Of Dice and Meeples



Issue 6 October 2026

Colophon

Introduction



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Contributor Guidelines

Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Of Dice and Meeples will be available to the public for free, so matters you don't want publicly known should be discussed elsewhere. Please adhere to all the normal rules of public discourse: no libel, no inciting violence, no infringement of another's copyright or trademark, and no pornography.

Zines should use 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 #7 — 6 November: Essen Spiel and other conventions
Issue #8 — 6 December: Rulebooks: the good, the bad, the weird
Issue #9 — 6 January: Wargames

Suggestions for further Ignorable Themes are welcome!

This project is explicitly inspired by Ever & Anon, the digital APA successor to *Alarums & Excursions*.

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Cover by RogerBW

This issue's Ignorable Theme is: Games you wish you had the time and/or table space for

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 other's 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. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_press_association.

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.



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

ISSUE 6 **FRANK CAVIL** OCT 2026

TABLE CLEAR OF CLUTTER NOW FINALLY COVERED IN DIFFERENT CLUTTER

I suggested this theme because it has been a bit of a bad year in terms of board gaming at home, but such is life, as soon as it gets used I find myself with two and a half weeks where the table is all mine, and I can finally get around to scratching whatever itch I've wanted to scratch.

This time it's the turn of ***Tainted Grail***, for I have a some campaigns of Awaken Realms' weird take on Arthurian legend to finish, and the reason I want to get it to the table is because I want to get thoroughly stuck into a twisted medieval grimdark survival adventure story about a land seemingly devoid of hope.

Looooooong story short, when King Arthur led his knights into Avalon to settle down, there were a few things to clear up first, like the locals, and the wyrdness. The Fore-Dwellers who were here before we arrived have four arms and are formidable opponents - the kind you run away from until you're much better prepared. King Arthur, with his two arms, slays them for breakfast.

But the wyrdness is a bit more problematic. Like a blanket of fog it covers Avalon, infecting everything that falls outside the protective glow of the Menhir, skeletal statues whose magic is the only defence there is against the horrifying qualities of the wyrdness, which include but are in no way limited to: turning ribcages into gaping maws, having animals lose the skin from their faces and grow rocks out of their spines, and sometimes, if you're lucky, allowing organs to just float about and drip all over the place. In short, I *love* the aesthetic of ***Tainted Grail***.



But there's a big problem. Life on the isle of Avalon is very much like playing this game: it is unfair, the rules are broken, and everything that isn't the story is kinda sh!t.

Yet here I am with one massive base game, two and a half large campaign expansions, and multiple boxes of now painted miniatures...

Matt Elliott lives in a flat with an extendable table and an artist. Universal law dictates that all tables in flats where an artist lives are in fact shelves, and shall be treated as such while the artist continues to be present.

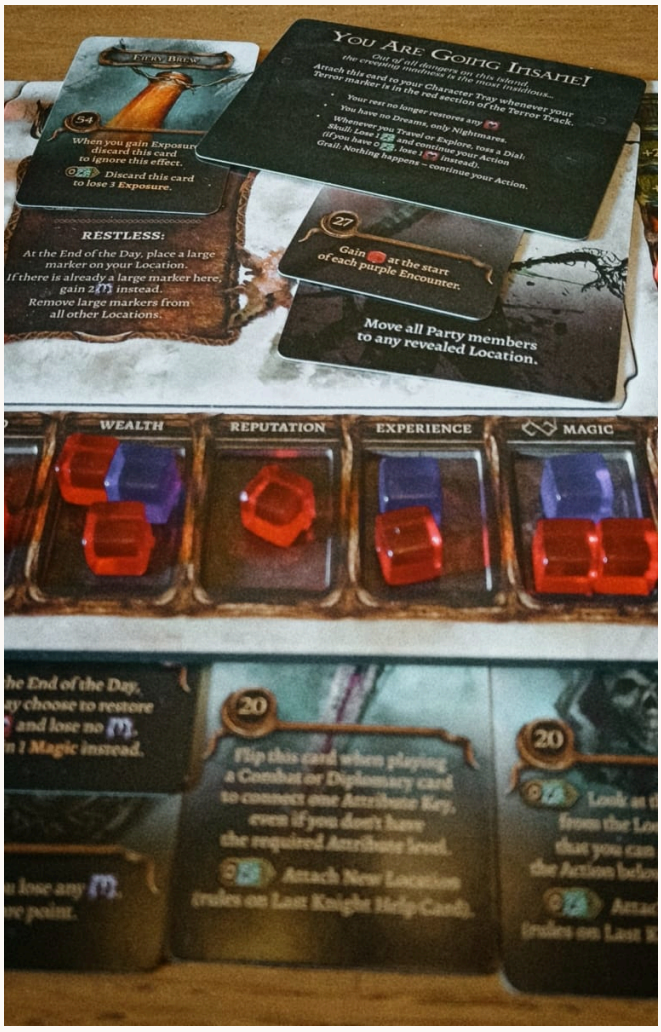
At its heart, ***Tainted Grail*** is an adventure that'll see you traverse the world via the thrill of spending action points. Action points to move, action points to interact, action points for everything, and naturally you don't have many to use each day.

Let's say you use one to explore a location. Now it's time to haul out your ringbound Choose Your Own Adventure-like Journal to see what that location provides, and to its credit, there's barely any location that feels pointless, so you'll be spending a while in this journal flicking from paragraph to paragraph, often spending more action points along the way to delve deeper into caves, or investigate shady practices or whatever.

You might be spat back out to the over-world in a few minutes, but you might find yourself in a full on fight, or a milder heated discussion, and both will involve an entire card game within this adventure game where you chain together attacks based on your character's attributes and follow more step-by-step procedures to determine whether you get hit, or lose progress, or get hit *and* lose progress at the end of each and every round.

When that scuffle concludes one way or the other, you might find yourself low or out of energy - action points - and it's now time to rest, at which point you realise you haven't got enough food to restore any health, and so don't recover as much energy for tomorrow, meaning you're even more likely to die to the next thing you encounter, which may even be a roaming monster that you should have dealt with yesterday who happens to move into your location to immediately trigger another fight...

And it gets worse! Seemingly every item you pick up, every secret that you discover, every skill that you acquire, every random event drawn at the start of the day and damn near every location card you plonk your character onto has a line of text that adds or modifies a rule that you have to somehow keep track of, and if that's not enough, ***The Last Knight*** campaign that I'm playing takes place in a harsh winter where exposure to the elements adds yet another convoluted mechanic into the mix, just to keep you on your frostbitten toes.



There are so many things going on, so much stuff to keep track of, that even with just two characters I'm overwhelmed. Rules regularly go unchecked and ignored simply because they are spread across multiple components and books, and I don't have the mental capacity to stay on top of them when half of them are in flux, dependent on certain circumstances, or literally buried under yet more rules.

There are a few difficulty levels to mitigate things: Normal, Challenge, and Story Mode. If you want an idea of how difficult they are, there is now a Version 2 of the rules that had to make the more relaxed Story Mode *even easier*...

The world of ***Tainted Grail*** is cool. The look, the feel, the concept of Arthurian legend made spooky... I want to spend time exploring Avalon, but not in this game; certainly not to these rules.

This is the feeling I have not just for ***Tainted Grail***, but for Awaken Realms' space adventure ***ISS Vanguard*** too. Another story to sink your teeth into, with some wacky/interesting game mechanics, but they too ultimately get in the way, and you come out of the game feeling like you've spent 4 hours doing what should have happened in the space of 2 at most.

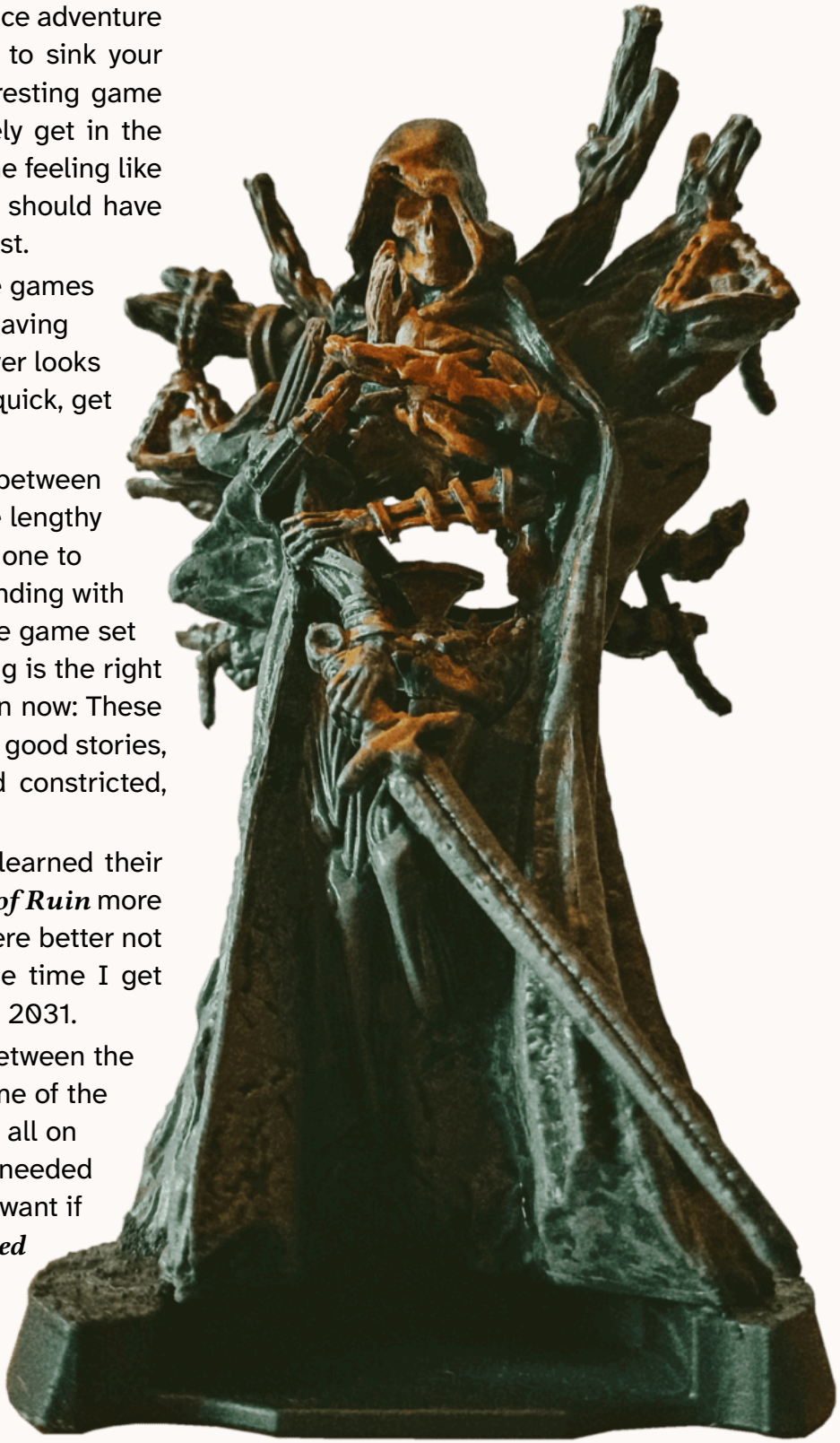
Work. That's what playing these games is like. Busy work for the sake of having something to do. "Damn, this player looks like they have a bit of downtime, quick, get them to do something, anything!"

I'm bouncing (painfully slowly) between the two games, each having three lengthy campaigns (and a smaller, harder one to round off ***Tainted Grail***) before ending with ***Kings of Ruin***, which is a separate game set in the world of Avalon - and ending is the right word, for I have learned my lesson now: These games aren't good games, they're good stories, good ideas, wrapped, bound and constricted, by an awful lot of faff and bother.

I'm told Awaken Realms have learned their lesson too, and have made ***Kings of Ruin*** more of a game and less of a grind. There better not be a Version 2 of its rules by the time I get around to finding out first hand in 2031.

There was a recent crossover between the ***20 Strong*** solo dice game and some of the Awaken Realms titles which I was all on board for, until I learned that you needed to buy/Kickstart things you didn't want if you only wanted to play the ***Tainted Grail*** stuff - even outside of the isle of Avalon this IP wants to kick me in the nuts...

Still, it's something to look into if it means getting a taste of this deliciously disgusting world without having to block out days of game time and de-clutter *all* of the extendable table.



OH DEAR

"(including diagonally)"
— Tainted Grail Rulebook, page 10

Do you remember a few pages back when I said that ***Tainted Grail*** had too much going on for me to keep track of and that I was overwhelmed by it all? Well, I want to expand on that...

Since writing all that I have finished ***The Last Knight*** campaign and thought "I've still got a week, the stuff is on the table, this is the best opportunity I've got to hammer through the ***Age of Legends*** campaign too, while it's all fresh in my mind", and so two new adventurers took to the table in a story set a few years after King Arthur first set foot in Avalon.

Without spoiling too much then, I progressed through to Chapter 5, learning yet more mechanics designed to make this campaign different from the others, when the King - for I have been able to get chatting to him in this tale - tasked me with investigating why people keep falling off a cliff instead of building Kamelot atop it.

One of the nice things about ***Tainted Grail*** is that you get to visit locations in Avalon at different stages of their existence. I've seen Kamelot in good times and in bad, and now I get to see it being built - or would, if I could get up to the f%cking thing. Apologies, ***ODaM*** readers, I tend to swear when I'm... irked...

I know where on the island it is, I'm not lost in that sense. I need to go north to Titan's Steps, then east a couple of locations and I'm there. But to attach (and then visit) an adjacent location requires a nearby active Menhir to cast its protective aura and push back the wyrdness enough to allow for exploration.

"No worries, there's a Menhir on Titan's Steps." But I can't activate it. Not until I clear the Steps of a threat that I seemingly can't deal with until later chapters. Hmm.

I look around for alternative routes. There are none. I *have* to get through the bottleneck of Titan's Steps. I pick up the adventure journal and leaf through it, hunting for keywords I may have missed, avenues of exploration I can go back to and re-examine in greater detail, locations I may have glossed over, or that have new options now that I have gotten through a few more chapters, but *nothing* is helping.

As time drags on I am basically cheating in a desperate attempt to find a way through Titan's Steps but there is no solution, for the problem is not within the adventure journal; my choices up to this point *haven't* lead me to a dead end. The problem is more fundamental than that.

After *literal* hours of trying to find a solution, I checked the rulebook for this basic rule that has existed since the beginning of time: To attach a location requires an active Menhir within range *(including diagonally)*.

Fffffffolks I *already have* **two** active Menhir within range of the bloody location I need to be in, meaning I don't have to even *think* about activating the Menhir in Titan's Steps right now, or for the foreseeable, to make forward progress, I just need to walk right past it to the next location. That's it. Don't spend an action to explore Titan's Steps, spend an action to walk into Heather Highland. Nothing else is needed.

Except for an actual calming walk of my own...

"YOU'VE GOT YOUR GREMLINS, YOUR SPIRITS, & GRIZZLY STEELCLAWS, AND CAN CAST THEM ALL FROM YOUR SPELLBOOK IN THE GAME OF MAGE WARS"

It's not often you need to store game components outside of their box, but it's true for our ***Mage Wars*** collection, a grid-based, card-driven battler that sees wizards going head to head in a fight to the death.

The box, buried under yet more games, contains important things, yes, but this is a game where you don't even need its board to play. What you absolutely do need is one of these lovely (albeit rather plasticy) spell books, for that's where the magic of ***Mage Wars*** happens...

These spell books are used exactly how a wizard would use a spell book, assuming wizards and magic were to exist. If you want to cast some protective armour, or build a wall of thorns, or throw a good ol' fireball, or summon a wild animal to sit menacingly between you and your opponent, you pick up your 4 card-per-page binder, leaf through it looking for the spell you want, pay its mana costs and play it onto the table with a wizardly flourish. Isn't that neat? Sure beats drawing a hand of cards...

Everything magic'd into existence stays in existence until defeated, and each thing usually gets a couple of actions each turn, a fast and a slow one if I recall, so turns quickly ramp up into back and forth tussles where you wonder what order to activate your stuff in, where to move so that something can be in/out of range of an attack, which hidden spell you've previously cast to finally fully reveal and resolve...

Many games do that but how many present the choice thematically, in a book of spells, and not a deck of them? It's the one thing ***Mage Wars*** does to stand out, and it's genius.

Pretty much everything within the art and theme of ***Mage Wars*** is generic fantasy, it is played safe in those regards, and the gameplay isn't really anything to write home about either, but those spell books turn what is an otherwise unremarkable game into an experience I want to get to table again.

I suppose the first step to making that happen is by not storing it all at the bottom of the shelf...



TO ME

"vague rules about permitted table talk"

— Roger BW

As briefly mentioned in the past, my partner enjoys ***The Game***. No "concrete information" about card values is permitted, but "all other communication" is allowed. Cue clearly obvious, strongly worded hints about what you plan to do on your next turn, complete with rapid finger jabbing on the exact number you're going to play on top of. "Yeah, but I've got to play another card, and I've got no choice..."

It is, with whatever level of communication skirts the 'not communicating' rules or not, still a game, unlike its rival (for want of a better word) ***The Mind***.

Its rules stress that to be in sync with your teammates is where the true skill lies, that it simply isn't a luck based game, and that "It should be emphasised at this point that this is **not** a question of counting off the seconds. There is no counting."

No counting in a game about playing numbered cards in the correct order. Okay. What exactly do I do in my head then, hum elevator music? Oh, no, I can't even do that, because now I'm imagining the lift moving up a bunch of numbered floors...

TO YOU THEN

FILE ASYNCHRONISATION

Well, that's a new one. I knew games could be played by post, and by obvious electronic extension could be played by e-mail or bulletin board, but games by file sync... What's next? Games by drone drop? Ooh, no, what about some sort of espionage game played by dead drop? Where's my nearest Geocache?

I don't claim to know any of the ***ODaM*** contributors well (or frankly at all), but if anyone was going to mention something techie like this, it was going to be Roger.

I've fumbled about with ***Tabletop Simulator***, and that choice of word is telling of the reason why I haven't done a whole lot with it. A little clunky, a little cumbersome, a little confusing... That sums up the first experiences I've had with a great many games and simulators, but with ***TTS*** I do struggle, despite definitely knowing how decks of cards, dice, and even tables work in the real world - something I can't really say about any other simulator I find myself playing, be it in the realm of motorsports, aviation, virology...

Yeah, I know of ***Plague Inc*** from back when it was a Flash game going by a different title, which probably meant I'm thinking of a different game, but whatever. Haven't played the board game version - can't really say I've any interest in it to be honest. I think I lump it in with all things Zombies, and I tend to avoid that theme like, well, the plague. You know, except for owning ***Tiny Epic Zombies***. And ***Run Fight or Die***. We sold ***Hit Z Road***, though I'm still not sure if that was the right choice or not.

Anyway, I might just have to dip my toes back into ***TTS*** and see what's what in the world of 'PrtScn n Play'. Sounds safer than getting lost in the woods looking for a Geocache, at least.

NOT SPENDING PENNIES

Whenever I see PnP games asking for markers "such as coins", I usually pull a face of disgust and wonder why it has to be a coin and not a generic wooden cube or something instead. "What do you mean you want me to use actual money as a playing piece? It's just not right." Not even for replacing the likes of paper money or victory points - we have metal board game coins for that sort of thing for a reason: Cash is cash, not board game component.

And then I remember that my pennies end up superglued to the bases of ***Warhammer*** figures to give them a satisfying amount of weight when picking them up...

Will something like ***Master of Coin*** change my perception? Maybe it's the use of currency as a generic token that feels iffy, and its use in a game about money, to some degree, might solve that issue?

I quickly DuckDuckWent looking for it and found myself on PNP Arcade, which is now a Substack and not one of the go-to PnP hubs I knew it to be, so I scrolled down their recent posts to see what else is going to catch my eye and saw ***Village Emporium***, which CTD also mentions, and which I know about only because I follow its creator on YouTube.

It doesn't sound like my cup of tea but I was pleasantly surprised by yet another example of how close-knit the board gaming community can be; how something that surely only I know about is actually more widespread and connected to a whole bunch of other little pockets of... stuff you can just get lost in if you have the time to start exploring - and long may issues of ***ODaM*** continue to point me in all these new directions.

I'm beginning to wonder if I too should have some sort of electronic device capable of playing PnP games without P-ing them. I wouldn't want to use a phone, but the closest I've got is a smallish touch screen Linux laptop, and I'm sure I could cobble something together on that, though it is a touch slow depending on what you ask it to do (but it is easily good enough to play the outlandish Gen1Recomp of ***Pokémon***, complete with its flashy bells and whistles - but don't be telling Nintendo, eh?).



As for your untitled game, the DC/playmobil/Kinder crossover Batman here scored 9 points. His Chocolate Ice Cream d6 kept kept rolling 6s, his Mint Choc Chip die mostly 3s, until the penultimate turn saw a fat load of nothing.

I should have taken a photo of a McDonalds Happy Meal Minion that kept rolling 2s early on and moving sideways until a burst of progress had him score 10 points.

LEGO Mixels figure Torts had to balance on one leg to score 9 points, and Funko Pop Ted "The Million Dollar Man" DiBiase - in this household called Noel Edmonds for what are obvious reasons when you see a picture of this Funko Pop - was about as large a figure as I had to hand that would fit well enough to record a legitimate score. He sailed down the river really reliably until coming a bit unstuck near the end for another 9 points.



The ignorable theme for this month is “Games you wish you had time or table space to play”. This is kind of all of my games, at least on the time side. We can rule out table space for the most part as I do have a moderate sized table. Not a swanky gaming table like some of you, mind, just a common old wooden dining room table. There is a third dimension to this situation though and that is player count. For any number greater than one, you have to be able to assemble the correct number of players in one place, something that gets exponentially harder as the player count rises. Using the wonders of mathematics, and factoring in the time constraint, we have what is known as a NP Hard problem. Of which the tl;dnr is that there is no easy solution in any reasonable time frame. Now before actual mathematicians jump all over me and say, “actually that isn’t what it means”, I will claim artistic licence and that it is meant to illustrate the challenges of a large collection of board games vs. the probability of playing any of them. We shall call this formula *t.ts.pc* for convenience and maximum confusion.

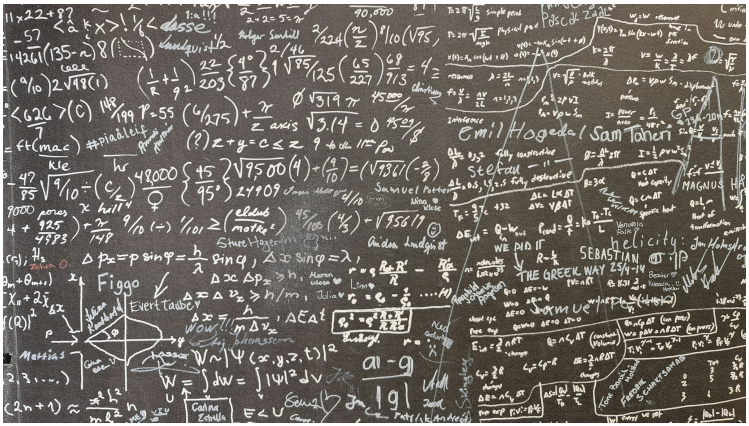
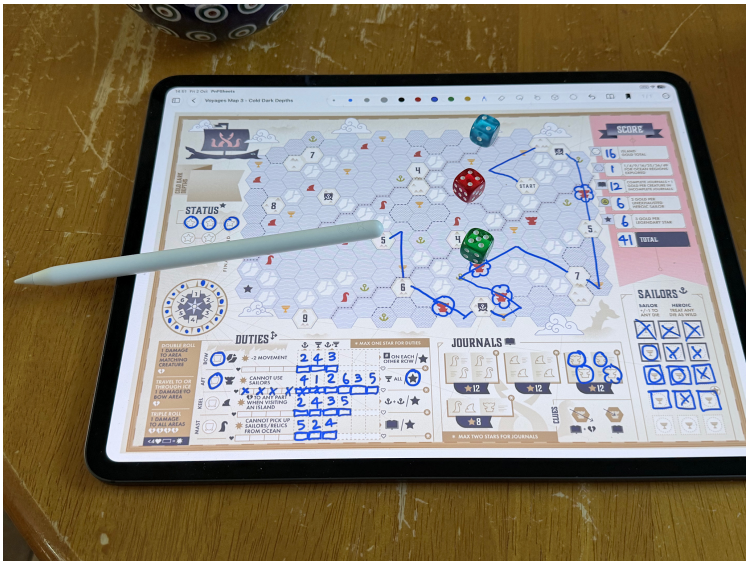


Photo by Thomas T on Unsplash

Yes, there are solutions to some of these challenges. A friendly local games club. Conventions of varying sizes, some local and some more distant.

Grandchildren. Even online gaming outlets like BGA, though these are fairly unsatisfactory for learning new games, and only work very well with a small subset of games. Actually I have discovered a fix, of sorts, for this problem. What you need to do is simple. You need to write an article for this zine. You see after the article last month on Print and Play games I exhumed a number of the ones in my collection and actually played them, as a direct result of that article. So there you have it. A guaranteed solution.



Setting that aside, at the end of that preamble, how many games on my shelves have I removed from the scope of this article? Exactly, none. Oops.

Many computer programs these days generate random names by joining words together as this is better than just assigning a number or sequence of characters. These names are used to label temporary sessions, users or devices. Any kind of transient thing. I had one recently called strategy-deity, which amused me for no particular reason. But maybe this could be a better theme? Or it could help focus the mind, What games would a strategy deity want to play. If they had time, which presumably they would, being a deity and all.



We have had a lot of fun with War of the Ring over the years, a game that succeeds in spite of multiple problems with the components. Vanishingly tiny text on the cards. Giant wobbly Nazgûl figures that toppled over all the time, until I glued 1p pieces on the bases so they weren't so top heavy. Now they only fall over most of the time. A map that is too big for most tables (see theme of this article) yet many regions are too small to contain all of the armies and wobble-Nazgûls. Speaking of armies, the free people armies are hard to tell apart and so I painted the tips of their spears different colours. We even experimented with replacing the minis with cubes, but that got even more confusing fast. These component issues could have been fatal flaws but the game play itself is compelling. The Free People have an extremely tough task of balancing defending their strongholds well enough to allow the fellowship time to travel all the way to Mount Doom. No handy public transport here, unless you want to hitch a lift with a Nazgûl. Despite often comically unbalanced games, there is always a strong narrative and occasionally, very occasionally, the Free People would triumph. Certainly a table hog, and sufficiently heavy to only be broken out when both players are fresh, but

definitely a keeper. Oh and eventually the publishers helpfully made an "upgrade pack" available with larger cards which fixed the main accessibility issue for my eyes.



Something that fits the theme here is the game Dead Reckoning, a slightly weird game from John D. Clair, as seems to be his M.O. The main gimmick here is that it is a card builder. You have a fixed deck of cards, but these cards, in fancy sleeves, can be upgraded by sliding in transparent advancement cards that improve a part of the card. As the game goes on your cards get fatter and fatter and better and better. Probably. It is hard to know exactly what upgrades to pick and when. Very definitely a game I would like to play more of, but have only had a couple of outings with. Also comes in a box the size of a shipping container, rather like War of the Ring.

A quick shout out to Oath, which I mentioned in a previous article. Also slightly weird. OK. Actually weird. Also in a big box and sitting there, looming larger than life, on the shelf, just begging to be restarted. Maybe the expansion fixes some of the issues, but unfortunately I haven't got that, so clearly the thing to do is to add that to the mix so that I have an even more comprehensively strange box to torment me on the shelf. While we are referring back to earlier articles I would love to get Earthborne Rangers underway again. I even had a table set aside for it, but like all level surfaces it has been claimed by all manner of things.



I have a small stack of Undaunted games, from the late lamented Osprey Games, starting with the original, then the Reinforcements set that replaced a lot of the original components. I do really like the gameplay which sort of scratches that same Up Front itch. Small scale tactical engagements with strong narrative, and constrained actions that don't always let you do what you wanted to do. One slightly odd aspect to these games was that, as in Up Front, each individual soldier was named, which allowed for greater narrative

cohesion, especially when they perished. But many were named after game designers, presumably with their say-s0, so it was strange sometimes to be sending them into peril. This set of games expanded so fast that it outran even my assiduous collecting instinct, but I would like to play more of these when *t.ts.pc* allows. The Battle of Britain variant even sits on the shelf still in shrink wrap.



Somewhat mechanically similar to Undaunted are all the games based on Richard Borg's Battle Cry system, including BattleLore, Command and Colours, and Memoir '44. The common feature of these is that your actions are constrained by cards in your hand that allow you to perform actions confined to set areas on the battlefield, or to specific units. These are, as in Undaunted and Up Front, not always exactly what you want to do, so there are hard choices on how to proceed. I have almost a complete set of the original BattleLore, which we bring out from time to time, alongside various Command and Colours sets. Always entertaining and challenging. The biggest downside perhaps is that setup is often protracted, finding all the

pieces and setting them up, which can take almost as long as the actual game play. Definitely plan on playing a scenario a couple of times once you have all the bits out.

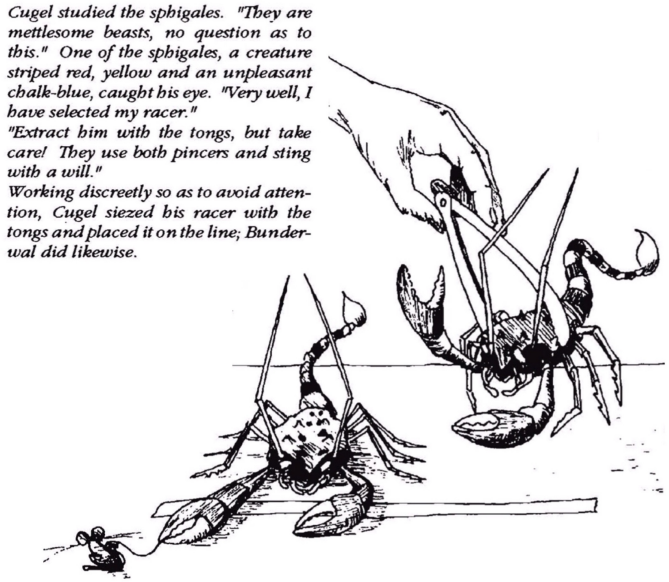
I did have a set of Memoir '44 which I sold on BGG eventually. Twice. The first person I sold it too had a COMPLAINT. One of the tiny tank traps was missing. These are used in hardly any scenarios, and could easily be substituted by, well, almost anything. I had never noticed it was missing and we had played the game quite a bit. This was the END OF THE WORLD though and I had to refund the money to this distressed individual and receive the game back. I then sold it again, with the deficit clearly marked. The person I sold it to later said they wrote to Days of Wonder who sent them the missing part free of charge. Which just goes to show you should learn to complain effectively, a wise moral to the tale that justifies this otherwise incongruous digression.



I can finish up with Caverna, another Uwe Rosenberg game that I enjoy, even though it isn't as streamlined as some of his later games. The end of turn restocking of resources can be fiddly and prone to errors unless you are careful. But it has a nice theme and building out your cavern and fields is fun. As a 2 player game it can be vicious, especially in competing for the adventuring spaces with your upgraded dwarves. It is here in this article because I have an expansion that adds a number of enticing features, none of

which I have ever got to try out. Maybe one day, when I am levelled up to strategy deity...

For those confused by the sudden arrival of Tree Weasels in the title of this article, this stems from a series of letters "home" that started in the 1980s when I moved to London to take up a 3 month contract of work. The fact that I am still in London many years later indicates I am probably bad at maths (see above), or something. These letters eventually acquired the title of Tree Weasel Weekly. Tree Weasels are mentioned in the book "Cugel's Saga" by Jack Vance. While defending himself during a competition with Bunderwal, Cugel memorably exclaims "Master Chernitz is mistaken! I also came out here to relieve myself. Glancing along the wall I noticed my friend Bunderwal and signaled to him, whereupon Master Chernitz set up an embarrassing outcry, and made infamous hints! Better that you eject these two old tree-weasels!". The contest then moved to racing sphigales, which also didn't end well, but has not, as far as I am aware, featured in a board game. Anyway, in a hasty search for a quick masthead I repurposed the TWW logo, as I was in a hurry.



Little Wooden People

Number 6: by Roger BW

- Blog: https://blog.firedrake.org/
- Gaming stuff: https://tekeli.li/
- Rulebooks: https://tekeli.li/rogers-rules/
- Mastodon: https://oldbytes.space/@RogerBW
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(Technical note: Whether everyone's links work this time depends on whether the bug I found in `PDF::API2` and `PDF::Builder` is fixed yet. Probably not, it's a tricky one, but I have some Cunning Plans to work round it.)

Recent Games

(As usual, I played more games than this, but if I've talked about them before and I don't think I have anything new to say I shan't mention them here.)

My main gaming in September was at Tabletop Scotland[1], and with the incipient demise of Airecon this is the remaining large play-first show I get to. (Yeah, I like Essen and even UK Games Expo, see next month's IgTheme, but they are sales-first as I think big shows tend to become unless the organisers resist it, and that promotes a different attitude in everything they do.) I drive; it's about as long as to Essen, but it's cheaper than the train, I can take games to play, and it gives me an excuse to drop in *en route* to friends I don't often see, not to mention the Moffat Toffee Shop and Tebay Services.

My love affair with what I generally call Imperium: [foo][2], the composite game of *Imperium: Classics, Legends* and *Horizons,* started slowly. I played *Classics* shortly after it came out, and quite enjoyed it; I played it again on Tabletop Simulator, and found it very hard work (there are a lot of moving parts and even a high resolution screen isn't as a good as a table in front of me), and never got round to taking it further. Then a couple of years later I lucked into a review copy of *Horizons* from Zatu, found the new rulebook in particular much easier going, and ended up buying the earlier boxes as well. (It all fits inside the *Horizons* box, though only just.) What I'd recommend to anyone trying this out and unable to borrow a copy is: buy *Classics* first, but download and play from the *Horizons* rulebook PDF, because that's much better organised and explained.



[1] https://tabletopscotland.co.uk

[2] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/367518

Anyway, it's a lovely game. Yes, it's a deckbuilder, but it's a deckbuilder designed by people who very much know what they're doing. Yes, there are cards anyone can pick up that are worth a lot of points, but each civilisation has its own unique point-scoring goals, and its own challenges and advantages, which you can't ignore. And while interaction is generally low, the way you have to play *against* another civilisation varies too.



(If you're more of a fan of *Star Trek,* be aware that *Star Trek: Captain's Chair* is basically the same system with a few tweaks. To me it makes less thematic sense: I can believe in alternate-history Egyptians pivoting to naval power and developing triremes more than I can believe in Jean-Luc Picard somehow being in charge of a Romulan ship as well as the *Enterprise.* But my one play of it was enjoyable nonetheless.)

Consensus seems to be that this is best at 1-2 players, but I like it most at 3-4, where there's some choice about where to deploy your limited interaction abilities. Yes, it can take a while. But I find I'm not bored even while I'm waiting for other players to take their turns.

And of course one *cannot* play this game without paying respects to the Great Beetle, who eats the sun after the final Solstice phase when the game (and thus the world) ends. (The Beetle was knitted by my friend Gus, originally inspired by *Kabuto Sumo,* but ended up spending more time around games of *Imperium.)*



I got in a game of Compile: Main 2[3] which I don't play as much as I'd like simply because I don't do much two-player gaming: if I'm at a slightly larger gathering, which is my usual experience, playing with two feels as though it's excluding the other people there. (This is another game like *Imperium: [foo]* and *Railroad Ink* for which what I really want to log is a meta play of "the whole system, doesn't matter which specific box I was using".)



Also of course when I meet a game like this that will clearly reward you for putting all of your game-playing hobby time into it, I know I'm going to lose against people who've specialised in it rather than being gaming dilettantes like me. Fortunately my friends tend to be the latter.

[3] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/440606

Small Islands[4] always feels to me like a game that got away: I was generally aware of many new games when it came out in 2018, but I didn't hear anything about it at the time, and only met it rather later when I discussed it with my co-host on the podcast *More Games Than Time* (which we've allowed to fall into desuetude since he now has a small son and a demanding job). He lent it to me so that we could talk about it, and when I said how much I'd enjoyed it offered to sell it to me.

It's basically a tile-layer: on your turn you lay one of three tiles from hand, matching up edges a bit like *Carcassonne,* or end the round. But you have a secret scoring objective, as it might be "I want islands with more pink flora than yellow flora, and I'll get two points for each one plus one per anchorage on them". Each player can only score any given island once, so one of the basic tricks is to join up an island someone's already scored with one they're building later.



It'll never set the world on fire, and the rulebook is unusually clumsy (of course I have written a replacement), but I've never had a play I didn't enjoy, and I think it deserves better than to be basically forgotten.

As does Steampunk Rally[5] (in this case *Steampunk Rally Fusion: Atomic Edition,* and see below for what that means). I hear other people talk about it every so often, but I don't think it's ever been a well-known game, and again I've never had a bad game of this even when I've lost comprehensively. It's a little like *Flamme Rouge* to my perceptions, in that while it's framed as a racing game, it could also be seen as a card game with an unusually complex scoring ladder. You draft machine parts and one-off special effects, you apply dice to your machine to generate effects, you try to win the race. And I can introduce it by saying "if you have a favourite historical inventor on this list, tell me and you can play them".[6]



It's a little more fiddly that it might be because there's original *Steampunk Rally* and *Steampunk Rally: Fusion* which came out six years later. These are stand-alone games, but mutually compatible, and I've crammed them both into one box (with various promotional inventor cards), which is classed on BoardGameGeek as "Atomic Edition" under its own listing even though it's never been a thing you could buy directly at retail. But this gives me four race venues each with its own flavour, 38 inventors, and… actually rather too many part cards, since as usual with a large deck they can cluster together, but a BGG user put together a subset[7]

[4]https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/236248
[5]https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/331992

[6]And there is that occasional glorious moment when someone's eyes light up on seeing someone relatively obscure, like Asima Chatterjee or Marie Marvingt.
[7]https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2794919/decklist-combining-original-and-fusion

which makes for an enjoyable game, and that's the standard list I play with.

Tavarua[8] is the game Cody Miller designed before *Xia,* and I think I detect some of the same sensibility: an obsessive determination to capture details which *matter* thematically and make them important in the gameplay too. It's a game of surfing, and your core job is to keep your fore-and-aft balance on the board, with limited information about what the wave's going to do next.



I know essentially nothing about surfing, but this feels like a game designed by someone who's put effort into learning about it.

Lost Ruins of Arnak[9] (played on BGA) always seems odd to me: thematically it feels as though it should be about exploring the ruins, but I've done best when I completely ignored that and concentrated on the score ("research") track.

I've played A Carnivore Did It![10] on the tekeli.li forums but wanted to try it in person. It's essentially a set of deduction puzzles, and in a face-to-face play at Thirsty Meeples (Oxford) we accidentally fell into a timerless cooperative mode, which I quite enjoyed but which did reduce the experience to a puzzle rather than a game. I'll probably still buy this as I had planned, but I suspect that finding players may be hard.



I saw Monster Eater: A Delicious in Dungeon Board Game[11] on the Thirsty Meeples new arrivals list, and knowing nothing about it but having enjoyed the anime (vt *Dungeon Meshi)*[12] I suggested we give it a try. You each run a competing party; you explore the dungeon, working your way towards the level boss, and must trade off progress cards (that get you further towards the goal) against other cards that help you acquire resources. You can drop monsters in front of each other (or in front of yourself, if the reward is great enough), and then — this is the bit that really ties in — having defeated them you can try to cook them.[13] If you succeed, that'll get you food to un-exhaust your characters (or you can save up gold, or accept delays). Get to 100% on the upper level and you can fight the end-of-level boss (and once they're defeated, nobody else has to); beat the boss at the end of the lower level, and that's the end of the game. (There are points to determine the winner, but there are a lot more points for beating the bosses than for most other things.)

[8] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/186323
[9] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/312484
[10] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/451594
[11] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/371794
[12] https://blog.firedrake.org/archive/2026/03/Dungeon_Meshi.html
[13] Or at least derive food from them in some abstract way; in the case of the orcs, you befriend them and they give you ingredients, for example.

Like the 1980s computer game *Carrier Command* (I bet nobody was expecting that comparison) you start at a pretty high level of capability, and as with my winning strategy for that game I pushed ahead as quickly as I was able rather than building up further. I was able to beat both bosses with un-enhanced characters, by making sure the full party was available as we went into the fights.



The designer is Seiji Kanai, best known for *Love Letter,* who started this project with Ginichiro Suzuki's 1988 game *Monster Maker* (itself somewhat inspired by *Mille Bornes* in that you make progress, impede your competitors, and build up protections against them impeding you). Overall I think we all found more depth and enjoyment to this than we were expecting.

I was particularly impressed by the rulebook, which does what many games don't and actually illustrates each component. So when the setup guide says that you should gather the Dungeon cards, you can look them up and see, aha, those are the ones with the green backs.

And we (the group of three of us who hit up Thirsty Meeples to try new and old games each month) used to play a lot of various *Timeline* games to close out the evening, but found we remembered too many of the cards, so we've given it a break for a bit; but we tried Timeline: General Interest[14] again and we've forgotten much of it, so that's good.

Games you wish you had the time and/or table space for

The original for me was *Firefly: The Game.* The original board was 50 × 20 inches; expansions brought it up to 70 × 20, 1.8m × 0.5m. And then you need space for each player's ship card and associated bits; and for 20-odd decks of cards and their associated discard piles; and trays for various sorts of token. I bought a lot of acrylic "business card holders" with double compartments, which lets one pass around a set of cards and discards as a single unit. But it's also a game which can casually take an hour per player if you're not careful, and in the end that's why I don't get it out as much as I'd like to.

I have to admit it's not the best game in terms of mechanics. There are ways you can randomly fail which will set you far behind the other players, to the point that you have no chance of winning this game; sure, if you'd succeeded it could have been glorious, but should a choice like that be in the game at all, especially if you didn't have any option about going into it? This isn't meant to be *Arabian Knights…*

What I enjoy it for, though, as someone who quite liked the TV series but didn't make it the thing I cared about to the exclusion of other fandoms, is the random story generation. Here's the ship with Kaylee and the Scrappers; here's Zoe's ship without Mal, frankly better organised and disciplined; here's Monty, still pining for his devil woman, but this Yolanda he's just hired on is a completely different person, right? Here's how they stacked up against each other, this time round.

For example, in the game I played at Tabletop Scotland, I had a selection of cards including a character who can turn a Fight test into a

[14] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/131325



Negotiate test once per Job, and she also happened to be crewing the Vehicle-Mounted BFG. Which gave rise to:

"Observe the nice lady with the ridiculously big gun. The only reason she hasn't already ventilated your sorry carcass is the shells for that thing cost like two hundred bucks each, and you just aren't worth it. Yet."

(Did I mention I have a nearly 3m × 1m table at home? I got it when I was still hosting small LAN parties, but it turned out very handy for boardgames too.)

The same designers (Aaron Dill and the late Sean Sweigart, with John Kovaleski also credited but as I understand it in more of a managerial role at Gale Force 9) also gave us *Star Trek: Ascendancy* (like *Firefly,* now out in a new edition with no upgrade path for those of us who bought the original apart from buying everything again). That deliberately constrains the size of its playing field (which you fill with star systems as you go along; it's one of the few 4X boardgames which really pushes the exploration side), but there's a fair old bit of clutter in front of each player. And, similarly, it can take really quite a while.



Another game that tends to spill to consume available space, and a bit more, is *Xia: Legends of a Drift System*. The map gradually sprawls, but

also there's the trade pentagon (if using the *Embers of a Forsaken Star* expansion, which I always do), the stack of ship parts, the various card decks… the thing that seems to get lost most is the ship cards not currently in use (which you'll want later in the game). I 3d-printed an inlay (found on thingiverse) which handles *almost* everything…



And I can't go without mentioning long-term favourite *Leaving Earth,* which in its fully expanded form with *Outer Planets* and *Stations* does *technically* fit on my 150×80cm "mouse mat",[15] but only just. And only solo. I think that solo run took about three hours, and none of these is the sort of game that can be put away in mid session.

[15] I prefer undecorated gaming surfaces, if I'm not playing with the mat for *that specific game.* I have some doubts as to the utility of these as an actual mouse mat, though.



We Also Heard From

Comments on OdaM number 5

CTD: I use Inkscape for a lot of "play without actually getting the bits out" plays, for a reason unrelated to its vector-editing properties: an object remains an object unless you deliberately merge it with something else, in Photoshop terms as if each thing were on its own layer, so even if everything is a bitmap it's very easy to drag things around without changing what they're being dragged over. But I've found I'll enjoy basically any game more if I play it with real components.

I hadn't thought of RPGs in the context of print and play (possibly a problem with writing both here and in Ever & Anon[16]), but most of what I've acquired recently is online-only; my shelves are full, mostly of ***GURPS***. Ongoing favourite *Cthulhu Eternal* can be bought in print, but why would I when these days I'm mostly running games over videoconference rather than at the table, and I can text-search the PDF faster then finding a printed page? I just remix and print the few pages I actually want, as reference sheets. (Again, Inkscape is very good for hauling stuff out of PDFs.)

Matt Elliott: your retheming sounds as though it might be a good fix for my abstraction gap problem: if the game isn't really tied hard to the specific thing it's nominally simulating, I might as well retheme it to something I'll enjoy looking at and imagining.

(Has there been an *Ace of Aces*-style combat game for *Star Wars?* Yes, Star Wars: Starfighter Battle Book[17] from 1989. Obviously a bit more specialised than this, just one X-Wing and one TIE. And ultimately *Ace of Aces* inspired *Wings of War* which was more or less directly copied into the *X-Wing miniatures game.)*

I'm not much a font nerd, but I do know a guy who shouted out loud in the cinema "but that's Helvetica!" (in a WWII film.) As I understand it, one of the principal design goals of Atkinson Hyperlegible was to make things easier for people with dyslexia,[18] but I've also heard from dyslexic people that being able to *change* the font is often more helpful than having one font that's particularly good.

I start to drift into definitional limbo with some solo/P&P games I've looked at: what's a solo or cooperative game, and what's a puzzle? (I *think* that if I can come up with a protocol which always succeeds then it's a puzzle, while if sometimes I'll fail no matter how well I play it's a game. But that's only to satisfy the chorus of critics in my head.)

RYCT Marcus, I have some colour-blind friends but I know that there are a lot of variations. I generally try to run designs through COBLIS but I suspect playtesting with actual people too is the only way to be sure.

I played *Alchemists* once at a convention. I had a great time with the deduction puzzle, but there was this rote Euro glued to it which kept getting in the way. (I admit bias.)

Thinking of print and play card decks, I've seen various proposals for extended decks with more numbers, more suits, generally more options for subsetting so that you can play more games that need slightly custom decks. So many of them that one could build a collection purely out of them…

(A side note, while I'm not a wheelchair user the things that are good for them are also good for me with my rolling games library, a camping trolley I bring to most conventions.)

[16] https://everanon.org/

[17] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/3152/star-wars-starfighter-battle-book

[18] Inevitably I am now having trouble typing this word.