A Gentle Stroll

September 2025 — Issue Four

Water's Edge

by Tiffanie Gray

Collation File

Editorial Note

We are a bit late. The holiday weekend confused matters.

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.

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.

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. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and will be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

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I Was Walking

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This is my first zine for A Gentle Stroll, written, inevitably, close to deadline.

#RPGaDAY2025 has prompts here: https://www.autocratik.com/

Some of my thoughts, having only started this at the end of August:

1: Patron: Patreon comes to mind. I'm currently supporting Thomas Manuel, Justin Alexander, Jenna Moran, Melissa Scott, and Graham Walmsley, and following Jordan L. Hawk.

But also, as the editor for some of Golden Goblin's Cthulhu Invictus books, I think of the Roman patron-client relationship. I also edited Golden Goblin's collection of scenarios where the PCs are cats, called *Tails of Valor*, and one of those scenarios is set during the Invictus period, called Triumphis Felix Ferae, which one can translate freely as "Stray Cat Strut". The PCs are Proud Roman Cats! And, naturally, each of them has their own Patron.

Finally, I think of Ada Palmer's book *Inventing the Renaissance*, which Joshua Kronengold is reading and telling me a lot of the many choice bits of information, including how the patronage system was viewed during the Renaissance (he can explain how I'm vastly oversimplifying) and why it is a terrible system.

2: Prompt: I think of a writing prompt, which is an element of how, I think, most journaling games work.

I could also note that it means "on time", something many gamers, including myself, are not always good about, and indeed, something publishers aren't always good about, sometimes due to events outside of their control.

One of the interesting things about the larps I help run is that they *must* be finished promptly because they run on a set day. One can cancel, if need be; that's not ideal, but it's sometimes the best of a bad situation.

3: Tavern: You all meet in a tavern is the obvious. And there's the idea of a cyberpunk game where the PCs are the ones running the noodle shop everyone eats at, which could be modified to the tavern for other genres -- and, indeed, the game Stewpot is about ex-adventurers running a tavern. The novel *Legends & Lattes* is about an ex-adventurer who decides to open a coffee shop, having been delighted when she encountered one herself.

4: Message: Communications and how they work is fascinating and important. Sending spell? Carrier pigeon? Letters? Graffiti, like gang or hobo tags and symbols? Psychic powers?

Also, I think of the anime *Violet Evergarden*, which is, among other things, a love letter to letters. At the start of the series, many people aren't entirely literate, so they pay for the services of a small company to write their letters. Two movies follow the series, and in the first, three years pass and technological advances have begun. In the second, the telephone arrives.

I remember hearing that one of Heinlein's characters said, when telephones started becoming a common household thing, that this spelled the end of doctors making house calls, because if one can now make a phone call rather than having to physically travel to the doctor, one is likely to call for things that are not sufficiently important to merit a house call.

The question of literacy affects communications, obviously. in Good Society, there is an Epistolary Phase, during which characters write letters to each other, and players can negotiate about whether a letter is intercepted and/or read by someone other than the intended recipient. In the Penned to Good Society game Avalon Society, players decide whether or not their characters are literate. If they aren't, then messages must be written and read by other characters. In the 7th Edition Guide to Cthulhu Invictus, there's a short paragraph or so explaining that literacy was surprisingly high in the period covered by the game.

5: Ancient: In some games, age is directly proportional to power. I'm thinking about D&D dragons, and also about World/Chronicle of Darkness vampires.

Of course, there are games where one loses skill/ability with age, including, iirc, at least one edition of D&D, and Call of Cthulhu, at least in 7th edition. I cordially hate this. Nor am I mollified by what older characters gain; this is rarely as good as what they lose.

That said, I note that the rules on aging seem to get quietly dropped by the time *Down Darker Trails* came out. I'm all for this.

When I ran several Gumshoe campaigns with recurring PCs, I let folks rework those PCs at the start of each campaign. Gumshoe doesn't have anything like aging rules, and is explicitly mimicking genre conventions, not realism per se. This meant that the players got to decide how aging affected their skills, if at all.

One player shifted points around to model both the effects of age and the fact that the character switched professions. The player also described the character's age as "TV 50s" in one scenario, and then "TV 60s" in another. This worked for me.

6: Motive: This is important. It's useful if NPCs' motivations make sense. PCs need a motive to engage with the game/scenario/situation.

In games of Lovecraftian horror, a question that one hopes authors and GMs consider is "Why is X NPC a cultist / sorcerer?" Or, to put it another way, why would anyone worship the Outer Gods or work to destroy humanity? It's not that one can't come up with reasons; it's that one needs to actually do the work here.

7: Journey: Quest time? If a journey is receiving any significant space in an rpg session, it must be important. Several of Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu campaigns come to mind, including *Horror on the Orient Express*, which, of course, suggests Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, although the two are not very similar.

In the novel, a single murder is committed on the eponymous train, and the focus is on learning who the passengers who might have committed the murder are, and how and why the murder was done. The same is true for *Death on the Nile*.

In *Horror on the Orient Express*, it's not that nothing happens on the train. But the focus is on the places where the train stops, and the PCs have goals other than solving murders. There are a couple of plot-relevant NPCs who might show up on or attack the train, but otherwise? If the players want to learn more about their traveling companions, they and the GM are going to be doing a lot of heavy lifting. The campaign provides raw data for the GM, but doesn't focus on these inessential characters.

Beyond the Mountains of Madness is another type of campaign. I don't know how good a job I did running it, but this is one where the PCs are likely to get to know at least some of their traveling companions, and there's an interesting slow burn aspect, where, yes, the journey is full of peril, but the real challenges come when their ship reaches Antarctica.

And then, there's an odd Castle Falkenstein adventure, *Babbage's Engine*. The train car the PCs are in is stolen, airlifted on 4 thick cables attached to some kind of platform triangle like a flatiron, with its bottom open, and I think that platform may have been attached to four gas bags. The PCs are told that the train will go to a country about four hours away.

So, we cut to four hours later, right? Er, no. The group I was part of didn't have any intention of waiting. Indeed, no group the GM ever ran the adventure for waited meekly until the train landed. Why the heck would they? Apparently, this never occurred to the scenario's author.

8: Explore: I'm not sure if I'm good at running an exploration campaign or adventure. Possibly, it's a question of definition, though. When I ran *Eternal Lies* for the first time, it's possible one could describe it as exploring the question: What will you do, how far will you go, what atrocities will you commit in the name of saving the world?

Unknown Armies is similar. The questions it explores for the characters is: How far will you go to get what you want? What price will you pay to save the world? What will you do for power and what will it do to you?

Bluebeard's Bride is, in some ways, an exploration of powerlessness. The Bride, personified in up to five aspects, explores the home of her husband, trying to answer the question of whether he is a good man. (He's not.) I'm not sure I could run this one well, although it clearly scratches an itch for me as a player.

Most games of Good Society are about exploring the characters and the relationships between them. One's reputation improves if one puts social constraints ahead of one's own desires, and worsens if one does the opposite. What decisions will the characters make? How will that go for them?

9. Inspire: I suppose Bardic Inspiration and similar things come to mind first, but I also think of where folks get inspiration for scenarios, campaigns, NPCs, PCs, and so on.

I've used various media as inspiration, sometimes lifting things whole, with varying degrees of success. I'm pretty sure I still sometimes take something without thinking it through and then try to make it fit when I should loosen up. Ken Hite recommends using history for inspiration, which I've seen various Call/Trail of Cthulhu scenarios do.

And of course, games are inspired by other games. This is true of card, board, roleplaying, and live action roleplaying games. Many of us can talk about the larps

and rpgs influencing a given larp or rpg. And in turn, we've seen rpgs influence books and shows.

10: Origin: I find I'm not so into playing a character from the very beginning and seeing if they survive to become someone potent and interesting. Even in games all about characters, like Good Society, I'm probably not going to start with the characters as infants. And if I do, it's going to be something specifically calling out that the game is for doing this, whether in a serious or satirical way.

This gets into the whole "Story Now!" concept. I want to be interested and engaged from the beginning. I want to have my character start doing cool stuff, not slogging along so that maybe, someday, they might do some cool stuff.

11: Flavour: Flavor text, or description passages, are an odd beast. GMs are often told to reword it, not read it aloud. I read an article, which, naturally, I cannot find at the moment, that said that this advice is bad. Why is this text there if it's not supposed to be read aloud? Why is the author assuming the GM will do better? Why isn't the author doing better?

I forget where it went from there. I do know that, during sessions of playtesting Pelgrane's forthcoming campaign for *Swords of the Serpentine*, I absolutely read several descriptive passages verbatim, partly to describe things, of course, but also partly for the love of it. Some of those passages amused me, and I wanted to share them.

A related concept is chrome. If a character is doing 5 points of damage, and the player wishes to go wild in describing what that looks like, it's generally fine so long as everyone understands that this isn't adding to the mechanical effect. If I'm playing a sorcerer in *Feng Shui*, odds are I have the spell Blast. I can describe what that looks like; the mechanics are the same whether my character blasts her foes with fire, frost, void, chaos, or, my actual choice for that game, math.

12: Path: "Never leave the path" may be sound advice in certain stories, and indeed, sometimes that advice is taken. Heck, in a *Clockwork: Dominion* game I had fun playing at Gen Con, our characters went to a Fae lord's realm, and, as advised, did not leave the path.

But when it comes to a more meta concept, the idea of a path through the events of a scenario or campaign, unless you intend to keep the characters on that path *and* the players understand and buy into this conceit? Expect them to leave the path. Expect them to leave it early and often.

This won't always be because they object to the path. Often, the path is invisible to the players. They are doing what they think makes the most sense, whether that's tactically/strategically, realistically, narratively, what their character would logically do, or some other measurement.

And they're not infrequently right. I can give many examples of players being right. I can give many examples of it not being a matter of right and wrong per se so much as the players' chosen path being fine, just as good as whatever path or paths the GM or author assume are open to them. Heck, I can talk about scenarios where I, as GM, want to allow options that haven't occurred to the scenario authors or that they blithely assume are undesirable.

Sometime, though, I would agree that the players are not right. This usually is a matter of games where it seems to me that it is obvious that there is a premise that the players need to buy into.

Fr'ex, *Trail of Cthulhu* and other Gumshoe games are very open that it is the players' job to come up with reasons for their characters to run towards the mystery / danger / heart of the scenario. And to aid them in this, they pick a Drive for their characters. Sure, that Drive won't always apply. And sure, even if it might apply, that doesn't always mean the character needs to put themselves in an obviously suicidal position, as Aviatrix reminded me at least once when I was playing in one of her campaigns. Nevertheless, the fact that this mechanic exists helps signal that players are responsible for finding reasons for their characters -- and themselves -- to engage with the game, to *play* the game that they have agreed to play.

13. Darkness: Ugh. Rules about darkness and what penalties a character incurs. Always, this seems to make things harder for PCs and easier for NPCs. But honestly, what really annoys me is that rules about darkness are One More Thing a GM, generally me, is supposed to keep track of, and I often forget this entirely. As a player, I'm not sure it bothers me. Either it's not my job to keep track of it (the usual case), or I'm sufficiently engaged that it's not a problem to keep track of it because there are far fewer things I need to keep track of as a player than as a GM.

14: Mystery: Most of what I run. Arguable, most of what is published as a scenario, at least, if one uses a very broad definition of the term.

And just how does one define the term? I've run games for people who say they don't enjoy mysteries, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. One is very much a gamer -- larps, rpgs, board games -- and very much wants to enjoy playing by the rules and having their presence *matter*. They say Gumshoe doesn't work for them, and they've played enough of it with me running it that, for them, this is something they've

tested. (I'm slightly skeptical because a) they've only had me running it, and I can point to some mistakes I've made and b) I'm not entirely sure they know how much they did or didn't accomplish.)

I asked about something like *Apocalypse Keys* or *Brindlewood Bay*, where the mystery isn't set until the players come up with a theory and the dice tell them whether they're right. They said that this was, to put it mildly, worse. And that makes sense. In theory, something like my handing them an enciphered message should work, because it's a puzzle they can solve; it's diegetic. In practice, that's not always the case. Such puzzles should be calibrated carefully based on the players, and I don't necessarily have the skill to do so.

But there are other types of mysteries. Some unfold, rather than get solved. I learned when I was running a pbem game that I had at least one player who wanted to solve mysteries, and was good at that, and at least one who was quite happy with them unfolding over time. It wasn't that this player ignored the mystery; they didn't. They just didn't necessarily know how to go about solving it. They were happy to hand off investigation tasks to NPCs when I made that possible and to enjoy looking at the information the NPCs brought back.

Sometimes, one might say that something is a thriller, not a mystery. I'm not entirely clear on the distinction. I mean, there's a different feel, and a different procedure, but that doesn't mean I can point at a given scenario and say with certainty that it's one or the other. And I'm not sure what one calls an adventure like "Ragamuffins" for *Swords of the Serpentine*. The characters want to know "Who stole our stuff?" This is easy to find out, and then they need to decide what to do about it. I wouldn't describe it as either a mystery or a thriller.

I like Gumshoe's premise: It's never fun to fail to find clues. If a character has the appropriate skill, and is using it to look for a clue in the appropriate place, and a clue is, in fact, there, the character finds the clue. Deciding what it means, how to put the clues together, and what to do about it all is up to the characters/players.

There are players who don't like this. They want to feel like they found the clue, not that it was handed to them. I don't feel that way. I'm not entirely sure they are correct to think a clue is handed to them. Robin Laws says that the process for finding a clue is essentially the same in Gumshoe as in, say, *Call of Cthulhu*; the only difference is that you don't roll to see if you fail to find a clue if you're looking in the right place in the right way. Indeed, *Delta Green* uses this idea. Many scenarios have clues that a character with a

certain amount of a skill will automatically find. E.g., if a character has 40% in Biology OR the player succeeds in rolling under their Biology skill, they get X information. Heck, *Call of Cthulhu* explicitly says that if a clue is essential for the scenario to move forward, either don't require a roll to find it or have the character "fail forward"; i.e., have failure mean something other than "you don't find the clue, so you don't get to the rest of the plot, so we might as well break out the board games".

(There are better and worse ways of *presenting* clues, but I am presuming for purposes of this consideration of the topic that the GM and players are playing in good faith and with a certain minimum level of competency.)

When I look at a mystery scenario, I focus on the clue trail. What do players need to know at any given stage to move forwards? How can they find it out? These are questions I constantly ask as a GM and as an editor. I do this when I adapt a mystery from a different medium as well -- I've used books, manga, and shows, and in all cases, I need to know what the clues are and how they can be discovered.

15: Detective: Someone who solves mysteries. This seems somewhat tautological; still, it's interesting to look at where one might take this definition. Fr'ex, in the movie *The Glass Onion*, Benoit Blanc points out that he has no authority to do anything once he has figured out what happened.

The Good Society hack *Lady Susan, P. I.* takes things in a slightly different direction. She is there to investigate the death of Lord Walnut. She does not report to the authorities. She reports, instead, to the executor of Lord Walnut's Will.

The other characters are all suspects, and one of them did indeed murder Lord Walnut, possibly with the help of an accomplice. But the facts, and indeed, Lady Susan's private conclusions are not relevant. Lady Susan will interview everyone (and the players of the other characters are encouraged to suggest questions for her to ask the suspects), and will then gather all the suspects and state her official conclusions. (This is a collaborative process out of character.)

She will say whether it is her official conclusion that Lord Walnut was murdered or died of natural causes (however unlikely that may be). If it is a murder, someone may confess (truthfully or otherwise). Or, Lady Susan will accuse someone of the murder. It may or may not be the actual murderer.

What actually happens next is up to the players. Lady Susan has no power to make an arrest, and the executor only cares insofar as Lord Walnut's murderer

is not eligible to inherit. So in the epilogue, the characters each write one letter about their lives in the aftermath of Lord Walnut's death.

When I facilitated this, playing Lady Susan, we were a little confused. I should try again now that I've played a variant which Hayley Gordon facilitated: *Lady Susan Van Helsing, Vampire Hunter!* *cue the lightning and thunder*

16: Overcome: Fate has a small set of things one can do when rolling dice. One of these is Overcome an Obstacle. NPCs can also be obstacles. I rolled on the random charts included with this year's list, and got Who, Proud, and Accessory. I could see the PCs' attempts to solve a mystery or otherwise deal with a murderer or other criminal hitting the obstacle of a proud accessory taking full credit for the foul deed.

17: Renew: Additional prompts: When, Nostalgic, Character. One could view Brian Rogers's X-Men pbem as a sort of renewal. He picked up the comic, er, campaign, at a specific point, and I think most of us were at least somewhat familiar with the sequence we were reworking. It was a lot of fun, and I wondered why the comic didn't put Colossus and Calisto together, as happened in the game. Of course, after a bit of poking around on Wikipedia, I learned that it did, for a time, at least, and didn't necessarily do it well. Apparently, just about anything one wonders why Marvel didn't do, they probably did, and just about anything one wonders why Marvel would ever do, they also probably did.

Characters can renew their acquaintance with each other. This happened in the Penned to Good Society game of Modern Gothic Society I played, The Sky's Gone Out. My character, Max (Maxwell Livingston III) and another, Casimir Giroux, were Old Flames. Max's family had been killed some time ago in the backstory, and Max had been rescued and turned into a vampire. Casimir discovered he was a werewolf. The two met up again some years later, but some months before the start of the game. Max made a somewhat clumsy pass once he and Casimir realized what each other were now, which Casimir really didn't need; he'd had a trying day. They got more comfortable with each other over time, and there was an alternate reality interlude, which was fun.

One can renew vows, oaths, and bargains. Breaking such things or failing to renew them is the starting point of more than one *Monster of the Week* adventure.

18: Sign: Additional Prompts: What, Confident, Character. I played two recent larp characters who were the subjects of prophecy. In one case, the character didn't understand why they had to work to

achieve what the prophecy had foretold. This was a relief to me because I wasn't sure if I'd be a good fit for the larp. There were certain mechanics that I'm not especially good at. But, while one could play the character otherwise, my first thought was, "Yay! I'm an idiot! I can do this!" I didn't try to lose. But I also didn't worry about whether or not I'd achieve my character's goals.

In the other game, my character understood that the world wouldn't be handed to them on a platter of any type, regardless of signs, portents, or prophecies. And, in theory, that game had a lot more mechanics than the other one. But the mechanics I interacted with were ones I understood a lot better and was a lot more comfortable with and confident about.

19: Destiny: It feels like I just did this one. Josh and I played in a larp called *Arabian Days*. Each character had a destiny -- but there was one character who could change a person's destiny, if they asked.

In the larp *Wicked Hearts*, similarly, everyone started with a destiny. But unlike in *Arabian Days*, they all knew their starting destiny. There was a mechanism that allowed them to choose a new destiny at random, and this mechanism could be repeated. My character helped Josh's character do this until he got a destiny he was okay with -- and one that another character, closely allied with his, desperately wanted. The player seemed to have a lot of fun trying and failing to be stoic about that.

20: Enter: PCs want to enter everywhere, regardless of protocol. That is, except when they don't want to go near a place that the GM or scenario author is counting on them to enter!

This can be a challenge because one doesn't want a place that should have good security to be a pushover. But if there are no discernable weaknesses, players can get discouraged. There's a mansion in *Eternal Lies* which the authors clearly expect the PCs to find a way into, as they've put clues linking to about 2/3 of the remaining campaign in there. But they've also made the security so tight that players may not realize they're expected to have their characters do this, especially since, if they try the direct approach of knocking on the front door, they're utterly stonewalled and turned away.

There are things the players in my first group did to overcome this, and these worked. The players in my second group decided not to push it, and while I could wish I'd done a couple of things differently, this actually made good sense for that group, and it wasn't a problem. By this point, I was using the Alexandrian Remix, aka Justin Alexander's extensive notes on what he'd done and recommended others do to make the

campaign better, including, but not limited to, making sure that there were places other than the mansion to get the clues pointing to other locations.

21. Unexpected: What we play for. What I play for. Sure, there are times I think I can read the players and predict what they'll do, plan accordingly, and discover I'm right. And often, that's great!

But if I can always predict what will happen in an rpg or larp, I think that's a sign that something's wrong. Or as the player I mentioned in an earlier entry noted, if things always go the same way no matter who's playing the game, then what the players do doesn't matter. Their presence doesn't matter; anyone could play, and things would turn out the same.

"Turn out the same" isn't always what it seems, of course. Fr'ex, there are only so many endings in *Bluebeard's Bride*. There's a larp where, no matter what, a powerful force will take a certain number of people as sacrifices. This is made very clear in the game's description.

And that's fine. The important stuff, the what-happens that shouldn't be the same every time is internal or in the details or both. It's why I've run *Masks of Nyarlathotep* and *Tatters of the King* twice, and *Eternal Lies* roughly 1 3/4 times, and would like to run these again at some point. It's why *Curse of Strahd* is run so often and folks watch it and play it, and sometimes play it ore than once.

22. Ally: An ally is not a subordinate. They'll have their own agenda. If PCs throw their weight around, this may alienate allies. The reverse is true as well.

And one may have to make common cause and ally with those one would prefer not to. The trick in a scenario is to walk a fine line, making the characters and perhaps the players uncomfortable, but not so much so that they reject the alliance. Allies need to be a net gain, and one must see them as such.

23. Recent: Recent gaming includes:
* The final episode of the *Phoenix Dawn Command* game I was in
* Summer Larpin' (4 larps played)
* Playtesting a Swords of the Serpentine campaign from Pelgrane (in progress)
* Requesting and receiving the playtest material for Evil Hat's forthcoming *Streets of Jade*, based on Fonda Lee's Green Bones saga.

24. Reveal: Telling the players/characters what's going on. Pacing is important here, as you don't want to overload people with information. I've done that.

25. Challenge: Playtesting is challenging. You usually don't have the final manuscript, obviously, which often means:

* The text isn't laid out.
* Page references are to Page XX.
* There probably aren't maps, even if they're referenced in the text.

The finished product may not be everything a playtest hopes for, but will usually be easier to read and use. Of course, it's rare that one runs the same scenario or campaign more than once.

26. Nemesis: Additional Prompts: Who, Proud, Genre. Who doesn't want one of these for their PC? Or perhaps it's the players wanting their PC to be someone's Nemesis. What a Nemesis is depends a lot on genre. If you're playing *Golden Sky Stories*, the most hostile you can be with another PC is Rivals in the context of a gentle pastoral. In *Fight With Spirit*, the context is sports. In Strixhaven, it's theoretically academic rivalry, but definitely has the potential to be lethal.

27. Tactics: I love it when a scenario author tells me what tactics an NPC will use in sufficient detail that I know how to run a combat -- or non-combat -- scene. Having a large stat block with lots of special abilities is tricky to manage, especially when there are multiple NPCs.

The Masks of Nyarlathotep Companion recommended taking every NPC spell list and crossing off every spell that isn't useful in combat. It turns out that there aren't many spells that are particularly useful in combat. What boggles me is that folks who play *Call of Cthulhu* consider Mindblast to be a good combat spell, and I cannot figure out why. It's a spell that makes the target unpredictable, which isn't necessarily what one wants, IMO.

The authors of *Swords of the Serpentine* have a list of various special abilities NPCs might power with Malus points, but say that GMs should generally give NPCs relatively few abilities because otherwise, they'll forget to use all of them. I find this to be the case. They also note which abilities are potentially deadly to PCs, particularly in combination.

28. Suspense: A feeling that's not always easy to engender in one's players. Still, if they come back because they have to know what happens next, that's sufficient.

And often, watching the dice fall generates its own suspense. I've seen a remarkable number of 01s and 00s rolled on percentile dice over the years (probably nothing statistically unlikely, but it still surprises). And

for dice pools where one counts the number of successes, it is sometimes remarkable -- and frustrating -- how many dice one can roll without getting a single success.

29. Connect: Additional Prompts included Contemplative, Character, Art. In the original edition of *Over the Edge*, Jonathan Tweet insisted players draw a picture of their PC. It didn't have to be in any way a good picture. It could be a stick figure picture. But he wanted them to do it to make a right brain-left brain connection.

I don't know about the whole right-left brain stuff, but I get the idea of wanted to make the connection, to engage not just the verbal part of the mind, but the visual part. Many people draw their characters or find or create online art of them. I'm more used to writing in character letters and journals, which helps when playing Good Society games, and these games further encourage such writing in other games.

A recent(ish) development is character and campaign soundtracks. Sometimes, these are included with a published game or campaign. Sometimes people create them for their characters. I don't quite grok how one creates a whole soundtrack for one's PC; I'm lucky if I can come up with a song or two.

In all cases, one is connecting and committing to one's character and/or the campaign. As a GM, I'll connect to scenarios and campaigns by creating outlines and detailed notes and relationship maps. I'll often create a family tree for campaigns with space outside of published material, and if the campaign goes on long enough, it's probably inevitable that I'll have a family tree showing how everyone is actually related to everyone, one way or another.

Even if my notes are not present after I've written them -- this has happened more than once -- the process of writing them makes a strong connection to the material and makes it easier for me to run the game. The more I sketch out, the more I theoretically "script", the easier I find improvising when (not if) the players do something completely unexpected and outside the scope of my notes.

30. Experience: Experience points are part of D&D and similar games. I'm more comfortable with smaller pools of experience being required, and not for levels but for smaller things. I'm also fine with milestones, which Fate and D&D both use, if I understand correctly.

I don't like "give extra experience points to the best roleplayer". I like giving folks set, equal rewards -- but I also like the PbtA experience tracks, perhaps supplemented by giving everyone an extra advance at
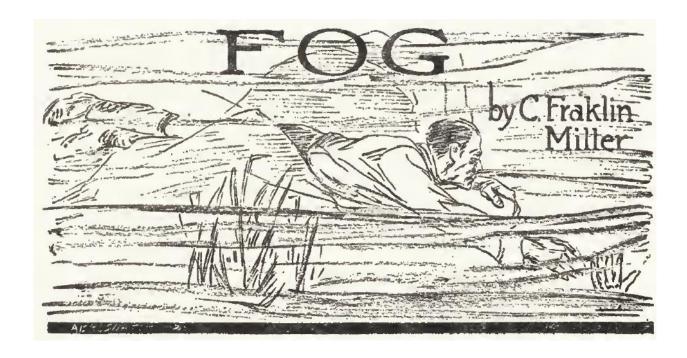
certain points. *Shadows of Yesterday | Solar System*, one of the systems on which *Lady Blackbird* is built, has players decide what sorts of things will earn their characters experience, and lets them decide when this has happened.

As a GM, getting more experienced means that I often don't need as much time to prepare. Not always, though -- I need some time to review a scenario I hope to playtest, as there are a lot of moving parts. Part of being more experienced means knowing my limits and knowing what I do need to do.

31. Reward: PCs often want rewards, as do players. Experience points are all well and good, and cool powers are great! But there's also money, nifty items, bases/homes, allies, influence, and so on.

In *Night's Black Agents*, one kind of reward should be revealing new levels of the Vampire Conspiracy on the chart of said conspiracy, and it's an interesting lack in any published NBA campaign that we see no examples of how this works in play.

In various Lovecraftian horror games, keeping the world from being destroyed may be a reward, as may saving a smaller number of people, or perhaps simply surviving. Learning the truth is a reward as well, if a two-edged one.

C. Franklin Miller published the short story "Fog" in *Weird Tales – The Unique Magazine*, Vol. V No. 1 (January 1925). The story, subtitled "Prehistoric Patagonian Monsters – a Tale of Stark Terror", features an encounter between two spelunkers and a nearly invisible monster that takes one of the men and allows the other to escape. The encounter later is told to the narrator by the survivor.

The creature lives in a cavern system that runs along an underground river as it passes through a mountain. The cavern system itself is foggy and hazy. The creature is described as "Damnable life! A hideous survival of those ancient times when life first oozed up from the bottom of the sea." The area has "a strange, nauseating odor…at times almost unbearable" – though it is unclear whether the odor comes entirely from the creature or also from a rotting corpse within the cavern. Later, the creature is said to have "a pungent, fishlike stench that was almost overpowering". In any case, the corpse and to some extent the cavern are covered in a "sort of gray mold", though again it is unclear whether the mold is associated with the creature. When the creature moves, it makes "a steadily swishing sound…like some unwieldy body laboring along in" water. The creature exudes "a blast of icy air" that "struck us and froze its way in to the bone". Later, the creature makes "a tremendous long-drawn hiss" which apparently causes "an icy spray" that "descended like fog and settled without dissolution". All of this takes place in the dark of a cave. The end of the encounter occurs at the mouth of the cave, as

the men are frantic to escape, in heavy fog issuing from the cave. At this point, the creature is described thusly – "an enormous shadow loomed in the mouth of the cavern. Gray, shapeless and scarcely definable, it seemed a part of the fog itself. Like a huge puff of smoke it came rolling out of its lair and spread." The creature does have some type of corporeality, however, for the survivor attacks it – "Almost blinded and scarcely able to breathe, I hacked away with my knife, trying to dig a way through the pasty mass."

Fog
Large elemental, unaligned

Armor Class 14 (Natural Armor)
Hit Points 97 (13d20+26)
Speed 50 ft., Fly 50 ft. (hover)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3, +3)	19 (+4, +7)	14 (+2, +5)	10 (+0, +0)	15 (+2, +2)	11 (+0, +0)

Skills Perception +8, Stealth +14
Resistances Bludgeoning, Piercing, Slashing
Immunities Cold, Poison; Exhaustion, Grappled, Paralyzed, Petrified, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained, Unconscious
Senses Blindsight 60 ft.; Passive Perception 18
Languages None
CR 6 (XP 2,300; PB +3)

TRAITS
Fog Form. The Fog can enter an enemy's space and stop there. It can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch without expending extra movement to do so.
Fog Camouflage. When in fog, the Fog has the Invisible condition.
Stench. *Constitution Saving Throw:* DC 15, any creature (other than a Fog) that starts its turn in a 10-foot Emanation originating from the Fog. *Failure*: The target has the Poisoned condition until the start of its next turn. *Success*: The target is immune to the Stench of the Fog for 1 hour.
Sunlight Weakness. When in sunlight, the Fog has Disadvantage on D20 Tests.

ACTIONS

Spellcasting. The Fog casts one of the following spells, requiring no Material components and using Intelligence as the spellcasting ability (Spell Save DC 11).

     At Will: Fog Cloud, Ray of Frost
     2/Day: Misty Step

Vortex. *Constitution Saving Throw:* DC 15, one Large or smaller creature in the Fog's space. *Failure*: 7 (1d8+3) Cold damage, and the target has the Grappled condition (escape DC 13). Until the grapple ends, the target can't cast spells with a Somatic component and takes 10 (3d6) Cold damage at the start of each of the Fog's turns. *Success*: 7 (1d8+3) Cold damage.

BONUS ACTIONS

Shadow Stealth. While in Dim Light or Darkness, the Fog takes the Hide action.

– Clark B. Timmins
Fog #1
September 2025

An Introduction

I suppose that I should introduce myself. My name is Niall Shapero, and I am one of the grey-muzzles of the fandom (TTRPG fandom, at least). I started playing D&D back in the original three books from the box days, before Greyhawk, before Gods, Demigods, and Heros, and long before Advanced D&D and all the later editions of the game. I attended the first DunDraCon put on by Clint Bigglestone and associates, I contributed to the All the Worlds' Monsters books that were put out by Chaosium, and I used to play D&D in Berkeley in a group that included Steve Perrin, Steve Henderson, Clint Bigglestone, Hilda and Owen Hannifen and other SCA types and with a group of students at Stanford University. Oh, and I had a zine in the many of the early Alarums & Excursions, The Wild Hunt, and Mutations APAs, as well as trying my own hand at it with The Lords of Chaos. And when I wasn't playing TTRPGs, I was designing them; I designed a science-fiction TTRPG, Other Suns, and a supplement thereto, The Alderson Yards Shipbook, both of which were published by Fantasy Games Unlimited in the early 1980s (yes, I am an *old* fan … really).

I've still running games, though not as frequently of late. I've been busy working on my second career – writing. So far, I've found a home for three of the novels that I've co-authored with George Cole at Jarlidium Press and hope to have the fourth finished and submitted later this year. (Our third novel, RED STREETS, was published earlier this year.)

The submission last issue came out of the campaign that I've been running, on and off, for several years now. The events in that story grew out of campaign events, and George and I worked together to craft the events into a semi-reasonable story – or at least a part of one. George was, until recently, a practicing attorney, so the segments on the law were very much his…and the rest? Well … as with any good collaboration, after a point, it's not quite clear to either of us who exactly did what.

I still do on occasional software gig … but at my age, they are not as commonly available in the local market; I am a bit too settled to go gallivanting all over the country for work, as some of my colleagues have been. I've specialized in real-time embedded systems development, and as a result, remote work is not usually a viable option. But I planned ahead, and with the occasional contract gig, my writing, and my investments, I'm able to keep head above water, and survive with a certain measure of style.

What follows is the introduction of one of the characters into what I called my "Cyberfur" campaign – and it is the first part the story of Richard Fox.

Unstuck in Time
By N. C. Shapero and G. S. Cole

Prologue
The Past is Present

He could not find any emotional energy; Richard knew he was on the verge of dying. He'd long passed through tunnel vision and graying-out to blindness; the scents of struggle and illness had long been blotted by the oxygenation tubes. He no longer heard sounds, whether from the hissing in his nostrils or the beeping of the monitoring machinery or from the rales of his tortured breathing or the fading pattering of his heart.

Fear had passed; anger, like the adrenaline that had supported him, had likewise faded away. The most that he could manage now in the way of emotion was a gentle, lingering, sense of regret.

There was that last flare of the neurons, one final pulse of the organized holograph that embodied the sense of self, before the terminal dissolution. *Just like when I was a child – a sickly child – only this time, why fight it? Time to rest…*

Another Present

Walls of polished black stone towered over him, surrounding him. Names and dates, row on endless row, were carved into the stone. The walls curved in gentle concentric arcs. Overhead, the sky was a brilliant

blue, marred by only a few puffs of cloud; it was warm, uncomfortably so; the heat and humidity both strange and yet someone familiar.

Dominating his view was a part of 'himself' that could not be, yet it was clearly attached to his self and had aspects strange and yet familiar. Surprised, Richard blinked – his vision was sharp despite the absence of his glasses.

Scents were familiar, yet strange, their intensity heightened almost to the limit of tolerance. He blinked again, and staggered slightly, feeling as he did an entirely different somatic kinesthesia. He began to look down at himself, but stopped as soon as his gaze reached his hand, a hand now resting against the hot black stone.

He had four fingers and a thumb, but they were not "his" fingers. Flexing them, he started, as the tightening motion triggered the emergence of sharp, ivory-colored claws. They disappeared the moment his extensors flexed again, straightening them.

Richard shook his head; a single, heartfelt "damn" escaped his lips. The shock of hearing a different voice was subsumed in the greater shock of feeling the motions associated with and stimulated by his head shake. He reached up and cupped his hands over his eyes; there was a sensation of fur-on-fur, and his fingertips brushed against large, mobile and sensitive ears as he ran his hands over the top and back of his head.

"I get the same feeling – every time I recognize a name on the Wall," a voice said, from behind and to his left; there was a richness of sensation to the words – overtones, and undertones, emotions and logic – a sense of deeper communication beyond the simple sense of the words. As he turned towards the source, he caught brilliant sunlight directly in his eyes; he flinched, dropping his head and blinking as his eyes began to tear.

"Reason enough to cry, as well," the other said. The speaker was bipedal, and while humanoid, clearly not human. The face was more that of a fox than a man, but the eyes were bright and intelligent, and the speaker wore a uniform and the insignia of an air force captain. "We lost nine in ten – the tango tangos lost one in five. The humans got off easy – barely one in ten."

"Y-yah," Richard stammered. "I … sorry." He squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head back towards the wall. "It's just … overwhelming."

"Especially when you find the name of someone you knew," the fox being said, and reached out to touch the monument. "David Alan Reynard, my older brother." He reached into his jacket, pulled out a small flag and stuck it into a nearly invisible slot by the name. "To absent friends. I'll leave you to your memories," he said, turned, and walked away.

Richard's ears tracked the sound of his steps; he opened his eyes, blinking in the brilliant morning sun. He stared at the little flag for a moment. *Eighty-one stars?* he thought. He shook his head, and began walking as he tried to establish his bearings.

'The Monument', as the collected structure had been described, was an ordered layering of circular walls ringing a center, with breaks for passing between the layered rings at what seemed to be the cardinal compass points. Subtle markings in the form of brass metal fittings at each break indicated the compass point; comparing them to the position of the sun made the time either morning or afternoon, depending on the hemisphere.

At the center of the Monument was a simple plaque that read, "Lest we forget", at its top, and "In memory of all those who died, that we might live in peace", at the bottom. The dates – as a self-starting audio explanation informed him – ran from 15 March 2071 through 2 June 2096, 'VA Day'. Along the walls were little memories that visitors had obviously left – flags, photographs, tokens, indecipherable objects. *Eight million names*, Richard thought, and shuddered.

The others at the Monument were all bipedal and bilaterally symmetric – even, he suspected, purely mammalian. Variations on canine and feline predominated, and among the former, a mix of coloration and somatic blending that to Richard suggested both 'fox' and a similarity to himself. The clothing – most of it marked with that unnamable stamp that yelled "uniform" – was not all that different in style from what he had been used to: pants, shirts, and jackets. The markings on the uniforms were even readable, for the most part.

The "fox beings" seemed to fall into two groups – at least, what appeared to be the adult "fox beings". There were those considerably shorter than the current human norm – almost a foot shorter – and a smaller group that were several inches taller. The former all wore blue uniforms that screamed "air force"; the latter wore suits, and shoes that fair screamed "detective". *There is something eternal about "flat feet" – and policemen's shoes*, Richard thought, as he categorized the animal-men by profession – soldiers and police.

He began working his way outward from the center of the Monument, along the path that the majority of individuals seemed to follow on their outward-bound path. It took time – longer than he'd expected – to work his way out. *How many feet of black marble does it take to engrave eight million names? How many jelly beans in the jar?* he thought, and shuddered.

It took nearly an hour to work his way clear of the Monument, and to the half-anticipated transition point. *There are only so many ways that you can design a subway station,* he thought, *though with the "Underground" sign, this is more like England in markings than American. At least there's no crown, and no Union Jack on the flag*, he thought, as he stared at the entranceway.

He stood back for a few minutes, and watched the other travelers depart – each took out a small rod and inserted in a waist high slot. Credit card or memory stick, he thought, and reached up around his own neck to find a fine chain, and a similar small rod hanging from it.

Standing back and looking over the passers-by, he spotted what could only be another watcher. Watching intently – and wearing that set of formal but not high enough quality business clothes that again screamed "cop", to Richard's mind. *Not a uniform, so more likely a descendant of the FBI or Homeland Security than a simple policeman*, Richard thought, revising his first estimate of the individual's profession.

The watcher rubbed a spot at the back of his jaw and began to work his jaw even as Richard looked away. It was yet hours until nightfall, but the Monument was obviously too emotionally haunted and too bleak to be a comfortable stopping-point; past a certain time, remaining would raise more questions than would leaving.

Sideways glances, quick and subtle observations, and a minimum of fumbling (hid-den by placing the bulk of his body between the entrance slot and the spotted watcher), allowed Richard to insert the stick-on-the-chain into the proper point and then put one palm flat against the smoothly shaded surface of the angled surface. A monitor lit up and on the surface a keyboard appeared. With only a few fumbles, Richard was able to call forth some basic information about … himself.

It's going to be an interesting ride, he thought, as he quickly read up on "his" back-ground, and purchased a "ticket" on the subshuttle. *Definitely an interesting ride*.

1PMG PBEM
(One Player, Multiple Gamemasters, Play-by-Email)
How to Get Started, Part 3

Jim Vassilakos

Over the last two months I discussed the first five steps of how to begin running a single-player/multi-gamemaster campaign, so this month we'll start with…

Step 6: Outline the Protagonist

In a traditional, MP1G campaign, the group would get together to generate characters, and the GM would tell everyone about the setting and what to expect along with any house rules worthy of mention. In a 1PMG campaign, it's much the same, but only one character needs to be generated. You can use whatever method you like.

In the case of the Plankwell Campaign, I let Phil generate the protagonist however he wanted, and I simply gave my approval.[1] But if you want to do things differently, that's your prerogative. Whatever you decide, however, there are a few questions you should consider asking up-front.

- Is this character going to be a projection of you, the player, or does this character have a personality that is different from yours, and if so, how is he or she different?
- What are the character's strengths, and what are their flaws?
- Does the character have any deeply held perception or idea about the world that is semi-irrational? What in the character's background may be the root of this outlook?
- What actor would you cast to play this character if they were depicted in a movie?

By the way, you should feel free to ignore this piece of advice. Not all campaigns need to involve a psychological study of the main character, and not all novels do this either, so if you don't want to do it, then don't. But if you do, then when choosing a flaw for the protagonist, beware there are certain flaws that may make the character unlikable to any potential readers, flaws like indifference, entitlement/arrogance, greed, officiousness, a lack of common sense, etc.[2] It is perfectly okay to have a highly flawed character, particularly if the player agrees to allow the character a redemption arc after a crushing *Dark Night of the Soul*[3], but if the character is so flawed that reading about them becomes a form of psychological torture for the reader, then you'd better get to that redemption arc pretty quick, in which case your campaign write-up may end up being more of a novella than a novel.

Conversely, it's perfectly okay to have a character largely bereft of shortcomings, but if the character is too perfect, then there's nothing for them to learn and no reason for them to change, and if they don't change, then what's the point of the story? Granted, this is a modern perspective on storytelling and is perhaps even an overstatement of that perspective, but if you want the campaign write-up to conform to modern expectations, then it's something worth considering.

Of course, you and/or the player will also need to sketch out the protagonist in the traditional way that nearly all RPGs do, making a list of their attributes, skills, possessions, and the seminal events of their character history. You and the other members of the group may also wish to brainstorm a list of pre-existing relationships with various NPCs that can be introduced.

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[1] Strangely, Phil left me the option to choose whether his character was retired or active-duty (I chose the latter, as I hadn't run an active-duty Traveller campaign for a quite a long time), and I let him choose the starting year for the campaign (he chose Imperial year 1114, which is four years after the Fifth Frontier War). Of course, it's obviously a bit strange for the GM to decide if the character is retired or active duty. Most Traveller campaigns involve retired characters. Also, most Classic Traveller campaigns start around 1105, which is the assumed date of CT's *Supplement 3: Spinward Marches*, meaning that the war is in the near future of most Traveller campaigns, whereas in this one, it was part of the backstory.

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1xkeOo6iLE
[3] https://careerauthors.com/dark-night-of-the-soul/

Once this is done, you'll need to determine a few more things about how the campaign will be run, which brings us to…

Step 7: Determine Tense & Person

At this point, the group needs to decide in what tense and person they will write.

	1st Person	3rd Person
Past Tense	I said this, I did that	He said this, she did that
Present Tense	I say this, I do that	He says this, she does that

As you probably know, roleplaying is typically done in the present tense, as all the events are happening now, not at some point in the past. However, roleplaying is sort of funny when it comes to person. Around the gaming table, we usually speak in the 1st person, "I say/I do," not "my character says/does," but we all understand that it's the 3rd person that we actually mean. "I do" is shorthand for "my character does". We could and sometimes do express it either way, and yet the same thing is always understood. So roleplaying is really done in the 3rd person, and this can become somewhat problematic when converting a multi-player PBEM's email logs into a campaign write-up. Since each character arguably has equal claim to the role of protagonist, there can be no singular "I".

However, in a single-player campaign, the singular "I" (and therefore 1st person) is an option, and so making use of it is something you should consider. I personally believe it increases the story's psychological depth, and in my opinion that's generally a good thing, but there may be cases where it's not.

For example, consider the Conan stories. There's a reason why Howard wrote in the 3rd person. To write them in the 1st person could have created a narrative bottleneck.[4] With a cerebrally laconic protagonist or one that you wish to remain mysterious to the reader, 1st person probably isn't the way to go.

Also, 1st person will potentially cause more work for the player, because it is arguably the case that it's really he or she who should take the play logs of Stage 1 and coalesce them into a first draft of each scene, so that the narration is cast in his or her character's voice. Note, the player doesn't necessarily have to be the person to do this, but whoever does it will almost certainly have to edit the narration, thereby creating a narrative voice.[5] This is a very important task, and so you'll have to decide whose job it is (probably yours). Whichever the case, the group needs to understand how the editorial process will work and be okay with it.

As for past tense vs. present, most fiction is written in the past tense. Because of this, you should consider using it. Having said that, there are some novels written in the present tense, so it's certainly an option. Just be aware that if you compose the narrative in the present tense, it will, at least at first, be off-putting to most readers. Hence, there's a lot here to consider, but regardless of which way the group decides to go, everyone should be in agreement on the tense and person before the campaign actually begins.

Step 8: Make an Ownership Agreement

Some sort of joint statement should be made in advance over how everyone is to be credited as well as who the resulting work belongs to. My general feeling is that any of the participants should be allowed to publish without monetary compensation, but that if money starts changing hands, then all co-creators should agree with the terms. However, you may wish to adopt one of the Creative Commons licenses[6] just to keep things clear and simple. As usual, your mileage may vary, but this is something you should discuss before you actually…

Step 9: Commence Play

Finally, we get to the fun part. The way from this point forward is pretty simple. You know how to roleplay, right? The GM presents a situation, the

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[4] Try to imagine Conan mentally narrating some fine detail of Aquilonian history.

[5] I'll talk more about this next month.

[6] https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/

player responds, and then the GM responds to the player's response, and back and forth it goes. The only differences here are that a playlog is being preserved for future reference and multiple GMs are cooperating in order to make things more interesting. Possibly one of the GMs has the lead, or maybe there are guest GMs playing various NPCs. Regardless, the back-and-forth of roleplaying remains the same.

One thing I will suggest is that rather than simply respond to the player, take what they wrote and copy it into the first draft of the narrative, editing it as necessary in order to establish a semi-consistent narrative voice. Make sure to edit for person and tense, and then edit for what's possible or what the protagonist would notice as he or she is doing whatever it is they're doing. Insert thoughts as desired, maybe a little bit of background to clue in the reader as to something they wouldn't otherwise know, or perhaps some paranoia to up the stakes.

Here's an example of a game[7] that's is presumably being run via some sort of multi-channel chat forum (such as IRC or Discord).[8] Bear in mind that Stage 1 is where the player is, whereas Stage 2 is the GMs' private channel.

Stage 1/G_1: There was a small alcove with a wooden door beneath a slight overhang of rock.[9] The door itself had clearly been damaged, as there were two holes, one a little bit over three feet up from the ground and the other at almost double that height.

1/Player: Peepholes? Is anyone looking at me?

1/G_1: Were these peepholes? I couldn't see anyone looking at me, but it was dark in there, so I couldn't be sure I wasn't being observed.[10]

1/Player: Is there a handle? A knob? A lock?

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7   Not an actual game but one I'm just imagining for the purpose of illustrating how this might work.

8   I personally prefer email, as it gives me more time to think, but playing by chat would certainly be quicker.

9   For what it's worth, I'm taking this from *100 Dungeon Entrances* published by Azukail Games in 2022. This is from entrance #47, which is the number I just rolled on percentile dice.

10   Notice how instead of merely responding, the GM is restating (with some minor editing) what the player wrote. That player can, of course, rephrase this into his or her character's voice if they so wish, and perhaps this should be encouraged.

1/G_1: There were two small holes where it looked like there used to be handle, but the door had no knob or keyhole.

1/Player: I stand to the side for a moment and listen.

1/G_1: I stood to the side for a moment to listen. There was some sort of click-clacking noise.

1/Player: Click-clacking? Like stone or metal?

1/G_1: I couldn't tell if it was stone or metal.

1/Player: Is it regular?

1/G_1: After a few seconds, I heard it again.

1/Player: I try opening the door.

1/G_1: How?

1/Player: I try pushing on it softly.

1/G_1: I pushed the door softly, but it didn't budge.

1/Player: Then I'll try kicking it in.

1/Player: Wait!

1/Player: What are my odds? You said the door looks like crap, right? So better than 50/50?

1/G_1: I solidified my stance, preparing to kick the door in, but then lost my nerve. I had no what my odds were. 50/50? It depended on what was on the other side. For all I knew, it might be reinforced by iron bars, or maybe there was just a little pile of dirt to keep the wind from blowing it open. I had no idea.

1/Player: Okay, fine. I'll make a noise like a cat. I'll meow. But first I'm going to stand off to the side, so if anyone is looking through either of those peepholes they can't see me.

Stage 2/G_1: What do you think? (Asking G_2)

2/G_2: It would depend on whether there's enough space on the sides of the alcove where the door is situated.

2/G_1: Does a 2 in 6 chance sound fair?

2/G_2: Sure.

2/G_1: Okay, so on a 5 or 6 there's a place he can stand and not be seen, and I rolled a 6.

Stage 1/G_1: There was a small spot to the side of the door where I could stand, and nobody looking out from those peepholes would be able see me, so I stood there, flattening myself against the stone as I meowed like a cat. Then came a voice.

     "Sto sep kien neb spet?"

     "Et meow kat ae qut."

1/Player: What kind of language is that?

1/G_1: You have no idea.[11]

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11   https://lingojam.com/EnglishtoGoblin

1/Player: I've never heard the accent before?

Stage 2/G₂: He has encountered goblins before.

2/G₁: Maybe all subterranean races sound the same.

2/G₂: I think it's worth an intelligence check.

2/G₁: Okay, he just barely made it.

Stage 1/G₁: I couldn't be sure, but the accent reminded me of those goblins I'd encountered back at the fort.

1/Player: Goblins are pussies. I'll meow again.

Stage 2/G₁: What do you think the odds are they'd fall for it?

2/G₂: Cats are good mousers, and if there's no mice, they're good eatin'.

Stage 1/G₁: It sounded like something was happening on the other side of the door, like someone was sliding back the bolt of some sort of lock or reinforcement. Then the door opened a crack.

1/Player: Is it opening in or out?

1/G₁: In.

1/Player: Which side is opening, the side closest to me or the side away from me?

1/G₁: The side of the door closest to me opened inward, albeit just a crack.

1/Player: So that means if they're looking out the crack, then they're looking the wrong way.

1/G₁: If they were looking outside the crack, they'd be looking the wrong way, but if one of them was still behind the door looking through either of those peep holes, there was now a good chance I'd be noticed.

1/Player: I kick in the door. I go into full on battle mode.

1/G₁: I kicked in the door, and in front of me were two goblins, a pair of knucklebones on the floor behind them.

"Oh, kahn!" they yelled, both of them drawing their swords.

1/Player: I said I was going into battle mode. I attack!

Stage 2/G₂: Actually, given that they were gambling and were only expecting a cat, they might have put their weapons off to the side. Also, it might be worth your time to look at the weapons chart for Goblins on page 47 of the Monster Manual.

2/G₁: Okay, one has a morning star and the other has a military pike. As for whether or not they grabbed their weapons, I'm pretty sure they would.

2/G₂: How about a 1 in 6 chance they didn't.

2/G₁: Okay. So on a 6, they forgot to grab their weapons. I rolled a 2, so they grabbed their weapons.

2/G₂: There's still possibly some element of surprise.

2/G₁: I'll give him a +3 to initiative. And he wins initiative against both of them, but just barely.

Stage 1/G₁: Slight correction.

I kicked in the door, and in front of me were two goblins, one holding a morning star in a way that made it apparent he wasn't expecting to have to use it, while the other had a military pike.

"Oh, kahn!" they yelled, as I slashed at the nearest, but his buckler saved him from losing his hand. Next thing I knew, the spikes of his morning star were clanking against my armor. Meanwhile, the other one ran down an earthen passage, yelling, "Human! Sot's ehn!"

As you can see, there's a narrative being constructed. G₁ isn't just responding to the player. He or she is restating the player's actions, correcting for tense. For example, "I stand to the side" gets restated as "I stood to the side." The reason for this is that by restating everything the protagonist does, says, and even thinks, it then becomes much easier to construct the first draft from the playlog.

G₁ is also expanding descriptions in response to the player's questions. "Then the door opened a crack" becomes "The side of the door closest to me opened inward, albeit just a crack." And G₁ is correcting him/herself. Initially the goblins drew swords, but in response to some help from the assistant-GM, those swords changed into more goblin-appropriate weapons.

Notice also that G₁ is rolling the dice. You may or may not want to do things this way. Many players like rolling their own dice. But if you don't have a dice-rolling application as part of your channel, then it's probably appropriate for one of the GMs to handle this.

Another thing I would strongly recommend is that you should periodically remind the player to include their protagonist's private thoughts along with their actions and dialogue. If they fail to deliver, and you think it's important to the narrative, then you can (and arguably should) insert

these thoughts yourself, and then see whether or not the player wishes to correct you.

If the player disagrees about your assessment of what their character might be thinking, that's a discussion worth having. The players should have an expansive degree of agency over his or her character, however, everyone is subject to certain emotions, so if they're claiming their character has no sense of fear, for example, that might be a legitimate bone of contention.[12]

Now, maybe instead of using the Bisect (G_1/G_2) framework, you'd prefer to try the SPC-Method I outlined last month, where G_S is the Setting-GM, G_P is the Plot-GM, and G_C is the Character/NPC-GM. For simplicity, I'll assume an AD&D-based campaign being played via IRC or Discord or any other chatroom application that enables users to access multiple channels simultaneously.

Stage 1/Player: What are my odds for picking the king's pocket?

1/G_P: Not great. He already knows you're a thief. He's trying to hire you, remember?

1/Player: Yeah, but he knows I know that he knows, so he wouldn't be expecting it.

Stage 2/G_P: His base % is 65.[13] Does that get situationally modified?

2/G_S: Up to you.

2/G_C: The king would have something nice and easy to wear. He's the king. He doesn't have to carry a lot of stuff. Maybe a key.

2/G_S: Whatever. You two work it out.

Stage 1/G_P: As far as the odds go, it's hard to say.

1/Player: If I fail, does he know I tried, or can I back out of it before committing?

1/G_P: Depends on how lucky you are.

1/Player: I should have some idea of the odds. If it looks like it's going bad, can I stumble a little bit, so he thinks I'm grabbing onto him for support?

1/G_P: You don't know what level the king is, and that plays into it, but if he was just some standard dude, then you'd have a 65% chance. If you want to work a "stumble, fall, and grab" into the action, it'll give you plausible deniability if you get caught, but it won't change the odds of success.

1/Player: Cool. Then I'll do it.

Stage 2/G_S: You want me to roll percentile? 01-65 he succeeds.

2/G_P: Yes.

2/G_S: 95.[14] Uh-oh.

2/G_C (playing the king): So I caught this prick thief with his hand in my pocket?

2/G_P: Yeah, anything over 85 means the king knows, but he said he's doing the stumble-move. Take a WIS check.

2/G_S: Spectacular success.

2/G_P: So does the king knows this is BS, or does he just strongly suspect?

2/G_C: Can I have him castrated?

2/G_S: You strongly suspect but aren't 100% sure.

2/G_P: King George is Neutral-Good.

2/G_C: How sure am I?

2/G_S: I would say at least 90%.

2/G_C: So how about I just chop off one of his nuts?

2/G_P: This might throw off the entire scenario. King George is supposed to hire him, not cut off his dangly parts.

2/G_C: I'm a king. I can't have people trying to steal

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[12] There's this concept is Jungian psychology of the Shadow Self, that aspect of yourself that your ego doesn't know about, which you bury because it doesn't fit how your perceive yourself to be. I've observed that most players don't like to play out character flaws, which has made me wonder if there should be some mechanism whereby the protagonist is turned over to someone other than the player for short periods of time, if the player is unwilling to play out their protagonist's primary flaw. In this way, we might avoid the pitfall of a static protagonist.

[13] G_P knows this because the Setting document references 1st edition AD&D as being the primary ruleset, and the PC is an 8th-level thief.

[14] As you might recall, last month I mentioned G_S is the one who rolls the dice under this SPC-Method. The reason for this is to keep G_P and G_C honest. After all, randomness is a big part of what makes a roleplaying game a roleplaying game. G_S doing the rolling prevents G_P from cheating to make the narrative go one particular way or another. Now some people will say this is the GM's prerogative, that the whole reason GM screens were invented was to give the GM the opportunity to cheat. Well, cheating the dice, in my opinion, is a way of bending the plot, and I think it gives the GM too much power. He or she would often rather do cartwheels than be forced off the plan or off the map or what have you. In short, cheating the dice is often just another way of railroading a campaign, and I'm guessing it happens more often than GMs ever admit. But if you want to have G_P or G_C roll dice, that's up to you. Since I haven't actually tried this stuff out, I can't say how well these ideas will mesh together in actual play.

my shit. By the way, is anything in that pocket?

2/G$_P$: Would he have a magic item in there?

2/G$_S$: Up to you.

2/G$_P$: I'm gonna say just the key to his private quarters. Or would there be a royal harem?

2/G$_S$: The northern folk don't do harems, but he could have a mistress or two.

2/G$_P$: And he has a queen?

2/G$_S$: Most likely. And possibly children. You can determine all that within reasonable bounds.

2/G$_P$: Okay, a queen and two daughters. And no mistress. At least not inside the castle.

2/G$_C$: So this son-of-a-bitch was trying for the key to my wife and daughters. I gotta at least grill him.

2/G$_S$: Over an open flame?

2/G$_C$: No, verbally.

2/G$_P$: What sort of grilling?

2/G$_C$: Gonna call him on his bullshit. If I'm 90% sure. That's good enough to say something.

2/G$_P$: Go ahead.

Stage 1/G$_P$: As the king leans over to show you something on the map, you try picking his pocket. You touch something for a moment, something metallic, but then he turns toward you, and you have to fake like you tripped.

1/Player: No, I don't want to touch him as a result of his turning. I'm pretending to trip over the rug, and the only reason I'm touching him is because I don't want to fall on my face.

1/G$_P$: Okay. So as he leans over to point out something on the map, you fall into him, getting your hand in his pocket for a moment, and you touch something metallic, but before you can grab it, he abruptly turns, and you kind of have a little trouble withdrawing your hand as quickly as you'd like.

1/Player: In other words, he noticed?

1/G$_C$: "You are most clumsy," the king says reaching into his pocket and pulling out a silver key. "You wanted this, perhaps?"

1/Player: "I'm so sorry, Your Majesty. I tripped on this loose rug." There's a rug, right? Kings have floor covering.

1/G$_P$: Sure.

1/G$_C$: "I'm rather disappointed," the king says, frowning. "I thought I was hiring the greatest thief in all Fairport, but if you're so clumsy, I see I have the wrong man."

1/Player: He's firing me?

1/G$_C$: Would you hire you?

1/G$_P$: Please, no unnecessary OOC[15] on Stage 1.

1/G$_C$: I'm showing him the door.

1/Player: "I'm very sorry to have wasted your time, Your Majesty." Can I try picking his pocket again as he shows me out?

Stage 3/Observer: LOL. Incorrigible!

3/G$_S$: Yes he is :-)

Stage 1/G$_P$: You can try, but he's on guard now.

1/Player: He wouldn't expect me to try it again. It's still 65%?

1/G$_P$: Whatever. Sure.

Stage 2/G$_C$: Should be lower.

2/G$_S$: I'm okay with keeping it the same.

Stage 1/Player: I go for it.

Stage 2/G$_S$: 14. He succeeds

Stage 1/G$_P$: How are you going to go about it?

Stage 1/Player: I'll brush up against him on the way out.

Stage 1/G$_P$: Okay. You succeed. You got the key. He didn't even notice.

1/Player: Great. As I'm saying goodbye, I'll show it to him and tell him thanks for the souvenir.

1/G$_C$: The King searches his pocket. "You little son-of-a-bitch!"

1/Player: Before he gets all that out, "Your Majesty, picking pockets is a simple matter. Avoiding rugs, however… it's a skill I have yet to master. Here's your key, and if you change your mind and decide to give me a second chance, despite my clumsiness, I promise to be more careful."

Stage 2/G$_C$: This dude is smooth.

2/G$_P$: Thank God. I thought I was going to have to throw out the whole adventure.

Stage 1/G$_C$: "Wait," the King says. "Come back."

1/Player: I go back.

1/G$_C$: "Let me be clear. I don't trust you any farther than I can shit you out of my ass, but my need is dire, and my purse is large if you can get what I need, Thief."

1/Player: "And what would that be, Your Majesty?"

Next month, I'll discuss various issues with respect to turning the play log into a campaign write-up.

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[15] Out-of-Character Conversation. Different groups will likely have different rules about how much OOC commentary they permit on Stage 1.

Random Hopscotch #3

Reading over A Gentle Stroll #3, I can't wonder if the character of the APA, its main difference with E&A being to have no fiction limits, will tend towards RPG-adjacent fiction? In which case, I likely won't have that much to say, at least unless I do more writeups or original fiction, I suppose; I've dipped my toes there occasionally but it's not usually what I want to do (although I could pub a song or poem or whatnot; formatting would be somewhat challenging).

One thing I've been thinking about, which straddles the border a bit, is how if we're looking at early interactive fiction (as narrative games are, as RPGs are via whatever mechanism), an easy to miss thread is the detective procedural.

Of course, the main focus these days of detective/ mystery fiction is on the story. It's an established genre now, and while it certanly has its tropes, a lot of the focus is on what can happen *aside* from the mystery; what twists and turns the mystery can take, and the people in the mystery.

But if you think about early detective fiction, the idea was that even as the story progressed, the reader should be able to solve the mystery before the answer was revealed by the detective, adding an interactive puzzle element to what was otherwise a novel. This was true Even as early as Doyle (who was kinda lousy at it) and very explicitly with the authors inspired by his work like the Detection Club, who came up with *rules* to make it more likely that they would be *playing fair* and writing mysteries that a careful reader could solve.

This is phenomenal, thinking of it as interactive fiction. THe reader was in one-sided (or not so much, if a novel was serialized) dialogue with the author, who strove to make their mystery neither too easy nor too hard, so that readers who solved the mystery before the detective did could be justly proud of their accomplishments, rather than frustrated, and so when the solution was revealed, it would *make sense*.

Turning to roleplaying games, then, it's fascinating that mysteries are one of the things hardest to do with our format. Of course, one part of this is obvious—early inventors in our field were coming, as has been mentioend, from wargaming or history backgrounds, so why would they design games that made it easier to write interactive mysteries at the table?

But I'd argue that more of the issue is foundational. Of course, a GM can present a well-built mystery, just as a mystery writer does, and hope the PCs can solve it, with the players attempting to put the clues together just as the readers of a mystery novel try to. Maybe they can! But here's where things break down—nothing goes wrong in a mystery novel if the readers don't solve the mystery! Instead, the story continues to its conclusion, with the detective revealing the solution, and the reader, having lost the "puzzle" if they were even attempting to solve it, something not always worth attempting with even some Detection Club members' works "cheating", like Agatha Cristie, lying in her characters' internal narrations in *And Then There was None* to mislead the reader. But in a roleplaying game? The player is *playing* the detective, so if they cannot solve it, or worse, their solution is plausible but wrong, the story hits a brick wall. Of course, the GM could smooth things out by including a NPC detective—a rival, or even a mentor like Nero Wolfe (whose stories I have never read, so forgive me if I mischaracterize them—though I have read the Garett Glen Cook novels which are, I'm told, deeply inspired by them). With the "master detective" NPC, the GM can allow the players to solve the mystery if they can put the clues together, and if they can't, the master detective can step in and solve it for them.

Narratively coherent! But, perhaps a bit dissatisfing; is the resulting story of a roleplaying game not supposed to be a collaboration (if, in traditional styles, an indirect one) between the GM and the players? What then with having the same person—the GM, presenting both the problem (the mystery) and the solution (playing the ultimate detective?).

This brings us to our alternative approach: The double-blind game in which *nobody* really knows the answer to the mystery until the detectives reveal the answer. This allows the mystery story to be a true collaboration; the GM introduces clues into the narrative, and MAY EVEN HAVE AN ANSWER IN MIND (I'll get back to this), and the players can elaborate on this and extend the story without having to guess what answer the GM had in mind originally.

Of course, this solves one problem and presents a number of new ones.

The main one is that if what the players want is to solve mystery, just like a detective does in a mystery story?

They aren't doing that. Well, not exactly. What they're trying to do is solve the mystery like the *author* of the mystery story does, knowing that the answer they come up with could be the answer! So if what the players want is the experience of the readers of a mystery story, with added roleplaying, then this isn't a great answer; they're better served (probably) with a more traditional kind of mystery RPG, failure modes included.

The second one is that it turns out that while there are a fair number of RPGs that take this approach in recent years,—Brindlewood Bay, Apocalypse Keys, the Numberless Secrets expansion to Hearts of Wulin, all using the PbtA toolkit where this approach is encouraged by the toolkit encouraging a "play to find out what happens next" agenda —, with the exception of Numberless Secrets (which impressed me), they do a pretty poor job of explaining how this is supposed to work. At least, according to me.

One difficulty is that when you're designing a mystery to be used in this style, you want to be vague, particularly with your clues. "a blackmail letter". "an encrypted file," etc. After all, you don't know where the story will have gone by the time the clue is introduced, and the players get to play too.

But when you introduce a clue? You *need* to be concrete as fuck. Because when you get to the part where the PCs (and players) are trying to come up with an *answer* to the mystery, they need to have a strong idea of what is going on, so their answer feels satisfying, like it could have been the intended meaning all along.

Actually, that's the second thing that designers introducing this style usually get wrong (or to be kinder, over-simplify). They say that as GM, you shouldn't have an answer to the mystery; coming up with an answer is the players' job. But that's weak sauce. If you don't have any answers for the mystery, then it's simply not going to feel like a mystery at all; it's gonna feel like a pile of disconnected clues, and it's no fun at all to turn a bunch of disconnected clues into any kind of answer.

If anything, you want to have *multiple* theories for the answer for the mystery as GM. You can have a single main answer—the "default answer" which if things stay more or less as you started, is likely to be the answer to the mystery. Joe Smith killed his wife because she was about to reveal that he was actually an enchanted penguin and as such, couldn't inherit gobs of cash from "his" great-uncle; the reason he seemed to have an alibi is that he was seen at a party across town, but that wasn't actually him—it was actually a different enchanted penguin that escaped from the zoo." Well, something like that. And the other theories could be that the other enchanted penguin did it! Or that actually Joe's great-uncle isn't really dead but is *also* an enchanted penguin! Or, well, you know.

Maybe none of these are true. But by building a framework like this, you're building the skeleton of a mystery, and the work the players do can much more plausibly put it together in interesting ways that you didn't expect.

The *other* thing several of these games are unsatisfying with (except for Numberless Secrets, which is pretty good here; Apocalype Keys gets part of it right but could be improved on this score) is what happens when the PCs fail their "is my clue the answer to the mystery?" roll.

Because, of course when you're doing this, you want to have that roll. And ideally, all of the results should be interesting. Full success on the roll? You're absolutely right on the money! And you've even in a good position to stop the true culprit from striking again (or, you know, ending the world, whatever). Partial Success? You're still right! But things are heating up as you go into an action/chase scene, and things might get dicey!

Failure? Ok, so you're probably wrong. But the plot still goes forwards, with your wrong guess pushing into an interesting narrative, maybe with more deduction!

It's that last where many of these games are unsatisfying, and I think it's because the designers haven't played enough Zendo.

Maybe (perish the thought) they haven't played any Zendo at all!

Ok, for this digression, I probably need to explain Zendo. So, Zendo is a game that was invented in the late 90s, originally using Looney Pyramids (also known as Icehuose Pieces; the plastic pyramids). It was published by Looney Labs in two editions, and also a folk game played with the pyramids for years before that (and after it). The way it works is that someone is the Master (just call them the GM, though it's not a RPG), and has come up with a rule for what arrangements of pieces "have the buddha nature" (aka are marked with a white stone) and which arrangements "do not have the buddha nature" (aka are marked with a black stone). Any possible arrangement of pieces must unambiguously be sortable using this rule, which the players do not know, into one of these categories.

The goal of the players is to figure out the rule (in a competitive game, the goal of the players is to figure out the rule before any other player figures it out). But the key point for the purpose of mystery games is that each arrangement that players made (each player *must* make an arrangement of pieces on their turn, which will then get marked with a black or white stone) is a clue, and the answer to the mystery (which in this example, does not change, but any rule that will mark the arrangements the same way the master does is considered the same rule, so maybe it's actually a better parallel than I thought?) is the rule that determines how they are marked.

So, every time a player makes a valid guess, the master MUST do one of two things:

1. Make a NEW clue that violates the player's guess. OR

2. If this is impossible, say the player has won, even if the formulation of their rule isn't close to the master's formulation.

What this does is mean that every time a student makes a guess, the game moves forwards. Not in a "you now know the answer," but in a "ok, now the guesses you might have made before are quite possibly not valid and you have new data to make *differnet* guesses.

And if you're running a game where players can roll to solve a mystery and they fail, you need to do the same thing. You need to not only establish that they're wrong, but reveal a NEW clue that establishes why their guess is wrong and points them in a new drection. Possibly (if the guess was actually your primary answer to the mystery, which is why it's important that the GM have several possible solutions) something that points to one of the alternatve ideas!

Comments on A Gentle Stroll #3

Myself: I meant, of course, next -month-, not next week. So it goes!

Whether we're playing one Swords of the Serpentine game or two is an interesting question. With Lisa as GM, we're playtesting a series of linked adventures, so it's obviously one game. Except, since several among the group was attached to the stock characters from the Ragamuffins adventure, Lisa looked over the adventures and figured out which ones would be very suitable for a gang of street urchins (slightly updated; the adventure they appear in stats them up at lower totals than your typical Serpentine character since they're kids and scales the adventure to match, so we had to boost them up to fit the adventures we were playing them in, since those adventures are scaled for reglar PCs). Other adventures aren't really suitable for a group of urchins running from the Guards and helping those they owe; they're more suitable for your typical group of slinks or mercenaries (slink is the Serpentine term for a Private Eye), so we made up an entirely new group for that, composed of my unworldly academic/necromancer, along with a covetous info broker a rash theater person, and an aggressive duelist-for-hire. (all adjectives taken from the character sheets...except for mine which I just edited in). Thing is, there are players in both groups that aren't in the other group, so..is it one game or two?

I'm now in the home stretch of Inventing the Renaissance, about 75 pages from the end (well, from the bibliography which is good enough). So I expect I'll finish it within a day or two of finishing this.

Jim Eckman: Space travel (or travel in general) presents some issues in pacing; how much player time are you going to spend on these multi week jaunts? In the Starjammer game I'm in, this is actually an advantage; players can use the multiple weeks the characters spend in travel as a resource, but otherwise you want something in between; slow enough that it feels like travel rather than everything being in roughly the same place; fast enough that the players don't have to spend too much time in real life staring at star navigation charts.

Another approach to space combat is to establish that projectile/beam weapons are (for whatever reason) ineffective and easily avoided, so most space combat is done with boarding actions. Doing so restores the importance of squad fighting, restoring to a state we all know and appreciate: parties against opposing squads.

N C Shapero/GS Cole: Welcome to the APA!

I see I'm going to have to recalibrate how I read this APA if I want to keep up—at the very least to accommodate the fiction.

It might be my less than careful reading, but I noticed that the narrator has two different voices. His internal voice, which is highly conetemporary, and his external voice, which is very formal and flowery. I get that he's some kind of "quantum leap", but does that grant him the abilty to speak as the locals do?

Monogamous males, polygamous females. Any explanation for that one? Of course, the main reason we tend to see the reverse pattern is that most female animals (including humans) can only productively mate with one male in a season, whereas males can generally remain fertile for much longer periods. And, of course, in humans,

it's always very clear who the mother is, but if one has societal reasons to want to know who the father is (inheritance, in our case) then female polyandry complicates that. What, then would result in the reverse pattern?

The best I can manage is that either (for whatever reason) genetic compatibility is rare, unreliable and hard to test for, so females need to mate with many *different* males to produce issue. Or, I guess, they could simply not be limited to a single father-donor per brood, but be able to have a single batch of offspring with multiple fathers, producing benefits for heterogeneous issue. Of course, this doesn't answer the question about why males of that species would be expected to be single-partner (unless they "gene-locked" to a single partner and would not produce issue with any other, so proscimuity wouldn't result in a wider genetic lottery, I suppose).

I can't think of much that would result in a *societal* reason for males to be expected to be faithful and females not—although I suppose you could have a mechanism where a male having sex with multiple females without due care would result in some of them carrying one another's children? So the motherhood would always be clear if the males were faithful (and presumably the system would involve inheritance largely along mother-daughter lines), but if the males were not faithful then there was the possibility of another female's issue inheriting by accident?

This all is sounding pretty complicated. And not even getting into the question about why the flirting behavior of this species seems to mostly involve sexual harassment.

Jim Vassilakos: I've generally have good experiences with "MP1G" games, but for the best experience, you need to treat them as a troupe game, with all players contributing creatively. Of course, these can be "hard" to novelize, but then, many novels have many protagonists. Of course, most such novels separate the protagonist, not always putting them in the same scenes—which may be parallel to how many more functional MP games that aren't primarily tactical will split up the PCs a lot of the time.

I also find it curious that your descriptions of 1P1G games feature there only being two PCs. But why would that be the case? Why wouldn't the "player" play more than one PC, if the player was up to it, and for that matter, unless the game was SO focused that only one set of interactions was viable (in which case, it would probably be a two player larp with a constrained setup, not a GMed game at all), why wouldn't the GM play multiple roles, just as they do in a multiple player game? In fact, having playtested two commercial "1P1G" game, they tend to very much focus on the GM playing multiple roles. In Paragon Blade (the fantasy version of "duet" Gumshoe), not only does the GM play all the NPCs in the PC's adventures, they also play at least two regular allies—a tool or mechanical companion that is theoretically under the PCs control (like Stormbringer) and an ally or companion that is generally loyal, but notably more independent. In such a way, the GM can act as the sounding board and companion to the player—as well as also, of course, play the opposition.

In the other game, Hillfolk 1to1, the game was very much focused on the interaction, with the idea that

situations would be framed where the PC wanted something and their interlocutor (often a different person each time) wanted something else. The token mechanic tended to set things up such that the PC got what they wanted about half the time, but quite a lot depending on how much the different characters cared about things.

Re MP/MG games, the most common example in practice is larps. Larps aren't scripted (generally speaking), but you can often divide up the realms of control, which can at least theoretically avoid too much of the GMs contradicting one another during a run. And, of course, often there's a hierarchy, with a "head GM" doing all the harder calls, but in more cohesive groups things may not need to be relayed to the head GM (if any) most of the time.

Re many GM models, only slightly sarcastic: I mean, it's great that the player has all these different GMs to maximize their fun, but after a certain point, why is the player even there? Couldn't you just have a 0PMG model where the different GMs make decisions for the PC at need, or even add multiple PCs if the narrative seems to require it? (and as you know, there are multiple "every player is a GM and also plays a PC" games being happily played; Good Society, No Dice, No Masters, Microscope, and Universalis to name four).

Also re your 3 GM structuer; how does having a setting GM differ significantly from having a system that someone not in the group wrote, which then gets drawn on (but only rarely modified) by the active GMs? Is not using a system someone else wrote in some ways involving them as a (not present, inactive) GM?

Gabriel Roark: I think I talked about my history in RPGs a few times over my somewhat longish run, but I don't think I ever attempted to sum it up as I did here, so this may have been something of a first; glad you enjoyed it.

And no, I had a potential SF/fantasy fan background (I was unaware that there even *was* a science fiction/ fantasy genre when I first encountered the concept of D&D, but I also knew what I liked and read quite a bit for my age; the period in which I was consuming a book a day, sometimes two, was somewhat after that—from maybe 11 through, oh, around 25 or so (at which point the Internet got interesting and started slowing me down a bit). So, no, no wargaming or historian background, but before long, a strong sense of what fantasy and SF stories looked like.

Re history subgames: somewhat less appropriate to a SF game (unless it has very, er, interesting economics), but I'm reminded (I am, after all, still reading a fascinating historiography of the Renaissance) of how our early, "medieval" games, historians being part of the hobby and

all, totally failed to capture the economics of pre-industrialization civilization, where both books and clothes, absent industrial looms, cotton gins, and printing presses, were enormously expensive compared to modern day numbers—even "ordinary" books and sets of clothes, and an extensive, royal library might have as many as 50 books, whereas a highly prized scholar's collection might have, say, 5. Think about how research would be changed in that environment! Rather than going into your library and trying to find/make the information you need, and perhaps if your library doesn't meet your needs, perhaps using a university library or even a "great library," a true quest for information might involve a massive trek, as you first need to search to even find out where the information you look for might be found, and then have to persuade whoever guards the information you wish to part with it for a few moments (if they even still have access to it). And even once you have made fair copies of all the materials you thought you needed, you might find that those linked you to yet more distant sources of information, or required that you experiment to amplify your understanding before you could even begin the great work that you hoped to complete. (a kind GM would not, however, as the Renaissance was, make this a multiple generation process where the ones who began it, like Plutarch, were never fit to bring it to any sort of conclusion).

George Philies: I never actually played Champions (I did show up for one session but it wasn't really for me; 4 hours and I think they finished the combat that was going on when I entered?), but I did play Justice Inc fo ra while, which also uses the Hero System in a much simpler form. That said, since the Champions game I watched included a fair amount of Variable Power Pool play, I did get a strong sense of how it worked (very complicatedly!)

At 88,000 words, *No Tears for a Princess* is a bit more than tice as long as necessary to qualify for a novel under Hugo/Nebula rules, but still significantly shorter than your average modern SF or fantasy novel (which tends to bottom out at 120k words). Not to mention Sanderson novels—Wind and Truth, the most recent Stormlight novel, clocks in just shy of half a million words long. Of course, novels were shorter in the 80s, but even then, 120k word novels were somewhat more common than 40k word ones.

...And there's only one bed! Have to wonder if the princess does ever get into any romantic tangles; so far, the response to an offer of companionship was very much "nah, I don't like sex" or "I don't like casual flirting"; I can't really tell which. Or whether Grandoon's "offer" was uncommonly forwards, but I guess 800 year old wizards are accorded some leeway.

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #4
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Thoughts on Space Games

I have some new items to research, thanks to input from several people. Scan the SFRP Wanderer.

Reactions to Issue #1

A Boat to the Golden Isle (Tiffanie Gray) Can Ms. Gray or our collator tell us anything about the artwork? Tiffanie Gray responds: *I would be happy to talk about the artwork! It is fully digitally painted using the software "PD Howler". I love PD Howler because you can mimic so many natural painting techniques with it.* Lovely painting, I will have to check out PD Holder.

Reactions to Issue #3

Random Hopscotch #2: Joshua Kronengold Gumshoe sounds interesting.

I appreciate the impressionistic cover this time; it fits the "gentle stroll" title (and in fact has that title rather than some other title), an also having an impressionist title gives the APA a really different feel that fits the relaxed idea that the title connotes. Its an OZ inspired Chinese literati painting, which is an odd combination but I think it works for this.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #2: Gabriel Roark *Was this deliberate?* Yes

Stylistic habit? In one sense, I've only studied Chinese and Japanese painting techniques, so that's what I do.

At its peak: is that a structure of some kind? You give the impression of movement up there, though. This is an impressionistic painting so what you see is correct, even if it seems a bit paradoxical.

Your pre-Traveller campaign had good premises; Thanks

...you mean John McEwan's Starguard! That's correct.

You are looking for a good RPG to run the sort(s) of SF campaigns Yes, I'm not fond of Traveller, the most popular one. George Phillies comment is on point: *It was a fine afternoon of dicing. Sorry that his first activity will be attending a funeral, his own.*

Do you know of an SF RPG that has an academic subgame? Yes, a very old one called Legacy. A friend called it stone age roleplaying, lots of theory with little implementation. There are some bits and pieces in other works.

Consider the magical research rules in almost any variety of D&D Thanks for the list, I will look at those.

RE Space Opera is published by Fantasy Games Unlimited, now back in print.

Did your friend ever publish their SF RPG? No, Wanderer was never published. I've located my copies and now scanning them. They will be made available hopefully in the next month or two,

RE your Bushido campaign Players in the campaign, 30+. Sessions were 15-25 players.

Your campaigns all sound like fun,

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD: FINNEGAN TARREGA'S UNAUTHORIZED INVESTIGATIONS INTO MATTERS ANCIENT AND ARCANE Nice source material.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade: George Phillies *Rhodomontadulous is from Rodomontade, as passed through the filter of the early 19th century American Tall Talker movement. It's a splendiferous word.* Indeed it is, Vance or Clark Ashton Smith would be happy to use it.

The Fox's Den: N. C. Shapero and G. S. Cole Is N. C. Shapero coauthor of Outer Suns? If so, inspected any bottles lately ;)

1PMG PBEM: Jim Vassilakos An interesting method of play.

Figure 1: Strange Alter by Jim Eckman

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #4

A Parade of Boasters and Braggarts

Comments

Dangerous Doors: We imagine from Tiffany's artwork that the young lady is going to use a spell to open the door, or perhaps do the unthinkable, test the latch to see if the door is unlocked.

Random Hopscotch#2: Ah, yes, the Hugo Awards. I gather that there is no interest in correcting the awards from two years ago, when the rules were apparently trampled at least at the nomination stage, on in investigating whether or not nominations from earlier years were also, umh, adjusted.

With respect to promotion from the ranks, Dr. Melissa Scott in her Ph.D. Thesis (Doctor Scott is a military historian as well as an SF author) demonstrated that in the Elizabethan or thenabouts period entering the military as an enlisted man was as honorable as entering as an officer, and some number of nobles did so.

Yes, that was the second part of No Tears for a Princess, and in this issue was have the third. The tale is currently around 90,000 words. That's about a third of the proper length for a solid fantasy novel.

This zine appears at the end because A Gentle Stroll is not my ego trip; it is a contribution to the National Fantasy Fan Federation that is its formal publisher.

Ronin Engineer: Yes, that is a fine list of traditional ways of arranging space ships. The Spartan was originally the magazine of the Spartan International Competition League.

I confess I played EPT only once. We were a group of first levels on a ship and were attacked by a group of bad guys. We had enough initiative that we got to throw spells while they were closing the range. After less than a half round of combat, the bad guys were not there any more. As I recall, the enemy ship was destroyed before it was a my turn to fore. We were impressed by the lethality of the combat spells, but did not try to play it again. I had friends who were fond of En Garde. I never tried playing it.

The Fox's Den: A fiction, a strange society of non-humans, very thoughtfully constructed. The writing was very rich in implied background details that are not spelled out. There is truly a great deal of detail being transmitted by you, without the tale turning into an infodump. The legal maneuvers were amusing. Your numbering system is clever, but after a while may tire the reader.

Jon Peterson wrote Playing at the World (MIT Press, Second Edition, in two volumes).

1PMG PBEM: Fixation on single-point-of-view writing is something of a modern affectation, in that I recall far less of it from fifty or sixty years ago. With one player, one can get inter-PC conflict if the player is running several characters, but that's not entirely typical of all campaigns. As a not-exactly-a-counterexample, consider the novelization of Forbidden Planet, in which each chapter is from the perspective of a different character.

"...mistakes may get embedded in the plot…" However, if you are writing a novel, you can simply rewrite that portion and undo that mistake. True also here assuming that the player is cooperative.

I see one more issue to consider here, though I think it does not matter for you, Some people outline novels heavily and then write the tale in order. Some people find chapters, write them, and then put the book into order at the end. These are the *outliners* (they outline) and the *pantsers* (they write by the seat of their pants).

To take a famous example, the Fall of Eddore at the end of the Lensman series was something that E.E. Smith reportedly wrote very early on, years before he wrote the prior books. The final bit of my novel Of Breaking Waves, the last in the four book Eclipse series, I had written very early on.

"*… I leaned back into my lounge chair, took another sip of the cocoa, and watched the clouds change shape, ever so slowly, as they drifted across the sky. Gradually they faded from pale gold to umber and pink, their bottoms finally turning gray. The cinnamon-raisin cookies, one tiny bite at a time, were really good. After all, I'd baked them myself. I had lots of things I could do, but sometimes you should stop and smell the roses.*

*****The Very End*****…"

There is nothing wrong with either approach, except according to writers who use the other one, but the pantser approach might be the more difficult to implement.

That is certainly a creative list of alternative paths to running an RPG. I have no idea which of them would work in practice, and expect that the success would depend on the people involved.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne: I ice skated as a grad student and postdoc, but tried only once thereafter. With respect to names, "Sandra" is a local common name, somewhat like "Jennifer" is today in our world.

An archaeological expedition. A fine start to an adventure. There are hints of something odd, but they are very subdued. And our protagonist has ill memories of the unknown visitor. All said, very well written, with much more well-researched historical data than I am using for Earth Terror.

The Ocean Leech: Long continued to write tales for a very long time, finally expiring in his 90s. You have brought dice to a remarkable literary creation written by a young author. Long's adjectives were truly imaginative, though the younger generation alas will complain that "*something mute, misshapen, blasphemous, and we saw industrious retching matter, brainless and self-sufficient*" is both opaque and overwrought. The rules set you invoked appear to have captured the creature's multitudinous properties adequately for a gamesmaster to summon the creature into a game, where the player characters might not welcome it.

Our Adventurers

And in typing up the characters wealth, I dropped a trailing zero.

And so the adventurers assemble around the secluded meeting table.

"So we are finally all together at the same time," Herman Engolph said, "our server has brought us watered wine, our loaves of fresh-baked bread, grilled squash, and a large crock of lentil stew. I see the Brian is already serving the stew."

"My family," Brian Northwindson said, "is respectably large, so as the youngest child I've had much practice at this. Though this is as much ham stew as lentil stew, and the cook clearly did not stint on garlic."

"And you selected the horse," Herman continued.

"Indeed," Brian answered. "My family raises draft horses, so I obtained Ebeneezer at house price, 70 gold pieces, and a covered wagon, at 120 gold pieces. Yes, that's expensive, but it's seasoned oak, steel-shod wheels, and steel bearings for the axles."

"I looked at the horse," Sandra said. "It's a fine horse. So 30 gold pieces from each of us, only 10 from Brian who saved us at least 30 or 50, as we had agreed."

There was a clang as she dropped three half-dragon coins into an empty pewter bowl.

"The agreement," Herman said, "is that we would each cover up to 60 gold pieces of party expenses, on an agreed list of topics. Sister Jennifer knew which of town's chandlers gave the best quality in travel biscuits, properly dried and in sealed boxes, not to mention various pickles and salted this and that. These came to 40 silver pieces for a month's supply for one person – that will be a gold piece from each of you. We also have a large tent...some of you have your own smaller tents."

Brother Gowophilus cleared his throat. "Mindful that the All-Fleeing expects us to be able to move quickly, So long as we stay on Imperial roads we can still load the wagon with 2000 pounds of cargo, of which a third is food for the draft horse and grain for the other two horses, enough for some weeks, more if we can buy hay when we stop in a town. All assisting the wagon to get up hills will help. That leaves 200 pounds less rations for each of us."

"I believe that our two mages have been discussing weight issues," Herman said.

"Yes, sir," Vincent answered. "But stone magic is largely based on tools, so I have enough carpentry and stone mason tools. A simple stone melting spell lets me shape horseshoes, but I'm not the one to be nailing a shoe to a horse."

"I mostly have books," Emmanuel said. "Clothing. Soap to enhance clothing-cleaning spells. Needles and thread. Oil for leather boots. And we both have personal books for casting spells."

Herman turned to Sandra. "Extra weapons. Waxed hooded coat for rain. You mentioned crossing the Western Range, so I have a down coat. And a horse blanket."

And I have the signed offer from the merchant we are escorting. He provides food and forage for us, his cooks will feed us, his farrier, leatherworker, and wheelwright will treat new damage during the march. For the first half of the march, eight silver pieces a day. For the second half of the march, where combat is more than possible, a gold piece a day, and we keep the loot on the bandits we kill."

"Two questions," Sandra said, "which I told you privately. Why might there be combat? Why are we doing this long land caravan when he could use barges up the Great West River?"

"The River has rapids," Herman answered, "with locks for barges. Except last month someone blew up the Parker's Shoal rapids, must have been several tons of well-made fireseed. Combat? Last Spring Baron Perchblade marched along the High road, leaving the Empire for one of the neutral zones, and in the large area beyond the law apparently burned and looted several smallcrofter villages. He and his men then vanished. Since then, in an expanding part of the neutral zone, there have been attacks on travelers, new toll booths, and other bits of disorder. Not all the time, but repeated, with no clue as to who the guilty parties are."

No Tears for a Princess Part 3

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The lamps were dark. Coals glowed low in the fireplace. Clockwork, tools, and book were carefully returned to their rightful places. Grandoon snored gently, alone in his bed. Elaine lay near the fireplace, layered between a thin pad and thinner quilt. Drowsily, she rolled to one side, then stretched, confirming that her sword was in easy reach. When she touched the hilt, the lines of her face and shoulders softened. She smiled slightly as she rolled over further, finally pressing her nose to the pillow and drifting off into deep sleep.

Grandoon's pose was an affectation. An archmage's immortal body needed some rest to recover from the strains of the day. For his mind, a few hours of dreams would suffice. Most of the night would be spent waiting, watching, thinking. His eyes might be closed, but magesight revealed every part of the cottage in finer detail than normal vision could ever perceive. To his inner eye, the fire of the Presence, the hidden power which underlies all sorcery, burned as bright as day. His books and scrolls glowed soft pastels; potions on the far wall shimmered with hidden light. The clockwork on his worktable encaged starry constellations. And Elaine?

He set his inner eye toward her. Every thing has an aura. Hers was violet-black, hinting at untapped power, but power now quiescent, doing no more than scattering any spell set against it. An aura, thought Grandoon, should have structure, revealing its roots the way the grain of fine-polished wood names the tree from which it was cut. Elaine's aura was featureless as fresh-cast silver, lacking even the patina of age.

From where had Elaine come? For all Grandoon had learned, she had no past, as though she'd stepped from Heaven within the past month. His ignorance was not for want of effort.

When he returned to the Academy, his fellow mages would ask how a city so well-protected as Arburg-am-Tressin had fallen so quickly. Its defenders had been somewhat disorganized, but should have held longer than they did. The Academy drew a sizable part of its income from the construction of defensive spellworks. If those works had an unknown flaw, found by accident by the besiegers, the Academy's sizable royalty income would be jeopardized.

Grandoon's workbench was lined with memory crystals, each carefully engraved from the mind of an eyewitness. The task facing him this night was to organize the memories into a coherent whole, transforming a mishmash of observation into consistently patterned facts. The outline of events was clear, but curiosities remained. Elaine's role in the city's fall was inexplicably large.

The first interesting observations dated to six weeks past. There had been a Republican revolt in Arburg. The Guilds, led in many cases by their own Syndics, had risen against the lawful authority of their Duke, His Clergy, and most especially His Loyal Mages. The Duke fled over city walls, clad in a nightgown. The clergy talked swiftly, or saw their temple treasuries donated to the cause of the people. The mages of the peaceful town of Arburg-am-Tressin spent their days enchanting potions, most learning barely enough battle magic to stun a housefly. Confronted with an angry mob, such mages bent to its will, ran, or perished. Further north, where all mages knew battle magic as a matter of course, the mob might have fared very differently. Further north, Pyrrin sent armies, not demagogues.

Arburg-am-Tressin had been subverted by agents of the Archmage Pyrrin and his so-called League of Democracies. Grandoon had traced the essential

details. Infiltrating the city, Pyrrin's spies sought out those Syndics most vulnerable to enchantment, inflaming their minds against the ordained order of the world. For a city to replace one group of nobles with another, replace nobles with other masters, or put up or set down a cult was one thing. But once a land was enrolled in the League, it could never depart, nor change its style of government without Pyrrin's leave, leave which was never granted. Worse, Pyrrin demanded that no mages, save those loyal to him, could hold power; all others must be exiled or carefully chained. Grandoon and the Academy found Pyrrin's ideas unbearable.

The revolt filled the city with rioting mobs, all too susceptible to the mass hypnotic methods which were Pyrrin's specialty. Hypnotic spells, easy to forestall, could not take defended towns while mages worked protective wards. Against a city in chaos, hypnotic spells were admirably effective. Years of work had been needed to place the kindling. Once the fire began, the city fell to Pyrrin's rioters in a single heady evening. Ducal levies, raised from the outer valley, put the city to siege.

Grandoon checked his rush through others' memories. The Archtyrant's hirelings were active in every corner of the world, stirring up trouble wherever they might. The Duke of Arburg was an idiot, whose every pronouncement seemed to reduce the store of human wisdom. For Pyrrin to attack the Duke was no great surprise. The anomaly came much later, during the siege itself.

Arburg-am-Tressin had the most powerful defenses in the Duke's domains. Its granaries were full; its shields against sorcery were well-maintained. Even with all his levies behind him, the Duke's siege was not assured of success. More to test the defenses than in hope of victory, the Duke launched a two-pronged attack against the city. The main assault was bloodily repulsed. The diversionary attack on the North gate -- the most heavily fortified point of the city's walls -- succeeded beyond all expectation, capturing the tower and opening the city gates. Once a foothold was established within the city, counterspells set by the Duke's mages dissipated Pyrrin's enchantments, freeing the street mobs from Pyrrin's thrall. With common sense restored, the rebellion crumbled.

The anomaly was the fall of the North Gate. No tower of wood or stone, unless shielded against magic, could long survive the attentions of a first rate sorcerer. The North Gate had been protected by powerful spell dampers, great mechanisms of crystal and wrought iron locked securely in the bowels of the gate tower. So long as they functioned, any conventional spell-sending would soundlessly flicker to nothing without harming the gates themselves.

On each side of the gate itself rose a column of spell ports -- windows a yard wide through which defending mages might send maledictions against their foes. Permanent runes of guard kept out arrows, and assured that anyone trying to enter a port would be blasted by a thunderbolt. Elaine had been first up a ladder in an early assault. Not bothering to try for the top of a wall, she had jumped through an open port. The man following her up the ladder remembered that the thunderbolt had seemingly had no effect on her. Within the room, two guards fell to her sword; a third survived to describe what then ensued. In dying, the guards gave the defending mage enough time to raise a spell against Elaine. He invoked the Rune of Death Ascendant -- enough to slay three hundred unprotected men -- without success. Seeing that his own death was nigh, he then shattered his staff against her. The resulting cone of destruction melted steel fittings half-way across the room, yet failed to scorch her clothing.