Session Report: Victoriana and Optimism

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | December 14, 2019

Session Report is a series that explores the intersection of narrative and broader themes of game design by focusing on specific tabletop games. This month’s game is:

Victoriana by Benjamin Gailey & Brad Lawrence
Games Afoot, 2019
Games Afoot

[]-To be unsealed on December 31, 1999—the Eve of the New Millennium-[[]

We are standing on the precipice of a new age. An age of technological wonders to amaze even the most jaded intellect. An age whose citizens will see the sharp eye of reason finally pierce the veil separating life from death and peer at that which lies beyond. A new age of exploration, not of the globe but of the mind. As we cast our gaze before us, we are witness to a glittering vision: the Future Metropolis, a sanctum of peace, progress, and prosperity.

Unless...

There are those who would pervert that vision, criminal masterminds who seek to seize the promise of this new century and reshape it in their own warped image. Madmen and -women who would transmute peace to war and prosperity to ruin, who would taint the noble pursuit of knowledge with their blasphemous inquiries. Those who would challenge the just and pacific rule of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria Regina.

And there are yet others, a coalition of extraordinary individuals who would stand in defense of our Crown and our glittering future. Even now they scramble to uncover the elements of this foul conspiracy before disaster strikes, on this the final night of the nineteenth century...
In this mission, Time itself is your greatest Adversary.

*Victoriana* is a cooperative board game for 1–4 players set in a pulp-tinged rendition of fin-de-siecle London. Heroes and villains from Victorian-era fiction—H.G. Wells’ Time Traveller, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, Bram Stoker’s Wilhelmina Harker—appear alongside historical seekers after the unknown like occultist Aleister Crowley, investigative journalist and *Borderland* founder William Stead (accompanied by assistant editor and regular contributor “Miss X”), and (ahem) explorer, geographer, translator, writer, soldier, orientalist, cartographer, ethnologist, spy, linguist, poet, fencer, and diplomat Sir Richard Francis Burton. This ragtag group must first investigate and then avert a terrible conspiracy before the clock strikes midnight on December 31, 1899.

**NB:** So you are not distracted by certain chronological considerations, I will insert here a brief passage from *Victoriana’s* FAQ:

Q: It’s 1899. Some of Victoriana’s characters weren’t alive at this time.

A: Or were they?
In order to accomplish their goal, the investigators must track down leads and investigate locales to uncover the three elements of the abominable conspiracy: the deplorable Mastermind, the despicable Plot, and the loathsome Locale. Narrowing down the latter element is relatively straightforward: by ending their turn at any locale on the board, investigators may scour it for clues by flipping over its token, hoping to chance upon the one marked with an X. Uncovering the other two elements is trickier and involves investigating leads by visiting their locales and spending resources, which come in four flavors: occult, politics, science, and underworld. Most of these leads provide multiple investigation options, with varying costs and rewards; for example, if Griffin, the Invisible Man, discovers an Unknown Element at the British Museum, he can choose to test it in the lab, secure it in a government warehouse, or attempt to unravel its atomic structure. More resource-intensive choices generally offer greater rewards, typically in the form of deductions; for each point of deduction earned, the investigator can discard a card from the Plot deck, coming one step closer to revealing the mastermind’s true objective hidden at the bottom of the deck.

This is but a specimen of the dastardly Plots the mastermind might enact.

Alternatively, the investigator can forgo the rewards and instead keep the lead as a piece of evidence. The mastermind lurks behind three successive henchmen, and only by collectively gathering the right kinds of evidence can
the investigators see these malevolent minions brought before a magistrate, unveiling the next rung in the criminal ladder.

Finally, regardless of which option was chosen, successfully investigating a lead inevitably reveals a new one, like a daisy chain of depravity and intrigue. This is one of Victoriana’s cleverer systems: the new lead, which appears at a random location, is of a type influenced by the current lead and locale. In other words, following up on an underworld lead is more likely to produce another underworld lead, though there’s no guarantee. By the same token, investigating a lead at the Houses of Parliament or Speakers’ Corner is more likely to generate a political lead, while locales like the Tower of London and Cleopatra's Needle are more likely to generate occult leads. Players have a little influence, as well, but ultimately, there is no way to know a lead’s nature with certitude until it has been investigated.

Each mastermind stands behind a trio of nefarious Henchmen.

In addition to a set of astonishing abilities, each investigator has a speciality, a type of lead that investigator is particularly suited to. Successfully investigating a lead in your speciality produces an additional point of deduction and generates two new links in the daisy chain rather than only one. If the lead is instead kept as evidence, it is considered wild; the investigator is knowledgeable enough in this domain of evidence to wield it
against any henchman.

The grim Masterminds are more than mere criminals. Unfortunately, a number of grim forces are arrayed against our intrepid investigators. Chief among these is the inexorable march of time. Every two turns, the hands of Big Ben tick off another quarter hour. This might cause a lead to go cold, removing it from the board without generating a replacement; letting this happen eight times results in defeat for the investigators. Furthermore, the investigators have only five hours, from 7pm to midnight, to piece together the conspiracy and gather the right resources to stop it. Nor is that the only danger the investigators face: as they make progress toward solving the conspiracy, the mastermind will send agents to pursue them. Their pursuit may appear a little aimless, as though directed by a random roll of the die, but they can cause serious trouble for the investigators, blocking off routes and even inflicting trauma or other pestiferous conditions. Following a run-in with an agent, investigators might want to visit Bedlam to tend to their scrapes, but they must be ever cognizant of the grains remaining in the hourglass.
The mastermind will dispatch one of his foul Agents when he feels the noose tightening.

Should investigators find their options narrowing due to leads running cold, they can always research fresh directions of inquiry at certain locales in London: Singapore Charlie’s is a great place to dig up underworld leads, for example, while London University has its finger on the pulse of all the latest scientific gossip. Or they might wish to take advantage of locales like Isambard Brunel’s workshop or Millbank Prison, allowing them to convert resources directly into deductions (at a poor rate of exchange, but better than nothing). Whatever they do, investigators should know that *Victoriana* is a battle of attrition: they’ll begin the game with plentiful resources at their disposal, four fresh leads, and boundless optimism, but as midnight approaches, these stores will inevitably dwindle—opportunities to gain new resources are few and far between, mostly limited to a few far-flung locales.
London’s many charming Locales are artfully rendered in the included map.

Take a look at its board art (from industry heavyweight Ian O’Toole) and hear a high-level overview of its gameplay—investigators dashing around a city, collecting clues and evading agents of evil before a foul plot can be brought to fruition—and you’d be forgiven for assuming, as I did, that Victoriana would be a sort of transatlantic Arkham Horror. The similarities, it turns out, are only skin deep—and even then, only in a failing light. Arkham is damn near the epitome of a “theme-first” game design, top-heavy with fiddly rules and even fiddlier exceptions, dominated by flavor text—the industry term for any text on a card or other game component that serves no mechanical purpose, like the little quotes on the bottoms of Magic cards—and secure in its belief that the best way to resolve any dispute is to chuck fistfuls of dice at it. Victoriana is far more elegant, sparing both mechanically and narratively. The only text on most leads is their title—“Hysterical Toffer,” “Seven-Percent Solution,” “Cursed Portrait”—and investigation options. It is left to the players to fill in the blanks, narratively, about how each lead fits into the overarching story. The rulebook does an admirable job of modeling this kind of collaborative storytelling:

Mrs. Harker’s recurring nightmares have driven her to revisit a place from her past: Carfax Abbey. While investigating a lead at the monastery, Wilhelmina rescues a Kidnapped Heiress being held
prisoner by a sinister coven. ... [Following the rules for generating a new lead, she places a token on] The Prussian Embassy. What do the Prussians want with the heiress?

Investigators must keep their wits about them to make the most of a dwindling reserve of Leads and Resources.

While it can create some memorable emergent narratives, this brand of storytelling is bound to prove too abstract for some groups of players. *Victoriana* also suffers under some frustrating cut corners when it comes to components, namely a set of eight generic event tokens that are woefully unequal to the task of representing anarchist explosives, secret tunnels, insanity, creeping black fog, werewolf bites, unholy boxes of earth, and more—often several of these things simultaneously. Weighing these quibbles, *Victoriana* is best appreciated by those with a deep attraction to its theme.

On which subject, if *Victoriana*’s premise sounds like a graphic novel you’ve read or a (far inferior) movie you might have seen, it should. It’s a bit like one of those high-budget porn parodies, something you might expect to bear the title *Totally NOT Alan Moore’s League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, except instead of lust and lasciviousness, it adds cards and dice, to which I
The entire cast of that other property is represented, including vampiress Wilhelmina Harker, Wells’ Invisible Man, Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll (as a promotional add-on), and Jules Verne’s Captain Nemo. One possible iteration of the villainous Plot even has tripod aliens invading London, a la Wells’ War of the Worlds, for those who wish to “live” their favorite graphic novel series. But the differences with Moore’s vision are more striking, hinting at a historifictional tapestry all Victoriana’s own. We have Emma Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel—not the original masked hero, who outwitted and outfenced ne’er-do-wells during the French Reign of Terror, but his descendant, named for the iconic character’s creator. Dion Fortune, a prolific spiritualist of the early twentieth century, appears as a nine-year-old medium channeling the spirits of the Ascended Masters. Perhaps the strangest of the investigators is a spectral Ada Lovelace who appears bearing the preserved brain of Charles Babbage (which is actually on display at London’s Science Museum, alongside trial models of his famous analytical engine). Their backstories aren’t spelled out explicitly, leaving the players to piece things together. Why exactly is Sir Burton, who died in 1890, still very much alive in Victoriana’s 1899?
Each investigator is imbued with a unique set of Extraordinary Abilities and an investigatory Speciality.

The forces arrayed against the investigators include specific references both large and small—Doctor Moreau (H.G. Wells is very, hem, well represented here), Moriarty, White Fell the Were-Wolf—as well as broader genre cues like stitched-up corpses, automatons, and sinister doubles. (One of the accursed plots is to replace Parliament with clockwork doppelgangers.) Readers with Lovecraft fatigue will doubtless be pleased to hear that the New England author makes only the most cursory of appearances. Most to *Victoriana*’s credit, this is perhaps the first board game to include quotations from Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, André Malraux, and Frederick Douglass, alongside a good bit of Shakespeare and Sun Tzu.
Some leads might yield valuable Advantages or devastating Setbacks.

Those seeking a more narrative-heavy approach might appreciate **Victoriana’s The Ripper Returns expansion**, a set of three linked scenarios that see the queen’s finest team up with Scotland Yard (represented by none other than Inspector Lestrade) to solve a series of gruesome murders with an eerie similarity to the handiwork of Jack the Ripper. Adding new mechanics such as clues, suspect interviews, and other surprises, this story-driven expansion fleshes out Victoriana’s core mechanics to tell a grisly tale in three acts. (The Time Traveller is also expansion content.)

**Secretum. Defensione. Stabilitatem.** For the Crown, and for the promise of a brighter century!