

A photograph of a woman in a white, tiered dress and a man in a colorful harlequin costume dancing on a stage. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right, wearing a black top hat and a multi-colored diamond-patterned outfit. The background is a green and gold stage set.

The Penguin  
Harlequinade

by

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## Introduction:

First, a disclaimer. There are no penguins in this game. Or at least, we have run many sessions of it in multiple tournaments, and there are yet to be any penguins.

The source of the name was as follows: we were going to a tournament in Wellington called KapCon. We needed a name for this new system we'd come up with, and we were stumped. Eventually one or other of us came up with "The Penguin Harlequinade" because there are penguins in Dunedin (where we're from) and not in Wellington; and because the system was designed as a Commedia Dell'Arte system and the Commedia was called a Harlequinade in England.

If you really want to play a game with penguins in it, look out for *The Penguin Masquerade*, a forthcoming game which we have yet to write. Its premise is simple – you're a penguin, just keep it under your hat...



*A penguin overcome by the overwhelming pain and angst of its cursed existence...*

## On the Commedia:

It's all very well and good to say we've created a Commedia dell'Arte roleplaying system, but that isn't much help if you don't already know what that is. So, here's a brief introduction, to let you know roughly what we're on about. If you want to get a clearer idea of what the Commedia's about, though, we recommend tracking down an actual Commedia troupe, or at least someone who's doing a performance. We also recommend checking out theatre books on performing Commedia dell'Arte, and the comic *Harlequin Valentine* by Neil Gaiman (which has a bunch of information on the English Harlequinades at the back as well...)

Commedia dell'Arte is a very old Italian style of masked theatre and as the name suggests, it's comedy (low comedy at that). Because the actors in Commedia all wear masks, it's impossible for them to use facial expression as an aid to characterisation – everything needs to be done through voice, gesture and posture. As a consequence, Commedia tends to be over-the-top, with very silly physical humour, ridiculous situations, and lots of acrobatics.

The purpose of the masks is to identify the characters. Commedia dell'Arte uses a set of stock characters, who all have easily recognisable masks and physical mannerisms. These characters were, in their time, at least as well known as Shakespeare's – this means that people will talk about *an* Arlecchino in much the same sense a connoisseur of Shakespeare would talk about *a* Hamlet.

The plot in a Commedia play always results from the interactions of the characters in a scenario which has been pre-determined. These are generally pretty simple to leave plenty of space for improvisation and set-piece gags. A basic Commedia scenario might be as follows:

1. **A** is in love with **B**.
2. **B** is in love with **C** (who is for some reason utterly unsuitable).
3. **A** enlists his (faithful but unfortunately very stupid) friends **D** through **F** to help him win her heart.
4. Hilarity ensues.

Commedia characters embody comedic archetypes which recur in comedies of all eras, so you will quite quickly be able to get an idea of what any given character is like by comparing them to their “nearest reflection” in a more modern comedy. For example, El Capitano is similar in many respects to Major Bloodnok of the *Goon Show* and also to many other military but cowardly characters.

# The System:

The mechanic for *The Penguin Harlequinade* is a very simple one which we refer to (rather pompously, as no other game uses it) as the Mayhem Engine. It works as follows:

- Each character has a number of Abilities. All Abilities have ratings, some have ratings in the negatives.
- Every task can be (rather arbitrarily) given a difficulty between 1 and infinity.
- If a character has a higher rating in the appropriate Ability than the difficulty of the task they are attempting, they succeed. If not, they fail.
- Players can spend a poker chip from their pool to reduce the difficulty of an action by 1. Any number of chips can be spent at once.

That's the bare bones of it. The complicating factor is that no player starts out with any chips. There are two ways of getting chips:

1. Reading the quote written on their character sheet. This quote will generally commit them to some course of action which moves the plot along (or at least convolutes it further).
2. Asking the GM<sup>1</sup> nicely. The GM will of course oblige, but will expect them to draw a piece of paper from the Mayhem Pot. This is a hat (or other such object) in the middle of the table which is full of pieces of paper. These papers have instructions on them, which must be obeyed within the scene in which they are drawn. We provide sample Mayhem instructions on the next page, but once you have the idea you should feel free to write your own.

This may be done on the fly – e.g. Bert is playing as Columbina, and wants her to move a heavy chair to block a door. Now, Columbina has a -4 in “Breaking a Sweat” and Bert has only 2 chips left. So in order to achieve his goal, Bert can ask Ernie (the GM) for some chips. Ernie will let Bert away with having Columbina move the chair if Bert takes 2 Mayhem instructions.

Another option for Bert would be to have Columbina frantically explain (through the door) why it's absolutely necessary for the door to be barricaded right now. If she uses her quote: “Wait! It's not what it looks like - there's a perfectly logical explanation...” she gets another chip.

Mayhem instructions need to be used as soon as possible after they are given.

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<sup>1</sup> That's the **Game Moderator** - the person what runs the thing. In other systems they've been called Dungeon Masters, Game Masters, Storytellers, Directors, Animators and all kinds of other crazy shit. We prefer GM, because it's simple and anyone with any roleplaying experience will know what it means.

## Sample Mayhem instructions:

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Immediately declare your undying love for another member of the cast. Maintain this for at least the remainder of the scene.

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Someone hands you a vase and tells you not to let it out of your sight. It's probably more valuable than you are – don't let anything happen to it or there'll be trouble.

---

Take violent offence at the next thing said. Challenge the speaker to a duel. Do not back down.

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Someone's watching you – they must suspect about that thing you did (you know, that one you don't want ANYONE to know about...) You should probably take cover, but don't tell the rest of the cast – they can't know either!

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Break into song at the next opportunity. The song should be topical, if at all possible.

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You have, unbeknownst to the others, discovered an entire bottle of wine about your person. You have until the end of the scene to drink it all. Don't let them see it – they'll only make you share.

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You can hear a fly, but you can't see it. If you could see it, you could kill it! You hate flies! Find the little bastard and make it pay! Let nothing stand between you and your quarry!

---

For the remainder of the scene, your every utterance must contain at least one pun on your current circumstances no matter how dreadful. This should be considered a form of comedic Tourette's – outside your conscious control.

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You are ravenous – you must have food NOW! If you don't eat, you'll DIE! You're SURE of it...

---

For the remainder of the scene, you are incapable of experiencing emotions at any level less than operatic scale. Declaim everything you say.

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Another member of the cast (pick one) has stolen a small but important item belonging to you. You MUST get it back by the end of the scene. However, you don't want to make a scene – get it back by stealth, the same way it was taken!

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You are totally certain of your martial prowess (you are a Master of the Blade, or some obscure martial art, or once killed a man with a rolled-up newspaper or something). Approach every situation in a macho and belligerent fashion for the remainder of the scene. You should probably aim to say “Let me at 'em!” at least twice before the end of the scene.

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# Dramatis Personae:

Each of the following is one of the stock Commedia characters. This section is devoted to those who make good player characters. The next section deals with those who make good non-player characters. Some characters (notably Brighela, Il Dottore and El Capitano) fall into both camps, they will be dealt with in the first section, but should always be kept in mind as potential friendly NPCs or antagonists if you're running a small game.

There are far more Commedia characters than we have mentioned here. We have only dealt with the ones with immediate application as player characters or antagonists. This has also been limited by our personal knowledge of Commedia, which is not encyclopaedic. If you want to include your own favourite character, go ahead and figure out rules for them, that's just fine.

All playable characters have Abilities (as previously mentioned) Facts (which serve as character notes) some items of Equipment (more of a character note than a real asset) and a Quote (to get chips with). They also have Status, which determines their social level. There are three possible values for Status: 1 denotes a slave, able to be ordered about by anyone, 2 denotes a servant (most of the players) and 3 denotes a noble, who can order anyone of any lower status to do pretty much anything.

Before we get to the characters themselves, a word on Wits. A number of characters have Wits, but it should always be remembered that the score they have in Wits relates to the speed at which they think, not the quality of thought produced.



# Arlecchino (Harlequin)

pron. Arr-le-kee-no

Status: 2

Abilities:

- Acrobatics: 6
- Fast-talk: 4
- Wits: 5
- Rational Thought: -4

Facts:

- You are such a consummate acrobat that your confidence is boundless. In fact, you have difficulty believing there are any limits to any of your capabilities whatsoever.
- You are always ready to help a friend. With anything.
- Despite your other flaws, your flirtatious nature and wandering eyes among them, you are hopelessly devoted to **Columbina**. You would never betray her, and generally eventually follow her advice.

Equipment:

- The Slap-Stick: This is (in the original theatrical form) a split stick designed so you can hit people with it, producing a loud bang but doing them no harm. It is a symbol of Arlecchino's virility, and he uses as a tool as well as using it to knock other characters tumbling about. Anyone hit in-game with the slapstick will fall over dramatically, though Arlecchino will still have to face the consequences of hitting someone of higher status than himself.

Quote:

“It's all right guys – I've got a plan!”

## On the stage:

Arlecchino is often the central characters in Commedia plays, largely because he's one of the most entertaining characters to watch. This is because he's flamboyantly acrobatic (actors who play Arrlecchino need ot be *fit*) and totally hyperactive. He's often cast as the “servant of two masters” and plots revolve around his habit of creating incredibly elaborate (and astoundingly ill-considered) plans to achieve his goals.

His mask has a long curling moustache, and little lumps on the forehead which were horns in the original form of the mask.



# Brighela

pron. Brig-eh-lah

Status: 2

Abilities:

- Brawling: 4
- Larceny: 5
- Brazen bare-faced lying: 6
- Altruism: -4

Facts:

- You never miss out on a chance to make a profit. You are not particularly scrupulous but prefer generally prefer rackets to outright theft for safety reasons. Not that you turn your nose up at a little breaking and entering from time to time...
- You are definitely someone's servant, but no-one is very clear whose. You make no effort to clarify the situation.
- Thanks to your various “business” contacts you are very good at getting hold of/rid of things.

Equipment:

- Several games of chance, all rigged.
- An extensive, if occasionally erratic, set of contacts in various quasi-legitimate trades.

Quote:

“I can get you that – I know a guy, see? Only trouble is, he won't be cheap...”

## On the stage:

Brighela is a shady character. He is sometimes a shopkeeper and sometimes a servant, but almost always finds a way to profit from any given situation. It is greed, and the temptation to overreach himself which gets Brighela into trouble. Fortunately for him, Brighela is very good at talking his way out of trouble.

It is worth noting at this point that none of the player characters are very likely to get their hands on any money. Servants (the class most of the player characters belong to) operate amongst themselves in a boon/barter system. This means Brighela counts profit as any situation where he ends up with some quantity of a resource he can trade or someone owes him a favour he can call in later.



# Columbina (Columbine)

pron. Coll-um-bee-na

Status: 2

Abilities:

- Breaking a sweat: -4
- Fast-talk: 6
- Seduction: 4
- Wits: 5

Facts:

- You are the only one of the characters with anything resembling a functional intellect.
- You are hopelessly devoted to **Arlecchino** despite his obvious faults. You would never betray him, and he still doesn't know that the only reason any of his plans succeed is because of you subtly manipulating him into doing the right thing at the right time.
- You have noticed that it's when you *stop* talking that bad things tend to happen. Try not to shut your mouth if you can avoid it.

Equipment:

- Access to maidservants' clothing. This is more useful than you would suspect at first glance.

Quote:

“Wait! It's not what it looks like - there's a perfectly logical explanation...”

**On the stage:**

Columbina is in many ways the opposite of Arlecchino, which is why they complement each other so well. She can run mental and verbal rings around any of the other playable characters bar Brighella, and she could probably give him a run for his money. Columbina is also a master manipulator – she will use any means at her disposal to get people to do what she wants, up to and including application of her “feminine wiles” (which are considerable). That being said, she's not promiscuous, and she rarely tells outright lies. She always *implies* rather than promises – so she's never *obliged* to deliver.

Columbina wears a half-mask which only covers her eyes. This makes her one of the most expressive characters. Despite her low status as a mere servant, her mask is very decorative.



# El Capitano (The Captain)

pron. Ell Cap-it-an-oh

Status: 2 or 3  
(depending on what's convenient for the story).

Abilities:

- Boasting: 7
- Bravery: -6
- Fast-talk: 5
- Fighting: 1

Facts:

- You constantly boast of your military exploits. However, no-one has ever heard of any of the campaigns you mention, or the regiment you claim to have served in.
- You affect the finest clothes and most elegant manners. You are inordinately proud of your long luxurious moustache (which curls at the end – you need to keep twisting it).
- You are the most incredible coward every to walk the face of the earth. However, as your entire reputation is founded on your military prowess, you cannot allow this to come to light.

Equipment:

- A suit of ostentatiously elegant clothes and an immensely ornate, somewhat oversized sword (actually made of gilded and silvered tin: -3 for fighting/+3 for displays of gallantry).

Quote:

“The insolence! I demand satisfaction – sir, I challenge you to a duel!”

## On the stage:

El Capitano is the archetypal cowardly officer. He may or may not have been a member of the army at some point, but he certainly never saw any combat. That being said, he certainly looks the part – long flamboyant moustache, erect military bearing, elaborate custom-made uniforms (often yet to be paid for) with the patented “enhanced” codpiece – everything but the actual ability to face an enemy without soiling himself. El Capitano generally survives on bravado, hoping everyone will be too intimidated to call his bluff. However, this has got him into trouble more than once when others have (perfectly innocently) called on his military expertise to solve a problem.

His mask has a huge moustache and a very long, somewhat phallic nose.



# Il Dottore (The Doctor)

pron. Ill Dot-oh-reh

Status: 2 or 3  
(depending on what's convenient for the story).

Abilities:

- Erudition: 7
- Ettiquette: 3
- Knowledge: -5
- Literacy: 2

Facts:

- You are very proud of your qualifications. However, no-one knows what it is you are a Doctor of (it's certainly not medicine) and you never mention the same University twice when talking about your studies.
- You are incredibly fond of grand words and flowery expressions, and love a chance to display your knowledge or help those less intelligent than yourself. However, your speech is peppered with malapropisms and you actually have very little knowledge of anything. You will die before admitting this.
- For all this, you can actually read and write. This is certain proof (for you) of your intellectual superiority. Have a ready (and preferably complex) answer for any question.

Equipment:

- A library of books cadged and stolen from various sources. You understand virtually none of them, but the books all have very nice leather covers.
- A very tatty scholar's robe (scavenged from a more reputable Doctor's rubbish).

Quote:

“Ah, now it's interesting you should ask about that. You see, it was in fact the subject of an address I gave recently – now if I can just find my notes....”

**On the stage:**

Il Dottore is a quack and a charlatan (though sometimes a very well-respected one.) He is the archetype of the man who obfuscates with long words and complicated explanations rather than answering any question directly. This is because he is incapable of admitting that he might not actually know anything about any given topic. As he knows next to nothing about anything, this means he is *a/ways* obfuscating.

His mask has bushy eyebrows, a short moustache and a large bulbous nose (reminiscent of a character from *Asterix*).



# Non-Player Characters/Antagonists:

These are characters who will be played by the GM in order to provide foils for the players to bounce off. Some of the characters from the previous section (notably **Brighela**, **El Capitano** and **Il Dottore**) work equally well as antagonists and player characters, depending on the size of the group. The characters in the following list are all relegated solely to antagonist/NPC status. This is because they are a) homebodies who it is difficult to motivate to move about b) characters which it is difficult to play enjoyably or c) of such high/low status that it buggers the game dynamic (in terms of social interactions) to use them.

Because the system is designed for the *players*, NPCs may ignore it entirely. The one stat provided for NPCs is *status* because it's important to know who the players can boss around, and who they need to defer to. That being said, almost all of the NPCs will have higher status than the player characters, so it's not something you'll need to keep close track of.

## Innamorati (The Lovers)

Status: 3

**The Lovers** provide most of the forward momentum for the plot, and most of the initial conditions for it as well. One beginning for a *Penguin Harlequinade* game might be to cast **Arlecchino** and **Columbina** as the man/maidservants of the male and female lovers respectively. This would put them in a perfect position to have their shoulders cried on about the unfairness of it all, and lead neatly into the action.



There is really very little to the Lovers except for the fact they are in love. They don't have set names – anything Italian and romantic-sounding (Isabella and Roderigo, Julietta and Romeo etc. etc. etc.) will do. Lovers never feel any emotion except at full operatic strength, so GMs portraying Lovers need to do little more than burst into tears at every setback and repeatedly declaim “It's not FAIR!” or “I'm so HAPPY!” (also useful is “He's so dreamy..... sigh.....”)

### On Stage:

On stage, the Lovers have one distinguishing characteristic: their walk. Lovers move by pulling themselves up onto their tiptoes, then overbalancing in the direction they intend to travel – this means they rush headlong across the stage before pulling themselves back up to a

poised tiptoe stance. This is a nice metaphor for their emotional states as well. Lovers have a small domino mask like **Columbina's**.

## Pantalone

Status: 3 (arguably higher)

**Pantalone** is a miserly, irascible old man. He is incredibly rich, but cannot trust anyone to look after his money, so carries as much as possible of it about with him. He usually provides an antagonist, as one of the **Lovers** is usually his son or daughter, and (of course) would rather marry for love than financial advantage.

Pantalone cannot be reasoned with, he can only be reached through greed or (if it looks to affect his business prospects) social embarrassment. He is also incredibly spoilt and petty, as he is used to getting his way all the time. It baffles him when he finds someone he cannot buy (as this is Commedia, it is worth bearing in mind that only **Lovers** are liable to prove unbribable).



Though he is quite senile, Pantalone remains quite cunning (especially where money is concerned). His major weakness is that he tends (like many Commedia characters) to overestimate his own cunning and underestimate the intelligence of others.

### On Stage:

Pantalone's relationship with his money is totally obvious, as his moneybag hangs like a codpiece directly over his crotch. His entire body is hunched over it, protecting it from would-be scavengers or the freeloaders he sees everywhere. This makes him sidle like a crab.

Pantalone's mask has huge bushy eyebrows, a hooked nose and a long wispy moustache. Sometime he has a single wisp of hair on his head, and sometimes a beard.

## Pedrolino (Pierrot)

Status: 1

**Pedrolino** is a young (the youngest) servant. He is sensitive, intelligent and loyal to his master. He suffers (when he is included in the plot) from hopelessly and obviously unrequited love (usually for **Columbina**) and is a constant daydreamer. Pedrolino is always the butt of any joke when he is in a scene, and always suffers the physical

consequences of any practical joke which is going. He is the universal fall-guy.



Despite (or perhaps because of) this he remains one of the most sympathetic of the characters. In terms of modern(-ish) comedy, he is most related to the characters of Tim from *The Office*, and to a lesser extent Bluebottle from *The Goon Show*. He is nearly as intelligent as **Columbina**, and loves practical jokes but is easily manipulated (especially by women) and is ultimately powerless to prevent himself becoming the victim of whatever joke is currently going.

#### On Stage:

Pedrolino wears cast-off clothes which are always too big for him – his sleeves are often too long for his hands. He dresses in white. He is physically slight, has a light, lilting voice, and sometimes wears whiteface rather than a mask. His character has descended to modern clowning in the character of the sad clown with baggy white clothes, black and white makeup and a conical white hat.

## Pulcinella (Mr. Punch)

Status: 3 or 2

**Pulcinella** is an ideal antagonist, a perfect opponent for the **Lovers** and a dark reflection of **Arlecchino**. He is a vain, cruel, violent and lascivious man. Pulcinella is sometimes a master, and sometimes a servant, but he is always a man who understands power only in terms of the ability to inspire fear. He obeys those above him in the social pecking order as a result of the beatings he has received from his betters, and punctuates his conversations with those lower down the scale with blows from the cudgel he calls his “staff of credit” (the way he pays his debts).



Pulcinella, like **Columbina**, is a prodigious talker. However, while she can talk her way out of trouble, he is a boastful idiot who never knows when to shut up. He is also insensitive to others reactions to him – he won't stop attempting to seduce a woman if she displays a lack of interest, and he probably won't even notice if her boyfriend is about to beat him up. Pulcinella can be most closely compared to the character of Gareth (David Brent's creepy offsider) in *The Office*, or possibly Brent himself. Pulcinella

has also evolved into the English puppet Mr. Punch.

### On Stage:

Pulcinella is curled in on himself as if to hide from a beating he cannot avoid. His posture has been compared to that of a frog, and he is sometimes so curled that he has one hand on the ground for balance. This has led to him being occasionally portrayed as a pot-bellied hunchback. In contrast, when he is about to hit someone Pulcinella uncurls and draws himself up to his full height. Another comparison would be with a jumping spider – slow-moving until it strikes. His voice is described as like a chicken screech, and his walk is jerky like that of a small bird.

Pulcinella's mask has a beaked nose (to heighten the chicken comparison) and a furrowed, frowning forehead.

## The Zanni

Status: 1 or 0

**Zanni** are the source of our word “zany”. They are general-purpose clowns. They are usually employed as servants, and are always incredibly stupid and sometimes slightly insane. Players (as more privileged servants) should feel free to order zanni around as they choose. However, it is never a good idea to give a zanni complex instructions as the likely responses are golem-like direct obedience, or a hopeless cock-up as they totally misunderstand. Zanni have very simple names (in fact, Harpo, Zeppo, Groucho and Chico would be perfect names for zanni).



### On Stage:

Zanni are every character not worth giving a name – porters, soldiers, doormen, menial servants, all these roles are filled by zanni. It is rare that a zanni has a major speaking part. Zanni posture denotes their intelligence. The stupider a zanni is, the further forward they lean, and the longer their nose. The dumbest actually drag their knuckles on the floor.

Zanni masks are rudimentary, and have incredibly long noses. This is supposed to make zanni resemble chickens (as a reflection of their intelligence).



## Making it run - GM information:

Commedia plays were often semi-improvised once the initial situation had been set up, and *The Penguin Harlequinade* was designed to run the same way. It should be possible to run *The Penguin Harlequinade* on the basis of no more planning than the initial scenario, though we have found that an unhealthy caffeine intake can help. The trick to keeping the plot ticking over is lying to the players, or rather forcing the characters to get things wrong.

This sounds like “railroading” that perennial bugbear of “character” roleplayers – and so it is. However, railroading is only a bad thing if you use it to force the characters toward the plot ending that you have designed, because then it destroys the illusion of free will (which is, admittedly, an annoying sensation as a player).

In our case, however, there **is** no set end-point for the plot (though it's nice if everyone can get married, like in Shakespeare's comedies) and the purpose of the railroading is in fact to shake up a stagnating situation by adding a bit more chaos. This is also the purpose of the character quotes and the Mayhem Pot.

Only one of the characters in *The Penguin Harlequinade* has any kind of brain at all, and they're all total slaves to their baser passions. That being the case, it's very easy to force the characters into mishearing and misunderstanding things in passing, so that their plans get further and further out of control.

For example, during one of the games we ran, the players had the mission of preventing two people getting married, as the woman was one of their employers and in love with someone else.

We suggested that the best way to do this would be to catch the man “in carnal embrace” to discredit him. At this point we explained that “carnal embrace” meant being caught with one's arms flung around a side of beef, a situation which the players then had to engineer (which they did, if I recall correctly, by means of an immensely convoluted plot involving a leopard-skin, a block and tackle, a saw and some quantity of fresh-cut flowers). On another occasion, we convinced them that the word “accordion” meant “a man from Accordia” with similarly hilarious results.

The character of the Doctor, **Il Dottore** is a particularly good target for this kind of misinformation, as he is constitutionally incapable of admitting that he might be wrong about anything. That being said, any of the male characters will do, and even **Columbina** isn't immune.

The ideal, from your point of view, should be a situation where you crack up laughing involuntarily every time you try to review the players' current plan aloud. Any time the players are working towards a goal you find insufficiently entertaining, it's your duty as GM to mess it up.

That's all folks, just remember – if it ain't fun for everyone, someone's cocked something up!

Peace and love,

Hugh & Angus Dingwall

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- All images sourced from Wikimedia Commons. Character art by Maurice Sand, other pictures by Claude Gillot, PRA and Toshihiro Oimatsu (with GIMP-tweaking by Hugh Dingwall).

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