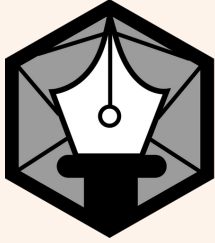# The Journal of Dungeoneering for Hip and Attractive Professionals

The Journal of Dungeoneering
for Hip and Attractive Professionals

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS
UPON THE PUBLICATION OF OUR
SECOND ISSUE

When we first envisioned what this journal would look like, we dreamed that it would be a place where literature, analysis of tabletop roleplaying games, and fashion could intersect in effective, engaging ways.

Well, we got that in this issue, for sure.

We also gathered an amazing community of people who believe in this project and who want to share their successes, their failures, and their journeys in tabletop roleplaying game culture. Our first issue dropped in March 2021, after two years of hard work—and the reception was mind boggling.

This second issue touches on some deeper challenges. Throughout the 2020-2021 pandemic, folks had to adapt their play styles to accommodate virtual play, since we could no longer safely be in the same room. We learned how to use virtual tabletops like Roll20 and Foundry, and along the way, we learned a little bit more than the practical, too.

Throughout this volume, a theme emerges: Roleplaying games have always offered ways for players to express themselves creatively, but that sense has magnified a hundredfold as we navigated ways of interacting with each other in the virtual world. And some of us have spent the better part of the last year focused on throwing our energy into social justice initiatives and bringing that part of ourselves to the fore.

In short, we've all grown a lot.

Thank you for reading, and thank you for letting us borrow some of your brain space at least for a little while.

Stay fashionable,

Elizabeth Parsons
Alex G. Friedman
Editors

Advice from Felix

You can send letters to Felix the Flumph at

editors.jod4hap@protonmail.com.

Use "Dear Felix" in the subject line. Ask anything you like, but this column will focus on resolving awkward situations around the gaming table.

Felix the Flumph, CR1 Aberration

Hey gang!

It's time for my advice column! First point of advice this issue, as in every issue, is to please tell everyone you know about the *eldritch horrors* waiting for you just beyond the veil of sleep. They're really bad. You should get your friends and practice lucid dreaming together so that you can locate each other in the Astral Expanse and become dream warriors. It's your only chance to save reality! Anyhoo, enough of that, let's get to the letter pile…

Hi there Felix,

I was asked to send my "dilemma" over your way.

The Paladin player in the campaign I'm running got bit by a wererat and failed his constitution save and became cursed with wererat lycanthropy. May have been poor planning on my part while following the

adventure (it's my first time DMing). Now he's loving the immunities, but hates that it's a rat and evil and is trying to talk me into letting him become a werebear because it's good aligned.

Now, I'm not completely opposed to the idea, but I have zero intentions on allowing him the immunities and just gifting him the werebear lycanthropy for no reason. He's already in the process of finding a cure for the wererat lycanthropy and I adjusted the NPC that gave him the info on the cure to actually be a werebear in secret. I was planning on having the final secret ingredient be some of the Paladin's blood, drawn from the bite of the werebear NPC, causing a weaker werebear lycanthropy curse, but I feel like I need to present some sort of test that the paladin needs to pass I order for the lycanthropy to happen. He wouldn't know outright about becoming a werebear lycanthrope because it would be a slow onset.

Thoughts on what I might be able to present as a test of worthiness for the NPC to decide to pass on the curse? The party has already rescued her before so she knows that he's not a total arse, but I definitely feel like there needs to be more.

The paladin is lawful neutral, if that matters at all.

Thank you for your consideration,
SneakAttackJak

Hi there SneakAttackJak!

Wow, you and your player really dug yourselves a dungeon-sized hole to crawl your way out of! No worries, I'm here to help. I consulted my brood of friendly flumph game masters (there are thousands of us watching your culture flounder, lol) and they had some THOUGHTS.

First, from a philosophical perspective, we caution you against granting your players a boon when you were trying to provide a challenge. It sounds like you were trying to YES-AND

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with your player. That's good! But you might be diverting them from a better time by being too eager to help them with what should be a really fun challenge.

Lycanthropy can be a really fun way to challenge your players at lower levels. It can force players to find help in a situation where they are two or even six levels out of their depth. You're obviously considering this; having them seek out a werebear NPC is in the right ballpark for how to handle the situation. Yet y'all seem to be getting ahead of yourselves! A LN paladin suddenly confronted with the curse should have to deal with the curse as written. This will vary from edition to edition, but generally speaking, the player should be confronted with the monstrosity of the curse at least a few times. This will challenge the other players at your table to creatively neutralize the paladin-rat as a threat. That's a lot of fun! It's in the books for a good reason!

Now, when presenting your player with a way to lift the curse, you want to make it feel like its own sub-quest. Maybe a dryad (who is very dangerous and difficult to find; finding her could be a whole session) will lift the curse in exchange for one of her own curses? The paladin must plant a tree, every week, without fail, for the rest of his life! Should he fail? The wererat curse returns, and the paladin is turned to wood during the day. Sounds harsh, but it's the sort of curse that could be lifted magically around 8th or 10th level. So it builds character!

But exchanging rat power for bear power? Werebear curses are one of the "secret menu" of pretty good curses to have in roleplaying games (although so is wererat if you play it right). Every GM I consulted was against giving your player werebear powers as a part of this solution. A paladin should refuse any curse that would influence their alignment.

If your player is more set on becoming a werebear than being a paladin, you could give them the werebear curse in a way similar to your description, but at the cost of their paladin powers. Now they can re-spec and make some interesting character roleplay choices. Just make sure it doesn't eat into the fun of lifting the initial wererat curse.

Hope that helps! ℰ

Interviews

An Interview with Quinn Murphy

Freelance TTRPG Designer and GM

Quinn Murphy is a longtime industry freelancer who is presently emerging as an influential voice in adventure and encounter design. We caught up with Quinn this summer over discord to talk with him about his latest projects and musings. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Alex G. Friedman: Quinn, why don't you introduce yourself?

Quinn Murphy: My name is Quinn Murphy, I'm a tech nerd by day and a game designer… Well I would say by night, but really it's just like, all the time.

AF: Well, you get paid for it, so…

QM: Yeah, right, I do get paid for it. It's like blurred lines. I feel like I've had these two careers so long, they're always happening simultaneously. My gaming stuff is informed by my tech nerd stuff, and my tech nerd stuff is informed by my gaming. I've been doing freelance off and on for a little over a decade now. I've been doing roleplaying for like 30 years. I got my kickoff during 4th edition D&D. I wrote a site called At Will, where we specialized in homebrew 4th edition stuff. I did a lot of stuff with skill challenges, which was different from how Wizards of the Coast (WoTC) was doing it. I designed monsters and new rules and different ways to use the 4th edition rules. I transitioned to other games from there.

These days… I took a few years off to deal with a case of "wild life" and have come back in the last like, six or seven months or so and have been working for stuff like the Ultimate Micro RPG book, I had one in there. I've been working a lot with Paizo these days, but also recently working with *Sig: City of Blades*. I wrote the adventures in there, and that's actually out now, so that's really exciting. It's like *Planescape* meets *Blades in the Dark*. Jason Pitre had written the game, which was set in an interplanar metropolis. *City of Blades* is about the underbelly of that big city.

When *Dragon* went digital, I got published on their blog. I wasn't in *Dragon* magazine, but I did get published in Kobold Press a couple times.

> *My gaming stuff is informed by my tech nerd stuff, and my tech nerd stuff is informed by my gaming.*

AF: **Yeah, Kobold's great. They just had the big bestiary come out for 5th edition, great book. Couple ice breakers here: What is your favorite kind of NPC?**

QM: I like NPCs that are loveable trouble. Every time the player sees them, they know something's about to go wrong, but they are really fun, so bring it on. Characters who are problematic but are also loveable.

E:lizabeth Parsons You can hear your players groaning in the background but also they're like "Well, we knew this was coming."

QM: Right, and if you took them away, and have them leave, your players are like "No-no-no, come back!"

AF: What player class would you be?

QM: Like, real life me? Um. I'm gonna be like, I feel like I'm cheating or breaking the fourth wall here, but it has to be Investigator.

AF: Cool.

QM: Because the iconic Investigator's name is actually Quinn. He's an older Black gentleman.

EP: That's not cheating, that's pretty legit.

QM: But also the Investigator is my favorite class. What I love about the investigator is like, "ah, here's something." Its balance is interrogating the fiction.

AF: Page 54 of the APG.

QM: In 2nd edition, the Investigator has some of my favorite mechanics, because they're very meta. I love it for the reason that some people might hate it. There's one feat that's just like, what's wrong here? "That's odd." You walk into a room and you're like "That's odd. GM, tell me what's wrong here." What's wrong with this picture, right? And it's such a great thing. As a GM, I am sorely missing having an Investigator on one of my teams, because I love having that kind of thing to run with.

> *I love it for the reason that some people might hate it.*

I like when players get to interrogate the world and establish fiction; it creates this cool thing where they get to author the world. Because when you ask, "Hey, what's wrong with this thing?" Well, now, fictionally, I have to explain it to you, and it adds that little detail into the world. Even if it's like, well, it's a fine crystal from here, but otherwise harmless. We've established bits of the world and it feels a touch more real.

> *We've established bits of the world and it feels a touch more real.*

EP: Reminds me of when I was writing my early fiction, you would take it to someone and say "Please read my story!" They would say, "Okay, why is this happening in your world, and why is this happening, and you have to make up something on the fly. And that's what you're doing as a GM. You're establishing that fiction. You can't just be like "IDK"

QM: You're allowed to do that. But then it flattens your world. The things I live for as a DM are those moments when both the player and I are kind of surprised. Where they're like, I'm going to go off the beaten path and go into the brambles. And you're like, "What is the brambles? Huh. I guess this is in the brambles." And I find when I'm making stuff up on the fly, and improvising, stuff comes out of my brain that's even surprising to me. And I'm like, Oh this is great. And we're all along for the ride. I love that feeling.

AF: I first encountered your work in "Archaeology at Aspenthar," and as a player who played it in Organized Play, boy did that Alchemical Golem whip us. That was a memorable fight. It basically came down to... Everybody was down except my cleric and the party's ranger. I had to cast "magic weapon" on him. And we had to outmaneuver him. That was great. Tense time.

QM: How did you do on the climb down?

AF: The climb wasn't so bad, because we were all lighter characters with high Athletics scores. Could have been rough if we had a wizard along.

So how did you pitch that story? What went into writing it?

QM: Sure. Well, with a lot of the Society stuff, they'll usually have the "frame" for what things they want in it, and you sort of flesh it out, with characters, with the flow. You have a rough outline of it, but you're sort of sculpting how we're gonna get there and things like that. That was the first thing I had written with Paizo. I spent a lot of time researching the people of the area, so I could write interesting characters. Then the Alchemical Golem seemed like a really cool monster. Obviously it's an extremely leveled down Alchemical Golem. But I like monsters that aren't just mechanically like, I just have a really high Armor Class. That'll get the job done when you just want to beat players up, but when it's dealing different conditions, and it's got all these different points of articulation and interaction...

A sort of a maxim that I have, when I design encounters and monsters, is that I design always for interest first. Challenge is a thing that I almost don't think about. Especially in

Pathfinder 2nd edition, the encounter-building rules are really tight. If you build to budget, you'll get what it says on the tin. If you want to possibly TPK your party, give them a Severe. If you want to GUARANTEE a TPK, give them an Extreme. That's it! And so, you build the encounter to taste, then really what you want to do is think: Will they remember this?

A sort of a maxim that I have, when I design encounters and monsters, is that I design always for interest first. Challenge is a thing that I almost don't think about.

I've had challenging encounters that went really lopsided for the players because from the outset they roll a couple of critical hits–incredible damage. With dice, challenge just ebbs and flows. But let's say all the dice go wrong–will the characters remember the fight? And something like the Alchemical Golem was cool because it has all these chemical weapons, effects it can inflict. The chance that you're not gonna remember having fought that thing is Zero.

AF: As we've demonstrated tonight, yeah!

We were going to ask you about chasing interest in encounters, because you were tweeting about that earlier, so I'm glad that's on your mind.

Moving on to some of the other stuff you've got with Paizo...

QM: I contributed to the backmatter for the second *Abomination Vaults*, the Fleshwarp article. And two monsters in Bestiary 3, Shabti and Sumbreiva. I have a couple other ones I can't talk about yet. My big thing last year was to do the second volume in the *Strength of Thousands* AP. I was an author for the second adventure in the adventure path. That was monstrous. Lots of writing.

I never! My largest piece up until then had been about 12,000 words on one assignment. Twelve thousand words! And that was pretty challenging. But doing that AP was about 40,000 words, just the main adventure.

EP: That's an entire novel!

QM: Yeah! And while you're doing it, you're creating monster entries, making maps—you don't have to go crazy with maps, they have cartographers for that—but the design! You have to work with mechanics and ACs (armor classes). The first parts of it were super challenging, because you're just trying to make progress. And sometimes, like, in the early part of it, I would think, 'Okay. I'm gonna go get X amount of words done, right? I'm gonna get 500 words done.'

EP: We've all been there.

AF: Yeah.

QM: And I'm gonna get 150 words in and then, "Oh yeah, crap, I need a monster entry. Hmmm. Okay, so, let me go design a monster." And the monster is maybe 100 words or so, 150 words. But mentally, it's like you wrote four or five times that. Because you're trying to juggle numbers, and then that kills your writing for the night. You're done for the night. So you get out of pace with it.

What was awesome for me was that it forced me to work through it. You know, because I have a day job, it's not like I could spend all day writing. I have time to spend with my partner, time to spend with my son, right? And so I had to really be strategic about how I was going to use my time and it forced me to develop a really good process for game writing, specifically. I broke down mechanical work. Anytime I got to something

mechanical, I'd flag it and put it on a separate list. Cool, that's a mechanic, pin this thing. And then I would break out narrative writing, and I would build out mechanics in a separate session. So I would do a morning session for like an hour or two and then a night session for an hour or two. I honed my process. I needed to! Because otherwise, I wasn't gonna get it done. It was like 40,000 words in about three months.

I had to really be strategic about how I was going to use my time and it forced me to develop a really good process for game writing, specifically.

AF&EP: (sounds of sympathy from interviewers)

QM: It was intense, but it was great. I look forward to hopefully doing it again. To apply from the start everything that I learned and do an even better job.

EP: How did that job come about? Did you apply to do that writing or were you commissioned to do it?

QM: I think they asked me to do that one, after I had done some stuff. They were pretty happy with my previous work. And I have a lot of experience in the field before even writing for Paizo. And so they asked me if I wanted to take it on, and I thought, yeah, sure do.

EP: That's a great opportunity, yeah.

AF: Yeah, that's a huge honor to be asked to write an entire AP volume.

QM: Yeah, it was a great honor. And you know, for me, it was a great honor to be asked to write for *The Strength of Thousands* theme set in The Mwangi Expanse. For me personally, it's the kind of setting—very Afro-centric fantasy setting—that I had been wanting to write for and see from a major publisher for a very long time, and to be asked to write... you know, I didn't get to write for the main Mwangi Expanse setting book, but writing for the adventure set there was really incredible. So I was really excited about that.

AF: That setting book is said to be really great too, I can't wait to see that. Particularly in this edition, Paizo has done so much work on making the Mwangi Expanse bigger than just the one Heart of the Jungle expansion we got in 1st edition, and really, like you said, they've made an Afro-centric setting for Golarion, which is really cool. Can't wait for that book. The art that I've seen so far has just been great.

QM: Yeah, it's gorgeous, it's gonna be so good.

AF: Can we talk a little bit about Bestiary 3?

QM: Sure!

AF: So what can you tell us about your monster design philosophy?

QM: So, recapping first, building for interest instead of challenge, right? Because you don't control dice, right? What you can control and influence are having things that your players can react to and have fun with. I think the thing that helped me design monsters the best was back in 4th edition D&D days, I had built these things called Worldbreaker monsters. And they were like

these big unique legendary monsters.

AF: *Kind of like, kaiju sort of things?*

QM: Well, no, the influence there was I was watching someone play *World of Warcraft*, a raid boss, and at the time I was looking at it, and I was like, I am really, as a tabletop player, really jealous of this raid boss. Because there's all these like, shifting strategies, right? You'd be fighting the monster and then all of a sudden, boom! The whole scene would change, it would blow everything up; the whole stage that you're fighting on would change. And so I thought, I'm going to do that in tabletop. So I worked on this concept of making monsters that would sort of trigger and change the scene.

AF: *Are you talking about lair actions?*

QM: So this was long before lair actions, actually. Technically, I was first!

AF: *Okay, that's cool.*

QM: Not that anybody at WoTC was paying attention to what I did! But I did do this back in 4th edition, long before 5th. When the monster hit a certain HP level and got bloodied, it would trigger a special action. The first one I did was called *Etherkai*, and it was a nightmare dragon. When it went into its special mode, it would create these nightmare wells and reach into your nightmares and create nightmare soldiers out of them. Players could interact with the nightmare while they're fighting. And there are different kinds of skill challenges and all this other stuff that you could do within that mode.

Playtesting that, and releasing it, I would hear stuff like, "Oh my god, we fought Etherkai and he wiped our whole party." But they would be like: "He wiped our whole party, and it was awesome! It was a great fight." Because they'd talk about nightmare things coming out, and you hear these tales, and I was like, oh my god! If you're happy getting wiped out, I think I did a good job there! Thumbs up! I'd also hear ones where people would be like, "Yeah, our party killed it in 3 rounds," but they thought it was so cool, right? That was sort of what helped shape my maxim. I would hear both ends of the spectrum.

"Oh my god, we fought Etherkai and he wiped our whole party." But they would be like: "He wiped our whole party, and it was awesome! It was a great fight."

That was sort of the influence, and one of the things that shaped my thinking was having these points of interaction. It's one thing to have stats and your armor class. But have a point with your monster where it's going to do a special thing, and give your players the ability to do something about it.

You can see it in actually quite a few of the APs. There will be boss characters, and they'll sometimes come with an action that players can take, like for example, try to convince this person. Spend two actions trying to convince this person that they're wrong. And then you can make a diplomacy check. *Pathfinder* 2nd edition's design works really well with this philosophy, because it's action-based, and since all actions are equal, you're not trying to spend a move action to talk, or spend a standard action to fight like you would in 1e. Second edition is pretty fluid.

AF: It's another part of that design philosophy that gets characters away from just doing full attack actions. It's always wiser to spend a third action doing something interesting, which that kind of design really speaks to.

EP: Writing for memorability and for interest, that to me seems like the throughline to your work.

AF: Yeah, like having to do skill checks to counteract the nightmare, that's a story within a fight.

EP: I wanna play that fight. Right now.

QM: I'm a huge shonen nerd. And one of the things I love about shonen manga and anime is the way that… You'll often hear in tabletop —"I don't want too much combat in my game, I want more story." But what I love about shonen is that combat can *be* story. People will fight for like ten episodes, and like live out half their lives in the middle of one fight, right? It's laughter, it's sadness, it's my past colliding with my future, it's, "How could you betray me when we were five years old?? Aaaahhh." Clashing of powers! And it doesn't need to be that overwrought, but I feel like fights can and should have narrative. Create flow and sense and meaning within it, until the fight's over.

EP: That dovetails into one of the questions we have here, which is to talk about anime influences in your writing.

AF: You've talked before in your social media about how you try to incorporate anime into RPGs. Hyper-emotion?

The major arcs of these stories tend to be about feelers experiencing being vulnerable to the world and actors stepping in on their behalf.

QM: The TL;DR explanation of hyper-emotion is when a cry becomes a punch. The longer explanation is, when you see, especially in shonen anime, there is a style of storytelling where you have a community of two types of people: actors and feelers. Feelers tend to be weaker characters (not

always, everybody has some actor and feeler in them). People who, because they are vulnerable to the world, can experience the world and feel it deeply, right? And actors are hardened against the world but are powerful. And the major arcs of these stories tend to be about feelers experiencing being vulnerable to the world and actors stepping in on their behalf, and ultimately sort of climaxing into these moments where an actor, with all the energy of those feelers, has this big eruptive moment, like Goku going, *"You can't hurt my friends anymore!"* Or Naruto is legendary for that, *"I'm here for my friends!"* *"How could you betray this person who loves you?"* And then they have this big release of power. It's about finding, mastering, and releasing those emotions that are the true narrative arc underneath all the powers and fighting moves. They're these narratives of communities.

AF: *Jack Berkenstock (interviewed in issue 1) would love that idea. His work includes using RPG play to help people become better emotional communicators.*

EP: *What was your experience writing for Paizo and writing in the Golarion setting, versus playing it?*

QM: Golarion is delightfully weird in a good way—just strange enough to feel real. I feel like the problem with a lot of fantasy worlds is they try so hard to be like, sensible. But as anybody experiencing real life will tell you—the real world is not often that sensible. And when things are a bit weird, you think, okay, I feel at home here.

AF: *That's a cool way to put it.*

QM: I'll just use a Golarion example. Hellknights, right? Hellknights are so dumb

they feel real, right? Imagine someone like the Hellknights. "Hey, you know who has really great laws? Devils! Let's emulate hell!" They have these great tensions, they're trying to do what they think is right, but it's like, "Guys, do you understand what you're doing?" Because they really don't! I am fascinated by the Hellknights, because that weirdness of them makes them feel cool and like they would exist.

AF: *A lot of your comments got me thinking about how weird and yet approachable some of the creatures in the new ancestry guide were. Golarion is one of my favorite settings.*

QM: It's a fantastic setting. My writing for them has hooked me on Golarion, so I use it in my games a lot. Then, when I GM *Pathfinder*, I love to experiment and try new things. There's a lot of new stuff that I would never even try to put on a developer for *Pathfinder*. Especially if you're doing an official release, you need to keep within bounds. When I GM games, I get to push limits really hard—because it's not getting published, it's for my players, and as long as they're having fun, we're good.

AF: What projects do you have coming out that you can tell us about? Where can we find the work that you're most proud of? And where do you want to be found online?

QM: Stuff I am working on right now: I just turned in my first work for *Starfinder*. I also love *Starfinder*. I want to be playing and writing more for *Starfinder*. That's going to be in a society adventure that's coming out in a bit. I've been working on rules for solo play. It's really one-on-one play. I made it with my son. I wanted to make it be a simple thing of playing *Pathfinder*, so I didn't have to make too many rules. I want to be able to play in AP with just one other player.

My adventures are in *Sig: City of Blades*. I did three really cool adventures in that. I did some consultant work in *Hard Wired Island* (a cyberpunk themed TTRPG on Itch.io).

Follow Quinn:

Blog: ThoughtCrimeGames
Twitter: qh_murphy

Artwork by Sita Duncan

An Interview with Logan Bonner

Lead Designer for Pathfinder at Paizo, Inc.

Logan Bonner is an industry veteran. We asked Logan to share some thoughts about his career and his independent expansion for Pathfinder 2nd edition, The Pnoll: An Ancestry. *Sita Duncan graciously provided Pnoll art for this piece. This interview has been edited for clarity.*

Question: Please introduce yourself to our readers, along with some of your contributions to TTRPGs?

LB: Hi! I'm Logan Bonner, currently the Pathfinder Lead Designer at Paizo Inc. I've been at Paizo for a while as an editor, developer, and designer, and previously worked full time at Wizards of the Coast in the late 3.5 into 4th Edition era. I've also worked on other RPGs: Spectaculars, Mistborn Adventure Game, Marvel Heroic Roleplaying, and a ton more.

What character class do you most identify with?

Probably the bard. A lot of performance at the game table, studying bizarre things nobody else needs to worry about, and all that.
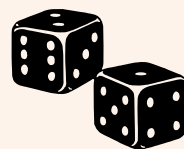
Tell us a bit about your background, and your journey to get to where you are now in the industry.

I'm originally from Kansas, and got into TTRPGs in college when I was pursuing a Fine Arts degree with an English minor. I got pretty lucky and got a job on D&D from applying cold to an editing job and doing well on the test! After some time there, I did several years of full-time freelance. That was exhausting, and I was happy to take something full time at Paizo. My former coworker Stephen Radney-MacFarland was there at the time, and recommended me for an open editing job. Since then, it's been mostly Paizo stuff, with the occasional project I can fit in outside of work hours.

Tell us about your work at Paizo.

I'm the Pathfinder Lead Designer, meaning I keep a general overview of the rules coming into the game to make sure we're keeping things in line with the base rules of the game, introducing new concepts at the right time and in the right books, and that sort of thing. Most of my job is putting together new books in the Rulebook line and doing development passes over the text for them.

The pnolls (puh-nols) seem to have been well received! We picked up our copy as soon as it dropped, and they have generated a lot of fan art on social media. Tell us about your work on The pnoll: an Ancestry for Pathfinder 2nd Edition.

The pnolls came out of a conversation about possum people on social media. I ended up drawing a possum person on my iPad, and eventually settled into the idea of turning it into a small, fun thing I could publish.

You included many references to actual Virginia Opossum biology in the supplement. What interesting 'possum facts' did you learn in the process?

It's weird, because so often with concepts based on real-world things like this it's more important to meet people's expectations rather than be strictly accurate. So you learn a lot that you don't necessarily use. Their newborns are peanut-sized and once born need to crawl to the pouch to go inside and find a teat. Not a whole lot of application of that for an adventurer!

Did you come up with the "puh-nol" pronunciation before or after you came up win the brilliant "pnolltimate sacrifice" ability?

I think they came about together. I was probably going back on forth on what wordplay would work depending on the pronunciation. I ended up picking "puh-nol" since it would allow for the roleplaying tidbit of correcting pronunciation, and would also make pnolls and gnolls clearly different since games so often need to convey information verbally.

i do CRIME

SITA DUNCAN

Artwork by Sita Duncan

Proceeds from the pnoll go toward the Black Trans Advocacy Coalition, who have done some great work dispersing resources and funds to the Black Trans community and have even joined the congressional fight for the Equality Act. What drew you to support them with your independent work?

Trans rights were under attack at that particular moment, something that's unfortunately so frequent that I don't remember who was behind it at that particular moment. I'd seen a friend run a fundraiser for this group shortly before, so I had them in mind.

Plug any projects you are working on now.

Right now we're finishing up work on *Secrets of Magic* for *Pathfinder* 2nd Edition. It's a very exciting book, with a fun take on rules, lore, and presentation. Looking forward to people seeing it! ☯

Read more about the Pnolls:

The Pnoll: An Ancestry

Short Fiction

Cooking With the Cosmos

ALYSSA AMSBAUGH

Jiamia   #001-A   Seared "Fish" with Cream Sauce

- 2 Jiamia root vegetables
- 8 lbs Jiamia mystery meat
- 1 cup Jiamia seeds
- 1 cup whipping cream

1. Remove skin from Jiamia mystery meat. Sear on medium heat, five minutes each side
2. Julienne Jiamia root vegetables for side dish. Saute on low heat for eight minutes
3. Boil one cup heavy whipping cream on medium heat. Add in finely chopped Jiamia seeds and continue cooking for additional four minutes, stirring frequently
4. Plate seared meat and drizzle with sauce

This is a nightmare. I'm hopelessly lost in a kitchen without holoplatter tech. I've had to remind the captain *multiple times* that I'm blind, and on top of that, I've never heard of any of these ingredients before. I don't have any recipes, or any familiarity with these foods. I don't even know what planet we're on—I think Jiamia?

I've lost count of how many times I bumped into the counters. Lucky for me, this kitchen is at least equipped with a hot cooktop proximity sensor—it's definitely saved me from some burns. One of the other kitchen workers had to basically lay all the utensils out in front of me because I couldn't find anything.

It was embarrassing to be supervised while I was working, especially with how long it took me to get my bearings. The kitchen worker provided me with a meat, and its texture reminds me of fish. The skin was thick and scaly—took forever to get it off. It seared nicely, had almost an herbal smell to it.

Tried to saute some local root vegetables as a side… big mistake. As soon as I cut into one, I was assaulted by a terrible odor. It overwhelmed the kitchen completely. The smell faded a bit as it cooked out, but it lingered in the taste. I whisked up a sauce with some cream and seeds. It added a great earthiness to the dish, but couldn't save it from the horrible aftertaste.

The crew complained the whole night about the horrible new chef. Nobody really wants to talk to me, so I found my way to my sleeping quarters. Not much to do when you're a hostage on a rebel ship… I hope I can impress the crew tomorrow, or who knows what they'll do to me. It's not like I'm particularly helpful outside the kitchen. Oh, what I wouldn't give to be back in the Embassy kitchen again.

Rating: 0/5

Jiamia   #001-B   Jiamia-style Barbecue Prime Ribs

- 10 lbs pork spare ribs
- 1 clove fennel
- 4 lemons, sliced
- 2 tbsp paprika
- 1 tbsp pepper
- Barbecue sauce
- 16 stalks asparagus
- 1 cup federseeds
- 1 lb blowstome

1. Mix up barbecue sauce recipe
2. Mix up fennel, paprika, and pepper and dry-rub ribs. Place pork spare ribs on oven grill. Make sure flavor diffuser is ON and set to DISPERSE
3. Slice up lemons to quarter-inch thick slices with calchoppers. Top ribs with sliced lemon
4. Cook ribs at 200 C for two hours
5. Lightly roast federseeds at 200 C for ten minutes; sprinkle over ribs
6. Grill asparagus for ten minutes. Drizzle with extra barbecue sauce and roasted lemon juice
7. Remove excess skin from blowstome and cube. Place in jerkinator until dried. Sprinkle atop asparagus

I convinced the kitchen workers that I needed more time to familiarize myself here and that I didn't need supervision today. They showed me to the food storage room before leaving me to do my job. I know yesterday was a hot mess, but I had a job with the highest-rated Embassy kitchen on Via Lactea. If they let me prove myself, I can show them I know what I'm doing.

The crew was holding out on me… The back room in the refrigerator has a huge stock of kitchen staples from Via Lactea. I was feeling around for some ingredients when I

bumped into something hanging from a meat hook. I rubbed my hands over it gingerly and felt the unmistakable bumps of rib bones. *Now we're talking.* I wanted to impress, so I went for a classic favorite back in the Embassy kitchen: country-style spare ribs.

I learned that the fish I cooked yesterday is called a blowstome, and it is *delicious* when dried. I tossed some in the jerkinator just to try it, and it was so good, I had to find a way to use it in the dish. I figured the herbal flavors would work well with some grilled asparagus, and boy, was I right. The barbecue sauce—same recipe as usual, but with some of those seeds on top. They sort of melted into the sauce, added a nice crunch.

   The entire crew was beyond thrilled with tonight's dinner. It was almost like a celebration, which worked in my favor. The whole way back to my room, I heard people fawning over the food, telling me how glad they were that they found a chef like me. Maybe they were just giving me a hard time yesterday because I'm the rookie. Either way, I know I made a good impression this time.

   Rating: 5/5, a keeper

Artist: Lexie Rueve, Kelpie 2021, lexierueve.com
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Jiamia   #001-C
Braised Blowstome with Federcream Sauce

- 8 lbs blowstome
- 1 cup federseeds
- 1 cup heavy whipping cream
- 2 stalks wortweed
- 1 pumplum
- 1 tbsp lemon juice

1. Remove skin from blowstome. Sear on medium heat, five minutes each side
2. Boil whole stalks wortweed for ten minutes, until softened
3. Dice boiled wortweed and pumplum. Saute on low heat for eight minutes
4. Boil heavy whipping cream on medium heat for two minutes. Add in finely chopped federseeds and continue cooking for additional four minutes, stirring frequently
5. Plate blowstome and top with federcream sauce
6. Drizzle lemon juice over federcream sauce

Welp. Apparently, the stash of kitchen staples I found was their supply of goods from their last raid. You know, the one on the Embassy kitchen on Via Lactea. The one where I was kidnapped. Yeah. I have some regrets. I knew that the Comet Chasers were a gang of pirates, but I didn't realize they relied so heavily on what they stole.

I got chewed out by Captain Rhiemus for running through the specialties so quickly. I'm new, and blind, so she let me off with a warning, but I won't be allowed unsupervised in the kitchen for a while. The gang will have to plan another raid sooner than expected.

I guess the ingredients they give me are either foraged or bought on whatever planet the ship happens to be near. Seems a little cheap, but I'll just have to cook with these for now. One of the crewmates—Fyldenn? Faldar?—told me that boiling the root

vegetables before cutting into them neutralizes the odor, so I gave that a go. Worked like a charm! After boiling the wortweed, I seared them up with some fruit called a pumplum. It's crunchy, and has a refreshing amount of sweetness without being overpowering. The boiled wortweed takes on the flavor of whatever it's cooked with, so it ended up tasting a lot like the pumplum.

The blowstome was fine from my first recipe, so I remade it, sans the stench. I discovered that acid is what caused the federseed to harden on the spare ribs, so after whipping up a federcream sauce and dressing the seared blowstome, I drizzled the dish with some lemon juice. The sauce completely candied; I didn't expect it to change so quickly.

Rating: 3/5, the side was hit-or-miss, and the candied sauce turned sticky

Galgade   #002-A   Galgade Bark Stew

- 4 lbs small fowl
- 3 Galgade vegetables
- 4 pieces tree bark
- 8 cups bone broth
- 1 cup corn

1. Pluck small fowl clean. Cube meat and saute for twelve minutes on medium heat, stirring frequently
2. While meat is cooking, add bone broth to large pot. Heat to a boil
3. Dice vegetables and add to mixture. Add in cooked fowl
4. Chop pieces tree bark into strips and add to mixture
5. Add corn. Cook for additional five minutes, or until vegetables are softened. Salt and pepper to taste

The Comet Chasers pulled off a successful raid on Jiamia, so we had to flee. The gang rummaged up some spare ingredients to hold us over. For now, we're just outside of Galgade. I think they wanted to unload some cargo here, or something.

But, new planet... new ingredients.

Bragnor was on kitchen duty today, and they gave me some small, plump poultry. The things were covered in tiny feathers, and it took me forever to pluck the bird clean, even with the kitchen helping. The meat smelled of exotic spices, even raw. To avoid over-seasoning it, I decided to make a soup. I added some local vegetables to the broth. I even convinced the first mate to let me break into our specialty supply and add some Via Lactea corn. Who *wouldn't* like a chicken corn soup?

They also brought me some meaty tree bark. Thick and chewy, but had a great spice and heat to it. It softened nicely in the soup. Bragnor warned me about adding too

much of the bark, but I know what I'm doing. A little spice goes a long way.

The dish was incredibly flavorful—maybe too flavorful. A few crewmates were complaining of stomach aches by the end of the night. I think the dish was a touch too much for them. Guess I need more time to experiment with these new ingredients.

Rating: 3/5, some conflicting flavors

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Galgade   #002-B   Roasted Stuffed Bulkbill

- 6 bulkbills, unplucked
- 4 didia
- 3 rokarrots
- 5 slices dried lavash
- 1 cup hot water
- 4 tbsp thickener

1. Clean bulkbills and prep to receive stuffing. Remove gizzards and meat from neck. Rinse birds well and pat dry
2. For stuffing, add chopped didia, rokarrots, and dried, crumbled lavash in a bowl. Add hot water and mix together
3. Loosely pack stuffing mix into cavities inside birds and truss legs
4. Layer premium cooking foil atop birds and place in roaster
5. Cook birds for fifteen minutes at 205 C, and then sixty minutes at 175 C. Ensure that flavor diffuser is ON and set to COLLECT
6. In the meantime, prepare the gravy. Chop and liquefy gizzards and bulkbill neck meat. Add tbsp thickener. Add drippings from oven's flavor diffuser collection chamber and mix until thickened
7. Add mixture to small porcelain bowl and heat in the oven for fifteen minutes at 175 C
8. Remove birds from oven. Plate and dress with gravy

The bark I used yesterday added a great flavor to the food, and is often used on Galgade to make dishes more spicy. The problem? It's also used as a laxative. Two of the crewmates were extremely sensitive to the bark's medicinal properties, and have been suffering from food poisoning most of the day.

Rhiemus was a bit upset, but understood I had no way of knowing. I used this as an opportunity to advocate for the ship to invest in holoplatter software for the kitchen. Not only does it warn me of any biological properties an ingredient may possess, but it also helps me to keep track of food while I'm cooking it. My cooking utensils can be catalogued in the program, and I can keep tabs on them with the tracking feature. It would make everyone's life so much easier... Plus, they're pirates. I'm sure they've got loads of money.

Captain Rhiemus didn't go for it. Instead, she ordered me to come along to the marketplace to converse with the vendors from here on out. That way, I can learn the ingredients, and figure out what they're normally used for. Galgade's poultry is known as a bulkbill, and—*get this*—their feathers are so small, if you oven-bake it, it just cooks into a wonderful, crispy skin.

I decided to go with a few stuffed birds, filled with fresh roasted vegetables. I crumbled up some dried lavash and mixed it in with the stuffing. They didn't take very long to bake, and the feathers crisped up nicely, even if the skin did smell slightly burnt. The bulkbill's internal spices really brought out the flavor in the skin, and it was delicious.

I also made a vegetable puree from some leftover didia and rokarrots, and spread it on some sliced lavash for the sick mates. Pheldonn walked me over to the ship's medical ward so I could hand-deliver the dish. I apologized profusely for my ignorance, but they were very understanding. They don't know the foreign foods any better than I do. I should try to spend more time studying new ingredients before I just throw them into a dish. Maybe talking with the locals will help, too. But also, holoplatter tech... just saying.

Rating: 4/5, the roasted bulkbill is delicious, but the stuffing feels like it's missing something

Innius VI   #003-A   Podcrawler Stir Fry

- 2 stalks wortweed
- 5 ganban bean pods
- 5 concroix pods
- 3 bronroot bulb pods
- 2 mammaise pods
- 2 pounds podcrawler meat, de-shelled
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- 2 cups bulkbill broth

1. Boil off wortweed stalks until tender
2. Julienne wortweed and place in grain processor
3. Marinade podcrawlers in quarter cup soy sauce. Remove shells. Rub meat with salt and pepper and cube
4. Sear meat on medium heat for four minutes
5. Add in bulkbill broth, soy sauce, and wortweed rice
6. Peel bronroot bulbs, taking care to remove the stinger. Dice and add to saucepan
7. Peel concroix pods. Remove stems and add florets to saucepan
8. Peel ganban bean pods. Rinse off fibers. Add beans to saucepan
9. Peel mammaise pods. Remove husks, dice, and add to saucepan
10. Saute on low heat for ten minutes

The first mate—Vrinx?—made a request that we stop at this planet cluster. We made a quick stop in Innius VI, and we'll be leaving for the neighboring planet, Fhorrus. Captain Rhiemus took me with again to the local marketplace. I guess since we're stocking up on a lot of ingredients, she wanted to make sure I felt familiar enough with the food. Because of the dense atmospheric conditions on Innius VI, everything grows in a pod. EVERYTHING. Meat is less common here, so the locals tend to depend on beans, nuts, and insects for their protein. The planet is *great* for agriculture, so there are more

types of vegetables and fruits than I could have ever imagined in one place.

With so many fresh vegetables, I thought a stir fry would fit the bill, especially since I wasn't sure how great the protein source would be. I made up some rice by boiling wortweed and putting it through the grain processor. Since it absorbed flavor from the other foods, it would be a perfect substitute.

I was opening some of the different vegetable pods to figure out what I had to work with. Some bushy florets... some bulb vegetables... some cob vegetables... and some beans. Alright, plenty of great ingredients to use. I moved over to my cooking station to start my prep. And then I felt the beans crawling up my arms and screamed.

Yeah, I had opened up a podcrawler nest by mistake. *Why do all these pods feel the same!* Bragnor helped to contain the podcrawlers as best as they could. The insects were harmless, albeit annoying as they whizzed past my ears. A lot of the kitchen workers are afraid of bugs, so there was a minor panic, but fortunately, nobody went to Rhiemus about it. Once Bragnor had most of them secure in a glass jar, I began to marinade them in some soy sauce. I knew I'd have to get their shells off, but it would be much easier if they were dead first.

The rest of the dish was pretty straight-forward—chop up whatever was in the pods, and put it in the pan. The podcrawlers were... interesting. The meat was fatty and pulpy, but mixed into a stir fry, you hardly noticed. The wortweed took on a lot of flavor from the soy sauce, so I added some bulkbill broth to even it out. Mammaise was sweet and juicy—almost like corn, but with larger and tougher kernels. Concroix was earthy and savory, but it fell apart quickly in the pan.

After dinner was done, I had the kitchen crew help sort the rest of the ingredient pods so that we could avoid future mistakes. This is the first time I've been to a planet and left with so many new kinds of foods. It'll be a lot of work to learn how to cook all this interplanetary cuisine, but I'm up to the challenge.

Rating: 4/5, the flavors were great, but the concroix fell apart and altered the dish's texture

Fhorrus   #004-A   Brunch Burrito

- 1 mammaise pod, with the husk
- 2 tbsp food-grade oil
- 4 tbsp flour
- 2 pickachix eggs
- ½ cup fhorrus greens
- 2 strips blowstome jerky

1. Remove husk from mammaise pod and trim. Dredge in flour and oil and fry for five minutes on low heat
2. In a mixing bowl, combine pickachix eggs and chopped blowstome jerky. Place in pan on medium heat and scramble until eggs are fully-cooked
3. Remove mammaise kernels from cob and add to pain. Cook for additional two minutes on low heat
4. Chop stems off fhorrus greens
5. Take mammaise wrap and bake at 175 C for five minutes to dry excess oil
6. Place egg mixture atop wrap. Top with greens. Wrap and preserve for later consumption

Now that the Comet Chasers has its own chef, Captain Rhiemus decided it was time to focus less on raiding for rations. Sure, it's nice to have some Embassy-issued packed lunches for when the workers are in a hurry. But I have plenty of free time in my day to start making boxed lunches for everyone. Less stealing, more getting by with what we have. It'll give me a chance to experiment more, and I'm down for that.

To start, I decided on a simple burrito. The husks from the mammaise pod were a good fit for a wrap. I dredged them in a little oil and flour, and started frying them up—just on low heat; I didn't want them to fall apart.

Fhorrus is a really dry planet, with lots of fields and not a lot of vegetation. They grow some greens, and some grains, but not much else. As such, they focus mostly on raising

livestock. I guess they have a good trade agreement with Innius VI—Fhorrus provides the animal products, and Innius VI provides the crops.

I took some pickachix eggs and scrambled them up. Pheldonn marvelled when I cracked open the first egg—apparently, pickachix eggs have three yolks, and very thin egg whites. The eggs tasted extraordinarily creamy, so I grated some raw bronroot over the dish to give it a little something. To my surprise, raw bronroot is tart and citrusy, whereas cooked bronroot tastes a bit metallic. I topped off the eggs with some fhorrus greens. Leafy and a bit dry, but they picked up some moisture from the steaming eggs, and wilted nicely.

Captain Rhiemus was really impressed with my lunch. She sent Vrinx down to the kitchen to help me seal up the burritos and get them to the commissary. We made some small talk for a while, got to know each other. Eventually, he asked for my name. It'll be nice to have the Comet Chasers call me Corey. They never did that on the Embassy... they insisted they had to call me by my "birth" name. But these guys, they respect me. They're good people. After we finished bringing the packaged burritos to the commissary, Vrinx pulled me aside before I could head back to the kitchen. He has some sort of secret project he wants my help with, I guess. I'll find him after dinner tonight and get some more information.

Rating: 4/5, a good ready-to-eat lunch, nothing mind-blowing

Fhorrus   #004-B   Echassian Macaroni and Cheese

- 2 lbs echassian cheese
- ½ lb echassian butter
- ¼ cup echassian milk
- 2 pickachix eggs
- 2 cups flour
- 1 ½ lb echassian calf meat, muscle removed
- 1 tbsp dried tardus seed
- 3 concroix pods

1. On a flat surface, pour out flour, create a well in the middle
2. Crack pickachix eggs and empty their contents into the well on the counter. Mix by hand, pulling in flour gradually
3. Knead dough until dough has smooth surface texture
4. Place in instant pasta pot to form one pound of pasta—bowtie, small shells, or elbow shaped preferred. Use dye as desired. Cook in pasta pot until al dente
5. In a saucepan, mix echassian cheese, echassian butter, and echassian milk. Season with dried ground tardus seed and heat on low until it reaches a thick and creamy consistency
6. Chop echassian calf meat into thin strips, removing the tough muscle where possible. Sear on low heat for five minutes
7. Remove saucepan from heat. Stir in calf meat strips and pasta
8. Open concroix pods and remove stems. Stir in flourets

Bragnor *loves* pasta, and apparently a lot of the Comet Chasers crew does, too. They went out of her way on Fhorrus to buy me an instant pasta pot so I could make my own pasta. I think she used her own cash to pay for it, too! Well, if these guys want pasta, I won't let them down. I used some pickachix eggs and flour to make the dough base. The kitchen crew was concerned when I poured the flour onto the countertop—they thought I had misplaced my mixing bowl. Pheldonn even yelled to warn me. But after watching me add the eggs and knead the dough, he started to understand.

I played around with the instant pasta pot. It can make *any* type of pasta imaginable, and it can even color it with the built-in dye packets. I let Bragnor pick the colors for tonight's meal, since they were kind enough to buy me the machine. Everyone was fascinated as the pasta pot went to work, cranking out a pound of bowtie-shaped noodles into its cooking chamber. I set the machine to "al-dente" and left to get the rest of the meal ready.

We got in an order of echassian products. They are one of the livestock on Fhorrus, and produce a creamy milk and, surprisingly, a sweet cheese. And—here's the kicker—they shed their calf muscles on a weekly basis. Their body regenerates, and the old muscle slides off as the new muscle grows. Granted, the meat is very fibrous and sinewy, but it's an endless supply of meat, if you know how to work with it.

I grabbed some of the echassian cheese and got it melting on a saucepan with some butter and milk. The sauce was bright and sweet, so I went digging around in the boxes of goods from Innius VI to find something else to add. With Pheldonn's help, I found some pods with seeds usually used for spices. He called them tardus seeds. I dried them out in the dehydrator, ground them up, and sprinkled some into the cheese. It had a certain sharpness to it, and helped balance some of the flavors out.

I knew I had to find a use for this slab of meat, so I asked the kitchen crew if they could cut it and remove some of the excess fibers. I was handed back some stringy strands of meat. They also had a sweet smell to them, but I figured the sauce would blend it nicely. I seared them on low heat, just to make sure they were fully cooked, before adding them into the sauce. They pulled apart into even thinner strands while I was mixing, gave it a nice texture.

I added in the pasta and combined everything together for a first taste. It was quite good, but the sweetness of the meat was contrasting the cheese sauce a bit. I decided to throw in some concroix—its savory flavors would mask the sweet calf meat, and I added it in last so it wouldn't completely fall apart and get too grainy, like it did in the stir fry. The crew absolutely adored the meal tonight. Rhiemus, herself, was shocked

that I was able to make such great food out of the goods we scavenged; she was used to meals like that being a treat after a successful raid. We popped open a bottle of Via Lactea champagne to celebrate, just the officers and myself.

Vrinx did approach me after the festivities died down. Turns out, we stopped at Fhorrus and Innius VI for certain ingredients. He wants me to make a cake for him—it sounds like it's for a special occasion, so it has to be perfect. I agreed, on the condition that he be the one to help decorate. I don't think I can do it without my holoplatter kitchen. We shook on it, and he called me by my name and thanked me. I'm not sure what this cake is for, but I'll do my best.

Rating: 5/5, might be room for improvement with other meats

Fhorrus   #004-D   Innius VI Salad

- 4 Innius VI concroix pods
- 4 Innius VI bronroot bulb pods
- 4 Innius VI frifri berry pods
- 2 tbsp dried ground Innius VI tardus seeds
- ¼ tsp pepper
- ¼ cup processed tybex nectar
- ¼ cup Via Lactea vinegar
- ¼ cup food grade oil

1. Open concroix pods. Remove stems
2. Open bronroot bulb pods and remove stingers. Dice up raw bronroot
3. Open frifri berry pods and set aside excess seeds
4. In a mixing bowl, combine tybex nectar, vinegar, oil, tardus seeds, and pepper. Add in frifri berry seeds
5. Combine ingredients together and top with dressing. Preserve for later consumption

I figured a salad would be an easy packaged lunch. Hopefully the sweet and tangy dressing will be a crowd-pleaser. Tybex are another one of the livestock on Fhorrus. They pull pollen from the dry grassy plains, and process it into a nectar inside their bodies. Farmers are able to harvest it once they've produced enough, with almost no discomfort to the animals. Fascinating, really, when you compare them to pollinators on Via Lactea, which rely heavily on pollinating flowers.

The rest of the salad was pretty easy to put together. I decided to try one of the frifri berry seeds, and while they're not any good dried, they're very flavorful. Tossed them into the salad dressing, and it added a great texture to the salad. Pheldonn helped me box up the salads and took them to the commissary himself. I guess it's time to start thinking about how to handle this cake. I have until after dinner to figure it out, and then Vrinx and I are going to get to work. There should be plenty of fruits and sweets to work with in the food storage chamber. I know I can whip up something delicious.

Rating: 4/5, it's a tasty salad, maybe another dressing would fit better

Picclite #005-A Comet Chaser Carbonara

- 8 Fhorrus pickachix egg yolks
- 1 ½ cups Fhorrus echassian milk
- 1 cup grated Via Lactea Parmesan cheese
- 1 lb spaghetti noodles
- 2 lbs Galgade bulkbill meat
- ½ lb Fhorrus echassian calf meat, muscle removed
- 1 tbsp grated Innius VI bronroot
- 1 tsp ground currentcorn

1. Prepare spaghetti noodles with the instant pasta pot. Refer to #004-B for pasta dough recipe. Cook on "al-dente"
2. Cube bulkbill meat, leaving feathers on
3. Sear bulkbill meat on medium heat for 8 minutes. Drain juices
4. Prepare echassian calf meat with muscle removed. Sear calf meat on low heat for 4 minutes. Drain juices
5. In a medium bowl, combine pickachix egg yolks with echassian milk and grated Parmesan cheese. Mix well
6. Add spaghetti to large saucepan on medium heat. Add in sauce mixture. Be careful not to overcook sauce, or the eggs will scramble
7. Add in echassian calf meat and bulkbill meat and stir to coat
8. Sprinkle with ground currentcorn and pepper to taste

We've come a long way from mystery meat and stinky root vegetables. I've been on board the ship for a month now. I decided to celebrate my anniversary by making my favorite food from back on Via Lactea, but with an interplanetary twist on it: chicken carbonara... yum.

We already had most of the ingredients from our past few planets, but we were stopped on Picclite, and I decided to visit the local market with the ship officers. Picclite is a planet of pirates; they don't export much, or have any focus on agriculture or trade. However, they've picked up a lot of goods from their heists. I stocked up on a lot of Via Lactea spices, as well as some new ingredients.

I haven't had chicken carbonara since my last birthday, so this is the first bit of comfort food I've really been looking forward to digging into. I got to use the instant pasta pot again. It has many different sizes and textures of spaghetti, but I went with the traditional thick and smooth noodle. I let Pheldonn pick out the color this time. I was surprised; he picked a color and told me it reminded him of me. I thought it was sweet. I wonder what color it was.

The carbonara sauce was pretty simple. With the creaminess of the pickachix eggs, I barely needed to add any cream, so I substituted with some echassian milk to bind the sauce. I also found some Via Lactea Parmesan cheese, and knew that its sharp and light flavor would be much better than echassian cheese's fatty sweetness. I'll always go for the real thing any day.

I decided to go with some seared bulkbill and echassian calf meat for protein sources. The stringiness of the calf meat worked well with the texture of the noodles, and the spiced flavors of the bulkbill cut against the sweetness of the sauce. I added some grated bronroot to balance out the creaminess, and a new ingredient from Picclite: ground currentcorn. It's like a combination of garlic and oregano, very savory and rich.

I almost like *this* recipe better than the one I used to use on the Embassy Kitchen. It's refreshing, exciting, new... It's been so much fun creating these recipes from the different planets. I thought I was more of a "cookie-cutter" cook, but this expedition has shown me what I'm really capable of. The crew was a huge fan of my food tonight— they liked it even more than my prime ribs. I'm looking forward to seeing what planet we'll get to next, and what new flavors await.

Rating: 5/5, a keeper

Picclite   #005-B   Cosmic Cake

- 2 pickachix eggs
- 2 ½ cups sugar
- 1 cup tybex nectar
- 1 ½ cups echassian butter
- 1 ½ cups flour
- ½ cup echassian milk
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1 tbsp okress extract
- 2 frifri berry pods

1. In a mixing bowl, hand cream half pound of butter with half cup sugar
2. In a separate bowl, whisk together pickachix eggs, half cup tybex nectar, and okress extract
3. Slowly add egg mixture to mixing bowl and stir
4. Add in flour and baking powder and combine. Pour in milk and stir until smooth
5. Open one frifri berry pod and remove excess seeds. Muddle frifri berries and add to batter
6. Spoon batter into prepared cake pan. Bake for 30 minutes at 175 C
7. Make the frosting. In a mixing bowl, hand cream one pound butter with two cups sugar
8. Open other frifri berry pod and remove excess seeds. Blend frifri berries and tybex nectar and add to frosting
9. Wait for cake to cool completely, and then frost with frosting mix

 I got to make a cake tonight. I never was much into baking, but Vrinx helped. He's a lot of fun in the kitchen; he has NO idea what he's doing. I made a pretty standard cake mix with pickachix eggs, sugar, flour, and echassian butter and milk. Went with some okress, too—took the blossoms and steeped them for a few minutes, then reduced the

water down on low heat until I had a thick extract.

Vrinx told me that the cake *had* to have frifri berries, so I obliged. I muddled some up to put in the batter, and even put some in a buttercream frosting. I snuck a taste of the batter when Vrinx wasn't looking—it's so good. And I'm not big on cake.

After it came out of the oven, Vrinx tried to start frosting right away, and I had to yell at him that it wasn't ready. Really... and he was supposed to be helping *me*. Ah well. The final product was wonderful. We aren't able to have any tonight, but he promised he'd show me what all of this was for tomorrow morning.

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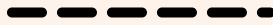
I found out today that Picclite is Rhiemus's planet. She was coming home for her daughter Vaylen's birthday. That's what the cake was for. Frifri berries are her favorite, and she loved that cake... more than most ten year-olds love cake.

Vaylen spent her entire birthday *begging* her mom to take her aboard the ship. At ten years old, she can choose to pursue traditional education at a nearby Embassy school, or take on an apprenticeship. It's a great way to figure out what you want to do, and I can't imagine a better way to learn about the universe than by seeing it firsthand. That's why I took on an apprenticeship at the Embassy kitchen in the first place.

Rhiemus had actually been pondering Vaylen's request for a while now. Remember when we started making packaged lunches so we wouldn't have to raid as often? She was trying to get the Comet Chasers to stop raiding altogether, be self-sufficient. A pirate ship isn't a safe place for her daughter to see the world. But a crew of cosmic adventurers? That's another story.

She took us all onto the deck, and told us that our days of piracy were over. We'd make ends meet by travelling the galaxy, peddling goods, and taking on odd jobs. In lieu of this career change, she gave everyone on the crew an out, if they desired. Of course, nobody took her up on it. Not even me, their captive cook. For the first time in years, I feel free.

I offered to start up a cooking class to bring in additional revenue. After taking a day to study the ingredients, I could host a class on the ship and show the locals how to make a great meal. I want to save up for that holoplatter tech myself. Rhiemus loved the idea and gave me my first promotion. First Chief of Culinary Science... I like the sound of it.

Each morning, I will get to work in the kitchen with whatever ingredients we have available. Each lunar cycle, more new recipes await. Each planet is a goldmine for new flavors and tastes. I know I was pulled from the Embassy Kitchen before I was ready, but I'm glad I was. I had outgrown them, and didn't even know it yet. I'm able to be who I was always meant to be: Corey, the Comet Chaser. ℰ

Rating: 5/5

Alyssa Amsbaugh writes science-fiction now, too. A self-proclaimed jack of all trades, when not working as a chemist, they could be found sewing, drawing, singing, writing, jogging, baking, playing video games, or streaming (twitch.tv/redriaplays). You might know her from previously published titles Up in Arms and Dungeons & Demons, both featured in anthologies by the Greece, NY Writer's Group. If there is a new skill to be learned, you'd better believe they'll be learning it. When not engrossed in one of their many hobbies, they can be found playing Minecraft, ingesting too much caffeine, and getting not enough sleep.

Cover Shoot

Featuring Soph of <u>Sophsbadgaming</u> and <u>Uncultured Palate</u>
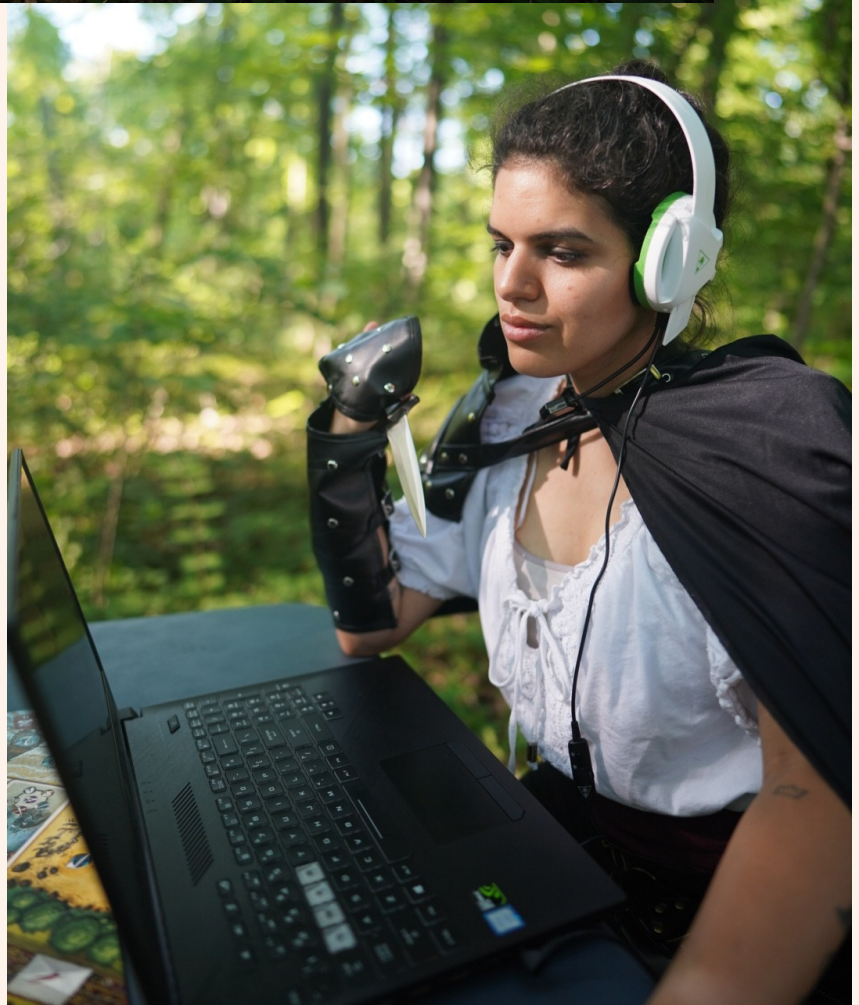
Homebrew

Pathfinder 2e: Unusual Companions

JAMES ABENDROTH

The following is designed for compatibility with Pathfinder 2nd edition.

Companions

The world is an unusual place full of unusual creatures. Anyone can have a pet tiger or wolf or even a big bat or small dinosaur. Only the most mundane people settle for such mundane companions on their adventures. Since adventurers are notorious for being anything but mundane, they commonly seek out, or simply stumble across, strange and bizarre creatures and form lifelong bonds with them. Just as often, an adventurer will find one of these creatures abandoned by its parents because of its unusual nature and hand raise it, garnering a powerful, loyal companion through their kindness.

Whatever the case, an animal companion says something about its partner. What will yours say about you?

Any character with an animal companion can use the options below when their animal companion reaches the appropriate level.

Fantastic Companion

Fantastic specimens of creatures of all types with amazing and uncanny abilities and mutations appear either through the

influence of wild or controlled magic, the interactions of the planes, the will of the gods, or simple random acts of nature. Those with an appreciation for the unusual often seek out and tame these unusual beasts. Any time your animal companion would become Nimble or Savage, it can instead become Fantastic.

To advance a mature animal companion to a fantastic animal companion, increase its Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, and Wisdom modifiers by 1. It deals 2 additional damage with unarmed attacks. It learns the advanced maneuver for its type. Its attacks become magical for the purpose of ignoring resistances. It also gains 2 abilities from the list of Familiar Abilities in the Pathfinder Core Rulebook. These must be Familiar Abilities, not Master Abilities. Unlike a familiar, once these abilities have been chosen, they cannot be changed. Your companion's type changes from animal to beast, but it otherwise functions as an animal companion.

Mount Companion

In a realm of magic and mystery, some animals simply grow much larger than normal specimens of their kind. Despite their impressive size, these creatures are often as easy to tame and befriend as their smaller brethren, and many adventurers use them as steeds, taking advantage of their increased speed and strength to augment their own.

To advance a mature animal companion to a mount animal companion, increase its Strength modifier by 2 and its Dexterity, Constitution, and Wisdom modifiers by 1. It deals 2 additional damage with unarmed attacks. Increase its proficiency rank in

Athletics to expert. It gains the mount special ability. If your companion is Medium or smaller, it grows to be one size category larger than you. Its attacks become magical for the purpose of ignoring resistances.

Undead Companion

Some people simply cannot accept when their loved ones have passed on to another world. Others aren't given the opportunity to. Whether brought back to pseudo-life intentionally or through a terrible accident, your animal companion joins the ranks of the undead. Any time your animal companion would become Nimble or Savage, you can instead select for it to become Undead.

To advance a mature animal companion to an undead animal companion, increase its Constitution modifier by 2 and its Strength, Dexterity, and Wisdom modifiers by 1. It deals 2 additional damage with unarmed attacks. Increase its proficiency rank in Athletics to expert. It gains negative healing and immunity to death effects, disease, mental, paralyzed, poison, and unconscious. It also learns the advanced maneuver for its type. Its attacks become magical for the purpose of ignoring resistances. The companion's type changes from animal to undead, but it otherwise functions like an animal companion.

Croaker Drake

Some people like their companions loud... and everyone loves dragons. Your companion is a small drake with an oversized voice. Though it is not the most intimidating example of dragonkind, it is extremely dedicated to you and ferocious when

riled up. A croaker drake has the dragon trait instead of the animal trait, but it otherwise functions normally as an animal companion.

Croaker Drake

Size small

Melee (1 action) Jaws, **Damage** 1d6 piercing

Melee (1 action) Tail, Damage 1d4 bludgeoning

Str +1, **Dex** +3, **Con** +2, **Int** −4, **Wis** +1, **Cha** +0

Hit Points 6

Skill Stealth

Senses darkvision

Speed 20 feet, fly 30 feet

Support Benefit

Your drake releases thunderous chirps, barks and croaks at your opponents. Until the start of your next turn, each time you Strike and hit a creature in the drake's reach, the creature takes 1d4 sonic damage from the drake and is deafened for 1 round. If your drake is nimble or savage, the sonic damage increases to 2d4.

Advanced Maneuver Breath Weapon

Breath Weapon (2 actions)

Frequency once per hour

The croaker drake focuses a piercing shriek in a 30-foot line, dealing 1d6 sonic damage for every 2 levels the drake has to all creatures in the area (basic Reflex save). This uses a trained DC using the drake's Constitution modifier or an expert DC if the drake is specialized.

James Abendroth is a lifelong Texan, a relatively new father, and a relatively old husband. He has written scripts for the Come and Take It! podcast, articles for the Ideology of Madness website, four novels (and co-written 3), several short stories, freelanced for several gaming companies, and published his own game material. If it involves stringing words together, he will try it. He can be found on Instagram and Twitter @blackguardpress.

Starfinder: Soldier Fighting Styles

SASHA LARANOA HARVING

The following fighting style is available to soldiers in the Starfinder Roleplaying Game.

Wargamer

The wargamer fighting style is one that takes the tactical and strategic approaches inherent to wargames and applies them to the battlefield. Soldiers that practice this style are able to coordinate their allies and control the battlefield by establishing control points.

War Zone [1st Level]: As a move action, you can establish a war zone, a 10-foot by 10-foot square area that extends 30 feet upwards, lasts until the end of your next turn, and is centered on one corner of your square, but does not move with you. Allies (including you) within your war zone gain a +1 morale bonus to damage rolls. This bonus increases by +1 at 5th level and every four levels thereafter.

Strategic Zoning [5th Level]: When you establish a war zone, you can choose one of the following benefits to apply to your war zone: Your war zone is a 20-foot by 20-foot square that extends 60 feet upwards, your war zone lasts for one additional round, or the damage bonus provided by your war zone is +1 higher.

Rallying Zone [9th Level]: You can spend 1 Resolve Point as part of establishing a war zone to apply two of the benefits described in the strategic zoning style technique instead of one.

Tactician's Triumph [13th Level]: When you are within a war zone you've established, you deal 2d6 additional damage the first time each round you deal damage to a creature that is within the same war zone.

Checkmate [17th Level]: As a reaction, when you reduce a significant enemy to 0 hit points or score a critical hit on a significant enemy, you can establish a war zone.

New Gear Boosts

The following gear boosts are available to all soldiers. They all require a minimum level, and are grouped as such.

3rd Level

Imperial Coordinator (Ex): When you play imperial conquest (Starfinder Armory), it only takes 20 minutes per player to play, and each player other than you gains a +1 insight bonus to their Intelligence checks to resolve the game.

Imperial Strategist (Ex): When you play imperial conquest, you gain a +1 insight bonus to your Intelligence check to resolve the game, which increases by 1 for every four soldier levels you have.

Editorials

Heel Turn Based RPGs: Plotting Your Campaign Like Professional Wrestling
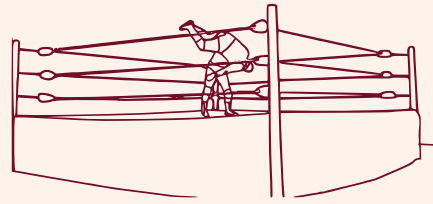
BRENT BOWSER

If you've ever crafted a fictional world, dropped your player characters into it, and asked them "So what do you want to do?" you may have encountered blank stares. Your players may be paralyzed by choice. You may need to run a different style of campaign.

Narrative-driven campaigns are a type of storytelling designed to follow the journey of heroes following the call to adventure to its epic conclusion, saving the universe from immeasurable evil. Before a Game Master can get into the minutia of encounters in story arcs, they first need to outline the plot points their story needs to hit. I would like to share with you a modern story structure that originated in The Round that will draw in your players and help them invest in their characters and your world. In this article, we will discuss how to structure your campaign using **The Seven Steps of Professional Wrestling**.

The common structure of the "seven steps of professional wrestling" is often seen in a five-minute wrestling match, with each step consisting of a series of maneuvers. Translating these concepts to your campaign should also be applied to events in the greater story. This should not be adapted to individual encounters. This thesis also operates under the assumption that the player characters (PCs) "always win." As we dissect each step, I will explain how the party can technically win, while still losing, and generating "heat" for your antagonists.

Before a match begins, wrestlers are introduced to the crowd individually, with the villain entering first. This is done to introduce the threat to the audience: the millionaire oligarch, fan of the rival city's sports team, or a large undead menace. By identifying the threat, it is then easy for the audience to identify the hero, which is why they enter second. Your session zero should follow a similar motif. You do not necessarily have to show Darth Vader capturing the princess, but you should at least introduce overarching threats the heroes will confront, such as the evil empire. Your players will create characters that exist in the world, and with a vested interest in protecting their attachments to that world.

Step One: THE SHINE

The first sequence of events to run your players through is the shine. In the shine, we prove our heroes' formidability, and desire to see them win. This is where the party fights the giant rats in the tavern cellar, the goblins raiding the village, and possibly the foot soldier minions of the main antagonist. Use these opening adventures to establish the "normal life" the party will return to once changed, and get a sense for who the characters are. Slowly introduce the overarching plot by having the party deal with the collateral damage of the antagonist's plans. Peaceful forest denizens turn violent from Fey influence. A mephit escapes the cultist that summoned it. Undead haunt a place the antagonist raided.

In the shine, we prove our heroes' formidability, and desire to see them win.

Displaced kobolds attack travelers crossing their newly claimed domain. The antagonist may or may not be aware of the heroes, but the shine alerts the antagonist to their presence and the threat they pose.
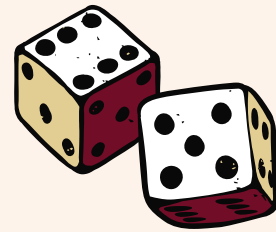
Step Two: THE CUT-OFF

Once there is momentum behind the heroes, and victory seems inevitable, we move to the cut-off. Our heroes encounter their first major blow. This is also where we first encounter the nuance of the players always winning while losing. The game master's role is to provide challenge, but ultimately lose. Never plan to win a fight. Your dice will betray you, and you will betray the trust of your players. Instead, use this part of the adventure to have the heroes return to find their attachments beset upon by the antagonist. A much-needed caravan of supplies has not arrived yet. They return to find their quest giver is not around to reward them for the quest they just took. The McGuffin, stolen. Their village, destroyed. Their mentor, struck down by a dark force they have history with. You'll want to craft adventures around fetch or escort goals. Don't plan on defeating the heroes when your antagonist's lieutenant attacks their village. Plan on the heroes successfully defending one

particular area, but unable to interact with the lieutenant's main goal. Perhaps make the goal of the adventure a successful escape by escorting the important McGuffin away from the conflict.

A McGuffin, the term popularized by Alfred Hitchcock, refers to a desired object or person that drives the plot. In film and literature, it compels the protagonist, and oftentimes the antagonist. The Holy Grail, The Death Star plans, and Infinity Stones are all examples. For the purposes of gaming, and particularly this narrative structure, I would encourage your antagonist to be primarily motivated by the McGuffin. Your players don't have to be motivated by the McGuffin. They can be motivated by the actions taken in *pursuit* of the McGuffin.

Step Three: THE HEAT

After the heroes are cut off, the villain starts The Heat. In professional wrestling, this is when the villain begins fighting back against the hero. Creating momentum behind your villain while still giving your players achievable goals can be difficult and may require some nudging by NPCs. I will start by reminding you don't write encounters you expect to win. Your dice WILL betray you. More importantly, the goal is for your story villain to draw ire, not yourself as the storyteller.

Your dice WILL betray you.

Giving the players an achievable goal will help maintain their trust in you as a storyteller, and thus keep the campaign progressing cooperatively. I would not recommend bringing in a strong encounter intended to defeat the party. Instead, give the party a McGuffin to escort away from the location. They may need to be

prompted to do this. Perhaps let them successfully fend off the attack, but they were unable to protect a McGuffin. Find a resource the party needs and cut them off from it; money, a mentor, their NPC cleric, their base of operations. If you do plan to bring in the main antagonist or a lieutenant, give them a way out, like flight or teleportation.

Another aspect of the heat to be aware of is how long and how far reaching this time of strife lasts for the party. I would recommend a minimum of two scenarios or story arcs where they are struggling beneath the victorious villain. Your antagonists' army may control several cities at once. Maybe other gods at other churches are not granting spells. Perhaps the next
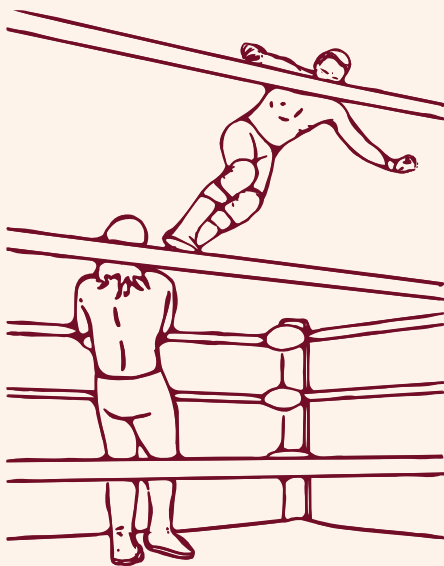
McGuffin is already in their possession, but thanks to clues left behind in ancient texts, coupled with your McGuffin, you know where to go next and the villain doesn't. I would be very cautious to drag this out more than three story beats because you risk turning off your players' investment if they don't feel like they are making progress.

Step Four: THE HOPE SPOT

Your overall story may need "more heat," but you will need to break it up with the fourth step, the hope spot. Give your players a decisive win. This provides a good point to force your villain to pivot their plan, or perhaps a revelation of something greater to strive for. The heroes might recover their denied resource, or replace it with something better.. You might also want to kill the villain's lieutenant here, or... kill your main antagonist as their lieutenant presents themself as the true, greater threat. The hope spot concludes this specific subplot arc in your campaign narrative.

You may need to go back into the "heat" step if you introduce a new main antagonist, so you can establish the threat they pose to the heroes. I wouldn't recommend dragging this out too long, probably no more than one scenario. If you increased the threat level of an existing antagonist, you could skip this altogether if you want. Your story should have enough backstop

Dragging out the story too long where the party doesn't actually feel like they are succeeding against the villain can discourage them from wanting to pursue further.

and unresolved plot elements to already establish the danger the party is facing. Dragging out the story too long where the party doesn't actually feel like they are succeeding against the villain can discourage them from wanting to pursue further. They will either distract themselves with side quests so they feel adequately equipped to handle the threat, or they will check out of the story because they feel like the storyteller is going to win regardless.

Step Five: THE DOUBLE DOWN

After the hope spot, you'll move into the double down. This is where the heroes place the villain between two pieces of fried chicken... No, this is where the heroes and the villain find themselves at their lowest point. The heroes score a victory, but at a cost so great, they feel as though they have lost. The party may have been unwitting pawns in the villain's grand scheme, defeating a powerful guardian monster that appears when the McGuffins are aligned. The defeat of the villain may be the needed catalyst to reveal their true power. Perhaps their success requires the sacrifice of a beloved NPC. Despite the loss, this should open up a path for ultimate victory for our heroes.

Step Six: THE COMEBACK

All of the suffering the party has endured will begin to pay off as we then move into the comeback. Your players should recognize the opportunity or advantage they now have over the antagonist, and have some motivation to put an end to them once and for all. Their denied resources are renewed and expanded beyond their previous capability. This is when the players can begin eliminating remaining lieutenants, freeing previously occupied territories, breaking curses and healing wounds. Their power and experience are greater than when they first encountered these problems. Reluctant acquaintances become allies. The Gods judge them worthy of their boons. This should take a few scenarios to work through and be its own story arc as the heroes build up for the final confrontation.

Step Seven: THE (FALSE) FINISH

Finally, you'll end your campaign with a series of false finishes and the finish itself. In professional wrestling, both athletes have a maneuver they perform that is strong enough to finish off their opponent. Should their opponent break free from a three-count pin attempt after suffering such a devastating blow, there is shock and disbelief. Each opponent raises the stakes, hitting harder and harder strikes until their ultimate victory.

The campaign can be run as a pseudo sandbox as the story arcs of the shine, heat, and comeback can be more open than a straight railroaded campaign.

You may recognize this as *"Now, I'll show you my true power." "This isn't even my final form."* The villain may also be aware of their own weakness, and planned for it accordingly. You may want to involve a short side quest prior to the final encounter that can weaken the Big Bad End Guy (BBEG). Perhaps you plan your fight in multiple phases, and the environment changes after a few rounds. The more damage the villain takes, the thinner the wall between the material plane and The First World becomes. The giant robot inflicts area of effect damage that destroys or weakens some of the landscape. The BBEG is simply stalling the party so the party cannot disrupt the ritual bringing the evil god into existence... and a tentacle just poked through a portal.

I've included some examples below of story beats that follow the professional wrestling narrative style to inspire your games. It requires a well-thought-out antagonist, an understanding of their plans, and how the players act as obstacles to those plans. The campaign can be run as a pseudo sandbox as the story arcs of the shine, heat, and comeback can be more open than a straight railroaded campaign.

I hope you have fun trying this narrative structure in your next game and playing, not just the game, but also with your players' emotions.

Pop Culture	Shine	Cut off	Heat	Hope	Double Down	Comeback	Finish
Pro Wrestling	The babyface punches and slams the heel.	Heel pokes babyface in the eye.	Heel punches and slams babyface.	Babyface dodges an attack, and gets a few hits in.	Babyface flies from the top rope to the heel, knocking both down for a while.	Both rise, babyface blocks heel's offense and strikes back.	Heel blocks babyface's finishing maneuver, tries to cheat. Babyface dodges the cheating, finishes heel and wins.
Infinity War/ End Game	Heroes stop Black Order from getting gems.	Thanos obtains the gems himself.	Thanos snaps.	Ant-Man returns and the heroes discover time travel.	The heroes obtain the Infinity Stones in the past, ultimately gathering all the stones for Thanos and losing Black Widow.	The heroes restore their fallen allies and fight back against Thanos's army.	Thanos wrestles the Infinity Gauntlet from Captain Marvel, who loses it to Iron Man, snapping away Thanos.
Star Wars	Obi Wan Kenobi saves Luke, Leia, and the droid from the Empire's control.	Obi Wan sacrifices himself so the rebels can escape.	The empire prepares to destroy the rebel base on Yavin IV and nearly destroys the rebel fleet.	The Death Star Blows up. Literally a New Hope spot. Luke learns of Yoda.	The Empire taking Hoth and Cloud city are heat spots. Luke rescues most of the rebels, losing his hand and Han. Darth Vader fails to not only finish the rebellion, but fails to recruit	The rebels rescue Han Solo and launch their attack to end the Emperor once and for all.	It's a trap! Luke and the rebels appear to be defeated, but are rescued by Ewoks and Darth Vader turning good.

Brent Bowser is a comedian, volunteer for the Organized Play Foundation, and red panda aficionado. ❧

The Problems With the Alignment Chart and Why Your Aunt Marjory Knows What It Is

JAMES ABENDROTH

While many things continue into modern times from the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons, most of them have either disappeared or shifted so much that anyone who played back in 1974 would find the modern iteration all but unrecognizable (and likely complain about how it had been ruined). Gone are the charts required to determine if a certain roll hit a certain armor class (and the incomprehensible design choice of making lower AC's better—why did it take 25 years for someone to reverse that particular logic?). Saving throws have been consolidated down, simplified, and modified to actually take into account how dangerous the thing causing the saving throw is. Nonhuman races are no longer classes, the level caps for nonhuman races are gone, and the races a person can play aren't taken directly from a Tolkien story. And a longsword, shield, and plate armor are no longer the clearly superior combination of equipment for all fighters.

One thing that still exists, largely unaltered in 45 years of revisions and play, is the alignment system. Though originally just one axis (lawful through chaotic), the alignment chart has

remained essentially unchanged since the second axis (good through evil) was added almost 45 years ago when Advanced Dungeon & Dragons came out in 1977. While it got a significant overhaul in 4th edition, like most things from 4th edition, the changes were abandoned by 5th edition. In fact, it has been such an integral part of the game for so long that people who have been playing long enough start seeing the abbreviations everywhere. For example, I always wonder for a moment how something can be Chaotic AND Neutral AND Good when I see the Compressed Natural Gas logo on the back of a car.

The crux of the alignment chart is to determine a character's attitude about themselves, society, and the world along the two axes. Simple enough in and of itself, and an idea that is so popular that versions have popped up in both tabletop RPGs and video games, in one form or fashion. The Palladium system had alignments, for example, though they were standalone rather than on axes. These alignments were even more limiting than those in the "standard" alignment system, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to find one that fit a character concept.

There was an entire line of Star Wars video games that tracked whether or not a character was drifting toward the light or dark side, including advantages and disadvantages for being on one end or the other or right in the middle.

The ubiquity of the alignment system is strange, because it is arguably the least well-defined and least functional system in D&D or any of its numerous offspring. If you got nine different gamers together and asked them to describe the alignment system and define the alignments, you would get nine different answers. Perhaps ironically, you could then place these nine different answers on an alignment chart (and get nine different answers about whether or not your placements were accurate).

The cultural norms underlying morality are constantly shifting, so even examples made at one point in time are no longer considered viable in another.

Even determining which alignments represent the best and worst possibilities is up for debate. While the neutral alignments are just that and no one would suggest they're paragons of right or wrong (though some might suggest the middle path is the best), the question of whether a person who obeys all laws and is good (Lawful Good) is better than someone who cares more about the greater good than following all the rules (Chaotic Good) is a matter of opinion. We'll call this the "Superman vs. Batman" question. Just as questionable is whether it is the person who eschews all order with no care for others (Chaotic Evil) or the person who only wants there to be laws that they control and that benefit them (Lawful Evil) is the worse sort of villain. This would be the "Joker vs. Darkseid" argument.

And the cultural norms underlying morality are constantly shifting, so even examples made at one point in time are no longer considered viable in another. For example, the creator of the alignment chart, Gary Gygax, apparently said that it was acceptable for a Lawful Good paladin to kill kobold babies because they were just going to grow up to be kobolds, an idea that is horrifying to most modern gamers and would be considered Chaotic Evil.

None of this would be an issue, were the alignments firmly established with objective rules in place the way things like spells and weapon attacks are. But since what a player may think fits with a particular alignment and what a game master thinks fits with a particular alignment could be completely different, a player could be subjected to a ruling with no real recourse to rules—which might be surprising to both. Debates about rules are common, and the usual rule is that the GM has final say, but this system is almost *entirely* objective.

This would also not be an issue if the alignment system only existed as an aide to role playing, but that is not the case. Several mechanics—from the damage weapons do, to how spells affect targets, to whether or not a character is even eligible for some options—hinge on a character's alignment, and if a character has chosen a certain option then behaved in a way the GM thought was opposed to the character's alignment, the character could lose out on abilities and become unbalanced compared to other characters.

Yet there is something so evocative and inviting about being able to break down a person's whole personality into a couple of dimensions. All sorts of alignments get made up. Lawful Annoying, Neutral Jerk, and my personal favorite, Chaotic Stupid, which was once used to describe a player whose Chaotic Evil character went through an entire dungeon with a 10-footladder strapped to his back but didn't use it until the characters got back to town and never once did anything even rude, let alone chaotic or evil.

Perhaps this is the very allure that explains the otherwise baffling fact that the system has not only stayed a part of Dungeons & Dragons so long but also has wormed its way out into other systems and beyond into the larger world of pop culture.

You can find an alignment chart for pretty much anything. A quick search pulls up ones for gift-giving, what components are required to make something a sandwich, and texting techniques and etiquette. I would say they're the Myers-Briggs charts of memes, but Myers-Briggs charts are the Myers-Briggs charts of memes.

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I would say they're the Myers-Briggs charts of memes, but Myers-Briggs charts are the Myers-Briggs charts of memes.

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And they are commonly distributed by people who not only have never touched a polyhedral die, let alone actually played D&D, but would likely consider D&D some form of devil worship and would be horrified to know that they're passing on anything based on such satanism.

But then, it is probably the same things that makes the alignment chart so troublesome in a complex game system bounded by specific rules that makes them so appealing in the wider world. They are a way to quickly and visually break things down into finer components than just "there are two types of people in the world" generalizations, but not actually detailed enough to truly analyze things. The fact that there's at least some aspect of them that is invariably thrown in as a joke (usually what is defined as Chaotic Evil) only makes them more popular.

So, the next time your Aunt Marjory sends you an alignment chart meme, ask her if she wants to join your Thursday night game session and find out if she's Lawful Cool or Chaotic Clueless. ☙

James Abendroth is a lifelong Texan, a relatively new father, and a relatively old husband. He has written scripts for the *Come and Take It!* podcast, articles for the Ideology of Madness website, four novels (and co-written 3), several short stories, freelanced for several gaming companies, and published his own game material. If it involves stringing words together, he will try it. He can be found on Instagram and Twitter @blackguardpress.

*If you have comments or opinions about alignment charts, or thoughts on your aunt Marjory being chaotic evil, write to us at editors.jod4hap@protonmail.com.

Major Image

Using Virtual Tabletops
in Hybrid and In-Person Games

MARK ORR

Virtual tabletops (VTTs) have become a fact of life in the tabletop gaming community during the global pandemic of 2020-2021. If you're like me, the prospect of games returning to the real-life tabletop is exciting! As it became safe for my gaming group to meet in person again, I got excited as I dusted off my minis, unfolded my battle mats, and rolled my favorite d20s once again. Yet there was so much I learned about VTTs before and during the pandemic, and I would hate for all of that to go to waste. I'd like to tell you about my journey with VTTs, and why they will continue to be a tool in my GM toolbox.

My first steps into remote gaming were primitive by today's standards. I have friends who live across the country, and our first steps to try to game together involved using Skype with a laptop camera pointed at a physical map. It worked okay, and we

had a lot of fun with those early remote games, but the introduction of VTTs made remote gaming feel much more like gaming in person.

As my experience with using Roll20.net, a virtual tabletop website, grew, it occurred to me that I could also use this tool in my in-person games. At the time, I was running Pathfinder's *Giantslayer Adventure Path*, which unsurprisingly had some huge maps! My table was not large enough to draw these maps to scale. I remembered running TSR's *Against the Giants* when I was a kid, and I thought about how I used theater of the mind to describe those combats, and I was sure that would work just fine. I saw an opportunity, however, to tell this story visually using this new technology, so I created a map representing a giant's hall the size of a football field. Everyone brought their laptops, and we played a thrilling session in which the players felt absolutely tiny in this huge space with fearsome giants. This was when I fell in love with VTTs as a storytelling tool.

When virtual games became mandatory in 2020, my group already had some experience playing this way, so we made the switch without missing a session. During 2020, I attended virtual conventions across the country, and learned tips and tricks for using different VTTs. I went from dabbling into VTTs to becoming comfortable creating engaging virtual games. I started thinking about their potential to tell different kinds of stories—to be able to create puzzles, social encounters, chases, and complex skill challenges using the visual aspects of this storytelling tool.

As I move back into in-person and hybrid games, there are four ways I plan on continuing to use virtual tabletops:

1. Handouts

One of my favorite features of VTTs are handouts. While I love a tangible handout I can place in the player's hands, I don't always find it necessary to print handouts that will just be tossed later. With virtual handouts, you can include visuals and player-facing information, while attaching hidden GM notes. Once they unlock the secrets of a message, character, or item that you've made the handout for, you can simply copy and paste them into the player information section.

2. Large battle maps

As I learned in my *Giantslayer* campaign, some maps are too large for most tables. Let's say you want to play on a map of a ruined village, giant encampment, dragon's cave, or chase across city rooftops. VTTs can do a nice job of conveying the scale of epic battles.

3. City and world maps

City and world maps are useful tools in any game, but VTTs can take your large area maps to a whole new level. With some VTT knowledge and a little bit of time, you can create an interactive city map, regional or world map. You can use tokens on the map to make clickable locations that have player-facing options and hidden notes. You can hide locations that have not yet been explored, and reveal them as players discover them. You can set the scale of the maps in the settings page, and then use the measuring tool to calculate the distance it takes to travel between locations. Virtual maps can be a great tool for setting up a sandbox-style campaign with well-organized notes.

4. Adding virtual players

Getting people together in physical space can be a challenge, even when there's not a pandemic. Giving players the option of joining the game virtually can add more flexibility to your gaming schedule. If a player gets sick or is out of town but would still like to play, they can join virtually. If a player gets transferred to another city or even across the world, the campaign doesn't have to end for them.

 If you have some players who are virtual and others in person, I suggest everyone at the in-person table except for one person mutes their microphone, and you set up a speaker and table mic that everyone can use to communicate with virtual players. I've gotten excellent results from suspending my 40-dollar USB condenser mic from a cup hook in the ceiling over the table, or using a simple mic stand that is out of the way of the battle map.

Some people may not like VTTs, and if you are one of them, I am glad you may have the option of ditching them in the near future, because I think everyone should be able to play the kind of game they want to play. For me, they will be a tool I will continue to use sometimes. I've always had the option of using a battle map or using theater of the mind. VTTs give me a third option, and when I'm collaborating with my friends to tell a story, I like to have as many tools to convey that story as possible.

Mark Orr is a life-long game master, a fan of virtual tabletops, and also has a respectable collection of physical gaming maps, dice, and minis. Mark works as a k12 instructional specialist in multilingual education. In addition to gaming, he enjoys writing nerdy songs and playing guitar. You can check out a few of his tunes at coolnerdmark.com.

Reviews

Review of *The Anatomy of Adventure* by M. T. Black

An easy-to-recommend handbook of practical scenario design blended with an indie writing career retrospective

Review by

ALEX G. FRIEDMAN, MA, MFA, human rogue 5

Students of writing and design absolutely crave practical composition advice. I personally remember trying to explain as much to a professor or two during my graduate writing programs. As a neophyte, I was under the impression that if I could just follow a step-by-step guide to finish a first novel, regardless of quality, I would glean the core structure of the process. From there, I figured, it would become a skill to be honed instead of a feat to aspire toward. These days, as a professor of English myself, I see both how absolutely accurate and witheringly naive my scholarly desires were. In *The Anatomy of Adventure*, M. T. Black is largely successful in distilling classic TTRPG design within an accessible, entertaining essay collection.

The Anatomy of Adventure collects ten essays about the composition, publishing, and marketing of independent D&D 5e compatible adventure content. For fans of his popular D&D 5th edition adventure line, he provides very specific behind-the-scenes examples drawn from his own library of works. Even if you haven't read his modules, Gen-X and elder-millennial lifelong fans of D&D and other old-school TTRPGs will be treated to some tasteful nostalgia about the Advanced Dungeons and Dragons era of gaming. Those with less of a background will have picked one up by the time they finish this book. The classics provide a context for Black's writing and business advice. It's a fun choice that also reinforces the legacy of the hobby.

Legacy is present in many of these essays. Black's first essay, "Goblins in a Cave," is about his beginnings writing adventures as pastiche projects. He describes the design and play of the famous module The Keep on the Borderlands. Black goes to lengths to explain how important "copying what you love" is to getting started as a module writer (a phrase he borrows from fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto, very career forward my dude). In the third essay, "Nightmare in Amber," Black traces the legacy of his own adventure Shadows on the Long all the way back to ideas first lifted from Clark Ashton Smith's pulp fantasy stories by TSR author Tom Moldvay. Black's scholarship really shines here due to his awareness of the shoulders upon which he built his career.

Legacy is present in many of these essays....
These essays encourage the reader to invest
in their own careers as well.

These essays encourage the reader to invest in their own careers as well. Aside from practical writing advice, the fourth essay gives readers real insight into how Black has successfully marketed his work. He includes his own early missteps as well as his breakdown of his own sales and marketing numbers, down to his spreadsheets and experiments in bundling products. Another essay describes practical dungeon design with randomly generated elements. Another details incorporating interactivity within your dungeons. *The Anatomy of Adventure* could easily serve as the text for a junior year college course on writing adventures. If the right people read it, that scenario may actually come to fruition. M.T. Black has even written an expanded reading list to accompany his TTRPG essays on his blog.

Overall, *The Anatomy of Adventure* is an easy book to recommend to anyone with even a passing interest in adventure design. Even veteran players who just want a peak behind the curtain will be educated and entertained. Pick it up on his site or on DriveThruRPG.

Review of *Low Stakes* by Craig Campbell (Art by Ashley McCammon)

RPG lite for the creatures of the nite

Review by

ALEX G. FRIEDMAN,
MA, MFA, human rogue 5

TTRPGs usually start with a founding fictional text they are trying to turn into gameplay. *Lord of the Rings, Interview with the Vampire, Call of Cthulhu*: Each of these spawned their own games. In modern times, we expect the systems that have arisen to answer these fantasies to be able to cover the new fantasies we conjure for each other. Yet, fiction tends to find or adopt storytelling styles that don't neatly fit into our TTRPG systems, even as these systems expand and broaden their concepts. (My friends and I were briefly obsessed with capturing *Mystery Men* in TTRPG form, with some success.) So I can understand why, faced with creating a wholly new game or attempting to live the *What We Do in the Shadows* fantasy in *Vampire: The Masquerade*, Craig Campbell and his team opted for the former. Thankfully, they were successful.

Low Stakes is a GM-less rules-light RPG with a heavy emphasis on improvisation and story structure. It runs smoothly with a group of four adults with above average reading and improvising proficiency in about two and a half hours. For the purposes of this review, I played sessions with two different groups of four adults who varied widely in terms of familiarity with the source material* and TTRPGs.

Low Stakes weighs in at 34 pages. These are divided into a lean 14 pages of setup and rules, 10 pages of character options, and 10 pages of story options (seven episodes and instructions to build your own). The game does not assume that players are familiar with improv games, so the rules begin with a concise breakdown of that concept. The rules can be read or described very easily in 15 to 20 minutes, characters can be created in five, and the story outline is best determined by a

few rolls of the dice. Within half an hour of being handed the book, a group should be ready to play. Materials required are pens, paper, and a fistful of D6s.
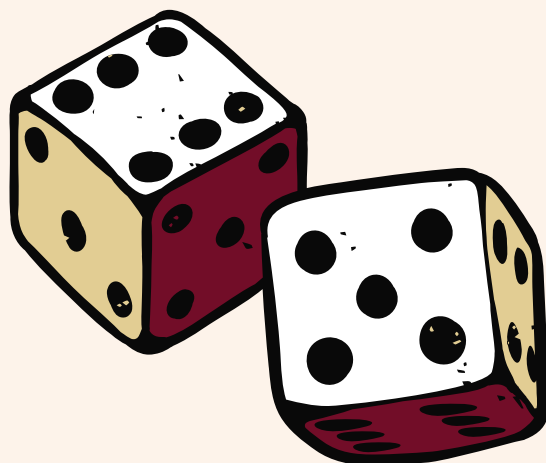
Low Stakes is a delightful book in both PDF and print-on-demand formats. The PDF reads well on a phone, tablet, or e-ink reader. The print-on-demand book is an inexpensive softcover, but the paper quality is high enough that I was able to repair a minor spill on an interior page with a little soap-and-water dabbing, no harm done. McCammon's art is charming and presents a diverse cast of weirdos. Five of McCammon's illustrations are present here, and while I always like more art in a book like this, it feels well populated enough due to the book's layout. McCammon's aesthetic is cute, textured, humorous, and packs plenty of pathos.

Low Stakes is well laid out and well edited. My only complaint with the book is that it lacks a spine and will get lost in most physical displays. That said, McCammon's cover art stands out very well in digital libraries.

The character options and storylines support a much broader scope of play than simply running a derivative retelling of *What We Do in the Shadows*. Rules are included to play as a human, vampire, psychic vampire, werewolf, ghost, and spellcaster. There is an "other" option for any other horror story trope or beast you might invent. Storylines present account for sitcom scripts that fit within two standard deviations of the collected bell curve of 20th and 21st century television. It would take a group roughly 15 hours to play through the content provided. In our two playtest games, one featured a Lady Bathory-type vampire and her variously creepy housemates dealing with a plumbing disaster (bathing in the blood of virgins generates a lot of laundry). The second featured a witch running a taxidermied bird-themed B&B haunted by a couple of flighty ghosts and a would-be murderous butler. We enjoyed both games immensely and by halfway through the second we had mastered the rules.

Gameplay in *Low Stakes* involves managing a couple of resources and once-per-game actions during improvised scenes with the objective of trading the upper-hand over other player character's actions for better outcomes at the end of the story. While it is largely GM-less, certain game mastery duties are traded as part of the power trading gameplay cycle. Every player will generally get to act in every power dynamic role during a session as long as they play their resources when given the opportunity. Anyone with a basic understanding of television storytelling will find that the gameplay naturally flows with the storytelling framework of the game, usually with humorous and rewarding results. The most difficult part of the game is remembering to use your Confessionals, moments where your character speaks candidly to an imagined audience in order to shift the dynamic of a scene to your advantage (or gain resources). Representing resources physically with pawns or coins is usually enough to remind players to use them, but if your table forgets, it won't break the game. The fun is in the structured improvisation and weird characters. If your TTRPG table collectively has a couple levels in Bard, you'll find yourself in for a fun creative structure to play with.

Low Stakes is an excellent game presented in a well-dressed package. At its PDF price point, this game is a steal. NerdBurger Games has a real winner with this game and I hope it finds its audience.

*One of my players had not seen the *WWDinS* and I tried to explain: "It's basically *The Odd Couple* but with vampires." She replied that she had no idea what *The Odd Couple* was (the reference being older than the Carter administration), and I had to fumble around for an example of the format from the past decade. I settled on *The Big Bang Theory* (early seasons) and then promptly crumbled into Boomer-vampire corpse dust, as though exposed to the aging influence of a thousand suns. ❧

Impressions of New and Notable Releases

Adams, Laura-Shay, editor. *The Mwangi Expanse*. Compiled by Eleanor Ferron and Luis Loza, Pathfinder 2E ed.

> Easily the best setting book Paizo has ever released. An essential expansion to 2nd edition Pathfinder.

Avatar Legends: The Roleplaying Game. Kickstarter, 2 Aug. 2021, www.kickstarter.com/projects/magpiegames/avatar-legends-the-roleplaying-game. Accessed 22 Aug. 2021.

> The fastest-funded TTRPG crowdfunding campaign to date. Lots of people are excited for this one.

Detwiller, Dennis, illustrator. *Delta Green: Impossible Landscapes*. Arc Dream Publishing, 2021. Delta Green.

> "IMPOSSIBLE LANDSCAPES is the first campaign for Delta Green: The Role-Playing Game. Four operations sprawl across decades and the immeasurable stretches of nightmare. Harrowing investigations and the bitterest truths test the mettle of the most accomplished Agents."

> Lots of hype behind this one.

Impressions of New and Notable Releases, cont.

Elliott, Paul, et al. ALIEN RPG *Colonial Marines Operations Manual*. Illustrated by Martin Grip et al., Free League Publishing, 2021.

> People really seem to like Gaska and company's take on the Alien franchise.

Glicker, Stephen. *Battlezoo Bestiary*. Roll for Combat, 2021.

> "3 books, over 100 new monsters, craft gear from slain monsters, play a Dragon, a level 1-10 pirate adventure, Monster Hunting, & more!"

> JoD4HAP editor Alex G. Friedman is featured in this book through a prize from the RPG Superstar! contest (2020).

Stevens, Jeff C. *Adventures from the Potbellied Kobold: 15 Adventures for 5E*. Jeff Stevens Games, 2021. ☙

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Inclusivity Statement:
This journal is not the place to submit screeds against woke culture in gaming. As adults who agree to play pretend based on a set of predetermined rules, we have evolved beyond the need to pass judgement upon marginalized identities. Inclusivity is in. Misogyny is passé.