



The Guy in the Giants Hat

**The Fan Writing of
Douglas Berry**
A Science Fiction* Fan

The Guy in the Giant's Hat

The Fan Writing of Douglas Berry: A Science Fiction* Fan

. = And so much more...

Douglas Berry's come and gone.

That fact alone has had me in crying jags off and on for a couple of months now. Doug was...well, that's a tricky thing to answer, because like any fractal, the more you cut the idea into smaller pieces, the more it appears that it just is. Doug was just Doug, and that was an incredible thing. He was funny, smart, dark, thoughtful, wise, foolish, fun, grumpy, scary, sweet, and everything all at once in a way that was endearing.

I miss him. I always will.

This selection of works by Chuck Serface and myself is a tribute to a fan writer who never quite got the respect he deserved. He was one of those writers who it didn't matter what length he wrote at, or what topic; it was all worth reading, worth chewing upon. He wrote about gaming, about science fiction books, about life, about death, about fun, about the San Francisco Giants, and ultimately, about what it was like to experience life as Doug Berry.

I spoke at his memorial, held in the building where I likely met Doug, almost certainly in a decade called the 90s, and almost certainly at a TimeCon or a BayCon. That event is, sadly, lost to history and my ever-worsening memory issues. No big deal, honestly, because once you met Doug, you'd always known Doug; he'd always been there. At the memorial, I told the story of the day he went on to a ventilator, and it hit me that Doug was almost certainly not going to pull out of this as he had so many other health scares over the years. I turned to comfort reading, Hunter S. Thomson, and found a phrase that perfectly summed up Doug staring back at me from the random page I'd opened to - "There he goes. One of God's own prototypes. A high-powered mutant of some kind never even considered for mass production."

That about summed up my thoughts on Doug Berry.

I want to thank Kirsten Berry, Doug's wife, for lettin' us do this piece, and gettin' all his work in a spot we could get at. I'm so grateful, and I hope that this will let those folks who missed the man in the flesh will at least be able to enjoy watching the tracks he left in his passing through.

This volume collects some of Doug's work from the final year of his life, plus a few appearances in *Journey Planet* and *The Drink Tank*, which he co-edited two wonderful issues with Alissa Wales, Chuck, and myself.

NOTE: The title is based on a Fanzine Lounge afternoon where several people popped in looking for "someone named Doug Berry" where we simply told everyone he was the 'Guy in the Giant's Hat' and Doug popped in later saying "You know I'm more than the guy in the Giants hat, right, Chris?"

So much more. So very much.

Art Credits

Vanessa Applegate - Cover, 10, 18, 44

Ditmar - 36

K8 - 6

Sean Russell Friend - 29

Chris Garcia - 16, 30

España Sheriff - 4, 14, 25

All others are Dover Clip Art

Douglas E. Berry

Selections from Gridlore.Dreamwidth.Org

Chosen by Chuck Surface

Class & Level Delenda Est

April 8, 2023

Even before the fiasco with WOTC's Open Game License, I had decided to drop Dungeons & Dragons as a first-line TTRPG system of choice, not because of the quality of the game or the actions of publishers, but a long-simmering dissatisfaction with class-and-level systems. I'm not a strict simulationist by any means, but the flaws of this kind of game mechanic became too much to ignore.

To begin, let's remember that D&D was born out of miniatures gaming, where abstract power levels and damage were not only normal but the only possible way to make the game work. When damage is applied to a formation of wood elves or Prussian riflemen, you must determine mass effects. But when *The Fantasy Supplement* became *Chainmail* and then transitioned to the original D&D they kept those abstracts. And they worked, even as other game engines began appearing.

I have three main issues with the Class & Level game engine.

First of all, Classes are restrictive. To use my military experience, I knew Army infantrymen who had been Navy corpsmen and decided to trade up. People change careers all the time, acquire diverse skill sets, and are well-rounded. Being a Fighter, or a Hacker, or whatever strait jackets the ability to create anything more than a singly-focused character. Better to have a system that allows for wider skills and more choices.

Secondly, Levels create an inevitable arms race. Heroic Fantasy features many scenes of Conan or Elric cleaving through a horde of lesser foes. In a game, that is boring as hell. Unless the Game Master just gives up and describes the slaughter, which takes away agency from the players. Magic-using characters are walking artillery (and the proliferation of classes able to use magic in D&D's various editions was a major turn-off for me) and able to pretty much destroy cities by mid-level. So the threats need to constantly ramp up, which means there's very little changing in game-play except for the length of combats and the clatter of dice to determine damage.

Finally, I hated the kludges bolted on to try to fix the base problem. Feats seemed to be a good idea until they multiplied like rabbits and slowed the game down to a crawl as everyone looked up all the modifiers and special effects. Class branching, like in D&D 5th edition, helped, but still had the limitations of both the classes and levels, plus too many of the branches gave magic to traditionally non-magic types. If you are going to define a class, keep the definition!

So my D&D 5e shelf has been reduced to the few books I would need to play with if I were offered a space in an interesting campaign. In the coming weeks, I'll be posting a series called *Why You Should Be Playing . . .* to highlight some very good TTRPGs that address these issues.

Why You Should Be Playing HârnMaster 3.0: Part One

April 10, 2023

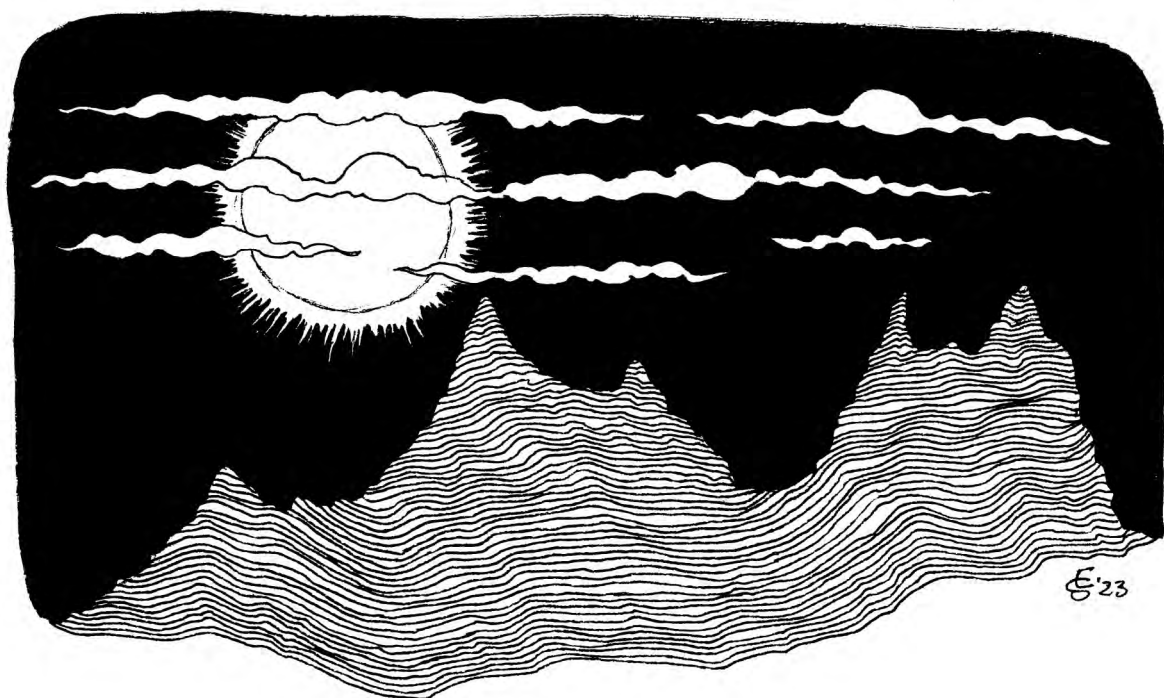
Hârn is one of the best-detailed fantasy settings around, and it is deliberately a low-magic, mostly realistic early-high medieval setting. This fog-shrouded island, off the northwestern coast of the continent of Lythia, is somewhat analogous to Great Britain and Ireland but as a single landmass.

Hârn was first published in 1983, and since then, the details of the world have just been added, but always thoughtfully and carefully. The level of detail is astounding. Visit the King of Kaldor in his castle at Olokand, and the GM will not just have the floorplan but the height and shape of ceilings, the location and probability of guards, and the names of everyone who lives and works in the place.

The island is home to several kingdoms and one merchant republic. The kingdoms are mostly traditional feudal states, although Melderyn is assumed to be ruled by a council of wizards, and Orbal is an Invinian (Viking) state that still struggles with internal strife and rebellions by the subjugated Jarin population. Every state comes with some drama. In Kaldor, King Miginath amazes his subjects by staying alive, and he has no clear heir. In Rethem, six of the last seven monarchs have died violent deaths.

Along with the settled lands, the vast forests and heaths are home to numerous tribal people, some peaceful, some hostile to outsiders. Guarding trade caravans is a great way to get a group together as they guide merchants along several trade routes. Also threatening the peace of the island are fierce Gargun (orcs) monsters either created or imported from another realm by Lothrim the Foulspawner.

The gods are real but limited in influence, and magic exists but is rare. I'll touch on these in the next few posts on the subject.



Why You Should Be Playing HârnMaster 3.0: Part Two

April 16, 2023

The heart of any RPG is the game engine, the mechanism by which tasks and conflicts are resolved. HârnMaster (HM from here on out) uses a percentile-based skill system for almost everything. One interesting wrinkle is that when rolling, and result ending in a 0 or 5 is a critical success or failure, resulting in a constant 5% chance of exceptional results.

Like any game system born in the eighties, the game is jargon-heavy. But with a bit of practice, it becomes intuitive. Character generation is comprehensive, with everything from your birthday, which determines your sun sign, which affects skills, to relations with your family and clan and your distance from the clan head.

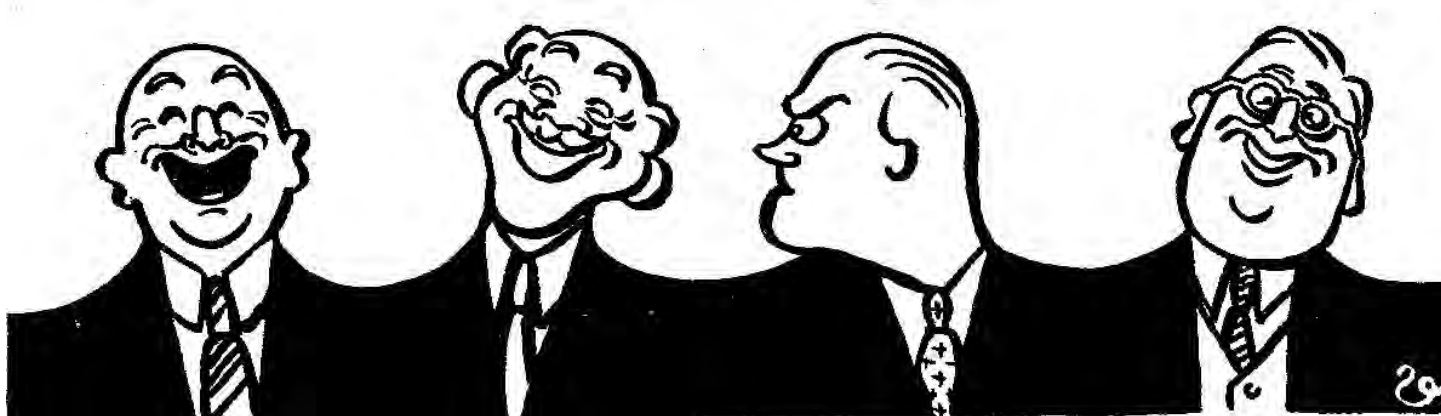
There are a stunning 32 character attributes determined by random rolls, with seven Key Attributes determined by rolling 4d6 and discarding the lowest die. Most of these are physical or social things that don't affect gameplay but are essential as background material. One fun suggestion in the family generation stage is using your Session Zero to make the characters part of the same clan.

There are two tables for medical and mental issues, where you can gamble for a few extra attribute points against the chance of some severe problems. I like that included as an option. One word of advice; ignore random rolls on your occupation table. Parents, sure. But choose your path, and don't be afraid to pick up an occupation that isn't immediately useful in an adventuring context.

So, how do the skills work? Simple. The extensive skill list shows how to generate the Skill Base. For example, "Spear" is caused by figuring $STR+STR+DEX/3$, rounding to the nearest whole number. Certain sun signs add a +1 to this number. After that, there is an Opening Mastery Number; in this case, the Skill Base x3. So if we had a character with an STR of 13 and a DEX of 15 and no bonus, his Skill Base with the spear would be $13+13+15/3 = 13.6$, raised to 14, and applying the OML we end up with a Spear skill of 42%.

It sounds complex, but it flows well in play with some practice. Character professions add additional skill opportunities, and as I said, most of this work is front-loaded in the character generation process.

The game engine is solid, easy to expand to new skills, and adaptable to new situations. It takes a little time to learn, like any game, but it hasn't needed heavy revision in forty years.



The Tale of Krispos by Harry Turtledove

April 27, 2023

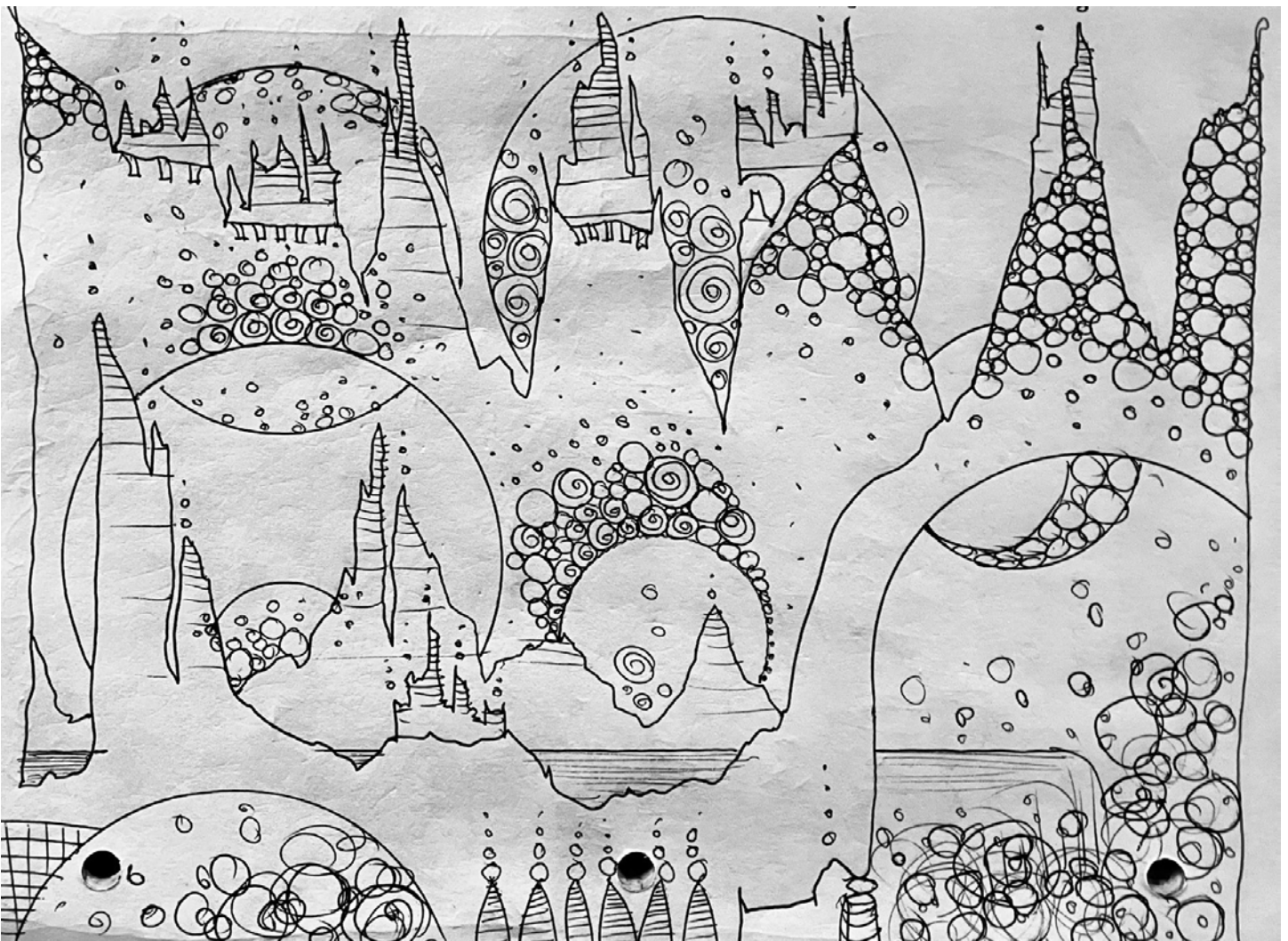
Reading this omnibus edition is like returning to an old friend. Five Stars.

Harry Turtledove's Videssos is simply the Byzantine Empire with the map flipped and Europe removed. He uses his doctorate in Byzantine history to create a vibrant, authentic setting. When my wife and I visited Istanbul, I could identify locations from the novels.

These three novels chronicle the rise of Krispos, a peasant farmer who was taxed off his land. Going to Videssos the City, he is aided by divine intervention. Krispos starts as a groom, rises through the palace intrigues, and finally becomes the Autokrater. The second novel has Krispos dealing with a civil war and a mysterious wizard sacking cities in the north.

The trilogy's final part is set some twenty years later. Krispos has three sons, and now new heresies threaten the realm's stability, and his heir is kidnapped. Or did he go willingly?

Turtledove's style is clean, crisp writing. His characters are engaging, and Videssos is a real place as it unfolds. These three novels are part of this milieu's much more extensive collection of stories. I like this book, and as I said, it's an old friend that stands up to being re-read occasionally.



Why Camerone Day Matters to Me

April 30, 2023

Every April 30th, I remember Camerone Day, when 65 men of the Légion étrangère held off nearly 2,000 Mexican troops in a meaningless battle that accomplished the Legion's mission, ensuring a vital supply convoy made it to the French Army.

I first learned about this event when I was in the 3rd Ranger Battalion. We had a full battalion PT session, and the Command Sergeant Major read us the "Recitation of Camerone," explaining what happened and making the point that this is what the Infantry does. We fight. Against the worst odds, we fight when we've been denied food or water for a day; when every bone aches and every friend by our side is dead or dying, we fight.

My decision to go Infantry was based on a 17-year-old's thirst for adventure. I wanted to run around with a machine gun and eat snakes. Infantry OSUT (One Station Unit Training) in Alpha Company, 7th Battalion, 1st Infantry Training Brigade at Fort Benning reshaped my body, and it also reshaped my mind.

I learned confidence and determination. I found that what I thought were my limits were just the beginning of my possibilities. In those thirteen weeks, I mastered the basic skills of an 11-Bravo Light Weapons Infantryman and gained control of myself in a way I never had as a rootless teenager. I was a soldier. I had a mission. Follow me.

Being in the United States Army in the mid-80s meant that we still expected to eventually fight the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact at some point. The expected lifespan of an infantryman facing that onslaught was measured in minutes. We were ready to be fed into a meatgrinder that included chemical weapon attacks and potential tactical nukes, and we did it wearing steel helmets that hadn't changed much since WWII and no body armor.

WWIII would have featured endless replays of Camerone as pockets of defending troops held out until the last breath, the final measure of devotion to duty, as 19-year-old NATO troops gave their lives. I was one of them. I knew exactly what my chances were in Germany or the ROK. It's what I trained for. It was my job.

The war never came. But in 1995, I fought a different kind of war. I was diagnosed with Stage IV-B Hodgkin's Lymphoma and given a 60% chance of living to see my 30th birthday. I am the Infantry. I went to war. The same strength I got from serving, the same toughening to rough times, the same willpower to get through and complete the mission was focused on surviving chemotherapy. I won but at a cost.

This year marks 40 years since I raised my right hand and swore to defend the Constitution of the United States. My oath still stands. I am still an Infantryman. And, if necessary, I will still fight to hold the Inn at Camerone, no matter when that ends up being.

I have munitions. I will not surrender.

Welcome the Chorus

May 10, 2023

This is some world-building for my planned National Novel Writing Month project and something I hope to publish eventually.

In the very near future, Earth will be conquered by aliens. They are very friendly and polite about it, and after about a day of futility trying to attack the orbiting ships, most of the world gives up. The fleet explains they represent the Chorus (that is how it is translated into most languages), a mixing bowl of thousands of civilizations and races that spread across much of this arm of the galaxy.

The Chorus is run by entities known mainly as the Directors. It is scarce to see one, as they tend to stay in their massive deep space cities and send directives out through messages and couriers. Those who have seen a Director describe them as "space jellyfish" or "electric starfish." No two Directors are the same.

Almost all technology in the Chorus is biotech. This is a hard rule from the Directors. A small amount of "good tech" is allowed, things that can't be done with biotech, like the Stutterwarp drive and most power plants for the drives, but everything else is based on living pieces of technology. Even the ships of the Chorus are living things, most with the intelligence of a housecat.

When humans asked why the Chorus existed and why so many species have put up with it for tens of thousands of years, the simple answer was "peace." The Chorus enforces peace and encourages trade and cultural exchanges between its subject worlds. To that end, the Chorus created the Trade Languages. There are 2,538 of them currently in use. Humans can speak, whistle, dance, or sign about forty.

For nearly every citizen of the Chorus, life under the Directors has become a near paradise. The biotech gifted by the Protectors lifts every member species to near post-scarcity levels, worlds are free to rule themselves as they wish, travel is almost free as most of the Chorus operates on a gift/barter economy, and advances in medicine means even a human can live a healthy 200 to 300 years if they want.

But there is a catch. The Directors are always eager to find aggressive races, species that excel at war and seem to keep fighting them even as the stakes rise. We fit that bill, and the price for our being allowed the full benefits of the Chorus was simple. We provide a billion or so troops for an endless war the Chorus has been fighting against a foe described only as "Machine Intelligence."

This is where the novel starts. My characters are soldiers in the war, biotech versus nanotech. The longest-serving, my protagonist, has been fighting for over twenty years. They've been told the war in this sector is over, and they are released from service. Find your way home. Oh, and this orbital habitat will be destroyed in ten days. Good luck!



A Modest Proposal Concerning the K'kree

May 13, 2023

Traveller was my first TTRPG experience and remained one of my great loves—the Third Imperium setting, at first remote and undefined, ground into a complex, vibrant place. I am proud to contribute to that growth by writing for Marc Miller's Traveller (AKA Traveller 4th Edition) and GURPS Traveller: Ground Forces, among other contributions.

But one thing always bugged me. The aliens in Traveller weren't very alien. Two of them, the Aslan and Vargr, were uplifted Terran animals (lions and wolves). One was just a variant human race that was only notable for their whole-hearted embrace of psionic abilities, something proscribed in the Imperium. The Hivers, starfish-like aliens with a penchant for manipulating other species through subtle methods, were nice, but my main problem came with the K'kree.

The K'kree are moose-sized hexapods, with the front two limbs evolving into arms. We know they are a herd species, extremely gregarious, and prone to panic if isolated from other K'kree for any time. They also tend to be claustrophobic, leading to their ships being massively oversized, even accounting for the size of an adult K'kree.

Note that these two conditions are also common in humans. We need social contact; numerous studies have shown that isolation, like extended solitary confinement, is mentally and physically damaging. Early hominids competed on the African veldt, wide open spaces brimming with predators. It's why walking upright was such an advantage. Humans, too, have an innate fear of tightly enclosed places.

My point is as an intelligent species, we can get over these fears to advance. So can the K'kree. Portraying them as animals who freak out if alone for five minutes does them a disservice. A K'kree spacer will train to endure time in a vacuum suit doing a spacewalk where he can't smell his fellow crew members because they are smart enough to understand their fear and get over it. Every year, hundreds of U.S. Army Airborne School students train to overcome their natural fear of heights and falling to earn their jump wings. The same would go for a K'kree assigned to an artillery bunker or something similar.

The other substantial defining characteristic of the K'kree is their endless war against G'naak (carnivore/predator). This dates back to a war fought when the K'kree reached space, and a slower-than-light starship containing an aggressive carnivorous species came to Kirur, the K'kree homeworld. The ensuing war lasted decades and ended with the G'naak (nothing is known about the invaders, the K'kree destroyed all traces of their existence after the war) exterminated and Kirur devastated.

Once the K'kree developed the jump drive, they encountered other sentient species, many omnivores or carnivores. The K'kree solution was simple. Stop eating meat, or be exterminated. Saving The Noble Herd from a universe filled with G'naak took on every aspect of a holy crusade. Along with ancestor worship, shrines to the heroes of this Purifications are found in every K'kree world.

Many species did bow to the K'kree and had their cultures remolded to suit their new masters. Some contacted early in the development still see the K'kree as gods. Others accept survival over death. These servant races can be found on most critical K'kree worlds and serve on starships where their generally smaller size allows them to handle tasks the K'kree would find difficult.

Purification fleets still sweep out, as they have for thousands of years. The K'kree's government, the 2,000 Worlds, prefers a dead zone around their territory and claims the right to kill and G'naak found in their exclusion zone. Mostly, the Third Imperium respects this, though Vargr raiders

constantly test K'kree defenses and resolve.

Now, here's my question. Does this paranoid, genocidal, reactionary species sound like they would trade with humans? We are G'naak! We are the K'krees' worst nightmare, a vast, advanced civilization made up of meat-eating species! The K'kree opinion of the Vargr is even lower. As for the Hivers, who not only are omnivores but will eat their own young while they are in the larval stage, there was a war that ended badly for the K'kree, and the 2,000 Worlds tend to ignore the Hive Federation.

The K'kree are cosmic hermits, staying inside their borders and trying to ignore the outside universe until a wave of quasi-religious mania sweeps a border region and a Purification Fleet is organized.



Why You Should Be Playing HârnMaster 3.5: Combat

May 20, 2023

Combat in HârnMaster is pretty fast once you get it down, and it generates real injuries as opposed to arbitrary hit points that have no real effect on the character. So you can leave a fight with a broken arm, a nasty gash on your face, and limping from when that mace hit your knee. Each wound heals separately, and while there are no hit points, each has injury points that act as a universal negative on skill rolls.

There are also immediate effects of being wounded. You might go into shock and be out of the fight. A hit to your arm might cause you to drop what you hold in that hand, or an impact on your legs might cause you to stumble and fall. In the end, a lucky swing of a sword or axe could decapitate an enemy in one stroke.

The actual mechanic is simple. You declare you are striking at a foe with a weapon. Your target chooses to Block, Counterstrike, Dodge, or Ignore. Each side rolls against the appropriate skill (except for Ignore) and compares their result (Critical or Moderate success or failure) to see the result. Every weapon has three aspects, Blunt, Edge, and Point, with a number describing their impact. For example, a spear has 4/-/7 meaning it is best used as a thrusting weapon, although you could use it as a quarterstaff in a pinch.

Armor is also rated for its defense against B/E/P, can be layered (within reason), and covers specific hit areas. So let us assume that a person wielding a spear gets moderate success against an enemy who rolls a mild failure to block. The result on the chart is A*1, meaning the attacker rolls 1d6 and adds it to the point aspect of his spear. I roll a 5 for 7+5=12—12 impact. A d100 roll for hit location yields a 42 for the right elbow. The target is wearing a long-sleeved leather jerkin, which gives 3 points of protection against Point attacks. So nine injury points go through.

Consulting the Injury Table, nine injury points to the elbow is a Serious 3 stab. This has several effects. Three Injury levels immediately incur a -3 on all attribute rolls and a -15% on skill rolls (-5% per injury level.) In addition, the wounded combatant must roll 1d6 for every point of his Universal Penalty, including all injury points, fatigue levels, encumbrance penalties, etc. This roll is compared to the Constitution of the combatant, and if it is higher, the wounded man goes into shock and falls unconscious. There is also a 3d6 Fumble roll against Dexterity; fail that, and the combatant drops whatever is in his right hand.

It sounds complex, but with practice, it flows very well. Many HM players roll two sets of d100s for both their to-hit and hit location rolls simultaneously to save time. As you can see, getting wounded has severe and immediate consequences, and you can be knocked out of combat by the first wound you take. Edged weapons can amputate limbs and even heads with a lucky strike, some injuries leave you bleeding to death, and you may find yourself crawling from the battlefield, dragging your useless leg behind you.

The system is fast and brutal, leaving PCs with real consequences for drawing swords. Did I mention the rules for wound infection? Yeah, you can die from that. Probably the best realistic combat system around. I like to take new players and have them do a few combats with pre-generated characters to emphasize that this is not *D&D*.

There are also rules for mounted combat, missile combat, and jousting. What is missing are rules for fighting in a shield wall, which is a glaring omission, as it was the most common infantry formation of the era for most nations. With the pseudo-Roman Thardic Republic and its legions as part of the setting, you would think that this would be an essential inclusion.

Next up, Gods and Magic!

The False Economy of Single-Ply Toilet Paper

May 20, 2023

One of the strictest rules at Burning Man that isn't one of the [Principles](#) is this:

THOU SHALL NOT PUT ANYTHING BUT SINGLE-PLY TOILET PAPER IN THE JOTS!

This is for an excellent reason. The nearly 3,000 Porta-Potties at Burning Man are served by drivers who make thousand-mile round-trips to clean the things four times a day. Anything thicker than single-ply clogs their hoses, requiring them to clear them. By hand.

As we love our jot trucks - seriously, those guys leave the Playa daily with beer, food, and gifts - we work hard to keep the toilets clean and pure. Well, you know what I mean.

But in almost any other situation, single-ply is a false economy. Oh, you see it everywhere. . . restaurants, hospitals, gas stations, virtually any public toilet is going to be stocked with this stuff. And yes, if you are buying TP in industrial lots, single-ply looks better for the bottom line, no pun intended.

But honestly, and I'd like to hear from the people reading this when confronted by toilet paper less structurally sound than Kleenex, don't you take twice as much as usual and make your double-ply tissue? To protect your hands and for the minimal cleaning expectation we are used to at home!

During my last miserable stint in retail, I noticed that we needed to change the TP in our restrooms five times daily. Which was unreal, given the usual customer load. Even the store manager agreed that customers used "too much" toilet paper.

No, Triesne, they used precisely enough of what we gave them.



Reflections on *The Lost Boys*

May 25, 2023

I'm writing this in a Santa Cruz, CA, hotel room a few blocks from the famous Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, which first opened in 1907. Going to the Boardwalk has been a rite of passage for Bay Area teens for decades. Going "over the Hill" (the Hill being the Coast Range) to spend long days enjoying the beach, the rides, and attractions at the Boardwalk -- and let's be real here, scoring weed -- was a big part of my teenage years.

But the Boardwalk is also known as one of the more critical settings in 1987's *The Lost Boys*, the best vampire movie ever made. I know that's a challenging statement, especially given the long history of vampire films going back to 1922's *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* and including such classics as Bela Lugosi making the definitive mark on vampire movies in *Dracula* (1931), or the even better Spanish-language version filmed at the same time as Lugosi's film using the same sets. Look it up. It's amazing.

But I'm going to make the case that while the character of Dracula defined the modern vampire, it is a definition rooted in Victorian mores and concerns. Dracula draining the blood of his victims leaves them pale and listless, similar to the end stages of tuberculosis, a pale beauty also celebrated in *La bohème* and other works of the era. Also, Dracula cemented the idea of the noble vampire, a character of means and refined manners. Again, this was a Victorian take on culture, allowing the threat to grow because a Count would never be suspected of such murders!

The Lost Boys subverts that meme and does it in the best way. Set in the fictional town of Santa Carla, the movie follows Michael (Jason Patric) and Sam Emerson (Corey Haim), who, with their newly divorced mother (Dianne Wiest), are forced to move in with their eccentric grandfather (Barnard Hughes). A rebellious and sullen teen, Michael soon falls in with a group of dirt bike-riding punks who terrorize the Boardwalk. His younger brother Sam encounters the Frog Brothers, self-proclaimed vampire hunters who push horror comics on Sam to educate him about the threat.

I'm not going to go into detail about the plot, except to say that it is both funny and scary at the same time. What amazes me on every viewing is that while the visuals are terrifying, much of the dialogue is amazingly quotable and funny. It keeps the viewer engaged and interested in the characters.

"My brother, a goddamn, shit-sucking vampire. You wait 'til mom finds out, buddy!"

The IMDB quotes page is filled with golden nuggets like these. The dialogue keeps the film from bogging down and reminds us that these kids are the main characters. What's the worst threat you can make as a younger sibling? Telling mom! That's not why this is the best vampire movie. So far, it's a great vampire movie, so what makes it the best?

The vampires.

The Lost Boys is one of the first big-budget movies not to portray vampires as suave upper-crust types or mindless monsters. No, this movie shows vampires to be what they should be: predators. The vampires in this movie don't seduce their prey or depend on deception or guile. They attack isolated targets and kill to feed. They are predators, and we are their prey. The empathy, the human connection you get in *Dracula* films, is missing here. They are only reasonably kind to Michael because he's a recruit. Everyone else is either potential food or a threat to be removed.

Even in recruiting Michael, they show a sadistic glee in tormenting him, pushing him both physically and with mental games. Until he joins them, he is just another amusement. Kiefer Sutherland's David is a magnificent example of what an immortal hunter would become. He's scary in the way Bela Lugosi never managed. Not even the more blood-infested Hammer films with Christopher Lee managed to portray the casual dismissal of mere humans the way David does. He is a monster. He is an apex predator who cares only for his fellow vampires.

The movie ends with a fantastic battle against the forces of darkness and not one but two twists. As we fade to the credits, Echo and the Bunnymen's cover of The Doors' "People Are Strange" begins, and it's one of those films you sit through the credits for, not because of the promise of additional scenes, but because it was so good.

Every year the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk has a summer film series, with movies screened to an audience sitting on the beach. The highlight every year is, of course, the night they show *The Lost Boys*. Every year people dress up in their 80s-fashion best for the movie. Cast members have been known to show up for the event. This summer, we will travel over the hill to watch this movie with the lights and the sounds of the Boardwalk behind us.

After the movie is over, we'll hurry back to the car, fearfully looking up to ensure we are not the next items on the menu.



Summer Begins!

June 2, 2023

I'm just home from the annual Crossing Guard End-of-Year BBQ, and OMG, our new Sergeant provided a taco bar. Las opciones de carne eran pollo, bistec y cerdo. We had salsa fresca, salsas picantes, cilantro, sour cream, and flour tortillas straight off the grill.

I will not need to eat again for a while. So freaking good. The only complaint was the sodas were all cherry. At least there was water. It was also good to reconnect with my friends, who offered support for me and Kirsten in this trying time. I also got to catch up with some of the people I've trained, and I'm happy to see they are thriving in the job.

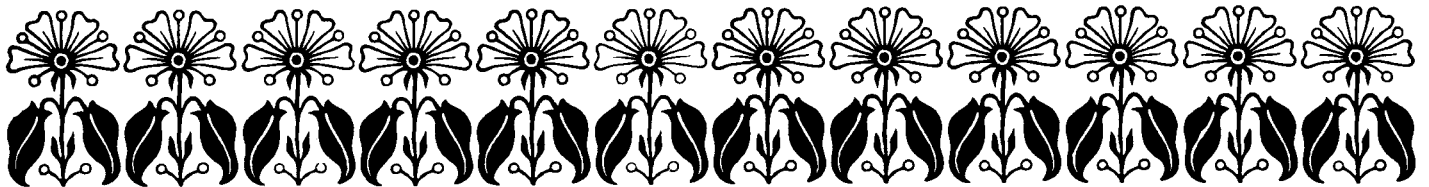
We got a lovely speech from the Chief, and the new City Manager showed up to thank us, which was nice. A couple of service awards were handed out. I'll get my five-year pin in August at the back-to-school meeting. But for the most part, it was us eating, chatting, and watching with amusement as some small kids chased the geese. Some geese even came to visit our party!

The only thing that needed to be added was the cerveza. The Chief laughed when I suggested this and said we'd do it next year with four motor units outside Central Park's car park. He knows us so well. We learned that we have at least two new motor officers, and they will be working the schools heavily for the first two weeks of school. Huzzah!

I ultimately failed to take pictures.

After the party broke up, I walked over to the library. I found two decent history books, one about the reigns of the first three Edwards in England, and the other a history of Empress Theodora, who deserves a Netflix series as she is far more interesting (as well as intelligent and powerful) than Cleopatra VII ever was.

Then I had two mundane tasks. Kirsten and I had prescriptions ready, mine at Rite Aid, hers at Costco. I picked them up and headed home, where currently I am nursing an oddly sore ankle.



This Is Hard

June 8, 2023

My wife has breast cancer.

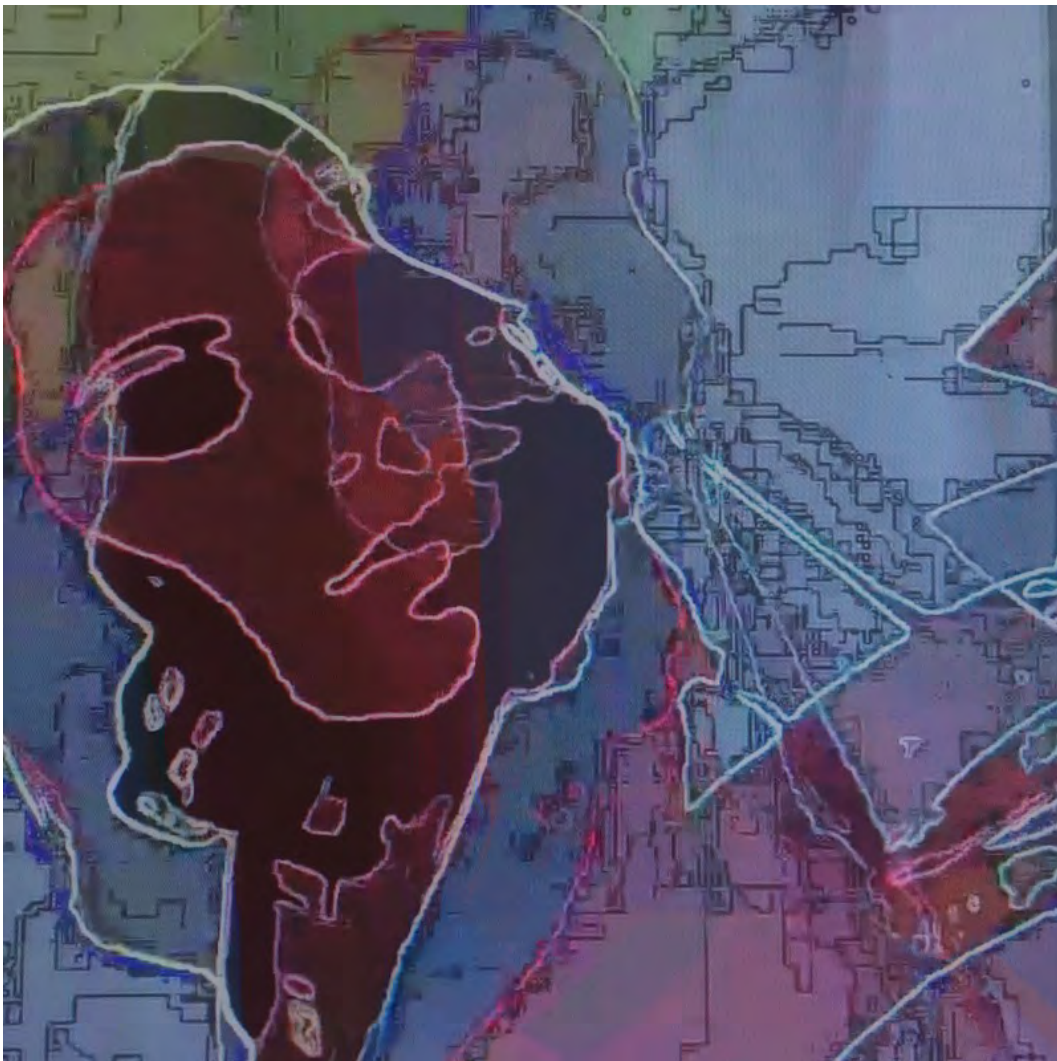
Those words are still unreal to me. We've been married for 32 years, and she has always been the rock while I've dealt with ongoing health issues. Now I'm the one sitting in the corner, watching as my world fights for her life against an enemy I know too well.

My battle with cancer is very different from Kirsten's, thankfully. I was staged at IV-B; hers was caught early. She has an incredible medical and social support team in place. She has a port installed, reducing trauma tenfold from the start.

But it's still hard. Her energy levels are terrible, and she's dealing with horrible, predictable side effects. Her hair has started to fall out, and if you know Kirsten at all, her hair has always been her one point of vanity. She got it buzzed down to make clean-up more accessible, but we now see the reality of hair loss.

I'm terrified for her. And for myself. We have months of this ahead of us, and with cancer, there is never an easy or clear path forward. Damn, it was much easier being the patient; all I had to do was lie there and do what the doctor said to do.

Still, I'll find the strength somewhere. She was there for me. I have to be there for her.



Campaign Seeds Are Everywhere

June 16, 2023

I've been reading an excellent biography of [Theodora of Byzantium](#). Daughter of a bear-tamer, mime, actress, and courtesan, she rose from the lowest ranks of society in Constantinopolis --beggars and actors -- to become possibly the most politically astute female co-ruler in the long history of the Roman state.

It's a great book, but what prompted me to post is a story that came later in her life, shortly before her death. Theodora was a lifelong Monophysite, believing that Jesus had only one divine nature. This contradicted the prevailing church teaching that Christ had two natures, fully human and fully divine. Monophysites were primarily found in Egypt (forerunners of the Coptic Church) and in the Syrian provinces. Their views and clergy were suppressed regularly.

This led to a frantic petition being brought to the palace by the king of the Ghassanids, Christianized Arabs. They no longer had bishops, and most of their priests had been killed or driven off by orthodox Christian leaders.

Theodora arranged for a deposed Patriarch of Alexandria to install a Syriac-speaking monk as Bishop of Edessa. Edessa already had a bishop, but this was all done in secret. Jacob, the monk/bishop in question, is described in the most heroic terms. Brilliant, the strength of an athlete, charismatic as all get out.

Jacob went to work, traveling at night with a small band of guards; he crisscrossed the Syrian provinces preaching, converting, and consecrating priests. The legend says 80,000 of them, but no matter the actual number, the church branch Jacob founded survives today as the Syrian Orthodox Church.

To me, this would be an excellent basis for a fantasy campaign. The player-characters are that small band of guards escorting this holy man around. He might be a reformer preaching against the corruption of the church or the empire (or both!). He might preach against excess wealth, or how elves and dwarves are people too, or he might be a long-rumored Prophet.

That's the pull. The push is the church, and probably the empire hunting you down. Of course, someone keeps setting up safe houses and meetings with sympathizers. Who is this mysterious patron?

A game like this would work best as an episodic campaign. Remember the "hero on the run" shows? Every week the hero would come to a new town, encounter some plot, and resolve it just as the pursuers show up. That kind of thing, but not as cliched. You'd also have daring escapes, accidental revolutions, actual wars, pirates, and all the other joys of life in Late Antiquity to deal with before we add fantasy elements.

I'd probably go with a low magic/distant gods setting here. This is as gritty as the sand in your sandals, and too much magic ruins the feeling.

A Bit of Fiction that Might Grow into Something

June 26, 2023

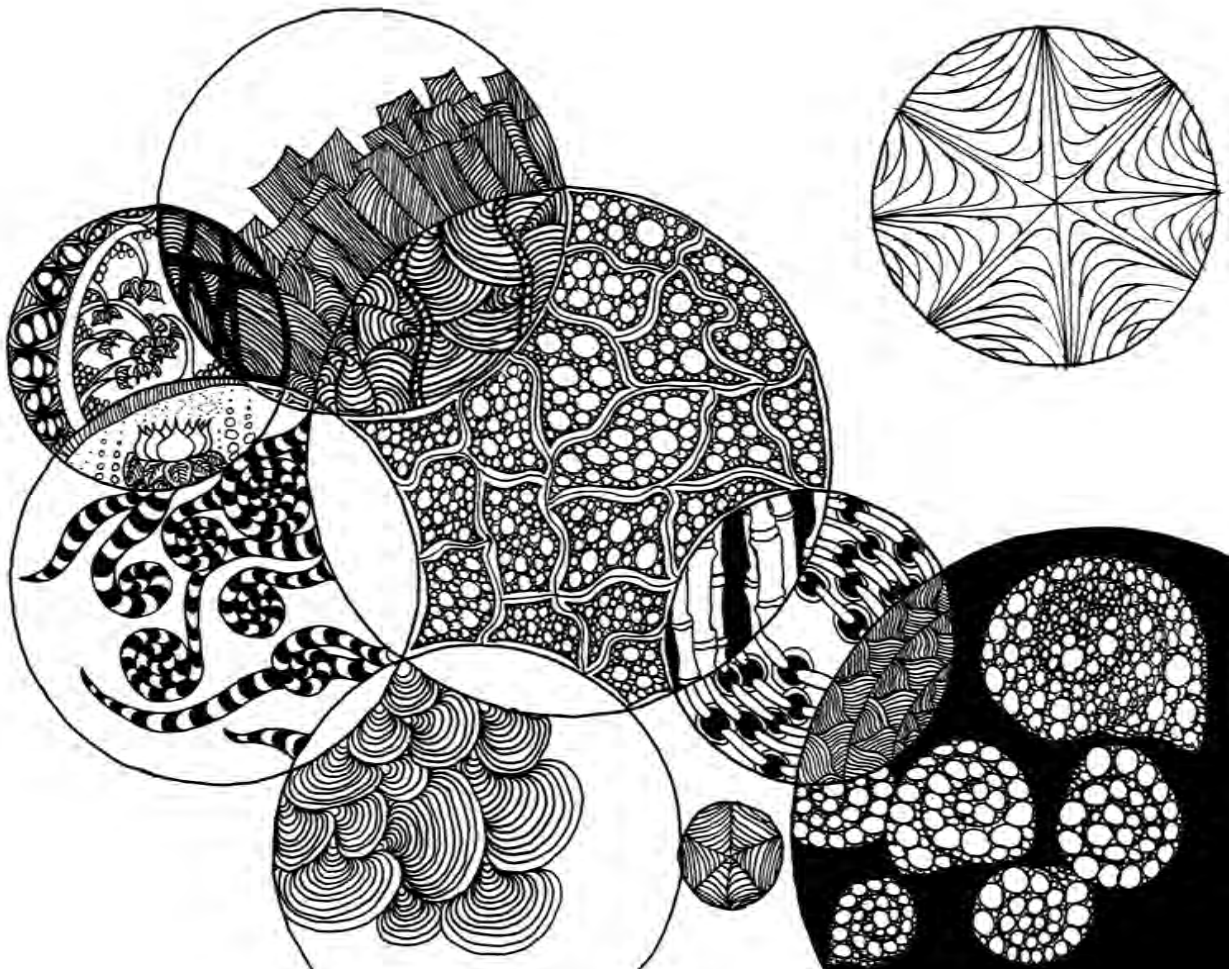
Up above, an arctic storm was lashing the towers of Dwumfords Hive. Sleet and freezing rain was attacking the soaring edifices and bridges of the upper city; coating the homes of the rich and powerful in ice that would only melt when the distant summer came. Down where I was guiding my bicycle through yet another souk, the storm manifested as an endless series of drips and rivulets of dirty water sluicing down from above. I had been told that once the storm passed, I should make my way to an upper level to view the dawn lighting up the ice-encrusted spires. Beautiful and inspiring, I was told.

Sod that. With any luck, I'd be off this world and long gone before the rain stopped.

So there I was, my dinner of fish stew in the basket and a dying glo-globe lighting my way as I maneuvered around the edges of the end-of-shift mob in the souk. All around me, people were haggling over prices, shoving, arguing, and then coming to an agreement and shaking hands like old friends. Dozens of bikes like mine competed with pedicabs and even a few draft carts for space to move. It was a typical evening in the not-quite Underhive. I was surrounded by thousands of people.

And I was being watched.

I've lasted this long by developing a sense for this. Someone was following me. Looking around, making sure it looked to any observer that I was just trying to find a faster lane of travel, I spotted three likely candidates. Not moving, not haggling, conspicuously inconspicuous. Three was



too many. I picked an exit from the souk and pedaled hard, sending up a spray of oily water in my wake. My three watchers reacted instantly, going from "trail" to "pursue" so seamlessly it was almost a thing of beauty. If only I wasn't the one being pursued.

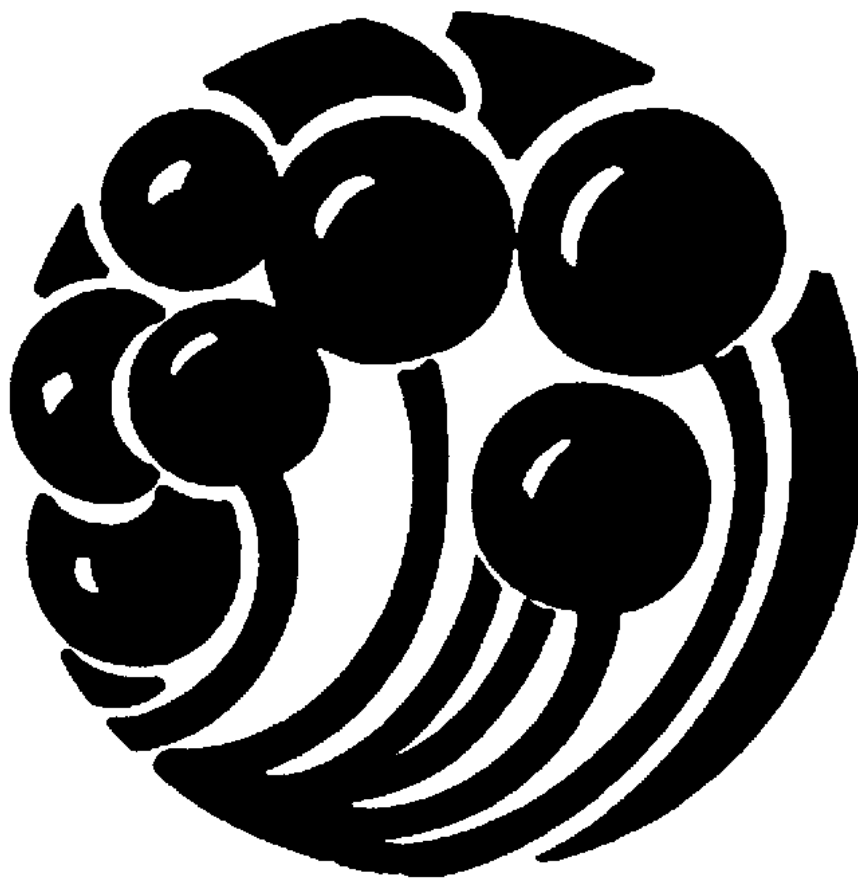
Three random turns and I dumped the bike and scampered into a narrow alleyway. I stopped several feet in and ate my stew. Somehow, I figured that eating now was going to be a good thing. As I slurped down the overly spicy meal, I tried to think who these guys could be. Arbiters? Not likely since I doubt the Merchant House families I had just scammed would want news of their gullibility to enter the official records. House assassins? Possibly, but why hesitate? They could have gunned me down in the souk easily, and to hell with the innocent bystanders. The local authorities would just pass it off as gang violence. They might have wanted me alive, to retrieve what I had liberated, but that made the whole operation clumsy. They'd know that my only options for leaving were the port or the maglev, easier to stake them out if they wanted me at their leisure.

The bike was stolen within minutes, of course. Fitting, since I had stolen it myself. At some point, I imagine every bicycle in Dwumfords must have been purchased legitimately. But in the centuries since then, they've passed from owner to owner by the simple act of taking one when the previous rider was inattentive . . .

. . . I froze as one of the three I had spotted moved down the narrow street. I could see now that it was a woman, and she moved like a trained fighter. I tried very hard not to look at her, but to instead focus on the wall and let her remain in my peripheral vision. Like I said, people know when they're being watched. My hunter stopped in the middle of the broken pavement, stared directly at me for several seconds (or so it felt) then touched a jeweled stud on the collar of her long raincoat.

"Wind meets Rocks. Fond Hearts. Reunion."

Without moving a muscle, I relaxed. So that's who was chasing me. The bastard!



***Europe in the Central Middle Ages:
962-1154 by Christopher Brooke
June 30, 2023***

<https://a.co/d/84L804L>

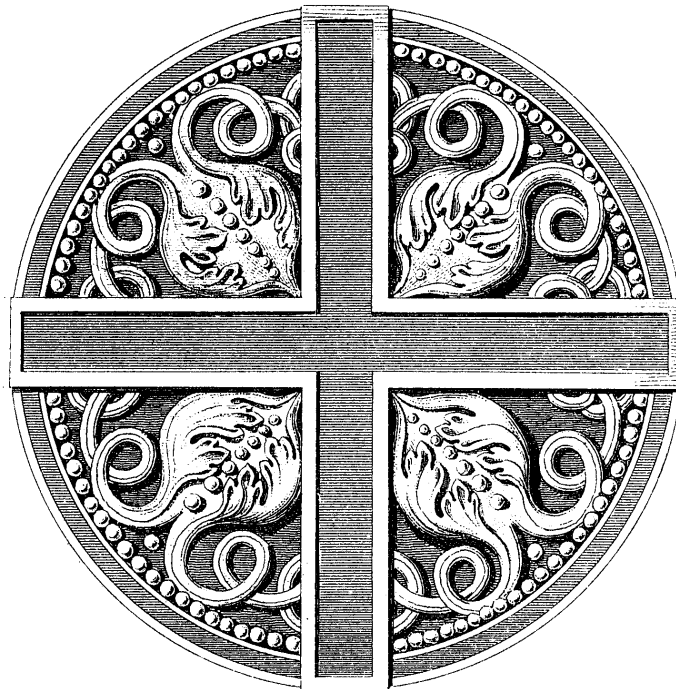
3.5 stars out of 5.

This book is quite enjoyable and written in a friendly style that draws the reader in. The problem is in the first half; there is an incredible lack of focus as author Christopher Brooke tries to address broad aspects of life in the period covered. He wanders into digressions, fails to provide critical information, and for the most part, is just confusing. The best example comes in the "Travel" chapter, which never addresses many facts about travel in the Central Middle Ages. What were the roads like? How were caravans organized, and what toils and hazards did they face? How many miles a day could you expect to make, and what would a weary traveler do at night? Sea travel? Okay, describe the ships of the era, how they navigated, and what they could carry. What were the major trading ports?

Instead, we get a ten-page divergence into the Crusades and *The Song of Roland*.

The style settled down a bit in the second half, which is a more chronological examination of Europe that focuses on the Holy Roman Empire and the Italian states, which I'll admit is a decent focus to have.

In total, it was an interesting book, but as a proper history, it falls short.



The REAL Independence Day

July 2, 2023

Today, July 2nd, is the day the Continental Congress adopted the Lee Resolution in 1776:

Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved

That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign Alliances.

That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective Colonies for their consideration and approbation.

Newspapers heralded the news, and John Adams wrote his wife:

The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more.

We missed it by that much, John. We celebrate the formal adoption of the Declaration of Independence, which actually amounts to the formal notification to the British Crown that we were out.

You can also say that everyone is celebrating my birthday, as I'm a July 4th baby.



My Birthday and My Complex Feelings Around It

July 3, 2023

I was born at 0137 hrs. on 4 July 1966. Yes, inconvenient from the start! I was also about 30 days past the initial due date estimated by my mom's obstetrician. My personal sit-in, I suppose.

People always comment on how "cool" my birthday is. It isn't. I'll start with the family issue first. On 4 July 1971, my sister Ann was born in the afternoon. This interrupted the finishing of my birthday cake, which is Capital. Felony. Treason. in my opinion. Sharing a birthday with a sibling is never easy, and Halford bless my parents for trying their best to make sure we each enjoyed our own, individual birthdays.

But then there are other factors. Families have plans for July 4th, so organizing a party is a nightmare. Your entire day is overwhelmed by the massive national celebration of Independence Day. Ann and I would trade who got the actual day, one of us getting the choice of dinner on the 4th and the other taking the 3rd or the 5th. Inevitably, one of us would choose tacos, and the other would choose a whole turkey done on the Weber with all the trimmings, in July.

So as I grew, I became disassociated from the importance of my birthday. It's an arbitrary date that I happened to be born on. Once I was in the Army, I stopped even mentioning my birthday and never really celebrated it in any real way. It reached the point where being reminded of my birthday felt toxic. Social media only made things worse.

A big part of my depression is feeling I'm not good enough to have friends. I've mentioned this to my therapist, and I can't understand why anyone would like me. But this year, partly due to therapy, I decided to take a chance.

The Giants are playing the Mariners tomorrow, and my mom and I will be there. This is the first time in a long time that the G-men have been playing at home on my birthday. Initially, it was supposed to be Kirsten and me going to the game, but she is too wrung out from cancer treatments to handle it.

That's the real bitch about cancer. Usually, you can't feel it, but the treatment lays you out flat.

So, I'm looking forward to that, and I even got up the nerve to post my Amazon wish list. The response, honestly, has given me all the emotions from "I have friends" to the depths of "they are humoring me because I'm pathetic."

So, tomorrow is my 57th birthday. Pretty good for a guy with a 60% chance of seeing 30, right?

My Tools for Writing

July 8, 2023

When I'm writing, whether for TTRPGs or just straight fiction, I use a couple of simple tools in the early stages of building scenes and characters.

The first is something I stole from the FATE system. I define three aspects of the setting of each scene or for each character. The advantage here is you have these three touchpoints when you fill out the background or person to build on. These can be notable physical aspects, emotional drivers, or anything.

For example, the main character in my current work-in-progress, *Senior Assault Leader Petros Makrakis*, has the following three aspects:

- Devoted to duty but tired of being responsible for people's lives.
- Prone to PTSD nightmares.
- He wonders if he's even human anymore.

The same can be done with places and things. The biotech war suits Makrakis and his team wear are:

- Crab-like in appearance.
- Intrusive into every orifice and the eyes.
- Can generate appropriate ammo on command.
- Users say it feels like being in the womb.

Yes, I did four. But the point is you can use the aspects to define broadly places, people, and things in your roughest drafts, so when the writing gets moving, you already know what the bartender at Elfedge is like or what the bridge of the ICV King Richard looks and sounds like.

For characters, I go one step further. I define their motivation in three questions. For Makrakis, it is:

What does the character want? He wants to return to earth and resume a peaceful life.

Why do they want it? Petros left Earth thirty years ago and has been fighting ever since. He's exhausted. Done. He sees Earth as his place to live out his life.

What's stopping them from getting it? The Chorus Directors have declared Makrakis and all the other personnel, as well as the rotating habitat they live in, surplus and to be destroyed if they don't leave. No official transport is being provided, so Petros and what's left of his team will have to find transportation and make the long journey back to a world, not even knowing where it is.

The working title for the book is *The 13th Month*, a reference any US Marine reading this should get.

Why You Should Be Playing HârnMaster 3.5: Religion

July 14, 2023

Yes, I fell off the posting wagon; it's been a rough start to summer. But back to HârnMaster! We've covered character generation, how skills work, and the sheer joy of the combat system. Today, religion.

Designed as a deliberately low-magic, skill-focused system and setting, the gods of Hârn are real but distant. They do provide rituals to their priests, which can be quite powerful, but for the most part, the various churches are more shepherds and institutions. The Gods of Hârn are:

[Agrik](#): the god of bloody war and fire. He believes that might makes right, only the strongest should rule, and that the uncertainty of conflict brings necessary improvement. War and tumult are the great threshing floor that separates the worthy from the unworthy. Agrik is in direct opposition to Larani and her rigid adherence to order. His worship is proscribed through much of Hârn, except in Rethem where it is the state religion.

[Halea](#): the Maker of Bargains, the immoral goddess of beauty, wealth, and hedonistic pleasures. Halea usually appears to humans as a beautiful youth. For Halea, greed is good; power is better. There is no sin, only pleasure matters. She shrewdly maintains her position in the courts of the gods and wishes stability, so she may continue to enjoy her pleasures. She has temples in most trading cities but is most worshiped in the Thardic Republic.

[Ilvir](#): known as the "Ochre Womb" and the "Brooder in the Blasted Plains", Ilvir creates strange beings known as Ivashu. The purpose of the Ivashu are a mystery known only to Ilvir. Ilvir's adherents are drawn to him by the promise that after death their souls will be reincarnated into Ivashu, which they believe is a higher form of life.

[Larani](#): the Lady of Paladins, the good goddess who represents order and the chivalric ideals of faith, piety, honor, righteousness, truth, justice, courage, and strength. She teaches perfection through order and faith. Larani directly opposes Agrik and his followers in their savage and chaotic attempts to achieve perfection through strength, mean survival, and brutal and unnecessary conflict. Larani is most popular amongst the nobility. Being found to be an adherent of Larani in Rethem gets you a spot at the next heretic burning.

[Morgath](#): the god of death, retribution, and revenge. Lord of the undead, suffering, and chaos. Morgath gathers souls to feed the Shadow of Bukrai and upend the order of the universe; he offers those in service to him eternal life, of a sort, with the offer to become Amorvis (free-willed undead). Proscribed almost everywhere but Rethem (sigh).

[Naveh](#): the god of nightmares, thieves, and assassins. He rules the night and is the silent death. Seemingly Nihilistic, Naveh's purposes are obscured in shadow, seemingly with no discernable aims. Every state on Hârn suppresses this religion. Or so they think.

[Peoni](#): the good goddess of peace forgiveness, love, life, and healing. She believes in achieving perfection through teaching peace and forgiveness. She nurtures with love, feeding the hungry, bringing hope to the hopeless, healing the sick, and forgiving sinners. She rewards patience, virtue, chastity, temperance, and forgiveness. She is the most popular 'goddess', especially amongst the lower classes. (Except in Rethem, of course.) Peonian clerics seeking martyrdom often sneak into Rethem to establish covert churches.

[Sarajin](#): the god of courage, strength, prowess in combat, fame, clever tactics, battle lust, and the "sport" of war. He loves Kelestia as it is. His followers seek his favor by gaining fame with acts of bravery in combat, canny gambits, and martial skills. Sarajin most often appears as a giant, yellow-haired warrior in leather and fur, carrying Fakang, his massive double-bladed axe. He is the god of the Invinians, the Viking analogs in the setting.

Save-K'Nor: the god of intellect, learning, and true knowledge. Save-K'Nor seeks to guide his adherents by perfecting their intellect and knowledge of moral philosophy so that they may understand the true nature of Kelestia and thereby select the righteous path of their own free will. The church of Save-K'Nor has few adherents because of its focus on scholarship; however, their level of education puts many in place to be of singular influence on events.

Siem: the benign god of magic, mysteries, and dreams. Siem is the oldest of the "gods." He chose to withdraw from the other 'gods' to his idyllic domain within Kelestia, the "Blessed Realm," where all remains preserved in a pristine state, and there is almost no passage of time. He is most associated with the Faerie folk, Elves, and Dwarves, though some Men worship him too.

HârnMaster allows a player to create a newly consecrated priest of any of these faiths, subject to the character's place of birth and the campaign's focus. Clerics start with many skills, but they have obligations to their church and order.

A Laranian Matakea (Temple Priest) might be ordered by his Rekela (Bishop) to accompany a young noble on his journeys. (Yes, this is a campaign seed.) A Peonian Reslava (Mendicant Priest, similar to the wandering friars of the Franciscans) would be constantly nagging his companions to show mercy, stopping to help every hamlet and cotter hold and healing the enemy. In short, the system encourages you to roleplay a genuine representative of your deity, not just be a walking first-aid kit and backup combatant.

Then there are the Invocations. These are rituals or prayers the clerics can use. For example, Laranian priests have access to the Bandage of St. Pereline, which can stop blood loss and heal an injury level from a single wound. A critical success heals the wound entirely in one day, while a critical failure causes the wound to develop an infection.

Every religion has these, some in the HârnMaster rule book, with more in the HârnMaster - Religion tome. More about that: do you want to know where the Amansurif of the Agrikian church lives? Want more details on church politics? Planning a campaign based around a mostly Laranian party campaign against the vile Agrikians? This book is for you. But there is more than enough in the basic HârnMaster rulebook to get started.

One final thought: as in most settings, there is a compact that keeps the gods from meddling too much in the mortal world. So if you want to run a mini-campaign where the PCs have to expose and oust the evil Sulapyn (Peonian bishop) who has been embezzling funds, go for it.

Tomorrow, I swear -- magic.

Why You Should Be Playing HârnMaster 3.5: Magic

July 15, 2023

As with religion, magic in HârnMaster is limited and rare, but a skilled mage can move mountains.

Magic is ruled by the six schools of the Ancient and Esoteric Order of the Shek-Pvar. The six orders, plus the Neutral school, and their specialties, are:

Lyahvi: Wind, Magnification, Visual Illusions

Pelehn: Fireball, Volcanos, Movement Enhancement

Jmorvi: Weapon Creation, Prospecting/Mining, Lockboxes

Fryria: Healing, Horticulture, Necromancy, Earthquakes

Odvishe: Waves, Precipitation, Movement Reduction

Savorya: Divination, Written Works, Memory Suppression

Neutral: Counter-Magic, Interworld Travel, Energy Storage

Every aspiring mage must determine their Convocational Mastery Level like any other skill. Each sub-order has different requirements and different astrological modifiers. So while you may want to be a fireball-tossing Pelehni, you might be better suited to an apprenticeship with the Savorya.

But here's a twist: every chantry is rated in Hârn's 1-5 star system. Getting into the best chantries is hard, and you might have to settle for a low-rated chantry and a drunk master.

Whatever your education was like (and honestly, a bad master and a shitty chancery is an excellent character backstory), you enter the game as a *Satia-Mavari*, a journeyman mage. Here's where HârnMaster shines as a campaign idea generator.

All Satia-Mavari are required to spend at least a year on wanderjahre. Before they can return to claim the status as full Mavari (full mages and entitled to the benefits of that status), they must collect at least three examples of a lost spell, original spell research, or a significant magical relic.

Halford's boots, this is a years-long campaign just waiting to happen. The Satia-Mavari calls on family to help him, and they begin tracking down rumors and legends, with numerous opportunities for side adventures.

Sadly, the base rulebook is lacking in spells. HârnMaster magic has plenty, and there are numerous online grimoires for additional ideas. The spells themselves depart from the D&D trope of walking artillery. Well, except for the Pelehni, of course. But you will find a plethora of spells that range from utilitarian to devastating. Every mage has unimaginable power if they survive long enough to tap into it.

The drawback is the schools are on a wheel, and learning spells from schools opposite yours is very hard. The goal of every wizard is to study and learn enough to become a Grey Mage. This requires:

Arcane Discipline to ML101 (or higher).

Master Arcane Lore to ML101 (or higher).

Know at least one spell in each convocation to ML 91 or better.

Know at least twelve convocational spells to ML71+

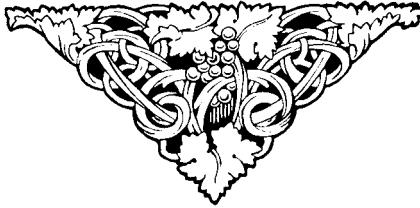
Know at least six neutral spells to ML61+.

Grey Mages are exceedingly rare and nearly legendary in their power. They are not tied to any chancery but instead tend to retreat into wild lands to build their towers and study in isolation.

Disturb them at your peril.

The structure of the Shek-Pvar has encouraged many players of Ars Magica to use Hårn as an alternate setting. Playing a Satia-Mavari is risky; you don't have many spells, and your control is still growing, but in the long run, your power can humble dragons.

OK, almost done! Next are some unique threats on Hårn, the more expansive universe, and Godstones. As always, I crave your reactions.



Theodora: Empress of Byzantium by Paolo Cesaretti
July 18, 2023

<https://a.co/d/5sN43Jt>

Five Stars.

We need a Netflix series about this woman.

Born into the lowest rung of the social ladder in Constantinople, among actors and circus workers, Theodora from an early age learned to use her talents and looks to rise in society. A scholar in an era when women weren't supposed to do that, she studied theology to support her monophy-site beliefs.

She married Petrus Sabbatius Justinianus, nephew of Justinian I after he changed the law for them. Once empress, she ran the court while Justinian focused on wars and reconquering the West. Her long experience as a courtesan taught her to have an informer in every bed and kitchen, to control the flow of rumors, and to run the Great Palace like a machine. She and her husband conferred on everything, and she even ruled in Justinian's name when he was stricken with the plague.

She was a remarkable woman, and I've barely scratched the surface. Author Paolo Cesaretti writes this in almost the style of a novel. Events unfold like you are there, which helps understand her journey from the side alleys to the throne. What's interesting, and something Cesaretti freely admits, is that most of our information about Theodora comes from Procopius of Caesarea and his Secret History, an absolute diatribe against Justinian and Theodora, calling them both literal demons.

So using that and then finding the facts was great work. Anyone interested in Roman history or great women should read this book.

***Gaunt's Ghosts: The Victory, Volume 2* by Dan Abnett**

July 20, 2023

<https://www.blacklibrary.com/series/gaunts-ghosts/ebook-the-victory-part-two-eng-2022.html>

Five Stars.

This series either has reached its natural end or a transformation point.

Picking up from the events in the first *Victory Omnibus: The Ghosts*, their Imperial Navy crew, and the Regiment's followers find themselves suddenly back in real space, with shattered memories, fogged minds, and being boarded. After a fierce fight, they learn the truth. The loss of one of their war engines has cast them out of the warp, and ten years have passed.

They reach the vital forge world of Urdesh, where an essential campaign will determine the fate of the war. To his shock, Gaunt is named a Lord Commander and ushered into the highest circles of the crusade's command, and a deadly new world of political infighting.

The two novels cover the final acts of the Urdesh campaign and are filled with Abnett's great characters, brilliant imagery, and vile enemies. The last book resolves many hanging plotlines, and as I said at the top, it is a perfect chance for the series to take a new direction. Gaunt is now the second in command of the crusade, the voice of the Warlord. The 1st Tanith is now his personal guard. I'd love to see the series lean into this, showing the big picture and infighting in the highest circles, as Gaunt did leapfrog over several people to be named to his new post. It would be fascinating to see the Ghosts evolve after over twenty years of combat and so many losses to find their new identity.

This is a tremendous new omnibus in the Black Library's longest-running series following a single unit.



Finding the "Push" in a Fantasy Game

July 22, 2023

There is a standard campaign model that involves the push, pull, gimmick (or MacGuffin), and the enigma. For most fantasy TTRPGs, the "pull" is obvious - riches, magic, growing in power, and skill. But what's the push?

The Push: The push (in my interpretation) is the initial motivation the PCs have to leave or escape their current situation and venture into a new one. It may not be something the PCs especially like, but it is the first reason for being there. The push can be relatively simple, like getting away or the need for money, or relatively complex, like a nefarious group or race intent on conquering the universe. There can be multiple pushes, some large and some small. Pushes also benefit the GM – they can come into play when the GM wants to further motivate the PCs. If the group is wasting time in some place and the action should move on, then over the hill comes a horde of barbarians, the same ones that have been following the group for weeks, whom everyone knows are bloodthirsty killers. "Quick," the group says, "Let's move on!"

When I write the Push, it is primarily why the PCs initially get involved with the adventure and any information supporting that.

The Pull: The pull is what draws the PCs along the path to the final goal: the paths and their rewards along the way. A pull is a motivation that attracts adventurers through the various stepping stones of the adventure. It can be as simple as a fabled mineral deposit on a distant world or as complex as a secret formula that will keep the sun from going nova – to be found within a certain time limit. They are also the stepping stones to get to that goal – the encounters along the way.

Pulls need a lot of thought and often must be tailored to characters in the campaign. When one character is an anthropologist and is interested in primitive cultures, the pull can be the secret of some race in a far-off world, one which allows the player to use his talents to puzzle it out after long expeditions. If a player tends to be a violence-prone soldier, then the pull may be a long-sought bit of training from a military society, available only after he has proven his worth.

Often, a campaign can do with two pulls. One may be major, and the other minor, but a multiplicity of pulls allows one to be important while the other lies dormant until needed. Shifting emphasis can make the total campaign realistic; a realistic course for the action is rarely a straightforward path directly to the adventurers' seeming goal.

I treat this as the core of the adventure – the series of encounters and sub-adventures that lead the PCs through the adventure or campaign.

The Gimmick: Any campaign needs gimmicks to appeal to the players. Early on, they have no idea what is important in a grand sense and will be self-centered to a certain extent. Gimmicks are designed to appeal to the players, enabling them to search for obviously valuable items while they also learn about their universe. Gimmicks (some say the word is an approximate anagram of *magic*) are things that players want, things they are fascinated with. In some cases, they could rank above money or ordinary ships; they may represent some advantage, such as high technology or special talents.

Gimmicks are things that cannot be bought – they must be earned through hard work, clever planning, and good fortune. Keep in mind that gimmicks are things that are acquired early by the players and then serve the person (and the group) for the rest of the campaign.

The gimmick to me is what the players discover by the end of the adventure and the true story behind it. It can also be a unique item or spell that is key to finishing the campaign.

The Enigma: Motivation or story behind the story. Something the players may or may not learn at the end of the adventure but can grow into something larger. Or there is a mystery to be solved or an ancient secret to be uncovered.

The existence of the enigma should be tied into the push or pull and motivate the players to keep working towards uncovering the secret.

The push is generally the hardest part of this to define. Why are the characters out wandering through monster-infested ruins and ancient roads plagued by bandits? Why not sign on with some petty king and get a nice warm barracks and two meals daily? (Medieval standard: big breakfasts and big suppers.)

That's the push, the reason why players cannot stop and set down roots until late in the campaign. Note that some reasons for wandering are *pulls*. A journeyman Shek-Pvar on Hårn has to complete a journey of at least a year and a day while finding three examples of specific things. That's a pull.

A push is something that makes you keep adventuring. It's a threat, a ticking bomb, or a standing danger. It is a threat if you stop. Finding who has managed to unite the orcs into a great army before these orcs eat the civilized lands is a push. Then there's the entire genre of "hero on the run" from television from the 1960s (*The Fugitive*) through the 1980s (*The A-Team*). Take the voice-over for *The A-Team*, as an example:

In 1972, a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire: The A-Team.

Now apply this to a fantasy setting. Wrongly accused of treason or heresy (or both!) and other crimes, the characters escape. The pull is to prove their innocence. The push is they are outlaws pursued by bounty hunters. The Gimmick/MacGuffin might be anything, like a witness who can prove their innocence - if that person can be found. The Enigma is who orchestrated their false trials. This would be a fine episodic campaign with a more swashbuckling feel. Each new town brings a new situation for the heroes to address, with a dramatic escape from their chief pursuer in the end. The campaign would work toward a suitably dramatic conclusion. It seems to me this kind of thing is tailor-made for *13th Sea*.

But pay attention to the push. It's what drives movement in your campaigns.

Oppenheimer

July 22, 2023

Oppenheimer is the single best movie I've seen in years. Cillian Murphy is almost as ethereal as J. Robert Oppenheimer. I can see him getting a Best Actor nod. Robert Downey Jr. shines as Lewis Strauss and better win Best Supporting Actor. The score and direction are fantastic, and the ensemble cast (Matt Damon as LTG Leslie Groves!) all provide incredible performances.

The movie follows three main arcs: (1) Oppenheimer's life from the late 1930s through the end of WWII; (2) the 1954 security clearance review by the Atomic Energy Commission; and (3) the confirmation hearings on Lewis Strauss' bid to be Secretary of Commerce in 1959. Christopher Nolan blends black-and-white sequences with color for an amazing palette, and he uses the two different hearings to set up the next scene from Oppenheimer's life story, which is messy, to say the least!

The second most tense scene in the film is the Trinity test, where the sound is gradually drawn down to just Oppenheimer's breathing before the detonation. It was amazing. The tensest scene? That would be a spoiler, but it's where RDJ cements his Oscar-caliber performance.

See this movie on the big screen. It's worth it.

A Quick Sunday Idea

July 24, 2023

I'm reading Eckhart Frahm's [*Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire*](#). It's a little further back and farther east than my usual realm of studies, but the Assyrians, in all their periods, were such a massive influence on cultures in every direction that I thought it worth my time to read at least a good survey of the topic. Plus, I got it for my birthday.

It's fascinating to see how power ebbed and flowed over the centuries, how different kings handled things, and how their neighbors dealt with a neighbor alternately on the ropes and overthrowing their rulers.

But one thing that struck me as a worldbuilder and game master was the practice of god-napping. Invading temples and stealing the sacred statues of the gods (and presumably all those lovely offerings) and bringing them back to Ashur or Nineveh or wherever the current capital was. As these statues were assumed to have divine properties equal to the Hebrew Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, the taking of those icons could be devastating to the morale of a city.

To put this in context for a fantasy setting, just as the Hebrews saw the sanctity of the Tabernacle as vital to their relationship with YHWH, so would these Mesopotamian/Anatolian cities see their idols. It could be that these statues were the method through which the deities communicated with their priests and allowed their power to flow. Most fantasy systems have some check on the power of the gods in the material world to stop it from being a constant war in which humanity gets crushed like ants, after all.

So stealing the idol of Ishtar from the temple in Babylon could deny the goddess's benefits to the Babylonians, but might even give the godnappers a chance to "adopt" the goddess into their pantheon! Bringing a consecrated statue and its accouterments back to your city, building a temple or sub-temple, or an extension to the temple of the same/similar deity of the same general portfolio, might draw the divine energy away from the original worshippers to your empire.

Bronze Age strategic bombing!

The adventure possibilities here should be clear. Stealing or recovering these statues or at least "decommissioning" them before they can be installed in an enemy temple. Of course, most of these statues were 4 or 5 meters tall and weighed several tons.

As we say, further events are left up to the Game Master.



Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire by Eckart Frahm

August 1, 2023

<https://a.co/d/1PuiDJG>

Amazing. Five Stars.

This one book can't be more than a survey of the 1,000-year history of the Assyrian state, but by focusing on the line of kings and how they influenced or were dominated by their times, author Eckart Frahm paints a great picture of the rise and stunning fall of the first true empire in the West.

From the one city-state of Ashur, named for the Assyrian's primary god, we follow the state's power's slow rise, to the empire's beginnings, to the heights of power and the stunning fall. Frahm spends time in each chapter explaining how the Assyrians governed their far-flung possessions, from tributary states to imposed governors in Assyrian-designed palaces.

Interestingly, the Assyrian kings didn't claim to be descended from the gods like many other Fertile Crescent rulers, but they did assert mandates from the gods. As Assyria absorbed the Babylonian culture, the link between God and King blurred, as the Assyrians adopted Marduk into the working of their gods.

Attention is paid to each stage of the empire's growth, and the personalities and policies of each king are examined. External causes for issues are also addressed, from climate change to barbarians raiding the borders to internal dissent. Careful attention is paid to the eternal fighting between Babylon and Assyria and the great game of diplomacy that stretched from the Egyptian states to the Hittites of Anatolia.

Frahm does a great job of linking topics from chapter to chapter, breaking the narrative to comment on how people the Biblical prophet Isaiah saw the Assyrians, or how the ordinary people lived and the influence mothers and family members had on weak kings. We get a complete picture of the empire, from rise to fall.

The story doesn't end with the fall of the Assyrian Empire in the mid-7th century BCE. Frahm tracks its influence on later empires, like the Neo-Babylonian and the Persian Achaemenid Empire, which copied the Assyrian model of governed provinces and tributary states. Frahm offers a chapter showing how Western eyes saw the Assyrian empire through the foggy visions of myth and mangled history.

The final chapter covers how ISIS tried to destroy the Assyrian period's relics and profit from the illicit sale of antiquities. Despite their best efforts, the memory of the Assyrians survives.

This was a great read, and I recommend it to anyone interested in history. For RuneQuest players, the Assyrians make a great model for the Lunar Empire.



Baudolino by Umberto Eco

August 4, 2023

Five Stars.

A novel where the primary character admits right from the start that he's a liar.

Eco is the master of the unreliable narrator, and this may be the height of the art. Starting in Constantinople in 1204 as the 4th Crusade loots and burns the Queen of Cities, Niketas Choniates is saved by the mysterious Baudolino, who confesses to having disguised himself as a crusading knight and offers safety to Niketas in exchange for writing his life story, which he had written a chronicle of, but had lost.

What follows is a fantastic tale of being adopted by Frederick Barbarossa, education in Paris, and a quest to discover the Kingdom of Prester John far to the East. The story slowly slides from reasonable to fantastic, adding each element slowly to keep you engaged. As always, there are no definitive answers and no clear explanations. We end with a sudden mystery worthy of Agatha Christie and a finale that resolves nothing but is satisfying, nonetheless.

As always, Eco does not skimp on the setting. We see and smell the sack of Constantinople. The meals are richly described, and his descriptions of the Hagia Sophia and the area brought me back to our trip there. A very sensory-immersive novel that challenges the mind.

This was both an easy and deep read, and I loved every page both as a student of the history of Constantinople and as a fan of Eco's work. I highly recommend it.

A Minor Correction to Traveller

August 6, 2023

I'm a history geek. I admit it.

One of the things that has been a bug in my ear for years was the name given to Traveller's ubiquitous Type S Scout/Courier—the *Suleiman* class. Now Suleiman the Lawgiver (Ḳānūnī Sulṭān Süleymān) was many things. A great leader, a scholar, a warrior. He was not, however, noted for being interested in exploring.

So I've decided, should I run Traveller again, that the Type-S Scout/Courier will be the Ibn Battuta class.

Abu Abdullah Muhammed ibn Baatutah, also known as Ibn Battuta, was a Berber traveler and scholar born in 1304. Over thirty years, he extensively explored various regions of the world, including but not limited to North Africa, the Middle East, East Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, the Iberian Peninsula, and West Africa. Before his passing, he left behind a detailed account of his travels, titled *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonder of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling*, better known as *The Rihala*.



Why You Should Be Playing Hârnmaster 3.5: Foes

August 6, 2023

"Hell Is Other People" - Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

On Hârn, most of your conflicts will be with other humans. Bandits along trade roads; aggressive tribes; Agrikian patrols; Orballese Ivinians spoiling for a fight; the guards in the castle or temple you are trying to rob; or if you follow the multiple campaign threads that lead to chaos in several kingdoms, in wars and skirmishes to decide the fate of nations.

However, Hârn does have some unique foes for brave adventurers to face. The misty mountains and deep swamps hold many mysteries and threats.

The Gargun

They have many names: Foulspawn, Goblins, Orcs, Hârn's Gargun are a race of small, vicious, intelligent humanoids. They are the most aggressive and brutal of the intelligent culture-forming Hârnian species. They are also the most alien, dramatically distinct from Humans, Khuzudul, and Sindarin in origin, biology, and society.

He is believed to have been created or brought to Hârn by Lothrim the Foulspawner. Lothrim used the fast-breeding Gargun warriors as shock troops, allowing him to replace his military losses, preserve his better-trained elite human armies, and rapidly expand his empire. The Gargun is one of Lothrim's more vile legacies; the creatures outlived their "creator" and, by 250TR, had spread

throughout the island. All Gargun have an abiding hatred for the Khuzdul and will if there is any chance of victory, attack any dwarves they happen upon. The two races have a long history of mutual animosity dating from the Gargun's first appearance on Hârn and the subsequent Carnage of Kiraz.

The Gargun are divided into five distinct sub-species: Gargu-araki (small or streaked orc), Gargu-hyeka (common or brown orc), Gargu-khanu (black orc), Gargu-kyani (white orc), and Gargu-viasal (red orc). Contrary to widely held belief, the Gargun cannot interbreed among their sub-species, at least not without the intervention of magic or alchemy. Each sub-species has unique social and racial traits.

The Gargun have a hive-based society, with one fertile queen and intense competition to be one of the fertile "princes" allowed to fertilize the queen's eggs. This is accomplished by being the strongest and bringing the most treasure back to the colony.

About half the Gargun of Hârn live in abandoned mines, cave systems, or lost Khuzdal citadels. The others are nomadic, competing with the human tribes.

When a colony becomes overcrowded, there are two possible outcomes. The first is a sudden genocidal slaughter until the population is reduced to a manageable level. The other is terrifying. Gargun will seize female "princesses," and thousands of Gargun will flood the countryside in search of a new home. They will eat everything in their path, steal what they can, burn what they can't, and are relentless in their advance.

Luckily for the rest of Lythia, the Gargun appear to be repelled by oceans.

The Ivashu

Ivashu are creatures of Ilvir, known as the Fatherless Multitude by the faithful or the Accursed Beasts of the Barren Circle by non-believers. Ilvir creates the Ivashu at Araka-Kalai, making use of a limited number of souls over and over again. Some Ivashu are relatively common because they have proved most adaptable to survival or are the easiest to create. However, Ilvir also enjoys experimental lifeforms and can produce any conceivable beast in some quantity. Many varieties are unique, designed to perform a specific task or to amuse the deity.

Ivashu are a great excuse to introduce unique creatures to the campaign.

Yélgri - the Hârníc Harpy

Yélgri is also called the Hârníc Harpy. They are small, highly aggressive, violent quasi-reptilian, warm-blooded winged predators and scavengers. They usually avoid attacking larger creatures capable of defending themselves, instead preferring to harass them. They are known to kill for amusement and will ferociously defend their nests.

They use simple tools and weapons such as clubs, barbed javelins, nets, rocks, and even bombs made of their dung. They communicate using a primitive language of barks, screams, and grunts. Some travelers have reported hearing Yélgri flocks singing harmoniously.

Yélgri are usually encountered in family flocks of up to a dozen, led by alpha males and females. Larger communities have been occasionally observed, with one colony in the [Hefiosa](#) Hills reported to number over fifty. Yélgri eggs are tiny, leathery, and cared for by the entire family flock. They reach maturity after around two years and may live for as much as twenty.

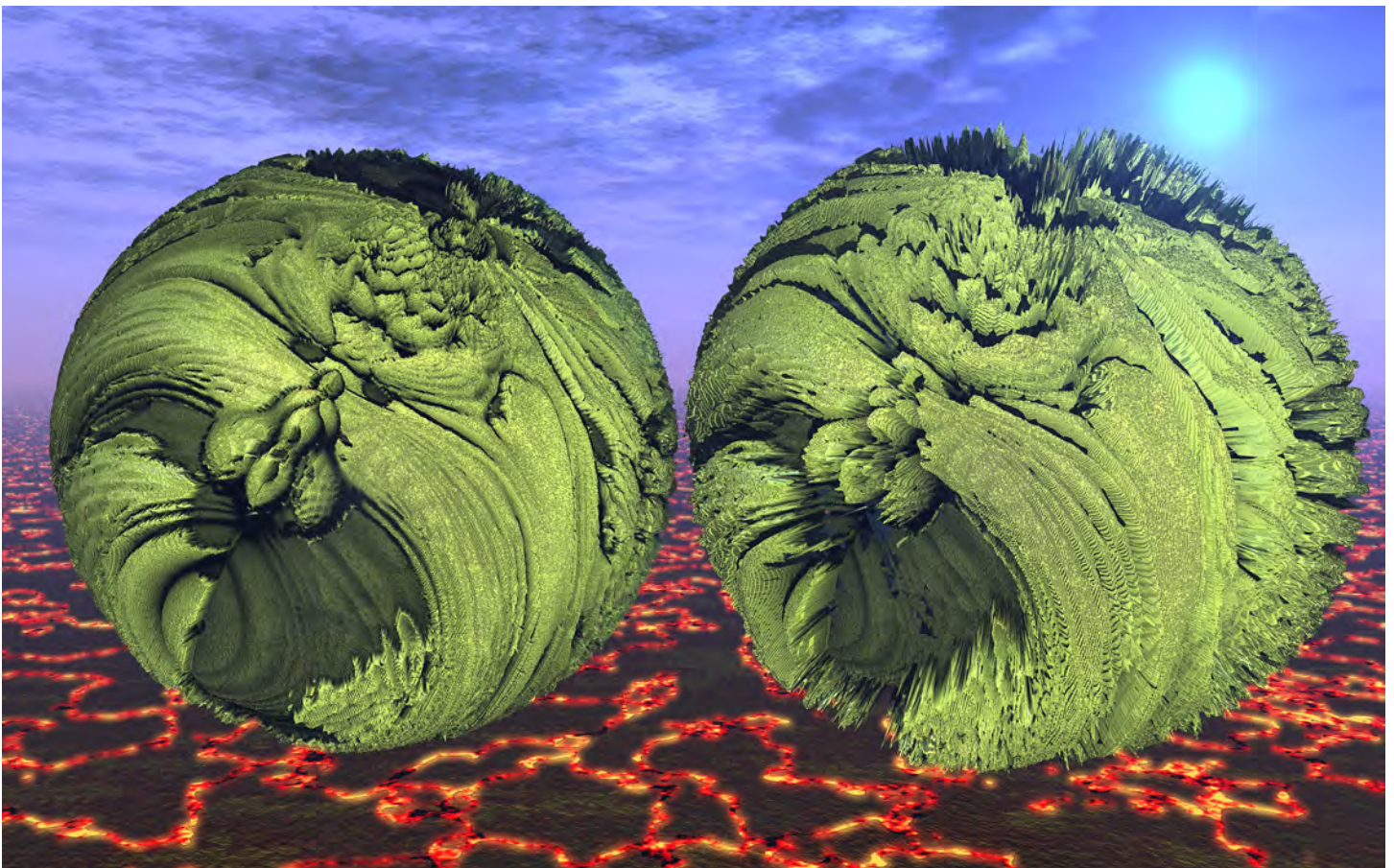
The only natural enemies of the Yélgri are the Orcs, who are fond of Yélgri flesh and eggs. Yélgri will hunt Orcs when they see an opportunity and are one of the few creatures willing to eat foulspawn flesh.

The Ilme

The Ilme are a strange race of mere-dragons, among the unique and most mysterious of the intelligent races on Hârn. The Ilme have an ancient culture with a complex language and deep mythology.

gy. They bear some likeness to their great dragon cousins, and many a reported tale of dragonkind was almost certainly an Ilme encounter, but there are significant differences. Although they are reptilian, the Ilme have no wings and probably could not fly even if they had; they commonly attain a height of 12 feet and a weight of two tons. The two sexes live apart except when mating. Despite their undisputed strength, male Ilme are somewhat cowardly and are frequently bullied and robbed by local Gargun bands. They prefer to hunt from ambush or eat carrion. They will rarely attack intruders but will fight with desperation when cornered. Even then, they usually try to negotiate first. Female Ilme is another matter; they will attack and fight intruders with limb-tearing ferocity, primarily to protect their young. The Ilme do not breathe fire, although their breath is far from sweet.

The *Hårn Bestiary* has multiple entries for critters, both mundane and monstrous. Many of the more extreme monsters can be credited to Ilvir. The cool thing is you get short articles on the setting's cats, dogs, cattle, and horses.



The Wars: Volume I-II by Procopius

August 7, 2023

Procopius of Caesarea is one of the more interesting characters of the sixth century. A legal scholar, he was assigned to accompany the "last Roman general," [Belisarius](#), as an aide and secretary. His chronicles of the wars against the Persians, the Vandals of North Africa, and the Goths in Italy are touchstones of the historical record of the times. The first two volumes follow the constant provocations and invasions by the Sasanian Empire, mostly under Chosroes. Interestingly, Procopius writes about what is happening *in theater* despite Belisarius having been absent on other missions.

The result is a fascinating look at warfare in Mesopotamia as rival armies struggle to find enough fodder and supplies, troops are dispatched with little knowledge of where the enemy is, and cities bargain to save themselves from devastation.

I hope to find the following three volumes from the same publisher, as these are excellent translations of the original Latin.

Back to Work!

August 10, 2023

After yesterday's Back To School meeting, the legion of SCPD Crossing Guards, of which I am a proud member, returned to work. Yes, school started on August 10th. For a relatively old guy who remembers school starting after Labor Day, it is pretty weird to welcome kids back in the middle of summer.

But we did get 90 days of summer vacation. Sadly, health problems for both me and Kirsten limited our ability to enjoy the season. I have been studying Spanish to better communicate with many of my families, as my school serves a large Latino population. We did make one or two concerts and enjoyed a trip on a scenic railway in Fremont.

I only worked my morning shift today, as I had to visit my cardiologist's office for an echocardiogram and get a three-day heart monitor. There are no real concerns, but people like me with an -- exciting? Terrifying? -- three-volume health history needs to keep up with heart health, and it has been a very long time between heart exams.

Seriously, I have the ICD-10 codes of everything that has tried to kill me or change the way I live tattooed on my right bicep, and I need to find an artist to add a couple of codes.

So, what does this mean for my writing and posting? With more structure in my life, I will be eating on a more regular basis (this has been an issue because depression sucks) and setting time aside after my afternoon shifts -- I work 1.5 hours in the morning and another 1.5 in the afternoon -- for research, writing, and posting.

Now I just need to figure out how to embed photos on my posts because I have a new TTRPG -- Gods of Metal: Ragnarock -- that is a fucking shit load of insane fun.

Currently drinking: Elysian Space Dust IPA.

Why You Should Be Playing HârnMaster 3.5: Final Post!

August 11, 2023

It turns out that the "new" edition of Hârn is vaporware at this point, so everything I've written before holds true.

So, here we are. I've tried to show those of you reading this why HârnMaster is a great system and a fabulous setting with forty years of development behind it. Realistic wounds, a real feudal setting, and an island teetering on the edge of chaos in so many places.

I've glossed over psionic powers, the enigmatic Earthmasters who left sites made of Godstone across Hârn, and the existence of the Keitherian family of worlds, accessible to powerful Grey Mag-
es. Most sages assume Lothrim summoned the Gargun from one of these worlds. A strange place called "Terra" is part of the family. Your choice as to what period Terra is in should you travel there.

But that is advanced stuff. Late campaign adventures. Let's start with some basics:

Embrace the character generation process. Sure, you might generate an impoverished shepherd, but that describes King David in the Bible. Use the character generation process to build an interesting character who might someday rock the world

Use Session Zero to establish why the party is together. Hârn families are extensive and united in a clan structure. This is the perfect way to build a party with established bonds. Take the case of a Satia-Mavari Who returns to his home village after completing his apprenticeship with a Shek-Pvar chantry. He has been entrusted with a magically sealed message tube to be delivered to a mage in Orbal, but the new journeyman mage is frightened of taking the journey alone. This is when cousins, siblings, and friends stand up. A chance to see more of Hârn and maybe make their fortunes doing something other than growing crops for the local lord? This establishes connections. Maybe one of the adventurers is the Satia-Mavari's older brother, who deserted from the Earl's guard and doesn't think his brother can poor piss out of a boot. Established relationships!

Hârn is a fog-shrouded, rainy land. Play this up. Trekking through the Sorkin Mountains should involve fog-shrouded trails where all sounds are muffled and distorted. Was that a Harpy?

As a GM, do not ignore the political situation. King Mignath of Kaldor amazes his subjects by just drawing breath, and there is no clear succession in place. Chysbia sits between two far more powerful kingdoms that both have a good claim on it. Rethem is facing a potential civil war and the king knows three of his four predecessors didn't die in bed. Kanday faces ongoing religious skirmishes between Kandian Laranians and Rethemi Agrikians. Orbaal is no more stable than any other Ivanian kingdom, and the majority Jarin population is gearing up for revolution. Again.

Build up slowly. One of the best early adventures is *100 Bushels of Rye*, a fairly simple investigation module that leads to some interesting places. This is for 1st Edition, but can easily be converted.

Do not neglect the importance of contacts and favors. People are people, and having a friend in Cherafir's bonding house, or a Thardic senator who owes you one can be vital. Conversely, honor your obligations.

Finally, and this applies to all TTRPGs, everyone should work together to both build the legend and have fun. The GM/player relationship should not be one of adversaries fighting in a wargame, but a cooperative effort to build something great.

Well, I've made my pitch. Oh, if you want to see how moribund Columbia Games is, check out the system requirements for the character generator. I laughed my ass off.

Currently drinking: Sierra Nevada Oktoberfest.

Yet Another Lost Weekend

August 13, 2023

I'm not talking about the classic Ray Milland movie, which is fantastic, and if you have a classic movie house near you, request it. Ray Milland and Jane Wyman star in one of the first movies to address the issue of alcoholism head-on. It won Best Picture, Best Director (Billy Wilder, who was a genius), Best Actor (Ray Milland), and Best Adapted Screenplay (Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett). As a big fan of classic cinema, this is a gut punch.

No, this is more about the song "Talk To You Later" by San Francisco's own The Tubes. I was lucky enough to see them when their stage shows were spectacles.

But anyway.

I planned to finish some writing this weekend, but deferred apartment maintenance overwhelmed me. Our recycling bags were overflowing. The dishes still need to be done, and I'm still not entirely over my pneumonia, and of course, Kirsten is battling cancer and COVID at the same fucking time. We may schedule me for a nose tickle even though this all feels like it is in the fever swamp that is the lower quarter of my lungs.

Did you know you have something in your lungs called the pulmonary toilet? It's a drain in your lower lungs that clears mucus you can't normally expel. Sucks to be me; my lower lungs are such shit (seriously, I love it when new doctors list to the Rice Krispies I call my lower alveoli, alveolar ducts, and bronchioles . . .).

So I can't muster enough force to clear this unless I am lying down, which means I've gone to bed every night for most of the summer and spent fifteen minutes coughing. Joy.

We did get a grocery order in (Kirsten still can't go out, and I am not allowed alone in stores that sell beer), so we have plenty of soup. I'm a bit upset that after seeing it on the website as available, we got told this was not in stock. But it appears to be at my local liquor store! Don't worry; this is a beer I will only drink with a big meal after a day of filling my belly.

I have a good outline and a start on the next K'kree article, and I will probably spend some time dredging up my notes on making the Third Imperium more like 4th-century Rome than the Western Federal Republic.

The Giants won today, and the 49ers looked terrible, but it's the pre-season, and I'm drinking Budweiser.

Don't judge me.

Whiplash Emotions: Burning Man Edition

August 16, 2023

I am experiencing some powerful conflicting emotions right now.

On the one hand, I know we can't go to the Burn this year. Halford's Liver, we'd end up in adjacent beds in Renown Regional's ICU by Thursday. Even without the breast cancer, my suck year would have put us so far behind in fitness and readiness . . . after last year, I need to be PREPARED. I am not ready for the Playa physically, mentally, or emotionally.

On the other hand, I need to be there. I need to walk to the inner edge of Esplanade to tell the Black Rock Desert to test me because I am stronger than it is. I need to tell stories as my gift and be with my family of choice. I sent them a Kooshball for Kirsten, but I left myself out as usual. I need to be 1SG Bullhorn, a role I love. I had been invited to work with Gate, Perimeter, and Exodus, which I was looking forward to. As with my job as a crossing guard, it would be giving back to the community.

But the main thing is that since 2014, Burning Man has done more to help me return to being me than any therapy or rehab ever could. Like every Infantryman, I was forged in fire and shaped by hammers. I had steel inserted in place of a spine (that explains the lower back pain, I suppose) and learned that pain is temporary, pride is forever, and what you thought were the walls of your limitations need to be broken down to open your possibilities.

In short, I am not a Sensitive New Age Guy. (However, I do want to see *Barbie*.) Kid gloves don't work on me. Give me a mission and an op order. Tell me to make shit happen. *Sua sponte*!

On my very first night at Burning Man, I broke down into a fucking crying, exhausted mess. A bunch of drunks I didn't know were trying to build our tent. I didn't know where I was, I was a year out from nearly dying and needed sleep. We were given cots in what I later learned was Rosie's Bar.

The next day morning, I was standing outside my tent in my underwear, screaming death threats at whatever camp was playing "Sunshine Day" at 0-fucking-700.

Later that day, while walking to a jot (Port-a-Potty) bank, a camp on our street needed line volunteers to help lift their climbing tower. Without thinking, I took my place, and gung ho!* I would never climb the thing, but people needed my help.

By Monday, I was in the street being a barker for our bar. "Sir! You have a drinking problem! You're not drinking!" This earned me the precious gift of a roll of a two-year-old's favorite Life Savers. I still have the candy on my desk.

By Wednesday? "Now, next year. . ."

Those drunks, now my family, gifted me the name "Uncle Bullhorn." Some wanted to christen me "Uncle Grandpa" for my storytelling abilities, some "Bullhorn" for my Army-trained command voice. A compromise was reached.

*Gung ho, from the Chinese gōnghé, literally means "work/pull together."

Gods of Metal: Ragnarock. First Read Reactions

August 16, 2023

It has taken three years, but it was mostly worth the wait.

I'm a Metalhead. I have been since 1983. I love almost all forms of the genre, so to see a TTRPG dedicated to the concept of a freewheeling, horns-flashing, headbanging game made me happy to back the Kickstarter.

Let's pretend we're all at a late-night restaurant after a show, sharing French fries and ranch dressing—first, the complaints.

The game is jargon-heavy. Successes are "Tributes," for example. Several important concepts are buried in the text. I had to keep flipping back to the glossary to comprehend the rule I was reading. The rules could be slightly better organized. Many simple proofreading and editing errors should have been caught in the layout process. Each of the six Metal Gods gets a single "art page" describing them and their goals. One of them is cut off mid-sentence. Later in the book, extraneous letters and odd cuts appear. I get meeting an already blown shipping date, but two extra pairs of eyes and one week of rewriting would have fixed these issues.

Now the things that make us throw up the horns, sing along, and get thrown out of Denny's at 3 A.M.

The tone of the writing and the artwork all build the setting and feel of Ragnarock perfectly. One of my early misconceptions was this was a game about being a metal band in Ragnarock. No, this is about being fucking Metal Demigods in Ragnarock. If this means your Avatar is Hammerhead Türzertrümmerer, who has a giant hammer for a head and two giant fucking Teutonic hammers for hands? Go for it!

Attributes and Skills are combined. For example, our friend Hammerhead should put some points in Brute if he wants to break down doors. You also choose a Metal God and a Tone. I'll detail character generation later because it is an adventure in itself, and yes, you can die during character generation.

The world-building requires two encores because there are two worlds. Mundania, where all of us Work Units (formerly known as People) are trapped, and Ragnarock, where a few lucky souls can escape to fight the good fight. Your mortal body is still in Mundania, filling out TPS reports or stamping passports or whatever soul-destroying job the Executors and Upper Management have bestowed on you. They desire absolute obedience and conformity. Think of the worst dystopian SF you've ever read or seen -- *The Adjustment Bureau* or *Matrix Revolutions* without the happy ending, a Stalinist gray wasteland if Stalin and J.P. Morgan joined forces.

But you have escaped, been drawn to the Spiral Umbilical, and if you survived . . . welcome to the party, pal!

So, there will be a second reading shortly. I'll run my idea for a character through the introductory adventure, which is also an ideal Session Zero and character-building exercise.

What do I want? Aside from a corrected book . . .

A proper atlas and gazetteer of Ragnarock.

A handout of the basic creation myth.

The Spiral Umbilical adventure as a download.

Tonight's GODLIKE Beer

August 17, 2023

[Dragon's Milk Bourbon Barrel-Aged Stout](#)

So smooth and rich, with a full-bodied flavor all through the sip. Coffee, chocolate, and you can just get the aging process. There's no after-kick which might be dangerous! 11% ABV.

This is not an everyday beer; it is a special occasion, a big meal beer. I want to pair it with a hearty stew and fresh French bread with real butter.

Try this if you love a good stout, which is not my typical beer style, as I tend to prefer a lighter brew.

Books from the Queen of Cities

August 23, 2023

In case you missed it, I love Istanbul. My studies include the wider Eastern Roman Empire (AKA, the Byzantine Empire) and later the Ottoman Empire, with a fascination with the end of that empire, which was very messy.

Which is why I had a big smile on my face when FedEx sent me an email that my package had been picked up in Istanbul. What am I getting? [Historica Arcanum: The City of Crescent](#).

The campaign takes place in Victorian-Era Istanbul during the reign of Abdulmejid I, with an intrigue-filled campaign taking players on a journey in one of the oldest and most culturally diverse imperial capitals of our world! I've been reading the PDF, but I wanted the physical book.

Yes, it uses the D&D 5th Edition engine, but it is magnificently tweaked to get the feel of nineteenth-century *Koṣṭantīniye* (The Turkish version of Constantinople.) Written by natives of the city, you feel it. They do a great job of translating D&D classes into roles appropriate for the setting and a much more subtle advancement path.

This is not a game of bashing monsters (although creatures of legend live in the Queen of Cities in disguises) but a thinking campaign of secret history, as rival magical societies and political movements begin fighting for the fate of House of Osman.

Then there is the free stuff. A pack of gorgeous maps that took me back in an instant. When I saw the books at Baycon, I checked out the map and was able to place our hotel from 2016 on it. There is a collection of smaller tactical maps for fights in the city.

There was also a 29-track soundtrack designed to be played at various points in the game. Just on it is own, it is beautiful. Two tracks, "Istanbul by Day" and "Istanbul by Night," are just ambient sounds from the city.

This is an amazing piece of work, and [Metis Media](#) has produced several similar titles. Check them out.

Facebook Post

August 19, 2023

Thanks to Donna Leaf, we have a border collie (named Gordon, after my spotter, who died after Desert Storm.) to help keep track of Angus, the Fuzzy Scottish Cu.

Which meant all night, all I heard was this:

"Mu?" (Scottish Fuzzy Cu for "Can I go here?")

"No. Go cuddle, Kirsten. You are her cow."

"Mu!" ("I am a highland cow! I'm running off the bed!")

"Well, good job Angus, You woke up Doug, and now HE will cuddle you."

(Roadie Butt) "Yeah. Good luck escaping him. Of course, he's going to need the latrine in seven minutes.. ."

"Mu! Mu! Mü!!!" ("You may take my cuddles, but you will never take my FREEDOM!!!!")

(Fancy Mouse) "Oh, dear."

(Cheddar Mouse) "I know, right?"

(Fluff Butt) "LOOK AT MY BUTT!!!!"

(Gordon) "I'll try to calm Angus down and keep him on the bed at least. I've only been here for six hours, and I hope to establish a good working relationship with all of you where you STAY IN THE CENTER OF THE BED WHERE I CAN KEEP TRACK OF YOU ASSHOLES!"

Fluff Butt whips out a DJ deck and starts Rage Against the Machine's "Killing in the Name Of."

(Nursie) "My patients need rest! Stop this arguing!"

(Dr. Plague) "PLAGUE!!!!"

(Nursie) "She has cancer. He has a current case of pneumonia that is in recovery. Not Plague."

(Dr. Plague) "So, no leeches?"

(Nursie) "No leeches. I sent some fascinating mushroom specimens from the cemetery to your labs. Have fun!"

(Llewellyn, the Senior Bear of the Household) "If you wake up my person NOW, they will find white fluff from here to the Carneddau mountains. Deall, chi bastardiaid Sacsonaidd gwaedlyd? Now, every critter on Sleepion and Dream duty GET TO WORK! They just saw a great concert. I want musical dreams and deep sleep!"

"Mu."

(Grimmy, the Last Guide, the Grey Wanderer, the Final Friend) "Will someone just fucking DIE already? I'm getting bored!"

(Doug) "Man, I do have a bitchin chess set. . ."

(Lord Cuddlich) "Been there, done that prefer undeath."

And y'all wonder why I can't sleep.

Douglas E. Berry: 1966-2023 (Posted by Kirsten Berry)

October 24, 2023

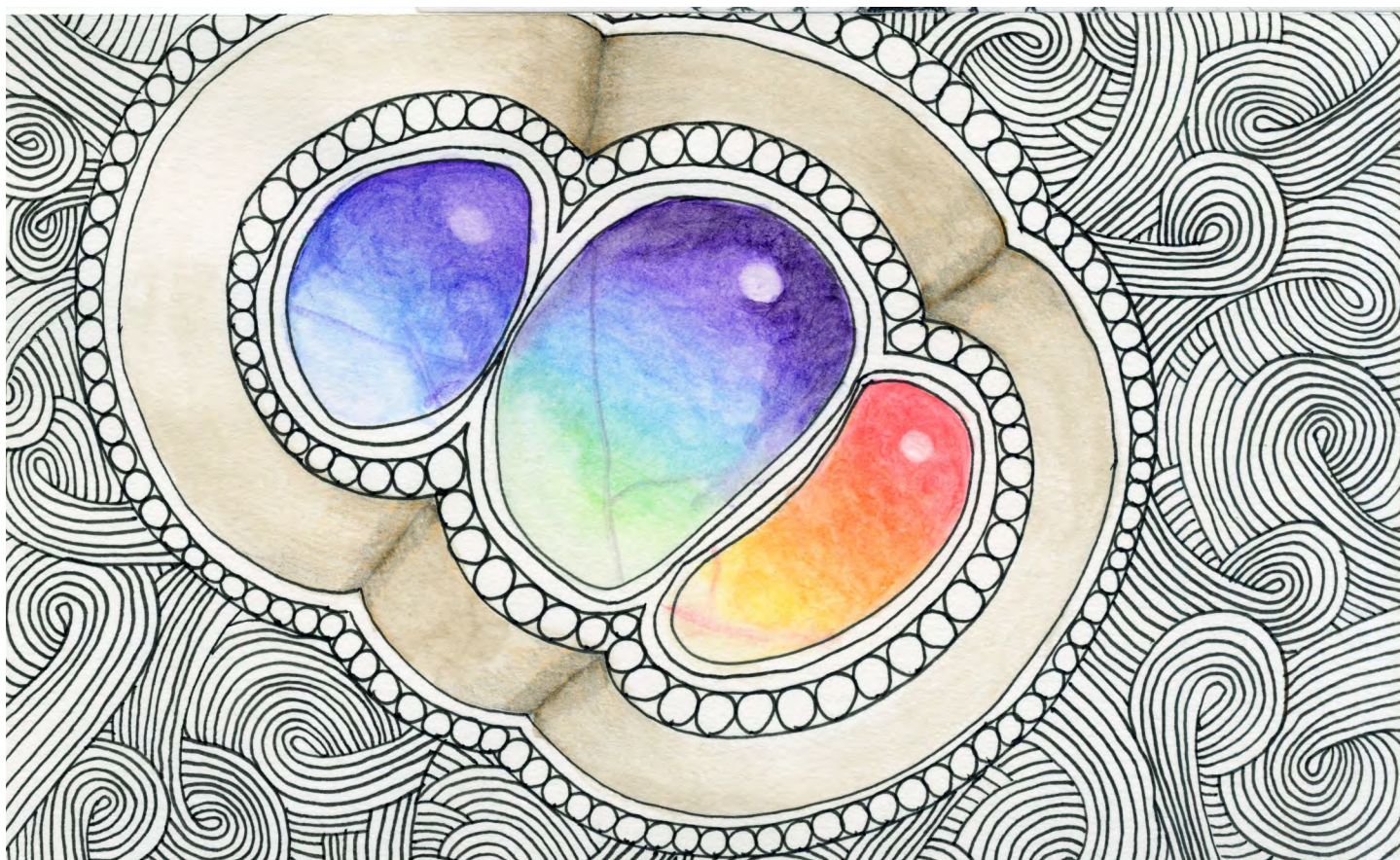
Douglas “Uncle Bullhorn” Berry passed away Saturday, September 30, from complications of long COVID. If love alone could have saved him, he would be as immortal as we always believed him to be.

As for the future of this blog, I intend to import all of the content from his erstwhile Patreon so it will remain available as long as this site exists (I've taken the time to unlock all of his posts so they are public there, and will remove his membership tiers so nobody is being charged any longer, but I realize that's not the purpose of the site). This may take some time to complete, however, as I am still managing my medical treatment AND moving back in with my mother.

Doug's life will be celebrated on Saturday, October 28, from 1-5 P.M..... at the Doubletree by Hilton, 2050 Gateway Place, San Jose CA. The dress code is "fannish formal" (the venue was chosen as it was home to the conventions where we began our life together) or "whatever makes you think of Doug," be that Burning Man attire, heavy metal T-shirts, SF Giants or 49ers gear, etc. Please be prepared to mask unless you are actively drinking or at the podium to speak. N95, KN95, KF94, or re-usable cloth masks with disposable PM2.5 filters will all be acceptable. (We will have a limited supply of masks on hand.) For those of you who cannot attend in person, we will be streaming at least part of the memorial on [Facebook Live](#).

Donations in his memory can be made to the [SF Giants Community Fund](#), the [All Within My Hands Foundation](#), or Mission 22.

I already miss him more than I will ever be able to tell you.



“All Quiet on the Western Front” and Anti-War Arts

Douglas Berry

First appeared in *Journey Planet* #30, Dec. 2016

“History is written by the winners” is an accepted truism. Defeated nations tend to accept the verdict of history and adapt their own histories to match the accepted view of things. But in the arts, you can find differing views.

Erich Maria Remarque's classic “All Quiet on the Western Front” (1929) is one such work. The book follows Paul Bäumer, a German soldier who—urged on by his jingoistic schoolteacher—enlists in the early days of World War I alongside many of his friends. We follow his transformation from a starry-eyed, idealistic recruit through the brutality of training, his first sight of casualties, finally to the harsh brutality of the trenches. We see through Paul's eyes how the war is nothing more than random death, boredom, and stress that prematurely ages these under-trained soldiers.

In the book battles are never named. Instead, the reader never knows why this particular fight is happening. Is it a major push? A diversion? A mistake that both sides stumbled into? Much like in reality, Paul sees the war only as his tiny slice of it. This is what makes the book great, for it isn't about war, but about soldiers.

Perhaps the strongest scenes come when Paul is granted leave and returns home. He sees his former school teacher not as an inspired patriot, but as a man clueless about the realities of war. His former friends and neighbors are strangers now. His only solace is with his dying mother, with whom he sits, both concealing secrets from the other.

The tale ends with Paul, last survivor of his little group, back on the front. In the movie he notices a butterfly and reaches for it; only to be shot and killed by a sniper. Back at German headquarters, a simple report reads “All quiet on the Western Front.”

“All Quiet” has been long hailed as a masterpiece of anti-war fiction. But is it really anti-war, or just honest about war. Remarque himself was a veteran of the war, and wrote honestly about the soldier's journey. He never spoke of the novel as being anti-war, just based on what he saw.

Which leads to the question, is there such a thing as an anti-war work in the arts? Or does openly and honestly portraying the horror and carnage serve as an anti-war message on its own? General William Sherman famously said: “You don't know the horrible aspects of war. I've been through two wars and I know. I've seen cities and homes in ashes. I've seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, war is Hell!”

What is interesting is that the trend recently has been towards more honesty in depictions of war in various media. Whereas WWII was largely whitewashed for years, and the Korean war mostly a basis for humor, today we get more and more works that examine the harsh effects of war on people, rather than big explosions and nobility.

“All Quiet on the Western Front” is a classic, both in book form and the 1930 film.

The Metal Out of Space - H.P. Lovecraft's stamp on Metal

First appeared in *The Drink Tank* 404

H.P. Lovecraft was a man born in the wrong century, a stunningly racist and misanthropic storyteller who was virtually unknown in his lifetime. Lovecraft created worlds of cosmic horror inhabited by obscene things that violated the laws of time and space, gods and monsters that manipulated, consumed, or discarded those around them with no more regard for man than we'd give an ant. Lovecraft sowed his terrible visions across the globe: sinister voodoo worship in a New Orleans swamp; a quaint New England town populated by a foul race of fish people; and a failed Antarctic expedition that uncovers ancient aliens are just some of the spaces explored in Lovecraft's world of gothic horror.

Rescued from obscurity by writers like August Derleth and Clark Ashton Smith who encouraged the publication of Lovecraft's work and expanded on his canon, it should come as no surprise that these macabre tales would come to inspire dozens of heavy metal artists drawn to the themes of power, madness, and gloom. Bands fueled by the imagery and tales of Lovecraft play, or have played, various styles of metal (starting in 1970 with Black Sabbath's "Beyond the Wall of Sleep"), and continue to release brain-frying tributes to that strange little man from Providence, Rhode Island.

Several acts have dedicated themselves to the musical exploration of the mysteries of Cthulhu and the other races from the Mythos. Many of these bands are in the Doom, Black or Graveyard/Funeral subgenres. Black metal pioneers Morbid Angel are a reliably Lovecraftian band. Morbid Angel's founder and primary songwriter Trey Azagthoth not only uses one of Lovecraft's gods for a surname, but has claimed influence from several occult texts, among them the Simon Necronomicon, a "grimoire" that claims to combine Middle Eastern mythology and magic with allusions to Lovecraft's fictional Necronomicon. Other bands like Back to R'Lyeh, Bal-sagoth, Chthe'ilist, The Great Old Ones, Innsmouth, and Shub-Niggurath have devoted most if not all of their writing talents to works that incorporate themes from the Lovecraftian world.

But even more "traditional" metal acts have found inspiration in these dark works. Metallica has dipped into the mythos several times, with songs like the instrumental "Call of Ktulu," "The Thing that Should Not Be," and "All Nightmare Long." Iron Maiden's classic album *Live After Death* also included Lovecraft's "In Strange Aeons" quote on a tombstone in the cover art, thereby connecting both the band and the creature known as Eddie to Lovecraft's larger mythos.

H.P. Lovecraft spawned an industry with his writings. Novels, movies, a few episodes of TV shows, even a role-playing game. But I think it's safe to say that his greatest influence shows in how his dark visions of terror and the end of the world have inspired legions of heavy metal artists.

Istanbul: A Personal Journey

First appeared in *The Drink Tank* 423

Lygos, Byzantion, Byzantium . . .

In 2015, my wife Kirsten and I came to a decision. Our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary was approaching, and we wanted to do something special for it. After much discussion, we agreed to try to make a trip to Istanbul happen. With an amazing outpouring of support from friends and family, we were able to raise enough money for a week in the Queen of Cities. I was about to fulfill a life-long ambition.

I had first learned about this amazing place as a teenage gamer. Wanting more options for my AD&D campaigns, I became a voracious consumer of history. Learning about Rome led me to Constantine I, and his decision in 330CE to move his capital to this sleepy trading town on the Bosphorus. I quickly fell in love with the story of the city, from its founding in 657 BCE to the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. Following the threads of the city's history is intoxicating. The sheer number of great people who lived there, the weight of history, all of that fed my desire to learn more and more. I read about Leo III and iconoclasm, or how Beyezid II brought the Jews expelled from Spain to the Ottoman Empire, saying, "He who has impoverished his own country and enriched mine!" Reading book after book, studying maps, and staring at pictures of this, the greatest of cities, only fueled my desire to someday see it for myself. To walk in the footsteps of autokrátōres and sultāns.

Augusta Antonina, Alma Roma, Roma Constantinopolitana . . .

Our arrival at the now-closed Atatürk International Airport after the eleven-hour flight was much like any other. Airports are generally utilitarian. The flags and language were different, but the dull routine of passport control and getting our bags was something we had done before. Even the ride to our hotel was old hat for two former airport shuttle drivers.

But then we passed through the still formidable Theodosian Walls and entered a place that seems to exist in several different eras at once. We had entered Istanbul's Old City, the heart of two great empires and a crossroads for traders for millennia. Our hotel was on Ordu Caddesi. Looking down on it, watching the trams and taksis battle porters hauling overloaded carts through the narrow side streets, I realized that this was the final stretch of the Roman Via Egnatia. I could picture the Roman triumphal marches going toward the Great Palace, or the Janissaries, led by their legendary bands, marching to Topkapi to salute the Sultan. Or revolt against him. It could go either way.

This feeling of timelessness was persistent. On our first day, we walked down to Sultanahmet Square to pick up a bus tour. Along the way, we passed a sixteenth-century graveyard, some remains of the Forum of Theodosius . . . and then I nearly walked into the Column of Constantine. I could feel myself slipping in time. The shops ringing what was once the Forum of Constantine were the direct descendants of the merchants who bought and sold on market days.

Constantinopolis, Kōnstantinoúpolis, Kōstanṭīniye . . .

The Old City is filled with wonders. The Byzantine Great Palace is long gone, but some of its amazing mosaics survive. In one short walk through the Hippodrome, you can go from the Obelisk of Thutmose III, which dates to around 1490 BCE, to the German Fountain, presented to Abdul Hamid in 1900. You run into this jarring clash of centuries everywhere. A centuries-old mosque sitting within sight of a McDonalds, or a modern funicular rising above an ancient cemetery.

But that's the joy of the Old City. That it is still, a living, breathing metropolis, with thousands living inside the walls. Life and commerce thrive here creating a link to those days gone by where the residents lived in much the same way. Names change, but the city lives!

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Kapalıçarşı, the Grand Bazaar. Begun in 1455 to stimulate prosperity, and only reaching its final shape in the eighteenth century, the Grand Bazaar is perhaps the world's oldest mall. Today, bright neon and LED lights catch your eye as you wander those labyrinthine corridors, but the din of haggling merchants and shoppers, the eager entreaties of store runners, and the ever-present warnings about pickpockets could come from the reign of Suleiman the Law Giver.

While bargaining over a set of chessmen depicting Byzantines on one side and Ottomans on the other, I had to wonder how many of these tiny stores had been held by the same families for generations. The spice merchants, the men selling cloth and rugs and lamps, all accompanied by tea and the ever-present arguing over the best deal. It was an uninterrupted cacophony lasting centuries, with no sign of stopping anytime soon, despite modern supermarkets and malls in the New City.

Miklagarðr, Basileos Polis, Rūmiyyat Al-Kubra . . .

Istanbul is really a global crossroads. In the Hagia Sophia, a bored Viking carved his name in runic symbols in a marble balustrade. Stores advertise in numerous languages, and visitors flock from around the world to see the marvels left by now-dead emperors. The city really reflects all its influences. Part European, part Roman, Part Turk, but undeniably all Istanbul. For our trip, we struggle to learn a few useful phrases in Turkish, but we soon learned that learning "Tuvalet nerede?" was pointless as there were numerous signs for the nearest WC.

But if I had to sum up what I learned in Istanbul -- what I learned that you can't learn in a book, or on a guided tour, or in a college lecture -- it came in something that happened early in our trip. We were getting onto the funicular that goes to the top of Pierre Lotte Hill, one of the best views of the city and the Golden Horn. Kirsten and I boarded, along with three women in full chador and a cat. The cat immediately jumped into my lap and demanded love. As I complied, we shared smiles with these three women, who were probably from someplace the US was at odds with. We had no common language, but for the minute or so of the ride, we connected as people over this cat.

And that's Istanbul. The crossroads between East and West for centuries and run by cats.

Der-i Sa'ādet, İslambol, İstanbul. . .

