

Zine OF WONDROUS POWER

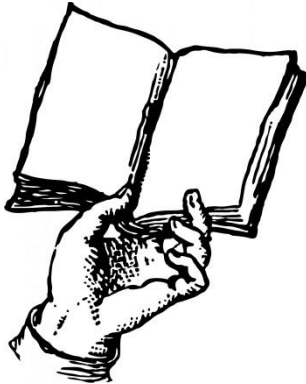
PLAY / DESIGN / CREATE / DISCUSS ROLEPLAYING GAMES

**VOLUME 01, ISSUE 01
31 DAYS THINKING ABOUT GAMES**

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31 Days Thinking About Games



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WELCOME TO THE ZINE OF WONDROUS POWER

Roleplaying games were first sold as small pamphlets, a format that was cheap and easy to produce. For years they thrived in the pages of photocopied and mimeographed fan magazines written by fired-up enthusiasts and budding professionals wanting to share their love for the games giving flight to their imaginations. In time, the hobby grew into an industry, and the pamphlets and zines were replaced by full-color hardcover books that were works of arts in their own right.

Where companies thrived selling big rulebooks, independent and fan creators could not necessarily follow, and though modern technology removed a lot of the obstacles for one person or a small group to create products on par with those of the larger companies, it isn't without a significant gamble in money and resources. As RPG books continues to get bigger and more expensive, there has been a return to the roots of the hobby, both in design and production, with fan-led movements embracing the simpler rules of the early days, distributing their work via blogs and PDFs, but also going back to the pamphlets and zines of yore.

I'm a firm believer that zines are the format of the future of roleplaying games for independent game creators. They are cheap to produce, easy to put together, and the perfect vehicle to explore small game designs and thought-provoking discourse. The Zine of Wondrous Power is my voice in this conversation, a zine where I can share small games and ideas, as well as thoughts on game design and creation. I hope that this zine entertains, inspires, and creates conversations.

31 DAYS THINKING ABOUT GAMES

During the month of August I participated in the annual #RPGaDay event. Usually there is a list of questions for each day of the month and people answer them on their blogs or social media accounts, but this year there was a list of one-word prompts that were vague enough to invite a lot of interpretation. It happened just as I was making the decision to get back into gaming after a few years away, and its start coincided with the start of Gen Con. The following short essays were originally written for #RPGaDay2019, but I have revised them for inclusion in the zine. It was a great way to get my mind back into the gaming zone, and I hope you enjoy reading them, and maybe thinking about the topics as well.

01 [FIRST] MY FIRST GEN CON

My first time going to Gen Con was in 2001, and to be honest, I don't remember much about it, in the sense that it was like drinking from the firehouse of gaming coolness. It was one of the last ones in Milwaukee (a city I would move to 15 years later), and all I recall is how overwhelming the massive smorgasbord of games in the Exhibit Hall was. I ended up going last minute because I had written a scenario for a new RPGA campaign. I got to run my adventure for a couple of groups, as well as participating in the Living City LARP as part of the Bards Guild. Even if my memories of it are hazy, and I have only a handful of pictures from the show, I remember it fondly as the time when I finally fulfilled my dream of going to the best four days in gaming.

02 [UNIQUE] UNIQUE IS ANOTHER NAME FOR SPECIAL

During a Burning Wheel game set in the Forgotten Realms, my character, Hal, wandered into the haunted, monster-infested ruins of the elven city of Myth Drannor as he tried to escape from pursuing slavers. I knew I'd be running into some monster or other, maybe a demon or some ancient elven ghost, but when my friend and GM, Judd, described the creature that my trespass had riled up, my jaw dropped in awe, fear, and incredulity. Hal came face-to-face with the Tarrasque.

This unique creature is the stuff of legends in D&D lore, and as such, it's not the kind of monster I'd expect to necessarily show up in an adventure. But why not? Unique is another name for special, not off-limits, so go for it and make sure it's a memorable encounter. There are many things I remember fondly about that Burning Wheel game, but facing the Tarrasque in the ancient ruins of Myth Drannor, knowing that this was definitely not an encounter I'd survive by mere combat, but one that would require wile and skill, that is definitely a highlight.

Be it the Tarrasque, or the Deck of Many Things, or the lost city of Atlantis, make unique elements of legend a part of your active gaming repertoire, not just things that get whispered about by players and townsfolk alike without ever being seen.

03 [Engage] ENGAGING WITH THE HOBBY

In my current journey back into gaming, finding engagement in the hobby has been one of the biggest issues. I've been away from the industry for a while, so whatever tenuous claim I had staked at being a game designer (and tenuous it was) is gone; I haven't really kept with the new releases, so beyond the big books from the big publishers and the few independent releases from folks I connect with in social media, I have no clue what people are playing these days; I haven't gamed in

a few years, so I don't have experiences to share with other gamers. So how do I engage with the hobby once more?

Although I don't consider myself to be in contact with the greater gaming community, I still connect with a few friends who are very much active in gaming in their own circles, and their enthusiasm about their games inspires me. I read and follow a handful of blogs, like Brad Murray's VSCA Blog and the Dancing Lights Press Blog, which invite me into the author-designer's mind, as well as listen to podcasts like Daydreaming About Dragons which celebrate games and gaming without being toxic.

I don't want to engage with the hobby at a large scale; I'm far more interested in engaging with it on a small, manageable, intimate scale that highlights meaningful shared experiences at the table and in design. While actually gaming is the most obvious way to achieve this goal, activities like writing on this blog, and connecting with like-minded individuals who follow the beat of their own drums, help me to feel engaged, to feel like I'm a gamer again.

04 [SHARE] THE PLAYLIST

In early 2019 I wrote a short game based around the idea of using a soundtrack to prompt conflict resolution. Inspired by the use of soundtracks in movies and TV shows to underscore the emotional issues of the main characters, the game invites the players to create protagonists with dramatic emotional issues, and to create a communal playlist of songs which will be used during conflicts to resolve those issues. I first wrote a themed version of the game inspired by *Robotech* and other similar rock-n-roll mecha shows, then wrote a core version which could be used to create any type of setting. It's completely a lark of a game, an idea which I've had for years that I simply had to get onto paper one night, something unlike anything in gaming I've designed before. I love this little game of soundtracks and feelings, and in the spirit of the *Share* prompt, I am sharing it with everyone. Go to <https://tinyurl.com/ThePlaylist4Free> to download your free copy, and rock on!

05 [SPACE] IN THE MOOD FOR SPACE ADVENTURES

For the last two years or so I've been really in the mood for science fiction, be it in my own writing, in books, movies, TV shows, comics, or (and especially) games. While I tend to prefer the *Star Trek*-type of space sci-fi, where it's more drama exploring the human condition, what I've been in the mood for is the more visceral, action-driven, fast-paced type of space adventure, especially the kind that involves a starship and its scrappy crew fighting the good fight against all odds. *Firefly* always hits the spot when I'm in this mood, and *Star Wars: Solo* surprisingly hit all the right notes, but I've been left wanting more.

While figuring out how to scratch the starship-and-crew gaming itch, I picked up two games. The first was *Starlight Manifesto* from Dancing Lights Press, which in general has more of a *Star Trek* vibe, but nevertheless can support a small starship game in its universe. I was re-watching *Deep Space Nine* at the time, and *Starlight Manifesto* gave me some tools to bring that setting into a game. The second game I got was *Scum and Villainy* from Off Guard Games, a game that's precisely built to be about a crew and their starship. The game is a hack of *Blades in the Dark*, a game I've wanted to play, though the sci-fi setting appeals to me far more than that of thieves in a dark fantasy city. The drawback is that *Scum and Villainy* is far more complex in terms of rules, which has kept me from taking it to the table.

Last year I finished a short story I've been kicking around in my head for years, a story that sets the stage for a larger epic in a space opera setting of my own. Whether I'll ever get around to writing the novel is up in the air, but I am continually building the world in my head, a world which features the parts I like about *Star Trek* and mixes them with the rough-and-tumble vibe of shows like *Firefly*, creating a world of intergalactic governments with high ideals where some still have to scrape a living with their wits and their ship. I might end up just running a game set in this nascent universe to help me develop it and to finally get a ship flying to the stars.

Although right now I have this idea firmly in my head about the adventures of the field officers of the Stellar Archeology division...

06 [ANCIENT] GAMING IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

One of my favorite periods for roleplaying games is the Ancient World, starting with the Roman Empire and going back in time from there. The so-called sword & sandal genre is just so evocative to me, full of wonder and magic, the stuff from which legends are made of. It's the real world, but unabashedly mythical; it's got regular people, our very ancestors, but also magic and monsters; it's got history, and it is history.

I like the Ancient World in gaming so much that for a few years I published a magazine dedicated to supporting a number of roleplaying games set in different ancient eras. *Targum Magazine* was primarily dedicated to my favorite ancients roleplaying game, *Testament*, published by Green Ronin, but quickly grew to support other games such as *Eternal Rome* and *Trojan War*. I also wanted to include support for other small-press/indie games, but I think that beyond running some ads, I never got around to it. After four quarterly issues, I ceased production on *Targum*, and to this day it remains the project I'm most proud of.

Alas, I still have yet to play a game in the ancient world, so it remains in my gaming bucket list to check off one day. As far as doing further game design in the ancient era, I don't have anything planned for the time being. Part of me would love to resurrect Targum; after all, I keep wanting to convert Testament to Green Ronin's new AGE System just for the fun of it, so who knows.

07 [FAMILIAR] NOTHING'S FAMILIAR, AND THAT'S ALRIGHT

Gen Con 2019 just finished a few days ago, and as I usually do, I kinda kept track of it via social media, checking the #gencon hashtag on Twitter and Instagram, mostly to look at pics of the games and events. It's been a while since I last went to Gen Con, and while I'm still parsing out my feelings about the con in this season of my life, it's also hard not to feel some excitement about the best four days in gaming. I indulge that by living vicariously through other people's photos.

Something dawned on me as I scrolled through pics on Instagram and Twitter: I was seeing pics of dozens of board and card and miniatures games, cosplayers with elaborate costumes, groups gathered around tables with books and dice splayed out, booths big and small from companies big and small, and pretty much nothing was familiar. Yes, I recognized some companies, knew some of the games I saw people playing, but it was interesting how so much of it looked different from prior Gen Cons I have attended. And you know what? That was alright!

Ninety percent of the companies I saw I'd never heard of before, yet there they were at the biggest gaming convention, a significant financial investment for a small company, showing off their games to thousands of gamers. I barely saw any roleplaying games that weren't D&D or Pathfinder 2nd Edition, but even those are unknown to me these days, and people seemed extremely excited to be playing them, which is cool. Cosplayers came in all sizes, ages, colors, genders, with costumes from the biggest media titles to obscure genre shows. There were lots of fans of streaming gaming shows, Critical Role being the biggest though certainly not the only one, people who tune in to watch others play their favorite game and be a part of their adventure. And there were lots of families, children, women, people of color, LGBTQ+, visible queer allies.

Yes, I know I was looking at a small sample, but what I saw in that sample was unlike the Gen Cons I last attended, and for the better. I saw way more variety and inclusiveness in the audience, and I can't help but root for any new company that makes the sacrifice it takes to show their game at Gen Con. Both of these show that the hobby is still very much alive, thriving even, evolving. There were unfortunate

episodes of persecution, intolerance, misogyny, and harassment reported via social media, so there are things that still need to improve in the hobby and the convention, and I can only hope that we are on that road already.

I don't know when the next time I go to Gen Con will be, but it's good to know that whenever that is, chances are I'll attend a con that has progressed since the last time I visited it, that while it won't look necessarily familiar, that will actually be a good thing.

08 [OBSCURE] OBSCURITY IS DETRIMENTAL

The first thing that came to mind with this prompt was to talk about some obscure RPG I may have in my collection that few have heard about, but (A) that's dumb hipster bullshit, and (B) I can't recall owning any such obscure game. Then again, when talking about games inside such a small industry, what exactly is obscure?

My collection certainly includes the big names in the gaming world, including a couple editions of D&D, all editions of Vampire and other World of Darkness games, the original edition of Shadowrun, etc. I also have a large number of digital games and supplements ranging from the heyday of the d20/OGL movement to the current explosion of independent mini games. Point is I have, have had, or have seen a heck of a lot of different games, but I don't know them all by any stretch of the imagination.

When you stop to think about it, pretty much any game beyond D&D can be considered obscure in some way, especially once you start talking about small press/independently published games. Is Burning Wheel obscure enough? How about Dogs in the Vineyard? Or Technoir? Or Sorcerer? The Shadow of Yesterday? Lady Blackbird? Revelations in Cold Iron? RPGKids? See what I mean?

The thing is, obscurity in gaming doesn't help anyone. You might have some hipster cred if you're playing a game that only five other people know about, but that doesn't help the game or the game's creator. If you truly are aware of an obscure game, shout it out to the four social media winds, tell people about it, play it, write about it, and help spread the word. There are too many great game designers working in obscurity in this hobby, and it's up to us to make sure their games get a good chance.

09 [CRITICAL] ON CRITICAL ROLE AND STREAMING SHOWS

I had never seen Critical Role, so I decided to give it a try by watching Episode 1 of their second campaign. I see the appeal of the show, what with the slick

production, the props, and the voice actors acting it up, but the show's not for me. While I've listened to Actual Play podcasts before, I've either known the participants, or explicitly wanted to check out how a game played at the table, so I have some sort of personal investment. With streaming shows? Well, not so much. I'm sure their adventures are great, but I'm not necessarily convinced that roleplaying is a spectator sport. I'd rather use that time for my own adventures. That said, these streaming shows are hugely popular now, and thousands of gamers watch them, so they're obviously doing something right.

10 [FOCUS] FOCUS ON THE CHARACTERS

My priority these days in both play and design is to always focus on the characters and their interactions. I had my times in gaming when I lived for the roll of the d20, for the thrill of critical damage, for the joy of casting a fireball in a small room while wearing a ring of fire resistance, and those were good times, but that's not what I find important in a game anymore.

Roleplaying games are, to me, all about the creation of a shared story, and story lives in the interactions of the characters, in what they say to each other, how they say it, what they do in relation to those around them. That's what drives me to play these days, that's where my focus lies. I don't get to play a lot, haven't really for the past six to seven years, but I have walked away from games because they were not giving me what I craved out of the experience.

Likewise when I'm designing a game, the primary focus of the rules has to be about the characters and their interactions. Massive rule books with thousands of words on combat rules, magic spells, and monsters of all kinds just don't do it for me. Give me a small game that is all about the dynamics of the characters and I'm happy.

It's cool to roll for initiative, to cheer for that natural 20 when you're fighting some big monster in a dungeon, but it's not all there is, and in this season of my gaming life, it isn't what interests me at all. I want the focus of my games to be right on the characters, on their stories, on their problems, on their quirks and issues and drawbacks, on how they solve them, on how they live with them and each other. That's where drama lives, and that's what I want most of all. But hey, if that drama happens to occur in the middle of a battle with a dragon, then roll for initiative as well!

11 [EXAMINE] EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE

My wife loves to watch murder shows on Investigation Discovery, so naturally I've seen a fair number of them as well. That source of inspiration, coupled with an

episode of the podcast *Daydreaming About Dragons* I was listening to a couple days ago, made me think immediately upon reading the prompt about investigation type of games where the characters have to examine a crime scene and then follow the clues.

I can't say I've ever played such a game, as cool as I think the premise is. I've certainly had instances of examination in other games I've played, but never one where that is the central action to perform. In *Daydreaming About Dragons* Episode 20, Judd talks about a *Blades in the Dark* game he's running for two players where each is a police investigator, an idea that sounds fantastic.

Judd addresses what I've come to realize is the biggest issue with this type of game: the examination of evidence is obviously an important part, but the real game is in figuring out what the characters do with the information they find. In the *Investigation Discovery* shows my wife and I watch, finding the evidence is obviously important, but the drama always lies in how the investigators use that evidence to bring the culprits to justice.

So I'm down for someday playing a game of examination, drawing conclusions, and bringing bad people to justice.

12 [FRIENDSHIP] FRIENDSHIPS NEAR AND FAR

There's no beating around the metaphorical bush with this prompt: through gaming I have made friendships, real friendships, near and far, and I am ever so thankful for it.

In high school, gaming gave my group of friends an activity we all enjoyed, as well as many awesome memories we still cherish to this day, twenty-something years later. In college, gaming was the magnet that brought together a few awkward kids in the cafeteria and turned us into friends, even if for a few years. When I moved to Miami, it was through gaming that I met the people that would become my family away from home, people who adopted me into their own families. Gaming took me to cons, got me to do podcasting, to write games, to blog, and through each of those I have made friends all over the United States, all over the world, people who have become more than just working acquaintances, but true friends even beyond the game table. Some are still in my life, some have gone their own way, but each has a place in my heart that came about because of this hobby we share.

As I get back to gaming, it is these friends I have made who I reached out to, to see if they wanted to join me in my quest back to the table. After a few emails back and forth, I'm now getting ready to start a Play-by-Email game with four people I call

true friends, all of which came into my life because of gaming. That's the awesome power of gaming, how it can bring people together to share stories, and in doing so turn them from strangers into friends.

13 [MYSTERY] MYSTERY IS OVERRATED

In my early gaming days, keeping things a mystery from the players was one of the sacred duties of the Dungeon Master. The story, the planned plot, the background, the challenges, the secrets, it was all supposed to be solely the domain of the DM, info to be doled out little by little as the campaign went on. I recall seeing that as the right of the DM, one of the highest benefits of the role; the more mystery you held over the players, the better. These days I see that stance as hogwash, and feel that mystery is overrated. Details held back from players until the right moment is one thing, but keeping things mysterious for the sake of having more knowledge than the players, or simply because that's what Game Master does, is detrimental.

In this season of my gaming life, I'm far more interested in seeing what players do with a piece of information than in how they find it. Sometimes there might be a challenge associated with finding some info, but keeping things hidden just for kicks? Nah, not my thing. Mystery for the sake of mystery is highly overrated. There is a place for mystery in a game, but it's more about pacing than about power.

14 [GUIDE] THE GAME MASTER AS TOUR GUIDE

For a while some years ago, I wanted to become a travel tour guide. I read up on the industry, read books by tour guides, studied itineraries from big and small tour companies, and pretty much absorbed everything said by travel guru Rick Steves. I didn't become a tour guide, but as I think of this writing prompt, I see that a Game Master is very much like a tour guide to the players, and that the skills very much overlap.

A tour guide's job is to maximize the time and fun of their group, and while a GM isn't contracted the same way a guide is, the goals are similar. Tour guides have itineraries planned in order to make the most of their group's time, but they also adapt and change them to fit the needs, likes, and wants of their group. Likewise, a GM may have a planned idea in mind for the game at hand, but must be able and willing to adapt and change things based on the players' actions, and their needs, likes, and wants. In this way both tour guide and GM are able to bring out the best from their plans while enabling their group to have the best time they can.

When someone in the group isn't having fun, a good tour guide, much like a good GM, should find out how to engage this person, see what can be done to help them

have fun as well. If they're not into cliff diving, maybe the guide points out a nice natural pool where they can relax. If they're not into dungeon exploration, maybe the GM points out an opportunity for social interaction with some of the maze's denizens.

I'm not gonna make any analogy of the GM as the players' tour guide into the lands of fantasy (though I guess I just did), but by assuming a similar role, a GM can help their players make the most of the game at hand, and everyone can maximize their fun at the table.

15 [DOOR] THE DOOR ON THE SIDE OF A HILL (ODE TO CINCINNATI)

When I lived in Cincinnati, I would often go wandering around the city, and one day, on a winding road on a hill overlooking I-75, I found a door. On the side of the hill. Not just a door, but a gate, an ornate brick gate with an arch, columns, and a small wall. On the side of the hill. The door is now sealed with bricks and blocks, and there's no clue or indication as to where the door led, what was its use. It's just there, serene, stoic, immutable, a door on the side of a hill in the Queen City. And I loved it.



An old friend told me they once played in a *Changeling: The Dreaming* game set in Cincinnati, and it was easy to see why that was a perfect fit. Cincy is a city with stairs along the hills leading up and nowhere, water towers shaped like castle towers

and fortified keeps, and doors on the sides of hills. There were other doors I found in my wanderings, doors in seemingly impossible places, doors left there when everything else around them was gone. I don't remember where they all were, and I didn't take pictures of each one, but they are all firm in my memory, as doors in the middle of nowhere should be. I liked all of them, found them all magical, but this door, this was my favorite, and I made a point to visit it every chance I got. If I were to play a modern fairy or urban fantasy game, I would surely set it in Cincinnati.

Doors are an invitation to adventure, to find out what lies behind. Make them wonderful, mysterious, whimsical, dangerous, and impossible to ignore, and see where they lead the story. And don't forget to put a door on the side of a hill in the middle of nowhere.

16 [DREAM] MY DREAM GAME TO PLAY AND DESIGN

My dream game that I'd like to play would involve a small group of players, maybe a GM and three players, where everyone is 100% invested in the in-game story, and the real-world act of playing. I want a campaign that has a beginning and an end, where we all are engaged, responsible, and excited to highlight all the player characters, where we are respectful of the effort it takes to get together to play and treat game time seriously while still having fun, and where it is our collective story that we all enjoy. It could be fantasy, it could be sci-fi, it could be modern, as long as the circumstances above are all met.

My dream game I'd like to design, at this point in my life, is one I've already been tinkering with, a game about the arrival of a true Messiah, and how the players (and the world) react to it. There are a lot reasons why this is what I'd like to write, and even if it seems like it would be a tough sell and a hard topic to design, I welcome the challenge. I want the game to be easy for people who aren't gamers to learn, but also interesting to existing gamers. I have lots of notes and thoughts on how to go about it, I just need to get writing.

17 [ONE] MY ONE DESERT-ISLAND RPG

If I had to choose only one RPG to have in a desert island (I'm assuming there's like two to three other people stuck there with me), my choice would be Primetime Adventures, second edition.

I had to think hard to answer my own question because there's quite a few games I really like and could've gone for, but for the desert island scenario, I think Primetime Adventures is ideal. It's one small book, easy to read, mechanically simple to learn but with some complexity to it the more you play it, needs only a

deck of cards (which is far more generally available than dice), and you can literally play any kind of game or genre you want.

I'll admit that I was actually surprised by my choice, given how long it's been since I last played this game, but it just hits all the right buttons should I ever find myself forced to only have one RPG to own. I specifically state that I'd go for the second edition because that's the version I played and read, although I do own the third edition released fairly recently, and I'm sure it would be a fine choice to have as well.

So yeah, if I'm stuck on a desert island with only one RPG, it would be Primetime Adventures second edition, with (hopefully) a deck of cards as well, so myself and my fellow desert islanders can play anything we come up with.

What would be your one desert island RPG and why?

18 [PLENTY] A CORNUCOPIA OF GAMES

For the last few years I've been away from the gaming scene, what with going through nursing school, a divorce, living in four different states over a six year period, a new marriage, and two daughters. As I took my first few steps back into the hobby it didn't take long to realize that, as the saying goes, I wasn't in Kansas anymore.

There was a time when little surprised me in terms of titles released in the industry. That is certainly not the case anymore. Since coming back into gaming, I've seen an explosion of games and designers at all levels, from big companies putting out glossy big books, to midsized outfits with a growing stable of games, to individual designers putting out microgames by the dozen.

I grew up having a good amount of games to choose from, but we are certainly in a time of plenty when it comes to roleplaying games. Pretty much any theme or genre you'd like is represented by a handful of games, some traditional and some experimental. The great thing is that I can sample different takes on a topic, and if one isn't for me, that's cool cause it'll certainly be for someone else while I still have options to play around with.

Whatever the drawbacks to this explosion of games, today I just want to celebrate the horn of plenty that is the current gaming landscape.

19 [SCARY] WE'RE NOT GONNA TALK ABOUT SCARY

I'm not a fan of scary. I don't watch horror movies, I don't care for ghost tours and, although October is my birth month, the fact that it gets coopted by the whole horror thing for Halloween bums me out. And while one of my favorite games of all times is Vampire: The Masquerade, scary isn't something I want in my games.

20 [NOBLE] OF FAE AND PEERS

I immediately think of two things when I hear the word 'noble' in terms of gaming. The first is Changeling: The Dreaming, the game of modern fairy tales from White Wolf. While I played Vampire a lot more, Changeling was a very close second favorite, its themes of dreams, loss, and the struggle between the magical and the mundane being close to my heart. The game featured a heavy feudal setting where the clash of nobility and commoners was a major and inescapable source of conflict. None of my players ever played a noble kith, and yet nobility, what it entailed, who had it, who embodied it, touched everyone's characters in ways that always drove the story forward.

The other thing I think of is how I've never played a game where my character is a noble, and how that would be an interesting campaign in its own right: a group of young peers of the realm with enough money and power to go off adventuring, but who must balance it all with the responsibilities of their titles, their families, and the crown. Sometimes being rich and powerful means you have the means to go off dragon hunting, other times it means you have to be in court to entertain the visiting ambassadors' family while negotiations are underway. It could be a fun campaign indeed.

21 [VAST] VISUAL AUDIO SENSORY THEATER

We tend to think of this roleplaying hobby of ours as 'theater of the mind,' meaning that we use our imaginations to envision the fun stories we create at the table with our fellow players. It's a term I love because it encompasses my favorite style of play, but I'd like to get creative with today's prompt to get at a way to make the most of theater of the mind.

The first thing I thought of with this prompt was space, but then I remembered a band I came across in the 90s called VAST, not as a word, but as an acronym for Visual Audio Sensory Theater. Clever word usage aside, I think that's a great way to approach theater of the mind to make sure everyone has as much information to feed into their imaginations.

Think of the VAST acronym when describing the setting or your actions. Engage all five senses to maximize the sensory input going into the imagination. A dungeon

isn't just dark, it's dank and humid, the air stuffy and heavy with dust and spores, the sweet-sour taste of rot clinging to everything, sweat quickly falling from your brow and down your back, the faint echo of dripping water coming from further down the hall. Your party doesn't just approach town to get supplies, you trod on aching legs, packs heavy on your backs with all the spoils from the dungeon, the cool breeze making you shiver a little as it lifts your spirits, the cacophony of merchants hawking their wares all around, and the smell of meat roasting over a slow fire making your mouth water.

Both players and GMs can and should do this when playing, as it helps the world come alive for everyone. I promise that your stories will be better as you add sensory details in order to engage the senses and make the most of the theater of the mind.

22 [LOST] NOT ALL THOSE WHO WANDER...

Tolkien's oft-quoted phrase was the first thing that came to mind upon reading today's prompt, and as overused and clichéd as it is, it really captures the wonder of this make-belief storytelling hobby of ours.

When I first started playing roleplaying games, what most captivated me was the idea of being able to wander about fantasy worlds, both those made by others, and those of my own making. Through my characters, I could be in an elven forest, a dwarven underground kingdom, a thriving medieval-ish city, or pristine snow-capped mountains. As a teenager, my travel and wandering options were quite limited, and as a resident of a Caribbean island, my world felt small, bounded by water. I hadn't yet begun to read fantasy and sci-fi fiction in earnest, although I did have movies, TV, and comic books as a source of fantasy fuel. Roleplaying games opened worlds to me, and I could daydream from sunrise to sunset, lost in my own mind, wandering the amazing lands of my games.

So here's to all those like me, who wandered, still wander, and will continue to wander fantastic worlds of imagination. Indeed, not all those who wander are lost.

23 [SURPRISE] SURPRISED BY MY PLAYER

I want to share with you the story of the first time one of my players truly surprised me.

We were playing *Changeling: The Dreaming* in my home chronicle set in Miami, Florida. The players were visiting the Sidhe court in Coral Gables when there was an attack and a dragon appeared. Of my three players, one grabbed his trusty magical staff and got ready for battle, the other smiled a little too wide at the

thought of unleashing her creepy-crawly fae magic on a dragon, and then there was the third player. She blinked, asked again, “A dragon?” and when I said yes, indeed, she replied, “Fuck this, I’m going home.” And she really did.

I remember being stunned. “You what???” My assumption was that the players would abide by the unspoken rule of going along with the adventure, but she surprised me like a player hadn’t surprised me before. It made perfect sense for her character to do that, so she did. I had to scramble to figure out where to take the story next in a way that would engage her character, which I admit was challenging, but ultimately proved so much more beneficial to the chronicle as a whole.

I still laugh about it to this day. It also taught me to never take the players for granted, to roll with the punches when unexpected things happen in the game, and to just enjoy being surprised by my players.

24 [TRIUMPH] I GOT A GAME GOING!

My biggest triumph in terms of gaming at the moment is the fact that I finally got a game going! I’m running STARLIGHT MANIFESTO, from Dancing Lights Press, for four players in a play-by-email game. The players are all part of the Starlight Union’s Department of Stellar Archeology and will be involved in tracking down an artifact thought lost for two hundred years.

Not having played in a few years, and having had two games fizzle out this early in the process the last times I tried, I’m excited at the prospect of a regular game with friends, even if it’s over email at this point to accommodate my schedule. It totally feels like a triumph, and I’ll take it.

25 [CALAMITY] CALAMITIES ARE INESCAPABLE CALLS TO ADVENTURE

I’m playing the Harry Potter Wizards Unite app game and the storyline revolves around an event called The Calamity, a spell with disastrous worldwide consequences that threatens to expose and upend both the magical and muggle world. Aside from providing the story basis for the game, this illustrates the power and true nature of calamities: they are inescapable and unavoidable calls to adventure turned up to 11.

Things like The Cataclysm in Dragonlance, the Time of Troubles in Forgotten Realms, the arrival of the Borg in Star Trek: The Next Generation, the rise of the Empire in Star Wars, these are all fantastic calamities that define their worlds and give characters unavoidable opportunities for adventure of the grandest kind. These calamities affect everything and everyone, and they are massive, as they should be.

They define a generation, give people a common purpose, a mutual adversary, a joint goal to accomplish. They provide an instant bond for any group of adventurers, and a steady source of problems to deal with. They are in-your-face and ignoring them isn't an option.

Calamities aren't something to drop in your game at random, but they can be highly rewarding sources of conflict and drama for years to come.

26 [IDEA] IDEAS ARE A DIME A DOZEN, AND THAT'S OKAY

After a few years of not gaming, I have more than a handful of ideas that I've been sitting on, waiting to do something with them. Some are for games I'd like to play, some for games I'd like to run, and some for games I'd like to write. The truth is I have dozens of ideas rattling around my brain and written down in a few notebooks, some new, some older than my kids, and I'm constantly adding more.

Ideas are a dime a dozen and that's okay. It's great to have a wealth of ideas to choose from and to keep your mind busy, to always have a source of projects to work on. Write them down, keep track of them, and develop them as your priorities dictate. Don't ever despair at having too many ideas, either! It means you have a working imagination, let it do its thing. Lastly, understand that everyone has ideas, and that you may even have some that are very similar to other people's ideas, but it's your viewpoint that makes them different.

There's a whole other talk that goes hand-in-hand with this one about how to turn ideas into complete projects, seeing them to the end, or letting them go, but for today we're just gonna celebrate having lots of ideas.

27 [SUSPENSE] USING COUNTDOWN MARKERS FOR VISUAL SUSPENSE

There's this one bit of game design in *Blades in the Dark* called *Clocks*—basically countdown markers—and the moment I saw it, I knew I wanted to use in a game. I think it's a great idea to create suspense in a way that everyone at the table can understand and see.

In a way they're nothing new since countdown tracks have existed in other games prior to *Blades*, but the way they are used in this game, at least from my understand after reading of the book, is pretty new and unique. Instead of being a static piece of design that exists on a character sheet or on the GM's toolbox, *Clocks* can be created at any time in order to visualize the passage of time, a plan in the making,

or any element of impending doom. Players can create them, the referee can create them, and at every point they are visible to everyone on the table. I think it's a brilliant way of creating a tangible sense of suspense in a mechanical way, something that everyone can understand.

I haven't played *Blades in the Dark* yet, so any misunderstanding of the way the rule works is mine. That said, I think I got it right and I'm curious if *Clocks* can be extrapolated into other games and work just as well. I imagine they can, and I look forward to trying to use them in my current play-by-email game, should the situation arise where it makes sense. Creating suspense in a game is something that I've always kind of struggled with, and I think bit of game design solves the problem of making visual an emotional reaction.

28 [LOVE] THAT TIME MY CHARACTER FELL IN LOVE

Alright, it's let-me-tell-you-about-my-character time, so buckle up. If that's not your thing, feel free to skip this post (but really, stick around, won't you?). Having a romantic subplot in a game had always been one of my gaming bucket list items, and it finally happened a few years ago when I played *Burning Wheel* with my friend Judd. He ran for me a party-of-one game so I could get to play my favorite character, Hal Whitewyrm. Hal was basically a version of me in the *Forgotten Realms*, that one character we all create at one point that's you with pointy ears, and I was finally gonna have a chance to play him. He came with a detailed backstory including a love interest, the elf lady Nasharel.

Judd did what he does best when playing *Burning Wheel* and started pushing my story buttons; I in turn, committed to playing the game and seeing where the story took Hal, found myself surprised by the turn of events. Where, in my mind, the story of Hal and Nasharel was set in stone, it turned out that (surprise surprise) a relationship between a mortal (even a long-lived half-elf) and an immortal being was hard, and I found out through play that we had been drifting apart. Then Judd upped the ante.

While on a mission to liberate some slaves (screw you, Zhentil Keep!), Hal met Reltav, an apprentice to the mage I was sworn to kill. Sparks flew right from the start, and though they started as opponents, Rel ended up on the run with Hal, both having to learn to work together to survive all the obstacles they faced. Along the way, Rel and Hal had various conversations about life, and somewhere in there, Hal fell in love with Rel. She was intelligent, tough, a survivor, a partner to Hal where Nasharel had been a beautiful immortal goddess.

We played through the love triangle, a plot as front-and-center as disrupting the slaving operations of Zhentil Keep was, and it was fantastic. At one point there even was a Duel of Wits between Hal and Nasharel that started about one thing but switched to being about the relationship, and I lost that duel. [Edit: Judd reminded me that I did not lose this Duel of Wits, but rather gave in once I realized that Nasharel was right and Hal had no further argument, for he'd seen things her way, which was even more poignant.] Hal's love for these two women, and the repercussions of events in the game, wasn't just something I fanfic-ed off the table, it was a primary part of the game (in fact, now that I think about it, a lot of that game was about Hal's relationship with various people, and perhaps that's something to unpack another time). When the game ended, Hal and Rel were happily in love, starting a new adventure in the city of Waterdeep.

So that was the time that my character fell in love, and what an fantastic game experience that was.

29 [EVOLVE] EVOLVING GAME CREATION

Although I've kept my focus during this series to game playing, today I want to talk about game creation, everything from rules design, to physical/digital manufacture, to publication. While I have seen an obvious evolution in the art and science of game design over the last twenty-something years I've been gaming, the creation of the physical/digital artifact to deliver those rules has remained stagnant, mired in traditions that make little sense in the current environment, stifling creativity and progress. I believe it's time for game creation to evolve, and drastically.

A year ago I wrote two essays about this topic. In one I argued that the way for independent game creators to get their games out was to return to the roots of the medium and utilize the pamphlet/zine format. Roleplaying games have come to adopt the big, full-color tome of rules format as the default, following in D&D's footsteps, but there's no reason for it unless you're one of the bigger companies that can foot the bill associated with that kind of publishing. As an independent game creator, guess what, you're not WotC, so why are you trying to publish like them?

The second essay was a design challenge, based on design movements in other art forms such as Dogme95 in film or Black Box Theater in playacting, which puts forth a series of rules to keep game creation small and agile, inexpensive, and accessible to any creator. Again, as an independent creator, why are you trying to make your game look like D&D, or Pathfinder, or Mutants & Masterminds, etc. You don't have the same resources, so why not play to your strengths?

There is a weird orthodoxy in game creation perpetuated by people who are either neck-deep in the current system, or those who blindly follow the former because that's how it's always been, and you know what, that orthodoxy needs to be eliminated, or at the very least ignored. Game creation needs to evolve based on the needs and resources of the creator. There is more to gaming than big, full-color phone books.

Challenge the established ways, and evolve game creation to take advantage of the tools at our disposal as independent creators.

30 [CONNECTION] ROLEPLAYING IS ALL ABOUT CONNECTION

There's one main reason why I play roleplaying games, why I continue to be involved in this hobby after two decades, why I keep coming back to it even after years away, and that is the connection I get to forge with my fellow players at the table.

When it comes to the thrill of the adventure, video games deliver that better and more efficiently. I greatly enjoyed playing *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* on the PS4 because it gave me the exploration, puzzle-solving, and thrills I want out of a D&D-type of game, and although I've been playing in spurts because life, *Horizon Zero Dawn* is delivering excellently on the deep storyline department (being a futuristic techno tribal warrior fighting machine monsters isn't shabby either). But as much fun as these games are, they are solitary endeavors. I don't get to share these adventures with other players at the table who share the highs and lows, the failures and triumphs. And it is in that sharing that connections are created.

In terms of hobby gaming, I've enjoyed the fun of playing card games like *Magic* and *Star Wars*, and I've been known to kick it with the Euro boardgames here and there, but RPGs to me are the undisputed king of the hill when it comes to games because of their ability to fire off my imagination, and also because in playing them, even potentially something as short as a four-hour one-shot convention game, I get to make connections with other people beyond a superficial hello. Some of those connections have turned into real friendships that I treasure greatly.

31 [LAST] THE LAST RPG I PLAYED

I figured talking about the last time I played a roleplaying game would be a good endcap to this series of essays, and a fitting transition to talking about playing new games as I come back to gaming. I had to think hard because, well, it's been quite a while.

The last time I played a roleplaying game was at Origins 2014, my first time going to Origins. I was living in Cincinnati, just two hours away, and I couldn't pass the opportunity to check out the second biggest gaming convention. I shared a room with three friends, and enjoyed four days of fun playing all sorts of games. I also took every chance I could to play roleplaying games, something I always want to do at conventions, but usually end up not doing, or doing very little off. At this Origins I played a game of Urban Shadows and a game of Headspace, both in the Games on Demand area, and a late night game of Iron Edda.

Urban Shadows is a modern fantasy/horror game in the vein of World of Darkness, and in that spirit, I played the Vampire character. I don't remember much about the game, except that I got to indulge in being the sexy, suave monster of the night Vampire type of character, and it was fun. Headspace was more in the cyberpunk vein, where a team of operatives all share a consciousness and get to share skills, experiences, and traumas. I remember my character was a badass at parkour, and I got to use it quite a bit during the game. It was a playtest so some of the rules still needed some work, but the concept was interesting, and we all had a good time. It was the game of Iron Edda, however, that most made an impression, and which I still remember the best five years later.

Iron Edda is a game where viking-like warriors fight against giant monsters by fusing with awesome Nordic magic mecha. I remember we played out on the lobby of the convention center, early in the evening, and it was a relaxed environment. We communally came up with our village and the dangers threatening it, and then made our characters to face those dangers. We played for four straight hours and it felt like we gamed a lifetime. Our heroes were awesome, we even had two star-crossed lovers kept apart by the gods, and of course we had magical viking spirit mecha fighting for the holdfast. It was a fun evening for sure.

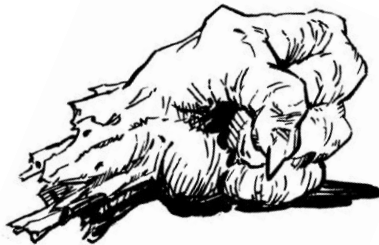
I haven't played any roleplaying games in the five years since, and though I'm working to break that dryspell, I can't complain about the game I played last, and the fun I had at the table. I'm looking forward to creating new memories once again.

Epilogue

I hope you enjoyed this first issue of the zine. Future issues will feature more essays, as well as lessons learned from playing at the table, and small game designs, both standalone and to be used with other games. I'm excited to explore all that can be done with the zine format to get game content and ideas out into the world. Have fun playing!

1D6 ITEMS FOUND IN THE FIRST ROOM OF A DUNGEON

1. The corner of a bloodstained map to the dungeon showing the first three rooms, with scribbled notes from Archibald the Sly on the traps to be found and their deactivation mechanisms.
2. A large, rusted key with an ornate eye carved into the bow with the inscription, "I close what is open."
3. The journal of Marla of Dalefalls, journeyman guild forager, documenting her research, preparation, and journey to the fabled Amethyst Caves in the Zuul Mountains.
4. The (constantly) talking skull of a goblin which promises infallible guidance through the dungeon to the treasures stashed in the goblin warrens under the foundations.
5. A severed and rotting humanoid hand clenched in a fist which opens if sprinkled with fresh blood. If placed against a left hand stump, the hand attaches itself to the stump becoming a new functional hand, granting the wielder enhanced strength and cursing them with a rotting malaise which spreads slowly throughout the body.
6. The skeleton of a former adventurer holding aloft a faintly lit oil lamp that never seems to run out of fuel as it draws energy from the life force of whoever holds it.



MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY
5	6	7
12	13	14
19	20	21
	27	28



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