



A Gentle Stroll

2 July 2025

Golden Road J. Eckman

Collation File

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Our experiment: After this first issue, A Gentle Stroll subscriptions are opt-in, not opt-out. After this first issue, you must ask to be subscribed to A Gentle Stroll, though the zine will also appear on the N3F web pages, with a rare issue mailed to all members.

Subscriptions: For the first six issues, A Gentle Stroll is free. After that, unless we end the project, contributors will be charged \$6 per year and be recognized as voting members of N3F (there is no obligation to vote or participate in other N3F activities). Readers are charged nothing. Contributors and readers have to opt-in to receive A Gentle Stroll. Contributors and readers also get to choose: (1) Receive only A Gentle Stroll and a rare issue of our other zines. (2) Receive all N3F fanzines.

General rules: Publication is monthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net, by the first day of the month. Collation and distribution will occur soon thereafter.

POSTSCRIPTS FROM THE PHOENIX THRONE #1

WHERE ROLEPLAYING GAMES ARE THE ~~CENTRA~~ CENTER OF ATTENTION

FOR *A GENTLE STROLL* #2

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JUNE 26, 2025

REBIRTHS, REINCARNATIONS, OR REPRODUCTIONS?

Yes. It seems that Lee Gold's folding of *Alarums & Excursions* (A&E) occasioned rebirthed, reincarnated, & reproduced roleplaying zines, according to the predilections of contributors to that amateur press association (APA). A&E is ended; *A Gentle Stroll* and *Ever & Anon* (E&A), both roleplaying game (RPG) APAs, arose from A&E's ashes. Many A&E contributors have continued their zines into E&A without title or format change, whereas others retitled their contributions & will perhaps make other changes. A few of us submitted contributions to both APAs & might continue to do so. I am interested to see this all shake out.

I read about *A Gentle Stroll* in E&A's first issue & downloaded a copy. I was intrigued, since George Phillies, a figure in wargaming & RPG circles alike, leads this APA. Too, I have read many of Jim & Jim's articles in A&E over the years. Richard Staat's name rings familiar from reading

Interregnum. I have no prior familiarity with Tiffanie Gray's artwork but enjoy the cover of the inaugural issue.

As for me, I became an RPG player in 1983, at the age of nine. My path to RPGs & APAs started four years earlier in elementary school. The teaching staff, in hindsight, were motivated & unconventional. These qualities were reflected in the literature available to students throughout the school. Our kindergarten library, for instance, had a copy of Stewart Cowley's *Starliners, Commercial Spacetravel in 2200 AD* (The Hamlyn Group, 1980), part of the Terran Trade Authority series of science fiction books. These books were amazingly illustrated. The teachers also used some novel teaching aids. My second-grade instructor Mr. Weil would read *Choose Your Own Adventure Books* to the class & have the students vote at decision points. I promptly checked out & read every book in the series that I could find. Eventually, my obsession led to

gamebooks in Joe Dever & Gary Chalk's Lone Wolf series. The Lone Wolf books introduced me to a combat resolution system & character tracking on top of the choose-your-own-adventure aspect of gamebooks. The illustrations were a window onto (fantasy) medieval material culture because the designers illustrated weaponry, armor, & other artifacts for the unfamiliar reader. With this background, I was primed for the jump into D&D.

1983: I was at a sleepover & became bored in the morning cos my buddy Ty & his family were late sleepers; I was not. To avoid waking Ty early, I went downstairs to their family room, where I saw a copy of Frank Mentzer's *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* red-box set. The cover art sucked me in. I opened up the box, found scratch paper & pencil, & started reading. By the time Ty was up, I had gone through all the tutorial scenarios & understood the basics of the game.

I took what I learned playing the Red Box & started running games for the kids in my neighborhood. I did not have any D&D books whatsoever, just remembered mechanics & kit-bashed additions from Lone Wolf. Road atlases served as early overland maps & I designed my own dungeons. It was messy, totally inconsistent, immature, & magnificent in its unbridled

imagination. Once I started earning paper route money a few years later & made friends who were as hooked as I was, we started pooling resources to buy Advanced D&D books. Our purchases made little sense at first. I remember the first book that we purchased was TSR's *Monster Manual II*. Players Handbook? No. Dungeon Masters Guide? The first *Monster Manual*? Nah. We wanted the newest book!

Since fourth grade, I've played & ran numerous game systems, almost continuously (graduate school & early parenthood slowed things down). Currently, I play in a D&D 5e (2014 rules) campaign & referee an AD&D campaign (The Temple of Elemental Evil).

My entry into APAs was oblique. I first heard about *Alarums & Excursions* (A&E) around 2014–2016 through an internet forum dedicated to Original D&D (OD&D). I was just getting into The Arduin Grimoire—which started as an OD&D variant—and read that Arduin's creator, David A. Hargrave, contributed to A&E beginning in 1977. I thought that Hargrave's A&E zines might have otherwise-unpublished Arduin material & that I should investigate it. Google fu pointed me to A&E's webpage and I emailed its editor, Lee Gold, to see whether & how I might obtain back issues. At that time, I only knew of one or two

issues to which Hargrave contributed.

Lee was very helpful to me. Rather than simply send me the issue or two that I initially requested, she also sent me a partial issue-index of A&E contributors, a brief history of the APA-L (APA-Los Angeles, a sci-fi APA, which spawned A&E), and the A&E issue index at RPG Geek. I also requested a copy of the latest issue of A&E, to see whether I might want to subscribe or contribute. After reading the then-latest issue of A&E, I wrote Lee about my interest in contributing, feeling out whether my gaming interests were likely to align with some of the readers. She replied in words to the effect of, "I think you will fit right in." I submitted my first zine to A&E in late 2016, contributed ever & anon, and made it to 39 issues before the APA folded.

COMMENTS ON A GENTLE STROLL #1

A Boat to the Golden Isle (Tiffany Gray)

Can Ms. Gray or our collator tell us anything about the artwork? Zooming in, I think that it is not originally a digital work. Colored pencil or pastels, maybe? The golden leaves drifting from the central tree are a nice touch. Why is no one in the boat?

Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman)

Hello! Balboa Game Co. had a prozine?! What was it called? Did you cross paths with *The Complete Warlock* crowd? I reckon so, since Tim Finkas provided artwork for Warlock & *The Monkey God's Curse*. An account of working at Balboa might interest other contributors in addition to me.

Why would you never run Empire of the Petal Throne again?

Is the artwork on page 2 of your zine one of your sumi-e?

Messages from the Zhalindorian Embassy #1 (Dr. Rich Staats)

Thank you for the interesting bio, Dr. Staats. I wonder whether you encountered a friend of mine, the late Sgt. Paul Mosher, while in the Korean DMZ? Since you mentioned using an Apple IIe computer, part of your time stationed in Korea had to be in 1983 or later. Paul came back to the U.S. in 1981.

Writing Fiction Through Play-by-Email (Jim Vassilakos)

Hey, Jim. I read your article with interest, having run a PBEM AD&D campaign during the pandemic lockdown. You are correct: a PBEM campaign (even a single session) is a writing commitment. I worked with two players to run a player-blind domain-level campaign. I write "player-blind" because the two players did not know the identity of

one another's domain rulers nor the location of their respective holdings. It was a lot of work & I think we all succumbed to a bit of lockdown apathy, unfortunately. Were I to do it again, I might contrive a conflict between border settlers or patrols, just enough to get some in-game correspondence going between the players & a third-party (to keep them guessing); I think this would improve engagement. You gave me much to consider.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #1 (George Phillies)

As a gamer who started playing D&D with a later edition (even if is a revision & clarification of OD&D), it never occurred to me that one could raise ability scores above 18 using the methods presented on page 10 of *Men & Magic* (7th+ printing). Did you ever see a player jack their magic-user's intelligence (Int or magical ability) above 18?

Working with my late printing of OD&D, the rules governing the reapportionment of ability score points arguably foreclose the possibility of using Strength (Str or military ability) to increase a magic-user's Int. Consider the following:

Strength is the prime requisite for fighters. Clerics can use strength on a 3 for 1 basis in their prime requisite area (wisdom), for purposes of gaining experience only.

Wisdom is the prime requisite for Clerics. It may be used on a 3 for 1 basis by fighters, and on a 2 for 1 basis by Magic-Users, in

their respective prime requisite areas. Wisdom rating will act much as does that for intelligence.

OD&D appears to prescribe which classes can mine which ability scores to add points to their respective prime requisite abilities. Some would argue that the rules do not proscribe the magic-user's use of Str to increase Int. The OD&D rules also vary slightly from printing to printing; this well could be one of those areas of difference. I very much enjoy the openness of the OD&D game & wish that my late-edition bedeviled friends understood that this quality is a feature, not a bug.

Nextish

I think that is about it for now. I want to get this zine to George in time for Issue #2 & do not expect to have a surfeit of writing time after tonight. What can the flâneurs of *A Gentle Stroll* expect in the next installment of *Postscripts*? Here are some possibilities:

- Comments on Issue #2 (this is a certainty)
- Essays on one or more RPG
 - Troika!
 - OD&D
 - AD&D
 - The Arduin Grimoire
 - Some other fifth thing

Until Issue #3, may your hirelings never flee!

Random Hopscotch #1

For AGS #2

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Dreamwidth: <https://mneme.dreamwidth.org>

Gaming blog: <https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/> (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish)

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Bluesky: mnemex.bsky.social

Reading through the first issue of a new enterprise, it looked like the majority of the contributors started with their resumes. So it would seem only appropriate to start with mine.

I started playing roleplaying games in the mid 80s, having found about their existence in the earlier 80s at the age of 11, but not having any friends to play with, nor confidence to start running myself. In fact, I did so somewhat prior to my becoming a reader of the genre of SF and Fantasy, which I also did t 11...at least if one discounts Oz, Narnia (a favorite among my gifted class at 9; I read the first book slightly later), Doctor Doolittle, and the odd novel with an interesting description. Regardless, I became aware that SF&F was a genre with a name that I could look for if I wanted to find the kinds of books I liked to read somewhat late into my 11th year, and my introduction to the concept of D&D came somewhat earlier.

I have continued to be an avid player of RPGs from then to the present, and also occasionally penned hacks and supplements that were used by other people, or at least I am arrogant enough to hope so. Probably my largest impact on the hobby is as a playtester, however, as through Alarums & Excursions, and later through acquaintance, effort, and attendance at Metatopia, a playtesting convention in New Jersey (where I have the fortune not to live), I have playtested an unbecoming number of roleplaying games, and also a fair number of board and card games as well.

I also participated in Alarums and Excursions for a substantial period of time. In short, I appear to have typed something around three hundred and six zines for that publication (the number is somewhat vague to me, as at least one zine appeared not using my usual title and also I failed to increment my zine's issue number at least once so the number was reused, so it's probably closer to 308). That means that my words appeared in more than half of the APA's issues, for which I can't bring myself to apologize; that they appeared with fewer errors than I wrote, credit can be given to Lee Gold as editor, but I don't expect to see her like again.

In that time, I've played quite a lot of different games. When I first appeared in A&E, I was done with D&D; I wanted freedom in my roleplaying games, and games that involved opportunity to optimize and strategy, I thought, constrained that freedom, turning my thoughts to numbers and optimization.

My thoughts have evolved a number of times since.

So these days, I play the latest edition of Dungeons and Dragons (I also have some thoughts as to how those rules could be improved), occasional Good Society (a game originally written to do GM-less Austinean roleplaying), the odd Powered by The Apocalypse game or playtest, Gumshoe (a game structure focused on mystery solving, although it has been used for more than that, of course; the current campaign is a Trail of Cthulhu/

Fearful Symmetries game, focused on early 20th century supernatural societies and occasional horrors, run by my very capable wife), and a succession of parlor LARPS, a minority of which I co-write [as I'm active in the larping communities in the Northeastern US].

For my sins, I also filk, program, and play strategic board games.

I wrote most of this near the beginning of the month (right after my comments), but it's now the 30th and nearly the first (in Eastern, anyway). So, a bit about the month:

Lisa and I have managed to update our Good Society Hack, Dangerous Refuge, with magical "reputation" conditions, magical effects players can take instead of social conditions when they qualify for a reputation condition, good or bad. We intend to run a couple of playtests at Dexlite on the upcoming weekend (July 4-7 or the like).

I'll also be playing the first session of a real-time larp that's known as the WSFS Business Meeting, this time as an online game, so that should be interesting at least.

Due to a friend picking up online chess—and one who usually doesn't play strategy games at all, I've practiced myself up a bit as well. So far, my rapid rating is still in the 1100s or so but managed to get to 800 blitz for a while, which, trust me, is pretty good for a casual player (the blitz ranking, not the rapid ranking; I haven't put as much work into my rapid game and you really do play differently at different speeds).

And I've started reading my friend Ada Palmer's non-fiction historiography, *Inventing the Renaissance*; it's written for a popular audience and is hilarious; it also absolutely has gaming-relevant text, as she not only spends time deconstructing our ideas of what a Renaissance was and why we had one (or did we?) but also why people invent them (and their inverse, dark ages) in real life, as well as fiction.

I also put shelves in a closet, the project hitting, not an end but a useful benchmark, as there are now, well, shelves in said closet (I was optimizing for having a result, it will be longer before the shelves are made of treated plywood rather than partially treated plywood or in one case, entirely untreated plywood that's a stand-in for the shelf that will eventually be placed in there). And, of course, as with all inexpert home modification projects, there have been some interesting wrinkles. Not least that, as I figured out a few days ago but was only able to prove today when I tried to insert shelves, the closet itself isn't even (my shelf supports are also not even, despite my leveling; I need more arms), so one shelf fits perfectly with room to spare and the other shelf is such a tight squeeze that without filing it down a bit it isn't going to reach the supports at all. But there are shelves enough to be able to put the chairs I've always put in this closet and then above them two shelves worth of

things, so that's a win regardless of a few warts.

Comments on A Gentle Walk////Stroll #1

Tiffany Gray: What a lovely and appropriate cover! How was it made?

George Phillies: Is it A Gentle Stroll or A Gentle Walk? [I'm guessing the former]. The cover, confusingly, says the latter and it took me a bit to realize that there was more confusion on that factor. I shall have to rename my files.

Also, 10 fanzines seems like a lot. Although, of course, many people have the ability (if not the knowledge) to filter and prune their received mail; certainly Google Mail has this capability and I would be entirely surprised if apple mail services lacked it.

Wesley Kawato: Towards the end of its run, Alarums included not only material on fantasy RPG, but on superheros, science fiction, Jane Austen romance, heist, and more besides. Fantasy will always be the largest of genres under the SF umbrella (and the fact that it includes much branded as science fiction and superheros, as well as a subset of "non-fiction" doesn't help the matter) but roleplaying games have become more varied as their borders have frayed and become hazier. It seems unlikely that many of the APAe springing up in A&E's wakes will long remain so constrained, either.

That said, do not let D&D be your entire view of what fantasy gaming can be, either. From heist-focused adventures in Duskvol (Blades in the Dark) to modern school dramas focused on monster teenagers (or is it teenager-hood or queerness through the lens of traditional monsters) [Monster Hearts], the field continues to expand, not contract.

Jim Eckman: Thanks for the info on Balboa Game Co. I knew that A&E was, in the early days, distributed in many stores (including the Complete Strategist in NYC) but not how that came to be.

Dr. Rich Staats: What a fascinating background (and thank you for your service).

George Phillies: I see you have managed to put your original APA title into service regardless of the original push-back. Well-played.

I see you've started as you mean to continue—putting a substantial piece of fiction (albeit under two pages) into your very first zine. I take it the surprise you allude to is the gender of the protagonist? Was the title thus delayed in the original telling?

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #2

by Jim Eckman,
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A Fistful Of SF Game Systems

Science fiction is my favorite genre and prior to Traveller's release I ran a very small campaign based loosely on some of Andre Norton's novels. I used Star Guard for physical encounters and my sole player and I winged it on investigation and research results. The main character was a Zacathan archaeologist chasing down clues about a recently uncovered Forerunner race. They had to submit reports, publish papers to get money and equipment to continue.

Call of Cthulhu - (Cthulhu Icarus?) could be used as a ruleset, adding some SF weapons, tools, etc. Missing the academic subgame among other issues.

Traveller – Ugh! There is hack for improving and learning new skills but it's very crude.

Space Opera – Sort of in print, byzantine rules set, furry friendly (humans are the cockroaches of space) and has a large amount published material. FGU has a website and there is new supplements in the works.

I ran a couple of campaigns using this, but the amount of house rules required inspired a friend to write their own SFRPG.

Wanderer! - (Rough draft completed, author passed away.) Basic mechanics based DareDevil/Bushido game mechanics. An insanely huge goodies list and a decent random worlds generator.

Stars Without Number – An OSR space game with character classes? I'm still reading the rules.

??? – Any recommendations? I've been out of circulation for 25 years.

Starting a Campaign:

Why is/are the character(s) adventuring?

- They are desperate, typical Andre Norton.
- Boredom or why not, Traveller or RAH.
- Circumstances, ship's crew or lifeboat.

Party size:

- 1 – Solo play, journaling.
- 2+ - a game!

For SFRP I think the maximum players I've ever had was seven, averaging three to five and sometimes I had one. My typical Bushido games were 15+ topping out at 25 or so.

My SF campaigns were more exploration and social interactions, combat was rare because it was dangerous even for the PCs. There was one ship, so party unity was easy to maintain.

Reactions to Issue #1

Front Cover - Tiffanie Gray

One advantage to E-zines is that we can have lovely cover art! No drawing on stencils and we can have full color anywhere we want it.

Messages from the Zhalindorian Embassy - Dr. Rich Staats

Looking forward to some examples of your non-standard roleplaying.

Writing Fiction Through Play-by-Email - Jim Vassilakos

That's interesting, though I think a second character would be easy to add. I've read a fair number of novels where POV alternates between two characters.

Rhodomontadulous Promenade - George Phillies

I admit that George must have access to better dictionaries, searching for Rhodomontadulous doesn't return any useful definitions. Nice fiction, looking forward to more as well as more gaming content.

1PMG PBEM

(One Player, Multiple Gamemasters, Play-by-Email)

How to Get Started, Part 1

Jim Vassilakos

In my article “Writing Fiction Through Play-by-Email” (PBEM), which appeared in *A Gentle Stroll* #1, I talked about a 1PMG (single-player, multi-gamemaster) PBEM I’m GMing with the help of Timothy Collinson. The write-up reads a little bit like a novel and can be downloaded from <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>.

Jeff Zeitlin, who also published this article in *Freelance Traveller*¹, asked me to write a followup on how to get such a campaign up and running, but I’ve been somewhat reluctant, because I can sense there’s a lot of different ways to do this, and I’ve only scratched the surface of 1PMG roleplaying.

There’s this moment in RPG history that springs to mind where Gygax invites Arneson to his house to run Blackmoor. They’re playing it on a ping pong table covered with butcher paper, and Gygax realizes this is a whole new type of game that nobody’s ever seen before, and he’s completely blown away. I don’t want to make the claim that 1PMG is a whole new style of game, but it may well be a new style of roleplaying.

We’ve basically inverted the paradigm. The traditional method of multiple players and one gamemaster has been tried repeatedly. It’s pretty well-explored. By contrast, 1PMG is largely unexplored territory, so I can’t claim to have developed a set of best practices. Other people will have to explore this further and figure out what works well and what doesn’t.

But what I can tell you, pretty unequivocally, is that you can write campaign-based fiction this way. It may not be great fiction. Indeed, it may be terrible, but it’s still a way to collaboratively write stories, and so far it’s been both fun and relatively easy. At least, it’s less work and less stress than running a standard tabletop campaign.

For one thing, it requires fewer participants, so it’s definitely something to consider if you can’t easily put together a standard-sized group. Also, PBEMs are asynchronous by nature, so that also makes it logistically easier. Likewise, it’s far less of an ordeal than writing a novel. When writing fiction, it’s easy to

write yourself into the weeds, but roleplaying seems to have some sort of course-corrective quality. The back-and-forth of the story’s construction generates its own momentum, which simply doesn’t exist when writing as a solo-author.

In the previous article I discussed some of the potential benefits as well as a few of the pitfalls. In this one, I’m going to take you on a step-by-step journey that I hope will give you the tools you need to get a 1PMG PBEM up and running. Just beware that there are other ways of doing this. I’m essentially a neophyte. I’m like some guy who discovered an uninhabited island, and now I’m trying to describe it, and I really can’t, because it’s too big for one expedition to fully explore. All I can do is give you directions and tell you what I’ve discovered so far. So I’ll do my best to help you find your way so that you too can begin exploring to determine whether this style of roleplaying works for you.

Step 1: Choose or Create a Campaign Setting

Don’t look at me like that. Of course, this is the first step. This is the first step of running any sort of RPG campaign. But with 1PMG, there’s a twist. In a multiplayer campaign, you can get away with running generic adventures, because it’s pretty much assumed that because there will be multiple player-characters (PCs), there will be a variety of skills in the party’s toolbox. However, single-player campaigns are by their very nature usually focused on a single character, and since you don’t yet know what sort of character your player is going to come up with, it’s hard to know what aspects of worldbuilding you’ll need to focus on.

Obviously, if you’re using a published setting, make sure you have a basic familiarity with it. You don’t have to be an expert on every last detail, but you need to have the knowledge and resources to look stuff up. If the setting is one that’s as sprawling and epic as that of Traveller’s Imperium, you need to accept in advance that there’s a lot you don’t know. I

¹ <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/>

made great use of the TravellerWiki², which was an absolutely indispensable resource. I also asked a lot of questions on the Traveller Mailing List (TML)³, another indispensable resource.

Even if the setting you're running is fairly compact, I'd still recommend subscribing to an online discussion forum for the RPG and/or setting in question, because you may become confused about the best way to handle some issue. Of course, you'll consult with your co-GM, but it's always better to have access to multiple outside opinions. Even if they don't change your mind, it's still useful to consider what different people have to say on any given topic. I believe it'll make you a better GM.

Now, if you're using an RPG & setting of your own design, then, first of all, kudos to you. That's fantastic. You're going to benefit a lot from running this sort of campaign, because the whole process, no matter how it goes, will prompt you to think more deeply about your setting. You'll come across questions you never would have considered. Don't worry. It'll be fun. But in the meantime, you need to create a Setting Document. It can be highly detailed or extremely brief, but it should, at minimum, contain basic information that most any player-character who lives in the setting would know. You'll need this in order to...

Step 2: Create an Online Advertisement or Elevator Pitch

The goal here is to find at least two participants, one to be your Co-GM, and one to be the player. If you get more than two people responding, that's great. You can have them run various non-player characters (NPCs), if you like, or you can have one act as an understudy to the player, with or without the right to kibitz. If you want to get really adventurous, you can try GMing-by-committee. In short, there are a vast multitude of ways you could structure your group. I'll outline some of these options next month, but for now I'll just show you the advertisements I initially wrote and briefly tell you how it went.

18-Jun-2021

<https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/16882428/>

"This is a bit off-topic, but for the past few years... not exactly sure how long... I've been thinking about running a new type of PBEM, one that follows a single character (like many novels) but which uses multiple GMs (because GMing is hard, and two or more heads are better than one). If anyone would be interested in taking part in something like this, let me know."

Believe it or not, this advertisement, as vague as it was, actually worked. Because I posted it to the TML, I didn't even have to specify that this was to be a Traveller PBEM. Phil Pugliese was the first to respond, and so I asked him, *"Have you put any thought into your preference with respect to roles (player vs. co-gm)?"* He opted for player. We were already discussing the protagonist he would play when Timothy Collinson offered to co-GM.

I sent Timothy a document detailing two of the possible RPG Frameworks we could use (more on that next month), and he essentially answered that he wanted to be more in the background, coming up with NPC write-ups and occasionally playing NPCs. He mentioned his struggles with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and said that depending on the pace of the game, it might be difficult for him to keep up.

Since two people were all I needed, we were essentially off to the races. Within a few months, however, Phil and I clashed over the standards and assumptions of the campaign, and he ended up resigning. Here's the advertisement I posted for his replacement.

29-Oct-2021

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/travellerrpg/permalink/4418277951623679>

"Wanted: One or more additional participants for an ongoing Traveller PBEM, an active-duty naval campaign to be more specific. You must be a strong writer, easy-going, patient, and a good ROLEplayer with a preference for characterization over action. Warning: There are about thirty pages of required reading before you can start. Additional Warning: The game's framework is a bit of an experiment and will be unlike other PBEMs in which you may have participated. More details upon request. Please contact me privately."

² <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/>

³ <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/subscribe/>

I received quite a few responses, so I decided to give each respondent a writing assignment with a fairly tight deadline, and Conrad Rader was the only one who came through. The main thing I want you to get from all this is that it's pretty easy to find players online. If you have gaming buddies in mind, far-flung friends with whom you'd like to stay in contact, then all the better. But if you don't, that's fine, because finding participants online is not very hard. What's harder is to effectively...

Step 3: Screen Applicants

Phil told me three important things up-front, any one of which should have dissuaded me from moving forward. I, however, foolishly put aside what he was saying. Since it was an experimental campaign, I figured I'd just take whoever volunteered on a first-come/first-served basis, and whatever happened, I'd learn something. So I'll take you through the three things he told me.

First, he said he wanted to play a science-fiction version of himself. This is not all unusual in roleplaying. Most of the time, I think, the character is a projection of the player. It's not always the case, of course. Sometimes a player will play a character who is different from themselves possibly as a way of "trying on" a different personality to experiment with what it feels like to be someone else.⁴ Without realizing it, I definitely wanted someone in this second group, someone who wanted to play a character with a personality somewhat different from their own, because I wanted a protagonist who had character flaws as well as a player who was conscious of those flaws. I wanted a protagonist who the reader could laugh at, if only a little bit, and I wanted the player to be able to laugh too, because that's all part of what makes a great character. I'm not saying you have to select a player with this in mind, but it's something you might at least consider.

Secondly, he said he hated modern writing. I discussed this in greater depth in my essay in *Alarums & Excursions* #581. I don't want to reiterate it here. I'll just make the point that there are, indeed, different writing styles, just like there are different styles of music. Would you invite your mother, who likes

opera, to a heavy metal concert? Probably not. And make no mistake, a PBEM is a writing project, so the participants need to be on the same wavelength in terms of what sort of style of story they want to cooperatively tell. If one person wants old-style heroics, à la Flash Gordon or Buck Rogers, and the other wants to run a soap opera, there's going to be some friction. Incidentally, I'm the soap opera guy.

Third, and this was the thing that ultimately led to Phil's resignation, he had a vision of Traveller's Imperium that differed somewhat from my own, and it's worth discussing this in greater depth so that you can see and understand this potential pitfall more clearly. Traveller has been through many editions, and it has changed quite a bit over the years. For example, initially there was almost no cybernetics in Traveller, but later editions included it.⁵ If you have a potential player who says they want to play one version of the game and not another, you'd do well to pay close attention.

So to be more specific, he said that in Classic Traveller, a lot of the nobles are like the royalty here on earth, largely impotent figureheads whose main role in public discourse is to serve as a cultural rallying point as well as tabloid-fodder. They could have varying degrees of power, he admitted. However, he asserted that it was MegaTraveller that established a strict hierarchy of nobles, each with absolute authority enforced by the Imperial Navy, and that he didn't want to play in that sort of setting.

I think he was mistaken in his last statement regarding MegaTraveller establishing the hierarchy of nobles. I first saw it in Classic Traveller's *Supplement 11: Library Data (N-Z)*, pages 34-37. In any case, I responded to Phil's concerns on this issue as follows:

"My general sense is that there are probably constitutional monarchs who wield power subject to publicly elected assemblies, so they may not have the power of life and death over their subjects. Similarly, there are probably nobles who oversee democracies, theocracies, bureaucracies, and other various forms of government, and their powers are no doubt limited by whatever arrangement has been negotiated. But if their subjects get sufficiently out-of-line so as to become a threat or embarrassment to the noble at the next level of the interstellar hierarchy, then there may be a clandestine action or perhaps even some sort of

⁴ D&D's Character Alignments were an early impetus for this sort of thing.

⁵ See footnote #44 on page 48 of the Plankwell Campaign write-up.

‘police action’ that may or may not involve the Imperial Navy. Of course, the Imperium would prefer to work through cut-outs, either megacorporations or other planetary princes who are probably naturally antagonistic to the notion of democracy spreading to their realms. In such cases, the Imperial Navy might be called in for peacekeeping after the initial point has been made. At least, that’s my general supposition.”

In response, Phil pointed me to https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Feudal_Confederation), quoting the line *“Interstellar government begins at the subsector level.”*

I didn’t agree with this statement and still don’t. As I understand it, interstellar government begins at a hundred planetary diameters, and it also reigns in the starport and the Imperial compound of the reigning noble, and there may be Imperial agencies that exert their will in various ways. But I didn’t see the point in having a big argument about it. I understood Phil didn’t want to play in a campaign where the reigning noble on *any given planet* was the ultimate authority on whatever happened there. My understanding of Traveller was that every planet is unique. On some, the reigning noble will be a figurehead. On others, the reigning noble will be a dictator. It all depends on the specific world and its history. So I thought we were pretty much on the same page.

When I posted the introduction of Lady Alise⁶, with all the NPCs bowing and Alise looking at Captain Plankwell *“as a child might look upon some strange toy for the first time, her nose wrinkling, though at least she was smiling,”* Phil seemed to initially be okay with it. But then I posted a question to the Traveller Mailing List⁷ regarding my initial intention to refer to Alise as a princess (which I actually did on page 22 of the campaign write-up), and I even opined that *“nobles need to have a little more oomph,”* which was, of course, something Phil was very much against. He felt they should be *de-oomphed*. Based on both his and Timothy’s input, I reverted to calling Alise a lady rather than a princess, but Phil let me know privately that he didn’t want to play in a campaign where nobles were as powerful as he sensed I wanted to make them.

I could have smoothed things over, telling him that I didn’t intend to make the Imperial Countess all-

powerful. Granted, I intended to make her powerful to some degree. But, I hadn’t yet determined how powerful she would be. In any case, I could have smoothed things over, but my instincts as a long-time GM kicked in, instincts that told me to let this one go. I probably would have thought twice if we’d been old friends, but we’d only been gaming for a few months, and I’d already come to the conclusion that it wasn’t going to work out. So I said, *“I understand. If you would like to resign from the game, just say the word.”* And he did.

Rather than end the campaign, however, I decided to look for a replacement, and by the end of that same day, I had four people who said they were interested in filling Phil’s shoes, so the campaign continued. I felt that Timothy and I had already sunk too much effort to just let it die this way. Also, I sensed that although Phil had taught me several important lessons, there was still much more to learn.

So when it comes to screening applicants, assume there will be points of conflict existing across multiple dimensions⁸, and your job is to find them and then really think about them, because these people, whoever you select, will become long-term writing partners. So you have to be a little bit careful, you have to be clear about what you’re looking for, and you have to really listen to what they’re telling you. Take notes on what they say. Make sure you don’t step on their toes after they take off their shoes and get comfortable. Most importantly, do not steer away from conflict at the beginning. Steer into it, so you can really understand what they want and expect.

I look back on the way I handled things with Phil, and I really have to admit that he told me everything ahead of time, and I just didn’t pay as much attention as I should have. So that’s my main piece of advice. Pay close attention during this screening process, and if you have multiple applicants, consider giving them a test to see if they’re really up to it.

In the case of those who responded to my second ad, I asked them to read the campaign report and write one in-character memory, something that might have happened during the protagonist’s life. I told them I wanted to use that memory as background material and possibly inject it into the write-up. This was a test both of creativity and of the innate eagerness to write, two attributes I wanted in a player.

As for the applicants who didn’t come through on

⁶ See page 30 of the Plankwell Campaign write-up.

⁷ <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/18039730/>

⁸ For one example, see 548vas at <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>

the timeline I'd set, I still offered to allow them to participate as co-GMs, but I didn't get any takers. These people all wanted to play. But if any had taken me up on this offer, I'd have had to figure out how to fit them in, thus changing the RPG Framework under which we'd been operating. But before discussing possible RPG Frameworks with your co-authors, you'll first need to...

Step 4: Create Stages 1, 2 (& 3)

1PMG campaigns require two or three separate forums, which I call *stages*.⁹

Stage 1: This is where the game is actually played. It is probably a mailing list that includes all the participants: the player, the co-GMs, and perhaps even observers. Decide in advance if you want observers to be able to comment on Stage 1 where the player can see what they're saying. If not, you might want to set up a separate forum (Stage 3, see below).

Stage 2: The second virtual room, channel, or mailing list includes only the co-GMs, so they can provide guidance (or vetoes) behind the scenes. Depending on the engagement level of the various co-GMs, it may involve a lot of inter-GM discussion.¹⁰ Anything that's not in the Setting Document has to be fleshed out on Stage 2.

Stage 3: The peanut gallery, for observer discussion, is optional. If this exists, you'll need to decide whether or not the Player is allowed in.

The pros of having a 3rd stage: It'll allow observers an opportunity to give running commentary to the co-GMs (and possibly the Player). This can be useful, as somebody who's watching the game may have a strong opinion about how something is being depicted, and they may be able to provide insightful feedback that could help steer the narrative or help clarify some detail of the setting. Crucially, because such feedback is essentially immediate, it can help the co-GMs fix any mistakes before these errors become so embedded in the plot that they can't be easily corrected. Furthermore, Stage 3 is the perfect place to groom potential stand-ins or replacements, should one

⁹ I'm using the term in its theater (not chronological) sense, as in a stage where actors perform.

¹⁰ How does such-and-such — some minor detail — work in this world? How much do these NPCs know about x or y, and what are their motives?

of the participants call it quits for reasons personal, creative, or otherwise. Finally, if the Player can access Stage 3, it might be motivational, and the observers may even give him or her ideas on how to play at a higher level, whether by suggesting alternatives or simply asking good questions.

The cons of having a 3rd Stage: If Stage 3 exists but is forbidden to the Player, which may be the case for purposes of minimizing distractions and enhancing his or her sense of immersion, the Player might still find a way to enter Stage 3 anonymously or under a pseudonym. Instead of having a 3rd stage, you could allow verified observers into both Stages 1 & 2 and then allow them to issue their comments to Stage 2. That way the GMs would only have to monitor two forums. Making observers privy to inter-GM discussions might also enhance their ability to give useful feedback and could be a good training ground for those who want to take part in some capacity.

In the Plankwell Campaign, each of these stages is a mailing list¹¹ at <https://groups.google.com/>. However, this only works because we only have two GMs, so it doesn't take very long to discuss things.¹² Even so, sometimes Timothy and I discuss things over a WhatsApp call. It's faster than typing.

If you end up with more than two GMs, you might want to consider running the GM-forum on some sort of text-chat network¹³ or video-voice network¹⁴.

Unfortunately, I don't think you can very easily run this gaming-method face-to-face¹⁵.

Next month I'll discuss the various RPG Frameworks from which you can choose as well as other preparations you'll need to make.

¹¹ For those who don't know, a mailing list is some program living on the Internet that forwards (and, in many cases, archives) email.

¹² As everyone knows, the length of a discussion increases exponentially with the number of participants.

¹³ For example, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) or Discord.

¹⁴ For example, Google Meet, Zoom, or Discord.

¹⁵ F2F is the traditional method, where people are in an actual (non-virtual) room, and so far as I have seen, all the other forums (PBeM lists, IRC channels, video chats) try to replicate this method by gathering everyone together in one place. However, 1PMG requires a wall of separation between the Player and co-GMs, so the co-GMs can privately work through questions and problems as they occur.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade

A Parade of Boasters and Braggarts
July 2025 -- Issue 2

From George Phillies
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For this issue, I have four segments. The first are mailing comments. A second is a partial discussion of D&D rules, as they appear the Three Holy Books and the One Sacred Plywood Box. I then supply some fiction, setting the tone for events and campaigns, followed by traditional APA fiction from a half-century or so ago.

Cover: The blowing leaves looks like they are floating in front of the trees. The effect is almost three-dimensional. The circular things at the front of the island are puzzling. The silver path winds off to the left, but swiftly vanishes behind tall grass or forbs. Nicely done.

Welcome: We hope you stay and enjoy what you have found. The letter is from Wesley Kawato, the long-time N3F Games Bureau Head.

Ronin Engineer for Unknown Zine: I recall Balboa Games, but I had no idea that they were more than two or three stores. You had some interesting early experiences. Did you ever see the description of early history in Jon Peterson's book?

The idea of worlds, to my recollection, at first did not exist. One did dungeon diving, sometimes in places that were not dungeons but abandoned cities, but long-time coherent events were not there. Runequest and EPT did worlds early. En Garde attempted to, but it was not so clear what player characters could do in that game that was all that interesting. I suspect that En Garde! Would have worked with a bit more experience.

Messages from the Zhalindorian Embassy: You have certainly had more of your life in games than I have. Interregnum was a fine magazine which alas did not take off adequately to pay for itself completely. Your military experience is certainly more august than mine. I finished in the reserves as an SP/5, a rank that no longer

exists. Role-playing exercises for training are a fine idea.

Writing Fiction through Play-by-Email:

Your praise of play-by-e-mail is noteworthy. You give a detailed account of moving from PBEM to an approximate novel. Have you considered transforming the written account into an actual novel that people might want to buy and read? One protagonist demanding one player makes sense from the point-of-view purists. However, for intragroup conflict several players might be an interesting alternative.

I agree about setting exploration. Setting role-playing exploration in a group, the situation then imploding, appears in Arthur Clarke's 1956 novel, *The City and the Stars*, which incidentally describes a nearly-full-immersion computer game that the hero crashes.

I have now written ten novels and several fractions of a novel, but none of them were related more than distantly to any RPG. The Elaine material you will gradually see here is the only one where the roll of dice can occasionally be faintly heard in the distance.

A Short D&D Discussion

So we imagine a party forming in a local meeting hall, some food and beverages sold. The people need reasons for travelling. For the sake of argument, they fourth-or-so born children of upper gentry/lower mobility, so staying on the family estate will by-and-by leave them with little more than a peasant's cottage, but leaving now doubles their wealth. They have as is expected prepared themselves for some sort of future. Only two of them have significant innate merit, e.g., wisdom. We will reach their characteristics in a bit.

Herman Engolph, Esq. is a Gentleman of Independent Means (local character class). His objective is to raise money to buy land, as Gentlemen gain from money, not from experience points.

Brother Gowophilus is a human cleric of Gow All-Fleeing, He who hides in his Invincible fortress beyond the skies. He worries that he is becoming a heretic, as his faith's chief virtue is cowardice.

Sister Jennifer is an elven cleric of the Corn Snake Goddess. There was a scandal for which she was falsely blamed, so she is leaving town. Quickly.

Vincent Goodheart is a budding human stone mage, a field of study rarely practiced locally. He annoyed his

family by not taking orders in the clergy. He is looking for instruction elsewhere.

Emmanuel Lorne was an advancing human mage, until he proved that in a university defense that his preceptor’s pet proposed spells were physically impossible. He is now moving elsewhere.

Brian Northwindson is from a human family of men-at-arms whose generations each retired to the farm while they were young enough to be in one piece.

Sandra ... skip her surname, which goes on forever ... had early talent at magic, but preferred to develop her martial skills. She has the curly golden hair, bright blue eyes, and small rounded ears that speak of elven ancestry; the troll part of the family tree only becomes apparent in combat.

I did roll for them. The dice were apparently affected by a Blandness spell

Name	Str	Int	Wis	Con	Dex	Char	\$x2
HE-GIM	12	12	11	12	11	8	22
Gow-Cl	12	7	13	13	8	9	18
Jenn-Cl	9	10	13	12	11	8	26
Vince-M	10	10	12	14	10	14	26
Lorne-M	13 9	16 18	9	9	6	12	18
Brian - F	12	8	10	11	11	11	24
Sandra-F	15 17	13 9	9	8	10	11	26

Two of the players have used the redistribution rules as interpreted where I was, in-period, to improve their characters.

The five characters who can cast spells have chosen them. More or less all characters can use level zero housekeeping spells that ignite kindling for fires, clean clothing, and the like. The mages are also aware of non-combat spells that maintain a modern-for-them society.

Setting the Tone

A gamesmaster setting the tone for a new campaign may well want to populate enough background that he can respond to unexpected player decisions. The tone also populates the sort of challenges that the players may encounter. Oft-times, the challenge is kept a secret from the players, something for them to find as the campaign advances.

So here we have a bit of background, more of the opening to my unfinished novel whose working title is *Small Giant Class Liberation Army*. After all, many role gaming societies are positively medieval, in many of the less fortunate senses of that word.

&&&&

Chang reached the survivors of her formation. Corporal Wu had taken charge. Near the waterfall, under a rocky overhang, a cooking fire was being prepared. Despite their exhaustion, her men had broken down their weapons and were carefully cleaning them. She counted noses. “Wu,” she said, “I do not see Peng or Gong.”

“Comrade Captain, I sent both of them a distance downstream to give warning if anyone approaches. The stairs lead to a trail that parallels the stream. Was this an error?”

“Absolutely not! That brush looks impenetrable, except where you sent them. Outposts are the right thing to do.” She looked around. It appeared that every man and woman had lent Comrade Zhou their blanket. She listened carefully. His breath sounded less ragged. Tseng pointed at his patient, smiled and nodded.

“Wu,” she said, “It is possible that something will happen to Liu and I, and you will be in command.” Wu began to look alarmed. “I hope this is not the case. But you should remember that Liu, Wang, and Ching are still up there. Ching is inside the cave. Three miles south of here there is a cavalry column. They appear to be Japanese, but strangely dressed. We are here to organize the people. We do not want to attract the attention of the Japanese.”

“Yes, Comrade Captain!” Wu nodded grimly.

Chang turned to the rest of her men. “People,” she said, “that cave was deeper than it seemed. We have come out far away from where we went in, much farther than it appeared. Still, we are in China, so we still face the Japanese Imperialists and the reactionary Chiang Kai-shek clique. From up there,” she pointed at the rise. “we see several peasant villages, a wide river, and perhaps a column of Japanese cavalry. I’ve also seen an airplane, so a sky watch is needed. Finish cleaning your weapons first.”

A crackling sound behind her was the cook fire being lit. The wood was very dry. It burned hot with next to no smoke. Tseng began stirring the cook kettle. It would still be an hour before they could eat. Weapons cleaned, men began to lean back on their packs and fall asleep.

“Comrade Captain?” Wu whispered.

“Yes?” Chang made herself smile. For all that Wu was entirely competent, she was also more than a bit timid.

“I have been watching the shadows.” Wu pointed at the stream bank. “When we got here, they

reached half way between those two big stones. Now they are getting longer. It is morning. How can the sun be setting?"

Chang was puzzled. "Some trick of the light. Put a small stone to mark exactly where the shadow of that jagged rock falls. Wait. In a while it will be clear. We are approaching noon, so shadows are of course shortening."

"Yes, Comrade Captain!" Wu scurried off to carry out her orders.

&&&&

By dinner time, it was obvious that the shadows were indeed lengthening. Indeed, soon the sun would be below the horizon. Chang was baffled. Where had the hours and miles gone? They were someplace far away from the cave's entrance, and somehow had managed to lose six or eight hours of time. Her men were not complaining. The Japanese pursuers were gone. The weather was considerably warmer than it had been. Most important, except for the few unlucky souls on watch, they had a perfectly legitimate excuse for more hours of solid sleep. They even had hot rice in their bellies. What could be better?

As twilight approached, Sergeant Liu brought his detachment down from the hilltop. "It is approaching being too dark to see anything," he said. "Except the tower off to the north. It appears to glow. It must have electrical lighting. But if we cannot see, we are better off if not detached from the rest of your men. That Japanese cavalry unit stopped and made camp. They seem to be fond of lanterns. They occasionally set off fireworks."

"Tomorrow morning we will take our next steps," Chang announced. "We have broken contact with the Japanese. Now we can return to our mission. We will send a patrol, two people in each direction, toward each of those villages, and pile rocks to block the cave exit."

Sergeant Liu nodded. "Captain? We have been running for most of a week. The peasants at the last village had been abused by the Japanese, and were willing to give us dried rice, especially after Comrade Tseng aided them, but we really need a day to recover."

"Wisely said," Chang agreed. "The patrols we send tomorrow should watch the villages from a distance, but not let the villagers know we are here, not until we understand whether they are friends or are puppets of the Japanese or the Nationalists."

The next morning dawned with a haze over the sun. Grey clouds did not look filled with rain, but the day would still be cool. Chang wished she had had more time asleep. Twice during the night, she had been awakened by the night watch. Peculiar lights were seen in the sky. Even through the large binoculars, the lights

appeared to be distorted rectangles, sweeping across the sky without making a sound. Morning calisthenics did little to relieve her groginess.

Sergeant Liu identified a half-dozen men and women to scout out the three villages. They headed down the one trail, Comrade Zhong properly at point. There was no guarantee, Chang thought, that the trail led to the villages, but it had to go someplace. The brush off the trail was so thick that there seemed to be no danger that the six could get lost or fail to find their way back. Comrade Zhou breathed more comfortably, but his pulse continued to weaken. Chang sent Apothecary Tseng and a small escort out to find useful healing herbs. If they came across a boar or sheep, they were authorized to kill it, but only with one shot. Sergeant Liu was then ordered to make a count. How many guns, and how much ammunition, did her detachment now have? How much food?

From the top of the hill, Chang could easily see the Japanese encampment through the large binoculars. The Japanese commander was obviously quite slack. The sun was well above the horizon, but his men were still lollygagging in camp. If that was his custom, a dawn attack sounded promising, but the Japanese force was simply too large for such an attack to succeed. Besides, she told herself, her mission was to organize the workers and peasants of a district, not to fritter away her men and women in attacks that would at best kill a few Japanese soldiers. The embarrassing difficulty was that she had no idea where she was, other than 'someplace in China'.

Now Comrade Ching was at her shoulder. "Yes?" she said. "You are guarding the passage, aren't you?"

"Comrade Captain, the passage is gone," Ching answered. "The window frame lies broken on the ground. There is now solid rock. I cannot see where there is a seam."

"Let us go and see this," Chang said. They walked a short distance into the cave. The cave seemed to come to an end. Chang scraped her combat knife along the rock. Indeed, there appeared to be no seam at all. How was this possible? she wondered. The frame lay on the floor of the cave. The peculiar glass had vanished. "Very well. You have a length of rope. See if you can drag this frame out of the cave. It's metal. We may find a use for it." Ching saluted.

Captain Chang headed back down the hill. Her men and women would soon be finishing their breakfast. This area appeared suitable as a remote base camp, precisely as described by Chairman Mao, though they would need to obscure or move away from the trail. However, they could not count on the weather remaining fair, so they needed to build some shelter before then. She would send Liu and Wu off in opposite directions, staying close to the cliff edge, looking for more waterfalls and for places suitable for building shelters.

Summary of events: By and by the visitors encounter a group of noble hooligans assaulting a smallcrofter village. After all, the hooligans will tell you, smallcrofters are not even human, can work little magic, so it is good to have release from the stifling dignity of the Imperial Court by having a little fun. The Chinese watch as the hooligans wreck two villages and are caught by the Chinese assaulting a third village. The hooligans take poorly to rifle and machine gun fire, just as the Chinese take poorly to archery and spell fire. The Chinese win, but are now out of ammunition. They search the dead, but find no ammunition, indeed no firearms. The peasants instead look for coins, which are of entirely unfamiliar styles.

Mariana Weaver carefully surveyed the lands around Morning Star Tower. The sun was sinking in a beautifully clear sky, but it was no more than early afternoon. Yesterday there had been dark smoke in the far distance, perhaps across the ducal border at a smallcrofter village. Towards noon there had been very peculiar sounds, very sharp like hammer blows, from someplace upriver. The Grand Master had assigned several additional acolytes to watch the tower and the gates, but gave no indication as to what was being looked for.

Now there was something, coming up the road toward the tower. Marianna cast the lightest of seeing spells, recognizing in the vastly enlarged image a line of smallcrofters, the one in the lead carrying the Great Oak Village banner. The smallcrofters following the banner were carrying stretchers and pushing their fellows in barrows. She cast the slightly stronger spell that let her see what was behind the trees. It was a great line of villagers, to her rough count most of the population of the village, and many of them were clearly wounded or grievously hurt. They were followed by a group of people, much too tall to be smallcrofters, and strangely dressed.

She tapped one of the message crystals on the tower. "Eric," she said, "something strange is coming up the road. It appears to be the small crofters from Great Oak Village, but many of them are hurt, and there are other people with them. Close and bar the gates from the forecourt to the midcourt. The forecourt gates should be open. Send one of the duty apprentices, preferably someone with medical and combat skills, down the road to greet the villagers and find out what is going on."

Marianna reminded herself of that traditional tactic, creating a distraction while something unfortunate was happening in some other direction. She walked briskly around the tower, saw nothing, cast a third-order detection spell that revealed nothing of any interest, and considered bothering the Grand Master. Bothering the Grand Master was generally understood by her acolytes

to be inauspicious. Before she made her mind up, she felt a presence touching her mind. "Yes?" She asked.

"I felt a disturbance," Grand Master Sandra said. "Is aught amiss?"

"There are a considerable number of villagers coming up the road toward the tower," she said. "At least some of them appear to be injured. They are followed by a group of strange men. I sent an apprentice to find out what was going on, had the midcourt gate closed, and then realized that these people could be a distraction, so I did a scan in all the other directions around the tower. I must most humbly and profoundly apologize for having disturbed you with my scan spell, and am prepared to submit to flogging or such other punishment as you may dictate."

"Marianna," the Grand Master said, "this is not that terrible Academy from which you recently and wisely managed to get yourself expelled. They taught fine combat discipline, so you did exactly what you were supposed to do, exactly as I hoped you would. Also, I am not in the habit of punishing people for making new mistakes. I try to teach you to do better. By and by, you will become comfortable with this situation. However, given the terrible Academy from which you escaped, complete with its quaint customs of beating, flogging, and torturing its students, and allowing them to assault each other, I realize this is going to take a while. In this case, you did the right things." The Grand Master's presence faded from her consciousness.

Down at ground level, Eric Anderson listened in dismay as his Apprentice reported from the roadway. Apprentice Quant was much older than many of the other students. He had seen combat, pirates, seadragons, and all manner of other terrible events. When Quant had heard what was coming up the road, he headed down the road if not at a run at least in a highly undignified fast walk. Eric decided that if a man of Quant's experience thought that dignity should be second to timeliness, he would respect Quant's judgment.

Quant reached the smallcrofters. "I count 25 seriously injured smallcrofters," Quant said through his speaking crystal, "and several of the strange people following are slightly or seriously wounded. At least seven of the smallcrofters are wounded unto death, as are two of the strange people. I am summoning healing spells as rapidly as I can, and have perhaps staved off visits from the young lady of the dark lands, but many of the injuries are sword piercings and slices that are beyond my safe interventions. The strange people do not speak the *koine dialektos* or any of the other language that I know. I am embarrassed to report that my mastery of the gift of tongues still needs some work, because that didn't work either. They appear to be friendly. From all the smallcrofters trying to tell me at the same time what happened, the strange people are very heavily armed with weapons I don't recognize. I did try a detection of

the art of casting; these people read at dead zero, which is at least unusual for people who are not some sort of undead. Allowing that you sent me out here because I have some idea what battlefield wounds look like and need for a cure, I count six great interventions, three dozen major interventions, and at least fifty substantial or minor healing spells. I am doing my best without exhausting myself into unconsciousness but I am not sure that I am not losing ground on some of the smallcrofters who are grievously wounded. The two strange people, and I mean strange, their eyelids are different, and their skin is dark but not tanned, responded much more positively to my spellworkings and seem to be safe for the moment. By the way, some of the strange people are remarkably tall. The young lady who appears to be their commander is taller than I am."

Eric Anderson considered some intelligent response, such as tearing out his hair. What was going on out there? However, Great Oak village had made an exchange of benefits with the Grandmaster, so they were owed healing. "Quant, do the best you can under the circumstances. I will summon help to be waiting when you reach the forecourt gate." There were going to be a considerable number of acolytes more than a bit annoyed when he called them from their work, but there really was no choice. He tapped one of the speaking crystals on his podium.

So the strange foreigners reach the tower and benefit from healing spells of various sorts.

"Forgive me, Grand Master," Eric said, "but I have tried *Speak in Tongues* twice, ditto *Commune with the Songs of the Earth*, and I fail to understand what the strange people are saying."

"Actually interesting," the Grand Master remarked. "And the strange people test out as having more or less no magical residue. How are they blocking your spell?"

"I am embarrassed to say, Grand Master, but I do not know. While I cast each spell the second time I had Acolyte-Third Morris casting a magical detection spell. I put up a circle so we would have enough quiet for that. He detected my spell and nothing else."

"That is different." The Grand Master lifted her hat and scratched her head. "OK, I will try a similarity spell. The hard part, of course, is to get one of them to talk for long enough for the spell to bite. I think we will need to do a pantomime. The tall woman is the one in charge?"

"Yes, Grandmaster." Erik pointed at Ching-Fei, waved, smiled, and gestured for her to come over.

Grandmaster Sandra pointed first at herself and then at Eric. "I." She pointed at herself. "You." She

pointed at Eric. She repeated the gesture and word several times. "Your turn, Eric."

Eric repeated the I and the you. He was reasonably sure the mysterious young woman was following the gestures and the voice. Indeed, before he got much further, the woman pointed at herself and said "I". She then pointed to each of the two magicians and said "You."

Sandra advanced to the next step. "I — Sandra." Then Sandra pointed at Eric. "You — Eric." Eric repeated the words. The hard part was hoping that the strange woman would realize that names were being used.

Mayor Stromheim, who had been waiting patiently to thank the Grand Master, understood what was going on, and inserted into the conversation "I — Stromheim. You — Eric." Then he pointed at himself again and said "I — Stromheim." Finally he pointed at the strange woman, and said "You" and waited.

Ching-Fei thought for a few seconds. These foreigners had very strange names. She hoped that was what they were saying to her. She bowed slightly at the Grand Master "I — Ching-Fei. You — Sandra." She stumbled slightly over the strange name. "Sandra." She then bowed to Eric. "You — Eric." She thanked the gods, no matter that was not what a good Communist would do, that she had learned how to pronounce English and German, since these strange people were speaking a language that seemed to use similar sounds. Finally she bowed to the Mayor, and managed "You — Stromheim."

There followed an elaborate pantomime, at the end of which Ching-Fei decided that for some reason the foreigners wanted her to talk and keep on talking. She launched, speaking not too quickly, into an explanation of the fundamental principles of Mao thought and dialectical materialism. She kept talking. The strange people kept smiling and nodding. While this happened, the elaborately dressed foreigner Sandra gestured in a complicated manner in her direction. She was absolutely unable to decide what the gestures might mean. Finally Sandra held up her hand in something like the military halt! gesture. Ching-Fei paused.

"Very interesting, Eric," Sandra said. "The similarity spell found no relationship between what the young lady is saying and any known language. Fortunately, there is another spell I can try, though we will have to persuade the young lady to stand inside one of the circles. You seem to be having considerable luck in getting her to do things. Your pantomime 'just keep talking' was extremely clever. Let us see if we can get her over here. I'll be inside the outer circle. I'd like you to power up the isolation ward, if you are not too tired to do so."

"I wouldn't care to do it all day, but I'm sure I can bring it up for a while," Eric said. "All of those

healing spells did get a bit tiring.” He gestured at Ching-Fei, and pointed at the center of a circle. She seemed, he thought, to have no awareness of any of the spells being thrown all around her. She would obviously been extremely grateful that he’d managed to save the life of one of her companions, but somehow she seemed to have no idea how he’d done it.

“Ready,” Grandmaster Sandra said. Eric raised the outer wards. Sandra checked her memory one last time. This was not a spell she needed to cast very often, but one of the advantages of mastery was that in a certain sense you never forgot a spell once you had learned it. “Sing to the songs of the earth,” she said. The remainder of the spell was unspoken, it’s complicated summonings and passings going unheard by those around her. To those outside the circle, the casting seemed to take a very little time. To Ching-Fei and Sandra, the spell took a very long time indeed, but at the end Sandra knew the strange languages Mandarin, German, and English, while Ching-Fei could now speak the *koine dialektos*. Sandra realized that there were a large number of words in Mandarin, or these other equally unknown languages German and English, that had no equivalent in *koine*. On the bright side, the songs of the earth ever so faintly reverberated to the tunes of Mandarin, German, and English. A good magician would have no trouble henceforth speaking with the foreigners.

“Honorable Ching-Fei, I am the Lady Grand Master Sandra.” Sandra stumbled only slightly over the Mandarin words. In principle she knew exactly what the tones were and how to make them, but she had never before heard of a tonal language, and her mouth needed practice to catch the intonations. She shifted to German. “You’ve been brought to my tower by my friends the smallcrofters. I gather you saved many of their lives, and I am happy to have had my acolytes return the favor by saving the lives of the men who were accompanying you.”

“Lady Grand Master Sandra,” Ching-Fei answered in the *koine dialektos*, “I am equally profoundly grateful to you that you saved the lives of...” Suddenly she stopped. “What is this? I am speaking a language I don’t know, and I understand it completely. How is this possible?”

“It’s a standard thaumaturgic binding,” Sandra said in *koine*. Then she thought for a moment, finding that neither Mandarin nor German had words for thaumaturgy or binding. Indeed, there seem to be a large magical vocabulary that she could not translate into these two strange languages. “I think we are going to need to talk for a while before we actually understand each other,” Sandra said in German. She repeated the same words in Mandarin. “It will be simplest if I do the same for your men, so that all of you speak *koine* and that we can have rational conversations.”

Fiction

Fiction has long been a steadfast component of rolegaming APAs. I could search more vigorously, but the following is the opening section of **No Tears for a Princess**, which was at least one of the first pieces of fiction to appear in a rolegaming APA. If I recall correctly, it was sent both to *The Wild Hunt* and to *Alarums and Excursions*.

It was written sometime in the period 1974-1978, when the surprise reveal at the end was far more radical than it would be seen to be in the current epoch.

No Tears for a Princess

Her hair fell back to hang golden-brown across her neck. One hand cleared stray locks from sea-green eyes. A gleaming line of chain mail rose above her collar. Seen without the cloak, her dark green tunic clung to her armour, revealing the slight curves of her body. She looked perhaps sixteen. Her mouth pursed, reflecting not so much fear as a touch of sadness. She pushed hair clear of the nape of her neck and probed gingerly where the club had struck her helm. A further poke at her ribs evinced a grimace of pain. As the sun set, she turned from the river and disappeared into the woods.

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CHAPTER ONE (Mages, Men)

A small fire crackled in the hearth, its flames competing feebly with the luminous white glow from the wall sconces. Left of the hearth, polished maple shelves were crowded with books and scrolls. Before them stood several antique globes and an armillary sphere. A gleaming bronze orrery hung like a giant spider, guarding the great window on the adjoining wall. The window seat was littered with bottles and alembics; more abstruse thaumaturgic implements lay piled on the carpet beneath.

The girl sat before the fire in a deeply-padded winged armchair. A silk robe, ruby-red, was tied primly at her waist and pulled close around her neck. The robe drooped beyond her toes; deeply folded cuffs at each wrist confirmed that the robe

had another, much taller, for an owner. Her armour lay on the flagstones near her feet. The green cloak and tunic were closer to the fire, slowly drying in its heat.

She peered down through curling wisps of steam into a mug cradled in her hands, then inhaled, enjoying the scents of cocoa, cardamom and mace. At last she looked up, a smile coming to her lips.

"Grandoon?" she called softly. The target of her question was a dark-haired, heavily bearded man who sat puttering at his workbench. He was staring into an intricate piece of clockwork which floated, without visible support, a few inches beyond his nose. His tools hovered in convenient reach, equally without support. He finished an adjustment, muttered slightly, then looked to the girl. A gesture dismissed clockwork and tools, which fluttered obediently to rest on a felted benchtop.

"Ah! Elaine! Are you feeling better?" His voice rolled separately over each syllable. He stood and walked to her side.

"Me?" she shrugged. "Yeah, 'course I'm okay. A little swim and bump on the head never hurt anybody. You don't have to worry so much. I just got a bit wet."

"Bump on the head? Elaine, that won't do at all! You have at least three cracked ribs, undoubtedly compounded by swimming the full width of the Tressin. In late fall. In full armor. By rights, you should be confined to bed for a week." He felt for the pulse at her throat. It beat its uniquely intricate double rhythm, fast and slow, no longer racing from an evening's excitement.

"Hmhm!" she snorted. "Bed! For a lazybones like you, that's one thing. Of course, for someone serious hurt, a day or two might make a teeny bit of sense." Her irritation was only mock serious. "If I spent a week in bed, every time I got bumped around a bit, I'd be due to stay in bed for forever and a while yet. Besides, it was hardly full armor."

"It wasn't?" His eyebrows wrinkled.

"I didn't wear greaves, nor mailed gloves. I didn't have iron-shod shoes -- just as well, it's hard to swim with them. I didn't have a shield, though a

Lyran shield, cross-grained cemented wood, is a dandy float. A few bits of chain are hardly full armor." Her teeth gleamed behind her smile. Earlier in the day, Grandoon had teased her about wearing any armor at all in a civilized, friendly city. He'd suggested that if she really felt in danger, he could find her a set of jousting plate in her size. She'd told him to be patient. Her smile widened. As he looked to the ceiling, she reached up and slid his hand from her shoulder onto the arm of the chair.

"Now, Grandoon, look." Her tone was serious again. "You've been real nice. I mean, thanks for watching my pack and letting me dry off and giving me the cocoa and not complaining about cleaning the pheasants I caught and even letting me eat one, but I just came back to get my bow and stuff. I can't be staying."

"You most certainly can," he answered. "What sort of a host would I be to put you out into this chill autumn evening? Your clothing is only half-dry."

"That's better'n might be," she answered matter-of-factly. "I've walked in darn-sight colder weather in wetter gear. Visiting Arburg darn near got me killed. I should've left days ago, soon as I could walk without limping much."