

Of Dice and Meeples



Issue 1

May 2026

Colophon

Introduction

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If you'd like to be informed when new issues become available for download, please join our forum at <https://discussion.tekeli.li/c/23>, or you can check our website at <https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/>. The APA is assembled with the free software [apatools](#).

Contributor Guidelines

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Zines should use reasonable page dimensions (if it's not roughly A4 or 8.5"×11" there should be a reason). Maximum zine length is 16 pages/10,000 words. Discussion of contemporary politics is discouraged but permitted with a maximum length for political content set at 2 pages/1,200 words. AI-generated material is not allowed. All artwork must be attributed to its creator, unless it is in the public domain.

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Contributors may submit their PDF zines via email to of-dice-and-meeples@tekeli.li

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

Issue #2 — 6 June: Racing Games

Issue #3 — 6 July: Cooperative Games

Issue #4 — 6 August: Alpha Players

Suggestions for further Ignorable Themes are welcome!

This project is explicitly inspired by [Ever & Anon](#), the digital APA successor to *Alarums & Excursions*.

Contents

Cover art by [Hobi Photography via Pexels](#).

This issue's Ignorable Theme is: Sandbox Games

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?

A: An APA.

Q: What's an APA?

A: An Amateur Press Association.

Q: What's that?

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

Q: What's a zine?

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

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

A: Exactly.

Q: And each one has a separate author?

A: Right.

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

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

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

A: Yes. It's like a cocktail party, but all written out. Come join us, if you like. Amateur Press Associations date back to the late 1800s and started to become popular among fantasy and science fiction enthusiasts during the 1930s.¹

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

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

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



Send us a zine. Or some cover art. Or comments. Or a blurb.

Or tell us why we're wrong.

Send your thoughts to of-dice-and-meeples@tekeli.li, and provided they aren't laced with powergamer profanity (or maybe even if they are), we'll likely publish them for the enlightenment & edification of the entire APA. Please include your name, collection size, and why *Flash Point: Fire Rescue* is the best game of all time, and be sure to feed your workers.

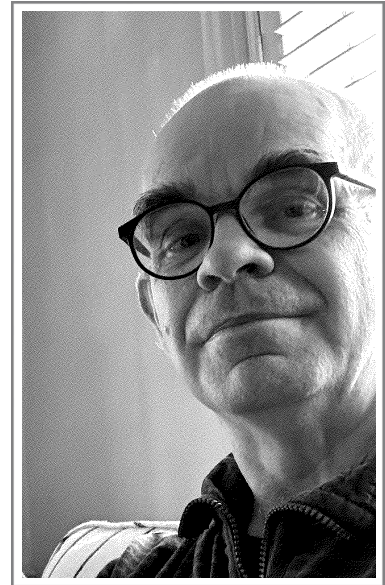
Abbreviations & Acronyms You May Need to Know:

- APA: Amateur Press Association
- Async: a slow online game where you're called back to take your turn
- BBG: Big Bad Guy/Gal (a major villain)
- BGA: Board Game Arena, a site for playing games online
- BTW: By the way
- XdY: X Y-sided dice added together; omit the X if it's 1.
- Frex: For example
- FWIW: For what it's worth
- IgTheme: Ignorable theme
- IIRC: If I recall correctly
- IM(H)O: In my (humble) opinion
- Monopoly: we don't talk about this "game"
- Nextish/Thish/Lastish: Next, This, Last issue
- (N)PC: (Non-)Player Character
- ODaM: *Of Dice and Meeples*
- PBEM: Play-by-Email
- PBF: Play-by-Forum
- RAE(BNC): Read and enjoyed (but no comment)
- Re: Regarding
- RHCT(M): Regarding his/her comment to (me)
- RYCT(M): Regarding your comment to (me)
- RYQT(M): Regarding your question to (me)
- TTS: TableTop Simulator, a physics engine for playing virtual boardgames
- WRT: With respect to / With regard to
- YMMV: Your mileage may vary
- Zine: A writer's contribution

Apple Me after ~50 years

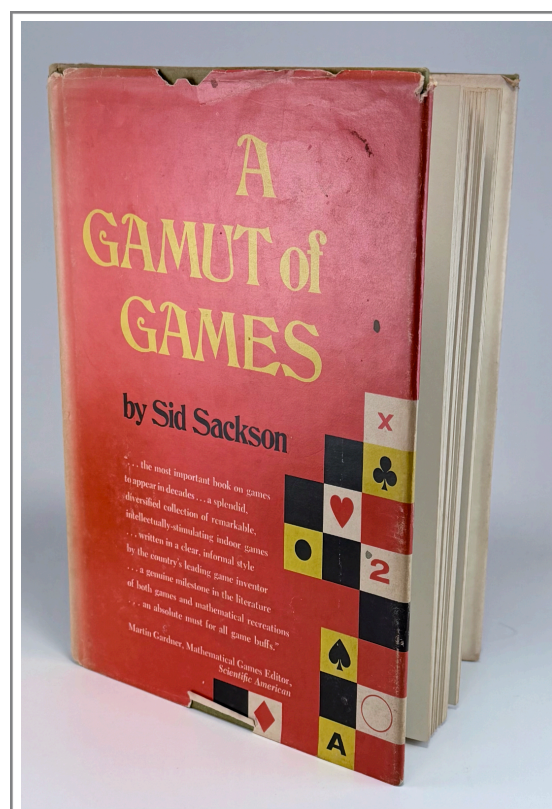
An open-ended look back at 50+ years of boardgames.

Christopher Taylor-Davies
@ctd@mastodon.social



How it all began

There has been a lot of chatter online about Apple's 50th Anniversary in 2026. Articles, podcasts, Broadway shows, all manner of retrospectives. I was considering writing something on open ended games for this zine. Had started it even. But something about looking back called to me louder. My board game origin story started probably more than 50 years ago in the St. Heliers Bay Public Library, in Auckland, New Zealand. I came across a book that literally changed my life. It was "A Gamut of Games" by Sid Sackson.



Card game mutations



This book had numerous really interesting games that could be played with things I already had access to. I was immediately captivated by Lines of Action, and some of the pencil and paper games. But it was the card baseball game that altered my destiny. A school friend and I repurposed it to play tennis. Baseball? What was that? We played around with tennis for a while before starting on the first version of what would become my life's work¹, a cricket simulation.

This should never have worked, but we somehow had enough in our design to make it work. The actual mechanics are lost in time, but there was a bowling deck of 40 cards, a batting deck, and an appeals deck if I recall correctly. You simply turned up a card from the bowling deck which would be either runs, extras, nothing (boring), or an appeal. With six 6 ball overs this meant that 4 cards weren't seen in each cycle, the first element that gave it legs. When an appeal occurred, a card from the appeal deck was turned over, which would be either out or not out. One or two cards in that deck caused the appeal deck to be reshuffled, which also added just enough variety. It worked well enough for us to play numerous seasons of imaginary games. The scoring rate was stratospheric, it wasn't well calibrated, but the overall scores were reasonably acceptable. Especially if you cheated every now and then. Did that happen? I couldn't possibly say.

Meanwhile something big was coming that would intersect with this essentially solitary activity. Although companies like Avalon Hill were publishing games to niche markets, they were almost unknown in New Zealand, certainly to a youngster like me. In 1974 though, D&D changed all of that. By the time it percolated across the Pacific to NZ, I had changed schools, found some friends interested in board games, and suddenly I became a GM of a D&D campaign. There were some hobby shops in Auckland that stocked some items but I mostly recall we pooled our money and imported the original D&D manuals, a stack of polyhedral dice, and miscellaneous other stuff from an outfit in California.

¹ Err, some artistic licence here...

Reverse Polish notation FTW

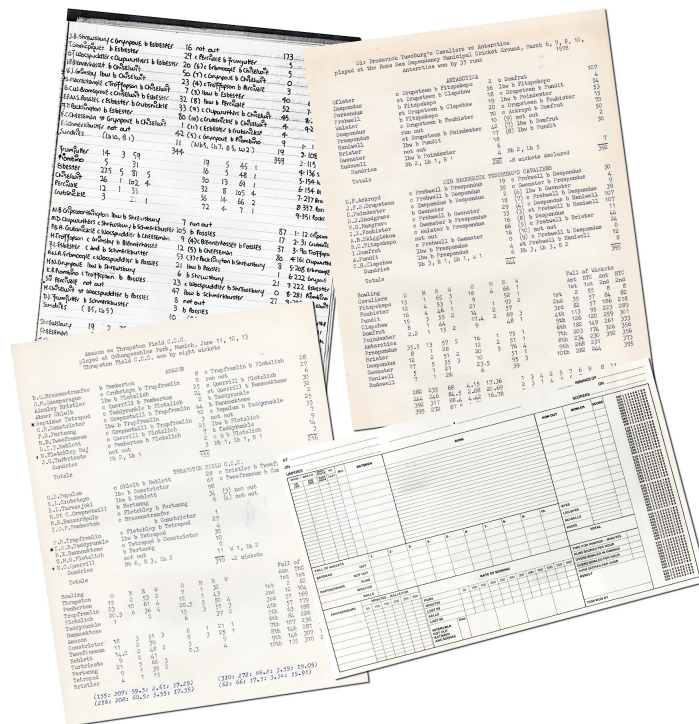


There is a third thread to the start of this story, and that was my grandfather appearing one day in the house very excited. He was a brilliant engineer, who invented many amazing things, but he was a taciturn fellow, not given to hyperbole. What he was waving around was an HP-35 scientific calculator, one of the first 3 to arrive in New Zealand. He described, mostly to my Dad to be fair, all of the remarkable things it could do, for which he would no longer need his slide rule. The HP-35 was quickly followed by its programmable siblings, and this is where the streams get crossed. The HP family glued together the D&D/board gaming thread with the cricket game thread.

I had been immediately intrigued with the way that the d20s we purchased for D&D could be used elsewhere. I noted that two d20s essentially became a d100 and all of the possibilities that offered. I had started re-working the cricket game into a probability based version, using three d20 as the basis. This was working, but was somewhat tedious to manage. I programmed a HP-65 or HP-67, then later the much more capable HP-41CX to do some of the heavy lifting. The three threads are now inextricably mingled.

Bringing it all together

Some of the score cards from those days still survive as I typed them out on an actual typewriter, or carefully wrote them into exercise books in coloured inks. As an aside, I was intrigued by cricket scoring at the time, and redesigned the scoresheets that were used at first class games in New Zealand. I also, improbably, had a brief stint scoring for Radio New Zealand, during Shell Trophy matches. My Bill Frindall/Andy Zaltzman impressions didn't last long, and I don't recall actually saying anything on air. It was a fun diversion while it lasted though.



Apologies for the lengthy preamble, but now the stage is set for me to justify my claim earlier about the Gamut of Games. It is the early 80s. D&D mania is in full swing, though we have pivoted to a Gamma World campaign for the most part. Our small group has also experimented with some of the early SPI games like Swords and Sorcery. Board games are a major interest but remain remote and somewhat unattainable thousands of miles across the ocean. My cricket game is running on an HP-41 and I somehow manage to purchase an Apple IIe, mostly to play games on. I am working at an engineering supply company selling machine tools and Huck bolts, when one of our gaming group suggested I apply for a job at the computer software company he was working at.

10 PRINT "Hello"

My thought process was literally, "Hey, if I learned to program computers, I could write a better cricket simulation". So, of course I said yes. Sid Sackson was in action, altering my life choices. Roll forward a few years and I had indeed started to work on the cricket program on the Apple IIe, as well as continuing with the day job where we were having fun tracking shipping containers across the Pacific, reading TELEX messages onto a computer. Such times. One of the partners we worked with was based in London and ended up staying with my parents while in New Zealand instead of living out of hotels. He returned to London, but almost immediately offered me a job in London, which was not something you turned down, when you were on the other side of the world.



I no longer have the Apple IIe, the best I can do is the ClassicBot model of it, but I do have those original polyhedral dice imported at vast expense.

Fast forward

So now my accidental career choice, inspired by A Gamut of Games, Cricket and D&D, has taken me across the world. We can compress the narrative now, as it contains a few clear subsequent phases. Settling down in the UK, in various locations, I was joined by friends from NZ at regular intervals and we continued playing whatever board and computer games were flavour of the month. Up Front was a regular, as was the Fury of Dracula. While living in Cambridge I joined a Mah-Jong club at the university, wrote a scoring program to keep track of the bizarre and complicated scoring variant they used. I understand this is traditional with Mah-Jong, everyone has their own special way of scoring. There was also a game club I attended occasionally, but the only game I remember playing there was Die Macher, so maybe that was why I didn't return.

Dr. Zonbrone's Wonder Mah Jong Scoring Aid - Game Statistics

Finished at 26/04/91 00:07

Captain Limit		Nisbet the Nasty		Umbrella Stand		The Outer Limits	
Score	1060	Score	-2620	Score	874	Score	686
Points	1278	Points	814	Points	1252	Points	1138
Average	44	Average	28	Average	43	Average	39
Mah-Jongs	13	Mah-Jongs	4	Mah-Jongs	5	Mah-Jongs	7
E/E	48* 288	E/S	32 -44	E/W	8 -116	E/N	4 -128
E/E	48* 576	E/S	14 -130	E/W	6 -226	E/N	12 -220
E/E	4 -464	E/S	4 -650	E/W	500* 1774	E/N	24 -660
E/N	12 -962	E/E	10 -1662	E/S	14 1284	E/W	500* 1340
E/W	500* 1038	E/N	44 -2094	E/E	20 228	E/S	24 828
E/S	96 1134	E/W	8 -2262	E/N	8 60	E/E	40* 1068
E/S	12 860	E/W	2 -2566	E/N	8 -226	E/E	144* 1932
E/S	26* 964	E/W	88 -2364	E/N	20 -296	E/E	8 1696
S/E	28* 1132	S/S	8 -2428	S/W	0 -384	S/N	24 1680
S/E	84* 1636	S/S	14 -2602	S/W	24 -528	S/N	10 1494
S/E	6 1480	S/S	88* -2250	S/W	0 -630	S/N	2 1400
S/N	16 1466	S/E	8 -2342	S/S	40* -470	S/W	6 1346
S/W	38* 1618	S/N	16 -2366	S/E	12 -550	S/S	10 1298
S/S	32* 1746	S/W	4 -2422	S/N	12 -574	S/E	12 1250
W/E	34* 1950	W/S	4 -2498	W/W	12 -626	W/N	4 1174
W/E	40 1886	W/S	56* -2274	W/W	16 -754	W/N	40 1142
W/N	30* 2006	W/E	16 -2334	W/S	24 -752	W/W	8 1080
W/W	4 1942	W/N	6 -2392	W/E	30* -572	W/S	6 1022
W/W	16 1778	W/N	28 -2508	W/E	52 -612	W/S	80* 1342
W/S	44 1642	W/W	160 -2296	W/N	4 -868	W/E	30* 1522
W/S	0 1566	W/W	8 -2348	W/N	8 -920	W/E	30* 1702
W/S	30* 1686	W/W	12 -2358	W/N	8 -946	W/E	4 1618
N/E	16 1662	N/S	8 -2402	N/W	8 -990	N/N	28* 1730
N/N	10 1576	N/E	28* -2234	N/S	6 -1088	N/W	44 1746
N/N	44* 1752	N/E	60 -2110	N/S	12 -1218	N/W	2 1576
N/W	12 1088	N/N	10 -2780	N/E	336* 798	N/S	6 894
N/W	14 1048	N/N	2 -2856	N/E	24* 942	N/S	18 866
N/W	30* 1168	N/N	20 -2844	N/E	8 870	N/S	2 806
N/S	4 1060	N/W	56* -2620	N/N	32 874	N/E	16 686

Then, as it does, life, marriage and children happened. I can't blame Sid Sackson or d20s for this though. It did mean that there was a quiescent period when not much gaming happened on account of other priorities. I did miss it though, and as soon as the children were old enough, or even before, I started pulling out, or buying, games to try with them. This coincided with a period when the board game scene transformed into something broader and more accessible.

Into the blogosphere

Carcassonne was an early view into this, and our, tatty, copy still gets to the table occasionally. It also lives on in the form of CarcBot, a tool I wrote that has been through many iterations. Its core concept is that it uses Carcassonne tiles to create maps of arbitrary sizes that tile seamlessly. Why? No reason, it is just a nice toy. And it saved laying out the physical tiles on a whiteboard, then inverting them, section by section, onto a scanner. Only a madman would do that.



This was also the age of the board game bloggers, and I discovered several favourites that I followed. Eventually even met some in real life, fancy that! One winter we both got flu really badly. Proper flu, the kind that totally wipes you out. I started to read about the new hot game, Agricola, that everyone was talking about, while convalescing, and still somewhat delirious². Having time on my hands, I imported a German version, with pasted up translated cards and a new obsession was born. We played this a lot, and eventually replaced the pasted up cards with official English versions as the publisher was smart enough to make an upgrade pack available.

² Perhaps this is why it remains an enduring title in my collection. Or perhaps it is just a really good game.

Community shenanigans

There was also a craze for enhancing your game with custom counters and tokens. This pre-dates the current Kickstarter fuelled mania for over-produced games by many years. Someone posted some pictures online of some adorable Fimo animals and vegetables they had made. We tried replicating these, but our skills weren't up to scratch. Luckily the maker put their set up on a maths trade, and in a determined effort to obtain them I bid on them, and them alone. What did I bid in exchange? A mint copy of Up Front, by then essentially unobtainable. I think I got a fair swap, they still get regularly used and I have my battered original copy of Up Front if I need it.



This was when Twitter was a place of discovery and community. Remember that? There are a number of people I encountered there that I continue to interact with, obviously in different pastures now. Others have disappeared into the online void. For a short time though it was a great place to chat about and discover stuff about board games. Out of this sprang something extraordinary. Well at least extraordinary to me. I had read about Alan Moon's Gathering of Friends, but even in the smaller world bought about by the internet, it was still essentially a fantasy realm. Somewhere you had to walk through a magic portal to go to. Amazingly this portal opened in the form of a Twitter DM that said, "Hey, would you like to go to the Gathering?". Err. Yes...

Current affairs

So from 2012 to 2023 I have occasionally made the trip to Niagara Falls to the aforesaid Gathering and met many folk who happen to like board games too. Sadly I can't see this being repeated any time soon. One mad highlight of this was playing the entire Pandemic Legacy campaign over two days in 2016.. Hey, I also went to a baseball game in Toronto, closing the loop started with Sid Sackson's baseball, which of course had meant nothing to a kid in New Zealand where rugby and cricket rule.



The last time I went, in 2023, I was also able to take my son, Raphael, which demonstrates my diligence in training up junior board gamers. Too diligent actually, he destroys me in most games, especially Agricola which was our mainstay while he was at school.

So to wind this all up, board games, from those distant days when I first encountered A Gamut of Games, until today have been a constant presence and influence, warping my life journey in unforeseen, but agreeable ways. Running alongside has been the quixotic pursuit of the perfect cricket simulation, with an audience of one—me. I have resisted all pressure to market the computer version. I have also dabbled with a deck-building cricket game that lies moribund on the shelf at the moment. It may yet emerge from its chrysalis.



THIS SANDBOX AIN'T BIG ENOUGH FOR THE TWO OF US, BY DESIGN

When I 'properly' got into board gaming some time around 2014, the thought of solo gaming was not one that came to mind. Games were primarily bought for, and played with, my partner, and when she was motivated to set up a gaming group, those experiences were then shared with 4 or 5 others at least. There was simply no need for me to seek out games designed for one solitary player to be entertained and engaged because I was getting what I wanted from gaming.

Until I *wasn't*.

I don't know when it happened, but it can be summed up simply as change. Even if not by much, we've all changed somehow, in our interests, skills, surroundings and situation, the result being that I now seek out gaming experiences that I can do on my own, not to deny others of all the fun, but to allow me to focus on myself, and try to reclaim what I was missing: playing a game without having to host it for others.

In 2021, most likely after watching a YouTube video from a solo gamer, I was introduced to *The Drifter*, a hex crawler that sees you wander the Wild West with one goal: to amass \$300. How you do that is generally up to you, with the game being summed up as picking a direction to move, rolling for a random event, and seeing where it leads.

Those events can take you just about anywhere you can imagine a Western themed game could. There are bandits with bounties on their heads, stagecoaches and trains to rob,



the promise of gold in them there hills, and the ever-present threat of someone looking at you the wrong way in the saloon.

One of my first failures (read: deaths, as this game is a case of win or die) came at the hands of young man who I bumped into quite by chance, and whose encounter required a skill check to see if I could stay away from him, for he was 'stricken with a terrible contagious disease'.

Another came when, within sight of a town where I could sell a gold nugget for the last \$50 I needed, curiosity got the better of me and I took a look down a mineshaft, only to be ambushed and outgunned in the combat checks that followed.

The Drifter is ultimately a game where you're trying to manage your stats, including your health, wealth, wanted level, and luck (or Karma, as the game calls it). Too high a wanted level makes life hard, too little health makes life harder still, and the only thing to get you out of a tight spot is often to spend a point of luck to reroll a die.

Matt Elliott is far closer to 40 than he feels. In the last three decades, no progress has been made towards his childhood ambitions to become an astronaut and/or stuntman. Sadly, the birds have left his garden.

Nearly everything out in the world comes into life thanks to a d100 roll, modified by your wanted level, to generate the encounter of the day (each day being a game turn), and then usually a d4, d6, or d10 roll to see what happens within that encounter, and if necessary a skill or combat check to finally pass or fail it.

Those checks are all pass/fail rolls, where you refer to the certain column of a table and read across the row for whatever result you rolled, with the leftmost column making it easier to achieve a pass than the rightmost. It's simpler than it sounds, but it can give the impression that the game is playing itself, or perhaps that there's a lot more upkeep than there is gameplay, or a sense of there being more randomness than player agency.

That's not *entirely* true, but yes, this is largely a reactionary game. On occasion, an encounter will prompt you into recording a hex cell which, if you visit said hex later on, will allow you to skip the day's encounter roll and choose to follow up on the lead instead, and this is about as much control as you'll have, unless you roll encounters that give you the option of being friendly or not in response to them, which inevitably funnels you towards a certain set of encounters on account of your wanted level going up or down.

Even going into town sees you rolling to see what establishments exist or are open, where you may have to hang around for a few days waiting to do whatever it is you want to do, and where you may stumble into the wrong person anyway and be persuaded to move on.

Such is life in the Wild West, I guess, so why do I keep playing *The Drifter*? Because I think it's neat, and I've customised it, albeit just a little.

I'm a big fan of fans modding the games they love. Be it quality of life improvements or full on content packs you wouldn't have dreamed of being possible, I'm all for it, and while it

seems *The Drifter* doesn't have a whole load of uploads, it has enough to inspire me.

It's only natural that you'd want to print out all the tables so you don't have to flip through the book or pdf, and if you're printing extra tables you might as well print a bigger map, and tokens to mark it right?

But as this is only a book, a map, and some dice, why not print those tables scaled down to a deck of cards that can fit inside your dice pouch, surrounded by crinkled pound notes (the closest I could get to a dollar) and appropriately coloured cubes and mini meeples for a more portable (and dare I say professional) look?

While writing this, I'm even wondering if I could make it more thematic and swap the dice for a deck of cards, because at one point in my life I was some kind of playing card collector, and bet I have a set that looks worn and western by design - and if I don't, I bet any number of charity shops have an actual worn out deck I could pick up instead. Will such a mod actually result in a win? I doubt it, but I'd make a lot less noise in the library than I would rolling these dice...

These days, *The Drifter* is accompanied by *Star Drifter*, set in space, obviously, and more recently *Adventurer*, which is your generic fantasy themed crawl through the wilderness, all available as pdfs or print on demand via DriveThruRPG, and were I to not be satisfied with the Wild West, I'd consider both of the others, knowing what I know now.

Are they going to knock your socks off? Unlikely. But isn't it nice to just crack open a game and not know where it'll take you?

WANTED: Small footprint solo games, light on components, the kind of thing you can put in a pocket and pull out to pass the time at a small table, waiting for the game night to start. Willing to craft for such entertainment.

A RALLYING CRY: STOP LIMITING YOUR IMAGINATION

While I can't say for sure what future issues of *FRANK CAVIL* will look like, I can say that if there's a chance for me to talk about *Rallyman* then I'm probably going to talk about *Rallyman*, and wouldn't you know, the ignorable theme this month is 'sandbox games', and I'm going to shoehorn in some *Rallyman*. Yes, I know what 'ignorable' means.

One might reasonably and quite easily argue that a racing game is *not* a sandbox game, it's clearly a racing game. You do one thing, race, on the way to do one other thing, win. What, exactly, is sandboxy about that?

The base game of *Rallyman*, be it *GT* or *DIRT* flavoured, contains 20 or so hexagonal tiles that depict the straights, curves, corners, hairpins, obstacles and so on that you'd find on a race course. While the rule books contain example circuits and stages to arrange these tiles into, it is very clear that the entire point of including modular hex tiles was to allow players to create whatever tracks and stages they want.

This freedom to create was the driving force behind my backing of the *Rallyman GT* Kick-Starter, and over the years since I have created many hundreds of circuits, with no end in sight. The number of possible combinations of the tiles just won't get reached - it's almost like counting the grains of sand on a beach...

While *GT* doesn't have too many extra bits that you can sprinkle in to modify the core dice chucking, push your luck gameplay, *DIRT* and its expansions include various tokens that change how you approach your turn by imposing new rules upon all those track tiles.

For example, the Oxygen token imposes a limit upon the number of Coast dice you may place down, and it is supposed to represent a lack of oxygen at high altitude reducing the



efficacy of your car's engine. Nothing about the token itself suggests that, however: it just shows a white die and a negative value from 1 to 3. It is a purely functional token.

So why don't players *change the reasoning behind that function*?

It isn't game-breaking to pluck an Oxygen token out of the box and say "This token represents the road at this point being particularly rocky, and thus driving through it requires you to pay more attention." The bold gamer might even add a new rule that says "If you don't heed this advice, draw a damage token", and suddenly we've gone from a component whose intent was to show a stuttering engine to one that shows tricky road conditions, just as thematic and relevant to the motorsports these games portray - did you know you could build other structures with your sandcastle shaped bucket...?

This repurposing of tokens is really no different from repurposing tiles that represented a rally stage last week, a hill climb this week, and a rallycross circuit next week, and if you think about it with a little more optimism about what is possible, you'll start to see *Rallyman* not as a game, but a toolbox from which to make the racing game you want, where certain rules are a

suggestion and your imagination is behind the wheel.

That *fascinate*s me.

The games sit at a solid 7, 7 and a half on the BGG ratings, but you all know that doesn't tell you anything. To you, maybe it's just a racing game, perhaps with a quirk or two that puts you off playing it. To me, it's a creative outlet, where I can funnel my motorsport interests into my board gaming hobby in whatever level of detail I care for on the day (and let's just say that more often than not that's a considerable amount of detail).

So *Rallyman* isn't a sandbox game: you will have to drive through a course to reach the finish line first. But what that course looks like, what its challenges are, who your opponents are, what cars you're all in, what advanced rules are in play, what the weather is like and much more are entirely up to you - even if you follow the rules to the letter.

Sounds a bit sandboxy to me...



DIGGING A HOLE. OR NOT.

There are a couple more sandboxy titles that I'd really like to get back to the table, ideally at a higher player count than 2, and they are the cave digging, farm tending of *Caverna The Cave Farmers*, and the colonising the Caribbean of *Archipelago*.

I don't know which we got first, but I know for sure that we were introduced to *Archipelago* through *Shut Up & Sit Down*, and we continue to follow in Paul's footsteps of deliberately mispronouncing it "Archie Pellargo". *Caverna* on the other hand probably came to our attention after playing *Agricola* and not liking the need to do everything in it.

These two games allow you to do whatever it is you desire to do on your path to victory, but where *Caverna* gives everyone the same routes to scoring all those points, and it being up to you to pick those you're going to focus on, *Archipelago* gives each player an end game objective that ought to push them in one direction over another as you discover your new tropical lands.

You'd think it'd be fairly easy to sell someone on the idea of playing these games, but both come with baggage that is perhaps the reason they stay on the shelf.

In *Caverna's* case, there's just so much stuff available from the start that you're overwhelmed during the setup, let alone the teach. It's great that I can tell players "if this area of the game sounds too complicated, don't worry, just do something else and you'll score points elsewhere", but it's almost like I've failed to convey everything properly by doing so.

On the *Archipelago* side of things, the first stumbling block is the game length displayed on the box, 30-240 minutes, with no explanation on why that is: That you can choose to have a short, medium, or long game, skewing the playtime closer to one end of that range or

the other, and still get to take part in all the exploring and exploiting and so on.

Get over that hurdle and you've then got to mention that at any point, as a direct result of player actions over time, the local population may revolt and bring the game to end because we've driven them to violence as a result of invading their home and stripping it of resources for our own personal gain - you know, a light topic of conversation for a board game night.

In *Archipelago's* defence, it *does* mention how you're supposed to have come from Europe *in peace*, and one player may be dealt the personal objective of making that rebellion happen, but that's randomly dealt out and so may not feature in your game, if memory serves.

And memories of these games is really all I've had for a long while now. I want to get both back to the table because they are pretty sizable, chunky games of doing all sorts of stuff, unlike anything we tend to play somewhat regularly, but the opportunity just doesn't present itself.

If I can't find a way to get them to the table for a group game, both do cater for solo play, though *Archipelago's* solo was an expansion consisting of a small deck of cards that goes for silly money these days, and is supposedly stupidly difficult, or could be through no fault of your own.

(I've since learned that it contains a card titled "Donald Trompe, the Entrepreneur", so I'm in no rush to learn more about the official solo mode, but if there are any fan-made rulesets, I'm all ears.)

So what does all that say about sandboxes, if anything? That there's *too* much possibility in these kinds of games, and that what we actually want is clearer and more refined? Maybe that's true. Maybe there's comfort in knowing there's only one way to score and therefore win a game.

But we can't stay cosy in our comfort zones forever now, can we?

KNOWING A MEEPLE WELL NEVER LEADS TO HATE

At the time of writing this is line 205 in a Typst document titled 'Mess', because why would I bother to have a separate file to play around in without fear of deleting something I want kept?

Originally I thought I'd mock up this faux newspaper in something I'm more familiar with, like a publishing suite, but the truth is even then I'd be using skills that I've picked up mostly from school (and it's been a long time since those days), or from furiously googling why something isn't working as intended, only to bodge a solution that works in the here and now with no planning put into how I'm going to use it in the future.

What I needed was a template, and while that's perfectly possible to set up in those publishing suites, this is a piece of writing far more than it is a piece of design, so I've settled on cobbling together Typst code until I'm satisfied enough with the results.

I like it. The look, I mean. The code is functional rather than perfect, pieced together by eye more than measurement, and I'm quite sure it comes nowhere close to the best practices I ought to be following. The photos were a right pain to stick in, or the one of *Archipelago* was at least.

The primary reason for that is that you're looking at the work of someone who is surprised that they remember what '<a href>' means, which was about as much coding as I've done since... let me think, 2004? Since then it has just been the similar forum coding of your [b]'s and [/i]'s and whatnot. The absolute basics. The kind of code that comes with a dedicated button on a GUI...

It's thanks to Roger that I'm mucking about in Typst, basically for daring to mention it when announcing *Of Dice and Meeples*, and indeed

it's thanks to this APA that I've been motivated to write about board games like this at all, though I have mulled over doing so to a much lesser degree on a few occasions.

I've flicked through some issues of *Ever and Anon* to get an idea of the kind of thing people contribute to an APA, but I guess this is a brand new world to create in our own image, so to speak, with this being my little corner of it, and I look forward to seeing how it evolves alongside all your little corners.

The game shelves here are, naturally, full of all sorts of titles that do and do not get played, varying in size from the obnoxious (like *Tainted Grail* and *ISS Vanguard*) to the losable (the PnP of *One Card Dungeon*, at a time where it was more true to its name). When I had the funds I backed far too many KickStarters and bought things on a whim, but these days nearly every purchase needs to be justified, and more games are creeping ever closer to the 'for sale' corner.

Despite my strong dislike for the HP printer and its stupid instant ink subscription, I have spent a fair bit of time doing basic print and play stuff, often combined with a retheme, in order to get that buzz of having something new to enjoy.

For example, my partner plays a lot of *Lost Cities* online, I've played all of the *Uncharted* video games, you can see where this is going, and if you guessed "she complains that she can't tell the colours apart despite me putting a colourblind friendly icon on each set and as a result doesn't want to play my homemade copy", you'd be right!

Still, we have fun, or certainly try to, and I hope *Of Dice and Meeples* serves as an avenue to share that fun a little wider, and to have a read of whatever it is that makes board games whatever they are to you.

Just don't get me started on *Rallyman* unless you're ready to buckle up for the ride.

YOU'RE NICKED, MY SON

To fill the space and flesh out who I am as a person to you, I'm going to waffle on about old British television in the form of *The Bill*.

To cut a long story short, I wanted to watch *The Wire*, which I own on blu-ray, but couldn't. I'm not paying to stream something I already own, and for the purposes of this story, laziness triumphs over piracy or ripping, so what do?

Turns out that U, formerly UKTV (presumably cutting back on letters to save costs), have 2,388 episodes of *The Bill* available to stream for free - not all of them, according to the episode count on Wikipedia, but I think we can agree that there are enough of them to watch.

So I started watching. From the hour long episodes of the 80s to the soapy looking 90s and beyond, my evenings in bed (quite long in the winter time, when the sun wants to set before teatime) are spent bingeing *The Bill*.

I'm not saying I recommend you doing so as well, but I am glad I decided to dive into this head first, because long, long ago I was a media student, and following the history of television - and in turn, Britain - through a series like this has been quite enjoyable.

From spotting boom mics dropping into shots, to repeated use of fancy sets, to picking out the early credits of many an *EastEnders* actor and the changing face of the Met Police... if something stands out to me enough, I'll probably be on Mastodon sharing it.

I'm currently at the start of 1991 and ITV are not scared to put *loads* of racial slurs and sexist insults into characters mouths. It is both a sign of the times and yet timeless: as we sit here 35 years later what progress has been made?

What I want to see most is the changing state of technology, and they've already had an episode that made use of a techie enhancing CCTV footage to help identify a criminal. Was it an ethical use of pixels? That's for the courts to decide, isn't it, Guv?

Little Wooden People

Number 1: by Roger BW

- Blog: <https://blog.firedrake.org/>
- Gaming stuff: <https://tekeli.li/>
- Rulebooks: <https://tekeli.li/rogers-rules/>
- Mastodon: <https://discordian.social/@RogerBW>
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Who Am I?

I played games as a child, but not in a big way. *Monopoly* was never a significant part of my life; we did have, for reasons I don't know, [Scoop](#), and what I think may have been [Cargoes](#). (And *Chess* of course.) But I got into RPGs in the early 1980s and for several years did boardgaming and wargaming primarily as an ancillary activity to that (e.g. *Battletech* and *Car Wars*). I have a vague memory of being surprisingly good at [Mertwig's Maze](#).

Then I slid back into boardgames about 2010, via demoing for Steve Jackson Games (I was already running *GURPS* and that got me copies of their other current publications), and I gradually spread out from there.

Now I float about on the fringes of the industry (copyediting, playtesting, etc.) and demonstrate games at big conventions. I care deeply about the quality of my game teaching, and of rulebooks, and that designers should get credit for the games they design.

I generally like thematic or abstract games, but not abstract games which call themselves thematic; I call this the "abstraction gap". If I'm playing a game about *this*, I want to be making decisions that are at least modelled on the decisions made by the actual person doing *this*. If the theme is just a coat of paint that could easily be replaced then I find myself frustrated.

Recent Games

[The Quest for El Dorado](#), new to me but regarded as something of a classic. I don't always get on well with Reiner Knizia games, but this makes few enough claims to theme that I could enjoy it mostly as an abstract. Somewhat fiddly, but I was only one turn behind the winners, which for me in a Kniz game is pretty good going.

[Project L](#), which I've been playing since the original crowdfund. I suspect the way to get better is in strategies to spin up from the basic starting pieces, when there aren't "friendly" tiles to work with, but I enjoy the spatial puzzle every time. (I have the *Finesse* expansion, but this makes for a major shift in play style; I use it occasionally, but not often.)

[FUSE](#), a reliable filler game because you *know* it will take exactly ten minutes. Also quick to teach, fairly quick to set up, and it lives or dies by quick communication between the players. (I've played more multiplayer than solo, but definitely won more solo.) I know the designer Kane Klenko has gone on to make many other realtime games (including *Pandemic: Rapid Response*) but this is one that works well for me.

[Pixies](#), a tableau builder with odd placement rules. I've played this wrongly sometimes, but as long as everyone's using the same scoring rules it still makes for an interesting game.



Jani Kantokosko on Pexels

[Flash Point: Fire Rescue](#) which I'll talk about [below](#), but this in particular was a play by forum game (there are occasional demands for a player to make a decision outside their turn, but it doesn't happen all the time, and there's no hidden information). Two-door map, six players, loss on turn 52.

[Ticket to Ride: Europe](#), well, I've never been much good at *Ticket to Ride* and in this case I managed to conflate red spaces on the board with spaces I'd already covered with red carriagages (BGA makes this harder). But I did have fun; I can't see myself ever buying this, but if people I know are playing I'll gladly jump in.

[Lemminge](#) which I'll talk about [below](#), but let's just say that I nearly didn't come last.

[Talon](#) is a space combat wargame that tries to get away from the divergence of the miniature on the table and the ship record sheet in front of the player. Each counter has a wipe-clean surface, and you record damage, weapon charges, and so on directly onto it. It's a pretty

lightweight system (less complex for example than *Full Thrust* which I used to play a great deal) and one can have substantial battles in a relatively short time. I've hardly ever played my own copy; mostly I've played via Tabletop Simulator or on BoardGameArena, where the implementation is a bit twitchy but mostly works.

[Sentinels of the Multiverse](#), specifically the Definitive Edition. More [below](#); this was Harpy, Unity and Expatriette versus Gloomweaver in the Pike Industrial Complex.

[PUSH](#), a push your luck game. Turn over cards and try not to go bust, and pass on some of them to your fellow players. Very simple, quick to teach and play, and a good one for the end of the evening.

[Rallyman: DIRT](#), which Holy Grail Games released after *Rallyman: GT*. This is the true successor to the original [Rallyman](#), with all the same track features and many new racing modes. (Also, like [Rallyman GT](#), the track is built from hex tiles rather than big boards, allowing for lots of variation.)

[Formula D](#) which I rather missed back when it was new and shiny. Frustrating with the roll and move, but it's the only racing game I've played that feels true to the ethos of someone I've met who works in an F1 design firm: the ideal F1 car would explode the moment it crossed the finish line. Any more strength than it needs to get there is wasted.

[Sundae Split](#) looks cute and fluffy, but is a ferociously thinky cut-choose problem.

[Pandemic: Fall of Rome](#) has got me over my *Pandemic* burnout. It's still synthetic in many ways, and I'm not entirely comfortable with the characterisation of barbarians as infections, but it was still highly enjoyable.

[Acquire](#), 1970s-tastic production on this copy but still a rock-solid game.

[Biblios](#), in which I'd probably have done better if I'd counted more cards...

[Arigatō](#), which I've played on BGA but which was rather more fun in person. (Though not being able to hover over a card and see what the icon meant was unhelpful.)

[Cartagena](#), a very silly game that I suspect lives or dies by having the right density of players per map segment.

The Games I've Played Most

I've been logging each game I've played, often accurately, since 2015, first on BoardGameGeek, and now in my own database since BGG's made it clear that they might stop allowing data downloads at any time. So I know what I've played more than anything else, at least since then.



10: Automobiles

This is the game I'm most surprised to see here. I've played it mostly face to face, and I haven't yet got into a season game (a series of races with some characteristics carried over between them) except online. But I do like it a great deal; it's a bag-builder¹ with four standard cubes for

¹Functionally the same as a deck-builder in that you start with basic stuff, play the stuff you have, add better stuff and get rid of waste. I've seen a home-made version that uses cards rather than cubes, and this doesn't change the rules at all.

moving on various speeds of track space, and five cubes with variable powers (though, for example, a purple will always get rid of waste cubes in some way, so you can select a set at random and it'll be playable). With the *Racing Season* expansion, which I was fortunate enough to find second-hand, there are five tracks each with its own distinct characteristics. It's not at all a realistic racing game, but it still feels like a race, where *Flamme Rouge* (#11 when I compiled this list) sometimes feels like a card game with a sophisticated way of keeping score.



9: War of the Nine Realms

Not only is this in my top ten, 71 of the 111 total logged plays on BoardGameGeek are by me. And the reason of course is that I have demonstrated it quite extensively for the publisher Wotan Games, mostly at UK Games Expo and sometimes at other shows.

This is an old-fashioned board wargame with some interesting tweaks. Thematically, it's Ragnarök, the last battle of all. Each of the four factions (Æsir, Norsemen, Dark Elves and Ice Jotnar—yes, the others are planned for a future box) has four front-line units who can be regenerated endlessly, and five more with unique powers. Some have melee attacks, some have ranged, and a very few have indirect fire (longer range and ignores intervening objects). In standard Heroic mode they have some basic

powers; in Epic mode their stats are lower, but they have more powers, which can be activated with Valour tokens.² But the most important rule element is the Blood Cauldron: every wound you inflict on an enemy puts a drop of blood in the cauldron, and if you fill yours before anyone else fills theirs, you win. Which means that in a three- or four-sided game you can't win by hiding and waiting for other players to wear each other down: they'll get the blood cauldron victory while you're still turtled. This is a game of *going for it*.



8: Rallyman

For this one I have to blame the One Player Guild: there was a monthly championship (the International Solitaire Games On Your Table Rally Association) with a new course each time. I thought that looked interesting, asked a fellow Guild member to bring the game along to a meetup to try out, and haven't looked back. In the end I took over running that championship when the previous administrator stepped down, and we kept going through the declared pandemic, only shutting it down (due to lack of players) at the end of 2025. And the story continues: see [Rallyman GT](#).

Anyway, the game is a slightly abstracted car rally: you place dice to show your intended path each turn, various track hazards like corners,

²Which means that one player can take Epic and another Heroic, and they won't be wildly unbalanced against each other.

bumps and streams restrict which dice you can play where, you throw the dice to see how dangerously you drive (with mitigations available), and you get a total time for the course. That makes it well suited to solo play, since even in a game played in person you rarely interact with other cars.



7: Lemminge

This is one of my two “Yucata Pandemic games”, which is to say games I discovered on <https://yucata.de> in 2020 rather than meeting them in the first flush of their popularity. It's very slightly like a cut-down *Quest for El Dorado*: you play a card and can move on that card's terrain and neutral terrain, and you often have a choice between expensive short routes and longer cheap ones. I fell in love with this and bought a physical copy; the one I could find was a German-language edition from a vendor in Zagreb, and I'm old enough to find that kind of cool. Still haven't sorted out a way of getting the designer's supplementary maps (available for play on Yucata) printed on a board, though.



6: Red7

This is one of the games here that I've had for longest; for a while it was my standard pocket game when going to non-gaming gatherings. On your turn, you have to play a higher card or drop out of the round; but you can also change the definition of "a higher card". Of course, since you aren't getting any more cards this round, if you both change and play you'll run out of cards sooner... This had the feel of a game that the old men in the corner of a pub might be playing, with a greasy pack of cards and small glasses of viciously strong liquor. I'm not sure why, but I've never felt enthused about the advanced game (in which playing some cards causes other effects), but perhaps I should try it again.



5: Sentinels of the Multiverse: Definitive Edition

I missed out on the earlier editions because I was mostly playing *Aeon's End*³ but I joined in the crowdfunding of this updated one—same artist, but he's got better over the years. It's a cooperative battle game that isn't really a deck builder; it's more of a tableau builder, as you try to get various powers and ongoing effects into play, but the details of how you do that and which ones you want will vary both with your chosen heroes and with the villain you're fighting. There's always a tension between dealing damage directly to the villain and taking out their damaging underlings.

I'm not much of a comics fan, but the entirely invented references to other comics on the cards bring back memories of reading comics as a child and feeling that I was standing on the edge of a larger fictional world. (The designers used to have a podcast in which they delved further into this, but I enjoy finding and inventing my own connections.)



4: VOLT

This is the other "Yucata Pandemic game" (see [Lemminge](#)). It's a streamlined *Robo Rally*, a robot battle themed programming game with

³Which only isn't here, as a frequent demo game for me at Essen, because I've played many different core boxes rather than the same one many times,

no provision for player elimination or the state in which you can't achieve anything but have to keep playing anyway. I can teach and play a full game in under an hour, and nobody's getting left behind on an earlier board with no hope of winning. (Also, thanks to a [tekeli.li](#) forum user, I have lovely painted minis now.)



3: Flash Point: Fire Rescue

This is a good candidate for my favourite game of all, a cooperative firefighting and rescue game. I played *Pandemic* when I was fairly new to modern boardgaming, but this displaced it for me: all the things you do make more sense to me (move here, extinguish fire, carry out victim, rather than wait until you get the right city card to move to that city) and the randomness is confined to things outside your character's control. These days there are lots of expansions and new roles, but the core game still works well (and at Essen⁴ we reliably sell all the copies we brought).

2: Letter Tycoon

This is the only one of the games in this list that I don't own, and that's because I burned out on it. I found it on BoardGameArena, and played a *lot*, at one point being the #7 ranked player there. But at that point I realised that there was no way I was going to get any better; if I beat

⁴Yes, the company I work for at Essen is the publisher of my favourite boardgame; this is not a coincidence.

someone above me on the ladder, it felt like pure luck, mostly in terms of who got two particular letter cards that had the highest potential to increase scores. 60 plays in 2020, 97 plays in 2021, one in 2022 by invitation, and nothing since.



1: Rallyman: GT

This game's Kickstarter arrived early in 2020, which made it just about perfectly timed for the start of the pandemic. I was already running the [Rallyman](#) solo championship, and starting a second one for this seemed obvious. That led me to involvement with Holy Grail Games, and is why I have some credits in *Rallyman: Dirt*⁵.

The core mechanics remain *Rallyman* but the emphasis here is on head-to-head racing, generally on a circuit. Tracks are built with tiles (a trade-off, more flexibility but longer setup time) and suddenly player interaction is much more important. I've played 400+ games of this, both on BGA and in real life; it's particularly suited for asynchronous play because each turn you're presented with a puzzle to solve but you don't have to carry over a lot of information from one turn to the next. (Or so it seems to me. There are a lot of players better than me and maybe that's what they're doing.)

⁵And then HGG went bust; indeed, my involvement is why I got a copy of *Rallyman: Dirt* at launch time, when most of them were seized by the creditors.

Sandbox Games

What makes a sandbox? I think for me it's a game in which you have an overall goal, whether that's points or doing some hard task, but you have to work up your capabilities in order to achieve that goal. There isn't just one path to doing this; you'll do a lot of things on the way.

[Xia: Legends of a Drift System](#) is a good example: you're racing to gain fame points, but there are many different ways of getting them: exploration, trading, piracy, bounty hunting, mining. Over the course of the game you'll move round the map and try different things, some to get fame directly, some to earn you money for better equipment.

Similarly with [Firefly: The Game](#), though it's a bit more constrained: whether the goal is money or a task, you'll basically do jobs, which are how you get money for better-skilled crew and more equipment, which is how you manage to do harder jobs. ("Find a crew, find a job, keep flying.") And in turn jobs take the form of "go to the place, do the thing, sometimes go to

a second place and do a second thing". That's essentially the course of every game, but the specific crew and equipment you want and the jobs you want to do will still vary.

[A Touch of Evil](#) is on a much smaller scale, just one Colonial-era New England village, but works in a similar way; you *must* travel around the place to get to the spaces where the goodies are, and you can only keep one card from each of those spaces, which forces you to keep moving.

I think sandbox games tend to have the same structure of progress as many others, in which at some point there's a pivot from wandering around building up resources to turning those resources into victory conditions. But a good sandbox game can make that wandering around enjoyable in itself, a generator of the microstories that I tell about characters interacting with each other. ("What if Kaylee had signed on with a crew of scrappers?" Or "oh, yeah, it must have been a terrible fight against that succubus, you've still got lipstick on your collar.")

