

Zine ^{OF} WONDROUS POWER

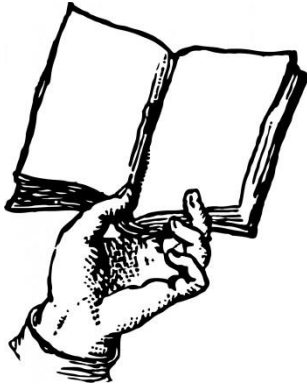
PLAY / DESIGN / CREATE / DISCUSS ROLEPLAYING GAMES

ISSUE 02
THE REVOLUTION WILL BE PAMPHLETIZED

Zine OF WONDROUS POWER

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The Revolution Will Be Pamphletized



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Welcome to Issue 02

This is the third magazine I publish, and invariably, the second issue is always the hardest to get out the proverbial door. The excitement and energy of a new project always fuels the creation of the first issue, while the momentum and exhilaration of keeping the fire burning fuels the creation of the third issue. The second issue, though, that one's always a struggle.

With the second issue I always wonder, should I keep going, should I make this a thing? The obsessive drive to see the project launched has now cooled off, replaced by the reality of what it takes to sustain an ongoing periodical, especially when juggling a full-time job, family life, and parenting two adorable toddlers. But you're reading this, which means that the issue got done and published.

Yes, the sophomore effort is the hardest, but it's also the one that cements the project as something that's happening, something that has endurance, something that's here to stay. Yes, I want to keep going, and make this zine a thing. I write it for myself, to have a creative outlet, to silence that annoying voice inside me that sometimes tells me to stop doing everything and disappear. I write it for myself, but I do it to share it with you. And I have lots more to share. So here's to issue number two, and to many more to come.

Last Christmas I Gave You My Dice

The weather outside in north Delaware is cold and windy, while indoors I am enjoying the heck out of hot chocolate, warm soups, cozy blankets, twinkling lights, and all kinds of Christmassy music. Like wrapped gifts under the tree, this issue's contents are my gaming presents to you, and there's something for everyone.

Back to Gaming Basics is an essay where I argue for a return to the pamphlet or zine format in RPG writing, publishing, and usage. Graduation Day is a short story meant to introduce a game I haven't yet written. Welcome to Kent Square is the first entry in a gazetteer of this small charming town where mushrooms reign supreme (based on a real town not far from where I live). Roleplaying Games as Interactive Fiction is an essay explaining how I'd like to redefine RPGs for a non-gamer audience. Last Christmas is a Jam for The Playlist where you get to play through the story in Wham's iconic holiday song. We round things off with a Random Table. Enjoy the issue.

BACK TO GAMING BASICS (OR THE REVOLUTION WILL BE PAMPHLETIZED)

The Roleplaying Games industry and hobby is a bit of a conundrum in that it's both fiercely traditional in its ways, yet constantly changing as new cohorts of gamers and designers join the ranks. With each explosion of change, the status quo gets thrown for a loop, as it happened with the OGL and the explosion of third-party publishers, the advent of small PDF releases, the rise of Forge-style/indie/story games, and the Old School movement, to name a few. Each expanded what tabletop roleplaying games were and could be, to the delight of progressives and chagrin of gaming conservatives.

A little over a year ago I read two posts online that aligned perfectly with thoughts I'd been having about designing, playing, and producing roleplaying games, each of us arriving at similar conclusions independent of each other. I've quoted the pertinent parts of each post below for reference.

“Tabletop roleplaying games are punk. [...] Individual, do-it-yourself, unburdened by other peoples' expectations. [...] What attracted me to roleplaying [...] was the economy of it. With as little as one book, some paper and pens, and a fist full of dice, my friends and I could build worlds. [...] I have nothing against full-color, heavily illustrated, hardcover tomes. Best wishes to the people who run crowdfunding campaigns, laden with all sorts of fancy rewards, in order to finance the production of those things. It's cool to watch attractive young people on streaming channels acting their hearts out. There's nothing wrong with people who watch those shows, and collect those books, but never actually play. That stuff's just not my jam, personally, is all I'm saying.”

- Berin Kinsman, from The Man in the Arena (post no longer available online)

“So game design. The more I'm exploring, the more I'm feeling that essays and pamphlets work better than books for the form. [...] I want games small enough that people can write rebuttal games as diss tracks. I want games that can be torn up and made into mixtapes. I want games we can lend to our friends without worrying about ever getting them back. I want games we can give to strangers because they expressed interest and we know we can just replace them. I want games that we can give to new players as welcoming presents at LARPs. I want games we're not afraid to write in the margins of. I want games we're not afraid to bend at the spine and

fold back to the page we want to reference. So yeah. Pamphlets. Designers of the world, unite! The only thing we have to lose [sic], is, um, terrible shipping costs, unfair expectations, shitty wages, and games nobody has time to read!”

- Olivia Hill, from a thread on Twitter

<<https://twitter.com/machineiv/status/1014319417461575680>>

We are, undoubtedly, smack dab in the middle of “new” paradigm shift in the roleplaying hobby industry, one that signals a return to the roots of the hobby in terms of form, content, accessibility, and price; not so much a backlash against the traditional publishers, but rather a revival of an independent spirit of creativity and opportunity for any and every gamer designer.

Dungeons & Dragons was first published by TSR in 1974 as a little box with three digest-sized booklets inside at a cost of \$10.00, somewhat equivalent to \$55 in modern prices. Compare that to the cost of the three core books for D&D 5th Edition at \$49.95 each. In terms of page count, the original box presented a whole game in 112 combined pages, compared to 992 combined pages for D&D 5th Edition. As great a game as 5th Edition seems to be, as beautiful works of art and graphic design as those three core books are, the fact remains that an initial investment of \$150 for the basic rules to play the game is ridiculous.

If that appeals to you, then awesome; I say this honestly, and I mean it from the heart. I’m not here to tell anyone that what they like is wrong. What I am saying is that it isn’t for me, and I am not alone. I want games that are low in price point, short in page count, and rich in options. I want games that are less about the presentation and more about the content, games that I can read and be ready to run in a day, games that provide the scaffolding and let me build the world however I want it. Big, glossy, art-filled books look great on the bookshelf or on the coffee table, but they do not deliver what I need or want.

Booklets, pamphlets, and zines: this is the format at the root of the hobby industry, and the format I am returning to, one that’s economical, unpretentious, concentrated, agile, and easy to produce. I want complete games in digest-sized or half-folded stapled pamphlets, anywhere between 20 to 80 pages. In her thread, Hill says, “If you cannot communicate your game’s essential concepts in 80 pages, your game doesn’t know what it wants to be.” I can’t help but agree. It’s time to distill, to let go of the padding, to boil it all down to the essentials, and then let the audience build up from there.

And not just games, I want experimentation, development, dissemination of ideas. I wanna see some group’s weird fantasy city in a 10-page stapled zine, or some

gamer's essays on hard sci-fi adventure design as a booklet. There will always be big publishers putting out glossy hardcover game books; let them, enjoy those for what they are, but know they aren't the be-all, end-all of gaming. The revolution will be pamphletized, and it starts with you.

Graduation Day: A Tale of the Third World

“Fahren, for the love of Ogma, move away from the ledge and take your place so I may begin!”

Fahren glances back at the Master Librarian, and with an exasperated sigh stands up, taking one more look over the edge of the hover platform, committing to memory the details of the steel and glass spire peeking through the trees. The smirk on Fahren’s face tells you a plan is already in place for the very moment you are set loose upon this world. Fahren walks back to the seat next to you, making a deliberate show of the act of sitting down and paying attention to the irate man once more.

“This,” the Master Librarian says as he rolls his eyes and gestures towards the forest-covered landmass below the hover platform, “was our ancient homeland.” Scattered towers of stone and steel jut through the trees like petrified arms reaching out to heaven, hinting at the world waiting to be discovered under the thick canopy. Beside you, Fahren pulls out the encyclopad and quickly searches for the lore of the ancient homeland, flicking links and text snippets into various folders, and over to your own encyclopad.

“Three thousand, five hundred and forty-seven years ago, Humans left the homeland to escape the cataclysm brought on by the collapse of the ecosystem which our ancestors abused over millennia. We would have perished as well, but the Incantatrix, the Bard Queen, Curator of Incunabulum, Blessed of Ogma, she had the foresight to preserve the most precious fountain of knowledge, namely Humanity, and with the help of all ten Archivists, she sent us to the lush lands of Thule to live, develop, and thrive until such a time when she would open the door once more and we could reclaim what was once our own.”

The Master Librarian lets the words hang in the air in reverential awe which he knows is completely lost on his wards. As he looks over his fifteen charges, these newly-graduated Field Librarians, he wonders if they will be up to the task the Blessed of Ogma has left for the returning Humanity. At least three of them will surely die, maybe four. Fahren will definitely be one, the cocky bastard.

You elbow Fahren as you notice the Master Librarian squinting at your friend and classmate, who is very much lost in the screen of the encyclopad and not paying an iota of attention.

“The Incantatrix and the Archivists,” the elder Librarian continues once all eyes are back on him, “having rescued Humanity from extinction, turned their attention to protecting the combined knowledge of the world from the ravages of the cataclysm to come. The Archivists gathered all the Incunabulum they could in their fortified seclusia, and turned these fortresses into an eldritch nexus that sealed off each of their bibliopoleis. The Bard Queen then finalized the ritual by giving her life to power the shielding nexus so that all knowledge would persist until such a time when we would return to reclaim it for posterity.”

“Master, why have we then waited fifty years since the Reopening to begin our search and cataloging of the bibliopoleis?”

The Master Librarian expected that from Fahren, but not from you, and he is taken aback for a few seconds. “Before defecting and becoming the Redcaps, the Guard caste conducted reconnaissance for years, as a matter of fact,” he replies, regaining his composure, and attempting to hide his contempt. “As Ogma in his divine wisdom dictated, the Guard caste was not allowed to touch any book, and thus they could only gather intel for us. Their defection into the willfully ignorant mob they have now become was a terrible blow, hence why all over the world, cohorts like yours are making their way to the surface today. We must begin our expeditions, lest the Redcaps find the bibliopoleis first and destroy them. Or worse, find an Incunabula and use its power to reshape reality to their ignorant whims. This is why we are here, why you are here.” He doesn’t hide the fact that he’s addressing you with that last statement, and you know without a doubt that he now dislikes you as much as he dislikes Fahren.

“On this your graduation day, my class of Field Librarians, you become emissaries of the Incantatrix as you embark in search of the lore of yore. Boot up your encyclopad, gather your equipment, and say a prayer to Ogma. We begin our descent.”

The moment the Master Librarian ends his discourse, Fahren turns to you and says, “I already spied the perfect place to begin our hunt. You will join me, right?”

You smile, hoist your pack onto your back, and say, “Let’s go find some Incunabula.”

* * *

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I wrote this story as a sort-of proof-of-concept for an idea kicking around in my head for a role playing game about finding lost lore in the form of books, scrolls, and other kinds of written materials. I love the idea of adventuring librarians, and while not necessarily meant to be my version of D&D, it certainly illustrates the kind of game that I always wanted out of playing D&D. If that makes it my fantasy heartbreaker, then so be it.

One of the features I want to explore with this game is the use of in-character and in-world narration to explain everything about the game, from setting to the actual rules of playing the game. This is why the story is in the second person, because it's supposed to address you as the reader/player/newcomer to the world.

I don't know if/when I'll get to this game idea, but in the meantime, I hope you enjoy this one glimpse into the world of Incunabula: Lore Hunting in the Ruins of the Third World.

Welcome to Kent Square

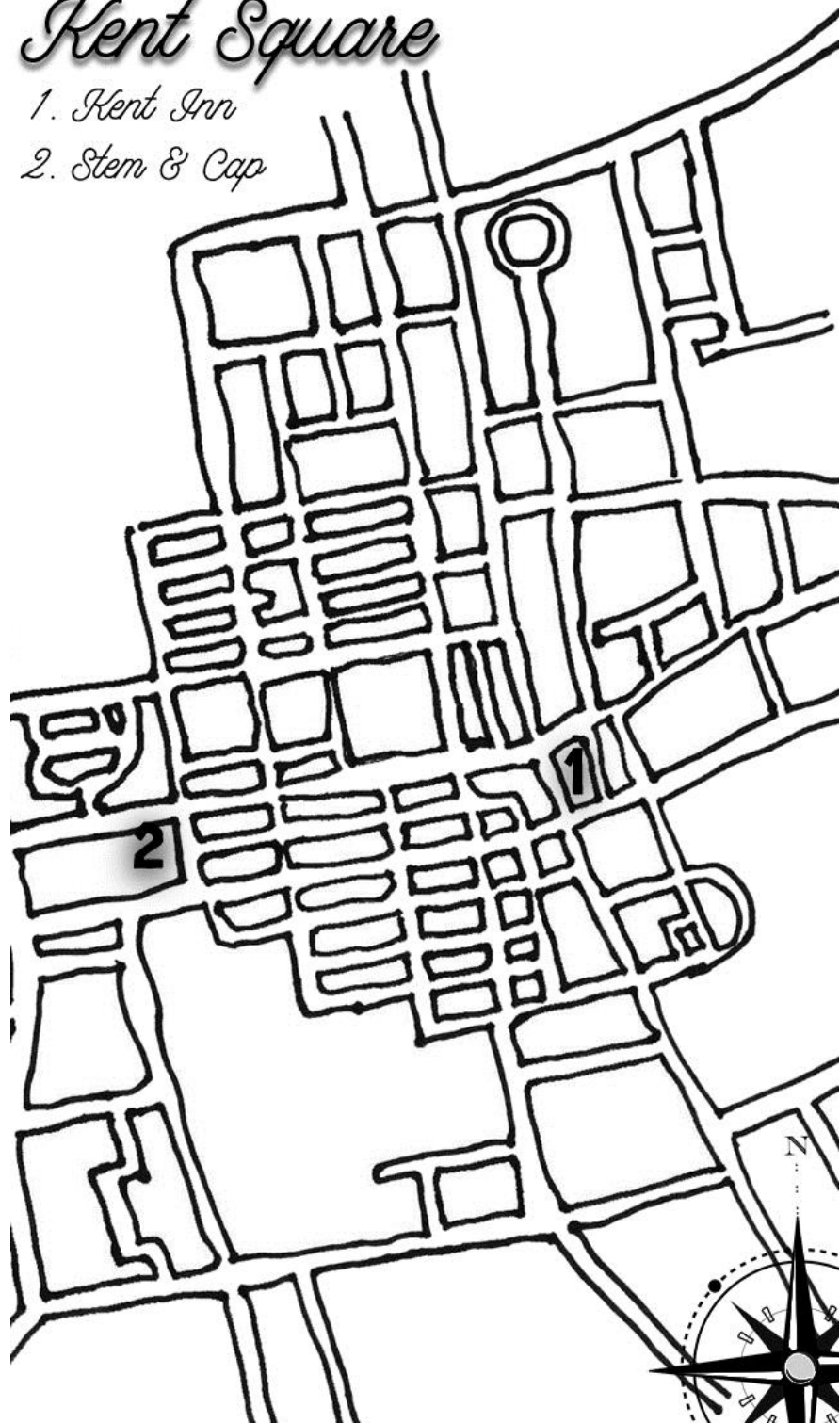
Nestled in the verdant rolling hills near Black Clay Creek, the small and busy town of Kent Square sits at the crossroad between the rich farmlands to the north and the big coastal cities to the south. A small town that belies its economic importance, Kent Square serves as the mercantile hub for the greater Kent township and all the farming operations for miles around. Fiercely holding on to its heritage as a place with a simple way of life where family and friends are the priority, Kent Square is nevertheless marching head on into the future, attracting caravans, prospectors, and adventurers seeking riches and opportunities.¹

Founded a hundred years prior by a group of city folk looking for a quieter alternative to the coastal urban sprawl, the group settled in a valley near the small-yet-navigable Black Clay Creek, finding in the area the characteristic black clay deposits that gave the creek its name, an abundant supply of timber, a natural pass through the hills to the north, as well as a number of caves perfect to be used as temporary dwellings, and as natural cellars after that. The town bloomed quickly, becoming a natural stop on the north-south road, a place where the northern farmers and coastal merchants could conduct business without having to wander too far from home. The area's distinctive mushroom farming also had much to do with the quick development of the town.

Local legend goes that a mysterious traveler passing by paid the town's innkeeper for their room and board with an exotic crop brought in from faraway lands called *hongos*, and that that's how mushroom farming began in Kent Square. While there is a kernel of truth to that tale (and locals neither confirm nor deny which part in particular²), the original settlers did find an abundance of edible fungi in the natural caves when they first arrived, and continued farming both local and exotic mushrooms given the ideal conditions in the caves. It wasn't long before mushrooms became the economic lifeblood of Kent Square, making the little town known to culinary connoisseurs and savvy merchants in the coastal cities in no time. Three of the founding families dominate mushroom production with large growing facilities outside of town supplying the bulk of the export orders, while over two dozen independent growers concentrate on providing fungi for local consumption, as well as growing exotic varieties.

Kent Square

- 1. Kent Inn*
- 2. Stem & Cap*



As beautiful as the landscape in Kent Township is, one of the side effects of mushroom farming are the occasional days of fetor from the decomposing material on which the mushrooms grow. Made from a mixture of animal manure, compost, and decomposing hay, the growing medium for the increasing fungiculture operations sometimes blankets the air with a pungent, earthy scent that can be smelled for miles around, further if it's a windy day.³ Locals are used to it and barely notice it. To those who've been away it is the smell of home, in a manner of speaking.⁴ Newcomers and visitors, however, face a period of adjustment, especially in hot, summer days when the miasma is particularly noxious.

Kent Square's main street runs east-west, leading to the outlying farmsteads and hamlets, while the newly paved north-south road still follows the original dirt path that brought the founding settlers from the south. Kent Square blooms out from the crossroad at the center of town, with the Town Hall, Kent Inn, Chapel of the Holy Sower, and town commons providing the legal, social, economic, and religious center of town life. Smaller streets and alleys branch off the two main thoroughfares, tightly-packed town houses, tenements, and eclectic shops lining the lanes closest to the town's hub, while larger dwellings, communal institutions, and parks both private and public are found towards the periphery.⁵

Kent Inn

The Kent Inn has been welcoming locals and travelers practically since the town was established, growing from a ramshackle building with a stable built atop the hill in the center of town, into an elegant and welcoming four-story establishment with a fancy façade that hides the organized chaos of additions and lean-tos connected by hallways and staircases that grew from that original structure. Founding members of Kent Square, the Stoltz family has owned and operated the inn since the beginning, with Johan and Maria Stoltz being the current innkeepers. Johan⁶ is a natural-born handyman and has worked the inn since he was a lad. He is responsible for much of the recent additions and improvements made, while Maria,⁷ his wife of ten years, takes care of the day-to-day operation, as well as running the famous kitchen. The couple, both in their mid-thirties, have recently announced they are expecting their first child.

The inn has a large open ground floor flanked by a simple stage to the left, a massive fireplace on the far end, and the bar to the right. Tables and chairs usually fill the space in the middle, but the floor can be cleared for performances or other events. A pair of swing-doors behind the bar leads into the kitchen, where Maria directs a small band of cooks and servers into delivering the inn's famously delicious dishes, most of which are her own creation. Mrs Stoltz takes pride in the culinary fare at the inn, and the menu changes with the season, always featuring a variety of local mushrooms. Menu dishes range in price from a copper piece for a simple bowl

of hearty stew,⁸ to several gold pieces for an elaborate meal featuring a sampling of various dishes. Drinks are sourced from local brewers and wineries, as well as brewed in-house, especially the iconic oatmeal stout (known as a “Kent Stout,” “a Kent,” or simply “a pint”) brewed by the Stoltz family since the town’s founding.



A camouflaged door in an alcove near the bar provides discreet access to stairs leading to the guestrooms. The Stoltzes live in a large apartment taking up half the second floor which features direct and secret access to the main inn floor, the kitchen, and the cellar under the inn (and by default, to the tunnels under the town), while the other half is divided into six luxury rooms, each with a private bath-and-privy chamber (featuring fancy new pump-operated indoor plumbing!). The twenty basic rooms in third and fourth floors of the inn are collectively and simply referred to as the “upstairs” because the floors weave one into another and at times it’s hard to tell if someone is on the third or fourth floor. The Stoltzes keep prices affordable for the majority of travelers, with luxury rooms averaging 2 gold pieces a night or 10 gold pieces for a week, and basic rooms ranging from 2 to 5 silver pieces a night, with longer arrangements bargained for individually. Guests receive a key to their room, one meal a day, and a modicum of privacy and security during their stay.

While most carriage and wagon traffic stays at the caravan grounds outside of town, the inn still keeps a stable and wagon garage around the back with enough room for two carriages or up to five wagons, depending on size, as well as space for ten

horses. Johan employs one to two local boys and girls every day to help feed and water the horses, and to keep the place clean, paying them a handsome wage of 2 silver pieces for an afternoon's work,⁹ with a meal included, a practice he learned from his father, and his grandfather before him. If the inn is particularly busy, he brings in extra help to assist Maria inside. At the end of the day, she always sends the kids home with a packed meal for their family, and some homemade candy.¹⁰

The Kent Inn is a lively, though not rowdy, place at pretty much any time of day. On clear days the main doors are left open and the conversation and music spills onto the main street. The inn is very much the town's communal living room, and townsfolk see it as an extension of their own home. Locals drop by regularly to have a drink after a day of work, to meet with friends, and to share meals as a community. Children are always welcomed, and Johan keeps a crate of wooden toys he's made near the bar for their entertainment. Troublemakers are dealt with by townspeople themselves, kindly at first, quite firmly if needed; there's always a member of the watch across the street at Town Hall for those times when the firmest of approaches are needed. Travelers are very common, and in general made to feel welcomed, regardless of who they are or where they come from. Although the Merchant House is the formal business center of town, everyone knows that Maria Stoltz is the source for information about odd jobs, day labor, and adventures of reputable origin (although she also tends to hear about those of less-than-reputable sources as well, though nothing illegal), which ensures a steady flow of skilled and manual laborers, and adventurers seeking fortunes through the inn.¹¹

STEM AND CAP FINE MUSHROOMS

Most people in Kent Square like mushrooms, and many absolutely love them, but no one has a passion for edible fungi like Sebastian Rios, owner of Stem and Cap, the best mushroom store in town, and winner of several awards at the yearly Mushroom Festival.¹² Originally a produce merchant in the city, Sebastian became enamored of the Kent region's mushrooms years ago, and began making monthly trips to town to purchase inventory for his customers. As he got older and the trips began to be more of a chore than a pleasure, Sebastian decided to sell his business and retire to Kent Square, purchasing a town house right on main street at a considerable price. He spent the first ten years in town becoming a self-made mycologist and fungiculturist, learning the town's trade, establishing friendships with all the growers in the township, as well as with all the cooks and chefs making delicious dishes with the town's crop. Five years ago he opened his store on the ground level of his town house, turning all that knowledge and connections into an instantly profitable business that serves both the local community and visitors from the city much like he used to be. A jolly man of fifty who loves to talk, enjoys the

outdoors, and the fine things in life, Sebastian operates the store himself, so he can meet every customer.¹³

Located on main street two buildings down from the Merchant House, Stem and Cap is a three-story townhouse with a simple storefront of whitewashed timber framing two large windows displaying a rotating cast of fresh mushrooms in neatly organized growing boxes, as well as all sorts of jars, bottles, boxes, and baskets full of prepared and preserved comestibles featuring the star crop. Stairs on the side of the building lead to Sebastian's small and lavish home upstairs where he lives alone with his pet dog, Fungi, a beagle he is training to sniff out mushrooms.¹⁴



Inside, the store is divided into a front and back room. The front room occupies two thirds of the ground floor, with shelves lining the walls all around, a square table in the center for displaying special items, and a counter at the back where Sebastian keeps his ledger, some of his books on fungiculture (a few written by him), a scale, and a locked and bolted coin box. The shelves to the left of the store display fresh mushrooms in small one-pound, pre-weighed bins ranging from one silver piece for white-capped *setas*, your basic, everyday cooking mushroom (also available in half-pound bags for 5 coppers), to 5 silver pieces for cremini or *champiñon* in various cap sizes, to one gold piece and higher for more exotic varieties like oyster, porcini, and shiitake.¹⁵ Sebastian sources these from smaller farms in the area which he visits regularly to ensure they continue to meet his exacting standards of quality.

The shelves to the right contain prepared and preserved foods such as pickled and marinated mushrooms in a variety of brines and liquids (the cremini marinated in local red wine are particularly good, only 5 silver pieces for a small jar), dried mushrooms, spreads, pâté, and tapenades. Depending on the time of day, there may be fresh foods from the local stores, like mushroom and rosemary loaves from the bakery right across, to piping-hot pot pies and quiches from Gallivant Pies down the street. Sebastian also keeps some of his more exotic, more expensive mushrooms on display near the back counter where he can weigh them, pack them, and put away payments in the coin box right away. Customers can usually expect Sebastian to have fresh morels or chanterelles (spring and early summer respectively), as well as some black truffles, with a rare, and valuable, white truffle showing up every so often.¹⁶

The back room serves as Sebastian's office and storage, which he likes to keep fastidiously tidy, and has a locked door to the basement, where he grows a few varieties of mushrooms himself, and keeps his expensive wine collection. There is a gate leading to the tunnels running all under Kent Square and into the caves right outside of town which Sebastian keeps locked with at least five different locks.¹⁷

This gazetteer will continue.¹⁸

* * *

Notes:

1. Hello, my name is Marlena Brandywine, itinerant bard and collector of tales. Kent Square is my home, and while the writer of this gazetteer is doing a decent job of describing the place to you, I'd like to be your guide to the ins and outs of this wonderful and unconventional town.
2. Listen, it's a cheap trick to enhance the appeal of our town, and it works, so I'm not going to tell you either.
3. This is absolutely true, and if you're going to spend any length of time in Kent Square, you'll just have to deal with it.
4. Also true.
5. I live in a small third-story apartment in one of the tenements two streets down from Main Street. It's a bit drafty in winter, could use a new coat of paint, but it's reasonably priced and close to the action, a must for a storyteller (and story gatherer) like me.
6. Trained by his father to wield a hammer to building as well as to fight, Johan is a novice warrior, and part of the town's militia. He favors a warhammer and shield in combat, and has an old suit of leather armor that, between us, probably needs to be adjusted, given how well he's been fed by his wife the last ten years. Naturally

strong, he wears a pair of studded leather gauntlets that increase his strength to ogre-like levels. I've seen him both easily lift stacks of lumber that would normally take two to three men to move around, and knock back a ruffian about twenty feet with a single punch.

7. Growing up a young scamp in the city before making her way into the countryside to find a better life, Maria is a rogue with a heart of gold and a gift of gab. Able to talk a snowman into buying a cartful of ice, she now uses her skill with words to run the inn and charm her customers. She's as handy with a knife in the kitchen as she was with a dagger in an alley, and she likes to keep her fingersmithing in shape by playing tricks on her friends and loved ones. She is really the sweetest, and I am so happy she's pregnant, but I'll tell you this: don't ever get on her bad side, or you'll regret it for life.

8. Very popular with the laborers working at the various mushroom farms, who can get a hot, filling meal for very little money.

9. I would work for his father occasionally when I was a child, and they were just as generous then. You have to understand, most laborers at the mushroom farms earn 2 silver pieces a day for a sunrise-to-sunset shift, so Johan's wage for half-a-day's work is a great one for these kids indeed. For many of these children this is a chance to help their parents, and to stay out of trouble. I'm glad Johan and Maria continue this tradition.

10. Maria's marzipan and candied ginger are absolutely divine.

11. While the Merchant House does have listings of work for hire, especially dealing with the merchant caravans coming and going through town, Maria is the undisputed source of the type of work adventurers are looking for, either because she overhears bits and pieces of every conversation at the inn, or because people come to her with information and requests, knowing she'll pass it on to the right candidates. Visiting adventuring parties will quickly be pointed to the inn (possibly even by me), and to Maria, if they're looking for their next adventure.

12. Held yearly as summer comes to a close, the Kent Square Mushroom Festival is a huge affair and arguably *the* social event of the year. We'll talk about the festival more in-depth at some other time.

13. Sebastian is a specialist with vast amounts of knowledge in everything dealing with mushrooms, but he's also well-versed in general information about nature, weather, geography, and even some local history. He's a nice man, if a bit eccentric, and at times fastidiously secretive. He's definitely a shrewd merchant with extensive experience, and he loves the thrill of haggling like a berserker loves a battle. He really does sell the best mushrooms in town.

14. Fungi is really good at finding morels, but I know Sebastian wants the dog to learn to sniff out truffles, because that's where the real money is.

15. All these mushrooms have a hundred different names depending on where you are. Sebastian has practically formalized the names by which they're known in Kent Square, and by definition everywhere our mushrooms are sold, using the most

common name by which the varietal is generally known. That means the mushrooms have names in a variety of languages, but at least when we say morel or champiñon, we all know what kind of fungus we're talking about.

16. Sebastian has been known to organize expeditions to search for white truffles, or to hire adventurers to guard expensive deliveries to and from the store. He knows to go to Maria at the inn whenever he has need for adventurers, but sometimes he may approach individuals himself if they fit the obvious stereotype.

17. We're not going to talk about the tunnels right now, and we're definitely not going to talk about why Sebastian keeps five locks on that gate right now. No, don't try. Not now.

18. And I will be back when it does.

ROLEPLAYING Games as Interactive Fiction

A primary goal I've had guiding this phase of my game design life is creating works that are accessible and appealing to a non-gamer audience. While this objective guided the creation of the goals for my rules system design, I want that accessibility to be expressed beyond only the mechanical parts of the finished work. As I've continued to consider how to best achieve this goal, I've come to realize that one of the biggest hurdles lies in the use of the name for the genre of gaming I'm working with: roleplaying games.

For someone who isn't a gamer, it's a term that must be explained to be understood. Many modern games still include a 'What is an RPG?' section in their core book to aid potential new players. This section, however, is located inside the book, in effect requiring the purchase of the product in order to learn what the product is. And yes, I know that in the era of Google anyone can search for the definition of a roleplaying game, but that means making assumptions about what a customer will do instead of providing them with all the info they need to make a decision in one place.

I work with a lot of non-gamers, and when they ask me about all these games I talk about on my blog, I've been explaining it to them in terms of fiction books. A novel, I tell them, is a work of fiction that is static: the author writes the story, and the reader reads it. These games I talk about, they're like works of fiction that are interactive: the players all collaborate to both create and enjoy the story, a story which, unlike a novel which never changes, can and will be different every time it's told. By reframing roleplaying games as interactive fiction, my non-gamer coworkers have all understood what these games that I like are without the need for elaborate explanations.

I also just like the term. It speaks directly to the collaborative storytelling nature of roleplaying games, brings it to the forefront. The gamemaster becomes the narrator while the players become the protagonists, and together they weave the tale of these characters through their combined adventures, a resolution system providing a mechanism to resolve conflicts and propel the story forward. Adventures become short stories, campaigns transform into anthologies or novels. The language has been there all along.

I'm not into renaming things just to be hip or pedantic. People already immersed in gaming will have no problem with the term roleplaying games, and will continue to use it regardless. But for non-gamers, describing the product as interactive fiction connects it to something everyone can understand and relate to. I may not necessarily use the term for all my gaming projects, but I very much like having it in my toolbox for those works I intend to promote to a wider, mostly non-gamer audience.

Last Christmas

A JAM FOR THE PLAYLIST

“Last Christmas I gave you my heart, but the very next day you gave it away. This year, to save me from tears, I’ll give it to someone special.”

We’ve all heard the classic Christmas song by Wham! about the unlucky lover who lost in love last holiday season and is now ready to give it a try with someone new. But what’s the story behind the song? What exactly happened last Christmas? And how’s it gonna go down this holiday when the lover runs into the ex with their new paramour in hand? George Michael never wrote a song about that part of the story, so it’s up to you to play to find out.

Last Christmas is a Jam for The Playlist, the roleplaying game of soundtracks and feelings. This playset is for a Game Master and one player, based on the song of the same name by George Michael, and includes notes on setting, characters with emotional issues to play through, and song suggestions to build your playlist for the game. You will need a copy of The Playlist, available from DriveThruRPG.com or Itch.io (or as a free download in Issue 01 of this zine).

Setting

Last Christmas is set right here and right now. Set your game in your own city to make it relevant to the players, feature well-known places for the characters to visit and interact with.

Or, you know what, set it any place you want. Fantasy kingdom? Why not. In a space station? Go for it. In the middle of a zombie apocalypse? Hey, figuring out love at such a time is most essential. If the setting has Christmas, or some sort of holiday celebration, you could absolutely swing it.

Characters

Each character has a description, an emotional issue, a Bonus, and a Drawback, as well as suggestions for their Theme Song. In Last Christmas, The Lover is the protagonist, while The Ex and The Paramour are non-player characters for the Game Master to play. Or maybe there’s no defined Game Master per se, and each player GMs for the other!

THE LOVER - Last Christmas they gave their heart and it didn't go that well. This holiday season they seem to have a chance at new happiness in love... and then they run into the Ex.

Emotional Issue: The Lover is still reeling from whatever happened with the Ex, but do they still feel something for them? The Lover has a new Paramour; will they end up together this Christmas?

Bonus: The Lover may Skip twice per conflict.

Drawback: The Lover must concede any conflict in which another character uses their theme song.

Theme Song: Last Christmas by Wham!

THE EX - Last Christmas they got a declaration of love, but why didn't it go well? It's been a year since, a brand new story unfolds... then they run into the Lover once again, hand-in-hand with their new Paramour.

Emotional Issue: Discover what happened last Christmas with the Lover. Was it enough to erase all feelings they had for each other? Is it over or is there something there? And what about this new Paramour?

Bonus: The Ex can declare their Theme Song at any point during play. Once chosen, it may not be changed.

Drawback: The Ex may only use one Skip per conflict, even during the Finale.

Theme Song: see Bonus.

THE PARAMOUR - They just started seeing the Lover this holiday season, having a nice time, but what's the story here with this other person they just ran into?

Emotional Issue: Make a stand for themselves!

Bonus: The Paramour can cancel another character's Skip once per conflict.

Drawback: The Paramour can be brought into a conflict by any character.

Theme Song: None. And all.

Playing the Game

Set up an Opening Scene as usual to introduce the characters, setting, and situation, the foundation from which you'll build an awesome holiday melodrama of jilted lovers, fated reunions, and dare we say, second chances?

Play through the Middle Scenes as usual, with a recommended three scenes to keep the story focused and on track. Use the song to guide you in setting these scenes up; the lyrics to Last Christmas tell a story of two former lovers meeting again and all the feelings that dredges up, so you could follow that same progression in three parts. That said, feel free to explore moments only hinted at in the lyrics, perhaps what actually happened last Christmas, maybe a possible rekindling of passions that

leaves the paramour out in the cold, or maybe how the paramour turns the whole thing on its head and starts calling the shots!

Go all out for the Finale, and bring this catchy song-turned-game to a conclusion based on how your story of Last Christmas has developed. Crank up the volume, play that magical song, and let's see what THIS Christmas brings our characters. Make George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley proud.

Playlist Suggestions

Last Christmas by Wham! (Obviously)

Pick holiday classics old and new to populate your playlist to make your game truly Christmassy. Keep in mind ultimately Last Christmas is about a romantic relationship, so maybe go for songs like Underneath the Tree by Kelly Clarkson, All I Want (For Christmas) by Mariah Carey, You Make It Feel Like Christmas by Gwen Stefani feat. Blake Shelton, or Baby It's Cold Outside by Idina Menzel and Michael Buble. Different versions by different artists may highlight particular feelings or moods, so experiment.

You can also build your playlist out of regular songs that run the emotional gamut of a relationship, giving the game a great chance at taking this story in new directions, with Last Christmas by Wham! providing the special holiday anchor.

And for that truly extra-special game, populate your playlist only with covers of Last Christmas! There are a ton of versions, each with its own energy and style, telling a similar yet unique story. It's madness, but fun madness. Check out this playlist on Spotify with 100 version of Last Christmas, including the original: <https://tinyurl.com/LastChristmas100>.

Have fun and happy Christmas!

Epilogue

I had my moments of doubt while putting this issue together (shoo impostor syndrome!), but I'm excited by the final result. I think this issue shows everything that's possible with a zine, and stands as an example of the type of content you can expect in the future. May your dice always roll well. Have fun!

106 WONDROUS HOLIDAY TREASURES

1. A small piece of thick paper folded in half with a beautiful illustration of an evergreen decorated with colored globes and candles. A message of friendship, happiness, and goodwill is written inside in the reader's language. When the card is gifted in a spirit of friendship and kindness, it grants the giver a small Charisma bonus to all interactions with the receiver for a short period of time.
2. A straw-filled chest with a dozen glass globes roughly the size of an apple. The globes shine with an inner light in a kaleidoscope of colors, and each has a small metal hook at the top so they can be hung on a traditional holiday evergreen. Speaking the command word, *chroma*, allows the owner to control the color of the globes in a variety of ways.
3. A red and gold ribbon with six round jingle bells sewn in. When played, their joyful, jingly sound can be heard up to a hundred feet away, creating the effect of a *calm emotions* spell once per day.
4. A plush red velvet stocking cap with a brim and pompom of snow-white fur. When worn by person who is good and pure of heart, the hat grants the continuous ability to tell who is naughty (*detect evil*) or nice (*detect good*), as well as who tells the truth and who lies (as a *zone of truth*). The hat also keeps the wearer warm in the cold.
5. A small water-filled globe of glass enclosing a miniature sculpture of an idyllic winter forest. When shaken, white particles float in the water creating the illusion of snow. Once per day, when the globe is shaken, magical snow falls for a few minutes in a ten-foot radius around the owner, regardless of location or weather.
6. A large knitted stocking much like the ones hung on mantelpieces during the holidays. Once per day, the stocking can produce a small pile of sweets and candies, such as chocolate bonbons, marzipan, candied fruits, or mint candy canes.





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