

By the WAY #20

by W. Andrew York
(wandrew88 of gmail.com)

I had a very quiet Thanksgiving holiday, having a smoked turkey leg and cornbread Stovetop Stuffing for my “feast”. I had a low key day, just watching some TV/DVDs, playing computer games (Honeycomb Hotel is addictive!) and doing a little reading. The rest of the holiday weekend was spent putting up Christmas decorations, seeing a couple of movies and avoiding the stores with all the crowds.

I hope y’all had a quiet holiday and are gearing up for a great Christmas time and a Happy New Year’s! My tree is up, presents posted out, cards are in the mail and only six letters remaining to write – once I get this column put to bed!

For the rest of the month, I’m hoping to coast into the New Year, having little on my plate other than a trip to Dallas next weekend to visit the King Tut exhibit. There are some good hotel packages around the event and I’ll get the chance to meet up with *Eternal Sunshine* luminaries – Doug and Heather.

Commentary

A few weeks back was the annual gaming convention here in Austin – MilleniumCon. As always, it was a great time with a wide variety of games offered (though heavy on miniatures and role-playing). I was able to enjoy Circus Maximus on Friday night – played on a large, home built, stadium. I came in second, in a medium chariot with both wheels wobbling due to damage. In last place was a heavy chariot, down two horses and barely able to make a maximum speed of 10 spaces. Everyone has a great time with this one!

Saturday morning, played the second half of a WWII beach assault. The previous evening, the marines landed and swept the Japanese from shore. The game I played was the strike to throw the Marines into the sea. Commanding half of the counterattackers, we suffered heavy losses. But, the forward US squads were all but destroyed – the remaining men trapped in the open trying to fall back to the final resistance line – two machine gun nests and command post aided by an immobile tank at the edge of the sand. Interestingly, the first few casualties were hit by one of my tank’s main gun, including the flamethrower – the small arms fire was singularly ineffectual at the start. One interesting aspect of the rule set was, if the Japanese failed a morale check, there was a chance that they’d commit seppuku. It happened once during our game.

The afternoon was a round of Power Grid (my first time playing), but only after recruiting an additional player from another board game that didn’t have enough to go. In a close run thing, I ended up in third place (ok, last place!). It was a lot of fun and I hope to play more of this one in the future (plus there are interesting expansion boards and power plant decks). Afterwards, we played a pick-up game of Kill Dr. Lucky (another first time play). This was a lot more fun than I’d thought it would be and another game I’d like to play more of in the future.

Saturday night was a series of hourly romps into a Warlord Dungeon Crawl. This is the same set-up as last year with six four character teams (all balanced, with similar capabilities) entering the dungeon from different locations. The two primary strategies are, one, to race as a combined group to slay the large, sleeping, dragon in the center room and gather his treasure. The other is to collect scattered treasures around the dungeon, fighting monsters and/or other parties. At the end of the hour (yep, only one hour per crawl), the number of treasures, unused “special” items and points for monsters/characters you’ve killed are tallied to determine the winner. Afterwards, the dungeon is reset for another group to sally forth. I played a couple times, getting third prize once.

Sunday was the flea market. I picked up some games for a good price, including finding a \$20 copy of Rail Baron for a friend who’s kids liked the game when played at a relative’s house. Then, I wandered the dealer’s room for the last time (picking up a book on U-boat pen construction) and, as the game I signed up for didn’t go, I watched some of the other games. There’s one I definitely want to get into next year, Moby Dick - Rise of the Kraken. You are in charge of one of the longboats trying to land the whale. Everyone was having a good time with it, particularly when it was the shark’s phase, going after the men that had went overboard.

If you haven’t attended one of these local gaming events, I’d certainly recommend looking into it. Every year MilleniumCon is a great weekend. In fact, I’m looking into going to OwlCon (near Houston) and ChimeraCon (San Antonio) this coming year. Also, Jamie McQuinn is holding his annual Rubicon Games in Dayton at the end of February that I’m thinking about attending. And, of course, next November I’ll be back!

Texas Spotlight

Unlike the press coverage after Katrina, there has been little national coverage of the effects of Hurricane Ike to the Texas coast. Most of the inland areas are back to something approaching normal, though there is still significant economic dislocation and ongoing rebuilding efforts.

It is different for Galveston island. I visited there a couple summers ago and found it an historic town, beautiful beaches and very friendly folks. Ike changed that, wiping out beachside buildings and flooding much of the historic district. Landmarks, such as the legendary Balinese Room were completely destroyed. And the effects continue to echo with the University of Texas Medical Branch, the only hospital partially open on the island, having to recently layoff of a large percentage of the staff due to slow rebuilding efforts.

On the other hand, the island's residents are resilient. This past weekend, about three months after landfall, they held their annual "Dickens on the Strand" in the historical district. Granted, most of the buildings didn't have power fully restored, requiring the event to close at dusk. Also, many residents having lost their costumes; had to find replacements. The bottom line, many local folks turned out to celebrate.

From the news reports, crowds were down from previous years and expected income is much lower. For instance, all of the parking meters were destroyed so the city won't get those funds. However, the determination of the island's residents continue to push for the return of Galveston to it's former glory - much as they did after the hurricane of 1900 wiped the city off the map. I know I'll visit again!

Source of some facts: [Austin American Statesman](#), December 7 2008, "Spirit Renewed" article on page A1 and A4.

LOCs

Send them in!

[Doug Kent] I was very pleased to see Wardencllyffe Tower on your playlist. I have been a huge Holdsworth fan since the 1980's, when my brother Paul introduced me to his work through his LP "Velvet Darkness." This led to the usual digging to find his work with Tony Williams Lifetime, Gong, UK...the UK and Williams stuff is especially appealing to me.

At this point, IOU was released on LP (import only) and I grabbed a copy at the local Record Town. A week or two later, Paul discovered that the IOU band was playing the Bottom Line in New York City. I think I was 13 at the time, but we had no problem getting me into the club to enjoy the performance. This was also the first time I saw Jeff Berlin play live, but Wackerman and Holdsworth were the highlights for me.

Road Games was the attempt to push Holdsworth into the mainstream, but I didn't like it as much as the other albums I'd collected. Then came Atavachron and the beginning of his Synthaxe fascination. I played that CD to death, but in some ways I missed the power of the guitar work. Still, as time went on, I've continued to have a tremendous fondness for his work. Metal Fatigue and Secrets are also personal favorites. I know I bought a signed copy of Sixteen Men of Tain for Paul one Christmas. I'd like to hear the "unreleased tracks" from his Against the Clock but I'm not paying that kind of money for the set.

I haven't yet purchased any of the live CD's though. Have you?

[WAY] Doug, sorry to say, my response is going to disappointed you. Wardencllyffe Towers is the only Holdsworth I have. A number of years back a writer I respect mentioned he liked Holdsworth. Since I had enjoyed a number of his previous recommendations, I bought that CD to try him out. However, in this case, I was not impressed and didn't pick up anything further by the artist (as I'd done with other endorsements by the author).

The reason it came up in last column's playlist? Pure happenstance - I do try to play everything in my music collection every so often (that being every couple of years), though what I have on cassettes and vinyl rarely make that cut. So, the CD was randomly plucked out of the stack and played while I was typing.

That being said, I'm willing to take another stab at Holdsworth. What is the single best example of his musical talent that would be a better introduction than Wardencllyffe Towers?

[David Burgess] This [Hangman, by Definition] should be fun? I love games! Especially ones that don't take a ton of time right now since I'm so busy....whine... **[WAY]** That's the primary idea behind the "everyone plays" games. They don't take a lot of time to participate; but provide a bit of a challenge to those who want it. In this case, the words are not necessarily "everyday" words and may take a little bit of effort to decipher - especially in early rounds. Hopefully, the addition of the definition will aid in figuring it out.

Review

David S. Kidder and Noah D. Oppenheim, three years ago, started a series of books under The Intellectual Devotional moniker. The premise is based on the religious practice of daily devotionals, taking it into the secular world and using to expand the reader's knowledge base. Each of the books consists of 52 weeks of one-page features for that day of the week's theme (each weekday has a different theme). The format is, usually, a one paragraph overview of the topic, a few paragraphs digging a bit more into it, followed by a few additional factoids that are tangential to the primary topic.

The first year they published a general educational book. The daily themes included History, Literature, Visual Arts, Science, Music, Philosophy and Religion. Some of the topics covered include, for the first week, The Alphabet, Ulysses, Lascaux Cave Paintings, Cloning, The Basics (of Music), Appearance and Reality (in Philosophy) and the Torah.

The next year, the book's focus was American History. Themes for each day were Politics & Leadership, War & Peace, Rights & Reform, Business, Building America, Literature and Arts. The first week's features are John Smith, Pequot War, Slavery, Tobacco, Pueblo Civilization, Anne Bradstreet and John Singleton Copley.

This year, they published one on Modern Culture. I'm looking forward, in 2009, to the themes of Personalities, Literature, Music, Film, Ideas and Trends, Sports and Pop. The first week looks into Sigmund Freud, Crime and Punishment (the book), Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, The Lumiere Brothers, Communism, James Naismith and Coney Island.

I've found these to be great reads, with a wealth of information about mainstream and not-so-mainstream topics. They don't take a lot of time in a day and do provide some thought provoking material (especially the first book). In fact, I've decided to read each book each year - so next year I have three of them to read every day!

Highly recommended, overall, though a few snippets and factoids, here and there, are a bit biased or open to challenge. However, these quibbles do not distract from the educational purpose of the books. After all, one of the reasons for the books, are to challenge minds, provide information and "open new horizons of intellectual discovery" (introduction of the first book). If everything they wrote was common knowledge, where would the challenges to the readership be?

Note - the books are published the fall so that they are fresh for the coming year. I've found the best prices at Costco with the list price for the latest book being \$24. The Costco price was \$12.99; but I bought it when they had a \$3 discount (that I was unaware of) for a markdown of over 58%.

Disclaimer/Rant - I try to buy local as often as I can. However, discounts that substantial are very hard to skip. Also, with the restrictive return policies most chains have, buying gifts has to be from one of them to allow folks outside the local area to exchange gifts that they already have or which don't spark their interest. So, it makes it difficult to support the local businesses when they can't compete with deep chain discounts and limited return policies. (As you can tell, I recently bought my Christmas presents, having to buy from a chain for most of the books rather than my preference - BookPeople).

Books Finished: The Grapple (Alternate History; B-); Presidential Book of Lists (History; B)

Movie Watch: Madagascar 2 D; Quantum of Solace B; The Boy in the Striped Pajamas A-

Observation

I'm very disappointed with this fall season's television offerings. Usually I have one or more shows to watch a night, and, every so often, two shows on simultaneously. However, this year, there's only one show on Monday, the Sarah Connor Chronicles plus the short, now ended, season of Boston Legal. Tuesday has nothing (well, once The Shield ended), with Wednesday another wasteland echoed by Friday and Saturday nights. Thursday does have two shows, Ugly Betty and Supernatural - Smallville didn't keep my interest this year. Sunday, since Amazing Race finished, has just 60 Minutes and Desperate Housewives. On the plus side, I'm starting to make headway on my reading and having a bit more time to write!

Playlist for this issue: Desperate Housewives, background music at the Saturn dealership, local CBS news, Sarah Connor Chronicles, Home Improvement reruns on Nick at Night

