brother to cover for the other to provide needed alibis either in the cemetery or in the darkened corners of the casino

The Hidden Aerie of *El Ángel Oscuro*

Perched high above the grand entrance arch of Colón Cemetery, hidden under the extraordinary sculptural group of the *Three Virtues* that crown the Arch, lies a forgotten chamber, a sanctuary in the

sky. This secret aerie was never meant to be a lair for a vigilante. It was originally designed by the cemetery's architect, *Calixto Arellano de Loira y Cardoso*, as his own hidden tomb—a private resting place concealed within the grand archway of the amazing necropolis he built.



But fate had other plans. Calixto died before Colón Cemetery was completed, and instead of being laid to rest in his secret vault, he became the first official interment in the cemetery, placed in a far more conventional mausoleum. His private burial chamber above the arch was forgotten—until it was discovered by a man who would become something far more than a mere ghost.

Now, this hidden vault high above the cemetery serves as the lair of Havana's most feared protector.

- **The Hidden Chamber:** Concealed within the upper sections of the main archway, accessible only by a treacherous climb through forgotten maintenance shafts, this chamber holds a hidden armory, an observation nest, and a modest living space tucked among the stone angels. By day, it is unseen; by night, it watches over the dead.
- **The Angels' Eyes:** From his high vantage point, *El Ángel Oscuro* can observe the cemetery below, using spy holes hidden within the carvings on both sides of the arch. Few realize they are being watched.
- **Calixto's Forgotten Map:** The original blueprints of Colón Cemetery included storm drains, the later now covered-over boneyard, and overlooked hiding spots from the long-ago original sugar plantation and farm-land—all forgotten except by the two brothers when Leandro who found it inside this forgotten vault. The two brothers now know every abandoned chamber, every false crypt, every tunnel hidden beneath the pathways. It makes them untouchable, but hasn't led them to find the remains of their murdered father.

How to Use Them in a Pulp RPG or CoC Scenario

The two brothers can be NPC Allies or perhaps alternative Investigator options. For example:

1. **Investigators Cross Paths** – PCs in 1930s Havana might hear rumors of the "Angel of the Graveyard" and seek the brothers' help—or be mistaken for enemies.

2. **Havana's Criminal Underworld** – The brothers are caught in a growing war between corrupt officials, gangsters, and something **far older** that stirs beneath the graves...
3. **The Plantation's Secret** – Something from the former sugar plantation and farmland that the cemetery was built on in the 1860s has awakened, and only the Santillán brothers know how to fight it.

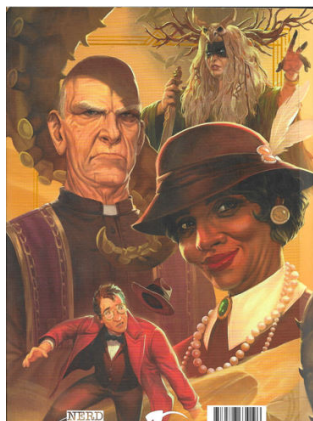
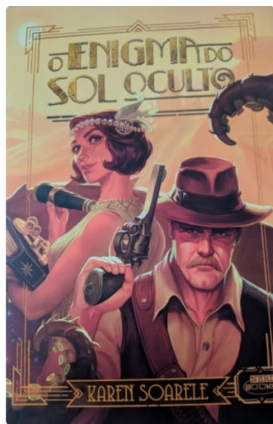
Comments #592

LEE GOLD: I'm late for the IgTheme, but I remember in my 'Doc's Tavern' *Pulp* Cthulhu mini-campaign (where there was actually almost nil Lovecraftian elements other than mysterious *grey matter*) having the PCs warily contact the police in St. Andrews by the Sea in New Brunswick, and rather than being resented, they were instantly deputized, and the local police chief was happily passing out firearms and donuts to the astounded and delighted PCs/players. Mind you it helped, that one of the PCs *was* a legitimate RCMP officer on leave.

Re COVID 19 numbers; I wonder how much having anti-vaxxer RFK Jr as US Secretary of Health and Human Services will affect funding for COVID 19 and other respiratory illness vaccines, let alone reporting on numbers or other outbreaks?

MICHAEL CULE: May your boiler and other renovation disruptions soon be over!

PEDRO PANHOCA da SILVA & MAIRA ZUCOLATO: *O enigma do sol oculto* looks beautiful and reads like a fascinating gamebook being set in a cosmic-horror drenched version of the 1920s. I love the legacy mechanics, with stickers and all, along with the graveyard of fallen investigators I followed your link and enjoyed what I could (*via translation*).



The author set their story as a kind of romp across European locals, and I'm envious of all Portuguese literal gamers who can use this work. Noting that the author is Brazilian, I wondered if anyone from

Brazil has ever used the Brazilian city of Manaus, aka as 'The Paris of the Tropics' (*A Paris dos Trópicos*) in a historical RPG scenario? Manaus an Amazonian port city right smack dab in the centre of South America, has a history spanning 350 years, and whose streets are filled with relics of its time when the city was rolling in wealth due to its earlier global rubber monopoly days.

SPIKE Y JONES: *Re transcribing Trump and friends;* you have my most fervent sympathies. I've been trying to (unsuccessfully) avoid US news since the election but it still bleeds over. And since Canada has been so repeatedly targeted and in so many ways that we are all starting to notice and realize this joker is no joking matter anymore. To quote Captain America in 'The Winter Soldier'; *"It kind of feels personal."*

Re my tire woes; Hamilton has some of the worst roads in Canada according to annual polls conducted by the CBC for about a decade now, and I cannot always dodge the new pot-holes until after I discover them the hard way! And I'm the one who swapped the tires off on my driveway the last time I did this the previous spring.

Re mysterious Montreal Game stores appearing as covers for SHIELD; no, it was *below* the sneaker (and ball-cap) store, which you had to pass through, then down the stairs to the Black barber shop, and then across the doorless hallway to the game store!

PATRICK RILEY: Sorry your *DunDraCon* CoC game sucked so much. But 6 hours for the time slot???

LISA PADOL: Thanks for writing me about last month's A&E; that meant a lot.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: *RYCTM:* Not a diced solution, but a Cipher/Puzzle either something Peter Hildreth created else borrowed from a book (perhaps he can explain 😊?). *Re Dread:* Correct; I condensed my remarks of what happens after the tower falls (and yeah, I don't know what happens if the tower falls due to external factors not related to game play, like an earthquake or a world's record sneeze). *Re Well, and watching with horror our ongoing executive coup, of course.* Amen to that.

RYCT Mark Nemeth Yes, cutting stuff should generally move the knife away from the other hand: This is very good advice for children in terms of safety, and this is what is taught in school. But cutting towards yourself is something often done by experts since it allows for finer control over small delicate cuts and is best for precision work where grip and pressure need to be finely adjusted. Example:

- **Surgeons** using metal scalpels pull toward themselves to make precise incisions with controlled small strokes.
- **Chefs** sometimes use a paring knife toward their thumb when peeling or trimming.

- **Woodworkers and carvers** use controlled draw cuts for detailed shaping.

There is *far more control* holding the object like a vice in one hand and then carefully cutting towards yourself. By cutting away you have paradoxically *less control* if the object being cut gives way causing the blade to slice into your thumb or finger. However, to do this you need a *proper grip* on the knife and the item being cut, use a *sharp* blade (since a dull blade needs more force and increases the chance of slipping), use the *proper blade angle and path*, and using *proper bracing & control* to limit blade movement (say with your thumb) *if the blade slips*, say if you are tired, distracted or your hands shake/cramp. When I assemble miniatures I purchase or make, I use a combination of both techniques, the cut away for rough work, but when I need more control for trimming flash, or scraping mould lines, or carving details I cut towards myself. Bottom line, for cutting towards you: *More Control, Riskier if Done Wrong.*

GABRIEL ROARK: I'm glad to learn your mother has such a supportive caregiver in your father.

JOHN REDDEN: I groaned at the Taco Emergency number. *RYCTM:* Yes, Peter is running some great scenarios involving interesting relics. I'm still waiting though for our nemesis, Lady Stuart, to rear up yet again when least wanted/expected.

HEATH ROW: RAE your comments about *bastions* in the DMG 5.5 . It rather sounds like something quite adaptable for solo play role-gaming.

CRAIG KAMBER: All the best with your recent move! Glad to learn your wife is now slingless.

RAEBNC everyone else.

Me Re "A New Age of Menace": Lest I be accused of injecting unwanted politics into my sub-zine, what I've been writing about in my sub-zine transcends mere politics—it's about sovereignty, stability, and the rule of law on an international scale. When a government, particularly a superpower, engages in economic coercion, threatens annexation, or abandons longstanding alliances, it isn't just a matter of domestic policy debates or partisan squabbles. It becomes a question of international order, security, and even existential survival for the countries being targeted.

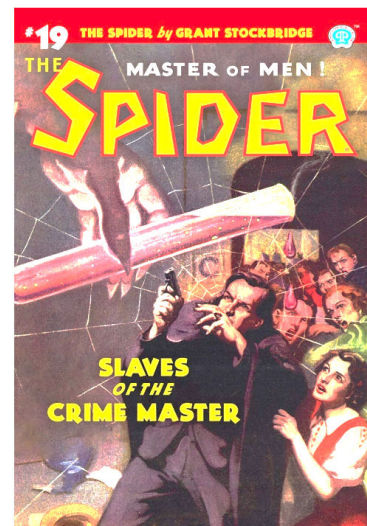
Dismissing these concerns as "just politics" is often a way to downplay real threats. Politics in its conventional sense involves debates over taxes, healthcare, or infrastructure—topics that, while important, don't typically threaten the very existence of a nation. But when a country starts engaging in financial warfare, disregarding treaties, and openly discussing territorial expansion, it moves into the realm of imperialism, economic warfare, and geopolitical destabilization.

My essay last issue documenting and responding to an alarming shift in global power dynamics. It's history-in-the-making, analyzed in real-time. That's not "just politics"—that's chronicling the erosion of international norms, the undermining of democratic sovereignty, and the potential collapse of alliances that have shaped the world for decades.

In short: what I'm writing about isn't politics in the narrow, partisan sense. It's about national survival, international law, and the creeping threats of economic and military coercion. It's about the difference between a world ruled by agreements and one ruled by brute force.

SLAVES OF THE CRIME MASTER

(more on the currentn Age of Menace)



As a proud Canadian and one of the few non-Americans writing for A&E, I find myself both baffled and sickened by the actions of the current U.S. President, Donald Trump, who is behaving like a 1930s pulp villain. Canada faces the greatest threat to our sovereignty since WWII, and the effects of Trump's threats are already being felt by most Canadians. To bring my strong feelings about this, and to convert into a more RPG relevant format -- given that A&E after is an RPG APA-- I thought about using the classic D&D alignment system to argue my case.

I would posit that the USA would have been considered either *Lawful Neutral* or even *Lawful Good* under President Joe Biden by many citizens of other nations.

However, these stunning seismic shifts towards economic coercion by Trump shaking down Ukraine for rare-earth mineral rights, threats of annexation of Canada, Panama, & Greenland, abandonment of long-established trade, health, and defense

alliances, and constantly (and weirdly) siding with Russia over all other Western nations will take generations to repair. The US government's current action and behaviours *could* fall into either *Lawful Evil* or *Neutral Evil* categories, depending on the intent behind Donald Trump's actions.

- **Lawful Evil:** If the govt. still operates within a structured legal framework but uses that structure to dominate, control, or manipulate others—such as leveraging economic power to force weaker nations into submission while maintaining the facade of legality—this would fit the *Lawful Evil* archetype. This alignment prioritizes order, but for self-serving or expansionist goals rather than the common good.
- **Neutral Evil:** If the govt. abandons long-standing ethical commitments & instead prioritizes power and self-interest above all else, even at the expense of allies and international stability, it could be considered *Neutral Evil*. This would mean it pursues opportunistic policies without loyalty to any principle beyond maintaining dominance.

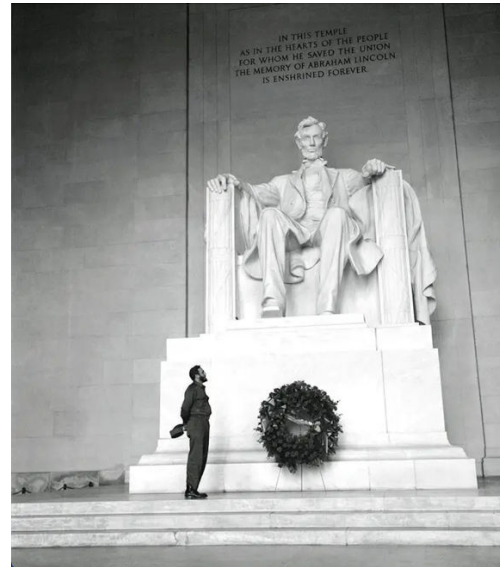
But I thought, these don't *quite* fit. Since these shifts are more erratic, inconsistent, and driven by short-term gains without a clear respect for law or order (domestically or internationally), then *Chaotic Evil* would apply:

- **Chaotic Evil:** When a govt. abandons established norms and is more than willing to sow chaos both domestically and internationally. Chaotic Evil thrives on unpredictability, reckless destruction, and power for its own sake—rules, agreements, and stability are only valued when they serve immediate self-interest and discarded just as easily. When a government is lashing out without a coherent long-term strategy, leaving even its own allies and institutions scrambling to react to economic threats, diplomatic breakdowns, and authoritarian tendencies—they have shifted towards both Chaos & Evil

Conclusion

Over the past month alone, U.S. policy has veered sharply toward authoritarianism, marked by escalating suppression of dissent, economic coercion, and institutional collapse. From Elon Musk's DOGE chainsaw dismantling of federal agencies to Donald (at the very least *functioning* as a Russian asset with their actions and behaviour) Trump public humiliation of foreign leaders, the current US administration's aggressive, vengeful, and illegal tactics have fueled domestic unrest and global instability. The erosion of legal governance, along with attacks on civil rights and free speech, has left both Americans and the international community deeply unsettled.

To the outside world watching with mixed dismay and sadness this fast-moving train-wreck: no one anymore considers the U.S.A. Lawful or Good anymore. Once a nation of principles that even inspired your enemies (see picture below), your country now teeters somewhere between Neutral Evil, or Chaotic Evil—its place on the Axis of Evil shifting slightly any given day depending on what verbal atrocity is bleated or tweeted out any given day, or whatever horror is reported by non-muzzled media.



Fidel Castro looking up at Abraham Lincoln after laying a wreath at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC (1959)

The real question is whether this trajectory can be sustained, or if the mounting internal and external fallout will force a reckoning.

Our daughter Lauren & co-scriptwriters thanked on stage at the final performance of Artsci-Story



March 21st 2025. BCM

Natter: Well spring is officially here. We are doing much better now that my spouse is glued together with a working shoulder, thank you for the well wishes. Apologies to Joshua Kronengold for misnaming him in my last issue. It was probable due to my brain cloud. Officially I use a spell checker so I can claim plausible deniability, my mistakes are too great to place the blame on a mere typo.

In an attempt to encourage us to move (slide) to the new home I have removed most of our stuff there. This week I put in a door with a doggie door. I think we will try it out today to see if they will fit. I am sure they will be reassured to see where all our stuff has gone. The house is getting pretty empty. This will be their second move.

Plastic is being used more and more in construction. It does resist wetness. I am not sure about long term UV resistance, but we don't get much here. It is jarring to me to work on a supposed wood construction only to hit plastic instead of wood grain. I am definitely going to have to get some sort of flex shaft grinder or super Dremel. I was trying to set the lock hardware into the door, and I was wondering 'why isn't this cutting?' I am not fond of it, plastic, for miniatures, though I admit keeping the price down for new gamers is important.

In reading the last issue I saw that another FLGS had closed. We had three, which probable not sustainable, sure enough, one closed leaving us with two. Before we moved up here, we would hit all of them. Now that we have moved here, with all our gaming stuff, we only hit one in the two years, with COVID etc. during that time. With the Spring our goal is to get out again. The Caterham should be a big help with that.

We hope to be in the new place at the end of March. This will be a one pager because I have to put wheels on the Caterham to move it, at least it is warming up in the garage. Oh, I was able to get the vehicle registered and, finger's crossed,

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waiting for my title in the mail, but I have plates for it. That was a major stressor for me getting past the DMV

Current Games: Player: DND 5e Running Hack Master 4th ed. (for two.)

IG theme 592: Players who need / want NPCs to react to their PCs in particular ways...

Charm person? I will be interested in other's take on this and I am probable missing the point. Is this a problem player thing? Players who need or want the NPC's to respond in a particular way are likely to be disappointed, as are the "real people" in "real life". Need is difficult as we are rarely at our best when anxious or needy. Want on the other hand is the human condition. The mechanic in my games is a skill check and/or role playing. If it is a plot thing i.e. the characters must convince the widower to give them the password to the crypt, then it maybe a poorly designed scenario? Hopefully you are good at improv. On the other hand, if the player is running a character they are ill suited, for such as when the person who rarely speaks wants to run a face for a change, I would try to make it happen and good for them for trying something new. If a player wants all the female NPCs to be attracted to their character for instance, they should make some efforts to build their character that way and maybe bathe and flash money around in game. Ah here is a novel idea: talk to the game master about it ahead of time. On the other hand, if it is more of a power tripping "respect my authority" PC v. NPC thing. News flash the NPCs don't know they are NPCs, and we are back to real life simulation. You treat people poorly and your burger gets spit with it. If you are a successful competent professional politely approaching an NPC who did not use charisma as a dump stat. It should work. But if you want to use your PC status to sway the king, first you may have to get on his short list.

Sorry all, it is going to me RAEBNC this time. Lee I like my new name <g> I may end up using it. Cheers all, be safe comments next time

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Solo Game Report: *Sojourn*

At the beginning of March, I spent a couple of days experimenting with solo play using Caleb Wimple's *Sojourn*. (<https://www.sojournrpg.net>) Randomizing class selection and using the *Characterize* mobile app to name the characters and determine basic descriptive characteristics, I created a party of five adventurers, each simple enough to be documented on a three-by-five card, two with a spell book.

Thjodoft Grimsson, Warrior
Force 16 (+2) / Finesse 15 (+1) / Wit 7 (-1) / Will 13 (+1) | HP 10 / Defense 4 | Longsword, spear, chainmail (+3), rations (3), tinderbox, torch, waterskin | Gray eyes, dark brown hair, bookish, forked beard, 4'3" (picturing him as a dwarf even though *Sojourn* doesn't include character races or species)

Zelda Erested, Mage
Force 12 / Finesse 14 (+1) / Wit 17 (+2) / Will 12 | HP 4 / Defense 1 | Spellbook, wand of frost, knife, component pouch, alchemist kit, candle, rations (3), tinderbox, waterskin | Gray eyes, dyed hair, flashy, 5'11" | Spells: Aural glamour, detect magic, magic missile, shield, sleep

Thorvard Asmundsson, Warrior
Force 14 (+1) / Finesse 12 / Wit 10 / Will 11 | HP 9 / Defense 3 | Longsword, spear, chainmail (+3), rations (3), tinderbox, torch, waterskin | Brown eyes, white hair, stubborn, uncommonly tall

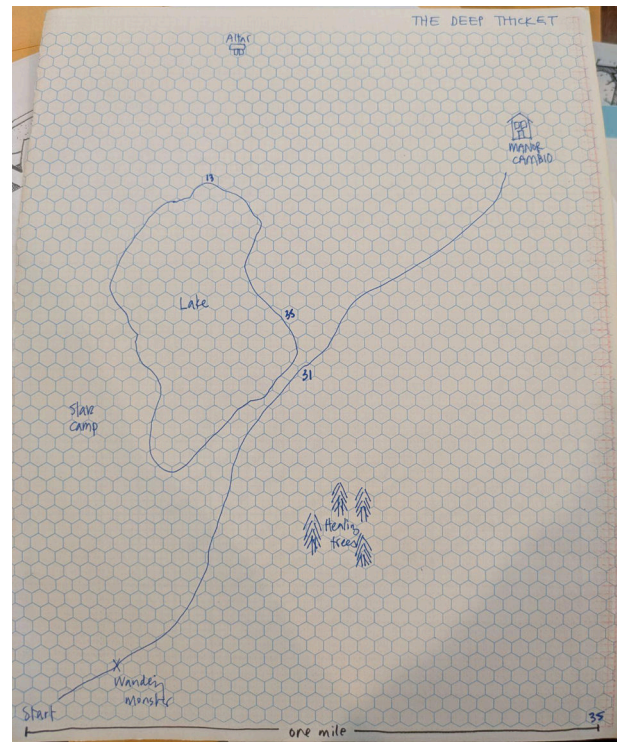
Wulfric Granger, Mage
Force 8 (-1) / Finesse 11 / Wit 14 (+1) / Will 9 | HP 3 / Defense 0 | Spellbook, wand of frost, knife, component pouch, alchemist kit, candle, rations (3), tinderbox, waterskin | Brown eyes, dyed hair, friendly 6'0" | Spells: Charm, detect magic, lock, magic missile, read languages

Cloelia Merenda, Zealot
Force 17 (+2) / Finesse 10 / Wit 7 (-1) / Will 18 (+3) | HP 10 / Defense 4 | Morningstar, shield (+1), chainmail (+3), book of prayers, rations (3), tinderbox, torch, waterskin | Green eyes, black hair, philosophical, 6'3"

Initially, I was somewhat confused whether the rolled value for abilities or the resulting bonus was the ability score, but I determined it was the bonus. Otherwise, spellbook content and the number of prepared spells would be overly generous.

The *Sojourn* rules includes an initial adventure, "Rebel's Rescue," so I chose to play that. A local woman named Anaiya hired the party to rescue her brother Taimon from the manor dungeon of a local prefect named Mevidius Cambio. Taimon is scheduled for execution in six days, so there's a countdown and time limit. The introduction to the adventure suggested four locations: the town of Loknam, seat of a backwater prefecture; a dense jungle; a hot, sticky glade; and the manor itself, its grounds patrolled by five guards.

Using the *One Page Solo Engine* mobile app as an oracle, I asked a couple of questions that would help determine how the party sought entrance to the manor once they arrived. Unfortunately, the group had not heard any rumors about a tunnel used by smugglers, or Cambio's illicit fight club. Front door it is, then!



Then I used the *Genesis* mobile app's Forests component to flesh out the approach through the jungle a little bit, to give the surrounding area—and travel from Loknam—some import. Called the Deep Thicket by locals, the humid, wooded area is marked by several details that might introduce gameplay elements: a single, untouched altar; fallen log crossings; the birthplace of an ancient hero; beasts

roaming freely; swarming insects around certain plants; “safe and peaceful,” a refuge for escaped slaves; everyone gets lost; healing trees; rhythmic pulses in the ground; gnarled mangroves; and a mirror-smooth lake at its heart.

On the way to the jungle from Loknam, the party encountered no threats but met a wandering cleric (a Zealot in *Sojourn* parlance) who’s on a vengeful mission. She is very petite and tries to enlist the aid of the party—to find the altar reputed to be in the jungle.

Equitia: Blue eyes, red hair, 5’2”, athletic, knows about architecture. She has not heard about the smuggler’s tunnel or fight club, either. She does know how to get to the altar, however. It’s located to the north of the lake.

I began mapping the area of interest using hex paper from an old Gamescience *Graph and Hex Book*. I then turned to the Old School Essentials *Classic Fantasy Rules Tome* to manage wilderness exploration. You decide the course of direction, determine if you get lost (“everyone gets lost”), and check for wandering monsters.



Los Angeles Times, July 3, 1959

The party follows the path into the jungle toward the manor. It’s blazoned with markers. When they reach the lake’s eastern edge, they leave the trail to head north. Figuring they’d get lost once past the northern end of the lake on a d6 roll of 1-4, I roll a 5, so they do not get lost.

However, they do encounter a wandering monster before they reach the lake—but not after they leave the path to head north. *Sojourn* includes seven pages

of monsters, so I randomized. A 6 on a d8 indicated a page featuring rats and soldiers, either of which would be appropriate, so I selected rats.

The second play session on the next day is when I realized I’d botched ability scores. I adjusted HP, defense, and spells to accommodate my reinterpretation of the rules. Because the jungle is “safe and peaceful” and rats will typically avoid a fight unless its food or nest is threatened, I consulted the oracle to see whether the party would hold its attack until a threat was presented. They did not, so Thjodoft attacked the rat—a single rat making its way through the trees—killing it.

Returning to their planned route of travel, no wandering monsters accosted them along the lake, and they don’t get lost. Once they’re past the tip of the lake do they get lost? (Apparently, I’d forgotten that I’d pre-checked this.) If lost on a d6’s 1-4, I rolled a 3, so they get lost. That’s more interesting! They’re lost for some time, actually, triangulating where they think the altar is for several hours before locating it.

While searching for the altar, the party sees signs of creatures in the jungle. Zelda, Wulfric, and Cloelia think it’s a bipedal humanoid. Finally locating the altar, they encounter those wandering humanoids, three goblins. Battle is joined! During the combat, Thjodoft kills a goblin, Wulfric is downed, and the remaining two goblins are killed.

Cloelia prays to spare the dying in order to stabilize Wulfric, then lays on hands so he’ll heal to full HP after a night’s rest. So they need to spend the night at the altar before proceeding to the manor. It’s pretty early in the afternoon still, based on my accounting for time. Traveling three miles an hour along the path, 8-9 a.m. brought them to the trailhead, 9-10 to the eastern edge of the lake, 10-10:30 to the lake’s northern tip, then lost until 1:30 p.m.

1:30 p.m. until 6 a.m. is 18 hours, so that’s four and a half watches. While the party rested so Wulfric could recover, Equitia undertook the ritual for which she was seeking the altar. I used *Gemini* to flesh out what that was—and what it was for.

Equitia follows a nature-oriented god, a god of storms and vengeance. The altar appears to be oriented to the wind and air—though Cloelia doesn’t recognize its markings—but is not corrupt. Equitia recites ancient verses, offering material devotions: her breath and a handful of feathers, adding a ring given to her as sign of trust by the now subject of her vengeance. She conducts a ritual of empowerment to amplify her powers and gain advantage over her enemy.

The altar is overgrown with jungle vines, which Equitia clears away. The area feels peaceful and calm, but strong. During the ritual, the wind picks up

slightly with a rush of air, then calms. During the first watch, signs of goblins are seen in the area. The second and third watches bring no events of note. The fourth watch leads to discovering more signs, and the morning dawns quietly.

That suggests a possible adventure hook: What are goblins doing in a usually peaceful area so close to a town and prefect's manor? Are they the same goblins as those encountered, or different?

In the next session, I'll start at the altar at dawn of day No. 2 of six. Five days remain before Taimon will be executed. Will they reach the manor, gain entrance, and rescue him in time?

Game Report: Kerzmielzorg (cont.)

We gathered at John's house March 9 to continue the campaign. The party now includes five characters because we've been joined by a new player named Justin, who's playing a minotaur bard. He also plays in John's Mongoose *Traveller* campaign.

The adventure resumes in the midst of combat aboard the walking vault, which the party had just entered. (E&E #22) A duergar calls out in alarm, and the fire giant leading the walking vault through the city turns, taking notice. Wami, my PC, takes control of the robot utilizing one of the Toymaker's automated scarabs.

Shades of *Robotech*, *Battletech*, or *Pacific Rim*, Wami directs the vault to punch the fire giant. Inkspot casts flee on the giant, who backs up some. My notes end there, but we succeeded in defeating the duergar, fire elemental, and giant, eventually handing the controls over to the Toymaker, who absconds with the walking vault, leaving town. That seems like more hand waving than actually ensued, but I was too caught up in the game to take more detailed notes, apparently.

For my bastion roll in between encounters, I rolled 66, a friendly visitor. Wearing a dark cloak disguising a gold cloak underneath, he seeks the use of my library, offering 300 gp for the privilege. The purpose of his research, as reported by my librarian, was to seek details of a time during which evil dragons didn't rule this place. He wanted to learn the secrets of Kerzmielzorg. The visitor came from far to the south and is affiliated with the temple of Pelor. My librarian suggested that he is welcome to return in the future. (The ghost of Drelthar, the white cloak, doesn't make himself known to the visitor.)

We then determine what to do next. Three guild bosses were present at the Scar when Terrapocalypse the dragon attacked. The kenku have abandoned their

treehouses. The crocs stopped trading entirely. And, when Wami has dinner with his librarian friend Lane, he learns that the white cloaks visited her archives, as well. Free with their gold, they visited the arcana section, also seeking maps of the city, specifically old maps featuring old roads and the river pre-chasm. They also looked at the city's current system of wells and water.



Los Angeles Times, July 3, 1959

Most of the city's attention, in terms of gossip, focuses on the crocs. After a bold attack on the duergar (the party's hijacking of the walking vault), security teams are being sent into the tunnels beneath the city. The group gives Captain Boon some gold to get out of Dodge for a time. Along the chasm, crocs are found without the backs of their heads, all but their faces removed. Murnald examines a corpse procured from a family member; there is a distinct scent of acid glands.

The crocs have retrenched to their lair in the Belch at the edge of the chasm. People asking about the crocs are also found without the backs of their heads. Varh gathers information at the Croc Roll Inn. We determine that the marks at the backs of guild members' necks suggest the mind control attack of an illithid, a mind flayer. Perhaps they've become thralls

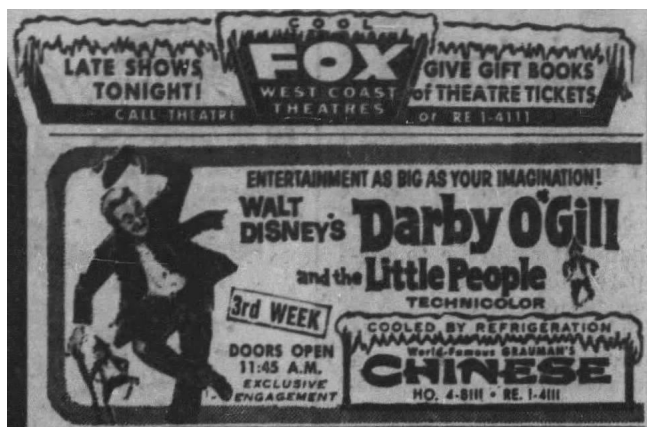
controlled while fully conscious and mobile.

We find a croc skull with its insides licked clean, the bone crushed on the outer edges and decide to go to the crocs' headquarters. Procuring plans of the property, the party determines that the mansion is built over a very long tunnel. Inside the mansion, party members see a swirling mass of dense viscous vapor, perhaps a croc soul train.

Speculating that there's a secret, extra-dimensional vault beyond the tunnel, the group explores the mansion grounds, locating a door floating above a pool of murky water. The adventurers are beset by whomping trees approaching the house, gain access to the floating door when Wami flies up to it, then carrying to party inside a bag of holding or portable hole. (My notes say portable hole.) There are stairs down from the door, but when you look around the edge, you just see the yard.

At the bottom of the stairs, there's a muddy island punctuated by armoires. The party is attacked by several demons and vlocks, as well as a banshee, who proves quite formidable. Wami utilizes Hunger of Hadar and lightning bolt, and we eventually defeat the guardians, collecting much treasure, including some characters' first magic items.

As the adventurers leave, they are seen by several illithid, entering through another door beyond the muddy island.



Los Angeles Times, July 10, 1959

The Ignorable Theme: Desired NPC Reactions

The Ignorable Theme this month is “Players who need /want NPCs to react to their PCs in particular ways.” I can understand the idea but am not overly sympathetic. As a player, the only control I have over how NPCs react to my player character is its charisma or similar abilities, the actions I take, and the interactions I have with them. (And the GM's handling of the NPC.) It's more my responsibility than it is theirs, and any actions undertaken by the GM might

be determined to serve the story, or be randomized. Similarly, as a DM or GM, while I want everyone to have fun at the table and for their characters to do very cool things, I can't imagine that I'd allow any kind of presumed or scripted NPC reactions to a given PC—unless the game supported it.

As a GM, what I might do is indicate that I've noticed they desire a specific kind of reaction to their character, and that that can't just happen on its own. I'd encourage them to roleplay appropriately and take appropriate actions to inspire such reactions and responses, if that's what they're interested in. I'll do my best to recognize and reward such roleplaying, and if dice come into play—rolled checks—they'll still contribute to the outcome.

Most of the time, I've experienced other players at a table seeking such reactions, even from other players. They'd like their character to be more mysterious, intimidating, or impressive than it might actually be. Or, they don't want to roleplay their way to such mystery, intimidation, or impression.

One player, during an in-store *Dungeons & Dragons* 4E campaign, adjusted all of their actions to be more flowery, literally. Scimitar attacks were made in arching cascades of lavender flower petals, and the like. It was fun and well-intended, but the end result was more intrusive and irritating than just unobtrusive flavorful fluff. That doesn't really fit the theme because they didn't expect it to have any in-game effect, or to change how NPCs reacted, but I remain querulous to this day.

What did the player desire out of such embellishment? Perhaps they merely wanted more attention, now that I think about it. Or, they wanted to be more creative; both could be true. Did they want other players or player characters to treat their character differently? In that case, that couldn't really be accomplished through fluffy changes, but hewing closer to the theme, I think that their behaviors and actions as a character would have a stronger impact.

So the answer is roleplaying. (And perhaps a favorable GM or dice rolls.) Not expecting, desiring, or requesting.

Some games support this kind of thing, with mechanics for reputation, stature, renown, or infamy. That's actually a really effective way to support this kind of situation over time, even if the desire might exist at lower levels or earlier in the game. As PCs undertake more adventures and accomplish more in game, their position in the game world becomes more firm and established. NPCs would be more likely to react or respond differently as that progresses, even if there are rolls to randomize. You could even house rule such an aspect if using a system that didn't

support it naturally.

Were I a for-profit GM, I might answer differently. (One of the players in the Kerzmielzorg game moonlights as a paid GM.) Then, my ratings or repeat business might depend on players getting a more specific, desired experience out of a game. You know, customer service and value for money paid.

But when it's just friends at the table, roleplaying is the way. Or, a game that supports reputational boons and banes.

Comments on Alarums & Excursions #592

It's 4:30 p.m. on deadline day, so I might not wrap this up in time, but I wanted to include some comments on the previous edition. Worst case scenario, Lee Gold holds onto this until next month.

In *Tantivy* dated Jan. 29, **Lee Gold** remarked on furnace and air conditioning maintenance. Preparing for an eventual move, we've been having work done on our home. So far, we've updated the HVAC, adding air conditioning and a vent in my wife's home office; upgraded light fixtures, a medicine cabinet, and a doorbell—we haven't had a working doorbell in the 14 years we've lived here; I haven't missed it—and this week brought a bathroom remodel with a new vanity, shower and bath, toilet, and tile floors. Our HVAC installers also returned this week to make some adjustments requested by an inspector. The work will result in a nicer home, but it's a little distracting while working from home.

Lee also mentioned receiving a morning news summary via email. Since the inauguration, I've been trying to limit my news reading and doom scrolling. To that end, I signed up for two daily news summary emails: the spicily named *What the Fuck Just Happened Today?* (<https://whatthefuckjusthappenedtoday.com>) and the *1440 Daily Digest* (<https://join1440.com>). I can't say I read both every day, but I've found them a useful way to contain how much news I consume—and therefore how irritated or frustrated I get about the day's events. My wife and I have been contacting our elected officials somewhat frequently to express concern about various events and topics.

In mid-March, Caitlin and I had an appointment at a local bank branch to adjust the names on some of our accounts, as well as to name beneficiaries for them. While there, I took out some cash from the ATM—I always try to do so at our home bank's locations to avoid bank fees—which was depleted the next day when paying our housecleaner. So much for having cash on hand! I'll have to return soon.

Your mention of the upcoming Passover reminded me that while I returned to daily Bible reading to recognize Lent early this month, I have already

stopped keeping up with that practice. Given that Passover is April 12-20 and Easter on April 20 this year, I can resume doing so. I appreciate the unexpected reminder!

Michael Cule's *Mundus Vult Decepi* also details home improvements. Our home, while not excessively tidy generally, has become excessively untidy during our work, as well. For example, there's a bathroom vanity in my wife's home office. We don't think we'll keep it there, we joke. We've had to manage where the cat spends his days so he doesn't disrupt the handymen or gain access to the crawlspace beneath our house if the trapdoor is open. Yes, our home has a trapdoor in the laundry room floor. But just the one. No secret doors or passages otherwise, unfortunately.

I quite enjoyed your approach to "Iggy's Theme: Not a Happy One." Made me chuckle, it did. Your advice to Lisa Padol to not "borrow... trouble from the future" is sound. Regardless, such nervousness is an understandable reaction to something deemed important, even if far in the future.

Thank you, **Pedro Panhoca da Silva**, for explaining the meaning of "free translation" in *Back to Brazilian Gamebooks* Part VI. *O enigma do sol oculto* sounds like a lot of fun! In addition to my two game reports included in this, I've also been enjoying *The Festival of Tombs* (<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/489894/the-festival-of-tombs>), Randall Right's *Dungeons & Dragons* 5E solo adventure that combines aspects of gamebooks and straightforward D&D gameplay.

Sorry to not offer more comments, but it's now just after 5. We'll see if I can sneak this in!



Los Angeles Times, July 17, 1959

BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #39

March 20, 2025, for A&E #593

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Natter

Here I sit, the day before deadline with a workday in between. An unenviable position, seeing as I started this month ahead of the game. I had read A&E #592 within about a week of receiving the paper copy, then put most of my free time into preparation for the Temple of Elemental Evil campaign (Advanced D&D, 1e). I only ran it once in March, on the ides. A crackin' good session, though, if on the short side. Trevor ran another D&D 5e adventure from *Keys from the Golden Vault*. I also squeezed in some prep time for an Arduin Grimoire adventure that a friend wants me to run for him & his daughter.

Work has been wearing me out, although staffing moves that my bosses & I made beginning in summer 2024 are paying dividends now. There are now five staff members in my unit & one student assistant. New staffers are getting the hang of the way our department conducts business. Solid.

Soon after A&E #593 appears in your inbox, my mom should be heading home from the skilled nursing facility. Dad finally retired after 51 years with

the same company. His last day at work was March 12.

Let's see...court. Our most recent court date was February 21—deadline day—so I didn't have anything to report. February 21's settlement conference was uneventful as far as the proceeding goes. Things had moved enough behind the scenes (psychological evaluations and all that) that the prosecution & defense agreed to work on getting the case assigned to a trial courtroom. This is a positive development because the trial court assignment will get us out of the Sacramento County Main Jail building, which houses the court's departments for initial proceedings. We also learned that the original lead attorney for the defense took a promotion & won't work on the case any further. Instead, his (former) second will take the lead. We also learned who her second will be and saw him in the courtroom. As usual, we saw the defendant in court & I'm glad to report that he looks to appreciate the seriousness of the accusations against him.

In other, unrelated court news, I was on standby jury duty for the week of

March 17. Just found out after 5:00 today that the court won't be needing me & I am off the hook. Huzzah!

IN THIS ISSUE

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- Nextish & Gaming News

COMMENTS ON A&E #592

Tantivy (Lee)

I enjoyed & learned something new from your linguistic comments, namely the meaning of the Hebrew word, "ken".

Heh, it is indeed Tim Kask, not *Cask* (hic!).

Mundus Vult Decepi (Cule)

Based on your description of "The Mountain is High," I would play in that campaign. It sounds meaty.

Back to Brazilian Gamebooks – part VI (Pedro & Maira)

O Enigma do Sol Oculto has some fascinating & novel concepts compared to my experience in gamebooks. I've not seen stickers incorporated in any English-language gamebooks, for one, and 1,150 references sounds monstrous. The legacy aspect struck me as an innovation at first, until I remembered that one could carry forward the same character (with equipment & improvements made during previous play) in the Lone Wolf series and Steve Jackson's *Sorcery!* I think that there is a Narnia gamebook series that incorporates legacy play, too. These are the only three gamebook

series in English that I know employ legacy play.

This Isn't the Zine #401 (Lisa)

Thanks for the sympathy.

No worries about the shrinkwrap thing; I was just curious & think that I read too much into your specific wording on the subject.

RYQ who Rufus & Burne are, they are agents of the Viscount of Verbobonc who are building a keep at Hommlet on the viscount's behalf. Rufus is a mid-level fighter & Burne is a mid-level magic-user. Rufus & Burne don't figure prominently in most of my play reports because their duties are specific & rooted in Hommlet. They do provide occasional assistance to the PCs, though it does cost them.

The Silent Temple 41 (Dylan)

The PCs have used the *sleep-slit* throats tactic about three or four times in our Temple of Elemental Evil campaign so far. It is brutal, but the PCs are trying to stymie an invasion of the viscounty by chaotic evil humans, demi-humans, humanoids, & monsters. The party learned that Lareth, a cleric of Lolth & servant of the Temple of Elemental Evil, took up residence in the abandoned moathouse with the express purpose of building a foothold near Hommlet. Combine that with the party having a paladin who can reliably detect evil at will...well, not much quarter will be given unless the party desires captives for questioning.

Reddened Stars (John)

Agree about the “DM’s easy chair”.

RYCT Craig: You wrote a memoir?

RYCT Joshua: why did you stop playing chess, exactly?

Random Access #305 (Joshua)

RYCT Cule: I like this “zoom” idea.

RYCT Brian: In our AD&D campaign, we have natural 20s to hit do maximum normal damage (no damage roll). Their opponents get the same benefit. We find the arrangement quite nice: on exceptional to-hit rolls, one gets a predictable damage output that is still completely within the normal range of the weapon concerned. When I start running The Arduin Grimoire again, I will absolutely use the critical hit and fumble charts in Hargrave’s books. They are brutal, but in line with the game’s vibe & hit point conventions.

Craig Cornered

I’m glad for you and your wife: happy rehabilitation & move!

I enjoyed the F.O.E. writeup.

NEXTISH

I hope to bring back the Temple of Elemental Evil XP tally nextish. I am leaning toward less play report, more data presentation and analysis. We’ll see.

In September 2024, I backed the Melsonian Arts Council’s *Get It At Sutler’s* retail adventure generator for the *Troika!* RPG. I backed it at the

second-highest tier & look forward to print & PDF copies of Sutler’s & four other adventures for Troika. Also in the backerkit are a host of game props for Sutler’s & a cloth tote. Melsonian already sent me PDFs of these materials (not the tote, though) & should ship dead trees to me this week or next. In short, I will have fodder for game reviews in future issues of B&B. Check out www.melsonia.com to see what Sutler’s is about. The adventure generator is highlighted on the homepage.

Melsonian Arts Council recently started a subscription service. For 20 USD per month, subscribers receive any new books released during your subscription period. This could be good or bad, depending on how often Melsonia produces new books—and how good they are. I have been a subscriber for two months now. Nothing arrived for me in month one, but in month two, I received a PDF of *Eye of the Aeons* (which I am going to download once I finish this zine) & notice that they will ship a paper copy & a hardback copy of Troika by the end of March. I only have Troika in PDF, so I am looking forward to this package. Subscription details are on the Melsonian homepage as well.

That is all I have for this. Depending on how you look at it,

1. My apologies
2. You’re welcome

Farewell to the bleak midwinter, spring is here again!

MUNDUS VULT DECEPI

A zine for ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS 593 by Michael Cule of 3 Barratt Place, Easton Street, High Wycombe, Bucks. HP11 1XS. UK. All material is copyright 2025 © Michael Cule

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Read my Blog why don't you?: <https://room3b.blog/>

DAYS IN THE LIFE: More Searching and a Clear out

Yet again looking for a book turned the flat upside down. (The book about Starships for Greg Stolze's TERMINATION SHOCK this time: these are always books I want rather than books I have any need or immediate practical use for.¹) This involved clearing out the corner of the flat that has two bookshelves containing my RPG collection² and that led to me sorting out and wrapping up all the games I am never going to run again or in some cases I've never run at all. In several cases games I have Kick-started in haste and repented at leisure. I got a suitcase two-thirds full of games and ruddy heavy and took it to a one day convention in Milton Keynes to try disposing of the lot.

CONCRETE COW³ is a lovely little local convention full of gamers from the Milton Keynes area who have a taste for the more unusual games and so I had some hopes of clearing out the weirder stuff. I managed to sell three-quarters of it but was left with one big (and heavy item) and a few more things that I will have to put on EBay. The fact that I had to take myself up to MK the day before lugging a very heavy suitcase and sleep at a less than wonderful Travellodge probably means I won't ever visit that con again but in addition to getting rid of a lot of clutter I managed to get a completed session of THE FALL OF MAGIC for the first time which pleased both me and the players I picked up there. My back and knees still complained the next day but you can't have everything.

I'm off to the Eastercon in Belfast and have decided to arrive a day early so as not to find myself turned about the way I was at Glasgow when travel arrangements went wrong.

I'm going to be moderating a panel on RPG game design on Saturday tea-time with Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan⁴ and other luminaries. Should be fun.

HIS DISGUSTING AND DEVIOUS PRACTICES: Where's the next write up?

I went back through my games of the last year or two (as reported in earlier A&Es) in order to find something you might like to read and I would find pleasant to revisit. And which I had recordings of obviously.

I started looking it was in the middle my writeups of the LICTORS campaign and I kept falling into a state of nostalgia and admiration for my earlier self's writing that delayed a decision.

And my decision is not to decide. The material I have not yet written up either uses too much published material (the RUNEQUEST games), is too long ago to have complete written portions of the games (The stories of Aegis, the city with a thousand gates and the mortals the god Uncle recruited to help him) or have no recording at all (the ORPHANS OF THE BROKEN SKY).

So for now, no write up until I either find my way to write up something from what I've got or I start a new game and can write up that.

My Wednesday night game at the moment is GURPS MONSTER HUNTERS with a bunch of overpowered characters working for a shadowy Foundation to stop the things lurking in the shadows. I have had some fun finding the right modern environment for the cryptids, mad scientists and evil wizards and they have passed through brutalist university campuses (gargoyles), a mostly abandoned Welsh mining village (evil corporation implanting mind control parasites at the behest of a time traveller), a RenFaire (demonologists) and Not-Transformers-Honest posing as Ubers to harvest peoples' souls (Milton Keynes).

There's stuff about the enemies of two of the characters which might lead to some revelations

¹ THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF A&E: Did that history book that you bought a duplicate of turn up? ME: It did not!

² At least the ones that aren't on other bits of shelving, like the GURPS and the RQ and the Tekumel and the Harn and the Pendragon...

³ <https://www.concrete-cow.org.uk/>

⁴ THE PPoA&E: Namedropper! Snob!

about What Is Really Going On but I'm wondering where the really sweet place is between the limited cartoonishness of MONSTER OF THE WEEK and the over-complicated power and skill lists of GURPS.

I'm going to have a bit of a break with two players away the next three weeks and one (Pum) away for a further five weeks after that. (Hmm, he's going to Japan... Maybe I should do something Samurai-ish.)

Monday nights see Hartley's Midgard adventure coming to an end in a distant city with the only teleport gate on the whole flat world that the player's haven't visited yet. After that I don't know. I'm going to ask them what their limits are and how weird I can get with theme and mechanics. I would like their permission to do something out of our usual stomping grounds.

I ran a couple of playtest things with the Wednesday night group. I'm not allowed to be more specific (I think I'm not) but you may be able to guess given my enthusiasms. They indulged my desire to influence The Future Of The Hobby.

IGGY'S THEME: DO YOU NOT KNOW WHO I AM?

Graham is playing an Angel in the MONSTER HUNTERS game. He is built to be the group's Face: the person who talks to the civilians who don't know about the monsters. And he is endowed with Charisma and Appearance bonuses up the wazoo and a lack of sexual scruples that means he will try to seduce every attractive person who they need the co-operation of.⁵

This trait of his may or may not be related to why he was chucked out of Heaven: his memories have been obscured on the topic. That may or may not be related to his enemy who seems to be someone from his former workplace with the ability to impersonate him who goes around and makes sure people don't always remember their encounter with him kindly.

And I find the fact that the Angel always does this and always has the ability to get a friendly reaction to his proposals if not an outright "Hell Yes!" to be irritating. I want to put things in his path. I want to put stumbling blocks in his path in a way I don't want to put them in the path of the Ritual Path Magician or the gun-bunny.

It may be that I am jealous of Graham's character

for being such a blatant fantasy-satisfying ego boost which is ridiculous at my time of life. (I do not think I am jealous of Graham which would be even more ridiculous.)

Part of the problem is that I have to challenge the players by challenging their characters and this is harder for some characters than others. I'm not sure how far I'm allowed to go in making their lives difficult. It is Bad GM Behaviour to blatantly take away from them the abilities they have paid for in character points. But perpetual success is dull in anyone and the same shtick repeated week after week is hard work.

What I probably should be doing is putting things their characters are not built to handle in the way of the characters. Give Martin's Gun-Bunny a dilemma they can't shoot their way out of. Give Graham a challenge in the fighting area or have his enemy sic a demon hunter on him. (He's a fallen Angel after all, just not fallen all the way.)

That may be a generally accepted way to make the lives of characters more interesting.

COMMENTS ON 592:

LEE GOLD: RYCT SPIKE Y. JONES: In none of the three family deaths I was around for did anyone ask anyone to identify the body. Hum. Presumably the evidence of the doctors at the hospital my father was in and the staff at the nursing homes my mother and aunt were in were thought good enough. I got to see my mother after her death and waited by her side for the funeral director to turn up but I suppose someone could have slipped a ringer in. Just didn't occur to me as a possibility. Nor to Parliament either that I know of. // I get my main news from the BBC web page: have for years. I was in a cab in London on Saturday and the news and discussion program on the radio in the cab was so blatantly pushing an agenda ("the Chancellor of the Exchequer is an ignoramus and a menace") that I nearly exploded. **RYCT Me:** You are more fastidious than me (more fastidious than most people) in noting that some things are what you have heard but not confirmed of your own knowledge. // Indeed every language has its own mental map. I have become aware that my mental map isn't the same as people who are using another variant of English, the dialect of a differing class, region or viewpoint. And just as happens with the Bible, people hear me using words that are not part of their dialect and assume things about me that are not true. It depresses me a little that I have no linguistic talent to speak of and the little bits of other tongues I have learned are from random chance or

⁵ Only women so far but who knows where this is going.

rote repetition. I'm especially annoyed that I can't understand Ancient Greek so I can't tell where the mistakes are that I am sure Plato and Aristotle are making and also German so I can properly disagree with Kant.

LISA PADOL: RYCT Me: I started writing THE MOUNTAIN IS HIGH with just the idea of the Old General and his entourage. I began the REIGN version by generating characters by picking packages from the random chargen system and putting together believable starting characters. This brought in a lot of the background details of the PCs as I said last time. Having statted out the PCs and the Old General I turned to creating the Factions... and collapsed in the face of both too little detail to depict believable opposition and a capable Company for the PCs and too much work to get the Companies done. Also I quailed at the amount of explanation I would have to give. So I just damn well simplified. I think REIGN is the system I'd want to use for a long term campaign in that setting but for a one off Hell No! // I think it can be fun to have the majority of the PCs in a party being Bertie Wooster types who rush into danger, confident in their victory and have one player be Jeeves to the whole lot of them who follows them out of a sense of duty, extracts them from the soup and clears up their messes. But too much Prudence⁶ can bog you down. // **RE YOUR THOUGHTS ON MY IGTHTOTS:** I still think 'freeform' means 'LARP'. // I think the linguistic problems arise most fiercely when the GM says something and the player nods as if his understanding was complete and goes on for several minutes before the difference comes out. And we should always keep The Gazebo Story in mind. // And oh yes, I know how some players assume that I am making their achieving anything impossibly difficult just because... because I'm a meany. Or something. Or they like being miserable.

SPIKE Y. JONES: RYCT Me: I think I was arguing for more rear-echelon support services being united into one organisation. Even if they have to go to the front (and how often did the Royal Army Dental Corps⁷ have to do that), they don't need distinctive cap badges and organisations. Would a Marine make a better dentist because he's a rifleman? **RYCT ATTRONACH:** I rather like a good critical hit/critical miss table (though RIFTS/PALLADIUM RPG takes things too far) and I despair at the GURPS Critical Hit table which makes the most common result No Extra Effect.

⁶ A lovely young lady I knew at University. There would never be a surplus of her.

⁷ No, really there was such a body. No longer with us.

PATRICK RILEY: Gosh, the cons in America run long game sessions! I've seen people playing boardgames for six to eight hours at a stretch, or LARPS but never tabletop games.

ATTRONACH: Wow! What a picture!

JOHN REDDEN: RYCT Me: BitD is great for creating filler adventures when long running games fall short of their needed numbers. But it only really sings when there is a campaign in which the Crew grows and changes. Which we never seemed to really manage.

JERRY STRATTON: RYCT Lee:
<<CHORTLE>> <<APPLAUSE>> **RYCT**

SPIKE JONES: INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS was 1956. **RYCT Me:** I remember a prescient SF story by Mack Reynolds about the ways to hack a universally issued credit/ID card. Sometime in the seventies I think. The protagonist managed to hack the system with a wax model of a thumbprint// The recording is there to bring the event back to a memory of someone who was there (i.e. Yrs Truly) and cause him to create an artistic interpretation of the event that captures the best bits and slides over anything liable to cause embarrassment to GM or players. It's true that if you didn't already know the players you'd have a horrible job getting the swing of things. But the aim is art rather than record keeping.

PUM: RYCT Me: People who tell me to 'adapt' one game to another have no idea how much trouble that is! Watch me scowl the next time Alan suggests I try GURPS Glorantha! That said, a PbtA version of NBA might be possible. Or a BitD... The greater integration of the Crew into the system might work... Let me go and think about this for a while.

JIM VASSIAKOS: Plankwell: Press Gangs In SPAAACE! I'm not at all sure how that would work given the need for high tech knowledge even in the most ground poundy bits of the Imperium. Mind you, I never really understood (still don't) how Conscription is supposed to work over interstellar distances and conscription is just press gangs with better PR. I've always assumed that Mark Miller included it in original TRAVELLER because that was how military service looked in 1970s America. // **RYCT Me:** Do let me know (do let us all know) if the RPG Writeup Writers Circle comes to fruition. I can't commit to taking part though: my laziness and general reluctance to take on new stuff argues against it. // Thanks to you and Tim for the info on Xenophobia/philia in TRAVELLER games.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: RYCT Me: (And in general reply to those who talked with me about the BOOK OF JOB) I think the difference between our readings is that you can see the narrative in terms that are compatible with your faith and I hear the story in terms of doubting that there will ever be a moment when all things are revealed and reconciled and God's actions will make sense.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: Commiserations on your particular national woes. My memory says that I learned Trudeau was on the way out just before Trump started to talk about the 51st state giving the impression that he took advantage of what he perceived as a weakness. As for blaming Zelensky it's clear that like all bullies Trump blames the victim for all the trouble because they committed the unnatural act of resisting. I hope nobody in your neck of the woods believes that giving in to him will bring them the advantages (such as they are) of full American citizenship. You'd be recent immigrants who had to learn how to do things the American way first.

MARK NEMETH: And sympathies to your particular national woes too! As a former civil servant to one still on the books I recognize the idiot political prejudice (it cannot be said to be a philosophy) which assumes that no bureaucrat has a Proper Job as one that our nations are both infested by. // I've got to disagree with your interpretation of Jonah's reasons for avoiding Nineveh. "God," says Jonah, "you were never, ever going to destroy Nineveh. You're a gracious, forgiving deity and it was all bluff and bluster." If you believe that a) Jonah knew that his prophetic voice was what was needed to move the Ninevehans (Sp?) to repentance and b) that he wanted them to suffer, I suppose that might make sense but it's stretching what there is in the text a bit to go that far. // As to Job, well the idea that the message of the text is that you can/must trust God to know best, not only is this pre-Christian version of God not clearly all knowing but in the fiction of Job we see God bragging to Satan about Job and putting Job to the torture and his family to death for no better purpose than to prove a point.

We must concede God's greater power and knowledge but his wisdom and goodness are nowhere in evidence in the text of Job. To say that 'this being is more powerful than me and therefore I should obey him' is far too useful to those who only have earthly measures of supreme power for me to accept it and I'm not at all sure it follows from the premise that an infinitely powerful being exists to my obedience to it being morally required.

It may sometimes be that we have to say 'this being is more powerful than me so I must obey him or die' but that is a very different thing. 'Must' acknowledges this is coercion. 'Should' internalises the idea that power brings virtue and justice with it. Which ain't necessarily so. // The power of Balaam to be a prophet is odd from the point of view of later monotheism. It seems to be a power inherent in him which he used to find employment with the richest employers around. It doesn't appear to be a gift of God (as prophecy is in later stories) or even of a god. Perhaps he is more of a wizard than a prophet? Perhaps that was what 'prophet' meant back then?

Until next time; May your local political situation (and our global political situation) be a little brighter next time. Or at least no worse.



THE DRAGON'S BEARD

APRIL 2025

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INTERESTING TIMES

As a government employee, our uncertain future is an ever present specter in the minds of my family. My organization has been decimated, twice. Remaining employees are working twice as hard with half as much and uncertain if they will be working at all in the next month or two. We carry on as best we can, as dedicated to the mission we have always been, coping with dark humor that we are living through “interesting times.”

DESIRED NPC REACTIONS

People are complicated. They are not always predictable, even someone you think you know very well. Think about all the times you’ve seen or heard about a rejected marriage proposal. Certainly, they all expected the answer to be “Yes!”, and more than a few “No!”s should not have been a surprise, but there were surprises nonetheless. And some never ask the question in fear of the uncertainty. While a prospective spouse is no NPC, the predictability is no different.

My NPCs are not playthings in the game world for the players to use, abuse, and bend to every expectation of the player. But they are not arbitrary and capricious either. Social norms in the campaign world will generally be followed, and each NPC has their own degree of dignity, morality, values, motivations, and self-preservation. I want my NPCs to make the game world feel as immersive as possible. Automatic compliance and cooperation with the players characters might make the game easier but also extremely dull. Characters and the world sets boundaries.

I do want to give my players the game experience they want. I ask them about what they want to see in a game — what type of adventure, what type of monster, what types of environments, and what types of rewards when I build their game. I can not recall any ever telling me they wanted a certain type of social interaction with a NPC, but if they did, I would probably establish an NPC who would have the right temperament and be in the right situation at the right time to enable such an interaction for the player character.

My player once remarked that enemy NPCs did not seem to be inclined to surrender for self-preservation. This was often a result of the PCs being

over powered too quickly to enable a surrender or plea for mercy. One time session, I had several NPCs who were quick to surrender, which created a problem that the players never had to deal with so far: what to do with the “prisoners”. Letting them go risked letting go to get help. Keeping them made stealth nearly impossible and risked betrayal in the middle of fight. Worse was when another NPC surrendered, then Another! Players had to be careful what they wished for.

Some of my players struggled unpleasant or uncooperative NPCs. They preferred to either ignore the NPCs or attempt to force differential behavior. NPCs responded by either retreating, reporting the PCs to authorities (usually civil leadership), or becoming passive aggressive (which really drove them nuts). It took a while for the player to actually treat the NPCs like real humans and engage them better, learning more about them and what motivated them so they could better engage in civil discourse and have better expectations of each other.

My most memorable NPCs haven’t been the compliant ones that made the player’s tasks easy. The most memorable NPCs have been the ones who acted independently of the PCs, often causing the PCs to react, usually villains or the surprise betrayer. The other memorable NPCs were those the PCs invested a relationship to create a bond that weathered good and bad times. The random NPC who accepted a stranger’s kiss or offered an inexplicably good deal on a desired magic item did what the players wanted but were soon forgotten. I try not to let my players down with compliant and predictable NPCs.

GOOD HOMES

My son was home from college on Spring Break this month. He brought his girlfriend as usual. He also brought two other friends from college who needed a place to stay over the break. We were happy to offer our home for them to spend Spring Break. It’s not Cancun or Daytona Beach, but the room and board is free and the game collection is large. They all had homework assignments and projects they were working on. They also slept till noon daily, staying awake until 3 am nightly — the circadian rhythm common for many college students. We also played many board games: 22 in all. One of the boys was a big hobby gamer like my son. The other was up for anything. And the girlfriend was easing herself into the hobby, but still liked to keep game light.

The big hit, or perhaps just a surprise hit, was [Hail Hydra](#). *Hail Hydra* is a deduction game set in the Marvel universe. Players are all superheroes fighting against various hydra villains to save New York. However, some of the heroes are secretly Hydra agents

waiting for the right moment to betray the others a secure a victory for Hydra. During a mission, heroes contribute to the fight against a villain by playing one or more combat cards secretly, and the combat card could be positive or negative values. Since the combat cards are randomly drawn, heroes may have to play negative cards which may make them look like Hydra agents; and Hydra against may end up helping the heroes to either hide their allegiance or because they do not have enough negative cards to use. The mission leader collects all the combat cards and then adds them all up, dealing all the positive damage (if any) to the villain until they knock the villain out. After each battle with the villain, the players may vote a hero they suspect is a Hydra agent off a mission to reduce their impact on the fight. The heroes have to defeat all the villains before Hydra destroys New York or Hydra wins.

The game sat unplayed in my collection for several years. Because of the betrayal mechanic, my family did not express any interest in the game, despite the Marvel theme. I finally moved it, still sealed, to the purge pile. But I sensed the game might be something the college group might be interested in, so I was sure to include it with the rest of the games while they were here. Once I described the game to them, they wanted to play it right away. We ended up playing the game twice in a row, one of the few games to earn multiple plays during their stay.

In the first game, the two college friends were Hydra agents and the hobby gamer clearly took charge of managing all the voting. The card draws by the heroes were abysmal and we were fighting a losing battle early, failing to defeat the hydra villains before they could damage New York. While New York was getting beat up, accusations amongst the boys over who was the Hydra agent. We were able to ferret out one of the Hydra agents and remove him from the mission, but the remaining Heroes still struggled to defeat the next villain before damaging New York badly. Both Hydra agents revealed themselves, allowing them to further damage New York and secure a win for Hydra.

In the second game, the Hydra agents were me and my son. The heroes fared much better against the villains attack New York for the first two rounds. As before, one of the college boys took lead in the team discussions before voting. No one trusted the former Hydra agent, especially as the two college boys seemed to be teaming up again. My



son became the obvious suspect, while I remained undetected and unsuspected. During a mission, the heroes hatch a plan to force everyone to switch cards, thus exposing my son the Hydra agent (who passed his cards to his girlfriend seated next to him), but left me undetected since I passed my cards to my son who would not expose his Hydra partner. During a round of voting, my son's girlfriend suspected him but still targeted her other accused at the vocal player leading the discussion. I, on the other hand, threw her under the bus by making a baseless accusation. During the next round of fighting, the villain was someone that HAD to be defeated in one round or he would revert all the damage he received to New York, which would be a lot. During the draw, I ended up with a lot of positive cards, and I quickly announced that I could defeat the villain all by myself. New York was still at full health and any failure or betrayal will result in too little damage to New York before my exposure. So I sacrificed the villain and defeated him soundly. Suspicion was no longer on me, the powerful Black Panther who defeated the villain all by himself (well, I provided enough positive cards that we could not only defeat the villain but sluff off some negative cards for the team — I still had plenty of negative cards for the future fight). When the next round of voting happened, they voted off the girlfriend (who was indignant of the accusation), my son, and the vocal leader (as a consolation). However, my son declared his allegiance to Hydra, and was thus able to make an attack on New York. As we gathered our combat cards, I played all my high value negatives. The group wanted me to use my special ability to double the result of our combat, and I "reluctantly agreed". As I gathered the cards, they were heavily negative — the only remaining hero in the group fight only had one positive card of small value to contribute. My negative cards were overwhelming, then doubled, and every body groaned. And I turned over my allegiance coin to reveal the Black Panther as a Hydra Agent, dealing the final damage to New York. It was a major surprise to everyone. They college students loved the game and talked about it all night.

Despite all the enjoyment the college kids expressed about the game at dinner, I knew the game would not get any more play at home. The family was not sold on it. If anything, it solidified their dislike of the game. When the boys were getting ready to head back to college at the end of the week, I gave them the game. I told them that they game would find a better home with them, sowing discord amongst their friends at college. They were happy for the gift and looked forward to sharing it with their friends. I can't wait to hear how it went.

Other games played: [Forest Shuffle](#), [7 Wonders: Architects](#), [Qwixx](#), [Space Base](#), [Battle Line: Medieval](#), [Champions of Midgard](#), [Concordia](#), [Everdell: The Complete Collection](#), [Fleet: The Dice Game](#), [It's a Wonderful World](#), [Mystic Vale](#), [Quacks](#), [Morels](#), [Roll for the Galaxy](#), [Sagrada](#), [Scythe](#), [Terraforming Mars](#), and [Tiny Towns](#).

It was a busy Spring Break.

Spike Y Jones – RYCTM Re: *Baldur's Gate 3*. I do not think the disparate reactions by the NPCs to the player's decision had anything to do with making NPCs realistic. I feel that a realistic party would consist of a group of people with a shared goal and means to reach that goal. I think the reality of group dynamics works against the NPC composition in BG3 being perceived as realistic. People tend not to want to associate with others who do not share their values, especially if there is a strong adverse reaction to some behavior or ways and means to an end, even if the end is a shared goal. Group dynamics seeks stability and consistency within a group. If a behavior is not tolerable, the group either tries to correct it or the group adopts the behavior as acceptable. Someone might tolerate a slight once or twice, but eventually it leads to conflict within the group. The group will evaluate the value one person (and their behavior) against the other (and their behavior) to what best benefits the group overall, leading to the rejection or adoption of a person and behavior. Even when accepted into the group, the party can have the NPC "wait" in the main camp, so the NPC is not rejected outright, but benched (to borrow a sports term) for a mission. The adventure is complex and requires a variety talent and behavioral attitudes to execute some of the mission tasks successfully. Rarely is one NPC the perfect companion throughout the game. Getting the most out of the missions requires the swapping of NPCs depending on the mission (if one know ahead of time). Having a less than optimal NPC mix does not equate to failure but it does mean that some items, benefits, and story elements are not available because of the missing NPC. It is not a clean extending of the sports metaphor to say that NPCs swapping in the party is no different that player swapping on the team to match the situation (run package, pass, package, option package, etc) because the entire team agrees with how the team functions and recognizes the need to apply strength and specialized skills to specific situations. There is no player on a cohesive team who objects the another player on a team and how they contribute to the team. Well, they are players who do that, but they tend to be viewed as selfish and either learn to accept the value of everyone on the team or eventually get traded. Toxic players are not tolerated on teams for long. I do not think that any of the NPCs in BG3 fall into the category of toxic, but there plenty of conflicting values between the NPCs that create challenges for the player to keep the team together. If these were characters on a tabletop role playing game, I suspect that some strong words would be exchanged between the players. Nothing rose to the level of PvP (yet — I have not finished BG3, so I may be in for a surprise), but the disharmony among the NPCs is something that probably only the video game could get away with. The player could dismiss the NPC, but why would an NPC join a party that clearly has a prob-

lematic character already in it?

So why add that layer of challenge to the game? The life and death situation facing the characters seem to outweigh any petty personnel conflicts within the group. Could the NPCs all been given a compatible values set that enabled an easily manageable group operating in harmony? Sounds dull. And it does not provide for interesting story elements. If everyone shares the same values, where is the challenge in deciding who goes on a mission and who stays? Only one set of decisions seem to matter to the group, so there is no real challenge in agonizing two or more different decisions the choice would be obvious. More importantly, I think, is that certain decisions paths and experiences would not even be an option with an NPC group with homogenous values. Paths that lead through morally questionable encounters are only feasible with some NPCs who are comfortable in those environments. Best to leave the others at home. I think the various NPCs with their varying background and values enables the designers to provide more diverse environments and situations for the players to experience, with the assistance of an NPC up to the challenge while preserving the values of other NPCs and their suitability in other different situations. Sure, a player may decide to stick with just one favorite NPC, but the sequence of events is going to take the team through some challenging times that would test, change, and traumatize an NPC (if realistic) and probably for the worst. I think the various values allows the players to experience different play styles also and feel the consequences of forcing the group through incompatible stages of the game. In short, I think the various values and reaction by the NPCs facilitates plausible willingness to explore and have improved success in a broader range of experiences than a homogenous set of NPC values and reactions. It is a good design decision to experience the game world at the total of total investment in any one specific NPCs story and character development.

Joshua Kronengold – I appreciate the praise on turning the initial combat reaction confusion into a plot thread in the Bards' War campaign. I think you are peeking into my session notes I have yet to write!

Lee Gold – Once again, I am starting late, despite all my best intentions. Issue is due in one hour. I hope I finish in time. Holiday meals at the Gold house sound delicious.

Dylan Capel – I plan to take better notes the next time I solo-play *Pendragon: The Fall of Roman Britain*. There are several session reports on BGG. One does a good job narrating the turns as an epic saga. One thing I noticed in most session reports is the challenge of keeping the Bots and NPC moves properly managed. It is easy to confuse the proper execution of the NPC moves. The player's assessments of bot plans and

strategy are helpful to understanding the NPC tree actions. My next play may take months to complete.

Lisa Padol – Re: Jealous NPCs in *Dragon Age*. Yes, romanced NPCs did get jealous if another NPC was romanced. And they ALWAYS knew if you cheated.

I use [Ree Drummond's Chocolate Pie recipe from the Pioneer Woman](#).

Ingredients

1 1/2 cups sugar
1/4 cup cornstarch
1/4 tsp. salt
3 cups whole milk
4 egg yolks
6 1/2 oz. bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped
2 tsp. vanilla extract
2 Tbsp. butter
1 pie crust, baked and cooled (or can use Oreo or graham cracker crust)
Whipped cream, to serve
Dark Chocolate bar for shavings

Directions

In a medium saucepan, stir or whisk together the sugar, cornstarch, and salt. Pour in the milk and egg yolks, whisking to combine. Stir over medium heat until the mixture just barely comes to a boil and becomes thick, about 6 to 8 minutes (maybe less, maybe more; just watch it). The second it starts to bubble and thicken (it should be thick like pudding), remove it from the heat. Add the chocolate, vanilla, and butter, and stir until everything is beautifully combined.

Pour the pudding into the pie crust (if there is extra, spoon it into small dishes) and place in the fridge, uncovered, to chill for 4 hours.

Cut it into slices and serve with whipped cream. I also shave chocolate off a dark chocolate bar to add an interesting garnish to the pie topping.



Jim Vassilakos – From my personal experience, I can confirm that I have several writing projects that have stalled. My work writing takes so much of my writing out of me that it is a challenge to get back onto the writing desk and be very productive again. Maybe in my retirement when my work writing does consume my words per day production. I just hope I still have energy for it then! Glad to hear that your wife your favorite person. I've told my wife that many times. The kids know it, too. They tease me by asking why she is the favorite, and I point out that the kids left me after 18 (or so years); my wife has been with me for more than 32 years. And she still talks to me!

Spike Y Jones – I really love the cover of A&E. It strikes me right in the nostalgia. It brings me back to 8th grade, drawing scenes from my D&D campaign on notebook paper in class, getting asked by passing students about what was I drawing, and hiding it from the teacher to avoiding getting caught drawing in class. At least I was not carving into our little wooden desks.

Everyone Else — RAEBNC. Frankly, I ran out of time and I apologize ahead of time for any spelling mistakes and incoherent thoughts from failing to proof the zine.



MERMECOLION AT A PICNIC #463

Written by Spike Y Jones from his home at 57 Admiral Boulevard, Dundalk, Maryland, 21222-3945, as he deals with the schedule changes during the new Trump era, which include both a reduction in the number of departmental press briefings (reduced from daily to weekly for the White House, daily to monthly for the State Department, and down to zero so far for the Pentagon) and the increase in President Trump's media events (including a number each week that are listed as Closed Press on initial White House official schedules, but which sometimes, unpredictably, become Open Press after the fact), which somewhat balance out but are difficult to schedule limited transcribing resources for.

e-mail to spikeyj@crosslink.net to ask about the biggest change will be told about the fact that President Trump has more events on Fridays than the Biden administration did, making the Evil Uber Boss's decision to give multiple transcribers and editors Monday-to-Thursday schedules a problem.

Phone callers to (410) 282-1640 to inquire about Spike's health will be told that Spike's too busy falling apart to worry about his health.

COMMENTS ON #591

LEE GOLD: Re Los Angeles' Weekly COVID Rate: I read recently that so far the 2024/2025 flu season has been deadlier than the 'rona season.

Re My Boxing Week/Kwanza/Hanuk-kah Vacation: It went well enough, but now I'm really worried about going up to Canada for Boxing Week 2025. My Green Card expires in December '25, and the rules say you can only apply for renewal 6 months in advance, so June '25. But with the current goings on, I'm worried about delays in processing. And even if I get the new Green Card in time for the trip, I'm worried about tensions, politics, and policies at the border, none of which can be predicted 9 months in advance. Heck, I might have to cover over some bumper stickers and remove the Canadian flag pin from my label for our planned trip to Texas in August.

Re Billionaires Paying Politicians With Cheques Instead Of Cash: Yes, legitimate campaign donations are made with cheques or direct transfers of some sort.

But cheques are traceable through banks, so they're not usually used for bribes. Investigators found 13 gold bars and \$486,000 in cash stashed in various place in former Senator (now convict) Bob Menendez's house during his bribery investigation.

Re Using Word 97 Because The Ease Of Seeing And Using The Toolbar That Has All The Functions You Need: Things would be different if you could customize a toolbar,

combining functions from different toolbars that you really need onto a single one, and removing features that are nothing but clutter for you. Heck,, just remembering where to find the button to click to Close a file in the three different versions of Word I have on my work computer is an unnecessary chore.

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND

MARIA ZUCOLOTTI: Re Quick Combat In *Deus De Garra*: If someone goes through the entire book choosing the Quick Combat result each battle, is he likely to succeed in the adventure?

MICHAEL CULE: Re Angels Changing From God's Momentary Messengers To Permanent Entities With Individual Identities: A change that can be blamed on the Book of Daniel, the last-written book of the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament), and the one probably the most influenced by Judea's neighbouring countries/cultures.

Re The Ethnicity Of Job: There are traditions that he is a descendant of Esau (the brother of Jacob/Israel), so therefore related to, but not a member of, the Israelites.

Re Whether I'd Want My Pet Insured By The Same Folks That Handle My Health Insurance: I wouldn't want anyone saddled with the USAn health insurance system.

Re How Much The Declaration Of Independence Is Part Of USAn Jurisprudence: Technically it shouldn't be at all, but judges do give it a lot of deference as a guide for determining the mindset of the writers of the

Constitution and other early laws. And as with any other founding document, you only pay attention to the parts you like.

Re Turning On “Biometric Identification” On Your Bank’s iPhone App: In order to file my federal income tax return this year I had to spend an hour setting up passwords and accounts, and having my identity verified (including by way of a 15-second video chat with someone probably in a foreign call centre comparing my driver’s license photo with my live face). I’m told this isn’t standard procedure in other countries.

Re The People Who Wrote The Bible Expecting The People Who Read It To Understand All The Words Used: And there are many words that’s meanings are no longer *exactly* understood. Many of them only appear a single time in the Bible, making them hard to pin down. Heck, even the name of the writer of the Book of Habakkuk is a conjecture, the familiar “daily” in “give us this day our daily bread” is uncertain (although scholars are mostly in agreement that it ain’t “daily”), and just forget about the gopher wood used to build the Ark.

Re You Theoretically Saying “Thank You. That’s Very Interesting. I’ll Take That Under Consideration” To God Or His Messenger: That’s the same thing that a columnist in the newspaper said a teacher should respond to a student who tattles on some other student.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Re *D&D* Classes: Owen KC Stephens said recently that Paizo created 37 classes for *Pathfinder 1st edition* (not counting alternate classes and tie-ins to other IPs). And I recently read online that there are 13 *D&D 5e* classes and 123 subclasses.

Re Small Apartments: I recently read an article saying that Taiwan is considering legislation to require a minimum of 86 square feet for apartments, cracking down on a problem of people subdividing existing apartments.

Re *Agatha All Along*: Mary didn’t think she was going to like this series, but was eventually taken in by it. I thought it was long for what was essentially the origin story of a

single character (and ghostly sidekick) to join the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

GABRIEL ROURKE: Re The Reference To THACO In *A&E* #4 Being In A Zine By The UCLA Computer Club, Not Lee: Wouldn’t be the first time that an outside article writer was confused by the multi-author concept of an APA.

Re The Charisma Of *AD&D* Ogres Depending On Whether It’s Relating To Fellow Ogres Or Other Races: But since Charisma measures persuasiveness, not attractiveness, would that be racial audience dependent? And if so, should there be a general rule that Charisma takes a -1 penalty with similar/allied races, a -2 penalty with distinctly different/enemy races, and a -3 penalty with weird races?

HEATH ROW: Re *Pegasus* Magazine’s Strange General Interest/House Organ Status: Since JG (effectively) didn’t produce any games of its own, it and its predecessors were as close as you could get to being general interest RPG magazines though still house organs. Heck, *Dragon* went through periods of being a semi-general interest magazine, and *White Dwarf* and *White Wolf* both started that way.

Re The Various Government Lists You’re On Because Of Your Group Affiliations And Magazine Subscriptions: Yeah, I have a lot of those, and add the various web searches I have to do as part of my job.

JERRY STRATTON: Re The Desirability Of Black-And-White Marvel Essential Reprints Of Comics Originally Printed In Colour: When the Essentials first came out, I hadn’t bought comics in decades because of the price, and all of a sudden there was an affordable source of reprints -- I could just use my imagination for the missing colours, just like I did with the B&W Marvel comics I got in Quebec on vacations and like Brits had to do for decades.

And speaking of the Brits and Marvel comics, I’m currently reading the Captain Britain omnibus, in full colour -- until a few issues into its run the comic’s sales dropped to the point they couldn’t justify colour, so ran black-and-white for the rest of his tenure. I’m

noticing the colour separations in the omnibus are frequently off and the B&W issues so far have been somewhat muddy/faint, and I'm wondering if that was the case in the originals.

Re Daimon Hellstrom (Marvel's "Son Of Satan") And His Parentage: During the decades I was originally reading comics, Marvel was never clear about the relationship between the various Big Baddy In Hell characters they had running around simultan-eously: Satan, Mephisto, Satannish, Marduk Kurios, Lucifer (plus death gods like Hela and Pluto), at least three of whom were declared to have been the true father of Daimon Hellstrom at one point or another.

CRAIG KAMBER: Re A Word (Besides "Hero") For Someone Who Accomplishes A Hard Task: Eotm (Employee of the Month).

CLARK B. TIMMINS: Re The Decline Of The Castle Under The Threat Of Cannons: I just finished reading *Connections* by James Burke (the companion to the 1978 TV series), and in it Burke says two changes to fortifica-tions were replacement of stone by brick (because it could better absorb the force of the cannon balls), and the philosophy of pushing the defences outward with the construction of bastions, ravelins, and (dry) moats at a distance from the actual walls. The more successful the outer defences were, the less necessary the tall inner wall became.

JIM VASSILAKOS: Re *Basic D&D* Players Who Didn't Convert To *Advanced D&D* Because Of The Mass Of House Rules They'd Already Developed: Considering the continuity between *Basic D&D* and *Original D&D*, that's very likely.

MARK NEMETH: Re Me Being Qualified For Technical Writer And Editor Jobs: They still use humans for that stuff?

Re Contemporary RPG Designs That Mimic Old Scrolls And The Like: Green Ronin's *Testament* (2003) was supposed to have mottled gray page backgrounds of that sort, just to relieve the standard sea of white pages, but the final product came back from the printer something like 20% darker than the earlier page proofs, making the book hard to read in

anything but strong light, and I'm convinced hurting its sales and award performance.

Re Whether Demon-Descendant Tieflings Would Be More Likely To Be Good-Aligned Or Evil-Aligned: In a *D&D* I'd run, I'd expect the majority to be evil-aligned NPCs, but all PC tieflings to be the good-aligned exceptions. There's just more story value in that.

Re You Not Thinking That People Who Read Books After Graduation Are Bizarre Oddballs: But as a gamer, you're already firmly in that category yourself.

Re James Lowder Talking About Drow As Lawful Evil When They're Officially Chaotic Evil: I assume Jim was just writing off the top of his head without consulting the *Monster Manual* for reference.

Re The Albuquerque Game Store With No Sign And Completely Blacked-Out Win-dows: Sounds like the outward appearance of a lot of bars around here.

Re Visiting A Home With No Books Or Signs Of Any Hobby Activities In Evidence: Could just be a part of the generation that has all its reading and hobbies on its cellphones.

Re Copper Gull And Turtle Coins That Are The Same Size But Differentiated In Value By The Images Stamped On Them: Since copper is a comparatively easily worked metal, I'd assume a thriving business in up-valuing the cheaper Gulls into Turtles. More sophisticated forgery outfits would turn copper Candles into Turtles.

MARK A. WILSON: Re "Simulated Intelli-gence" As A Substitute For "Artificial Intelli-gence": I'm going to have to remind myself to use that.

PATRICK RILEY: Re *D&D 5e* Stat Blocks For NPC Bandits, Guards, Veterans, *etc.* That Don't Have The Same Class Abilities And The Like As PCs Would: Similar to the Warrior class for NPCs compared to the Fighter class for PCs in some earlier versions of the game?

Re How The Balance Of Life Energy And Death Energy Works Out For Growing Children: When a new life is started by the creator/life god it has a certain amount of mag-ical impetus behind it, allowing life/growth to overcome death/decay, but that

impetus is limited, running out in, say, 16 years in humans. Necromancers don't generally harvest the death energy of children resulting from the constant death and replacement of cells, but it's not known whether that's because the death energy is taken back up by the child to empower the growth of new cells or because the abundance of life energy in the child's body taints the death energy in some way.

Re The Other Players Not Explaining The Situation With The Stolen *Ring Of Healing* To The Player Who'd Quit My Campaign Over The Incident: None of the other players knew the true story of the theft except the one whose thief PC performed it, and the player who quit probably wouldn't have believed me if I told him the truth when he was in mid-hothead.

Re Arnold Schwarzenegger's Accent Probably Causing The Movie's Creators To Limit His Dialogue In *Conan*: But the accent would've been perfect to establish Conan as a Cimmerian, not a local (whatever the locals were).

Re Tripping On "Nothing" Because You Don't Pick Your Feet Up High Enough From The Ground When Walking: My slippers have much thicker soles than my shoes, so when I switch from one to the other, there's a short period of time when I tend to catch my toe on stair carpeting and the like.

Re Me Not Having As Much To Fear From "Simulated Intelligence" About Disenfranchisement And Lack Of Representation As People Of Colour: I was thinking that the RPG publishing community doesn't have to worry about S.I. completely taking over the art-producing industry if S.I. can't do what even a marginally competent human artist can.

LISA PADOL: Re How The Terms "Mechanical," "Synthetic," "Robot" And "Android" Apply To The Human Torch: The Human Torch flying around the *Fantastic Four* comics and movies nowadays (since *Fantastic Four* #1 in 1961) was modelled after an earlier character, an android artificial human called the Human Torch (*Marvel Comics* #1, 1939). The two characters met for the first time in *Fantastic Four Annual* #4 (1966).

Re Wanting An Ongoing Reward For The Production Of Drawings, In-Character

Journals And The Like, Instead Of A One-Time Point Boost Like In The *Amber RPG*: And worse yet, most of the *Amber* "player contributions" are assumed to be ongoing contributions (e.g., a writeup of every game session) in exchange for that one-time boost.

Re Rich People Keeping 5-15% Of Their Money In Cash: I wonder how much of that is cash and how much of that is "cash"; i.e., liquid assets that can be easily converted to cash, whether it's stacks of paper bills under a mattress or in a wallsafe or safe deposit box, money in bank accounts, or a sum in an investment account that hasn't yet been allocated to specific stocks.

Re Dying Of Alzheimer's: As the story of Gene Hackman's death spools out, we apparently are seeing an example.

Re Whether You're Committing Evil If You Go To The Supermarket And Shop Without Considering How It Affects Others: If you don't know about things like Fair Trade Chocolate and Coffee when you shop, then your chocolate and coffee purchases are innocent. But if you know about them but decide to buy non-fair products anyways, then your shopping is indeed evil (although in a tiny amount compared to murder, say).

PATRICK ZOCH: Re Your Granddaughter Miranda: Excellent name choice.

Re Unusual Convention Pairings: Like the Players Ball and the Alumni Dinner held simultaneously in the same hotel in *Doctor Detroit*.

SPIKE Y JONES: Re Facebook Groups: Now in late February, almost 6 months after I put in the Join request, I was just accepted to yet another Facebook movie group that I'd wanted to join in order to promote the movie-essay book.

And the final proofs of the movie-essay book have passed through all the appropriate hands, and should be on their way to the printer by the time you read this.

NEXT ISSUE: Comments on issue #592.

Eris Ignore/Pooh Protect,
Spike Y Jones

Ronin Engineer for A&E #593

by Jim Eckman, 255 S. Rengstorff #171, Mountain View, CA, 94040

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All me to reintroduce myself, it's been a long time since I've read or published in A&E. I'm not even entirely sure when I first started, one of things sacrificed moving to a 1 bedroom shop condo from a 2 bedroom house, garage and kura, was my A&E collection. I think I started in writing in #6 and stopped reading around #150. I dropped out of gaming and SF fandom and pursued some of my other hobbies, Japanese, sumi-e, and as always, reading Speculative Fiction.

August 2018, some of my book club, which is mostly SF, attended Worldcon 76 in San Jose. We all enjoyed the hell out of it, fandom was also more inclusive, Gamergate and Sad Puppies had me a bit worried. I did look in on the games and there were some interesting ones. Also met some old friends, including Lee.

Most of my friends did only a little gaming, mostly computer or Cataan, so I didn't follow up on this until the pandemic introduced me to working video conferencing which we still use for weeknights and when infection rates are high. Played in some fun online games, mostly one shots and that resparked my love for RPGs, though I admit after looking at and playing current D&D, its not my favorite by a long shot.

I'm unfamiliar with the modern game systems, a gamer Rumpelstilskin, but I'm surprised how many of the older games have come back in print. Games I've DMed, Bushido, The Fantasy Trip, Traveler, CoC and D&D. Also EPT, but never again. I'm less interested in game systems than the world of the game. I ran my first SFRP using McEwan's Starguard for the little amount of combat and hand-waving the skills, I was running the Zero Stone as a scenario from the POV of the Zacathan archaeologist. We enjoyed it, this was prior to Traveller.

As a player I'm up for most things.

IgTheme: I was using a heavily modified Space Opera, though in this case, the rules don't matter. They were running down parts for their oddball spaceship as well as some other items. They had recently found a rutter with jump directions, one entry caught their attention: Planet Cred, abandoned wrecking yard, unique minerals, low tech, "libertarian paradise". Patrol blockade, sale of energy weapons prohibited.

They purchased an assortment of tools, clothing and medical gear, including a basic med center. The Creds only bought axes and chisels and with some demonstrations, basic medical treatments. The party had gotten some parts and gemstones, but nowhere near what they were expecting, so they put the med center up.

"Really nice, but no one can afford it".

Party leader said "If ten of you pooled your resources, you could buy it".

<stunned silence>

"What else do you want? Public Schools?".

Trading was over and never resumed.

Lee Gold: I mask in public, as do many of the older folk and shop clerk's but almost none outside of that group. I'm paranoid, my painting club has some very senior citizens and I don't want to pass anything along. I've been trying to avoid too much mass media, its too distressing, I do what I can about the present Cthulhu in Chief and ignore the what I can't help with. Your Icelandic campaign sounds interesting.

Michael Cule: Your alternate China game sounds like a hoot.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva and Maira Zucolottoe: Sounds like Brazil has a very active gaming community, neat stuff.

Lisa Padol: I've watched a view videos on solo journaling, it might be easier to write a book, less dice rolling at least.

Spike Y Jones: Monitoring FOX would drive me crazy in short order. I applaud your mental fortitude.

Patrick Riley: RAEBNC

Attronarch: Those are detailed adventure logs, are you recording the sessions?

Dylan Capel: I'd say that the character generation for Traveller automates one of the most interesting parts of a character's life.

John Redden: Reminds me a bit of *The Terraformers*. Nice read.

Jerry Stratton, Pum, Plankwell Campaign: RAEBNC

Patrick Zoch: When I GM, I generally allow NPCs that either add a talent lacking in the group, or in CoC as character armor.

Joshua Kronengold, Craig Kamber: RAEBNC

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: Trump is a horrifying menace. I wish he would drop dead.

Mark Nemeth. Heath Row. Gabriel Roark: RAEBNC

I enjoyed reading this issue of A&E, there's a large number of topics and it doesn't concentrate on one game system. I still enjoy paper, still a versatile storage media when compared to FB, Discord, X, etc. You don't have to chew back thru posts or have things randomly deleted. It will take me awhile to get up to speed.

Next issue: Random nattering on SFRPs.

Yours truly,
Jim

The Seedling

#47: Extra stars in the sky

A Tortuous Path to Pseudo-Retirement

Last month, I referred briefly to unusual circumstances associated with my job. Here's the short version: I retired. Sort of.

Here's the long version: Since 2000, I've been a federal employee in the Department of the Interior, working at a water management agency that is generally uncontroversial and remote from political whims. Everything was very orderly for 25 years. Then, on January 28, I, along with other federal employees, received the now infamous "Fork in the Road" email, offering a so-called "deferred resignation," which consisted of a continuation of regular pay and benefits through September 30, along with being placed on administrative leave (i.e., not having to actually work) sometime in late February or early March. To accept, you could supposedly simply respond to the email and write "resign." This email came from a generic address at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), contained little detail, and wasn't designated as being from any particular person. (Usually, we get policy related information in electronic memo form, from someone within the Department of the Interior, such as the Secretary of the Interior, the agency commissioner, or the director of something-or-other.) The deadline to accept the deferred resignation offer was February 6. At the time, it was unclear that this was even real, given the unfamiliar email address, odd format, and lack of technical detail. Also, the text of the email was unusual in tone, and, frankly, a little threatening, warning about future downsizing, heightened performance standards, and stating "we cannot give you full assurance regarding the certainty of your position or agency."

While this was of general interest to me, given how unusual it was and the possibility that some of my employees might accept it, I didn't seriously consider accepting the offer, since getting a few months off wouldn't be all that great if I had to get another job anyway. Under ordinary circumstances, my earliest possible retirement date would have been in January 2030, which was close enough that persevering to the end was the obvious choice. However, on February 3, we got an email from the Department of the Interior stating that they intended to seek approval to offer voluntarily early retirement (for which I would be eligible). It was quite a shock to have only three days in which to decide whether to retire. Then, the following day, it became clear that the early retirement offer was *only* available in conjunction with the deferred resignation offer, which gave me considerable pause, since it wasn't clear how the deferred resignation offer would actually work, whether it was entirely legal, and whether it would actually be honored by the government. I was definitely interested in early retirement, but the overall weirdness made me worry. I changed my mind about what to do twice on February 5, the day before the deadline. Late on February 5, we *finally* got a draft of the actual contract, along with the new knowledge that all of this would be processed by the HR staff within our agency (whom I trust), rather than OPM (whom I do not).

On February 6, the day of the deadline, I was planning to accept, when a federal judge in Massachusetts ordered the federal government to put the program on hold until at least the following Monday, February 10. I decided to hold off on signing up until the judge ruled. Then, on February 10, the judge announced that he would extend the hold indefinitely, pending his further ruling; there was no indication of how long this would take. February 11 came and went out anything happening. On February 12, it seemed that the same thing would happen. But a little before 5 p.m., I was playing with my phone and checked the news, seeing an article that the judge had ruled the program could proceed. I thought I had better sign up for it right away, so after a brief consultation with Molly, I did so, sending the email at 4:52 p.m. At about 6 p.m., we got an email announcing that the program was closed and that the effective deadline had been 5:20 p.m.

Then nothing happened. Had my email gone astray? Had I failed to use the right wording? I waited anxiously through the following day. Finally, at about 5 p.m., I got a cryptic email stating that my email had been received, but without clarification that it had been accepted or any indication what would happen next.

Immediately after that, it became apparent that the warnings about downsizing was more than mere talk. Throughout the government, agencies were instructed to fire employees still in their probationary period, which is an initial period—usually one year—during which employees have fewer protections against termination. That Friday, I had a meeting on routine matters at 1 p.m. with two people whom I didn't know whether I would be forced to fire at 3 p.m. I was fortunate that all my employees were spared this time. Some of these employees were in positions for which we'd been desperately trying to hire for years. Furthermore, the probationary period is supposed to only allow firings *for cause*, such as poor performance or conduct, not to adjust agency size. (There's another process for that, known as Reduction in Force (RIF), that works differently.) As I write, a federal judge has indeed ruled that the causeless firings of the probationary employees were indeed illegal, and they're being rehired this week.

Getting back to the main timeline, the next week, I waited impatiently. My boss mentioned that knew which people in our office had accepted the offer, but he had been instructed not to tell anyone who they were, even to confirm whether I was one. I talked to his boss, whom I have known much longer, and I finally got her to confirm that I was on the list. Nearly a week later, on February 20, I got an email from the Department of the Interior, with an updated draft contract, stating that I should email them within three business days to confirm my interest in resigning and retiring. I did so immediately. The following Friday had another round of probationary employee firings, but, again, our office was spared.

Then I kept waiting. Nothing happened. About a week later, I got an email from someone who seemed to be aware that I had accepted and who wanted me to fill out some ancillary paperwork, but I still hadn't gotten anything from the HR group. At some point, my immediate boss confirmed that I was on the list, and he said that he had requested that I work an additional month beyond the nominal day that was supposed to be everyone's last day at work, which was March 7 for our agency. This meant I expected to work until early April. Still, nothing official had occurred.

It was now March 3, and I began getting antsy that something had gone wrong, since March 7 was only a few days away. At about noon on March 3, my immediate boss being on leave, I talked to his boss, who told me that the HR group was expecting my signed contract—a fact that was nowhere expressed in any of the emails I'd received. She also said that she'd been informed, less than an hour before, that no extensions had been approved and that everyone who had accepted the offer was going to be instructed to be out of the office by that very night, or, at the latest, the following morning! I signed my draft contract and sent it immediately, but it seemed strange to leave the office without anyone from the government signing it too, even though the person who was supposed to sign it in Washington D.C. was a guy whom I've known for years. I talked my way into being able to stay until the afternoon of the following day, March 4. Until now, I'd not told anyone at work other than my boss (and his boss) about any of this, since I had planned to wait until I had a firm retirement date, which I'd thought was still a month away. On the afternoon of March 3, I told a couple of people in person. The first guy almost fell off his chair. The second person took it with greater equanimity. Then I sent an email to my employees, stating that my last day

would be March 4. They quickly organized an informal retirement lunch for me, which I decided to have at a local Indian restaurant. I started packing up my office. The suddenness had left me shocked, as if I'd just been in a minor car crash or been genuinely surprised at a surprise party.

I drove home on March 3 at about my usual time. I hadn't had an opportunity to even tell Molly yet, since she was out at lunch with a friend, and I didn't want to interrupt them. I told Molly when I got home, and she was even more shocked than I was. It was a very strange night. I went for a walk, as is my usual practice when feeling uneasy. Sleep was surprisingly not difficult.

The next day, I moved things out of my office, which took longer than I had thought. The retirement lunch was nice, if somber, since everybody has been a bit at ease, owing to the layoffs, recent announcement of upcoming RIFs, and the overall antipathy toward government employees that had been repeatedly evinced in the language of communications from OPM and public statements of political appointees. So anyway, I left the office on the afternoon of March 4 and haven't been back since.

Officially, I'm on administrative leave through September 30, at which point I will retire; my retirement paperwork is already on file.

At work, I used to put a quotation on my office door every week. One of the ones from sometime last year was from Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué: "Do not be surprised, O man, if events almost always happen very differently from what you expect." My recent experience was nearly the exact opposite of how I'd envisioned my retirement process. Rather than looking forward to it, counting down the days, and having it feel like the last day of school, it was instead a tense, volatile situation, with huge daily fluctuations in my mood and expectations. Nevertheless, it is definitely delightful not to have to go to work every day. It's not as exciting as I'd imagined, but the extra time, extra sleep, freedom of schedule, and elimination of workplace nuisances are all extremely pleasant. I must say that I quite like it.

In honor of my career with the Bureau of Reclamation, I'm submitting this zine in the agency's house style, which is probably the last time I'll ever use it.

Still in a Lightless Realm

The Dullstrand Campaign | Session #47–48

Setting: Greyhawk—City of Dullstrand & surrounding environs

GM: James Schnedar

Game System: D&D 5E

Character	Player	Species & Class
Keolaren	Mark Nemeth	human druid
Gardai	Joe Ring	dwarf ranger
"Deuce" Durzub Mulakh	Mike Schnedar	orc barbarian
"Bova" Korst Bovasht	Polo Schnedar	lizardfolk monk

Prominent NPCs

Dudvin Hopnik	Keolaren's new henchman, a human knight
Karvala	Former party associate, an elven rogue
The Professor	Leader of a rival expedition in the area

Recap

While in search of treasure of a recently uncovered underground complex, the party encountered an ancient hag to bargained with them to draw cards from a magical deck. One of Keolaren's cards won him the service of a loyal knight, Dudvin Hopnik, but his last card caused him to vanish.

Session 47 [as reported by Dudvin Hopnik]

Bova returned from the hag's cavern alone, bringing the lamentable news that Keolaren, the beloved master whom I had known for so short a time, had vanished upon drawing another of the hag's damnable cards. Bova further reported that he, having drawn first, had received a boon to receive a truthful answer one time, by engaging in a period of meditation; he had used this ability to determine that Keolaren was being held captive by servants of the demon lord Graz'zt beneath the keep of which he had previously seen a vision. Since Keolaren had set forth on this expedition to these abominable caverns, I felt bound to see it through to the end, after which I planned to seek Keolaren in his imprisonment, with the assistance, I hope, of Keolaren's companions.

Bova reported that the hag had informed him that the way to open the portal at the bottom of the stairway was for us to extinguish all light and each deposit an item of value in the cauldron, while reciting a specific chant. Before we could do anything, an elven maid entered the chamber. The others recognized her as Karvala, a mercenary with whom they had once traveled. I introduced myself. Karvala indicated that she had



attempted to sabotage the Professor's progress, but that his large party would doubtless arrive soon, nevertheless. Without further delay, we enacted this plan, and I, having only two potions of value, cast one of them into the cauldron. Bova discarded his serpent mask, which I gather had been responsible for the anomalous scales on his cheek; I didn't take note of what anyone else contributed.

Suddenly, we were all transported to a dimly lit, withered plain. Before me, a black dragon sat atop Keolaren, as if he were an egg to be incubated. Everyone else was beset by some adversary from the past, none of which I recognized. I backed slowly away from the dragon, but it breathed acid upon me, injuring me gravely. The others all seemed to be having unusual difficulty with their own adversaries, each attack ending in utter failure. I tried to attack the dragon myself, but my strongest blow seemed not even to attract its notice, and the horror of the situation gnawed at my sanity. I ran from the dragon, toward Bova. Bova, however, had left his own adversary—a sort of undead lizardman—and had moved to assist Gardai, who was battling some shadowy beings lacking true substance. A single blow from Bova dispersed the shadows, and we immediately deduced that, while we could not harm our own initial adversaries, we could easily dispel the adversaries of others. I moved to attack the undead lizardman, and it dispersed to nothingness. Gardai, similarly, banished the dragon, and the vision of Keolaren with it. Once everyone's visions were destroyed, we found ourselves back in the cavern with the cauldron, the portal at the bottom of the stairs now open. Our damage, however, was quite real, requiring extensive expenditure of



healing resources we could ill afford to waste. We also found ourselves strangely bonded together by the experience, able to grant one another insight and encouragement [*inspiration points*].

We proceeded through the caverns, journeying onward for a few hours. Sensing a glow ahead, we doused our lights and cautiously approached. The passageway opened into a larger cavern, lit by several glowing crystals. As we entered, we saw a hideous monster perched on a high ledge, looking like a giant, twelve-legged, blue-tinted salamander. We moved immediately to attack, and the thing spat a bolt of lightning at us. I was momentarily blinded, then recovered my sight several seconds later. A few more attacks from each of us took the creature down. It had no treasure that we could discover, but Bova, acting against my advice, chipped away at the glowing crystals to reveal a core crystal that will emit a burst of lightning upon striking a hard surface. We split these among the party and continued onward.

The natural caverns gave way to worked stone, and we entered a burial vault with a stone sarcophagus. After much debate, we removed the lid, discovering only the ordinary corpse of a human knight, rotted by its years of repose. Proceeding further, we entered a chamber with a large pool of apparent blood, which we avoided. Further ahead, we saw a candelabra, with four candles burning but without consuming the wax. An adjacent chamber held a many-armed demon in a magic circle, seemingly in stasis. As we debated what to do, one of the candles went out, then another. I tried to relight them, but to no avail. The third candle went out, then the fourth. As the last candle was extinguished, the demon opened its eyes and raised its head.

Session 48 [as reported by Dudvin Hopnik]

As the demon stirred, we realized that this must be Drelzna herself, whom we had inadvertently freed from her long imprisonment. She addressed us briefly, using words I cannot now recall. I suggested that we all attack her simultaneously with our lightning crystals, but Gardai stayed my hand as I began to throw mine. Drelzna took particular interest in Gardai's cutlass, suggesting that she would spare our lives if he gave it to her. I kept thinking that we should attack at once, but by companions continued to bide their time. Eventually, as I had known they would, hostilities ensued; Gardai finally tossed his lightning crystal, and we approached the foul creature.

Her six arms wielded a variety of blades, posing a potent defense in addition to attacking us. I got one stroke in with my cold-iron rapier, but she seemed so formidable that the injury seemed but a tear in a salty sea. Drelzna struck Gardai, grievously wounding him with a single attack. As we converged on her, she vanished, reappearing back the way we had come. She attempted to flee, raising two bloody beings from the blood pool we had earlier passed, then bringing the knight in the tomb to undeath. Bova used a magical gem in his possession to summon a fire elemental to fight on our side.

We pursued Drelzna, with half the party engaging the undead knight and other half, including myself, battling the bloody beings. As I fought them, a new menace arose, appearing to be a sort of undead shaman, approaching from a corridor we had not yet ventured along. The other half of the party quickly put down the undead knight and continued pursuit of Drelzna, who reversed course and teleported back toward the chamber of her imprisonment.

At this point, the fire elemental and I were locked in combat against the undead shaman, who kept casting spells to disquiet the mind and turn the body against itself. I was able to fight off the worst effects, but, surprisingly, they were effective against the fire elemental. I kept hitting the shaman, but it remained standing, and I was sufficiently wounded that another spell or stroke from it would send me to unconsciousness. Having long trained myself to act quickly in combat, I was able to strike the monster before it could hit me again, and, summoning my last reserve of strength, I was able to strike it five times in succession, finally collapsing it to the floor. [*Using his action surge probably saved Dudvin's life here.*]

Meanwhile, the remainder of the party circled Drelzna, who struck one after another of them with strong blows, such that another hit would render them unconscious. Deuce, fearless as ever, stood in there to deliver a final attack, but the return stroke from Drelzna put him down. All of them were in dire straits, but our luck held, and Drelzna was sent to the Abyss before any of us died the final death. Bova rushed to attend to



Deuce, who was on the verge of succumbing to his wounds. Though unskilled in the healing arts, he was able to arrest Deuce's bleeding.

We all gathered together to heal ourselves as best we could. I gather that a former member of the party, the late Qulies, was in expert in such matters, such that our combined skill was not a match for hers. Years of expeditioning had led us to suspect that a great treasure might available nearby, and, indeed, we were not disappointed, as a side room contained substantial loot. There was a trapped chest, but the trap was easily bypassed by Karvala. Altogether, we found a mass of gems, several pieces of jewelry, many rare books, as well as items of apparent magic, including a brazier, crystal ball, and lantern. I'd been hoping to find a magic weapon, but, alas, I must continue with plain steel.

Observations & Commentary

My thoughts on these sessions appear below.

I'm Not There

Owing to Keolaren's demonic imprisonment, I played sessions 47 and 48 as Dudvin. To distinguish him from Keolaren, I tried to adopt a more formal speaking style. It was kind of fun, but I'm not sure how well I did. My characters are usually just me, but with a lot more risk tolerance. It was fun to have some different abilities.

Chop 'em Up

I'm going to have to remember to take more care to proactively address any beings that might potentially come to life (or unlife) as adversaries later. We really should have dismembered the knight in the sarcophagus, and I didn't even consider trying to find a way to drain the pool of blood, though that might not have been possible. You'd think I would have learned my lesson from the twig blight and dead satyr outside Granny Knotwood's cave [session 10], which we had ample chance to chop up or burn before they later came to attack us.

Comments

On A&E #591 (part 2)

Craig Kamber

I'm glad you're making progress on the car. I liked your general approach to combat preferences.

Like you, I miss the reflecting lightning bolts and expanding fireballs.

I think I may have seen that house you mention with part of the floor cut out! In college, I once visited a friend who had recently moved to a plain-looking Victorian house, and there was a big hole in the wood floor next to his bed. It didn't seem like it ought to be legal to rent it in that condition, and the whole place was dilapidated. (Just joking—I'm sure it's not the same house.)

Gabriel Roark

My sympathies about the court delay.

I like your suggestion of an ignorable theme about species/nationality effects on social interaction.

Your campaign finally has people going to level 2! As always, I appreciate the XP detail.

Heath Row

Regarding "freedom balanced with care and respect for citizens"—hey, that does indeed sound quite desirable!

Thank you for the kind words about my book reviews.

Patrick Zoch

Congratulations on the birth of your granddaughter!

Like you, I have trouble sustaining interest in listening to or watching games that I'm not playing, whether as a podcast or in person. There are a few exceptions, but my attention usually drifts away quickly.

Joshua Kronengold

The green dragon bites were in two successive rounds. I reacted with the amulet the first time and with the scimitar flare the second time. The fireballs were also in different combat rounds. My group is pretty strict with the rules (other than things we've specifically house-ruled).

The dragon lair was the home of one full-grown adult, one older juvenile, and two young juveniles. We killed the older juvenile outside the lair and the other three inside.

We seem to disagree a lot about attunement in general, but reading your zine made me think about how it could be changed to something we both might like. Suppose you can only be attuned to X items, but instead of attunement being binary for each item (i.e., it either requires attunement or doesn't), attunement is required only if the character doesn't meet a prerequisite. Say, attunement is required for characters under 8th level, or with intelligence less than 16, or who can't yet cast 4th level spells, etc. This concept would put a check on weaker characters using too many items, without preventing more powerful characters from using items that are interesting but not overpowered at that point in the game. The potential problem that attunement is supposed to prevent is stacking, not accumulation of unrelated abilities.

I don't know who you've been playing poker with, but my experience is the opposite of what you describe. If I'm not playing for tangible stakes, I'll tend to stay in way too many hands and play much looser than I would if I was playing a cash game. Tournament poker requires

meaningfully different strategy, since finishing just out of the money is effectively identical to finishing last. Also, the finishes are discretized, in the sense that, for example, if you finish second, it doesn't matter if you were almost first or almost third. Conversely, in a cash game, the placing doesn't really matter; winning \$25 is a lot better than winning \$5, regardless of how much anyone else wins or loses.

You're exactly right that any sort of nutritional energy has to come from some energy source. In our own world, that's mostly the sun. In the underground, as you note, it could be a variety of things, but probably not the sun directly. I did once design a dungeon room with natural lighting through a quartz vein that reached the surface, but that was only a novelty, rather than a serious attempt to address energy.

Comments

On A&E #592 (part 1)

Lee Gold

How are Charles Fort's books? I first heard of him in Roger Zelazny's *Nine Princes in Amber*, as an unexplained obscure references. Since he wasn't in printed encyclopedias, I didn't really find out who he was until the it became easy to look him up online. I've never read any of his books.

Thank you for the updates on L.A. fire-related issues. My condolences regarding your friend who had a bad outcome; I'm glad everybody else seemed to be okay. When you referred to someone uncle as "Larry Niven," is that *the* Larry Niven?

Michael Cule

I'm glad your boiler got fixed, too. Mine is fine now.

Lisa Padol

Regarding Dullstrand, Julie specifically mentioned that she liked the idea of her character being unique in her ability to restore people—my character was the only one—from the dead, so she didn't want us to be able to run out and pay a random cleric to restore her character.

I hadn't heard of any of the books you mentioned that potentially contained Byronic heroes. I'm not sure I can think of any fantasy books with clear Byronic heroes. Maybe Luke, from Roger Zelazny's *Amber* books #6-10, though he's not the protagonist. Is Elric a Byronic hero? He fits with Lord Macaulay's description as "a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection." I'm not sure Luke has misery in his heart.

Spike Y Jones

You make an excellent point about Bill Gates having been viewed as obnoxious and ruthless during much of his tenure at Microsoft, as opposed to the much more benevolent image he has now.

On Fantasy Grounds, rolling initiative every round is very easy: the program does it automatically when the GM tells it to advance to the next round. I don't mind the variability. It makes some tactics not work as well, but the unpredictability feels a little truer to life.

In my setting, if the One doesn't exist, then arcane and divine magic have the same source. Some inhabitants of the world argue that this is indeed the case. Since the One isn't purported to be the creator of the world, I think it makes sense to suggest that druidic magic comes from an inherent property of the planet.

I don't think anyone has ever seriously argued "You deserve punishment that you don't deserve." The idea is more that outcomes are correlated with actions in a partial, probabilistic (from the perspective of a person, not God) sense. This concept seems—to me, at least—to be true in a lot of non-spiritual contexts, as well. For example, becoming more skilled and knowledgeable will probably get you a better job, but not necessarily. Having a lot of personal integrity increases the chance that your marriage will be happy, but it doesn't guarantee it. Taking good shots and playing solid defense makes a hockey team more likely to win, but, again, it's not guaranteed.

I don't get a sense that Job is attempting to negotiate with God

(which, as you note, is apparently acceptable sometimes). Rather, it seems that Job is claiming he knows better than God, which usually doesn't go over well.

Regarding whether the former Central Asian Soviet -stan regions, the USSR *tried* to divide them up on the basis of ethnic identity, but they weren't especially accurate in doing so, nor was it an easy problem to solve, as some of the populations were not entirely distinct, and there were a lot of small groups that could not, as a practical matter, justify having their own "republic." As a result, some of the borders had elements of arbitrariness, whether by carelessness or necessity.

Patrick Riley

I'm curious about what aspects of your hypothetical *D&D 5E* character creation for a convention game you think might be poorly received.

My forearm isn't 14 inches long either, and I'm 6'4"!

In responding to your comment about tieflings, my thought process eventually brought me back to the inherent absurdity of the *D&D* alignment system. If the alignments exist as absolutes in a way that corresponds precisely to the Outer Planes, then the existence of tieflings (or of any devils) tends to confirm the existence of objective morality. For nine-alignment morality to exist objectively, there has to be some authority to define it, whether that's God, multiple gods, or the inherent, observable configuration of the multiverse. If the absence of any such authority, then tieflings could indeed be the same, from a moral perspective, as any other being, with cultural context being important. Since neither tieflings nor the *D&D* Outer Planes really exist, there's not a definitive answer. But if it's established in-game that lawful evil objectively exists and devils are lawful evil, then it makes sense for tieflings to tend toward lawful evil as an inherent property of their existence, either probabilistically or near-universally. Or maybe it makes sense for them to tend away from lawful evil, if they are more mindful of such concepts and want to reject their devilish natures. Either way, it seems unlikely that there'd be *no* effect on morality.

If I remember correctly, the house I mentioned literally had no books whatsoever: not even a travel guide, technical manual, bible, dictionary, textbook, or cookbook. I looked everywhere, given that it was an open house real estate showing. (And yes, people still lived there, as evidenced by clothing, food, etc.—it wasn't even carefully cleaned up.) Even in your wife's case, I'm sure she has at least a few physical books somewhere. Maybe the inhabitants really don't do much other than watch TV or some outdoor activity (though there weren't any skis, hiking boots, tennis rackets, etc.) it was quite strange.

This may sound odd, but I think volition is sort of probabilistic. You can't choose not to be hungry, but you can choose not to steal food (which might or not be the correct choice, depending on the situation). If you have some criminal urge, you're more likely to give in to it if the urge is strong and probability of being observed is low, as opposed to if the urge is weak and there a lot of cops around. But the probability likely isn't 100% or 0% in either case. Someone might reject a bad course of action almost all the time, but if it's something that comes up a lot, he or she might still eventually do it. Sometimes I wonder whether, if I were to live on earth an infinitely long time, I'd inevitably fall victim to every vice at some point, even those I have very little interest in at present.

Your explanation of rules lawyering makes sense. My view is similar, except that I might be more likely to let someone do it once, then announce a corrective house rule.

Quick Book Reviews

Shirley

by Charlotte Bronte, 1849, 6/10

Compared to *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* is neither as tightly plotted nor as interesting. It feels as if it needs another pass of editing and revision. However, the background situation is strikingly relevant to the 2020s, and the conversational repartee is lively and clever. The main characters are subtly drawn and distinct, though some of the minor characters tend to blend together.

The most interesting aspect of *Shirley* is the profusion of proto-feminist sentiments throughout it. Many of them are prescient of later

developments, while others, especially the title character's requirements for a husband, are more at variance with contemporary orthodoxy. All of this content, however, fits well within the narrative and seems like something the characters would actually think or say; it feels like an organic portion of the novel, rather than a tacked-on insertion.

Demian

by Hermann Hesse, 1919, 5/10

One of my theories is that the development of psychology in the early 1900s was one of the worst things to happen to novels, and *Demian* bears that out. *Demian*, like Hesse's earlier novels, shows insight into the human coming-of-age process, but then it gets diverted to a quagmire of mystical Jungian nonsense involving the collective subconscious, Gnosticism, and other absurdities. It's like a late-night college dorm-room discussion about spirituality: interesting in the moment, but ultimately insignificant, juvenile, and unmemorable. The whole book just seems like a framework for half-baked philosophical dialogues, without meaningful plot or consequential events. There's a long section about combining the duality of good and evil, which comes off as a weak rehash of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but without any of the fun and inventiveness of Blake's approach. On the positive side, *Demian* exhibits the enjoyable and unique atmosphere characteristic of Hesse's earlier works. It's not unpleasant to read; it's just pointless to think about.

The Downhill Racers

by Oakley Hall, 9/10, 1962

If there was more justice in this world, Oakley Hall would be a household name. *The Downhill Racers* is the second book of his I've read, after the exceptional *Warlock*. This ought to be a staple of American literature; instead, I could only get hold of a copy through inter-library loan.

From the opening pages, I knew I was onto something good. Hall lets you know right away that you're going to have to do a little bit of work as a reader, but it's never hard work, as Hall encourages you to read in a way that enhances engagement and never feels like drudgery. *The Downhill Racers* is a novel about love and friendship, family and individualism, community and competition—and how they interact.

The book centers on a group of four ski racers over a period of about a year, focusing on their triumphs, disappointments, and relationships, as well as their interactions with a colorful cast of secondary characters from the world of ski racing. Hall is adept at showing more than he tells; all the subtleties and details combine perfectly to give the reader a sense of the characters' feelings and concerns, without ever being heavy-handed. The atmosphere is vivid, with interesting geographic detail and good verisimilitude. As you might expect, this isn't a plot-driven novel, but the narrative takes some unexpected turns. I wasn't thrilled with the ending, but I didn't hate it, either. On the whole, *The Downhill Racers* is enjoyable, thought-provoking, and insightful. Get yourself a copy of this, even if you have to scour used book stores or fill out a form at the library.

Remarkable Creatures

by Tracy Chavelier, 2009, 5/10

Somebody sent me my wife and I a copy of *Remarkable Creatures* as a gift, confusing it with Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, which is what she had meant to send. Always one to seize on serendipity, I read it anyway. It's not unenjoyable, but neither does it garner my endorsement. The situation was interesting, featuring two women discovering fossils on the south coast of England during the early 1800s. Since this is a fictionalization of real people and events, the reader's interest in the setting and characters is enhanced, but the plot leaves much to be desired. After a slow, dull start, the the book becomes more interesting, but it feels ultimately lacking in substance, as some of the conflicts seem to be manufactured for dramatic effect and the fictional aspects are, frankly, not terribly believable.

Remarkable Creatures also suffers from being thoroughly suffused with 21st-century sensibilities, continually fomenting outrage and mockery of how sexist and ignorant people used to be, presumably in contrast to how much smarter we all are now (especially those of us who read literary fiction). While there was, of course, sexism and ignorance in the past, this novel presents it in a way that seems to deny credit for basic intelligence to denizens of the early 19th century, essentially criticizing them for not living in the present. It also doesn't seem to recognize that it's natural and appropriate for human knowledge to increase, and for societal attitudes to evolve, over time.