Monsters and Aliens

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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EDITORIAL

What is the monster or the alien? In most RPG systems they are usually presented as some type of challenge, and usually a martial challenge of some sort. One only needs to flick through that classic book, the Monster Manual, for the first edition of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, for that sort of realisation. Certainly they have performed admirably in that context, and this certainly also applies in speculative fiction, whether fantasy, horror, or science fiction, as well. The 7th Voyage of Sinbad came with a cyclops, a roc, and a dragon. A Company of Wolves would be a somewhat different film without the werewolf (although it would remain possible, if it simply included very intelligent canines). What could have substituted the notoriously terrifying xenomorph in the Alien series? The added advantage of in roleplaying games of course is that the distinct difficulty of the challenge, plus the various special attacks and defenses, can be be incorporated into a game system.

Of course there is more to it than that. Sometimes, and perhaps not often enough, the monster and the alien are something to discover and to provide insight. Frankenstein's monster is a classic and famous example, with numerous studies on how the monster is supposed to teach us something about humanity (and it's not a particularly glowing
The monster in Mary Shelley is sensitive, highly intelligent, literate, but rejected by all that he meets, a rather different portrayal than what was made in movies of the last century about the poor creature. The Latin word "monstrum" is indicative of this; the word means a sign, a warning, a portent. By having creatures that are so grotesque, they attract attention. The physical attention that the monster attracts is meant to provide an equally important message, but that is often overlooked, such is found in the word “demonstrate”. The term “monster” was also applied to certain types of humans and animals as well in the past; in contemporary times these are referred to in the context of teratology, the various inherited or acquired defects. What would one describe a man "of loathsome aspect ... potbellied, misshapen of head, snub-nosed, swarthy, dwarfish, bandy-legged, short-armed, squint-eyed, liver-lipped - a portentous monstrosity"? Is this sort of being that would be driven away by society, who would find it difficult to acquire friends, let alone love? Would it be driven mad by loneliness, to anger and violence? Or would it provide some of the most profound messages to be remembered through the ages? For this is a depiction of Aesop.

Similar remarks can also be made about the alien. It is perhaps more common for the extraterrestrial to represent a lifeform to discover and interact with than the monster, but certainly the prospect of danger is prevalent. Throughout the cold war, the “alien invasion” metaphor was common for the political and military competition within the species; the aliens from It Came from Outer Space (1953) were an uncommon representation. “Alien”, also from the Latin, means “other”. It can mean the extraterrestrial, the foreigner, or, now largely forgotten except perhaps among the Francophone community, the insane. In political economy, there is a term that represents the transfer of labour into property owned by other, and the emotional reaction to such a system – alienation.

I am also going to take some editorial perogative to tell a little story....

Once upon a time there were two alien monsters. One of these alien monsters was called Troll and the other was called Toad. Now Troll and Toad had a lair in which they had stashed a multitude of tomes that many people would want to swap with shiny pieces of metal, printed ragpaper, polymer print, or even digital data, such was the magic of the times.

Let us suppose that there lived a wizard, far across the seas, who used the magicweb to visit the lair of the Troll and the Toad. Let us also suppose that said individual was savvy of the coin required for shipping across distances and had read with care the statement offered by the Troll and the Toad that said that up to forty items could be shipped simultaneously, and that they would use a service known as USPS. There was no certainly notice of any additional package or handling costs. So the wizard was happy and purchased almost thirty items from said store, for the princely sum of 416.23 thalers of the realm, consisting of a 166.23 thalers of the realm, and a surprisingly high and neatly rounded figure of 250 thalers for the shipping.

When the package arrived, the wizard was not happy. Ten of the items, fully a third of the request, were missing. So the wizard send a message over a scyre to the Toad asking how this could be the case, and mentioned that the shipping seemed to be very high. The Toad, as toads do, toadied. "Oh, Mr. Wizard, we are very sorry. Please let us know whether you would prefer the remaining items or a refund", The Wizard responded, "I would prefer to receive the items I ordered. I am also somewhat surprised by the postage I was charged for the original transaction, which seems far in excess of the actual USPS postage costs."

The Toad, perhaps taking orders from the Troll, grovelled. "We apologize very much so, however, it seems as though we are unable to fulfill the remaining items for your order. Instead we have issued a full refund for the amount of these items.... Also, I have issued a refund of 100 thalers for your shipping cost." The Wizard was not impressed. "You entered an [agreement] to provide goods and now you've unilaterally decided that you will not provide them. You charged 250 thalers for shipping when you paid less than 80 shipping".

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The Toad was indignant, "You don't know what you're talking about Wizard! I've checked with the Troll and he tells me that we charged you exactly the right amount. What makes you think you're so clever?" The Wizard smiled, somewhat bemused. "Why, Toad. I asked the shipper themselves".

Raising the gross visage, the Troll smiled cruelly. "Alas, Wizard, most sadly the tomes you ordered are no longer available. You'll just have to accept the refund." The Wizard grew angry, and his eyes flashed of lightning. "Snivelling Toad. Don't lie to me! For I can see all but one of the missing tomes in your cave", and a spell was cast and they were illuminated.

"Well", the Toad spluttered, "perhaps you could buy them again?"

Such fantastic stories are, of course, fictional. Toads don't talk, and nor do they ally themselves with Trolls to open stores that sell tomes. Whether one thinks that such stories serve as metaphors for events and people that exist in the real world is entirely their own perogative and responsibility. Any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental & etc.

This issue of RPG Review tries to convey both the oppositional challenge of the alien and the monster as well as the discomforting message that the alien and the monster is also within and a reflection. It begin with a series of reviews by yours truly on various products that have concentrated on the matter of our theme, before providing an unusual scenario for Over The Edge; Bunnies & Burroughs. Matin Tegelj offers a few examples of aliens in the popular award-winning independent game Eclipse Phase, whilst Tom Zunder provides a new look of some classic D&D/D20 monsters for OpenQuest and RuneQuest. Nicolas Cloister describes his innovative Monsters by Email (just what you want in your inbox), whilst Thomas Verreault provides a particularly frightening creature from the classic game Star Frontiers.

The ever productive Karl Brown offers a trilogy of articles; Lizardmen for Space 1889, a Modron as a sample NPC for Pathfinder Planescape, and a continuation of the Tunnels & Trolls Bestiary. The features for this issue is wrapped up with Jonas Petronis-Akins providing a brief alternative experience point system for D20, whereas Mingshi Wu provides her regular industry news column, and Andrew Moshos does three (count 'em) contemporary reviews from the silver screen – AWESOME!

Let us conclude with these sad words of Frankenstein's monster:

'Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred.'

Lev Lafayette (lev@rpgreview.net)
Hey, you no so late this quartering, I no spee-yak. You find new leaf and turn over this season? At least you have winter, lah. Poor Mingshi have two season only, one wet and hot and one dry and hot. So count your blessing before they hatched! Yes, Mingshi know how to metaphor mix like best char koay teow, but no talk cock.

So you talk of monster and alien this issue, lah? In my island home, no alien, but plenty of monster. Everyone from all culture welcome here, but we have big monster call gahmen. It is the biggest and cruelest monster in the world! It consumes everything in path, destroy many building, hospital, and school. Worse, it has psychic power and suck spirit from any who come in contact. Oh, you think Mingshi not talk of real monster, lah? It sai kang but someone have to fight monster. You have not met gahmen; worse than Godzilla!

But no, Mingshi have game story as well. New edition of RuneQuest now take order for "Monster Island" which full of "fiendish goodness". Minshi is pretty full of fiendish goodness too after a couple of famous slings, you know, lah? White Wolf also say they release new book Reap the Whirlwind for World of Darkness about creating Vampire. But Mingshi thought they do already maybe twenty year ago? It sound very half past six to me. White Wolf also do new scenario for Werewolf call "Skinner" about scary werewolf skin zombie, now that eat salt!

In different story, Cubicle 7 have new product, The Second Doctor Sourcebook, for Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space RPG, for fiftieth year of Doctor Who. Also want new generation of roleplay? New game Adventure Maximus coming soon, special for young people. Players select character from one of eight race working in the future world of Ex-Machina. Sound like Westworld but without Yul Brynner and not as scary, lah?

Final news, Steve Jackson say SJ Games too small and have money, so will buy. You listen?

“I’d like to plow some Munchkin money back into the game hobby... If you’ve been publishing good games, and you know it, but you would like to cash out... or if you want to keep creating games but would rather be part of an operation with a 30-year track record and a good health plan... talk to me.”

OK, that's all from me this quartering!

Love Mingshi! xox mingshi@rpgreview.net
BUNNIES & BURROUGHS

by Lev Lafayette

A Single-Session Over The Edge scenario that combines Bunnies & Burrows with the works of William S. Burroughs

The general rule of thumb however is to follow the Bunnies & Burroughs sense of scale, and the Over The Edge game system and style.

This a story of homosexual junkie rabbits in Iberia (“land of rabbits”) against the rock apes of Gibraltar. Because Over The Edge characters are quick and easy to generate and they probably haven't generated rabbits before, it is recommended that the players are given the opportunity to create their own anthropic lagamorphs. Sample characters are provided just the same, which each PC rabbit having three doses of a preferred intoxicating substance.

Sample Characters

Trippy. Apparently vague and passive, but considers a wide range of options with enhanced insight.
Carries 3 doses of ergot, provides 2d6 bonus to Perception but -1d6 to any concentration-based actions for 1d6 hours.

Crackshot. A large angry bunny with a heart of gold.
Central Trait: Hoplite [3d], Side Traits: Bun-Fu [4d], Strength [3d]. Flaw: Good and noble. HP: 28
Carries 3 doses of cocaine, provides 2d6 bonus to alertness and energy but -1d6 due to aggressive paranoid delusions for 1d6 hours.

Speedy. A small skittish rabbit, furtive and constantly worried about worse case scenarios.
Central Trait: Ranger [3d], Side Traits: Run [4d], Acrobatics [3d]. Flaw: Cowardly. HP: 14
Carries 3 doses of khat, provides 2d6 bonus to confidence and endurance, for 1d6 hours, but -1d6 to all activity for 2d6 hours afterwards.

Noddy. A gentle phlegmatic healer with a beatific smile, and a controlling personality.
Central Trait: Healer [3d], Side Traits: Medicine [4d], Surgery [1d]. Flaw: Conniving. HP: 14
Carries 3 doses of opium, provides 2d6 bonus “phantom” hit points for the purposes of ignoring pain for 1d6 hours, but -1d6 to all activity during that period.

Each character receives six doses of mota, which heals one hit point.
Over The Edge Rules Summary

The following provides a useful single sheet explanation of the game system to the players and narrator.

"All references to vices and to the supernatural contained in this game are for entertainment purposes only. Over the Edge does not promote satanism, belief in magic, drug use, violence, sexual deviation, body piercing, cynical attitudes towards the government, freedom of expression, or any other action or belief not condoned by the authorities."

Mandatory Disclaimer from Over The Edge, 2nd edition, p6

Each character has four traits. One is the character's central trait. Two traits are side traits. Of the three, one is chosen as superior. The last trait is a flour. Each trait includes a sign, some visible and tangible aspect to the trait. The central traits is your identity, who you are, what you do. The side traits are discrete characteristics or skills. Trait abilities are represented by a number of dice, which can vary from six (a narrow, superior trait) to 0 (technical, average ability). Hit points are based on a relevant physical trait, at 7 point per die and a minimum of 28.

Characters also have 1 die in the experience pool which can act as a bonus on any roll. For this special Bunnies & Burroughs session character that engage in homosexual activity receives 1 an additional experience point pool per described activity which are new, unique, and make narrative sense (i.e., the characters cannot simply gain additional dice to their pool by having a homosexual rabbit orgy at every opportunity; but they can do so at the start!).

For resolution just roll a number of six-sided dice equal to the value of your appropriate trait and get the total. Rolls are always opposed, with the GM rolling dice for difficulties for tasks such as climbing or avoiding traps. Bonus dice and penalty dice are given under particularly advantageous or disadvantageous situations. In either case you roll the extra dice, but still only count the number of dice equal to your trait, either the highest dice (for bonus dice) or the lowest dice (for penalty dice).

Group efforts in conflict resolution can either mean die totals are added together where the characters can effectively work together, or with all dice pooled where they cannot (effectively meaning dice rolled by the lesser character act as bonus die for the stronger). If efforts cannot be combined, then actions are carried out individually. If they *should* be carried out individually (e.g., fast-talking) when others butt in then the *worst* result is applied.

In combat, initiative is determined by rolling any appropriate trait, 2d6 is none available. Roll an attack roll and a defense roll. A non-combat trait (e.g., Agile) cannot be used for attack and defense in the same round. Damage is the degree of success multiplied by the weapon’s damage factor (unarmed x 1, knife, club x 2, sword x 3, guns x 4, big guns x 5). When damaged to half his hit points the character gets a penalty die. At zero hit points the character is out of the fight, and may be dying if the cause of damage is dangerous enough (GM’s call). Death usually happens once the character reaches negative hit points.
Scene One: The Old Man of the Mountain

Oiga amigos! Oiga amigos! Paco! Enrique! Last words of Hassan Sabbah, The Old man of the Mountain! Listen to my last words, anywhere! Listen all you boards, governments, syndicates, nations of the world, And you, powers behind what filth deals consummated in what lavatory, To take what is not yours , To sell out your sons forever! To sell the ground from unborn feet for ever? forever!

(William S. Burroughs, Nothing here now but the Recordings)

It is a warm summer's day when the player-character rabbits are summoned by their warren chief and then sent to meet their wise elder, The Old Man of the Mountain, Erizo The Hedgehog. Erizo meets the rabbits at his Thing, a small hill and at the edge of a forest. Speaking with the sort of accent that one would expect from a rural Spanish hedgehog, and gives an extensive lyrical and speculative (but rather lacking on precise facts) account of the wickedness of the Rock Apes of Gibraltar of the United Kingdom of Annexia. Wise PCs will probably work out about half way through the poetic rendition by the Old Man that the Rock Apes are those worst sort of monsters, notorious for their unpredictable behaviour, the human.

Erizo, a great friend of many tribes of rabbits from all around, is concerned. Recently Rock Apes have been kidnapping rabbits *en masse* from tribes to the south and gradually encroaching northwards. These rabbits have taken away in the travelling machines of the Rock Apes, then returned, but changed, no longer responding to the calls of their fellows. The Rock Apes release the rabbits at dawn who then go out all day digging around in whatever field they have been taken too, stopping only on occasion for food and drink (provided by the Rock Apes), and are then collected at the end of the day by the Rock Apes. They do not show their natural fear of the Rock Apes, and they are certainly not behaving as rabbits should. Effectively their warren has been abandoned.

Erizo is very concerned that the Rock Apes will advance further north and take over the PC warren. The Old Man of the Mountain recommends that now is the time of action, and all good bunnies must came to the aid of the warren. Typically rabbits will initiate their activity before dawn or after dusk.

Scene 2. Welcome to Annexia

*Take the case of the female agent who forgot her real identity and merged with her cover story. She is still a fricoteuse in Annexia. And incidentally, you can make a square, heterosex citizen queer with this angle using drugs... I've brought you a new typewriter which conveniently dispenses two types of intoxicating fluids when it likes what you've written.*

- David Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch*

The journey to Annexia involves the PC rabbits travelling through some wild woodlands, hopping across a deep river via a fallen log, and encountering a weasel! These events should be challenging, but it's far too early in the story to be killing off PCs, unless they are deliberately suicidal.

For example, travelling through the woodlands requires a navigation roll of 7 every six hours, with a penalty die due to the density of the forest. This is an either/or difficulty factor, with the possibility of rabbits arguing against each other on what the correct direction is to travel, especially if they have already failed one roll and are lost. Three successful
rolls are required to reach Annexia. Likewise the fallen log requires one roll per rabbit, difficulty 7 with a penalty die due to the slippery surface – they may wish to think of something clever to protect themselves from such an eventuality. If a character falls into the water, they must first make a swimming difficulty 3 check to prevent drowning, and an additional swimming roll of the same difficulty to reach a shore (determine randomly which one is closest). These difficulties increase by 2 each turn as the river current becomes stronger and stronger.

The weasel provides an interesting challenge. It is no friend of the rabbits and whilst it probably won't be able to kill one, it will give chase and give a couple of nasty bites. Of course, if the rabbits gang up on it, the hunter will become the hunted.

**Weasel**


Breaking out of the woodlands, the PCs will find themselves in an area of grasslands. After searching around for a while they'll encounter a road, and following the road they'll eventually come to a Rock Ape travelling device (i.e., a large white van). There is two Rock Apes (i.e., humans) on guard as some fifty rabbits are feverishly digging away – not that rabbits can count that high. What is remarkable is that they are doing so in broad daylight and are doing so without any attempt to escape.

With a bit of stealth (difficulty 3 check) through the high grasses, the PCs can position themselves to discover what the rabbits are doing without being noticed by the Rock Apes; digging up entire psyllium plants (taproot and all, difficulty 5 check with appropriate skill to recognise) and putting them in piles. To get closer to one of these rabbits requires an additional stealth test (difficulty 7), but with plenty of opportunities for a bonus die (e.g., mimicking one of the digging rabbits). Once encountering one of the rabbits, they will be found to be bleary-eyed and non-conversational, a very unusual situation. Furthermore, they also seem to be somewhat on the thin side, but are not stopping for food (a whistle will blow and the rabbits will, for a short period, munch on grass).

A clever rabbit will continue to search among these rabbits to find any which are compos mentis. If this is done eventually (random difficulty of 11, to 9, to 7 etc per arbitrary turn) then it is possible that the rabbits will find Byron. Byron will explain that the rabbits have been doped up with a combination of drugs (amphetamine and datura) which leaves them in a zombie-like state. Byron however has not eaten the drug-laced food given to the bunnies and has built himself an orgone accumulator in his hutch which he claims protects him from the mind-controlling Rock Apes. Although unmentioned, he has remained with his rabbits not because of any sense of duty towards them, but as a golden opportunity to satisfy his lecherousness. Just to clear this up, he is not a good bunny.

Byron is a potential alternative PC in case one is otherwise incapacitated.

**Byron**. Poetic, romantic, libertine, arrogant.

Central Trait: Poet [4d], Side Traits: Reading [1d], Intellect [3d]. Flaw: Lecherous. HP: 14

*I've got an Orgone Accumulator / It makes me feel greater / I'll see you sometime later / When I'm through with my Accumulator ... It's no social integrator / It's a one man isolator / It's a back brain stimulator / It's a cerebral vibrator*

- Hawkwind, *Orgone Accumulator* from *Space Ritual*
In the late afternoon, the Rock Apes will blow another whistle and the zombified rabbits will dutifully hop into the back of the van as the humans collect the piles of plants. This provides an opportunity for the PCs to also jump in the van. Of course, sometime prior to this the rabbits may design a way to incapacitate the Rock Apes. Due to their monstrous strength (by rabbit standards) this would normally be possible but it did occur during the playtest!

**Scene Three: Gibraltar and El Castillo**

*The old writer couldn't write anymore because he had reached the end of words, the end of what can be done with words. And then? "British we are, British we stay," How long can one hang on in Gibraltar, with the tapestries where mustached riders with scimitars hunt tigers, the ivory balls one inside the other, bare seams showing, the long tearoom with mirrors on both sides and the tired fuchsia and rubber plants, the shops selling English marmalade and Fortnum & Mason's tea...clinging to their Rock like the rock apes, clinging always to less and less.*

*(William S. Burroughs, “The Western Lands”)*

The van will travel into Gibraltar which, to unaccustomed country rabbits, must be some sort of Rock Ape hell. Apart from the excessive concentrations of Rock Apes themselves and their constructions, there is thousands of Rock Ape machines of various types. Any rabbit that has brontophobia, and all do by default, must resist a Difficulty 7 test or panic whilst travelling in the van. They will have to be restrained or calmed in some manner when the van stops at the Moorish Castle (aka “El Castillo”) or become very noticeable due to the agitated state.

The situation here is very open-ended. PC rabbits could be either be caged with the zombified-rabbits and fed amphetamines in the morning mixed with datura paste. Presumably the PCs wouldn't eat this, but if they do they will also fall into a zombie-state (difficulty of 12 to resist). It is also possible that the PCs will be in the same cage as Byron, whose intermixed combination of organic and inorganic walls has created an orgone accumulator which will provide mental acumen and resistance of two bonus dice against the effects of zombie-paste. Of course, there is another reason to fear being in a cage overnight with Byron...

Assuming that the PC rabbits do not end up in a cage, the next step will be exploration of El Castillo, which is described below (courtesy of Wikipedia). Most of the castle is deserted but there are a number of Rock Ape guards who are looking for any known escaped bunnies. These lumbering brutes are fairly easy for a smart rabbit to avoid, a contested check between a rabbit's hide ability and a Rock Ape's search of 1d6, although they usually travel in pairs. Only a very unlucky rabbit will be found by a Rock Ape, especially at night. If they are spotted however, the chase will be on. The Rock Apes are a very methodical lot, and have extraordinary endurance. Although in each individual instance a spotted bunny will, in all probability, get away from the Rock Apes, these hunters will continue. To simulate
this, in the first chase, a rabbit has a target number of 3 to escape the Rock Apes, then 5, then 7, then 9 etc. Again, keep in mind that there are usually two Rock Apes are chasing the rabbits (although there will probably be multiple rabbits as well). If a rabbit succeeds their check by 5 or more, then they have given the Apes the slip, and they will not been chased any further — at least not in this section of the building.

Following the trial of medical equipment (and perhaps even reading the signs if Byron is pleasant), the PC bunnies will eventually make their way into the below-ground level of the Qasbah, assuming they can make their way through the active above-ground throng), under the a pharmacy run by the Nova Mob. There they will find Dr. Benway's laboratory, where poor little rabbits are strapped to terrible vivisection machines and undergo LD-50 (lethal dose, 50%) tests as part of quality control for Dr. Benway's perfect arsehole regulator, made from the roots and husks of the psyllium plants. The snared rabbits are fed food that either cause them to become hyperconstipated, or suffer explosive diarrhea. Dr. Benway lacks a conscience and is more interested in his experiments rather than the well-being or the rabbits, whose corpses litter the floor of the laboratory.

Dr. Benway and three laboratory assistants will be present. Finding a way to defeat them and destroy the equipment, liberate the rabbits etc., is something that the PCs must discover for themselves.

“While in general I avoid the use of torture— torture locates the opponent and mobilizes resistance —the threat of torture is useful to induce in the subject the appropriate feeling of helplessness and gratitude to the interrogator for withholding it. And torture can be employed to advantage as a penalty when the subject is far enough along with the treatment to accept punishment as deserved. ..

“Squatting on old bones and excrement and rusty iron, in a white blaze of heat, a panorama of naked idiots stretches to the horizon. Complete silence—their speech centers are destroyed—except for the crackle of sparks and the popping of singed flesh as they apply electrodes up and down the spine. White smoke of burning flesh hangs in the motionless air. A group of children have tied an idiot to a post with barbed wire and built a fire between his legs and stand watching with bestial curiosity as the flames lick his thighs. His flesh jerks in the fire with insect agony.

“Well, as you can plainly see, the possibilities are endless like meandering paths in a great big beautiful garden.

Moorish Castle of Gibraltar

A. Inner and outer keep B. Qasbah C. Villa Vieja D. Port (Barcina)

There have been, over the years, an enormous variety of gaming supplements that have concentrated on providing a catalog of monsters, and aliens and the sort. It is, of course, not possible to review all of them here by any extent of the imagination. Indeed, in selecting several to review I’ve had to leave out some of my personal favourites such as the Role Aids supplements for *Monsters of Myth and Legend*, which were truly excellent. Instead, the listing here covers the most well-known and influential products.

It starts off unusually with a game rather than a supplement, “Monsters! Monsters!” which proved decades ahead of its time by providing not only “monster equality” but also PCs as “monsters” in a clever role-reversal. Whilst other games took this up in part and in whole (most notably RuneQuest), many of the discussions around contemporary gaming could have a good look at this early example.

Others of the catalog variety include the Monster Manual for AD&D and the Monstrous Manual for AD&D 2nd edition, both enormously well-known and probably the biggest sellers in this particular sub-genre in the hobby. Particularly notable is how the 2nd edition was such a thorough update of the first.

Also included, and much less well-known is GURPS Aliens. This supplement was by no means a big seller, nor is obviously important in the history of game design. However, it is quite an interesting example of the portrayal of various space aliens that does go beyond the “guys in suits” approach – although it also makes use of such examples as well.

Hunter: The Reckoning serves is an example of whereby the players are definitively monster-hunters, an interesting approach to a game-line which hitherto assumed the PCs were the monstrous protagonists, whether in the form of vampires, werewolves, sorcerers, wraiths etc. The psychological impetus behind the game – to illustrate that the monster hunter is as bad as the monsters that the hunt, is a well-elaborated theme.

Finally there is the two setting specific supplements, Anaxial's Roster for Hero Wars which remains the most comprehensive review for that most remarkable collection of creatures that inhabit the deeply mythical fantasy world of Glorantha, and the extensive *Malleus Monstrorum*, a labour of love which has documented every professionally published creature for the Call of Cthulhu roleplaying game.

**Monsters! Monsters! (1976)**

Originally published in 1976, this more recent reprint (2007) is presented as a forty page saddle-stapled booklet. A faithful reprint, the only new material that can be immediately discerned is the new first page credits which mention websites of the chief illustrator, the ever skilled Liz Danforth, and Flying Buffalo, the publisher. An edition I used to own some decades ago was comb-bound with a somewhat different cover in a similar style; a giant riding lizard and warrior. Both are attractive, as is the internal black-and-white line artwork which shows skill and humour but is placed more as features in their own right, rather than being contextual. Pages include tiny page numbers, lots of margin and white space, with single-column, ragged-right text in a serif font. Instead of sidebars the author provides footnotes to provide the same sort of information. The writing style is informal, even quite silly at times, avoids detail, and seeks to provide eighty percent of the information required for gaming in twenty percent of a typical page count. There is a table of contents, but no index (the game is short enough not to need one).

The by-line of the game is "When YOU want to be the monster!", a deliberate call for "monster equality", as the beings a rather tired of having their homes plundered by these murderous human "adventurers" and seek to have their own
complete set of statistics to fight back, albeit the game itself only covers spell levels up to 4 - the core game, Tunnels &
Trolls covers magics up to level 17. Player characters in this game are monsters, the typical opponents of roleplaying
games. Monster species is based on choice or by a card draw; a convenient choice of 52 options ranging from Black
Hobbits (their political affiliation rather than skin tone, the text helpfully explains), Goblins, Orcs, Orges, Mutant
Slimes, Living Skeletons, Zombies ... all the way up to Dragons and Balrogs. As a 14 year-old in 1982 who had some
sense of the absurd I selected a Balrog that had the unfulfilled desire to surf; now this was monster equality! The game
does come with the most minimal monster descriptions, a paragraph for each creature (including "human scum"),
covering the usual suspects. Of interest to the T&T/T!M! system are beings like Shadowjacks (from Zelazny), Demons
(from de Camp's "The Fallible Fiend"), Shoggoths (from H.P. Lovecraft), the Snark (from Lewis Carrol, mispelt
"Shark" in the description), Snollygosters (half truncated crocodile, half cross-eyed dog), and Tsathouguas (from
Clark Ashton Smith). As you can see, deriving beings from fantastic literature and flipping Tolkien Estate the bird is
acceptable behaviour.

The monsters themselves have a full range of attributes, which from Tunnels & Trolls, is fairly simple. Roll 3d6 and
multiple according to the species value. The attributes are Strength, IQ, Luck, Constitution, Dexterity, Charisma. There
is also a 3d6 roll and multiplier for height and weight, a letter value for speed, and a rather clever code to be associated
with Charisma to determine human reactions to the value (e.g., terror, awe, disgust, etc). A slightly below-average
Balrog for example, who rolled 10 for all attributes, would end up with a Strength of 100, an IQ of 20, Luck 10,
Constitution 70, Dexterity 20, Charisma 10 (among Balrogs, otherwise "!" to humans which determines a column for
random reaction checks), a weight of 680 lbs and a height of 16 foot 6 inches, and a speed of "F" ("fast", as opposed to
"normal", N, or "slow", S). The most important derived ability is Combat Adds, based on the each point of Strength,
Luck and Dexterity over 12 (and minus one for each point under 9). For the Balrog, this is an impressive 96. Bonuses
for attributes are generally quite simple; multiple Strength by 100 to work out ow many gold pieces of weight you can
carry (sound familiar?), use your Luck as the basis for determining Saving Rolls and to spot hidden objects, learn one
additional language for every point of IQ over 12, and as a prerequisite for casting spells. Pick some appropriate
equipment, and that's it.

In an early recognition of the notion of "currency" in a game
system, the author explains "The real point of playing a game
like 'Monsters! Monsters!' is not to accumulate gold and treasure,
but to pile up 'experience points'... The more experience points
the character gains, the more powerful it becomes, and the more
interesting are its adventures". Characters start at the first level of
experience and with zero experience points, despite significant
variation in abilities. Experience is gained through combat, based
on foes slain or captured (their Strength, IQ, plus Con times their
level), treasure (1 experience point per gold piece of loot), magic
use (2 experience points per point of Strength expended in spell-
casting), finding magic items, making saving throws (the number
required times the level of difficulty), gorging - as monsters are
characteristically fond of eating (half Strength value), captives,
and destructive behaviour. Whilst obviously still based on the
"kill them and take their stuff" model, it is expanded to account
for monster stereotypical behaviour. The level progression chart
is, quite honestly, all over the place, 1st at 0, 2nd at 1,000, 3rd at
3,000, 4th at 7,000, 5th at 15,000, 6th at 25,000, 7th at 40,000...
if anyone can work out an equation for that function. Level
increases provide bonuses to attributes, with modifications
according to species attribute modifiers.

In terms of a sample scenario, the book comes with the Woodsedge Inn and nearby cottages. These three score of so
men, women, and children are provided with names, a full selection of attributes, and maps of their inn and cottages, and the sole purpose of their existence in this scenario is be on the receiving end of a monster (i.e., player-character) assault for the purpose of murder, mayhem, pillaging and worse. The village isn't completely useless however, and may provide a surprising level of resistance if their effective leaders can rally the able bodied to protect those too young, old, or weak to stand up to the brutal invasion of monsters. Now you know how it feels, eh "adventurers"?

The game sequence is pretty much a distinction between strategic turns and tactical conflict. The former consists of five minute turns of movement, testing for the presence of "wandering enemies", moving to tactical combat if appropriate, and recovery of lost Strength or Constitution at 1 point per turn. The combat system simply involves calculating the total damage from one side against the total damage of an opposing side, with the loser distributing the difference among their party. Missile and magic damage however is always taken and distributed to the individuals struck - but then again, they will have that number taken from the distributed melee damage. Physical damage is absorbed by shields, armour, or magic, and the reminder is subtracted from Constitution. A three pages discussion and example of a mad hobbit fighting two ogres is provided for illustrative purposes.

Also considered in the context of combat, Saving Rolls, when they occur, are based on a level number which is a formula for determining the roll required on 2d6 (open-ended doubles) to avoid the trap, resist poison or disease, or similar. This is 20 - Luck for a 1st level danger, 25 - Luck for 2nd level, 30 - Luck .. and so forth. Missile weapon attacks, described in the same section are based on a cross-referencing of Dexterity and Range with hits determined on a single D6 roll. Characters who are shot at, and aware, may make a Saving Roll to avoid the consequences. The page of weapons provides the damage dice plus adds that the weapon does to the natural ability of the monster and the minimum attributes required. A Greatsword (presumably to human scale), for example, does 3D+3.

With the exception of a page of provisions that monster characters may even have to buy (really?), the remainder of the book is a selection of 1st to 4th level spells. These are described with some brevity and simplicity. Characters may purchase spells before the start of the game as appropriate to their level and may cast them with the expenditure of Strength points. The various spells have notoriously silly names (e.g., Take That, You Fiend!, Oh-go-away, Yassa-Massa, etc. The collection is small, and there isn't enormous attention to the different capabilities within each level.

Overall, Monsters! Monsters! was an extremely advanced game for its time, indeed quite easily one of the best for its period. Short, simple, exceedingly clever and insightful and influential in the design in other games, its ability to dovetail quite neatly with Tunnels & Trolls certainly would have been beneficial. On the negative side there is certainly a limited thematic orientation which is actually more appropriate for this game compared to many others of the ilk, but also with a fairly limited game system in terms of scope and verisimilitude. Nevertheless, the core premise of playing monsters as player characters in an act of murderous role reversal, plus the inclusion of full attribute values, stood in stark contrast with other game systems of the day. For that reason, Monsters! Monsters! retains a very special and elevated place in RPG history.

Style: 1.3 (layout) .8 (art) .5 (coolness) .5 (readability) .4 (product) = 3.5

Substance: 1.3 (content) .7 (text) .6 (fun) .5 (workmanship) .3 (system) = 3.5

Monster Manual (1977)

The Advanced Dungeons & Dragons "Monster Manual" was the first hardcover for the AD&D game. This is part of a series of reviews on AD&D, preceded by the Players Handbook. The manual comes in a 112 page hardback book with absolutely superb binding. The cover art by Dave Sutherland III, is a menagerie of a unicorn, a red dragon, a centaur, a troll and all sorts of critters, including a giant spider in a tree, most noticeable on the spine). The interior art, usually of
1/12th a page, is consistently quite good; there is rarely something that makes one recoil in horror (although the carrot-nose on the Shambling Mound is really quite the limit). The book comes with a comprehensive index and table of contents.

Essentially the Monster Manual is an alphabetical list of over two hundred creatures that populate the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons fantasy universes. Like all AD&D products there is a heavy bias towards the mythic fantasy of medieval European or Ancient Hellenic origin, although this is not exclusively so by any stretch of the imagination and some (e.g., Doppleganger) are quite inaccurate. There is a handful of creatures of the Indian subcontinent (e.g., naga, rakshasa, yeti), Semitic (Bahamut, Djinni, Efreeti), Sumerian (Tiamat) and some definite east Asian creatures (e.g., gold dragon, ki-rin, ogre mage). The Elves, Dwarves, Halflings, Orcs and (ahem) "Treats" and the "Balor" demon, are obviously very Tolkien-inspired, whereas the Mind Flayer is really just a 6' high version (and appropriately powered) version of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu. There is also a modest list of dinosaurs and pleistocene creatures.

In addition there are also a number of D&D-specific creatures; some of these may even be considered part an mythic bestiaries in centuries to come. Favourites include the dangerous pun the Beholder, a giant floating sphere with a huge central eye, several eyestalks with cast spells and a gaping maw; the Intellect Devourer, a psionically-capable giant brain on massive clawed legs; the rather disgusting carrion-eating Otyugh; the exotic polar worm, the Remorhaz [actually from R.E. Howard]; and the massive bipedal insectoid Umber Hulk.

By the same token, there are also numerous D&D designed creatures that are best forgotten, but as this is a review they're mentioned. First, the Gelatinious Cube, an improbable 10 cubic foot lump of flammable but acidic translucent jelly; the Gas Spore, an explosive floating mould that looks like a Beholder; the Thought Eater, a emaciated duck-like creature that inhabits the ethereal plane as a psychic vampire; the Lurker Above and Trapper, cunning creatures that take the appearance of dungeon floors and ceilings; the Piercer, a sapient stalactite; the Rust Monster, an armoured, well, I think it looks like a 5' spineless hedgehog with antennae, which a taste for the finest steel; and the evil manta-ray Ixitxachitl, a monster usually avoided merely on account of its unpronounceable name.

Perhaps the most annoying feature of the Monster Manual is that approximately 1/2 of the text consists of the most inane creature statistics and military organisation, which establishes their role in the game as an object to kill and with treasure to steal. One receives a full complement of combat abilities, including armour class, hit dice, % in lair, treasure type, number of attacks, damage per attack, special attacks and defense, magic resistance, but only a modicum, if any, information on where the creature actually lives, how it interacts with members of its own kind and different species, what it eats, and how it reproduces.

This issue is not just limited to the "monster races" either; Elves, Dwarves, Halflings, Men, Goblins, Orcs, Bugbears, Sahaugin, and so on. Even the social creatures are described primarily and most importantly in terms of their martial organisation. It is little wonder that a standard criticism of the AD&D game system is not a roleplaying, but rather a single-unit wargame.

This said, there are some exceptions to this general tendency with roleplaying potential. AD&D was perhaps one of the first products to strongly differentiate between
the lawful (but evil) devils and the chaotic (evil) demons; historically, the devil commanded various lesser demons. The
competition within and between the demonic and devil realms is strongly suggested and the leaders are portrayed even
as physical embodiments of their alignment (e.g., compare Juiblex to Asmodeus). A lesser known example of
roleplaying potential is the bizarre love triangle among the andro-, crio- and gyno-sphinxes.

Finally, significant comment must be made of the nature of dragons, seeming that they are the name of the game and
one would presume some thematic quality. For what it's worth, dragons are extreme in their moral alignment; there's no
neutral dragons. This moral disposition is also evident in their colour scheme - chromatic (black, blue, green, red,
white) dragons are evil and metallic dragons (brass, bronze, copper, gold, silver) are good. Likewise, the breath weapon
of dragons is also defined by their colour and - wonder of wonders - the environment they live in. White and silver
dragons, for example, inhabit cooler climes and have frosty breath weapons.

Other important elements of dragons include the fact that they are often asleep (an independent percentage per type),
they are innate cowards who can be subdued (roll percentile each round in ratio of their hit points if subdual damage is
claimed), they have the capacity to cause fear to low-level opponents, and finally, their hit points per die vary according
to age. Dragon hit dice typically vary between 5 and 11, making them a surprisingly weak opponent, even taking into
consideration their breath weapon and attack abilities.

Like the Players Handbook, the Monster Manual is one of those publications that was quite impressive thirty or so
years ago. Today, if anyone dared release a product listing creatures primarily as a list of potential combats and
treasure, they'd be justifiably mocked. Thus the assigned values must be taken in context. The Monster Manual is an
appropriate product for an AD&D single-unit wargame with high physical standards. As a roleplaying product there are
only occasional moments of usefulness, and a DM will have to work quite hard to put some persona flesh on these dry
statistical bones.

(Originally posted on rpg.net, http://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/12/12821.phtml ; March 2007. Yes the 'substance'
rating now has detailed subvalues)

Style: 1 .4 (layout) .6 (art) .8 (coolness) .3 (readability) .8 (product) = 3.9

Substance: 1 .3 (content) .2 (text) .2 (fun) .1 (workmanship) .1 (system) = 1.9

GURPS Aliens (1990)

Product

Designed for GURPS 3e, but certainly easily compatible with earlier or later editions, GURPS Aliens is a 128pp
softback covering a variety of non-human species for science fiction roleplaying settings. The book itself is very well-
glued and should be quite lasting even with heavy use. The bright yellow book with the 1950s-styled middle American
household sharing icecream and cookies with some bug-eyed aliens is pretty cheesy and not really to my taste at all,
although one must readily acknowledge the skill in technical execution and imagination. The internal black-and-white
line art of the interior is also well-executed and contextually appropriate. The internal text consists mostly of single
column justified plus sidebars, with perhaps a slightly greater than optimal level of whitespace. There is a single page
table of contents and much more extensive index which also fits in a single page, courtesy of a much smaller font size.
As with most GURPS books, GURPS Aliens is written in a style that's mostly formal, very readable, and manages to
provide a fairly good density of information.

Content
The first two chapters of the book consist of the inclusion of non-human aliens in a GURPS Space campaign, especially where alien encounters are the center piece. A rather unusual distinction is made between aliens and monsters, where the latter are seen as obstacles, whereas the former are meant to be an ongoing feature of the campaign. Where the author derived this concept of the distinction is not exactly elaborated and it is perhaps best considered both novel and contrary to convention. A few fairly obvious examples of the alien campaign are given, namely war with aliens, first contact, and the possibility of the all-alien campaign. Overall however, this section (the two pages don't really constitute a chapter) is not really impressive at, and could have been elaborated significantly with a greater variety of thematic considerations, popular culture examples, etc, along with contemporary debates of the existence (or not) of alien species and their makeup.

More extensive is the chapter on building aliens. To be sure, GURPS at this stage of its development was still using the conventional word "race" instead of "species", which isn't quite right for a self-professed realistic game, but again that's a minor complaint. What is more significant is the necessary ad-hoc rules modifications to deal with these alien species in terms of advantages and disadvantages. "The rule of 12" is particular notable example, to shoe-horn those IQ-based abilities when the species obviously does not have a high IQ by default. In addition to interpretations of standard advantages and disadvantages there is an extensive collection of new advantages and disadvantages. In some cases these represent repetition from prior publications (especially GURPS Supers) and even contradicts those publications in some cases! Overall however these difficult edge cases should not detract from the excellence in the GURPS system in being sufficiently adaptable to provide a system for alien generation within the same scope as the "normal" human default.

The third chapter, consisting of roughly a hundred pages, makes up the bulk of the text. It consists of some twenty eight alien species, mostly with four page descriptions which is fairly comprehensive. The organisation of the text in this chapter is surprisingly not alphabetical, although with the first two aliens starting with "A", and the last with "X", one can be forgiven for initially thinking otherwise! Another quirk is the use of a different font for the header for each alien. It is possible that the chosen fonts were meant to be representative of the alien in question (e.g., the letters for Mmm, a hive alien, is made from a dot matrix), but if that was the intent it is not convincing. A pleasing narrative feature of the aliens is that each and all are deliberately chosen to have some reason for human interaction and are therefore easier for a GM to slot into a campaign. It is also notable that the species from GURPS Space are included (with an expanded form) and there is references to material from the GURPS Space Atlas.

Even with a modest collection of but twenty eight species, the author has made a real attempt to present a diversity of creatures. True, an excessive number are essentially from the "guys in suits" approach to aliens, but there is a fair number of genuinely alien as well. In the latter category there is the Auroras, creatures of pure mental energy, the completely symbiotic Mermer and Saret species, the four-dimensional Traders, the aforementioned Mmm, the living (and immobile) rock Liok Sujan, the viral invasive Riders, and Crystal Computers. Favourites from the former include the tiny and annoyingly cute rodent-like Cidi, the split personality Pachekki, and the slave-mentality Truul.

Each alien species is introduced with an immediate
description, a listing of species-based advantages and disadvantages, naming systems, alien psychology, ecology, culture, and politics. Sidebar information includes the inclusion of the alien species in the campaign, the possibility of using the species as player characters, a number of adventures seeds, and a sample character. In most cases these are all quite interesting, with the An Phair, a meritocratic, unassuming, likeable, and downright boring, humanoid species being an exception. Of course, player-character aliens are not always probable; for the Aurora, a minimum of 4,000 character points is necessary. Of course, the adventure seeds really are just that as well, just an interesting situation and a hint of possibilities. The GM will have to make some creative and mundane effort to make these fully-fledged adventures.

Overall

GURPS Aliens falls into the category of a "very good" product. The faults are relatively minor, the content itself is pretty solid all the way through. Actual play material is quite extensive and works pretty smoothly. The only real gripe is that it is insufficiently challenging with a really hard consideration of what alien species could be like, and as a result the aliens are mostly a little on the mundane (but thoroughly playable) side. In terms of actual presentation of course, the product is well-helped by a game system that is sufficiently adaptable to deal with a great deal of species variation albeit with some kludges, but hard game-logic destroying ones. In terms of stylistic evaluation, the game again has a solid assessment. Above average layout, good artwork, an fairly interesting array of creatures, and well-produced.

Overall this is an excellent product for any GURPS Space GM, and a very good product for anyone running other game systems, or even for fantasy GMs who want to see an example of how to design social creatures with a high degree of internal consistency and elaboration.

Style: 1.6 (layout) .6 (art) .6 (coolness) .6 (readability) .7 (product) = 4.2

Substance: 1.6 (content) .7 (text) .7 (fun) .7 (workmanship) .7 (system) = 4.4


Product and Introduction

As a development from the Monster Manual (AD&D 1e), through to the Monstrous Compendium (AD&D 2e), the Monstrous Manual (AD&D 2e, revised) provides over six hundred monsters in almost four hundred pages of text. This large book comes with an attractive full-colour cover, and is solidly bound. It would be nice if some publishers of contemporary RPGs had a look at the binding of some of these older games (e.g., AD&D 1e and 2e, Reston edition RuneQuest) when considering hardback binding that is truly lasting. Inside, each creature is typically presented on a single page with a quarter provided for a stat-block, a quarter for a full-colour illustration, typically of fair competence but also usually lacking in creativity (an exception with humour being the Invisible Stalker), and obviously contextual. A half a page in serif two-column justified print covering general appearance, combat abilities, habitat and society, and ecology. The text is very formal, quite dense, but also clear. For a book that's arranged in alphabetical order there is no table of contents, however there is an index which does give references to common alternative names to their appropriate location.

The opening pages give an introduction on how to use the book, explaining the main headings of the stat-block. The book contains all the creatures that appeared in the first two volumes of the Compendium, noting that several have been condensed (e.g., Ravens) whilst others have been imported from specialised worlds (e.g., Dark Sun, Spelljammer). With regards to the stat-block itself there is a number of changes from the first edition iteration of this volume, which are all positive. The game now mentions the typical climate and terrain that the creatures will be encountered in, in addition to their frequency (it was weird to include the latter, but not the former), the general form of social
organisation, activity cycle, diet, and morale. These are all quite handy, recognising a greater elaboration in the
treatment of monsters in the AD&D game and providing "at a glance" information of the societal and ecological
information. This does not suggest that the AD&D engages in "monster equality" in terms of classes and abilities of
course, at least not at this stage of its development, and nor does it suggest that the game is still heavily biased towards
treating "monsters" as primarily martial opponents to kill and take their stuff.

Content

The book is essentially a compilation of monsters for the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons game, arranged in
alphabetical order. As with previous editions it incorporates a great deal from the mythic fantasy, especially from
medieval Europe and the Ancient Near East. However, both as a result of the game's own development and the fact that
the book consists of an compilation of two Compendiums, the bulk of the text consists mainly of AD&D specific
creatures, some of which are indeed quite imaginative and welcome additions, especially the Githyanki and Githzerai
(from the Fiend Folio) with their extraplanar habitat, their martial relationship with each other, and their history with
that other impressive AD&D (and Lovecraftian-derived) species, the Mind Flayer. Others however are somewhat less
imaginative, such as the Heucuva which certainly doesn't deserve an entire page for effectively being just a tough
version of a skeleton.

As most of these are invoked in fairly specific circumstances, there is an awful lot of creatures which fall into the "rare"
or "very rare" frequency category. This said, some of the more common, complex, and sociable creatures are provided
additional pages to the standard one to flesh out their descriptions. Thus there are four pages for the Dwarf, six pages
for the various type of Elf, four pages for Gnomes, and so forth, although the poor ol' Halfling just receives a standard
single page. I mean, even Orges receive four pages, and Orcs get two; why is the Halfling, famous for many complex
social relationships and habits (second breakfasts, pipeweed consumption, etc) relegated to one?

Some of the rarer variant creatures are relatively common in aggregate or sufficiently unusual to require further
elaboration. There is an astounding seventeen pages
dedicated to giants alone, which strikes one as a little
excessive even if it does now incorporate the Ettin and the
Cyclops. A similar remark can be made of the nine pages
dedicated to elementals, although again this also includes
previously independent creatures such as Aerial Servants,
Pechs, Salamanders etc. The envelope is pushed again with
the section on lycanthropes; there is appropriate general
information and several staple variants, but it's getting
clearly excessive when there's entries for the lycanthropic
seawolf (yes, it looks like a wolf, sigh), and the werebat.

As the game is entitled Dungeons & Dragons, one should not
be surprised to discover that there is a certain emphasis on
the namesake, indeed over twenty pages worth. As per prior
versions of this text, dragons are effectively colour-coded
with the good metallic dragons, evil chromatic dragons, and
the newly introduced neutral gem dragons. They've also
become significantly tougher, with 11 plus hit dice now
being typical, with commensurate improvements in other
combat abilities.

Overall

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In many ways the Monstrous Manual for AD&D ("version 2.5" as it has been described) represents a genuine attempt to correct two major mistakes of prior editions. From the first edition AD&D, the Manual clearly attempts to provide significantly more substance to the combat-stat block approach to creatures, although the useful content in actual play is likely to have declined due to the sheer extensiveness of the product; years of play would not result in an encounter with even the majority of entries in the book.

As an improvement from from the early printings of the second edition AD&D the Manual eschews the Monstrous Compendium approach of the ring binder plus supplements approach, a product which may have sounded good in theory but was bulky in practise and prone to damage. Arguably the Monstrous Compendium is the most well-produced book of its type, and the style rating would have been even higher still if greater effort was put into the artwork in particular, livening up some of the text, and ensuring that the many of the entries reached the level of being interesting before inclusion.

Style: 1.8 (layout) .4 (art) .5 (coolness) .7 (readability) 1.0 (product) = 4.4

Substance: 1.5 (content) .7 (text) .6 (fun) .5 (workmanship) .3 (system) = 3.6

**Hunter: The Reckoning (1999)**

**Introduction**

Subtitled "A Storytelling Game of Righteous Fury", Hunter: The Reckoning takes the perspective of "monster" hunters in the first version of the World of Darkness series. The 302p hardback is somewhat of the oversized end of the scale, and heavy or clumsy use will see problems with the glue and stitching, although it does lie nicely flat. The fire-styled cover art is does not excite, and the internal art varies significantly in quality only rarely is contextually appropriate. Both the table of contents and index are minimal, taking up two generous pages in the first case, and a large font single page for the latter. Page layout is two-column justified with boxed sections with thin margins and small and distorted page numbers. The writing style is extremely verbose and the several narrative out-takes in the text also contribute significantly.

The opening pages is an example of this story-telling style, a lengthy introduction that explains that monsters are real, but certain individuals have been imbued with special abilities that allows them to stand up to these creatures, along with hallucinations to guide them. Following this is the real first chapter, helpfully entitled "Introduction", which pretty much redescribes the narrative introduction, along with an example of roleplying, the gothic-punk setting of the World of Darkness, a high-level view of the various abilities of Hunters, and some notes on live-action roleplay and source material. The latter does not specifically mention Abraham Van Helsing, whose character in the 2004 movie is certainly an example of a Hunter with some rather impressive abilities and appropriate personality.

After the two introductions "Chapter 1: The Here and Now (The Hunter Condition)" and "Chapter 2: A World of Darkness", provide additional background information. The first chapter is various diary entries from a Hunter, with additional hints that the Imbued actually have psychic powers and are actually sleeper agents for governmental agencies, and the "Church of the Vindicated Faith" example of the sort of arbitrary, vigilante, and supernaturalist perspectives many Hunters seem to end up with. The second, somewhat briefer, is an essay of the Hunter in the World of Darkness setting, which concludes that the Hunters should rebel against the controlling "forces of darkness" throughout society.

**Character Generation and Special Abilities**
As a result of these three introductions, it is not until page 62 that character generation in a system sense begins with "Chapter 3: The Hunter's Creed (Character Types)". But even this is an introduction, where the player selects on of seven creeds for their Hunter, each of which is assigned to a virtue, although this is not a balanced correlation. Three creeds (Innocence, Matrydom, and Redemption) are applied to one virtue (Mercy), whereas only only one creed (Visionary) is applied to the virtue Vision. The other three creeds (Defense, Judgement, Vengeance) are all correlated with the virtue 'Zeal'. The distinction between the two is that the virtue represents what the character upholds as their goal of the war between the hunters and the monsters, whereas the creed is the means they will use to reach that virtue. Each Creed comes with a two page description including their weaknesses, apocrypha, suggestions in character creation (for example, Defenders start with high Perception, Empathy, and Willpower and typically possess allies and contacts as backgrounds), and starting Conviction (explained in detail some seventy pages later, a bonus to actions in the presence of supernatural beings ). These are effectively like the clans of Vampire The Masquerade, although the inter-clan conflicts seem a lot less evident in the creeds of Hunter The Reckoning, although the Innocents (who support a reconciliation between monsters and humans) are clearly the oddballs in the set, and are quite contrary to the overall theme.

Character creation proper starts with "Chapter 4: I Have Heard The Message (Creation and Traits)", which is should be familiar with players of any other the World of Darkness series. Characters assign their attribute categories (Physical, Social, Mental) according to a number of points (6, 4, and 2) with one point automatically in each specific trait (Physical: Strength, Dexterity, Stamina; Social: Charisma, Manipulation, Appearance; Mental: Perception, Intelligence, Will). Then abilities are prioritised according to their categories (Talents, Skills, Knowledges) with points (11, 7, and 4), although no ability can start play at a rating greater than 3. The next step is to select Background (5 points), Virtues (3), and Edges, derived from Virtue allocations, and assign Conviction (based on creed) and Willpower (set at three). Players can them allocate 21 points to their character with each Attribute costing 5 points, each Ability 2 points, Backgrounds 1, Willpower 1, and Conviction 1 (maximum starting value of 8). In most cases (Traits, Skills, Knowledges, Backgounds) the typical rating is between 1 and 5. In addition to these there is a number of personality archetypes to help set the broad parameters of the characters behaviour and also to determine when the character regains Willpower. For example, a Rebel personality regains Willpower when they stand up to authority or gain respect for opposing the status quo. A character's Willpower bonus acts a pool and a value. By spending Willpower before a test, failures can be converted into successes, or the Storyteller can apply them in an instinctual manner.

The relationship between Virtues, Conviction, and Edges are an interesting one. The former two have already been described. What is interesting is that Virtues can only be increased by increasing Conviction to ten points (at which case they can be reduced to their starting level), and Conviction gained by risking it with in an Edge test when confronting supernatural beings. This contrasts with more mundane skills and abilities which are gained through experience. In contrast Edges are gained by levels in Virtue and are allocated according to Virtue. The Edges themselves represent supernatural abilities, which again raises the question of who is the monster in these encounters - the correct answer being everyone, of course. Some thirty five Edges are described, rated according their power. As can be expected the most powerful Edges can be quite spectacular in their effects, but the graduation seems fairly smooth with no obvious flaws based on some modest playtesting.

Game System

The game system is pretty much entirely covered in a single chapter, "Laws of the Hunt". Timeframes are differentiated into turns (variable from three seconds to three minutes), a scene, chapter (a session), a story etc. Tasks are based (typically) on an attribute plus ability d10 pool with difficulty ratings (from 3 to 9 being typically) and margins of success based on a number of successful dice from the pool, but with each 1 subtracting from the margin. A "botch", or critical failure, occurs where there is at least a single "1" but with no successes, a failure occurs when no successes are rolled, or there are more 1's than successes. There is notes on repeated attempts, extended actions, resisted actions (a competition between the number of successes between the competitors), and the ability to pool dice pools. The entire game system description is carried out in twelve pages, including some minor examples, indicative of the simplicity.

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and scope.

The subsequent chapter, "Tools of the Hunt", elaborates the game system into actual practise. This includes a quite a range of physical, mental, and social feats and various difficulty levels and results. The depth of useful information in these few pages is an excellent example of what could have been done in the rest of the book, but wasn't. In addition to these 'normal' task elaborations, there is also a combat sections which covers initiative (Dex + Wits + 1d10), attacking (Dex + Ability, modified), damage (extra successes + weapon dice pool vs soak resistance). Planned actions may be aborted to allow defensive maneuvers such as block, dodge, or parry. Multiple actions are allowed, with subsequent actions having increased difficulty. Close combat actions come with a variety of brawling-like actions which receive their own checks. A thankfully short melee and ranged weapons chart is provided, along with the effects of damage which indicates the graduate penalty to dice pool from wounds, the distinction between bashing and lethal damage, and their respective healing times. In addition mental damage, or derangements are described, typically the result of sanity-blasting monstrosities (whether events or critters), but also from having Virtue scores that are too high. Specific derangements include the likes of megalomania, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and so forth. This is followed by a range of examples of natural world and special damaging effects such as disease, drowning, explosives, etc.

The GMs Toolkit

The last two chapters cover around seventy pages of setting and GM advise. Chapter Eight, charmingly entitled "The Truth", is a very verbose introduction of the art of gamesmastering, narrative development and especially in the contexts of the World of Darkness and Hunter: The Reckoning. It is perhaps a little surprising how little was dedicated to the most important component, that is the interaction, involvement, and standard of players into the game environment rather than characters as such.

In contrast the final chapter deal with the the collection of supernatural opponents that the Storyteller can set up against the Hunter PCs written with a narrative perspective. These include Warlocks, Vampires, various types of Zombies, Ghosts and Goblins, and Lycanthropes. The detail on each creature type is quite impressive even ignoring the possibility of including other WoD books that can (and almost invariably are) slotted into any Hunter game. Surprisingly there is somewhat less than expected discussion of the interactions and relations between the various monsters.

Following this are various Appendices for the game; a symbolic code which Hunters communicate with each other, the availability of special hunter gear for their activity and player advice on how to get this necessary material, which leads into a discussion of various hunter organisations that have come together for mutual aid.

Overall

Hunter: The Reckoning is a thematically strong addition to the World of Darkness setting. It applies that game system and setting in a consistent manner and allows for some modest variations to mark itself as an independent game. The core theme of the hunters being monsters themselves is not nearly as strongly expressed as one could imagine, but there are enough subtle elements in the rules that a Storyteller can certainly lead things in that direction (especially derangements from Virtues).

There are two serious issues with the game as presented however. The first is the general presentation; below average art, layout, readability, and even the physical product. The second is a very poor signal-to-noise ratio. Whilst the game system is good and well-elaborated, and the overall content fair, the fact that the book takes over three hundred pages to provide what it does really puts it close to rock-bottom in terms of what one gets per page. Nevertheless, if one can overlook this and derive some short crib sheets for actual play, then the game will run smoothly and enjoyable with the simple system and excellent theme.
Anaxial’s Roster (2000)

The Product and Introduction

Perfect bound and in novel sized form, Anaxial’s Roster, a collection of creatures for the world of Glorantha, is presented in single column justified with a serif font. There is a single page for a table of contents, and a five-page index in reduced font. The page numbers are clear, and the top margin clearly indicates the particular chapter, although the chapter titles themselves can be a bit of a mystery. The colourful cover art by Heather Bruton displays Anaxial on his ark with a collection of creatures. The internal black and white artwork by the same author shows technical skill and is placed contextually. Also included throughout is "sidebar" text which uses as dark grey background (not always the best contrast). Many of these are the mythic stories of Glorantha, including the thoroughly delightful "How the Cat Domesticated People", and sample characters such as “Gon Orta, A True Giant”, or, most impressively, the statistical rendition of the Green True Dragon, creatures which are normally represented as geographical features in their own right.

The Roster is a document based, as so many Glorantha supplements, on a mythology itself. The text begins with the story of Anaxial who, in a fairly obvious Noah-inspired tale, prophesized a great flood and sought to bring nearly all of the animals together in a giant ark. Of course, this is Glorantha, so the ark was the size of a small city and some creatures that Anaxial didn’t particularly like were left behind. The text goes on to explain the organisation of the ark into various levels, which make up the first several chapters of the book, and the taxonomic and "scientific" classification of creatures according to the God Learners. Also of note is an introduction to the headings of the entries, which covers Name (including Godlearner name), Ages (common appearance according to historical period), Distribution (Gloranthan region), Habitat, Weapons and Armour, Significant Abilities, and Innate Magical Abilities - this is all in addition to a general description. A notable inclusion is the use of consistent ability terms so "like can be compared with like".

Content

After the Introduction, the text is best understood as consisting of two general blocks of chapters. The first block consists, in sequence, the creatures of the various levels of the ark, which starts with Creatures of Above (i.e., birds), Domesticated Animals, Wild Prey Animals, Wild Predators, Creatures of Below, and Aquatic Animals. The second block of chapters are for those sapient, sentient, and otherworldly creatures, and thus starts with The Monster Army (i.e., Elder Races, Gigantic Creatures, Monsters (which surprisingly includes Trolls, which are supposed to be a definitive Elder race), Unnatural Entities (i.e., creatures of Chaos), and then Otherworldly Entities (e.g., Daimones, Essences, Spirits, etc) which technically were part of the Ark was well, on the first deck.

The Creatures block of chapters includes a good range of "normal" (within a Gloranthian context) and specific creatures for the world. It is not, as are many fantasy books of the creature catalogue variety, a list of combatative opponents of the carnivorous variety, although is a bias towards this taxonomy, but this can be justified in terms of probably interaction. Utility does place a function however, as the twelve types of horse illustrates. Arguably a significant number of the so-called wild prey animals in that chapter also fall under the category of utility as well, as there is a significant correlation between the species listed and those used extensively as riding animals in Prax. Many Gloranthan favourites can be found in these chapters, such as the Dragonewt demi-bird, the Gern herd-humans for the Morokanth, and the Rubble Runner.
It becomes evident that assigning chapters to levels does have its organisational problems. Indeed the author readily admits the split of the chapters according to the placement within the ark doesn't always work. It is perhaps a little unfair to describe the Nar Salla, or Wind Children, as creatures, or for that matter the Ludoch, the Gloranthan mere-people, but because they were placed on the same level as birds and fishes respectively that's where they've ended up. Organisationally, one would expect that they would be countered among the other sapient “monsters” of the Elder Races, but rather they have ended up in a kinda-sorta phylogenetic category.

Looking at the "monsters", the world of Glorantha does receive some recognition for having some fairly interesting and often unique interpretations of standard fantasy species. It is, of course, well known for its Ducks (no longer the politically correct term, apparently), and perhaps less so for the idea of Elves as sapient trees (not unlike a small versions of Tolkien's Ents), and even less so of their Dwarves as actually being sentient metal and rock rather like a fantasy type of robot; not to mention the strange lifecycle of the Dragonewt and their reincarnative state for spiritual attainment. All these Elder races and their associates receive a good basic description, as do the real monsters of the world, the Chaos creatures such as Scorpion Men, Broo, and even the less intelligent of the crew, such as Gorp and Dragonsnails. The collection ends with the variety of otherworldly entities, such as the theistic daimons, the elemental essences, and the embodied and disembodies spirits.

Overall

As a person who has been running a HeroQuest game for the better part of a decade there is no denying that one will receive extensive use of Anaxial's Roster. Such extended testing also allows careful consideration of some its flaws, such as the organisation of the text which had the competing tasks of pragmatic organisation and mythical taxonomy. Bringing in the somewhat ambiguous method of ability determination from the game to creatures themselves results in a bold attempt at largely succeeds, but still suffers from the lack of clarity that exists within the game system itself (e.g., are values relative or absolute?). Harpies, for example, clearly have some intellect and cunning, but this is not illustrated in the abilities. They are clearly quite dim, but how dim is not evident.

Nevertheless, Anaxial's Roster does still remain one of the most comprehensive collections of Gloranthan creatures. There is a very impressive amount of information in a relatively short book, indicative of a certain density of text. The authors have worked very well to get all this into one volume, and have done so with some flourish in the writings as well that give a good sense of a mythical world in both the catalogue and the examples. Indeed, by providing a supplement that illustrates the use of the Hero Wars/HeroQuest system over such a wide variety of creatures, the authors have made a valuable contribution in extending the game rules and their application successfully and appropriately.

Style: 1.3 (layout) .8 (art) .6 (coolness) .6 (readability) .4
(product) = 3.7

Substance: 1.7 (content) .7 (text) .7 (fun) .7 (workmanship) .7 (system) = 4.5
**Malleus Monstrorum (2006)**

**Product**

Weighing in at a hefty 300 pages (and perhaps a little too big for a softback), the *Malleus Monstrorum* ("Monster Hammer") provides a collection of almost four hundred creatures from the Cthulhu mythos for the Call of Cthulhu roleplaying game, an extraordinary task of the author/compiler. The broad table of contents (chapter headings only) notes that the text covers Creatures of the Mythos, Deities of the Mythos, Creatures of Legend and Folklore, Animals, and several Appendices, which each oddly receive their own entry even if they're only a single page. To help find things in this tome there's a six page Index of Blasphemies. The text is two-column justified with a serif font, well glued, with a fairly large margin. Each page also has the subject matter of the page on the top margin, further assisting in searches.

The cover art is a very attractive full-colour piece of some unfortunates in a life-boat at sea staring into the face of the great Cthulhu himself. The internal (and oft contextual) artworks are extraordinary and disturbing; extraordinary in the sense that they are meant to represent various museum pieces, artworks and so forth which indicate prior recordings of the interaction of members of the mythos with humans, and disturbing because they appear genuine, and I really, really, know that some of them are, but do you think that I can find them online? That's enough for the reader to lose SAN in their search - thankfully regained when one realises that they the text and art itself has been modified just to play with your head. The book also includes excerpts from the Journals of Sir Hansen Poplan providing a narrative account of encounters with creatures of the Mythos.

**Content**

The organisation of the creatures of the text is by key phrase (e.g., Tindalos), with Creatures classified as either Fabulous Creatures (enchanted creatures from legend), Independent Races (non-servitor species), Servitor Races (those associated one of the various Great Old Ones, Elder Gods, etc), and Unique Individuals. Deities are classified as either Elder Gods, Great Old Ones, Great Ones, Outer Gods, and Avatars. Monsters and Other Creatures do not have further classifications. The classifications themselves have no systematic value, but do provide in-game categorisation. As a system that does include "monster equality" the various creatures are described with statistical value (STR, SIZ, CON, INT, DEX, POW), but usually not those statistics directly related to human interaction (APP, EDU). Where appropriate they are described with skills, spells, special abilities, and of course the sanity loss that the investigator encounters cause.

As per other books in the Call of Cthulhu line, the creatures are presented with an opening excerpt from the literature, followed with a description, and finally a stat block. Being monsters of the mythos it is unsurprising to discover that the descriptions do not usually include issues of ecology and habitat (except where interesting and relevant), but rather physical descriptions, relationships with other beings of the mythos and humans, in some cases lifecycle, and their physical and psychic abilities. Most Creatures, Independent Races, etc, have capabilities somewhat beyond the abilities of humans, and in the case of the Dieties, well beyond. It should be fairly evident that even with this wide range of
creatures, they all must be quite rare. After all, if the planet was populated with dozens of new alien species, it would be quite crowded (and bloody, at least for a while).

There are also occasional additional pieces of boxed text independent of the main body, in a somewhat difficult black on grey, for example, a side discussion on "Tindalosian Time-Space Effects". Deities also receive the additional information of a paragraph or so of the existence and behaviour of their human cults. In most cases these are only a few lines mentioning that there is very little in terms of an organised cult, but perhaps a few lone sorcerers or madmen. In other cases, such as Hastur and Nyarlathotep they are somewhat longer. Nyarlathotep also receives the overwhelming number of entries for Avatars as well, meaning that this particular entry (usually taking up a a page or so in Call of Cthulhu rulebooks) is extended to an impressive twenty nine pages.

The chapters for the Creatures of Legend and Animals are, unsurprisingly, significantly shorter that those for the beings of the Cthulhu Mythos. I've never been entirely happy with the exclusion of "real world" mythic creatures from the overall expression of the mythos. It just doesn't make sense to present an all-encompassing mythos that provides an explanation of the magical and supernatural from an alien perspective, which then excludes the existence of such creatures. This said, the a rather small collection of staple fantastic creatures are provided, such as ghosts, golems, zombies and the like. Finally, there is the animals chapter, mainly carnivores as challenges to the Investigators or certain herbivores which they will find useful (such as horses). These are described in around a paragraph each. The artwork for the animals is some rather attractive greyscale woodcut

The Appendices include a Chaosium guide to "unpronounceable" mythos names, a short essay for Keepers on how to describe the experience of mythos encounters on the senses (including, usefully, example death scenes from mythos creatures), along with a lengthy list of adjectives, a page on the natural mortality of mythos beings, such as it is, a short article on creating new mythos creatures (as if you need more after this!), and a page on the Dreamlands. The Appendices also include three pages continued of the extremely extensive credits compiled for the publication.

Overall

This is a beautifully produced and extraordinarily comprehensive book of the Cthulhu mythos that provides a standard presentation from the Call of Cthulhu RPG for the variety of creatures, monsters, etc that are contained within. It does reprint and update those creatures from a number of rulebooks and scenarios and as such can be considered a more authoritative source that its predecessors in that regard. A modest criticism of the book however is that it does replicate some of the issue with the way that Call of Cthulhu deals (or rather avoids dealing with) real-world mythology and the minimal collection of real-world animals.

A deeper issue for the text, and one which effects its utility as a product, is that it so heavily orientated towards quantity rather than quality. True the quality of the Cthulhu mythos creatures have a high standard to begin with. But would it not leader to deeper and more interesting roleplaying sessions is more extensive descriptions of the weird alien technologies of the Great Race of Yith were provided? Perhaps a couple of paragraphs even for the Cult of Iod, rather than ",. was worshipped by early humans but is mostly unknown today"? Perhaps this is an issue for further consideration by the publishers, and indeed all publishers. Sheer numbers might look good and impressive, but often less is more.

Style: 1 .6 (layout) .9 (art) .8 (coolness) .5 (readability) .5 (product) = 4.3

Substance: 1 .7 (content) .5 (text) .7 (fun) .6 (workmanship) .6 (system) = 4.1
ECLIPSE PHASE ALIENS

by Martin Tegelj

Eclipse Phase: Pandora Gate Orientation: Xenolife

Hi, I am Horacio Forteza and this is your orientation for Gatecrashing through Pandora Gate.

As many of you are aware Pandora Gate on Saturn’s moon Pandora was the first of the wormhole gates discovered in the Sol system. The Pandora Gate was shortly uncovered after the mysterious disappearance of the recursive self-improving TITAN AIs which devastated trans-humanity. Some believe that the TITANs left our system through these and others believe they will return to finish us off through these same gates.

Putting the TITANs aside, Gatecrashing is fraught with dangers in its own rights; from unstable wormholes and inhospitable environments to hostile natives. In our previous instructional XPs we have illustrated the dangers of the unpredictable nature of the wormhole gates and unwelcoming exoplanets. Today we will be discussing some of the known xenomorphs that have been encountered.

Microbes

One of the largest concerns to any biomorph when entering any exoplanet is the presence of microbes. Bacteria, archea, virus, fungi and other microbes have the potential to be present when other xenoflora or fauna are not. They can thrive in sulphur baths, deep sea trenches and even within rocks themselves. This means that an overwhelming amount of xenolife is microbial.

Since our ancestors were never exposed to these microbes means that we have little natural resistances or nano-tech to respond to their threat. This means that you can either don your environmental suit whenever crashing or you can risk your morph with no guarantee of backup. Either way you should make it habit to disinfect yourself and your gear to avoid infection.

The Incredible Melting Disease is one gruesome infection. It is caused by a microscopic fungi native to exoplanet Bluewood. This aggressive infection is contracted from dermal contact and the first symptoms present as a crippling pain and day later the skin of the victim begins to ‘melt’ from the point of infection. This destroys the skins ability to retain fluid and even protect the victim from other infection. If the infection is not kept in check the victims flesh and other tissue is then ‘melted’ until death follows.

Suffice to say upon returning through the Pandora Gate you will find yourself put through stringent checks to ensure that these microbes do not result in an epidemic.

Xenoflora

Evidence of xenoflora is the most obvious indication that an exoplanet bears life. Unlike microbes and xenofauna, alien plant life is rarely an immediate threat to Gatecrachers. Most incidents of injury and fatalities have come from consuming or contacting venomous vegetation.

The exception to this rule is the highly motile Sunrise Whiplash. They are the largest carnivorous plant transhumanity has discovered. They hunt their prey by biding their time amongst boughs of trees. Dangling long vines from their vantage they capture prey with sticky sap that coats these vines. Captured prey is immediately drawn into a digestive sac where it is slowly digested with acid.
Xenofauna

Alien animals pose the most immediate threat to transhumans from hulking herbivores to cunning carnivores, predatory pachyderms to venomous vulpes. A single exoplanet would take a lifetime of documenting with such mind-blowing diversity.

Take the Clown Sprite and the Land Anemone from Echo IV for example. The Clown Sprite a sort of winged monkey and the carnivorous land polyps live in symbiosis. The sprites eat parasites and insects that keep the anemone clean and disease free. The cunning sprites draw prey into the anemone’s venomous grasp while the sprites are immune to the venom and find refuge amongst the tentacles.

There is nothing more dangerous than something that can think for itself as has been demonstrated by the TITANS. When the Factors first made contact with Transhumanity they were a mystery to us, their intentions, society, biology, technology or even their home world. Though they came in ‘peace,’ claiming to be ambassadors to the larger galaxy, there’s something sinister about those gelatinous blobs. There are stories of gatecrashers who stumbled upon Factor artefacts and then went missing or returned without their memories.

Just remember to keep your wits about you and have fun when Gatecrashing.

For the Gamemaster

Biological Infection

Microbial infection can be transmitted through a number of vectors dermal, inhalation, injection or ingestion. If a biomorph has a chance of exposure to a malicious microbe, the victim should make a MOX x 10 Test. If failed the victim has been exposed.

A biomorph exposed to an infection must make a DUR x 2 Test to determine if the infection takes hold. Basic bio-mods and nanophages do not offer any protection, though toxin filters and medicines each give a +30 bonus. If the exposed fails the test they become infected.

The Incredible Melting Disease

This disease is caused by a highly aggressive fungus native to Bluewood that is spread by contact. Within 3 days of infection the victim will begin experiencing immense incapacitating pain in the region of exposure giving the infected an effective wound (-10 to all modifiers). Within one day of experiencing the first symptoms of pain they then experience their skin melting which will deal 1d10 DV each hour. After 8 hours (if the victim is still alive) the fungi begins melting muscle and organs dealing 1d10+5 DV. This disease can be treated with lengthy healing vat submersion.

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Movement Rate: 4/16
Skills: Fray 20, Climbing 50, Perception 40, Unarmed Combat 40
Notes: Chameleon Skin

Clown Sprite

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Movement Rate: 4/20 (Flight 8/48)
Skills: Climbing 50, Flight 50, Fray 40, Infiltration 60, Perception 40, Scrounging 60, Unarmed Combat 20
Notes: Bite (1d10 ÷ 2 DV), Chameleon Skin, Enhanced Hearing, Enhanced Smell, Grip Pads, Prehensile Tail, counts as a small target in combat (~10 to hit)

Land Anemone

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Movement Rate: 2/4
Skills: Climbing 30, Fray 30, Perception 30, Unarmed Combat 60
Notes: Tentacle Attack (1d10 DV, +30 modifier to grappling), Chameleon Skin, Enhanced Hearing, Enhanced Smell, Toxin (Affected characters suffer 2d10 + 10 damage a turn for 3 Action Turns; medicines reduce this damage by half. They must also make a SOM x 2 Test (+30 with medicines) or be paralyzed for 1 hour.)

Factors

Unlike transhumans, Factors rarely act individually, individuality is a concept somewhat foreign to Factors. Individual Factors look like large moving amoebas, standing about 0.3 metres tall and from 2 to 3 metres. They ooze from place to place, they can produce pseudopodia to manipulate objects. They perceive the world around them through spectra that include the infrared part of the electromagnetic spectrum, magnetoception, a high resolution chemical-gradient based “sight,” and keen haptic perceptions (including vibrations). Factors communicate with each other through directly merging with other factors but can communicate over a distance and the future by using highly pungent ‘Factor Dust’.

Factors usually avoid open combat adopting a system of devising complex traps and schemes to defeat enemies. Though when it comes down to the crunch they can utilise their ‘Factor Dust’ to stun their opponents and have the ability to use other
weapons at the disposal.

**Factor Dust Toxin**

Type: Bio

Application: Inh Treat this as an area effect (cone) attack.

Onset Time: 1 Action Turn

Duration: 10 minutes (5 with medicines)

Effect: Severe coughing and respiratory distress, 1d10 damage per Action Turn for 5 Action Turns (or ongoing with continuous exposure), –20 to all actions for 2 hours. Medicines reduce damage by half and modifier duration to 15 minutes.

**Ambassador**

These types of Factors are the ones that commonly have contact with transhumanity.

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<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Movement Rate: 4/16


Notes: Access Jacks, Chameleon Skin, Grip Pads, Infrared Sensing, Magnetoception, Poison Gland (‘Factor Dust’ Toxin)

**Guardians**

Guardian Factors serve as bodyguards for ambassadors or other Factors whenever they leave a Factor ship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CO</th>
<th>CO</th>
<th>INT</th>
<th>RE</th>
<th>SAV</th>
<th>SOM</th>
<th>WI</th>
<th>MO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Movement Rate: 4/20


Notes: Chameleon Skin, Eelware, Electrical Sense, Grip Pads, Infrared Sensing, Magnetoception, Poison Gland (Factor Dust Toxin), Tentacle Whip (DV 2d10 + 1, AP –1)
Bulette

This armor-plated creature's toothy maw gapes wide as a fin-like dorsal plate rises between its shoulders.

Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STR</td>
<td>4D6+10 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CON</td>
<td>2D6+6 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEX</td>
<td>3D6+6 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIZ</td>
<td>6D6+20 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>3D6 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHA</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attributes

- Hit Points: 26
- Major Wound: 13
- Damage Modifier: +3D6
- Magic Points: 11
- Movement Rate: 30m/round
- Plunder rating: 1

Traits: Darksight, Nightsight, Earthsense, Natural Armour

Skills

- Resistances: Dodge 50%, Persistence 75%, Resilience 33%
- Practical: Athletics 75%, Perception 33%
- Combat: Close Combat 75%

Magic: none

D20 Hit Location AP/HP
1-2 Right Rear Leg 3/9
3-4 Left Rear Leg 3/9
5 Dorsal fin 1/9
6-7 Hindquarters 3/10
8-10 Forequarters 2/11
11-13 Right Front Leg 3/9
14-16 Left Front Leg 3/9
17-20 Head 4/9

Weapons & Armour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Weapon skill</th>
<th>Damage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bite</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>1d10+3D6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Claw 75% 4D6
Typical Armour: Plates (AP 3, Natural Armour)

Combat notes: A bulette can perform a special kind of pounce attack by jumping into combat. When a bulette charges, it can make an Athletics roll to jump into the air and land next to its enemies. If it makes the, it can follow up with four claw attacks against foes in reach. This can only be done when the bulette is not engaged in combat and 10m from an enemy. A bulette's bite is particularly dangerous, on a critical it in addition to normal damage it destroys 1d4 armour points in the location bitten, or destroys 1d4 general armour points if hit locations are not used in your game.

Ecology
Environment temperate hills
Organization solitary or pair

The creation of some unknown arcanist in millennia past, the bulette has bred true to become one of the fiercest predators of the hills. Burrowing rapidly through the earth just beneath the surface, sometimes with its armored fin cutting a distinctive wake behind it, the bulette launches itself free of stone and soil to tear into its prey without remorse, giving rise to the common appellation “landshark.”

Bulettes are notoriously foul-tempered, attacking far larger creatures with no regard for personal safety. Solitary beasts except for the occasional mated pair, they spend most of their time patrolling the perimeters of territories that can stretch up to 30 square miles, hunting game and punishing interlopers with a fury that shakes the hillsides.

Bulettes are perfect eating machines, consuming bones, armour, and even magical items with their powerful jaws and churning stomach acid. Lacking other food, the bulette might gnaw on inanimate objects, yet for unknown reasons no bulette voluntarily consumes elf flesh—a peccadillo many point to as evidence that elven wizardry was involved in its creation. Dwarves are also rarely eaten by the beasts, though the bulette still slaughters members of either race on sight. Halflings, on the other hand, are among the beast’s favourite meals, and no halfling with any sense ventures into bulette country casually.

The bulette is a cunning fighter, surprising foes with its impressive agility. One of its favourite tactics is to charge forward and launch itself into the air in order to drop on its prey with all four razor-sharp claws extended. Folklore claims that the flesh behind the beast’s dorsal crest is particularly tender, and that those willing and able to wait until the fin is raised in the excitement of combat or mating can target it for a killing blow—yet most who have faced the landshark agree that the best way to win a fight with a bulette is to avoid it entirely.

It is commonly believed that the bulette was created by crossing an armadillo with a snapping turtle, infusing the union with demon ichor. While the specifics have long been lost, some researchers have attempted to duplicate the experiment. Their notes state that especially large specimens of each animal are needed, as well as various arcane spells. The animals are placed in a large sealable container, then doused with the ichor from a powerful demon, with stronger demons giving the reaction a greater chance of success. After adding the ichor, the creator seals the container, casts the required spells (alternately, potions of the weaker spells may be mixed with the ichor beforehand), and hopes for success. How reliable the process is remains difficult to determine, as few of those who attempt it are ever heard from again.

Variations

A common artificial origin has spawned a number of monsters closely related to the bulette. Some of these are simple variations of the base bulette, with mottled skin colors, thicker armor plates, or smaller sizes, while others are distantly related, barely recognizable mutations or experiments.
**Leprous Bulette**: Bulettes can contract leprosy, usually by eating an infected humanoid, and pass the disease on to any humanoid lucky enough to survive the creature’s attack.

**Spiny Bulette**: Sages believe this is either a mutation or a new breed created with a hedgehog or porcupine as the base creature rather than an armadillo. Large spines jut from between its armor plates; anyone attacking it with natural attacks or unarmed strikes takes 1d6 damage and must make a Dodge roll or have a quill break off and embed in his flesh. Lodged quills impose a –25% penalty on attacks, and physical skills until pulled free, which takes a round. A referee may also decide that the spiny bulette can launch a spine each round instead of a claw attack, with a range of 30m and a damage of 1D6 (no extra damage bonus). They may well do this as a prelude to close combat.

**Xenarth (Ichor Shark)**: The most feared bulette mutations are the xenarths. Also called ichern sharks, xenarths are an incredibly rare species of bulette that most believe long vanished from the world. Since the original bulettes were created with infusions of demon ichern, many have long associated them with demons despite the fact that they’re simply magically created beasts. Xenarths, however, are actually demons. At the moment of the creation process when the fused animal parts were combined with demon ichern, xenarths were imbued with an excess of this essence, becoming demonic outsiders, creatures not of the Material Plane. Xenarths are covered in a slimy red ichern that burns like acid when touched and helps propel them through the soil much quicker than the bulette. Xenarths are brutal and even more frightening than their cousins. Bulettes eat to fuel an insatiable hunger—xenarths eat for the pure pleasure of destruction, and have been known to eat, regurgitate, and move on to other food. All weapons or objects or people that come in contact with the Xenarth are coated with acid ichern that burns for 1D6 damage for 1D6 rounds. Armour is destroyed point by point, and then the damage is take as hit point damage.

**OwlBear**

*An amalgam of fur and feathers, this bizarre half-bear, half-owl monstrosity raises its huge, ursine claws in anger.*

**Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STR</td>
<td>3D6+10 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CON</td>
<td>2D6+10 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEX</td>
<td>3D6+2 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIZ</td>
<td>3D6+20 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>3D6 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHA</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Attributes**

- Hit Points: 24
- Major Wound: 12
- Damage Modifier: +2D6
- Magic Points: 10
- Movement Rate: 15m/round
- Plunder rating: 1

Traits: Darksight, NightSight, Natural Armour

**Skills**

- Resistances: Dodge 65% Persistence 35 % Resilience 75%
- Practical: Athletics 35% Stealth 35% Survival 35%
- Combat: Close Combat 65 %
Magic: none, but counts as a magical beast where relevant

**Hit Locations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D20</th>
<th>Hit Location</th>
<th>AP/HP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>Right Rear Leg</td>
<td>2/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>Left Rear Leg</td>
<td>2/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>Hindquarters</td>
<td>2/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>Chest</td>
<td>2/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-13</td>
<td>Right Front Leg</td>
<td>2/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-16</td>
<td>Left Front Leg</td>
<td>2/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>2/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Weapons & Armour**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Weapon skill</th>
<th>Damage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claw</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>1D6+2D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bite</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>1D8+2D6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typical Armour: Tough Fur and Feathers (AP 2, Natural Armour)

Combat notes: Owlbears usually do not parry nor dodge, but attack with both claws at one target, if they succeed with both attacks then they have grabbed the victim and make a bite attack at +25%.

**Ecology**

Environment temperate forests  
Organization solitary, pair, or pack (3–8)

The origin of the owlbear is a subject of great debate among scholars of the monstrous creatures of the world. However, most concur that at some point in the distant past, a deranged wizard created the original specimens by crossing an owl with a bear—perhaps as proof of some insane concept about the nature of life, but possibly out of sheer lunacy.

Whatever the original purpose of such a freakish creation as the owlbear, the creature bred true and has become quite well-established in woodlands across the world, where it plays a key role in a region's ecosystem as an apex predator.

Owlbears are notoriously bloodthirsty killers, well known for their short tempers, aggression, and savage nature. They tend to attack without provocation, slaughtering any living creatures that cross their paths. Many scholars that have encountered these creatures in the wild have noted that they all have red-rimmed eyes that roll about wildly when they close in for an attack. This is sometimes presented as a sign of madness, suggesting that all owlbears are born with a pathological need to fight and kill, but more level-headed researchers believe that it's simply part of the way the massive bird-beast's keen eyes are constructed.

A full-grown male can stand as tall as 3 metres and weighs up to 750kg. Owlbears generally inhabit desolate areas of the wilderness, making their messy lairs within wild forests or inside dark, shallow caverns. They are equally adept at hunting during the day and at night, depending upon the prey available near their lairs. Adult owlbears live in mated pairs, and hunt in small groups, leaving their young behind in their lairs while they search for prey. A typical owlbear lair contains 1d6 juveniles, which can fetch a price of up to 3,000 gold coins apiece in many city markets. While it is considered impossible to truly domesticate owlbears due to their feral natures, they can still be used as guardians if contained within an area but allowed to roam and hunt freely there. Professional animal trainers charge at least 6,000 gold coins to find, rear or train an owlbear into a serviceable guardian that can obey simple commands.
**Variants**

Arctic Owlbear: These creatures have white fur and feathers (+25% bonus on Stealth checks in snowy areas), and are at home on ice, snow, and even near-freezing water (swim 30m).

Darklands Owlbear: The Darklands are teeming with owlbears. While most of them look like those on the surface, nearly a third have blue or pink eyes and white or pale yellow fur and feathers, much like other darkness-adapted creatures that lose their coloration. Some of these pale ones have perfect darksight, while others are eyeless and navigate with earthsense and echolocation. Whether normal or albino, Darklands owlbears are commonly often used by darklands sophonts as guards or beasts of burden, pacified by magic.

Screaming Owlbear: Native to the Maelstrom, these creatures are warped by exposure to chaos energy. Stripped of their base natures as animal-like predators, they are now more like chaos beasts—horrors whose forms are governed by their anger. Screaming owlbears are immune to critical hits and have 1D3 chaotic features.

Siege Owlbear: Bred primarily by orcs from the heftiest owlbear stock, siege owlbears represent the largest and most brutal of their kin. Such grotesque beasts tend to be used as stud creatures by orcs and are much prized by chieftains. The siege owlbear is bred for battle, fed a special diet of magically and alchemically augmented meats from a very young age, and trained to tolerate riders or gear such as small ballistas or catapults. Such owlbears have to be controlled by a rider and tend to be unpredictable—often setting off in a direction that suits the mount more than the handler. In a stressful situation such as combat then owlbears get distracted and if the rider wants to control the beast then a Riding skill test is needed, unless the action is one the owlbear would naturally do (usually attack and kill an intruder in it’s territory), or the owlbear will follow it’s own will.

**Rust Monster**

*This insectile monster has four legs, a strange propeller-shaped protrusion at the end of its tail, and two long, feathery antennae.*

**Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STR</td>
<td>3D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CON</td>
<td>2D6+6(14)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEX</td>
<td>3D6+6(17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIZ</td>
<td>3D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INT</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>3D6</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHA</td>
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**Attributes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit Points</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Wound</td>
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<tr>
<td>Damage Modifier</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic Points</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement Rate:</td>
<td>30m/round</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plunder rating:</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traits: Darksight, Natural Armour

**Skills**
Resistances: Dodge 65% Persistence 75 % Resilience 75%
Practical: Athletics 35% Stealth 35%, Scent Metal 75%
Combat: Close Combat 35 %

Magic: none

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D20</th>
<th>Hit Location</th>
<th>AP/HP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Right Fourth Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Left Fourth Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Right Third Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Left Third Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>Tail</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>Abdomen</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Right Second Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Left Second Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Right First Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Left First Leg</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-15</td>
<td>Right Antennae</td>
<td>0/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-17</td>
<td>Left Antennae</td>
<td>0/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>Thorax</td>
<td>1/7</td>
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</table>

Weapons & Armour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Weapon skill</th>
<th>Damage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bite</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>1D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tail swipe</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>0+rust*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typical Armour: Shell (AP 1, Natural Armour)

Combat notes: * any weapon that touches or is touched by the tail or shell is corroded to a fine powder immediately. If the rust monster receives a damaging hit to the antennae it will flee in pain.

Ecology

Environment any underground
Organization solitary, pair, or nest (3–10)

Of all the terrifying beasts an explorer might encounter underground, only the rust monster targets that which the average adventurer values most: *his treasure*.

Typically 2m long and weighing almost 100kg pounds, the lobster-like rust monster would be frightening enough even without the alien feeding process that gives it its name. Rust monsters consume metal objects, preferring iron and ferrous alloys like steel but devouring even mithral, adamantine, and enchanted metals with equal ease. Any metal touched by the rust monster's delicate antennae or armoured hide corrodes and falls to dust within seconds, making the beast a major threat to subterranean adventurers and those dwarven miners who must defend their forges and compete for ore. Though rust monsters have no innate tendency toward violence, their insatiable hunger leads them to charge anything they come across that bears even trace amounts of metal, and any resistance is met with unthinking savagery. It's not unheard of for rust monsters in metal-poor areas to track escaped victims for days using their scent metal ability, provided the victims retain intact metal objects. Fortunately, it's often possible to escape a rust monster's attentions by throwing it a dense metal object like a shield and running in the opposite direction. Those who frequent areas infested with rust monsters quickly learn to keep a few stone or wooden weapons close at hand.

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Stirge

This insectoid creature has two pairs of bat wings, a tangle of thin legs, and a needle-sharp proboscis.

Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STR</td>
<td>1D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CON</td>
<td>2D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEX</td>
<td>3D6+6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIZ</td>
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<tr>
<td>INT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>3D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attributes

- Hit Points: 4
- Major Wound: 2
- Damage Modifier: −1D6
- Magic Points: 11
- Movement Rate: 60m/round flying
- Plunder rating: 1

Traits: Darksight, Nightsight, Disease Immunity

Skills

- Resistances: Dodge 80%, Persistence 75%, Resilience 75%
- Practical: Flying 100%, Stealth 35%, Scent Blood 75%
- Combat: Close Combat 75%

Magic: none

D20 Hit Location AP/HP
1-20 Body 0/4

Weapons & Armour

- Type: Piercing 75%
- Weapon skill: 1 *

Typical Armour: None

Combat notes: * This damage is taken from CON directly and not hit points. Note that only critical attacks by the Stirge can penetrate armour. Unarmoured foes are at more peril.

Although the Stirge has a negative damage bonus, for the ease of play the damage is simply taken to be 1.

A Stirge that is hit will fall to the floor and be helpless for one turn before it regains flight.

All who take damage from a Stirge or who has untreated wounds in their vicinity are susceptible to a disease, such as
Different groups of stirges carry different diseases, it all depends on which other creatures they have sucked blood from, so the choice is as wide and as horrible as the referee chooses.

**Ecology**

Environment temperate and warm swamps

Organization (roll d100) 1-50: solitary, 51-80: colony (1d3+1), 81-95: flock (1d4+4), 96-99: storm (1d6+7), or 00: swarm (3d20 or 6d10)

Stirges are vicious, blood-drinking swamp pests that prey on wild animals, livestock, and unwary travelers. While weak individually, swarms of the creatures are capable of draining a man dry in minutes, leaving only a desiccated husk in their wake. They are attracted to blood and a referee may use their Scent Blood skill as the probability of arrival at a scene in a swamp where blood has been recently spilt.

Closer to mammals than insects, stirges carry their bodies through the air on four fleshy wings, searching out warm-blooded prey. They are fond of hiding near watering holes and waiting for travelers to drop their guard, then swooping out to attach and drink their fill by thrusting their long feeding tubes into unprotected veins. After feeding they flap heavily off into the mud and reeds to lay their eggs and rest until hunger drives them to hunt again.

A stirge’s coloration ranges from rust-red to reddish-brown, with a dirty yellow underside. The proboscis is pink at the tip, fading to gray at its base.

A stirge’s body is about 40cm long, with a wingspan of about 0.5m. It weighs about 1 kilo.
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The idea of Monsters By Email (http://monstersbyemail.com) came to me in September 2012, when I was thinking about my work with concept art and fantasy illustrations. I don't know the exact cause for it, but there are several reasons to why I took the idea further, and launched Monsters By Email in March 2013.

From the work on my previous projects, like RPG-Creatures (http://rpg-creatures.blogspot.com.au/) and Bestiary 1 (http://www.rpgnow.com/product_info.php?products_id=94210), I had noticed that quite a few people appreciated my fantasy creatures; the artwork, and the descriptions I wrote for them. It is just that bringing new imaginary beasts to life takes a lot of time, so I had to come up with a way to cover for that, financially. Perhaps I thought, if I do my very best, and flesh out the creature experience, not only with stats and descriptions, but also with information on how I make these creatures, print-resolution illustrations, and some rights to publish the art.... perhaps then, some people would be ready to pay just a little in exchange for the product I produce, and thus give birth to new Monsters.

I have been paid for doing artwork before, on a freelance basis, for a number of publishers, but this time I'm turning straight to the public. I have intentionally set the price very low, because I want to make the service affordable to as many people as possible, and share my work with many supporters. Now, as the second 4-month subscription period is about to begin, I make it even easier to join Monsters By Email. First time subscribers will be able to sign up for 2 dollars, and receive all the contents of a full subscription period. If they like what they get, they can come back at the end of the period and pay a little more, but if they don't like it, they don't. I'm not a big established company, so I invite people to check it out, and see how it works.

Monsters By Email is primarily a growing bestiary, adapted to suit traditional role-play. There are even some adventure hooks in the creature descriptions. By sending subscribers 4-6 new creatures every month they receive a portion big enough to digest. The creatures I provide are not goblins, elves, and big wolves, but are produced with the intention to add something to the game experience. I hope to provide some boost for imagination and inspiration, and to extend the fantasy fauna, rather than copying what's already out there.

For artists, an extensive PDF is included with every delivery, showing and explaining the progress and steps involved.
in making the creatures. This part, together with a bonus PDF called 'learning art', is designed for learning, and directed at those interested in developing their art skills in general, and their creature design skills in particular. Occasionally I'm adding commented movie clips of the painting process.

Since I also include non-exclusive publishing rights to half of the creature illustrations, many indie publishers have joined Monsters By Email, and some people subscribe simply because they like the art.

The service is run in 4-month periods, and you have to renew the subscription manually. You can sign up at any time during those four months and receive the full contents of the subscription period. At the end of every month I send out a new Creature Set, including 4-6 new creatures, print-resolution illustrations, RPG-adapted descriptions, and extensive information on how they came about. Rights are included to 2-3 of those creatures. Some files are attached to the email, while download links are provided for the heavy files. There is a sample Creature Set available for free at MonstersByEmail.com to better illustrate what subscribers receive.

Subscription period 1 (March 1 to June 30, 2013) has been successful in many ways. At the delivery of the very first Creature Set, I had some problems sharing the big image files, but once that had been sorted the subscription has been running smoothly. According to a small survey I did recently, only 2% of subscribers say they will not sign up for another period, another 6% say they probably won't. 23% believe they will, and 63% are certain they will. The rest don't know. That means 86%+ have a positive to very positive experience of Monsters By Email, and are in a situation in which they see extended use for it.

The great challenge this project faces is promotion. It is evident to me that the idea of Monsters By Email works, but more people have to find out about it. Over 300 people have joined the subscription already, but only a tiny fragment of the world's population knows it exists. Financially, doing your very best to ensure quality is of little use, unless people know it's there. If you're reading this article, and know individuals who you think might enjoy MonstersByEmail, you are most welcome to inform them about it.

I'm an educated artist. My ability to paint, and my imagination, are my two swords in this world. To use them is a pleasure, and to share the results of my carvings, is a great delight. On the 3rd of July I will initiate Subscription Period 2, which will continue until October 31. By the end of it, I hope to have doubled the number of subscribers willing to join me for period number 3. I'm aiming to make this one of the best bestiaries of all time, as well as a proper and extensive course in creature design. If the word spreads far enough, the hatchery will heat up, and the Monsters will thrive. I welcome you to join the rampage!
**STALKED BY DEATH FOR STAR FRONTIERS**

*by Thomas Verreault*

**Using The Quickdeath in Star Frontiers**

In the Star Frontiers RPG one of the iconic creatures of the game was the quickdeath. It featured in as the “boss” encounter in the bundled module that came with the Alpha Dawn box set. It had features that gave it damage reduction vs. a variety of weapons, multiple means of attack and high stamina to make it a tough encounter. In addition it was a favored attack monster/bio-construct of the sathar, the game’s main villain. The creature was used in key encounters of all three modules of the classic Volturnus campaign.

It was portrayed as a creature that the sathar would abandon on planets to disrupt the environment. This means it can be found anywhere there has been past sathar involvement from secret outpost to worlds ravaged by the sathar in war. Normally in a science fiction game creatures are limited to being found on their home planet, however the quickdeath, and most other sathar creatures for that matter, are available for use all across the setting.

Star Frontiers, while being 30 years old, is my favorite science fiction RPG. I’d be the first to admit that it could have used revision years ago and that it has its share of wonkiness that was a product of the time it was published. However, it’s extremely fast play and adaptable and this keeps me coming back to it. What follows is an examination of the the quickdeath and suggestions for using the quickdeath in creative ways to build tension and terrorize the player characters.

**Origins**

The *Crashed on Volturnus* module explicitly stated that, “the sathar used an advanced form of DNA manipulation to create these hideous beasts from a common type of housecat found throughout the universe.” The phrase “common type of housecat found throughout the universe” doesn’t make a lot of sense. It doesn’t even make much sense if it’s, “found throughout the galaxy.” Even 30 years ago I didn’t buy that. The reality of the situation is that as the sathar explored and discovered new worlds they also discovered a feline like species that they began to bio-engineer.

Of all sathar creatures the quickdeath is the most changed from its original form. Things like the slitherer and the cybo slung are likely very close to their original form when they were first encountered by the sathar. The quickdeath’s base body structure is radically different from that of the sathar. The feline like frame is based on a skeleton while the sathar body is based on a segmented worm that is supported hydrostatically. Yet the sathar have clearly mated features from their own evolutionary tree with this creature from an obviously different evolutionary tree.

The first obvious engineered change in the quickdeath is the presence of sathar like tentacles/manipulator limbs growing out its side. These are used to grab prey and bring it to the “digestive maw” while the creature continues to attack with its legs, tail and mouth. They are actually quick redundant and strike me as something the sathar did to see if it could be done in the process of mastering their science of DNA manipulation.

Secondly, I would judge the four eye stalks to be an engineered change. The fact that the sathar have two pupils per eye and thus four visual feeds entering their brain suggests that they may have changed the creature from two visual feeds to having four which undoubtedly seemed more natural to them. The radical change while successful on the surface is the source of the quickdeaths one weakness: it retracts its eyestalks as it attacks to protect them from damage. In the Crash on Volturnus module the player characters were provided straw decoys by the native for facing the quickdeath. Holding a straw decoy in front of you provided a 50% chance of it being attacked instead.

Other sathar monsters show considerably less structural change then the quickdeath. This could mean that the
quickdeath has been part of their bio-construct experiments the longest or that the sathar have opted to get new biological assets into the field faster with minimal changes or both. For these reasons I believe it is one of their first bio-engineered creatures. It’s entirely possible that there are other breeds of quickdeath, abandoned prototypes or even original stock felinoid creatures to be encountered.

**Behavior**

In *Crashed on Volturnus* it was portrayed as a creature that rushed into combat and fought viciously till dead. In *Volturnus Planet of Mystery* it was portrayed as a kept creature in a 900 years old obelisk to guard against intruders. In *Star Spawn of Volturnus* it was portrayed as an attack creature that accompanied sathar soldiers into battle. We are further told in its description that often mated pairs will hunt together.

What we have, intelligence wise, is a highly adaptable creature with a lot of computational ability going on in its brain. The sathar must have enhanced its brain when they changed it to have four visual feeds as that is a lot to process and think about. In addition, adding the tentacles to the sides of the beast required more mental assets. It’s apt to work in pairs and pack hunt which suggests a cunning intelligent creature. In the Volturnus campaign the creature was not given the opportunity to display much cunning or intelligence but it is probably one of the most intelligent creatures that the players could encounter and still not be classified as sapient.

The situation in *Crashed on Volturnus* was artificial in that the Ul-mor had corralled a quickdeath and released it at the appointed time for the rite of manhood ceremony. It’s believable for an aggressive beast to charge obvious opponents when suddenly released. I believe the more natural behavior, when not impacted in an artificial situation, would be intelligent stalking and hunting of prey with attacks sprung from ambush. A mature quickdeath may even have multiple strategies for handling different prey.

**The Hunt**

Hunting and stalking is about looking for the optimal moment to strike. Sometimes a predator wants its prey to know its being hunted to cause panic and exhaustion by not allowing it to rest. This is called endurance hunting. The point is not to actually catch the prey just stay close enough to it that it can’t rest or escape and when the creature reaches the point of exhaustion the predator strikes. Another strategy is ambush when the prey is within the effective sprint range of the hunter.

A solitary or mated pair of quickdeath will potentially, stalk a party of player characters for days. It will look for ideal terrain and vulnerable targets to spring an ambush. The player characters will become aware of being stalked. Common signs of the presence of the predator would be tracks, skat (feces), territorial marking of trees, a half-eaten carcass, and unexplained noise. A referee should use these signs to build tension in the players over the course of a game session.

Eventually the quickdeath will make its presence known in a concrete fashion though the players may not get a good look at it. This can be done by having it kill something or someone in the party that it is solitary, a vulnerable NPC, a
pack animal, or robot associated with the party.

If the players opt for a strong defense by having their characters create a fire base with tripwires and traps the quickdeath by hunt other local prey while maintaining loose contact with the player characters till they are on the move again. It is highly adaptable and will respond intelligently to the actions of the player characters.

Everything should build to a final encounter but does not have to. If the players take enough precautions that any attack by the quickdeath would be suicidal on its part let the player characters leave the area without ever knowing what was hunting them. Leave the mystery in place so that if they ever return the tension starts high.

**Counter Measures**

As stated above the quickdeath retracts its eyestalks when attacking. The Ulmor learned to make straw decoys to distract the creature and 50% of the time the quickdeath will mistakenly attack the decoy. Holo-projectors and personal light shift screens can be used to great effect when combating a quickdeath. Unlike a straw decoy a hologram is not destroyed when a quickdeath attacks it. The creature will not continue to attack empty air because of a hologram while the party kills it but will turn and target those that have attacked it.

Needler weapons are completely ineffectual against it. Laser and projectile weapons only do half damage. These weapon can still be used but not without wasting ammunition. Lasers will need to be set at their maximum and automatic weapons will need to be used on burst fire. Sonic weapons like the sonic disrupter are the best counter. The sonic disrupter is normally considered to be handicapped because it’s a short ranged weapon but the quickdeath’s camouflage ability means that it will almost always be encountered at close range. The exchange rate of 6d10 or 4d10 per shot at point blank or short range is a good alternative to wasting ammo with laser and projectile weapons.

Because the beast is so dangerous, one would not want to remain in melee with it for long. Thus high damage melee weapons are called for. One low tech weapon that could be fashioned by a party that is being hunted is the pole arm. Knives are common enough item that many characters carry. Using a knife and a pole the characters could fashion a pole arm and use it to good effect, especially if straw decoys or holograms were employed to distract the creature.

If all else fails, run for the mountains.

**Quickdeath**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE:</th>
<th>Large Carnivore</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER:</td>
<td>1 to 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOVE:</td>
<td>Very Fast</td>
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<tr>
<td>IM/RS:</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>STAMINA:</td>
<td>180</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATTACK:</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAMAGE:</td>
<td>6d10 bite, claws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPECIAL ATTACK:</td>
<td>poison dart S10/T3 (RW 60, Range 10/20/30/40/50), attacks extra opponent with maw (10 points)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPECIAL DEFENSE:</td>
<td>Immune to needler weapons; 1/2 damage from laser and projectiles, 70% chance will remain unseen until within 120 meters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIVE WORLD:</td>
<td>Special: found in all terrains except mountains</td>
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NOTE: Digitally Remastered copies of the Star Frontiers rules and many of the modules are available here: [http://www.starfrontiersman.com/](http://www.starfrontiersman.com/) Additional game resources can be found here: [http://frontierexplorer.org/magazines](http://frontierexplorer.org/magazines)
While Space 1889 provides the option playing Martians, the other well-known aliens, the primitive lizardmen of dinosaur infested Venus are not presented as PC careers. This article addresses that omission.

In keeping with Victorian era English these people are called lizardmen, not lizardfolk. Suffragettes are encouraged to remark upon this during game play. Players should read the material on lizardmen in Space 1889 (p196-197).

All Venusians are restricted to maximums of social 1, intelligence 5, and education 3. They only speak their local native language by default and must invest in linguistics to learn English, German or other languages.

All lizard men can hold their breath underwater using oxygen absorbed through their skin for 5min x (End+swimming skill). They can also ‘see’ underwater using echolocation (obviously this ‘sight’ is colour blind) and also while submerged their sense of smell is acute, treat as +1 to tracking rolls while underwater. On the down side when exposed to cold or dehydration lizardmen suffer one extra point of damage whenever damage is done.

(Venusian Careers

**Hunter**
Str 3+, End 3+. Marksmanship 2, Close Combat 1, Wilderness Travel 1, Field Craft 1, Tracking 1, Swimming 1.

**Porter**
Second career only. End 4+ Marksmanship 1, Close combat 1, Fisticuffs 1, Swimming 1, Bargaining 1, Linguistics 1 (English or German or Italian or Russian), Wilderness travel 1.

**Headman**
Int 4+, Char 4+ Marksmanship 1, Close Combat 2, Swimming 1, Eloquence 1, Bargaining 1, Leadership 1.

This character is accompanied by a loyal guard NPC.
**Merchant**
Int 4+ Char 3+ Marksmanship 1, Close Combat 2, Swimming 1, Bargaining 2, Linguistics 1 (other Venusian, English or German or Italian or Russian)

**Guard**
Str 4+ End 4+ Marksmanship 2, Close Combat 2, Fisticuffs 2, Swimming 1.

**Raider**
Str 3+ End 3+ Marksmanship 2, Close Combat 2, Fisticuffs 1, Swimming 1, pilot (sailing) 1 or riding (pacyosaurus) 1

**Farmer**
End 3+, Int 2+ Marksmanship 1, Swimming 2, Close Combat 1, Bargaining 1, Wilderness Travel 1, Science (biology) 1

**Fisherman**
End 3+, Int 2+ Marksmanship 1, Swimming 3, Close Combat 1, Wilderness Travel 1, Tracking 1.

**Pirate**
Str 3+ End 3+ Marksmanship 2, Close Combat 3 Swimming 1, Piloting (Sailing) 1

**Barge Crewman**
Marksmanship 1, Close Combat 1, Pilot (sailing) 2, Wilderness travel 1, Linguistics 2 (other Venusian or English or German or Italian or Russian).

**Colonial Servant**
This character has fallen into the personal service of a colonial master. Second career only.
Chr 4+ Close Combat 1, Linguistics 1 (English or German or Italian or Russian), Bargaining 1, Medicine 1, Riding 1, Observation 1, Swimming 1.

This character is accompanied by a Master NPC from the core book.

**Supporting NPC: Venusian Guard**

This NPC accompanies a Venusian Headman.
Str 4 Fisticuffs 4, Throwing 1, Close Combat 3 Agl 3 Marksmanship 4, Stealth 1
End 4 Fieldcraft 2, Tracking 1, Wilderness Travel 2, Swimming 4 Int 2 Observation 3
Chr 2 Soc 1 Riding (Pacyosaurus) 1, Piloting (Sailing) 1
Motives: Aggressive, Proud, Loyal.

A large lizardman dressed in either native talismans of rank or a second hand and ill-fitting European uniform. The guard’s attention constantly shifts from his master to their surroundings wary of potential dangers to his chief.
The Modrons are an interesting character species. Rumor has it that they were initially proposed by François Marcela-Froideval to Gary Gygax who included them in Monster Manual II, although Jeff Grubb also claims to their inventor.

The modrons first appeared in Monster Manual II, of which I was the "design consultant." This meant I took all the monsters, made sure they made sense and were formatted, and filled in all the missing bits. I created only a few of them: some of the daemons (charon, charonaloths, arcanaloths) and the modrons.

The modrons were a partial turnover. The monodrone (the sphere guy) was completely statted out and described. The duodrone was mostly statted out and described. The tridrone was described but not statted out. The quadrone and up were just names. I can't remember if the hierarchs had names or not, but I do know that the modron god, Primus, was my creation.

I liked the modrons because before they came along, the Lawful Neutral plane, Nirvana, was pretty durn empty. I turned it into the big clockwork universe when we got to Manual of the Planes.

So the concept of the modrons (based on Platonic shapes), the fact they lived in Nirvana, and were Lawful Neutral were pretty much set when I got there. I am the one to blame for the more warped-looking higher level ones.

(From Bart Carroll, Modron's March, Dungeon 395)

So maybe history is hazy on this point. In any case, they represent a physical manifestation of the principles of law, order, and hierarchy. Although rarely mentioned, Modrons are clearly and almost obviously derived from the Monads of Pythagoras, Bruno, and Leibniz, down to the physical manifestation of the principles of order, the geometric shapes, and the numbering system in their hierarchy. If one accepts, even for the sake of narrative, this metaphysical perspective, the Modron are a peculiar combination of monster, alien, and machine and actually can be used in a variety of genres rather than just fantasy.

In any case, they make a fascinating character to attempt to play, although for a long time this was simply not meant to be possible. It was with the development of the Planescape campaign setting, that interest in the Modron was revived, along with the prospect of "rogue Modrons" who have had their link with other Modrons broken. It was from these latter Modrons, first expressed in the Planewalker's Handbook (1996), that the possibility of player-character Modrons arose.

An example of such a character, and fitting to our regular attempts to include a NPC to interact with in each issue of RPG Review, is a rogue Modron called "The Administrator", from the Pathfinder Planescape game run by Felix Aplin (see RPG Review issue 13-14, The Shifted Soul, http://rpgreview.net/files/rpgreview_13.pdf). Initially (1st level) the Modron is confused and attempt to find their place in this new environment, and lacks any memory of their prior existence. By the time they've reached sixth level, they have taken up the role of "The Administrator" of a disparate party that are united by their Taint, literally carrying their soul around with them in crystal fragments known as Heartgems.

Has no name, Modron, Paladin, Level 1

Name: Has no name  Race: Modron
Age: Unknown  Size: 6'  Weight: 500 pnds
Alignment: Lawful Neutral  Deity: Universal laws
Background: Amnesia
Languages: Modron, Planar Tradetalk, Draconic

Abilities
STR 17, +3 Modifier
DEX 10, +0 Modifier
CON 16, +3 Modifier (14 base, inherent +2)
INT 14, +2 Modifier (12 base, inherent +2)
WIS 12, +1 Modifier
CHA 08, -1 Modifier (10 base, inherent -2)

Class and Hit Points
Class: Paladin (Holy Tactician), Level 1 Hit Points 13 (10 base, +3)

Armour Class
Armor Class: 20 (10 + 4 Armor, +2 Shield, +4 natural) Touch AC: 10
Flat Footed AC: 18 Armor Penalty -4, Max Dex bonus +4, Spell Failure 30%

Saving Throws
Fortitude +5 (Class +2 Ability +3) Reflex +0 (Class +0, Ability +0)
Will +3 (Class +2, Ability +1)

Combat Bonuses
Melee +4 (BAB +1, Ability +3) Ranged +1 (BAB +1, Ability +0)
CMB +4 (BAB +1, Ability +3) CMD 14 (10 + BAB 1, Ability +3)
Initiative +0

Feats and Features
Aura of Law, Detect Chaos at Will, Speed 30’, Metal Frame, Outsider (Mechanus), Memory Log 1/day

Skills (Bonus = Ranks + Ability + Trained)
Craft (Horology) 6 = 1 + 2 + 3
Know: Religion (Univeral Law) 6 = 1 + 2 + 3
Know: Nobility Modron 6 = 1 + 2 + 3
Know: Planes 3 = 1 + 2 + 0
Perception 1 = 0 + 1 + 0
Profession: Lawyer 5 = 1 + 1 + 3

Equipment
Modron Plates, masterwork inc. gauntlets (+4 AC bonus, -2 penalty), Heavy Steel Shield (+2 AC bonus, -2 penalty), 3 Heavy Crossbows with masterwork cold iron bolts, Cold iron masterwork falchion, Cold iron longsword, Storage Box, Abaqus, Inkpen, 5 sheets of parchment, scrollcase, compass, magnifying eyeglass, flint and steel, smoked goggles, winter blanket, drill. Cube shaped heart gem

The Administrator, Modron, Paladin, Level 6

Name: Has no name  Race: Modron
Age: Unknown  Size: 6’  Weight: 500 pnds
Alignment: Lawful Neutral  Deity: Universal laws
Background: Amnesia
Languages: Modron, Planar Tradetalk, Draconic

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Abilities
STR 18, +4 Modifier
DEX 10, +0 Modifier
CON 16, +3 Modifier (14 base, inherent +2)
INT 15, +3 Modifier (13 base, inherent +2)
WIS 12, +1 Modifier
CHA 08, -1 Modifier (10 base, inherent -2)

Class and Hit Points
Class: Paladin (Holy Tactician), Level 6 Hit Points 55 (base 37, bonus 18)

Armour Class
Armor Class: 23 (10 + 6 Armor, +3 Shield, +4 natural) Touch AC: 10
Flat Footed AC: 20 Armor Penalty -3, Max Dex bonus +4, Spell Failure 30%

Saving Throws
Fortitude +10 (Class +5 Ability +3, Enhance + 2) Reflex +4 (Class +2, Ability +0, Enhance +2)
Will +10 (Class +5, Ability +1, Enhance +2, +2)

Combat Bonuses
Melee +10 (BAB +6, Ability +4) Ranged +6 (BAB +6, Ability +0)
CMB +10 (BAB +6, Ability +4) CMD +20 (10 + BAB 6, Ability +4)
Initiative +0

Feats and Features
Aura of Law, Detect Chaos at Will, Speed 30', Metal Frame, Outsider (Mechanus), Memory Log 1/day, darkvision 60',
“Cog in Place” (Divine Grace) (+INT to all saves), “Life As Mechanism” (4 times 2D6 heal, “lay on hands”),
“Objective View (Mercy) removes shaken, Tactical Acumen, Battlefield Presence, “Restore Right Thinking” (removes
dazed), Duck and Cover, Spells: Blessing of the Watch, Compell Hostility

Skills (Bonus = Ranks + Ability + Trained + Enhancements)
Craft (Horology) 12 = 6 + 2 + 3 +1
Craft (Smithing) 4 = 2 + 2
Know: Religion (Universal Law) 8 = 3 + 2 + 3
Know: Nobility Modron 8 = 3 + 2 + 3
Know: Engineering 5 = 3 + 2
Know: Planes 7 = 5 + 2 + 0
Perception 1 = 0 + 1 + 0
Profession: Lawyer 8 = 4 + 1 + 3
Sense Motive 6 = 2 + 1 +3
Spellcraft 7 = 2 + 2 + 3

Equipment
Modron Plates, masterwork inc. Gauntlets +2 (+6 AC bonus, -2 penalty), Heavy Steel Shield +1 (+3 AC bonus, -1
penalty), 3 Heavy Crossbows with masterwork cold iron bolts, Cold iron masterwork falchion, Cold iron longsword
Storage Box, Waterproof Bullseye Lantern, Potion (cure moderate wounds), Abaquis, Inkpen, 9 sheets of parchment,
scrollcase, compass, magnifying eyeglass, 2 eyeglasses, masterwork manacles, pantograph, periscope, sextant,
masterwork horology tools, spidersilk ropes, thermometer, pocket watch, pulley, flint and steel, smoked goggles, winter
blanket, drill, 9 clot charms (heals 9 hp, +1 AC). Cube shaped heart gem
This is yet another article in a series of materials to revitalise the classic T&T. Previous articles appeared in issues: 12, 15, 18 & 19.

* Monsters are ones I might consider as PCs. As a guideline add up all the attribute modifiers (yes negative CHR subtracts) and if under 8 the kin may be suitable for use as a player character. An average IQ of at least 5 is also recommended unless you want to play a beast. Such characters generally abide by the guidelines above for role playing monsters. Issue 18 gave the rules for drakes (young dragons) as PCs.

# indicates a creature suitable for use as a PC were-form. As a guideline add up all the attribute modifiers (yes negative CHR subtracts) of the animal form (not the animal it is based on, IQ is x1) and if under 13 the kin may be suitable for use as a player character. Intelligent animal forms (such as giant eagles as per Tolkien) may not be chosen by any were PC or NPC.

Creatures marked # could also be used as awakened beasts if that rule is in use. All awakened beasts have IQx1 rather than the value listed.

The following creatures from issue 18 are suitable for were or awakened beast characters: Bear (Large), Boar, Cat, Carp, Dog (Medium or Large), Duck.

Dexterity: monsters without hands, tentacles or other manipulators have dexterity of zero.

**Fey Beasts**

These are the creatures that inhabit the lands of the elves, fairies and leprechauns. They are animals with double the MR of their mundane brethren with the extra personal adds due to additions to LK then ST. IQ is also usually a point of two higher than normal. Fey beasts domesticated by the elves have white fur.

**Firbolg**

MR 14 Dice 2 Adds 7
Natural Weapons: two attacks in a round these can be punches, kicks or head butts all doing 1d each
Natural Armour 0
Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil
ST 22 (x2) IQ 10 (x1) LK 7 (x0.5) CON 14 (x1.5) DEX 8 (x1) CHR 7 (x0.5)
SP 12 (x1) Height x1.5 Weight x3.5
Starting Age: 3d+40 Old at: 180

Large, rough-looking people who dress much like the ancient Celts. Firbolgs (pronounced Fear-Bolg) ruled much of the land before the coming of the dwarves and the elves, and they are still bitter about the lands stolen from them centuries ago. Firbolgs now generally live in wild areas near the edges of civilisation. They are not evil, but uncooth and a little wild. Firbolg often help humans, especially if doing so aids their long standing grudges. Firbolg culture also has a long magical tradition like leprechauns (using the same rules), but unlike leprechauns not all are wizards. Firbolg wizards are not members of the Wizards’ Guild (which was established by elves and dwarves), but may use spells like a wizard, begin with all first level spells, but must purchase more spells as if a rogue, and are prohibited from using large
weapons by Firbolg tradition. Unlike true wizards, Firbolg wizards pay for spells with STR not CON. Some referees may allow firbolg player characters, especially since they are an option for larger-than-human characters that don’t have a negative charisma.

*Flame Fiend (Balrog)*

MR: 200 Dice: 21 Adds: 100  
Natural Weapons: Two clawed flaming hands 4d each, breathes a blast of flame and heat (melee range only) treat as a melee attack 3d, bites for 3d, gores with its horns for 2d and lashes with a fiery tail for 3d.  
Natural Armour: 30 (flame heat and molten hide)  
Special Attacks: nil Special Defences: If damage gets past flammable armour (eg wooded shields and leather) the armour is useless thereafter. If the fiend’s armour stops a wooden or otherwise flammable weapon the weapon is destroyed (includes axes and spears). If it cools its flame every attack does one less damage but it ‘sweats’ choking volcanic smoke partially obscuring its body (lowering the difficulty of its dodge saves by one) and choking opponents within 30’ (for 1 damage a round for d6 rounds (duration but not damage is cumulative if it repeats the action)).  
ST 112 (x11) IQ 9 (x1) LK 109 (x11) CON 200 (x20) DEX 15 (x1.5) CHR -60 (x-6)  
SP 30 (x3) flying or running. Height x3 Weight x35  
Starting Age: thousands of years Old at: never

Flame fiends come from the fiery depths of the world. They are winged demons with bodies of flaming molten metal. Those who mine too deep in the earth can sometimes wake one from its dreams of a burning world. Flame fiends are the ultimate pyromaniacs once woken they seek to burn, burn the world!

*#Fox*

MR 10 Dice 2 Adds 2  
Natural Weapons: bite 1d, claw 1d  
Natural Armour 0  
Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil  
ST 4 (x1/2) IQ 4 (x½) LK 28 (x3) CON 10 (x1) DEX 0 (x0) max 0 CHR 7 (x1) though rural peasant may react as if x-1  
SP 20 (x2) Length x0.4 Weight x0.11  
Starting Age: 9 months Old at: 10 years

These rusty red lean canidae are the bane of rabbits and poultry farmers. Were-foxes are often said to be cunning rogues but rarely truly evil. Large eared desert foxes and white pelted arctic varieties are smaller than the animal described here. Small dogs would be similar with perhaps IQ3.

*Giant*

MR 288 Dice 29 Adds 144  
Natural Weapons: two fists and two kicks 7d each one blow each round is a ‘king hit’ doing an extra 1d of damage.  
Natural Armour: thick skin 5  
Special Attacks: nil Special Defences: nil  
ST 162 (x16) IQ 9 (x1) LK 7 (x0.75) CON 288 (x29) DEX 5 (0.5) CHR 5 (x0.5) or if ‘evil’ -62 (x-6)  
SP 9 (x1) Height x4 Weight x60  
Starting Age: 3d+20 Old at: 140

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Full sized giants are often over 24’ tall so it is fortunate that the most common kind is clumsy, oafish, and rarely of truly evil intent. Scholars maintain that the race of giants is degenerating and has lost much that made them great in ancient days.

*Gnome*

MR 9 Dice 1 Adds 4
Natural Weapons: unarmed attacks 1d
Natural Armour 0
Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil
ST 7 (x0.5) IQ 17 (x1.5) LK 12 (x1.25) CON 10 (x1) DEX 16 (x1.5) CHR 12 (x1.25)
SP 12 (x1) Height x1/3 Weight x1/4
Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 200

Short, stocky, but not as portly as hобbits, these people of the earth and soil are sometimes mistaken for under-grown dwarfs. However where dwarves are sturdy, stolid and stern, gnomes are nimble, bright and cheerful.

While similar to dwarves, gnome aptitudes tend to be on a smaller scale. Dwarves built huge stone halls and excavate cities within mountains, gnomes dig cosy warrens. Dwarves construct trebuchet and aqueducts, gnomes design intricate locks and telescopes. Dwarves forge steel into armour and axes, gnomes produce excellent jewellers. Gnomes are more amicable than dwarves, and with their mathematical aptitude this combination can produce shrewd merchants.

Gnomes enjoy practical jokes, preferring to outwit their enemies and generally get along with each other and other good kin. Gnome culture produces few warriors. Most gnomes have an aptitude for magic, there are many gnome rogues and some wizards.

Gnomes maintain that they were once genomus, a type of elemental that petitioned the gods to become mortal after becoming intrigued by beasts and plants. Whatever the truth of this, gnomes still have affinities for both the Earth and living things. Gnomes share the dwarf abilities of doubled digging rate, the ability to determine the value of jewels and gems, and to sniff out large concentrations of gold if they get close enough. Although earth dwellers, gnomes are concerned not just with rock but also with soil; they delight both in wild forests and gardens where the earth produces life but abhor the dull monotony of fields of wheat and other crops. Gnome gardeners are sought after by those who can afford servants. Many gnomes choose to learn one or more of the low tongues of animals; the rodent tongue is particularly popular.

*Goblin*

MR 10 Dice 2 Adds 5
Natural Weapons: two claws 1d
Natural Armour 0
Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil
ST 7 (x0.5) IQ 12 (x1) LK 15 (x1.5) CON 10 (x1) DEX 14 (x1.5) CHR -3 (x-0.5)
SP 15 (x1.5) Height x0.5 Weight x0.125
Starting Age: 3d+5 Old at: 30

Goblins are cruel faeries who are short and ugly but otherwise are so varied as to defy accurate description. Pointed ears, dog ears, pointed noses, ape-life snouts, skin of green, grey or purple, warts, cat eyes, black soulless orbs or eyes like red sparks; their magical and wicked nature makes no two alike. As faeries they have aptitudes for trickery and
magic, some become rogues or even wizards. Some referee’s may allow goblin player characters.

**Gorilla, Giant**

MR male 3780 female 2980 Dice male 381 female 301 Adds male 1890 female 1490
Natural Weapons: male bite 81d, two fists 150d, female bite 71d two fists 115d
Natural Armour 25 thick fur and skin
Special Attacks nil
Special Defences nil
ST male 1900 (x190) female 1500 (x150) IQ 6 (x1/2) max 8 LK 19 (x2) CON 3780 (x380) male, 2980 (x300) female
DEX 2 (x1/4 max 4) they sometimes use trees as bludgeons or throw boulders CHR 10 (x1) many people assume giant
gorillas are blood thirsty monsters (these people react as if the gorilla’s CHR was negative). In fact they are vegetarians
living in caring family groups. Giant gorillas are impressive animals able to show tenderness and simple humour as
well as ferocity but their use of CHR beyond their own kind is limited by their intelligence, inability to speak, and
frightening appearance. The gorillas rarely need to fight; a threat display is enough to scare off most opponents.
SP 60 (x6) Height males x5, females x4 Weight: males x170, females x120
Starting Age: 3d+20 Old at: 150

Twenty five feet tall giant gorillas are said to live on undiscovered jungle covered tropical islands but these exaggerated
sailors tales can’t possibly be true.

**Griffin**

MR 400:180 Dice 19 Adds 200
Natural Weapons: Two fore-talons 4d each, two rear claws 3d each, bite 5d
Natural Armour 4 from feathers
Special Attacks Nil Special Defences nil
ST 205 (x21) IQ 6 (x 1/2 ) LK 28 (x3) CON 180 (x18) griffins are tough but light with hollow bones, DEX 0 (x 0)
CHR -30 (x-3)
SP 30 (x3) in flight, 20 (x2) on land. Length x 1.5 length without tail. Wingspan is double this. Weight x 6
Starting Age: 5 Old at: 40

A griffin is large predator with the hind-quarters of an oversized lion and the forelimbs, wings and head of a great eagle
(except for pointed feathered ears). Griffins live in hot desert environments, live in large prides and are larger than
lions, despite these disadvantages they find enough food by covering more ground each day, riding the thermals, and by
use of their intelligence, between that of a human and a great ape. For some reason griffins relish the taste of horseflesh
and will attack horses and equine creatures, including centaurs and unicorns, in preference to other prey. Griffins are
large enough to swoop down, snatch a horse off the ground and fly off with it. Griffins speak a debased form of the
dragon language.
I have made an alternate XP system for class-and-level d20 RPGs. It is designed to be simpler and easier, and to encourage good roleplaying. Feedback would be much appreciated.

A character always needs 20 xp to gain a level. When they level up, their xp is reset.

- An easy encounter grants 1 xp to each victor.
- A challenging encounter grants 2 xp to each victor.
- A difficult encounter grants 3 xp to each victor.
- A great moment of roleplaying grants 1 xp.
- A great moment of creativity grants 1 xp.
- An epic moment of effectiveness grants 1 xp.
- Completing a major quest or reaching a significant goal grants 5 xp.
- Completing a side quest or reaching a minor goal grants 3 xp.

Is an easy, challenging or difficult encounter determined when the encounter is made or when it is done and over?

I was thinking that this would be decided when the encounter was made. However, the difficulty could be adjusted up or down at the beginning of the adventure, depending on the party's level, number, and competence.
MOVIE REVIEW: EPIC

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Chris Wedge

Epic is about the tiny goings on of a tiny bunch of people-like creatures. Hence, the irony of the title.

There is the eternal battle between the forces of life, and the forces of decay, and the conflict between fathers and their children, but, really, let's be honest, it's about fairies and goblins.

Sure, they call them Leafmen and Boggans (no, not bogans, though it’s hard to resist making the joke), but let's call a spade a dirt-shovelling device: goddamn fairies!

I don't mind fairies and forest spirits and such. They're in almost every book I read to my angelic/demonic offspring, they're in most of the kid's flicks we see together in eye- and wallet-gouging 3D, and they date back to the myths and legends of most cultures and nations.

Really, though, it's about fairies.

It's hard for me to drum up too much enthusiasm for fairy-related shenanigans, even when Tinkerbell isn't involved.

All this negativity makes it sound like I didn't like the film. The fact is I enjoy almost any film or movie I watch with my daughter if she enjoys it, because her enjoyment is as infectious as her colds and shingles are.

And she declared this film "Awesome!" at the end, and was entirely entranced throughout.

That's no guarantee of quality, sad to say. Everything in her world is either awesome or the worst. Try to give her something new to eat? It's the worst thing she's ever tasted. Give her something she likes in a familiar package? It's the most awesome thing in the history of forever.

We're all a bit like that. And, if the trailers preceding this flick are any indication, and they are, we just want the same things over and over again in shinier old packages.
Epic is about a girl calling herself MK (Amanda Seyfried) who goes to live with her estranged dad once her mother dies. Yes, I know it sounds incredibly familiar, that's the whole point of my world-weary intro.

She accidentally stumbles across a world where she's miniaturised, because, magic, why else? And she ends up trying to save the handsome, beautiful forces of the Light, I mean Nature, against the mean, ugly forces of the Dark, I mean Decay. The Leafmen, led by some humourless uptight guy (voiced by Colin Farrell, the only time a derelict like him is going to play a stolid authority figure), try to protect Queen Tara and her pod (not a euphemism) from the evil Boggans (led by some guy voiced by Christoph Waltz).

It’s utterly straightforward, utterly predictable and utterly commonplace. It’s still fun, even if it’s not even worth a tenth of a Hayao Miyazaki – Studio Ghibli animated film.

It’s not as if I demand every film be as good as that, but I hope, desperately, especially when I see an animated movie with Nature Is Wonderful themes, that it could be as impressive or as awe-inspiring and as sometimes complicated as something like Nausicaa Valley of the Winds, Arrietty or the even better Princess Mononoke, which this almost reminded me of.

It almost got me into a Miyazaki-like mood. The lush depictions of the forest and its beautiful expressions of life were moving. I have heard the idea that we, like the leaves of a tree, are individuals connected by life to each other, one vast tree upon which we all depend, many times, but it’s an idea that appeals to me deeply. At the very least it appeals to that tiny bit of me not drowned by whisky and cynicism.

The problem I have with Epic is that it depicts what happens in a forest in terms of good and evil, that ‘life’ is Good and ‘decay’, meaning death, is Bad. Not to get all Circle of Life Hakuna Matata on your arses, but life and death are natural complements to each other in a forest, any forest, even the ones that have little people running around in them. Without the decay of the forest floor, there’s no nutrients for the trees, or all the other ecosystems that depend on that decaying vegetable and animal manner. It’s beyond simplistic to depict part of that cycle as an evil that must be fought and destroyed. It’s so simplistic as to be, dare I say it, quite dumb.

I know that doesn’t seem that relevant, but if you ignore those elements of it, you’re basically left analysing the mechanics of a plot where people do a bunch of stuff you’ve seen a thousand times before. If a film from 2013 is reminding you of Avatar; a film so generic in its very nature that it rendered the term ‘rip-off’ eternally redundant, then you’re seeing something as familiar as the bedroom ceiling or the bathroom floor that you wake up looking at on a daily basis.

Don’t get me wrong though, despite all the reasons I’m giving you to do so, I was entertained as I was watching it. MK is a whiny protagonist, but it’s sort-of fun watching her navigate this strange place just outside her dad’s house. Her motivations don’t make a lot of sense, and Amanda Seyfried’s voice is not one I like listening to at the best of times, but she’s our in into the story, so I guess I have to accept her for who she is.

Slightly more annoying (as a character) but enjoyable is Nod (Josh Hutcherson), who is the head-strong, irresponsible
young guy who always annoys authority figures until he spontaneously realises, towards the end of a movie, that
conforming with the stuff those boring authority figures were saying is the way to get into the animated panties – I
mean – the way to save the village / planet / whales and be a hero. With what memory remains to me, as far as I could
tell, he looks exactly like the Flynn Ryder character from Tangled, exactly like the guy from Aladdin, which means that
male characters even in non-Disney movies are all starting to eerily look the same, in the way the female characters
have been different hair-coloured Barbies for decades.

None of this stuff is stuff I was thinking when I was watching it, I have to say. There were fun or funny bits, like
hearing the unmistakeable voice of Chris O’Dowd as one of a pair of snails. His Irish brogue, unlike Colin Farrell’s
brings a smile to my face whenever I hear it saying something goofy. The other snail / slug thing was irritating, but at
least it wasn’t generic, I guess, or at least too generic.

The action is all actiony, and the visuals are solid, appealing and sometimes beautiful. The forest and the life in it loom
large, but the natural world comes off looking better than the little people, who had something of a toy-like look to
them. I barely remember the story, but I don’t think it matters. It was enjoyable enough for what it was, which is
probably the most mealy-mouthed statement I’ve ever made in my life, very much along the lines of “people who like
this kind of thing will like it, people who don’t, won’t”, but it’s very much true.

The main thing I was thinking at the end of it was what I was seeing before it started. The surfeit of trailers aimed at
kids before this kids’ flick had pretty much the same plots, looked and sound like every other animated flick you’ve
ever seen, and mostly emphasised to me that they’re not really making movies aimed at kids that aren’t animated
anymore. The only trailer with actual humans in it was The Smurfs 2, which I’m sure will end up being prosecuted as a
crime against humanity at The Hague eventually, but even that has animated little blue bastards in it as the main
attraction.

I don’t want to be all “get off my lawn” about it, because I understand about the economics of it, but there’s something
a bit sad about the fact that now all the flicks aimed at telling decent stories relatable or understandable by the kids are
all animated, godsdamnit. Surely reality contains a few elements beautiful or inspiring enough to be worthy of being
seen or heard without the visual maelstrom of animation having to dominate everything. And I say that as a huge fan of
animation.

Epic is a bit of an adventure, but its ambitions are even tinier that it’s diminutive characters, and that’s saying
something.

6 times I hope the sequel has everything that’s small inflated up to gigantic “Honey I Blew Up the Kid” proportions for
shenanigans to ensue out of 10

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“Oh look, it’s Ronin. Defender of the weak, pooper of parties.” - whack that on your business card – Epic

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MOVIE REVIEW: MONSTERS UNIVERSITY

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Dan Scanlon

I know, I know. I start practically every other review pointing out that the film I’m about to review shouldn’t really exist, but I am nothing if not a creature of habit.

Monsters University is the prequel we didn’t really need to have, but it’s still very, very welcome to me. I watched it with my daughter, and she thought it was great. This is, after all, school holiday time, and not taking your daughter to the cinema, even for a deadbeat dad like me, would be tantamount to monstrous negligence.

She specifically wanted me to quote her in the review, and she even told me how I should depict that quote. She told me to put her name at the start of a sentence, with the two dots on top of each other after the name. You know, a colon, as thusly:

Dawn: "Monsters University is a good film because most films are about normal days with a character that wants to be different but Monsters University was about a few characters who wanted an achievement but when they got that achievement it ended up different but they still enjoyed the gift that the achievement had given them plus Monsters University is great."

I can’t argue with that. That’s a verbatim quote. I mean I can, but I’m probably outgunned, and who wants to lose to a six-year-old in an argument? The crying, the screaming, and then there’s no telling what she’d do in response.

Monsters Uni was very enjoyable to me even if it seemed constructed from American college clichés. It included almost every cliché that exists from the last forty years of college high jinks movies except for the sexual ones, so no panty raids and no drunken debauchery, thanks very much.

It’s not even really lifting from Animal House or Revenge of the Nerds directly; it’s lifting from the parodies of the parodies arising from those flicks. The Simpsons has had long-running gags about these flicks, either the nudgey-rudey ones or the Rodney Dangerfield Back to School type ones with poncy, apoplectic deans, bands of excluded misfits and snooty arists ODing on their own sense of oily entitlement. And then Futurama parodied those parodies of parodies with its Mars University – Robot House shenanigans. Now Monsters University lifts from the Simpsons/Futurama lifting from Revenge of the Co-Ed Boner Academy Part III which lifted from…

Even then – even then I didn’t mind it. The references are stripped of their dirtier aspects and cleaned up for the kiddie audience. This is, after all, Pixar, which means Disney. Therefore, it’s only about good, clean, pure aspiration to a better life.
Mike Wazowski (Billy Crystal) is a tiny green Cyclops as a child. He’s excluded, ignored, and mostly unheard. As a monster, he’s pretty cute, which possibly means the opposite in a monster-led universe. Where being scary is the prime attribute, being cute, little and funny is an obvious disability.

In such a world, the highest value is in being scary, with the entire economy being based on scaring children of the human world in order to generate scream energy. It constitutes the greatest ‘good’, with scarers being the equivalent of rock stars, business leaders and football legends simultaneously. Everyone else is just an adjunct, a hanger-on, a handmaiden to the master race of their betters, and who are we to argue with the social order?

Mike aspires to be a great scarer, like the monsters he idolises, but everyone and everything in this universe keeps telling him that he’s not cut out for it, and that he should just give up, for the love of sweet monster Jesus, just give up.

But Mike’s not going to accept that. He’s Rudy, after all. Who’s Rudy, I hear you ask, bored Australian readers who haven’t consumed enough American pop culture of the last twenty years to know? Why, he’s Daniel ‘Rudy’ Ruettiger, as played by Sean Astin in the film of the same name, about a short, dumpy guy who moved heaven and earth in order to play college football at Notre Dame, despite being way too short, way too light, and looking a lot like one of the fatter hobbits from the Lord of the Rings films.

Everyone told him he’d never make it, that he’d never play. And in the end, out of pity, and after the pressure of his teammates on the coach, they let him play for a few brief seconds, letting him achieve his lifelong, pointless dream of playing once in a college football game.

What do you do after that, I wonder? If I devoted my life to skating once at the Dubbo Ice Skating Under Sixteen’s Regional Semi-Final, and did so, then so what? The world would keep spinning on its axis, the sun would keep rising and setting, and life for most of us would go on. And then you’d have to start on the horrible work of figuring out what to do with the rest of your life.

Is our hero Mike made of the right stuff, just like Rudy? Of course he is, otherwise there’s no story. Otherwise the protagonist would just be like the rest of us, aspiring to stuff and giving up before we’ve even put the slightest effort into it. It never would have worked out, other people had an unfair advantage, I’ll do it tomorrow, the excuses combine, congeal, set us free, thank the gods.

Mike is made of sterner stuff. He forges onwards, not oblivious to what other people see as his shortcomings, but utterly determined to achieve his goal of being a scarer at Monsters Incorporated all the same. Yes, I know, considering the first film, we know where he ends up, and we never were that curious as to how, but they manage to imbue his aspirations with pathos, by arraying a whole world of opposition against him.

The powers that be, or are, don’t do it because it’s necessary, for anyone’s protection, or because they have to. They do it, whether it’s the snooty fraternity types, the snooty sorority types, the goths or the jocks, literally called Jox, because hearing Mike aspire offends them. The dean of the university, Dean Hardscrabble (Dame Helen Mirren), is disgusted by the prospect of Mike even being in her university, let alone in the Scare Program, and does all in her power to see his dreams die. They are monsters, after all.

He should know his place. He should stick to his caste, surely. It’s for others to be wonderful, like the James Sullivans (John Goodman) of the world, an imposing beast with natural talent and a prestigious family name. Sulley and Mike are therefore natural enemies. Mike puts in more effort than is monstrously possible, and Sulley resents it, putting in no effort himself.

The whole science of scaring is really belaboured, but I guess makes sense considering its centrality to their existence. The fact that there are entire courses devoted to the intricate construction of who to scare and how means that Mike has
an advantage because of the study he’s obsessively focussed on. He also has an innate strategic ability to use the environment to achieve something, rather than being able to do it solely through his own physical efforts. I wonder if that’s a possible way forward for him?

Sulley just blunders through, usually achieving easily what it takes Mike sustained effort to do, and even then Mike’s effort and achievements are ignored in the face of Sulley’s charisma and pedigree. Doesn’t that just burn you up inside, those of you who never got into a prestigious college, who watch as those from fancier families and connected bloodlines casually stride past you with minimal effort when your own herculean efforts are rendered laughable? It’s enough to make you want to drop out and drink yourself stupid for the next forty years of your truncated life. Well, maybe not you, because you’re a high achiever, but the rest of us…

You may wonder what any of this has to do with kids, who, you’d think, are the target market/demographic, since there are all the bright colours and the plush merchandising opportunities and whatnot all over the place. Well, none of that probably speaks to kids in the slightest, unless they’re genius kids who are graduating from Harvard at age eight. And they’re not going to relate to Mike, because their awesomeness has been identified and applauded from when they were still a zygote, and Mike would just seem like the clods born to serve gods like them.

Kids do understand exclusion, they understand group dynamics, they understand really wanting to do something or be something, and being told they’re aiming too high or that it’s just not right for them. They understand straining and reaching, biting off more clichés than they can chew, and the more mature ones understand that achieving that ‘impossible’ dream takes lots and lots of sustained effort, regardless of natural talents and entitlement, and overbearing parents trying to live through them.

Monsters University, and, I’m really surprised to say this, finds a really sweet way to tell its story about reaching for your dreams at all costs, being brought up short by reality, and then working fifteen times harder to achieve those goals in different ways. It’s a stolid, boring message, but a strong one all the same. The end of the flick, after an array of adventures and flustered activity reminiscent of a dishonoured frat somehow redeeming itself through a stupid competition, then sets all that goofy stuff aside, and shows what Mike and Sulley really did to earn their place on the Scare Floor at Monsters Incorporated, and those five minutes at the end say more than the preceding hour and a half.

Sure it looks fine, and it’s pretty entertaining throughout, though not as much of a rollicking and inventive ride as the first flick was. There were a fair few bored kids in the cinema when I saw it, as evidenced by their irritating running around, either that or their parents don’t hit them enough.

My favourite moment of the flick is where a fairly mumsy monster drops off a bunch of guys including Mike and Sulley at Monsters Inc., for a midnight field trip, and the mumsy monster tells them that she’ll just wait for them here, listening to her music. Of course the music that plays is the brutal sounds of Mastodon, one of my favourite bands, juxtaposed in absurdity against her homemaker image of curlers and housedresses. I laughed out loud and Dawn asked me “Why is that funny?”

I didn’t really have an answer, but it was. I really enjoyed it, and my daughter did too, so that’s 2 votes at least in its favour.

8 times I wonder whether I could have played with the Fighting Irish if only I tried hard enough, or if I just gave a good goddamn about sport out of 10

“‘I’m here to make good scarers great, not make mediocre scarers less mediocre.’” – they should have called her Dean Ayn Rand instead, I reckons – Monsters University

Originally from http://movie-reviews.com.au/content/monsters-university
MOVIE REVIEW: STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS
by Andrew Moshos

dir: J.J. Abrams

It says they’re going Into Darkness, but I’m not sure what that has to do with the film. Sure, there were some shadows, some underlit places, but I hardly think that justifies such a title. Wait, you mean it’s metaphorical, not literal? That it’s thematic, not aesthetic? Well, I haven’t been this confused since Michael Bay made a movie about something hidden on the dark side of the moon and just referred to it as Dark of the Moon. The Dark ‘what’ of the moon, Michael? Its dark chocolate centre, which I’ve heard is 80% cacao? Its dark and tortured past as a roadie for the other planets when they used to go on tour throughout the Milky Way? Its dark future as a holiday destination for bored mega-wealthy sadomasochists? The moon plays a small part in this flick, but mostly it continues to exist and complicates the adventures of the crew of the USS Enterprise, which is a spaceship capable of flying around really fast and shooting stuff.

That this is the new face of the Star Trek empire has to be accepted if anyone’s going to have any remote chance of enjoying it. Anyone who’s hated Trek all their lives and all its existence aren’t likely to hop on board the bandwagon now. With all the modern sprucing up they’ve done, the flick firmly and heroically panders to the Trek nerds like nothing ever has before. It’s been a successful reboot in that people really started to want to make money again from the Star Trek franchise. They’re not about to get Patrick Stewart and the rest of the Next Generation crew out of the enforced retirement that should have occurred after First Contact. There aren’t many of the Original Series crew working regularly, except as voices on cartoons. If any studio exec suggested making a flick for public consumption with either the crews of Voyager or the series Enterprise, they’d be serving soy lattes to jerks for minimum wage for the rest of their lives.

So of course they had to reboot it from the start, with young, vital versions of the people we came to loathe and love half a century ago. They had to find analogues, and they pretty much succeeded. They also had to allow them to go off into bold new adventures completely unlike the previous ones, but familiar enough so that nerds could loudly whisper to their tolerant but eye-rolling partners “that’s a call-back to episode #14 The Trouble With Dateless Wonders from the sixteenth season”!

For some reason, Kirk (Chris Pine) and his crew are inhabiting a different universe from the one in the established continuity, significantly different, but similar enough such that everything is not only reminiscent of the past, but it echoes all the past experiences of the original crew. Coming up with completely new adventures would clearly kill the ardour of all but the most loyal and obsessive, it seems. So, and this will come as no surprise to any of you reading my cynical blatherings, the events of this flick somewhat, kinda, recall an earlier film in Trek history.

Even then, it's completely its own tortured story. Some of the elements and the references may all be from earlier series and movies, but nothing ever transpired before like what transpires here. That makes it seem like it's something profoundly exciting and new. It's not, but it's good enough. It's more than good enough.

A good friend of mine with time and affection for things Trekkian watched this and hated it. That's fair enough, but I think the mistake he made was watching it with a girl, a decidedly non-geek girl sighing with boredom next to him. Films like this shouldn't be watched with regular, muggle girls. In fact, men and boys with girlfriends, wives, non-geek boyfriends or husbands shouldn't be watching stuff like this anyway. The very reason for its existence, like the invention of science fiction itself, all came about because sexually frustrated men were making products for men who weren't getting any and probably wouldn't for a long time coming. Targeted demographic with a laser-like focus, never doubt it.

Getting some satisfying stuff on the regular? Get the hell out of here! So, yes, perhaps the sci-fi bug, and specifically
the Trek bug, bit me at a time and age where the prospect of having sex with another human being seemed less likely than getting to fly to the edge of the galaxy and fight super-powered aliens. Maybe that's why I'm more forgiving than most.

Still, in truth, this is less of a pure Trek experience than just a sci-fi lite Action Movie! And that's not an entirely bad thing. In case no-one other than myself has ever noticed, the majority of all the Trek films, of any era, have been utter unmitigated shite. Terrible, just terrible experiences even for those of us who are meant to lap it up like the mother's milk it isn't. So I can say without a trace of irony that this is one of the best Trek films ever made.

I don't care about the plot. The plot doesn't matter. What matters are the interactions between the crew members. I really enjoyed the first of the new Trek films, and I couldn't even tell you what the plot was and who the villain was and what motivated them and whether any of it made the least amount of sense. What I liked was the actors playing the 'familiar' roles of the original series in new and engaging ways.

Same applies here. Kirk and Spock's (Zachary Quinto) relationship has deepened, presumably, in the last four years, but they still have conflict arising because of their fundamental differences as people, as officers of Starfleet. That is the real source of the drama, at least in the first part of the film.

Starfleet as well is still developing as a 'character'. That character, defined in the original template as being utopian and touchy-feely, is in danger of becoming dark and fascistic. Perhaps because of the same changes to the timeline that changed the fate of, say, the planet of Vulcan, these have also led Starfleet to fear instead of embrace the people and species that might be Out There in the universe. That's why I wasn't too surprised to see that the dress uniforms, the formal ceremonial uniforms of the Starfleet personnel, were so fascist it seemed like they could give Albert Speer, Ayn Rand and Leni Riefenstahl erections.

So there's the competition between logic and passion, between rules and gut instinct, but also between Starfleet becoming a militaristic totalitarian regime pushing planets around and giving wedgies to the other races in the galaxy (you know, kinda like the United States), or an organisation devoted to exploration and discovery, and singing kumbaya around a camp fire somewhere near Rigel 7.

I know which one I hope for. The thing is, when an entity like Starfleet, or the Federation, or the Catholic Church, or the BBC starts down an inhuman road, one which seems like it has gravity and inevitability on its side, there are always people who see the rot setting in and either despair, delight in it, or demand that the direction be changed lest they destroy it all themselves. It's not a stretch to figure out which way our heroes are going to go, but how they're going to get there and why is the unexpected element.

Some guy, some pale, angry guy (Benedict Cumberbatch) organises a strange bombing at some archive in London. Why, I'll never know. But he does, and it kills bunches of people. He becomes the Starfleet Enemy Number One, and on everyone's shit list, including Kirk's. But if people aren't angry enough, he then goes and kills a bunch more Starfleet high-ups, including Kirk's mentor figure Admiral Pike (Bruce Greenwood). Before Pike popped his clogs, he'd spent much of the film expressing his great disappointment and fed-uppedness the way a pseudo-father figure does, at Kirk's continued disregard for the rules, and his love of doing whatever he likes, and his spilling of bongwater on the lounge room carpet.

Kirk, like any self-respecting son-figure, says "sorry" a few times real sarcastically, and then "but Dad, everyone else was doing it!", and finishes with a few real stubborn "whatevers", with a mumbled finisher of "man, when I'm eighteen, I am so out of here".

All this unfair rearrangement of Kirk's life and command because of his reckless actions at the beginning get rearranged back again once the pale angry guy unleashes terorristic hell upon this world and maybe a couple of others. Kirk vows to hunt down and kill this John Harrison chap, who is one of Starfleet's own, if it's the last thing he does. I'm sure pale
guy had very good reasons for what he did. I'm sure they made sense to him, because it turns out this guy is some kind of super-genius. Still, because I'm pretty far away from being a super-genius, his motives and such remain perfectly obscure. As an example, why he ends up on the Klingon homeworld is a profound mystery to me.

Really, he ends up there because the writers wanted the story to go there, so we could see their new version of the Klingon race, which isn't really that different from the earlier version, which means they're a cross between professional wrestlers, Vikings and death metal band members. Of course there's action a-plenty, and fist fights and such, and lots of Klingons getting killed. This John Harrison chap, though, he's great at killing people even with his bare hands. And then he surrenders. Why would The Joker/Loki/John Harrison surrender, just when it looks like he's at the top of his game, and could get away pretty easily?

Who knows? I'm sure he has his reasons. Yes, there's a lot of story here, but digging your mind's hooks into it probably isn't the fruitful path to take. Therein lies the path to plot holes and general malaise. This isn't, for me at least, switch-off-and-enjoy-the-sensation-of-your-brain-dying-a-bit-at-a-time entertainment in the slightest. Viewers have complained that it's wall to wall action, but it didn't feel like that to me. I feel the flick struck the right balance of talking and explosions, or beat downs and arguments between people. The character dynamics matter, and they're present, and they're great. It might feel like the arguments, like the one between Scotty (Simon Pegg) and Kirk seems arbitrary, and that its repercussions are swiftly swept under the cosmic rug, but it felt right, both the argument and the result, which of course is helpful to the plot later on.

There's action, which to me is mostly just stuff moving around until stuff stands still again, but what matters ultimately is the quality of the sequences that the action is arranged in. And I really enjoyed the action set pieces. The opening one at the beginning of the flick has people running from savages, a volcano going off and a spaceship trying to climb out of an ocean. There's also a flinging of bodies between one ship and another through open space, which is of course timed within an inch and a second to save the day, and I'm not ashamed to admit that it worked a treat on me because I was jumping out of my chair in the cinema, with those annoying 3D glasses slipping off my face. Of course it gets big and explodey and fisticuffy at the end, but it has to, because how else would we know the film was about to end?

Sure, maybe I was confused at the end as to what had actually happened, and what it all meant, and whether that feeling I was feeling was known as 'anti-climactic'. And sure, I wondered how that 'crash' in San Francisco at the end didn't kill thousands and thousands and thousands of San Franciscans, making it somewhat less of a happy ending, which it clearly was. What I wanted was scenes of derring-do and self-sacrifice, knowing full well that ways existed, and were clearly telegraphed from the beginning, that would be used to undo those noble sacrifices when they happened. I don't care. It worked, almost beautifully, and all I needed to here were the words "Because you're my friend", because that's all any of us should have to hear.

I don't need these chaps and chappettes to sit around calmly discussing the nature of reality or personhood or deep philosophical arguments about whether it's okay to ever fuck a green chick (Orion Slave Girls: Where's the Consent?). Actually, I do want to hear those arguments. But most of all I want to experience them within a package where a lot of stuff happens and most of it is fun. And that's what I got for my money.

8 times I wonder when they're really going to go where no-one has gone before by letting Kirk and Spock really express their deep love for each other out of 10

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"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."
- “An Arabic proverb attributed to a prince who was betrayed and decapitated by his own subjects.”
“Well, it’s still a hell of a quote.” – that it is – Star Trek Into Darkness

http://movie-reviews.com.au/content/star-trek-darkness

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