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Winter 2026



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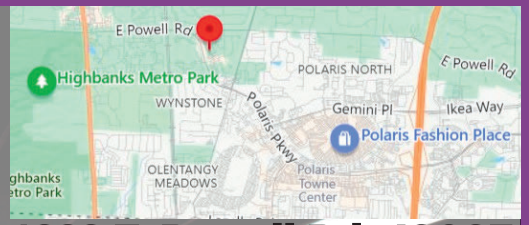
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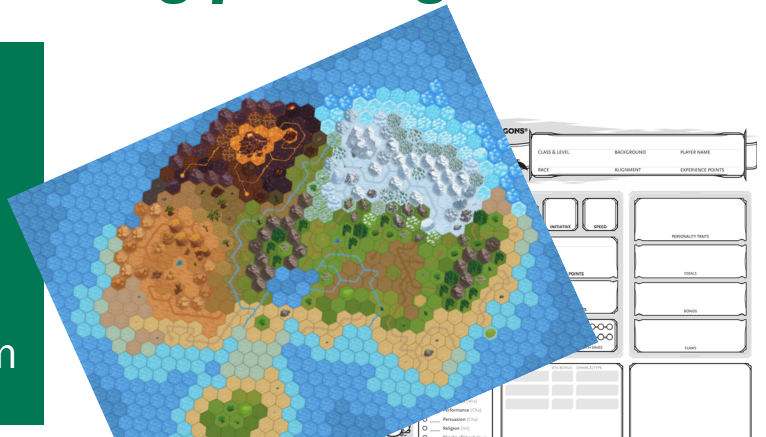


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Oathsworn Into The Deepwood

A Grogard's Dream Come True -Roger Legg



As someone who cut their teeth on AD&D in the early '80s, rolling dice in dimly lit basements and arguing about, I've watched tabletop gaming evolve from graph paper and lead miniatures to today's boutique board game renaissance. Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood represents the culmination of that four-decade journey—a game that captures the magic of those early RPG sessions while leveraging modern design sensibilities. Our diverse play group, ranging from twenty-somethings to those of us in our fifties and sixties, has been absolutely

captivated through our first twelve chapters. This dark fantasy campaign from Shadowborne Games doesn't just bridge generational gaming preferences; it unites them in a shared epic that feels both nostalgic and revolutionary. The Hybrid Campaign Structure

The two-phase structure of Oathsworn brings me back to those marathon AD&D sessions where roleplay and combat flowed naturally into each other. Each chapter begins with extensive narrative choices that would feel right at home in any classic module, but with the production values we could only dream of in 1983. These branching storylines aren't just flavor text—they determine encounters, rewards, and character development in ways that make every decision meaningful.

What truly captures that old-school RPG magic is the legacy-style progression system. Our mercenaries have grown from desperate sellswords to legendary warriors, each piece of equipment and ability feeling earned through blood and choices. The younger players in our group, raised on video game RPGs, immediately grasped the progression mechanics, while us veterans appreciated how it captured the satisfaction of levelling up without a DM's arbitrary decisions. The narrative weight creates genuine investment—when we lost an NPC ally we'd recruited three chapters earlier, the table went silent in a way I haven't experienced since my first character death in the Tomb of Horrors.



Revolutionary Combat Mechanics

The push-your-luck dice system initially reminded me of those tense moments when everything hung on a single d20 roll, but Oathsworn's implementation is far more sophisticated. The combination of dice and cards creates strategic depth that satisfies both the tactical board gamers and narrative-focused players at our table. Our sixty-year-old former wargamer particularly loves how the system rewards calculated risks rather than blind luck.

The Battleflow mechanic represents something genuinely new—even after decades of gaming, I haven't seen anything quite like it. Abilities cycle through a cooldown track that turns combat into a strategic puzzle reminiscent of programming games but with the visceral satisfaction of dungeon crawling. Watching our group coordinate Battleflow timings feels

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

EVERY GREAT ADVENTURE
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

like the best moments of 4th Edition D&D combat without the bookkeeping nightmare.

Boss fights transport me back to epic campaign climaxes, but with mechanical sophistication we never achieved with theater of the mind. Each massive miniature (more on those later) presents unique challenges that demand both tactical planning and desperate improvisation. These aren't just hit point sacks—they're puzzles, narratives, and genuine threats rolled into encounters that leave everyone exhausted but exhilarated.

Production Excellence

We splurged on the full Kickstarter miniature expansion, and while the standees would work perfectly fine for game play, there's something magical about placing these towering monstrosities on the table.

The modular weapon system lets us customize our characters to match their narrative development—my grizzled defender now sports the massive hammer we found in Chapter 8, and it matters both mechanically and visually.

The 3D terrain creates genuine tactical considerations while evoking the diorama-style setups we used to dream about. Yes, it dominates our table, and storage requires dedication, but for our group, the spectacle enhances every session. Even our practical engineer, usually concerned with efficiency, admits the visual impact adds to the experience.

Immersive Storytelling Tools

The companion app's narrated stories initially felt strange to someone used to reading boxed text aloud, but the professional voice acting and atmospheric sound design

won me over completely. It frees me to focus on the story rather than performance. That said, we sometimes use the physical storybook when we want that traditional feel—options that respect different play preferences.

But here's what truly captures my imagination: the "open the envelope" legacy elements. As someone who remembers when campaign play meant keeping the same character sheet for months, the physical act of opening sealed content based on our choices creates anticipation I haven't felt since unwrapping a new TSR module. Each "mystery box" represents genuine discovery—new mechanics, story revelations, and permanent changes that make our campaign unique. Our group has developed a ritual where

the person who made the triggering decision gets to open the envelope or mystery box, and the excitement is palpable every time.



Solo and Cooperative Excellence

While I primarily play with our group, I've run a couple solo sessions to explore different choices, using the streamlined companion rules. The enemy AI deck provides intelligent opposition that captures the unpredictability of a good DM without the overhead. It's remarkably satisfying for those evenings when scheduling our diverse group proves impossible.

Our cooperative play has been revelatory. The age spread in our group could create communication challenges, but Oathsworn's mechanics naturally facilitate discussion without enabling quarterbacking. The twenty-somethings bring video game tactical insights while we older players contribute hard-won tabletop wisdom. Everyone has moments to shine, and the

Battleflow system creates natural teaching opportunities without condescension. The Complete Experience

Twelve chapters in, we're aver-

aging about four hours per session—perfect for our monthly gatherings. The pacing feels like those epic Saturday AD&D sessions, substantial enough to feel meaningful but not so long that attention wanders. The difficulty has scaled beautifully with our improving system mastery, maintaining challenge without frustration.

The emotional journey mirrors the best long-term campaigns I've run or played. We started as desperate mercenaries barely surviving, and now we feel like heroes whose victories were earned. The dark fantasy tone reminds me of the Ravenloft campaigns we ran in the '90s—serious without being grimdark, maintaining tension while celebrating heroic moments.

Competitive Positioning

Having played everything from original D&D through Gloomhaven, HeroQuest, Descent, and dozens of modern campaign games, Oathsworn occupies a unique position. It captures Gloomhaven's tactical depth while maintaining stronger narrative focus, provides epic scope without punishing difficulty, and offers more mechanical sophistication than Descent while remaining more accessible. For our mixed-age group, it hits a sweet spot that satisfies both old-school sensibilities and modern expectations.

Final Verdict

Pros:

- Perfect marriage of RPG storytelling and tactical combat
- Legacy elements that create genuine discovery and anticipation
- Production values that make every session feel special
- Scales beautifully across different player counts and ages
- Meaningful choices with lasting consequences

Cons:

- Significant time investment (though worthwhile)
- Initial learning curve may intimidate casual players
- Premium price point (especially with miniatures)
- Requires dedicated storage and play space

After four decades of tabletop gaming, from scribbled character sheets to today's boutique productions, Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood stands as one of my finest gaming experiences. It captures everything I loved about those early RPG days—discovery, progression, meaningful choices, and epic storytelling—while leveraging modern design and production to eliminate the frustrations. Our diverse group, spanning forty years of age difference, has found common ground in the Deepwood's dangers. For groups seeking that perfect blend of narrative and tactics, who remember when "campaign" meant years of the same characters, and who appreciate both legacy discovery and tactical depth, Oathsworn delivers an unforgettable journey. Yes, the investment in money, time, and space is considerable, but for the right group—and ours certainly qualifies—it's not just a game but a shared story we'll remember long after the final envelope is opened. Twelve chapters in, with nine to go, we're already planning our second campaign to explore the paths not taken. That's the highest recommendation this old grognard can give. ■





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Teetotum Eclipse of the Heart



Teetotum on Top! -Craig Israel

A teetotum is essentially a top with four or more marked sides. It is spun and the side landing face up determines the results: when used as a randomizing device, it shows the number of spaces to be moved; when used as a game unto itself, it indicates what action the player is to take.

The oldest teetotums are believed to have been used in ancient Greece, dating to roughly 500 BCE, if not earlier.

The earliest discovered extant teetotums are four-sided and used for a gambling game nearly identical to the medieval game of "Put & Take." Players would each stake a coin, then spin the teetotum. Each side was inscribed with a Latin word or initial that indicated the player's action:

- A - Aufer ("take" one coin)
- D - Depone ("put" down one coin)
- N - Nihil (do "nothing")
- T - Totum (take "everything")

The ancient Greeks called it bembix or rhombos, which was a general name for any top spun by hand (as opposed to tops that were spun with a string).

Later period players named the top after the most fortuitous spin, combining the "T" inscribed on one side with the full word, "totum," to arrive at "T-totum."

By the medieval period (c. 500-1500 CE) "t-totum" had evolved to "teetotum." The top was used in a number of gambling games, with perhaps the most popular being "Put & Take." This teetotum and game were nearly identical to their ancient ancestors, differing only in that on some teetotums "nothing" was replaced with

"half;" meaning the player was to take half of the pot.

During the late Medieval and early Victorian periods the teetotum was a popular alternative to dice. The changing morals of the time saw the throwing of dice and gambling in general become wicked and ungodly



vices, making the teetotum a convenient alternative that was certainly never used for gambling purposes.

Teetotums were manufactured with up to 12 sides to accommodate a larger run of numbers.

In the late 19th century, many board games replaced the teetotum with mounted spinners made of cardboard. These spinners were flicked with the finger and provided a range of numbers or actions, just like the teetotum.

Since their high in the medieval period, teetotums have declined in popularity as a game for the masses. However, the game persists in two modern games: dreidel and pirinola; both popular games during December holidays.

Dreidel is a Jewish children's game, traditionally played with chocolate coins ("gelt") during Hanukkah. Except for gelt, the game is exactly the same as was played by medieval children.

Pirinola is a children's game popular in Mexico traditionally played during celebrations throughout the year, but especially around the winter holidays. Pirinola (also called "toma todo" for the best result) is six-sided, with instructions printed on each side:

- Toma uno (take one)
- Toma dos (take two)
- Toma todo (take all)
- Pon uno (put one in)
- Pon dos (put two in)
- Todoas ponen (everyone puts one in)

For such a simple device, teetotum, bembix, dreidel, pirinola, or whichever name you wish to use, has remained a popular gaming game for children and gamblers alike for more than 2,500 years. ■

I explore the rules, history, and strategy for ancient games on my YouTube channel, "The Gaming Bench" (<https://www.youtube.com/@TheGamingBench2024>).



You can watch me make a teetotum here: <https://youtube.com/shorts/lvLzpO3NLws>.



Pure Snow

Applying Snow Affects

- Jasper Trncoso



It's that time of year when a lot of us are getting cozy and gearing up for winter snowstorm

Recreating snow effects to add to our immersive games can be as easy and fun as playing with the real thing. In these simple steps, I will show you how to make snow effects that won't break your wallet. With these steps, you'll be able to elevate your winter-themed gaming pieces and have enough material to use for a long time before having to buy more.

STEP 1:

To make this, you only need three materials. Go to your local arts and crafts stores, or online, and get a bag of fine white sand, matte Mod Podge, or white Elmer's glue, and white paint. (See the photo below).



STEP 2:

In a container, pour some sand, glue, and paint, and mix them all thoroughly until you see all white.

There is no specific measurement I follow for how much material of each I should use in a batch; however, I do add them in this ratio.

- A. Larger amount of sand
- B. medium amount of paint
- C. A smaller amount of glue, and then mix them.



STEP 3:

Once mixed, you are now ready to apply the effect onto your model, terrain, etc. I recommend using a toothpick, a popsicle stick, or a paintbrush

In a dabbing up and down motion. Something important to consider is, once all these three materials are mixed, you cannot store them for later use.

It will be very tempting to put away the excess left over, unfortunately, because of the glue and the acrylic paints' chemical properties over the days it will dry on you. You can preserve it a bit longer if you place the mix in an air-tight container, but eventually it will dry. I recommend making smaller batches at a time until you are comfortable with making more accurate amounts needed for your project without wasting too much.

Below are some images for your entertainment, showcasing the application of this "easy snow" on some models I have painted and prepared for this tutorial.



The results are truly incredible.

In conclusion, every question has an answer, every problem has a solution, and when it comes to making miniature things, there are many ways.

Making snow effects like this is the best way. We need it fast, inexpensive, and with little effort. Anyone can do it.

I hope you try this for your next winter-themed campaigns, wargames, and dioramas; you won't be disappointed.

"If you can imagine it, it can be done." ■



Local Daily Quests

Monday:	Dragon's Lair	May the Force be With You Mondays
	The GuardTower East	Magic The Gathering
	The GuardTower West	Altered 6PM-10PM
		Paint Club 6PM-8:30PM
		One Piece 7PM-10PM
	The Warp Gate	Magic The Gathering Legacy 7:30PM
Tuesday:	Dragon's Lair	Player vs. Player Night
	The GuardTower West	Cookie Run Braverse 5PM-10PM
		Pokemon TCG 6PM-10PM
	The Warp Gate	Magic The Gathering Modern 7:00PM
		MTG Free Cube Drafting 7:30pm
Wednesday:		Grimm's Keep
		Weekly Foam Fighting Practice
	The GuardTower East	Pokemon
	Dragon's Lair	Warhammer Kill Team & BattleTech
	The Warp Gate	Magic The Gathering Pioneer 7:00PM
		Digimon 6:30PM
	Marche of Tirnewydd	Weekly Gathering Meeting & Armored and Rapier Practice
	The GuardTower West	Warhammer League 6PM-10PM
Thursday:	Dragon's Lair	Paint and Take
	The GuardTower West	Lorcana 6PM-10PM
	The FORGE Tavern	Star Wars Unlimited 6PM-10PM
	The GuardTower East	Trivia Night
	Canton of Pfedersdat	Youth DnD
	The Warp Gate	Armored and Rapier practice
		Commander Open Play
Friday:	The GuardTower East	Magic The Gathering
	The GuardTower West	Magic the Gathering: Draft 7PM-Midnight
		Magic the Gathering: Commander 5PM-Midnight



S



Friday: The Soldierly
Dragon's Lair

MTG Casual Commander

Friday Night Magic
Casual Commander

The Warp Gate

Magic The Gathering Draft 7:00PM
Magic The Gathering Modern

7:30PM

Saturday: The Soldierly
The Guard Tower West

MTG Casual Commander

Flesh & Blood 12PM-4PM
Alpha Clash 4PM-8PM
Gundam TCG 4PM-8PM

Dragon's Lair

Youth Pokémon,
All ages Pokémon, Lorcana*

Sunday: Barony of the Middle Marches Armored and Rapier practice

The Guard Tower East

Magic The Gathering
Open Play DnD

The Guard Tower West

Bolt Action 11AM-6PM
Battletech 11AM-6PM
Marvel Champions 12PM-4PM

The Warp Gate

Warhammer 40k Open Play
Pokemon League 6-8PM



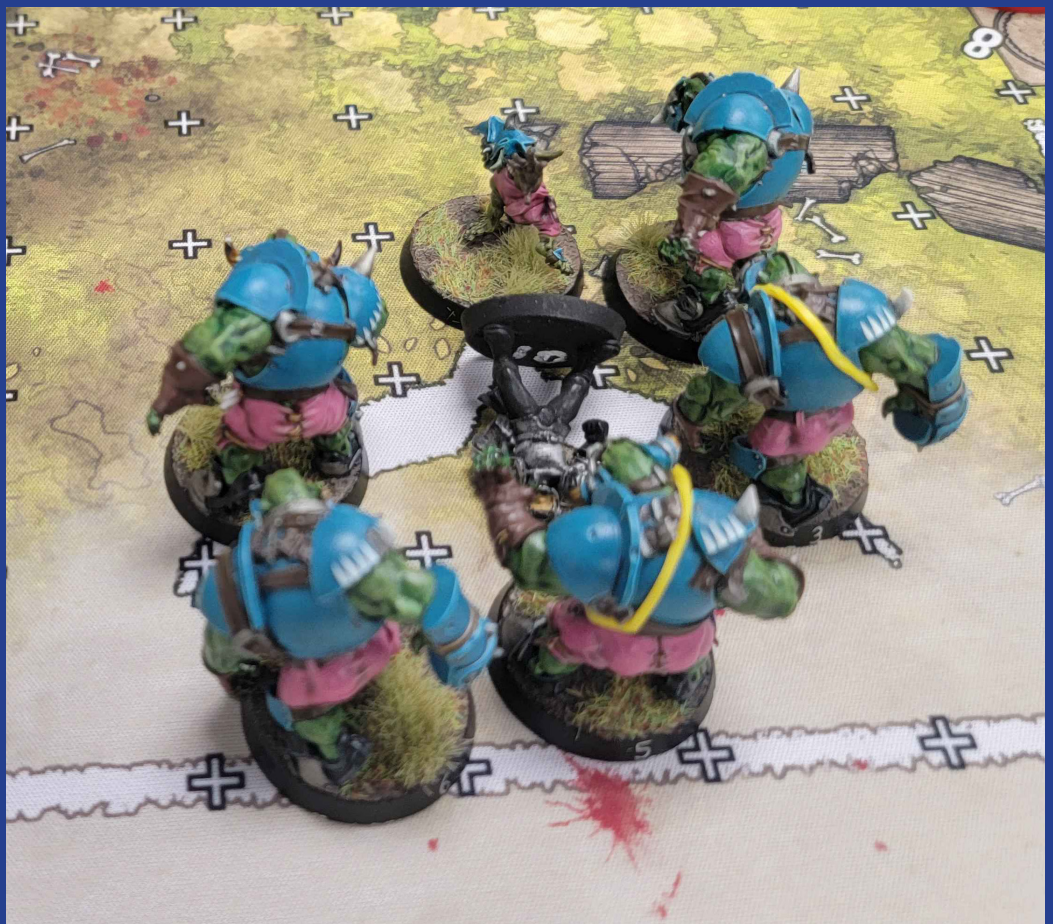
SPOTLIGHT ON

Mid Ohio Bashers League - Justin Rood



One truth among gamers is that we have our favorite games. Most of us like to play something different and new and there are those who live to try a new game, to be sure. But every one of us has that one game, or more than one, they always come back to year after year. With games that have a long publication history of multiple editions, many gamers will even have a favorite edition of a game they continue to play. Debates between the virtues and failings of this edition or that edition of a game are popular discourse that can foster interest in games and give an insight into how design philosophy has changed over time. Then there are those games that are forgotten. Perhaps a publishing company went out of business and the IP was never picked up by another or perhaps the game just never caught on and ended up becoming a relic remembered and preserved by the few who remember it fondly. Sometimes, there's a game that is abandoned by the publisher and is kept alive by players, maintaining its player base. Then there's the very rarest of cases: A game abandoned by the creator not only kept alive by players, but thrives under their care until it is recognized and published anew.

Your Humble Correspondent sat down to discuss one such game, the local community, and more with Michael St Clair, the organizer of the Mid-Ohio Bashers League (MOBL), a player-organized and run Blood Bowl league serving much of Ohio. British games company Games Workshop has a long history, mostly in the wargaming space



with their flagship of Warhammer 40,000, which has become a massive multi-media-spanning property many are familiar with on some level. Not all of their games have had such success. One game that

started as a spinoff of their fantasy wargames and models along with a healthy dose of the satirical silliness classic Games Workshop publications were once known for is Blood Bowl. A parody of American football, the

game was first published in 1986 and had sporadic publications over the next decade or so but was never a top seller and ended up being more or less put on a shelf by Games Workshop in the 1990's. The game is "simple enough to play fast and not take seriously but deep enough for strategy yet hilariously random," according to Michael. This is, after all, a game where one team can sneak a steamroller onto the field.

Michael first played and fell in love with Blood Bowl in the mid-90's, delighting in the fast-paced game play and the violent zaniness of the game. The game had already started to be ignored by Games Workshop at that time, though the company never relinquished their trademark and ownership of the IP. This neglect led to a falloff in play, though when playing games at conventions, Michael remembers people always being excited to see the game and remembering it with fondness. He started organizing playing Blood Bowl on a more than personal scale when a friend of his who ran the Nova Open convention (which is still being held, check it out at: <https://www.novaopen.com/>) suggested he run Blood Bowl tournaments at the convention. After a few years of doing this and hearing the repeated variations of "Oh, Blood Bowl, I loved that game and I've thought about playing but..." at conventions, Michael began to look for a league in his local area of Columbus, Ohio. There was no such league, though there had been one in the past. So, he created his own by putting up flyers in local game stores and using email to communicate.

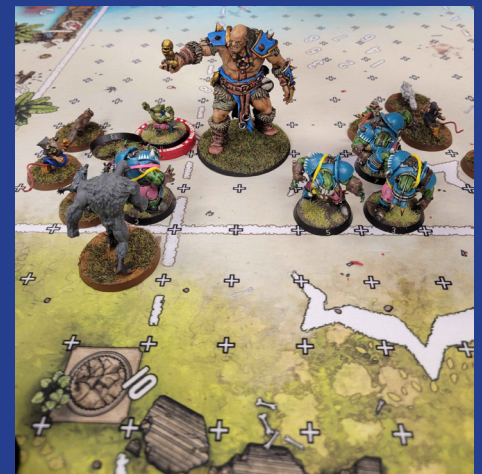
"We had eight players that first season," Michael recalls, "coming from as far away as Mansfield and Cincinnati so that they could play some Blood Bowl." These early days also created a lot of what would become the core of what MOBL wants to do. Michael's



goal with the league has always been to create a stable core of players and introduce new players to the game. "All comers, no barriers to entry, come as you are," Michael said. There's no need to have official Games Workshop miniatures or even any minis at all! "The game field hasn't changed, so as long as something fits in a square (28mm), it's good," Michael said, recalling a member of the league through 2nd to 6th seasons who played with all ogres represented with

random figurines, including a Super Mario Bros. Goomba.

One of the things that facilitated this philosophy in the past was, with game being left to rot by Games Workshop, the players continued to not only play but to also refine the rules. They became a living document within the community, kept online to be freely accessible and tweaked over time with options to use or not use. Michael laughed, "I'd just have a bunch of printed copies that I'd just hand out to people if they were



interested at all. I still have some of them at home." The community not only kept the game alive but over the decades increased interest, which was helped along by video game releases (both official and otherwise). Tournaments at conventions and leagues like



MOBL also used online tools such as Online Blood Bowl League Manager (OBBLM) and The NAF (standing for Nuffle Amorical Football) organization to track tournament wins helping to make spreading and playing the game easier. There is even a Java applet called Fumble to allow for online play, though according to Michael this is considered akin to "going pro" in the Blood Bowl community.

This continued stewardship of the game by the community did not go unnoticed. Whether it was due to the continued growth and development or simply a business decision to reassert their IP rights, Games Workshop released a new version of Blood Bowl in 2016. This was the first new release of the game in 22 years. Most interesting about this release was that the rules used were the ruleset the community had developed and been using all that time. The unofficial rules became the official rules and the game was given a new lease on life, thanks at least in part to the love of the players had for Blood Bowl. This caused an explosion in players, swelling MOBL and other leagues further with new players. A "second season" ruleset was released in 2020 and a third season new ruleset is slated for a 2026 release. All have been accompanied by new models and accessories for the game.

Being embraced, even if tentatively, by Games Workshop has brought in a lot of new players to MOBL, Michael noted that there has been a major uptick in interest since the 2016 release. MOBL has adjusted with the influx and the times as well, having a Discord on which players can chat and arrange their own matches. Player guidance has become the way the league operates, not only with players schedule games both during the season (November through May) and off-season but also regarding the rules. Many players have been hesitant to fully em-

brace the new official ruleset from Games Workshop and there is a high degree of skepticism regarding the upcoming rules release. By design and preference, both Michael's and others, the community as a whole decides on the rules the league uses. Questions about rules are brought up in the Discord for those interested to vote on and the decision of the community stands. "It's not my league," Michael stressed, "it's our league."

This solid core of independence and community isn't unique to MOBL but is a tendency in the Blood Bowl player community as a whole. Different tournaments will use the rules they like and leave out those they don't with a ready and even eager disregard for what Games Workshop considers the 'proper' rules or way to play. It's fitting given the irreverent tone of the game itself that the rules aren't taken too seriously. That's just the spirit of Blood Bowl. Now is the best time to get into the game, Michael insisted, and encourages anyone who wants to try it out to contact him at MOBL's email (midohbbowl@gmail.com) for questions, an invite to the Discord and other resources. "Come as you are, no barriers to entry," he repeated. MOBL is full of people who play for pure love of the bloody bonkers action that is Blood Bowl. If you've ever wanted to throw a halfling down field or break up a pass by breaking the thrower's face, reach out and have some ridiculous fun.

Blood Bowl is a rare story in gaming. Not many games get a second chance if they don't take hold after release. The story of the game's survival and rebirth all comes down to the refusal of gamers to let it die, not only keeping it alive but growing it in ways and to heights the publisher clearly never thought were possible. So keep playing your favorites, invite others to try them, because while there are never any guarantees a new edition will ever come out, a game that people are still playing is a game that is still alive. ■

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CON Artist

BY MIKEY WOOD



Episode IX: A Lineage of Stapled Paper

Not that anyone asked...

Indie comics never went away.

And, thusly, they didn't "come back." They didn't "return." They didn't crawl out of a grave behind a Spirit Halloween like some kind of culturally-relevant zombie.

They just...kept happening.

Quietly. Stubbornly. Like dandelions in a sidewalk crack. Like people who still use landlines and send letters with stamps. Charming oddfellows giving us stories the "Big Two" would never tell.

Because indie comics aren't a trend,

they're a behavior. A passion.

Indie comics exist for the same reason people still play guitar live in coffee shops even though Spotify exists. For the same reason people still write poetry. For the same reason people dance. For the same reason I once spent money on comics when I should've been paying for something responsible like...rent.

Indie comics exist because humans are story-hoarding goblins and eventually we have to dump the treasure pile out on the table and say, "Look what I made."

So let's talk about why indie comics never vanished, even as "comic-cons" turned into pop culture mega churches and corporate booths grew to the size of aircraft carriers.

The indie scene built its own infrastructure

Here's a thing people forget: the indie world didn't survive by begging for crumbs at the big banquet. It survived by building its own kitchen.

Small Press Expo...SPX...Was created in 1994 specifically to promote independent comics, and it positions itself as a creator-centered show (including being a nonprofit created to promote indie artists and publishers). Six years later, Columbus small press comics publisher Bob Corby staged the first Small Press and Alternative Comics Expo (S.P.A.C.E.) show at the Rhodes Center in the Ohio Expo Center. Forty-nine small press exhibitors attended

including Matt Feazell, Carla Speed McNeil, Alex Robinson, and William Messner-Loebs.

These types of cons matter because when you build a space where the entire point is the work, you don't have to compete with a 40-foot LED screen advertising the latest soon-to-be-cancelled Netflix series or yet another FAST AND FURIOUS movie.

There are a number of super-cool annual Indie-focused cons. MoCCA Fest in New York began in 2002 as an indie-comics showcase and the Toronto Comic Arts Festival...TCAF...has been running since 2003, and (this is huge) it's remained free to the public since launch while focusing on independent arts culture and accessibility.

You can call that "nice." And it is. Free admission is great.

But it's also strategic.

Free admission means curious people wander in. Wandering people become readers. Readers become fans. Fans become the kind of people who buy a weird little comic they've never heard of because the creator is standing right there, smiling, saying "Hey...thanks for looking."

Indie comics didn't survive because they were "allowed" to survive. They survived because the people who make

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

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Bartitsu, and more...



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

them and love them made places where survival was the point.

Look, I love the romance of the old days as much as anyone. The hand-folded, hand-stapled minicomic. The "I made these at 3 a.m. fueled only by coffee and moxie" energy.

(Yes, I just used the word "moxie".)

But indie comics didn't persist on vibes alone. They persisted because creators found ways to fund the work without waiting for permission.

Case in point: Kickstarter.

As of Kickstarter's own stats page, the Comics category has seen about \$330+ million pledged across roughly 33,500 projects.

Read that again: hundreds of millions of dollars. Not from movie studios. Not from corporate sponsorships. From people saying: "Yes. I want that book to exist."

Now, do I think Kickstarter has solved all problems forever and everything is perfect and capitalism has been defeated and the clouds parted and angels started singing?

No.

But it did something crucial: it let creators go around the gate and the audience never disappeared, they just needed a better door. A better way to GET the books that weren't being published by Marvel or DC or Image.

And something needs to be said about digital comics.

Despite what people will try and tell you, print is still here, still stubborn, still refusing to go quietly into that good night. Digital platforms didn't replace comics, they expanded the number of people who read them.

Take WEBTOON, for example, which describes itself as a global platform for creators and readers and lists 155 million monthly active users (as of a quarter ended June 30, per their own corporate "Our Brands" page and echoed in their investor communications).

That's not a niche hobby. That's a country. Seriously. That's five-point-seven times the population of Australia.

And when you build a reader base that big, some of those readers inevitably become the kind of people who want a physical book on a shelf. Something signed. Something handed to them across a table. Something tangible.

Digital creates discovery. Print creates attachment.

And indie lives in that attachment.

"Indie" is not a genre, it's an attitude. Indie doesn't necessarily mean "small." Indie doesn't necessarily mean "obscure."

Indie doesn't necessarily mean "drawn in a basement by candlelight while listening to The Smiths." (Though, to be fair, that does happen. Trust me.)

Indie means: you're making the work because you have to make it, and you're willing to find your own path to get it in front of people.

Which is why indie comics can exist in a hotel ballroom, a library festival, a zine fair, an online storefront, a Kickstarter page, a WEBTOON scroll, or a folding table next to the bathrooms.

Indie is portable.

That portability is why it survives every shift in the larger industry. Diamond distribution problems, streaming booms, convention mega-growth, social media collapsing into a burning dumpster full of ads for doomsday prep-er dehydrated food subscription services, caindie comics keep moving.

They're a compulsion far before they're a business model.

Indie comics are safe and the culture needs a place where weird can be safe

A lot of mainstream media is designed by committee to offend the fewest people possible while extracting the most money possible.

That doesn't mean it's bad. Some of it's great (as I write this I am anxiously awaiting the arrival of the last few episodes of STRANGER THINGS). But it does mean there will always be stories that don't fit the mold.

Indie comics are where the misfit stories

go to live.

They're where you find the memoir no publisher thought would sell, the horror comic that's too personal, the romance story that doesn't look like romance "should", the political rage that isn't sanded down into marketable slogans, the dumb experimental thing that is maybe brilliant and maybe unreadable but definitely alive.

Indie is where the art breathes without asking permission.

And if you've read my prior episodes, you know what I'm going to say next:

That freedom matters.

Because people matter.

And indie comics keep producing break-outs.

Here's another inconvenient truth for anyone who thinks indie comics are a "minor league":

A whole lot of the people running the show now came up through the small press.

Not metaphorically. Literally.

They stapled their own books.

They tabled at cons.

They ate bad convention pizza.

They sold comics to strangers who were "just looking."

And then...they didn't stop.

Take BONE.

Jeff Smith self-published Bone through Cartoon Books starting in 1991, distributing it himself before it became one of the most beloved graphic novels of all time, eventually picked up by Scholastic and translated into multiple languages. That's not an indie comic that "graduated." That's an indie comic that refused to disappear.

Or look at WALKING DEAD.

Robert Kirkman was grinding away in the indie trenches long before AMC came knocking. The Walking Dead launched at Image Comics in 2003 as a creator-owned black-and-white series. No movie deal. No guarantee. Just zombies, character work, and monthly deadlines. It went on to become one of the most commercially successful creator-owned comics of the modern era and a television juggernaut.

Then there's SAGA.

Brian K. Vaughan had already worked in mainstream comics and television, sure, but Saga exists because of the creator-owned indie model. Launched in 2012 at Image, it's not driven by IP synergy or cinematic universes. It's driven by trust: readers trusting creators to tell a long, weird, deeply personal story on their own terms. And readers showed up. In huge numbers.

Or consider SCOTT PILGRIM.

Originally released by Oni Press, Scott Pilgrim is the perfect example of something that only works because it was indie. Too

strange. Too specific. Too earnest. And, yet, it resonated, crossed over, became a film, an anime adaptation, and a cultural touchstone. All because someone was allowed to make exactly the thing they wanted to make.

You can keep going:

Love and Rockets: self-published beginnings, decades-long legacy

Ghost World: indie comics into award-winning cinema

Fun Home: small-press roots, Broadway musical

None of these careers happened instead of indie comics.

They happened because of them.

And here's the part that matters most: for every creator who "breaks big," there are thousands who don't, and that doesn't make the work any less real. Indie comics aren't valuable because they mint celebrities.

They're valuable because they let people practice being artists in public.

Indie comics are where creators learn how to finish things.

How to talk to readers.

How to survive rejection.

How to own their work.

Breaking big is a possible outcome, but making the work is the point.

The takeaway: Indie comics never went away because they're built on three things that don't go away:

Community.

Direct support.

New readers.

Unique stories.

Creative freedom.

So if you're a creator who's been staring at a half-finished comic and thinking, "What's the point?"

The point is: this is a lineage.

People have been making their own comics for decades, and they're still doing it now, not because it's easy, but because it's necessary.

And if you're a reader?

Go find the weird table. Buy the strange little book. Tell the creator you liked it.

Because your ten dollars and your one sincere compliment are often the difference between someone making issue #2...or deciding they're done.

I'll talk to you next time, nerds.■

RECOMMENDED READING:

LOCAS: THE MAGGIE AND HOPEY STORIES (LOVE AND ROCKETS) by Jaime Hernandez (New edition coming from Fantagraphics in March, 2026)

The Forge Tavern Presents Winter Cocktail Recipe:

SMITHY'S HOT TODDY

Our take on this warming drink includes an Irish Honey Whiskey which adds the sweetness and honey flavor in a warm, traditional cocktail.

INGREDIENTS

2 oz Whistler Irish Honey Whiskey
1.5 oz lemon Juice

INSTRUCTIONS

Fill Irish Coffee Mug with Hot Water

Combine ingredients: Stir

Garnish with a Lemon Wheel and Cinnamon Stick

Enjoy!



FLEET

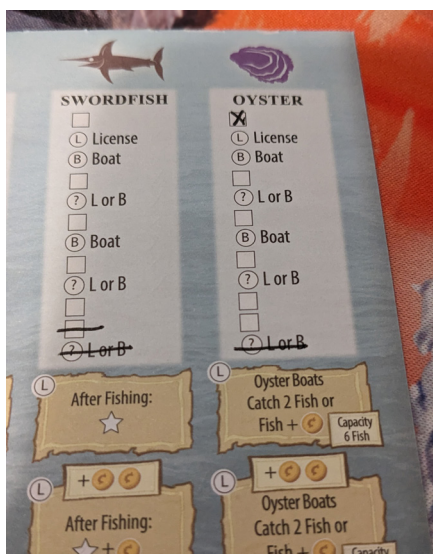
Table Top Times Review

By: Kimberly Gonzales

Fleet: The Dice Game is a roll-and-write game for 1-4 players based on the card game named Fleet. In Fleet: The Dice Game, players try to become the best fisherman on the high seas!

To set up a game, each player gets two player sheets (one Boat sheet and one Town sheet) and a writing utensil. Then, each player rolls one Boat die to determine their starting bonus, marking out three spaces top-down, for the symbol rolled, i.e. Lobster, Oyster, etc.. This way, each player starts the game with one license and one boat launched.

A multiplayer game takes place over 10 rounds, with 3 or 4 Phases each round depending on the round number. In the Boat Phase, the boat dice pool is rolled. Starting with the first player, each player will take turns choosing one die from the pool and performing the related action on their Boat Sheet, marking off spaces to eventually gain licenses and launch boats.



After each player chooses one die, there will be one die left which becomes the shared die. Each player gets to take the action that corresponds to the shared die. In the Income Phase, players will gain income according to their player board, gaining at least one coin. On the coin track, where you keep track of your income, there are some spaces shaped like stars. Whenever you get coins and mark off a star space, you gain a free action, meaning you can mark off an extra space anywhere on your player board, with a few exceptions. In the Fishing Phase, which only happens in even-numbered rounds, each player catches one fish in each of their launched boats. In the Town phase, the Town dice pool is rolled and then, like the Boat Phase, everyone selects a die, performs its action, and then performs the action of the shared die.

At the end of 10 rounds, the player with the most victory points is the winner! You get one point per fish caught, the points that correspond to each boat that you have launched, points from licenses, any points from buildings, and any bonus points you may have gotten from the King Crab bonus goal.



Solo setup is very similar to a two player setup, but you are playing against Captain Ruth, who instead of getting her own player sheet, crosses out spaces on yours! A solo game is played out over 8 rounds with the same phases as multiplayer games, but Captain Ruth only has actions in the Boat and Town Phase. The player is the first player in odd-numbered rounds with Captain Ruth being first player in even-numbered rounds. There are tokens that keep track of Captain Ruth's priority in each area (Boat, Harbor, and Wharf). Her token starts in the first spot in each area and rotates clockwise each round (skipping over any sections where there are no available boxes left to mark). The Boat and Town Phases work very similar to multiplayer games. Captain Ruth chooses her dice based on where her token is. For example, if her Boat token is on Shrimp, but there is no Shrimp die available, she will take the die that corresponds to the next available Fish type going clockwise from her token. She then crosses out the two bottom-most spots in the corresponding section, blocking you from ever getting that achievement. When it is the shared die, she crosses out one spot. In the Town Phase, her priority of dice choice is Harbor > Wharf > Boat Die > Market.

At the end of 8 rounds, you add up your score and see where you rank at the back of the rulebook.

Thoughts

I've been looking at Fleet: The Dice Game for a long time, and recently decided to buy it. I'm really glad I finally did! It's really easy to teach and 'get', especially if you've played other roll-and-write games. The play times that I've had are all fairly quick, usually around 20 minutes for solo and a little over 30 minutes for 2 players. Fleet: The Dice Game offers a strategic, meatier experience than most other roll-and-writes that I've played. The player sheets are very well-organized and easy to follow with guides given for income phase and special rules, like the

Kings Crab bonus or the Captain's Club fishing disclaimer.

I've played this solo 5 times so far and I'm loving it! I like the tension and the race against Captain Ruth to fill out the spaces that I want before she's able to cross them off. I'm still fairly new to playing games solo, but I think this is probably one of the most enjoyable times I've had playing solo. Since I had played solo quite a bit before I played a multiplayer game, and I really enjoyed it, I was worried I wouldn't like playing multiplayer. My reasoning was I was worried I would lose out on the tension provided by racing against Captain Ruth, since in multiplayer everyone has their own board, thus players don't block spaces from other players, with the exception of the King Crab bonus. However, the multiplayer game proved me wrong! There are still tough decisions



you have to make when choosing your dice since you want the benefit instead of giving your opponent the option of taking it, or looking to see what die would benefit them and taking that action instead.

Of the roll and write games I've played so far, this one is my favorite. The feeling you get when you are able to chain combos to get more star actions to mark off more spaces is great. Another plus is the low amount of table space this requires! I'm able to play solo on my desk, and the space needed for each player in multiplayer is very small.

I highly recommend Fleet: The Dice Game if you like roll-and-writes and want a meatier experience. I also recommend checking out the solo mode if you're into solo games! ■

State of The Series

Cycles of Crisis and Creation: Fifty Years of TTRPGs and the Rhythms That Shape Us

By: David "Blue" Wendt PhD

Welcome back, friend. As we enter the new year, I find myself thinking about patterns. Specifically about role-playing game publishing.

I feel like every generation, every decade reinvents what these games are for. Sometimes we use TTRPGs to escape. Sometimes to understand. Sometimes to resist. But always, without fail, the games we write and the games we play track closely—almost uncannily—against what the world is asking of us.

In this installment of State of the Series, I want to look back across the last fifty years and trace the patterns that keep rising and falling like tides. Because once you start seeing them, you can't unsee them.

And more importantly: they tell us something about where we're heading next. How I Approached This. I'm a statistician at heart, so I never trust a trend I can't map.

For this piece, I pulled data from ICv2, Roll20, Kickstarter, designer notes, publication dates, cultural milestones—and then layered them like sediment. What emerged wasn't a straight line or a tidy curve. It was a pulse. Here's the short version:

TTRPG design changes in rhythm with global events. Not reactively, but as a kind of cultural metabolising—our way of processing what's happening faster than we can explain it.

I'll walk you through the eras, the cycles, and then the forecast. Consider it a weather report for the creative climate.

1970s: When the World Broke, We Built New Ones

The mid-70s were heavy: post-Vietnam, Watergate, stagflation, Cold War dread. People were losing trust in the big systems meant to guide their lives.

And so—of course—we made our own.

Dungeons & Dragons wasn't a game about killing monsters. It was a game about recovering agency. Rulings over rules. A world where your choices mattered. Traveller gave us the stars when the earth felt small. We weren't escaping. We were rehearsing hope.

1980s: Fear of the System, Mastery of the System The 80s were a tension headache of nuclear threats, corporate growth, and early computing.

Enter the era of:

- GURPS
- Cyberpunk
- Call of Cthulhu

These games didn't just reflect fear—they gave it grammar. Crunch-heavy systems let players seize control of something, anything, in a decade ruled by bureaucracy and existential dread. It's no coincidence that cosmic horror surged when our sense of the future shrank.

1990s: The Enemy Within (and Sometimes We Were It) Post-Cold War optimism fades, the internet arrives, subcultures splinter.

Identity becomes the battlefield. World of Darkness steps onto the stage and quietly rewrites the industry. These games asked questions that fantasy had sidestepped: Who am I? What am I complicit in? What does power cost? Morality meters, personal horror, metaplots—mechanics as mirrors.

Not everyone loved the angst, but it was exactly the right tone for a world unsure of its own narrative.

2000s: War, Control, and the Open-Source Revolution

9/11 changed everything, including gaming. D&D 3rd Edition and the Open Game License exploded onto the scene, and suddenly everyone had the tools to publish. Meanwhile, the Forge movement was asking:

"What if story comes first? What if rules serve theme, not simulation?"

It was a decade split in two directions:

- militarized precision on one side (feats, grids, tactical combat), ethical storytelling frameworks on the other. Both were responses to the same global anxiety:

When the world becomes unpredictable, some people seek tighter rules; others seek deeper meaning.

2010s: Collaboration as Resistance Here's where the pulse shifts.

The Great Recession shook confidence in institutions again. Social media changed how we connect. We got D&D 5e, Apocalypse World, Fate, Blades in the Dark, and a rising wave of inclusive, community-centered design. This was the decade where gaming became public. Streaming turned tables into stages. Found family became a mechanic as much as a trope.

We rediscovered something the 70s had whispered: **play is restorative.**

2020s: The Decade We Needed Gentle Games.

The pandemic hit, and everything we knew about gathering changed overnight. People found themselves alone but still craving story and connection.

The industry responded with one of the most important shifts in its history:

- Solo journalling games
- Cozy RPGs
- Asynchronous campaigns
- Community-focused mechanics
- Rest and care as game play loops

Titles like Wanderhome and Thousand Year Old Vampire weren't an escape from crisis—they were emotional technologies invented to carry us through it. This decade didn't just evolve mechanically. It evolved spiritually.

The Four Cycles That Keep Repeating. After fifty years, four major cycles show up again and again.

Here's the short version:

1. Crunch/Narrative

We oscillate between "I need rules to hold me" and "I need freedom to breathe."

2. Darkness/Hope

When the news gets darker, horror thrives. When we've had enough, cozy games bloom.

3. Nostalgia Loop (≈30 years) Designers revisit the media that shaped their childhood once they hit their 30s–40s. This is why the OSR felt inevitable.

4. Analog/Digital Play-by-post/VTTs / Streaming/AI.

Each decade adopts the next connective technology and turns it into a storytelling platform. These cycles don't replace one another—they interlock. Understanding the cycles helps us understand audiences. The Data Behind the Patterns You know me—I love a good regression model.

And while this isn't a formal econometric report, the correlations are clear enough to sketch:

- Horror RPG releases spike 1–3 years after recessions.
- Rules-light games cluster around social-connectedness movements.
- Tactical games surge during periods of militarized media and tech acceleration.
- Journalling and solo RPGs grow when collective burnout rises.

Translation:

The medium listens to the moment, even when no one is consciously steering it. Where We're Heading: The Next Decade of Play If the cycles hold—and they've held for half a century—the next 10 years will be defined by a single creative question:

What does it mean to take care of each other? Not as metaphor. As design principle.

Expect:

- solarpunk optimism with dirt under its nails
- Communities as characters
- Asynchronous play treated as a first-class mechanic emotional currencies (trust, comfort, connection)
- Localism over epicness
- Systems built to support—not overwrite—human intention

This is "cozy resistance":

The belief that small acts of care are powerful, even radical, when the world feels unstable. It's not escapism. It's practice.

Why This Matters? TTRPGs have always been engines for imagining better worlds.

And every cycle has culminated in a form that helps players navigate their moment in history. In the 70s, we rehearsed agency.

In the 80s, we mastered systems.

In the 90s, we interrogated identity.

In the 2000s, we questioned authority.

In the 2010s, we chose each other.

In the 2020s, we relearned how to rest.

Now we stand at the threshold of the next cycle: care as structure. Community as mechanic. Hope as technology. If we design intentionally, the next decade of RPGs won't just entertain us. It will teach us how to keep each other lit.

And that, in its own quiet way, is revolutionary.

That's all for now—I should get back to creating. Until next time, happy gaming. ■

David "Blue" Wendt PhD

Until this magazine gets a letter page, you can find me at:

Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/DocBlue>

BlueSky: @wwwendt.bsky.social

Stew of Black Iron Keep

Eat if you dare! -Valerie Paxton

The Legendary Stew of Black-Iron Keep As transcribed from the kitchens of The Prancing Beholder Tavern "Aye, 'tis not a dish for the impatient nor the faint of heart. But give it time, and ye shall feast like the Kings of Old." – ThranoK Emberbelly, Dwarven Brew-Chef Ingredients Required for the Brewing of One Cauldron of Warrior's Stew:

- 2 tablespoons oil of the olive groves
- 2½ pounds of beast-flesh (preferably from a cow, ox, or similar quarry of the overworld; must be suitable for long-term simmer enchantments)
- ¾ teaspoon ground salt and freshly crushed black peppercorns
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced under the waxing moon
- 2 onions, chopped (may be yellow, white, or of the earth-born brown variety)
- 6 oz bacon, or diced speck from the boar-lands of the Eastern Wood
- 3 tablespoons of flour, ground fine from white wheat (all-purpose or spellbound gluten-free)
- One tankard (440ml) of Guinness, the dark Fae brew of the Emerald Isles – sacred to the broth
- 4 tablespoons paste of the fire-fruit (tomato)
- 3 chalices (750ml) of stock, chicken or beef, brewed with bones and patience

- 3 carrots, peeled with a dagger, cut into coins
- 2 stalks of celery, cleaved into inch-thick pieces
- 2 bay leaves, plucked under the stars
- 3 sprigs thyme, or 1 tsp of the dried green dust of said herb

The Ritual of Preparation:

1. Chop thy meat into chunks the size of a goblin's heart (5cm / 2"). Salt and pepper



as though warding off evil.

2. Heat cauldron over dragonfire, sear meat in batches until browned like scorched earth. Remove.
3. If the cauldron dries, add more oil from your traveling pack.
4. Cook onions and garlic 'til softened. Stir in the bacon, let it sizzle like dwarves in a gold rush.
5. Add the carrots and celery, tossing them in like spell components.
6. Stir in the flour, cooking it briefly to bind all with its thickening magic.

7. Pour in the Guinness, the broth, and the fire-fruit paste. Stir until smooth. Add bay leaves and thyme.

8. Return the meat to the pot, along with any juices (never waste the essence). Liquid should just cover the contents.

9. Seal with a lid. Let simmer for 2 hours, under a low flame or smouldering rune. Remove lid and cook another 30–45 minutes, until the meat yields like a vanquished orc.

10. Skim the fat, if you seek elegance. Adjust salt and pepper to the palate of your party.

11. Serve atop a mountain of mashed potatoes, as is the way of the North.

Alchemical Notes:

- The Guinness, a dark potion of ancient brewing, does not overwhelm but instead binds flavors like a binding spell.
- If ye fear alcohol (or it's banned in your realm), substitute with: 2 cups water, 1 tablespoon Worcestershire elixir, 2 beef bouillon cubes, crumbled with care —A noble stew still, but no longer Irish in heritage.

Alternate Conjurations:

- **Oven method:** Cover and bake at 160°C (320°F) for 2½ hours. Remove lid and continue for 30–45 mins to reduce sauce.
- **Slow Cooker:** Reduce broth by 1 cup. Simmer all in pot before transferring to cooker. Stew for 8 hours on low. To thicken: remove lid or decant into a pan and reduce on stove. May your spoons be full, and your flagons never empty. ■

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