

Session Report – Pathfinder Adventure Card Game: Rise of the Runelords (Pt. 2)

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | September 6, 2014



Session Report is a monthly series that explores the intersection of narrative and broader themes of game design by focusing on a specific tabletop game each month.

The Pathfinder Adventure Card Game is taking off. This first-of-its-kind blend of RPG-style stat growth and dice rolling, CCG-inspired deck construction, clever hand management and persistent progress across a 33- to 35-scenario epic campaign has rightfully earned the support of thousands of players worldwide. Like the deckbuilder craze that was at least part of Pathfinder ACG's inspiration, I have no doubt that this system will be copied and improved upon—it just feels too good to play for it not to be a success. Before we can experience the *Shadowrun Adventure Card Game* or *Fallout Adventure Card Game*, however, there's still plenty of Pathfinder ACG on the horizon, including a just-launched Adventure Path with a piratical theme (think eye patches, tot flasks, peg legs and parrots) and a soon-to-come Organized Play program.

In [Part 1](#) of this Session Report, I spent most of my time talking about the mechanisms driving gaming addiction and compulsion and why I considered a tendency toward such behaviors integral to what draws people toward games in the first place. I discussed how card games like *Magic: The Gathering* exploit artificial scarcity to drive compulsive purchasing, making them a kind of gambling game even though they are heavily marketed toward adolescents. Drawing on an article from Jack Flanagan for *The Week*, I introduced the concept of the Partial Reinforcement Effect, or PRE, that is so essential to the success of addictive electronic and tabletop games.

Recognizing that a game exploits your reward pathways or utilizes PRE doesn't necessarily make the game *bad* any more than knowledge of the psychological reward system driving flavor preferences (our brains are hardwired to crave saltiness and fattiness, essential nutrients that were much rarer in the prehistoric landscape in which we evolved) makes potato chip manufacturers bad. Just the opposite—it shows that the designers of games like *Magic* know their shit, know exactly which subliminal buttons to push to maximize the player's satisfaction. Game addiction is almost always benign; it only becomes a problem in extreme cases, when it jeopardizes the gamer's livelihood or personal relationships.

The golden ticket, from a player's point of view, is something that pushes all those pleasure buttons but in a self-limiting way, an expansive but contained adventure bundled into a single purchase. As described by the incomparable Arin Hanson, a.k.a. Egoraptor, in his [dissection of the](#)

[Castlevania series](#), that's exactly what grants these games their longstanding popularity: the feeling of consistently, but not constantly, gaining small and satisfying rewards within a framework that is vast but self-contained. Hanson asserts that this satisfaction is, by definition, shallow, but I'm not so sure—that sounds like the elitism of somebody who considers himself "above" enjoying popcorn flicks or trashy genre novels. Surely, the satisfaction derived from these two approaches to game design is *different*, but is one really *better* than the other?

In the board game world, there have been a few attempts to rework the Trading Card Game or Collectible Card Game format in a more consumer-friendly design. Last month, in my [Game of Throne Card Game Session Report](#), I wrote about Fantasy Flight Games and their Living Card Game format, which retains the limitless expandability of Collectible Card Games but removes the artificial scarcity. It's a nice compromise that rewards both publishers and players: "You can keep spending money on this game system, if you want, but we're not going to trick you into doing so."

Pathfinder Adventure Card Game takes the opposite approach. Derived from Paizo's popular Pathfinder series of tabletop RPG products, it centers around self-contained cycles of releases known as Adventure Paths. Unlike a Living Card Game, in which expansions can mostly be purchased in any order and are all interoperable—somewhat like an ongoing television sitcom—Adventure Paths in Pathfinder ACG are more like a TV miniseries. Each Adventure Path consists of 7 releases, including a Base Set, 5 Adventure Decks and 1 Character Add-On (which increases the maximum player count from 4 to 6 and provides additional character options). While the Character Add-On is optional, the player must purchase the Base Set and all 5 Adventure Decks, in their original order of release, to experience the complete Adventure Path.

At first, this sounds a lot more demanding than the "buy as many as you want" model of CCGs and LCGs. However, each Adventure Path is completely self-contained. If you purchase the 6 core releases in the *Rise of the Runelords* Adventure Path, you're done; you are under no compulsion to purchase any further Pathfinder ACG products, ever. The same holds true for the recently launched *Skull & Shackles* Adventure Path or the upcoming *Wrath of the Righteous*; although they follow the same general gameplay format, they are each treated as an independent family of products from a consumer's point of view. While individual cards from separate Adventure Paths are designed to be compatible, the player is not *intended* to combine them together in the same way you would different expansions for an LCG. In fact, doing so would break the experience; the interoperability of Adventure Paths mainly exists to allow for fan-made custom scenarios, which Paizo explicitly encourages. Purchasing an entire Adventure Path is a \$120-plus expense at online retailer prices, but it's a single large expense, not an ongoing series of small ones.



Lem uses his cunning to defeat the Henchman Viorian Dekanti.

Its detractors complain that the Pathfinder Adventure Card Game doesn't have a story. At its most basic, it's just turning over a series of random cards, which sometimes produce nonsensical results. How was there a collapsed ceiling on the rope bridge? Did nobody else notice the hulking, aquatic bunyip in the general store? What's up with all these falling bells in the woods?

In contrast, I find that collectively weaving a story around these random occurrences is part of the fun of the game. If you aren't willing to treat these moments of nonsense as a storytelling challenge, you'll find that, stripped to its bare mechanics, Pathfinder ACG's about as fun as working your way through a mountain of scratch cards. There's the excitement of not knowing when you'll get the big payoff, but there's also the tedium of all those \$1.00, \$2.00, and "free scratch card" rewards it takes to find the \$1,000 card. The call to create a narrative is the game, at least in my opinion, and I believe I showed in Part 1 that a coherent, exciting story can be built around the game's mechanics, with a little spit and polish.

This time, I'm going to show you the other side—the structural frame of mechanisms driving the narrative. These can be equally fascinating, both for their abstract suggestiveness and for the eerie tightness of the game's push-your-luck mechanisms (I can't tell you how many times, despite rolling a half-dozen polyhedral dice of various sizes with various modifiers, I ended up rolling *precisely* the value I needed).

Turn 9 was Lem's turn to act, but Pathfinder ACG's ruleset is unusually flexible about allowing players to do things out of turn—this is a cooperative game, after all. Unless it specifies otherwise, the majority of cards and power can be played at any time and on anyone. In this case, before Lem's first action, Ezren took the opportunity to play the Charm Person spell he had drawn the turn before; it instructed him to bury the spell (i.e. place it underneath his character card, where it would remain inaccessible until the end of the Scenario) to draw a random human ally from the box. He drew Vale Temros, a Black Arrow Ranger from Adventure 3 who can aid in your combat check, particularly against giants.

With that interruption out of the way, Lem was ready to explore his location—but before he could start, he had to satisfy its "At This Location" effect. Representing the energy-draining influence of the Runewell, it instructed Lem to bury a card from his hand; he chose the Ring of Protection that he had acquired the turn before. Then, turning over the top card of the Runewell's location deck, Lem uncovered Viorian Dekanti, one of the Scenario's special Henchmen! Each Scenario features a Villain and several Henchmen, who are distributed randomly among the location decks at the start of the game; the goal is to defeat the Henchmen in order to close the locations, then defeat the Villain to win the Scenario. If the Villain is defeated while there are still locations open, she will escape to a random open location. If they're in the right place at the right time, players can

attempt to temporarily close locations to prevent this from happening (think of them as blocking the doorway), but it's usually better to close the location properly by defeating the Henchman or fully exploring the location deck.

In the *Rise of the Runelords* narrative, Viorian Dekanti is a human warrior who has been possessed by Chellan, the Sword of Greed. Since Karzoug, the final Villain of the Adventure Path, is the Runelord of Greed, it makes sense that she's kneeling at his throne. Combat with Villains and Henchmen can get pretty complicated, but Viorian's effect is simple: she is defeated with a single combat check of 23, and if she's undefeated, a random character at her location has to immediately do battle with her again. This wasn't destined to happen in Lem's case: as soon as Viorian was encountered, the halfling played the Blizzard spell, which let him add 2d6 to his combat check. This is the terminology the game uses, common to RPG players but mystifying to normal folk. A d6 is a standard six-sided die, and 2d6 signifies a pair of them; the game also employs d4s, d8s, d10s and d12s.

After unleashing the Blizzard at the start of the encounter, Lem played a Swipe spell during the combat check itself (thematically stealing the sword from her hands) to reduce the difficulty to defeat Viorian from 23 to 20. If he didn't play another weapon or attack spell on the check, the Swipe spell lets its caster use his Arcane skill, a d10+3, instead of the standard Strength or Melee for combat; the spell also adds a d8. Finally, Lem recharged (put on the bottom of his deck) a card from his hand, representing the bolstering effect of his bardic song, to add an additional d4+3. Adding them all together, Lem rolled a d10, a d8, 2d6 and a d4, then added 6 to the result, hoping to meet or exceed a total value of 20. The result was...20, on the nose!

(This demonstrates the uncanny tightness of the game's dice-rolling, but I did forget that the party's Runeforged Weapons, a reward for completing Adventure 5, could have added an additional 2d4 to the check, since Viorian had the Transmuter trait.)

The downside of the Blizzard spell is that, after its use, every character except the caster is subjected to 1 cold damage; elemental damage like cold, fire or poison is much harder to mitigate than standard combat damage. Lini avoided the effect by playing Reflecting Shield, a rare but powerful armor that reduces any elemental damage by 2; the other characters had no way to avoid the damage, and thus had to discard 1 card each from their hands. Having defeated a Henchman, Lem now had the opportunity to close his location, which meant satisfying its "When Closing" requirement and, if successful, returning all remaining cards in the location deck to the box and flipping the location card over to its "closed" side. Luckily, the Runewell's "When Closing" text states that it can be closed automatically, so this wasn't much of a trial for Lem. Some locations are much harder to close, including high-level checks against rarely-used skills or burying cards from the closer's hand. Since you can only move to a new location at the start of your turn, Lem had nothing left to do but reset his hand, drawing back up to his maximum hand size.



A couple of Rise of the Runelords' more interesting Boons.

You don't technically need to purchase an entire Adventure Path to play the Pathfinder Adventure Card Game. As long as you purchase the decks in release order, starting with the Base Set for the Adventure Path you're playing, you can technically stop whenever you want. However, doing so would mean missing out on the game's greatest innovation, what lets it retain the CCG format's addictive appeal in spite of its self-contained release structure: persistence.

Most board games are designed to be played and completed in a single session. Between each play, the game state resets to a clean slate—the only thing that evolves over time is the players' understanding of the game and its strategies. This is the "metagame," and it's a huge part of the appeal of CCGs such as *Magic: The Gathering*; often, dedicated players will observe one another's decks and playstyles and construct specialized decks to combat an opponent's winning strategy. Without this metagaming element of competitive deck construction, *Magic's* lucrative system of artificial scarcity would be dead in the water, as there would be no motivation for players to splurge on booster packs or expensive aftermarket purchases.

Pathfinder Adventure Card Game takes this concept of an evolving metagame and incorporates it into the infragame, the experience contained within an actual gaming session. In Pathfinder ACG, players will devote part of their energies *during the game* to acquiring new cards, which they can then incorporate into their decks at the end of the play session. Each character in this fantasy RPG saga is represented by a specially constructed deck of 15 cards representing weapons, armor, items, spells, allies and blessings. The distribution of card types is prescribed according to the character: for instance, the Fighter will have lots of weapons and armor but no spells, whereas the arcane Wizard will come equipped with a well-stocked spellbook but not have access to any blessings. (These decisions are often based thematically on the character's backstory, printed on the reverse side of the character art; for instance, [Ezren the Wizard's history](#) indicates that he renounced religion after discovering that the charges of heresy against his father were founded in truth, explaining why he will never carry blessings in his deck between Scenarios).

At the beginning of the Adventure Path, the cards making up a character's deck, collectively referred to as Boons, are as mundane as they come: a regular shortsword, a wooden shield, a paltry spell of acid spray, an expendable potion. The rulebook allows players to build their own starting decks or use the "prerolled" characters the publishers have created, but in either case, all cards must carry the "Basic" trait, representing the worst of what the game has to offer. Over the course of a play session, however, players have the opportunity to encounter and acquire new Boons, which may be straightforward improvements upon their starting gear (a Shortsword +1) or

open up new gameplay options altogether (swapping out a melee weapon for a ranged one, a shield for a breastplate, or a potion for pair of elven boots). Once the play session has concluded, win or lose, the players pool together all of the cards that they discovered along the way, alongside the ones they started out with, and rebuild their decks. They are still limited by the ratio of card types printed on their character card, but otherwise, they are free to tweak the decks to their liking. Unwanted cards go back into their respective decks, to be encountered again at a later date.

In this way, the metagame of *Magic's* deck construction is made part and parcel of Pathfinder ACG's in-game experience. You might only pick up one, two or three cards worth keeping each game, but over dozens of play sessions, characters will gradually grow and evolve, swapping out their disposable starting deck for increasingly powerful or specialized alternatives. The game facilitates this by gradually evolving itself: each Adventure Path is composed of a linear series of 33-35 Scenarios designed to be played over the course of several months. Each Scenario comes with its own special rules, rewards, and villains/henchmen to confront, so that the challenge of the game ramps up alongside the players.

The card pool of Boons and their unwelcome counterpart, Banes, also evolves over time. The Scenarios are grouped into seven Adventures, containing 3-5 Scenarios each. Before starting a new Adventure, the owner of the game will shuffle a fresh set of higher-level Boons and Banes into the sizable decks representing each card type. As these stronger cards enter the fray, however, the weaker cards remain, and older cards will always outnumber newer ones. Thus, without forcing repeat purchases, Pathfinder ACG builds an in-game system of artificial scarcity that almost exactly mirrors the ranked loot drops in video games like *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo III*. Eventually, cards with the Basic and Elite trait gradually leave play for the remainder of the Adventure Path; in this way, during later Adventures, the card pool in its entirety sees an upgrade. However, even by the end of the Adventure Path, the highest-level Boons retain that patina of rarity. In other words, by shuffling the new cards in gradually instead of constantly replacing the entire card pool, Pathfinder cunningly develops a Partial Reinforcement Effect that keeps players hooked for at least the 35 play sessions required to complete an Adventure Path.



The Villain, Most High Ceoptra.

With the Runewell closed, the only remaining open location was the Throne Room. When she played her Dominate spell against the Scout, Lini had spotted the Villain Most High Ceoptra hiding in the Throne Room's location deck, informing the party's decision to explore that location last. All they had to do now was keep exploring the Throne Room until they encountered Ceoptra, then defeat her once in combat—pretty easy, right? That's what I thought at

the time...

Lini, already at the Throne Room, started her turn by exploring. Having played the Eagle to peek at the top card in the deck, she already knew what was coming: the return of the Scout, one of the game's "Veteran" monsters, which become stronger the further you progress along the Adventure Path. During the final Adventure, the Scout requires a combat check of 14 to defeat—but before you can even attempt it, he deals 3 ranged combat damage to the unlucky explorer. Normally, this means discarding 3 cards from your hand, but Lini was able to avoid the damage entirely by recharging the Magic Half Plate she had acquired a few turns earlier. She then fired the Deathbane Light Crossbow +2 by revealing it from her hand; unlike spells, most weapons can be played by simply revealing them from your hand, which means you get to hold on to them for multiple turns (as one would expect from a sword or bow). She also revealed the Belt of Physical Might to add 2 to the check, and Lem recharged the ally Shalelu Andosana (an elven ranger who can aid in any ranged combat check) and played Aid, one of the spells he had temporarily gained via the Emerald Codex, to ensure Lini's success against the Scout. If she had failed, she would have been dealt combat damage, but more importantly, the enemy would have been shuffled back into the location deck, acting as an additional buffer between the heroes and the Villain.

Ezren then moved to the Throne Room and explored, finding a Greatsword, a weapon that would have been great in Adventure 1 but was dead weight 30 Scenarios later. It can be worthwhile to acquire cards, even if you don't think you're going to use them, because they are essentially an extra point of damage the character can absorb. However, Ezren couldn't have succeeded at the Greatsword's Strength-based Check to Acquire without playing cards to assist in the check, which would have resulted in a net loss, so he ignored the Boon—unlike Banes, which stay in the location, Boons are automatically put back in the box if you fail to acquire them on your first attempt. Ezren then discarded the scholar Brodert Quink to explore again. (Most allies, in addition to their specific effect, have the generic ability "Discard this card to explore your location," thematically representing dispatching the ally to scout ahead.) The next card was the one they all knew was coming eventually: the lamia harridan Most High Ceoptra, Villain of the Scenario!

Here's where things went pear-shaped. As is appropriate for the boss of the *Rise of the Runelords* Adventure Path's penultimate scenario, Most High Ceoptra is one of the toughest Villains in the game, a threat I had seriously underestimated. Before the players can even attempt her successive combat checks of 24 and 32 (yes, you need to make two nontrivial checks *in a row*), they need to succeed at an Arcane or Divine check of 15, or they can't play attack spells against her at all! This was bad news for my adventuring party, composed entirely of spellcasters. As if that weren't bad enough, combat damage from Ceoptra can't be reduced by any means and requires cards to be buried instead of discarded. In Pathfinder ACG, your deck is your life, and while discarded cards can be added back to your deck via healing magic (both Lem and Lini had brought along a few healing spells), buried cards are gone until the end of the Scenario. If you're foolish enough to let Ceoptra damage you, there's no way to recover.

Ezren used the reveal power of the Robe of Runes, Ordikon's Staff and two Headbands of Epic Intelligence to help him succeed at his pre-battle Arcane check. These items all either boost the user's Intelligence or Arcane skills, and unlike many items, they can be combo'd for a massive +10 modifier. Since Ezren's Arcane skill is based on his Intelligence, and his attack magic is based on Arcane, these cards were the bread and butter of his deck; with them, in hand, he was virtually unstoppable. Ezren passed Ceoptra's test, but then realized he didn't have any spells in his hand with which to attack the Villain! That meant there was only one possible outcome to the fight: burying his entire hand, including the five cards that were most crucial to his survival. Ezren reset his hand, and Ceoptra escaped back into the Throne Room location deck.



The Assault on the Pinnacle Scenario, just prior to the first turn.

The *Magic* craze hit when I was at the perfect age for it, but I never got into the game enough to empty my allowance into it—growing up in a low-income household, I couldn't have afforded a serious deck even if I wanted one—so Pathfinder ACG is my way of getting that titillating new-booster buzz. Each Scenario boils down to exploring locations, which are 10-card decks with a prescribed card distribution similar to the character decks, searching for the Villain and his Henchmen. The contents of the location decks are randomized, but their types and quantities are known, so that I have a good idea I might find new spells at the Academy, new blessings at the Temple, or new weapons at the General Store. However, until I've explored the location—torn the metaphorical foil on the booster pack—I never know what I'll find in any given game, and the rarity of the best cards is carefully controlled to create that addiction-boosting sense of PRE.

This feeling of slow but consistent progression, just like a modern *Castlevania* title, is intoxicating, but as with *Magic*, it would fail if the mechanics of the game itself weren't solid enough to warrant repeated plays. Luckily, they are—to a point. Without the secret ingredients of persistence and PRE, Pathfinder ACG would be fun enough to warrant at least a dozen plays, but I'd probably stop there. The PRE effect triples that count, but it's a "gotta catch 'em all" kind of replayability, grounded more in compulsion than in fun after the novelty of the play experience wears thin. That's a polite way of saying that each Adventure Path runs about two times too long for my tastes—for reasons described in the following paragraph, I would much rather play a baker's dozen Scenarios multiple times with different characters than take a single character once through 35 Scenarios.

Addiction aside, there are a few things that Pathfinder ACG does extraordinarily well, one of which is character variety. Aside from the composition of their decks, each character is defined by a set of skills that

should be familiar to anybody who's played a tabletop or computer RPG—things like Strength, Dexterity, Constitution and Charisma. Next to each skill is a number representing a polyhedral die. Everything in the game, from acquiring Boons to defeating Banes, comes down to testing those skills, which amounts to rolling the die that's indicated and hoping to meet or exceed the number given for the difficulty of the test. Instead of listing their own die, some skills reference other skills, usually with a modifier—a character's Melee skill might be listed as their Strength +2, for example. Every time that player tests her Melee skill, she will roll her Strength die and add 2 to the result.

This means that even in the exact same Scenario with the exact same mix of Boons and Banes, your character's skills define the challenges of the game and dictate the strategies required to overcome them. If I'd brought a team of melee fighters to face Most High Ceoptra, the encounter would have gone very differently. For another example, a check to acquire a bow might require a roll of 8 using the character's Dexterity or Ranged skill. Harsk the Ranger, whose Ranged skill is a d8 +3, could conceivably make this check without playing any additional cards, and would greatly benefit from the weapon acquired. Amiri the Barbarian, on the other hand, only rolls a d6 for her Dexterity skill, and doesn't even have the Ranged skill—she'd need to use an item, blessing, ally or other boost if she wanted to acquire the card, but she'd be much better off going for a greataxe or broadsword. The Boons themselves sometimes modify the skills used in a check. For example, a standard unarmed combat check uses a character's Strength or Melee skill, but if Harsk were to fire his newly acquired bow, he could use his Ranged skill instead, whereas Ezren the Wizard could cast an offensive spell to use his Arcane skill (a mighty d12 +2) to defeat the same monster. You'll want to take the entire party into account when choosing which Boons to go after and swap permanently into your deck; for example, if none of your characters are good at Dexterity or Disable checks, then the Find Traps spell, the Masterwork Tools or the Blessing of Abadar start to look very tempting.

Finally, each character has access to a handful of unique powers that further change the way their player experiences the game. Lem, the halfling bard, can place any card from his hand on the bottom of his deck in order to give a small boost to another character's check, representing the RPG trope of stat-buffing songs. He's also infinitely resourceful, and may exchange a card from his hand for one of the same type from his discard pile so that the item, weapon or spell that he needs is always at his fingertips. The game plays very differently for Valeros, master of weapons, who can keep weapons in his deck even after playing them for their strongest effect (most characters would have to discard), or for Seelah the Paladin, who can push quickly through a location deck in search of evil to vanquish at the cost of putting most Boons out of reach, representing the Paladin's goody-goody selflessness.



Lini's character card, showing some of her earned Feats.
Her card list is on the reverse of this card.

On turn 12, Lem moved to the Throne Room—all 3 characters were now gathered there—and explored. The top card was Augury, a low-level spell that allows a player to examine the top 3 cards of his location deck and potentially reorder them. Succeeding at his check to acquire the spell, Lem discarded a Blessing of Pharasma to explore again. (The Pathfinder ACG's most versatile card type, all blessings can be used to add another die of the base skill to any player's check or, alternatively, discarded to explore your location. Additionally, each blessing can provide two extra dice instead of one when used to boost a certain kind of check, depending on the god being invoked.)

The next card in the location deck was the heroes' old nemesis, Most High Ceoptra! Before the combat, Ezren succeeded at the Villain's Arcane check, allowing him to play the Blizzard spell to boost all the party's attacks for the rest of the turn. Hoping to succeed where Ezren had failed, Lem went all out on the Villain's first combat check of 24, discarding his Venomous Heavy Crossbow and Venomous Dagger +2. (While all weapons can be revealed to use them regularly, most of them will deal additional damage if the player discards the weapon instead, representing going all out on the attack; presumably, the weapon will need to be repaired before it can be used again. The Venomous Dagger, like all throwing weapons, can also be discarded to add a small amount of damage to a check using a different weapon.) The bard additionally recharged a Black Arrow Ranger to boost his ranged attack, discarded a Blessing of Gozreh to add an extra die, and recharged Augury to power his bardic singing ability. Finally, he banished the Fiery Weapon spell from the Emerald Codex to add another d4, rolling a total of 2d8, a d10, a d12, 3d6 and 2d4, plus 11. The result was 30, exceeding the value needed to succeed at the check by 6 points.

Although in many cases, players may play cards or use abilities at any time, the player who encounters a card is almost always the one who has to ultimately deal with it. In the case of certain Villains and Henchmen, however, this rule is suspended: if the card has more than one successive check, then another character at the same location can attempt the first or last check, as long as the player who encountered the card attempts at least one of them. Since Lem had discarded both his weapons on the first check, somebody else would need to take care of the second combat check of 32. Lini stepped up to the plate. First, she discarded a card from her hand to roll a d10 instead of her normal d6 for her Dexterity check; this represents the druid's famed shapeshifting ability, temporarily taking on an animal form. She also used one of her other druidic powers, revealing an animal ally from her had (the Eagle, in this case) to add 1d4+4 to any of her checks. Finally, she revealed the Deathbane Light Crossbow and Belt of Physical Might, rolling a total of a d10, a d8, 2d6, and a d4, plus 7. The result...was 27, 5 short of what she needed to defeat the Villain. Since she failed the check, she had to take the difference in combat damage—and with Most High Ceoptra's special abilities in play, that meant the druid buried her entire hand. The Villain escaped once more into the Throne Room.

I had now learned not to underestimate the lamia harridan, so the next few turns were spent resetting hands and discarding unwanted cards, trying to get

the perfect setup to defeat this tough-as-nails Villain. Pathfinder ACG is usually more of a seat-of-your-pants experience, so wasting turns cycling through your deck is seldom necessary; in fact, it's actively harmful in many cases, since each discarded card is equivalent to a point of damage. In this case, though, discarding is better than burying, and Most High Ceoptra was burying *me*. Ezren also cast Scrying, an improved version of Augury, to ensure that when they were ready for the fight against Ceoptra, the heroes would know where to find her.



Each 10-card location deck is like a booster in a CCG—without the associated monetary expense.

Each Base Set for the Pathfinder ACG includes 7 unique characters, with 4 more supplied by that Adventure Path's Character Add-On. Additionally, Paizo is soon to roll out 7 Class Decks containing 4 characters apiece, each with a unique twist on the class's core concepts. Some of these characters share the same name and image as the ones found in the Base Sets, but their skills, powers or card list are subtly tweaked. The message from Paizo is clear: "We're not going to charge you for repeated content, period."

As a player's deck advances over a series of plays, so too do her character's abilities. Following specific Scenarios, the players might be rewarded with a Feat, the Pathfinder ACG equivalent of "leveling up." Each character has a prescribed set of Feats available, represented by empty checkboxes on the character card, but it's up to the player to choose which Feats to gain and in what order. A Skill Feat gives the character an additional +1 modifier to one of her skills, while a Power Feat unlocks an additional ability or boosts an existing one. Finally, a Card Feat increases the overall size of the character's deck, giving them additional flexibility and survivability.

Yes, I said "survivability," because in Pathfinder ACG, your deck is your life. Unlike in most games, you can't just shuffle your discards into your deck once you've drawn your last card—if you ever need to draw a card but can't (usually because your deck is empty), your character dies. This might happen because during your turn, you discarded a card to use its ability or as a result of a failed combat roll. Then, at the end of your turn, you must perform what's called a "hand reset," which means discarding any extra cards if you're above your hand size (maximum hand size is also character-specific, and can often be increased with Feats), and then drawing new cards if you're below your hand size. If your discard pile is larger than your deck, it usually means it's time to start playing cautiously. Of course, you could cast a Cure spell or drink a Potion of Healing to shuffle a few discarded cards back into your deck—assuming you have access to those Boons.

Death is not frequent in Pathfinder ACG, but that's mainly because its consequences are so dire. Thanks again to the game's reliance on persistence, when a character *does* pass, it's a knife to the heart. In a roguelike-like

twist, a dead character doesn't get to come back for the next Scenario—you're instructed put your entire deck back in the box, erase all your earned Feats, and start a new character from scratch. When you've spent 30 or more play sessions nurturing a single character, watching him slowly grow, that's a tragedy...which means, in turn, that Pathfinder ACG players can get *really* invested in the outcome of the game. Like the PRE, it's manipulative as hell, but hey, it *works*.



The combination of cards needed to bury Most High Ceoptra.

Pathfinder ACG's find-the-villain formula does get a little stale after 50 plays, but sessions like this one serve as an excellent reminder of how effective (and affective) the system can be. Because of Pathfinder ACG's unique "the Villain got away" mechanic, it's the only Bane you're liable to encounter multiple times in a single game. The Villain will pop up in one location and then another, almost taunting you, until you finally have them cornered. Even when the Villain is a pushover, chasing them down and closing off escape routes results in a very appealing *Scooby Doo* narrative and offers a fun logistical problem to solve...for your first few games, until it becomes second nature. But when the Villain is dangerous as well, players will actually grow to *hate* her, forming an emotional connection that generally requires hours of quality storytelling, making her eventual defeat all the more satisfying.

On turn 17, Ezren decided that it was now or never. Exploring the Throne Room, he found exactly what the Scrying spell had told him he would find: Most High Ceoptra. Since Ezren had buried his Intelligence-boosting items, his Arcane check to play attack spells was a gamble; to help him out, Lem sang his bardic song and played a Blessing of Sarenrae. It turned out to be a good move; rolling 2d12 and a d4 plus 8, Ezren barely managed a 15, the minimum required by the check! Next, Lem recharged another card to boost his own check, rolling a 16! Free to use every spell at their disposal, Lem and Ezren both played Blizzard, adding 4d6 to every combat check against the lamia harridan. For the first check of 24, Ezren took no chances, playing a spell of Frost Ray and having Lini discard a Blessing of Pharasma to roll 3d12 and 6d6 plus 5. The result was 47, nearly double the required total, but this wasn't just about defeating the Villain anymore; this was *payback*. Lem helped out with the second check, using his Wand of Enervation to reduce the difficulty by 5 to 27, but Ezren, who had taken the worst pummeling from Ceoptra, insisted on finishing her off himself. He played Lightning Bolt, boosted by the Charmed Red Dragon ally and a Blessing of Zarongel from Lini; Lem, meanwhile, added a Blessing of Norgorber. Rolling 4d12 and 6d6 plus 10, Ezren humiliated Most High Ceoptra with a combat total of 57. Overkill, to be sure...but even that would be insufficient to defeat Ceoptra's boss, Karzoug the Claimer, Runelord of Greed, in the life-or-death battle to come.

That, however, is not my story to tell. Perhaps it's yours?