

RPG REVIEW

Issue #28-29, Sept-Dec 2015

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The Undead

John Snead Interview ... Zombie Facts .. All Flesh Must Be Eaten ... Liber Mortis ... Open Grave ... Warhammer 40K ... Death in Eclipse Phase ... Labyrinth Lord in the Underworld ... Survival from Great Falls ... Killer LARP ... The Green Isles D&D Setting ... The Scythe of Thanatos ... Pyrrhic Victories and more in HeroQuest ... You Only Live Thrice ... Death Isn't The End ... Horror Game Mastery ... Secret of Saltram Shore ... Phaemorea ... The Revenant, Crimson and Lights Movie Reviews

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EDITORIAL AND LETTERS

Fan Mail

I highly endorse RPG Review! Look forward to every issue, there's always something great in there (and often many great things)

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Morgan Davie, Wellington, New Zealand

RPG Review is just awesome! And the new issue's editorial is just GREAT, Lev. Some serious issues raised and thoroughly discussed. I'll recommend it everywhere.

Fábio Romeiro Gullo, São Paulo, Brazil

A Cooperative Future

I've followed the Crux Australi newsletters with interest as I have felt for some time that there is a lack of cohesion in Australian gaming (and in the localised industry too). The focus on advocacy I think is exactly what is needed nationally. One of the core experiences shared by a number of gamers locally in my home town is that gamers are falling into a few categories (i) those that have always gamed together at someone's house and have become insular, (ii) those that have either turned exclusively to gaming via online tools or simply abandoned the hobby for video games, (iii) those that simply drift from casual game to casual game and usually don't roleplay all that much and fill in the hobby with boardgames.

There doesn't seem to be an interest in building another generation of gamers, or getting gamers to meet outside their own groups. Admittedly I'm part of the problem as I have a lot of trouble with the energy required to engage with large social groups (both of my gaming groups are two players apiece). I've run clubs in the past and a convention, but that was fifteen years ago, when one could reasonably expect between 40-60 gamers every fortnight. Nowadays, the local boardgames club is excited because they get fifteen people per monthly meeting.

This brings me to connectedness. I wondered whether the newsletter might also focus on promoting Australian gaming by highlighting podcasts, KickStarters or other initiatives like blogs? Crux Australis could then be actively building listener- and reader-ship of Australian content. There could be an arrangement that sees the Crux receive some more members through reciprocal promotion.

Lastly, it might also serve as a place for Australian games designers to seek input and maybe playtesters for their new ideas. As such, it could be a very powerful incubator for national activities.

These were just a few thoughts that occurred to me as I was reading the latest issue; my apologies if my narrative has become 'stream of consciousness', but I do see an overall pattern of connectedness that could have the Crux as its' centre.

I do hope that this is helpful and I'd be happy to expand on any of the ideas or discuss this further with you.

Pax

FR Podcast, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the extremely late 27th and 28th double issue of RPG Review. Those who were not in the know may have presumed our demise. A handful - fools all - wished it. However our death was somewhat overstated to say the least. Rising from the tomb, the crypt, the velvet-lined coffin, or some similar place in alleged interment, RPG Review is here - with a special double issue on the matter of everyone's favourite bad guy - the undead.

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But why, by all that is holy and unholy, is this issue so late? Well, there is of course the usual level of lateness from prior issues which pushes the agenda along a bit further than it should be on this one. After all get out our double-issue of RPG Review is no easy feat - there's some seventy thousand words to find. One can note however that, with good fortune, that the next issue of RPG Review has already received several significant contributions and we may be able to play catch-up with our alleged time-table fairly quickly.

However another issue that has taken up quite some time with the normal efforts that go into producing RPG Review has been the conversion of this publication from a single-person show with some valiant, welcome, and thoroughky appreciated helpers, to an incorporated association - and not just for the publication but for a range of activities dedicated to promoting roleplaying games and promoting better roleplaying games. There are details of this association and its activities in an article immediately following this editorial.

There is of course our regular Mingshi, who is quite irate at having to rewrite here column multiple times due to these delays. But in an industry that's famous for gossip, I am sure she has not shortage of rumours to act on, with the delays, it's just that some of the rumours have become a reality.

After this we have an interview with John Snead, one of the quiet achievers in the roleplaying industry. John has produced an enormous quantity of work over the years an is without a doubt one of the most respected authors out there. From Ars Magica, to Nephilim, Star Trek, Exalted, Trinity, Blue Rose, Eclipse Phase - once you start looking you see his name everywhere. John gives his thoughts on the various influences that led him to become an RPG writer and some future plans.

After this is Randal Henderson' special article on death and undeath in Warhammer 40K. Randal deserves a special mention because he submitted this article many months ago but of course has been waiting far too long to see publication. To say the least WH40K is a setting that is absolutely sublime in its presentation of the undead and this piece deservers a jolly good review.

Following this is a ready-to-run single page Killer scenario from science fiction writer and occassional game-author Stephen Dedman. Stephen has, of course, managed to incorporate in a single page all the horror that comes from a shapechanging alien monster from Antarctica. Sounds familiar?

There is a few articles relating to Dungeons and Dragons, of various editions. New contributer Adi Gondo Hartoo gives a little snippet of a piece on a character build that engaged in falls that should die, but walks away. A game that's very close (OK, extremely close) to the traditional Basic and Expert sets is Labyrinth Lord - Nicholas Moll provides an interesting exploration on how to offer alternatives in a game system which is a little notorious for its lethality, especially to low-level characters.

Still with the Dungeons and Dragons content (OK, it does make up at least half the market), is a pair of previously published articles by James Introcaso, who kindly and unproblematically allowed us to republish. The first refers to the lack of sufficient difficulty is bringing characters back from the dead, and the second is a logical elaboration of some plot matters arising from this. Rounding off this first bloc of Dungeons and Dragons articles is a piece by myself and Stean Vitasovic on an very troubling artifact from a Balkans historical fantasy campaign that we ran many years ago.

This begins a string of four of articles by your editor and the next two I'm must say I had a great fun writing. The first covers examples of the undead in reality - strange mythologies, unusual attempts, and more than enough disturbing modern day science which requires just a little elaboration. The second piece is a review of several undead-related RPG products; including Vampire The Masquerade, GURPS Undead, All Flesh Must Be Eaten, and the two recent Dungeons and Dragons supplements, Libris Mortis and Open Grave. In keeping with the review approach - this is the name of the journal after all - the recent combination of Paranoia and Call of Cthulhu makes its appearance with Andrew Daborn's visit to the Laundry files. The final piece by your editor is a look at the role and meaning of being

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undead in Eclipse Phase. Following this is Secret of Saltram Shore, a massive ghostly scenario for the Hero system, but readily available for other games. Written by Robert J. Hall, it was available online many years ago but has since vanished into the ether. We bring this brilliant scenario back from the dead (very appropriate verdade?).

Long-term contributor Michael Cole provides a couple of deadly snippets with supplemental rules for GURPS. What could be more deadly than poisons and dungeoneering? In a distinctly not very undead article worthy contributor and once even editor of this 'zine Karl Brown provides an overview of the faerie-heavy Green Isles campaign setting, strictly for fifth edition of Dungeons and Dragons but easily adaptable for other settings. Of course, there is nothing saying that every article in an issue of RPG Review must follow its advertised setting and theme. Thus we also see an elaboration of rules for the HeroQuest RPG, starship economics for Savage Worlds, and a pair of articles by astrology author Kieran Brannan - one on GMing horror games and one for the BECMI setting of Phaemoreia, which is co-authored with the psychic author Ryllandra Rose. The setting is somewhat thematic it does involve a large undead-powered empire as a major setting feature. Also, whilst it is described as "adapted" from the author's on demand it is

really an extracted selection, with an estimated 99% of the words are directly from their material - the most significant change was altering "I" to "we" and changing the description of D&D to BECMI D&D.



Speaking of which, being published in RPG Review is surprisingly important, at least from a critical point of view. With the move from print to electronic publications the marginal costs of producing written material has fallen dramatically. Whilst there is still a significant market for physical game-system books and supporting material there is no financially supportable market for physical magazines (a hat-tip to Gygax which is making a brave effort in that regard) and electronic magazines, such as ours, only survive on volunteers who are dedicated to the hobby for its own sake. Take the effort and hunt around – how many other roleplaying 'zines are there out there which have been around as long as we have? I can think only of *Alarums and Excursions*.

It is little wonder that we have had such industry luminaries grace our pages in the past - and in this issue we have an article from the ever-controversial but usually right, Lew Pulsipher who has penned a deeply considered opinion on

why computer RPGs aren't as much fun as traditional tabletop RPGs. You could say that we have his piece in lieu of a computer game review - but that would be a bad pun.

The issue concludes with three movie reviews by Andrew Moshos; there is a temptation to merge the reviews into a single article given the consistency in his approach and thematic selection choice. They are all movies about the undead, more or less, The Revenant, Crimson Peak, and the smaller budget Lights. Andrew continues to show his love of the big screen in reviews that can be both passionate and acerbic and his work is always a welcome rounding off to the RPG Review journal.

With that summary, happy gaming all, and sleep tight and may the hauntings be light.

Lev Lafayette (lev@rpgreview.net)

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THE RPG REVIEW COOPERATIVE

Formation

At the end of last year a small group of people met at the office of the Victorian Partnership for Advanced Computing (VPAC), in Victoria Street, Carlton. Their purpose was to establish a new incorporated association for the promotion of roleplaying and simulation games.

There was a gentle and tragic narrative occurring at the same time. The board of VPAC, which had provided supercomputer services for the previous fifteen or so years, had decided to close the non-profit association down, and many would say without justification. In just days after this meeting VPAC would close its doors for the last time.

Nevertheless, from the ashes of one association another, albeit very different in scale, scope, and activities, could arise. The agenda was set, with the following purposes for the Association:

- * To promote and advocate the use of simulation and roleplaying games.
- * To design, develop, and distribute of simulation and roleplaying games by members.
- * To publish periodicals, manuals, books, websites etc related to the simulation and roleplaying games.
- * To engage in activities, including generating income and expenditure, to further these aims.

The association will use the Model Rules for Incorporated Associations, published by the Victorian Government. The association will have an annual membership fee of \$10. The association will take ownership of the RPG Review website and the RPG Review Quicksales store, for use and development by members. The association will raise funds for the publication and distribution of simulation and RPG games designed by members (e.g., Gulliver's Trading Company) and will purchase ISBNs for this purpose.

The following motion was tabled and, put following discussion.

"That the RPG Review Cooperative be formed, and that the Model Rules for an Incorporated Associated be applied."
Moved Lev Lafayette. Seconded Andrew Daborn

The motion was passed, and with the election of a committee consisting of Lev Lafayette, Karl Brown, Andrew Daborn, Liz Bowman, and Nicholas Moll, the organisation was its way.

Consumer Affairs Victoria approved the application and on January 7th 2016 we received the certificate of incorporation, with the identity A0094301K.

Activities

The immediate activities was to establish a github (because that's what the cool kids are doing) for works in development, including several game systems and supplements and applications (Torquil Gault's Visual Combat Simulator is a particularly great item), open up the RPG Review Quicksales store to all members, and advertise existing game sessions organised by members. Soon after this we started organising monthly movie nights at the Astor for their invariable appropriate double-feature sessions – including a very enjoyable visit on World Aliens Day.

"All right sweethearts, what are you waiting for? Breakfast in bed? Another glorious day in the corps! A day in the Marine Corps is like a day on the farm. Every meal's a banquet! Every paycheck a fortune! Every formation a parade! I love the corps!"

As part of our advocacy role we launched a petition to Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast to give 4th edition Dungeons and Dragons and Open Game License. The Game System License which it has been granted compares poorly to the OGL (no open game content, restrictions on game terms) and as a result it means that consumers and publishers have less choice for this particular edition of the game – it is also inconsistent with the licenses granted for the third and fifth editions of the game.

<https://www.change.org/p/wizards-of-the-coast-grant-dungeons-dragons-4th-edition-an-open-game-license>



The Association has also started a library of games, magazines, and supplements. There was an offer to ship the significant gaming library from the Murdoch (University) Alternative Reality Society (MARS), and organisation which the president founded way back in 1988, and is now defunct after over two decades in operation. That has not been not happened yet, but we're still hopeful. In the meantime, a library has been established with generous donations from Lev Lafayette, Paul Smith, and Simon Stainsby. Borrowing rules have been established and Charmaine Daborn has kindly taken the role of looking after the library. It's not enormous yet, but from such humble beginnings great things can grow.

To top it all off, every month the RPG Review Cooperative has provided a newsletter to its members, *Crux Australi*.

The Future

The Association has succeeded beyond expectations. A number of committee members are old hands at this sort of thing and they know full-well that such a body only really gets its feet truly on the ground. Already we have more members than expected and will aim to increase that even further by the end of the year. The library will hopefully continue to expand, and we will certainly continue to provide the online store, this journal (ISSN about to be established), the newsletter, our movie nights, the github, and our regular gaming sessions. The next major task will be buying a bulk of ISBNs for would-be publishers – including the superhero game, *Verge*, the third edition of *Swordbearer* entitled *Spirit and Sword*, the well-playtested *Gulliver's Trading Company*, *The Eclipse Phase Companion*, and *The Laundry Down Under*.

Something we will not be doing in the immediate future of course is holding our own conventions. We're Melbourne based and there is already several well-established conventions operated by some excellent minds in this city, including Arcanacon and Conquest. As much as we possibly can we will be working with existing groups, not in competition but in cooperation – indeed competition in a hobby like this is frankly quite bizarre. We will instead look other national organisations such as SVEROK in Sweden and their federated approach to promoting a critical advocacy to our shared hobby, and put any differences aside in favour of that common interest.

HOT GOSSIP: INDUSTRY NEWS

by Wu Mingshi

Hosei bo, Mr. Lev,

Where you been? I think you dead! But no, just hiding behind this so very late double issue, lah? You so late Mingshi's rumors have become stale like old metaphor. You like that one? So Mingshi have to write her column again and again. It like I go on second day at Jie Bakery for stale ice-cream colored bread. You make my tasty column stale! No do again!

So in stale-bread news, the new Chaosium are now gone from California, and the new office with Moon Design and with distribution scattered all over world. But everyone know that because you so cruel to Mingshi. But new team doing well, with regular news about 7th edition RuneQuest and of course big success with 7th edition Call of Cthulhu.

In more stale bread news as Mingshi report in last issue, remember so long ago, Savage Worlds Rifts has been released mean that crazy world meet good game, equal crazy good game! Over \$200K raise in Kickstarter. But that small cheese, for John Wick's second edition of 7th Sea, 11,483 backers pledged \$1,316,813! Hey RPG Review have double pirate issue last time? Maybe new association get any kickback? Meanwhile Pathfinder Humble Bumble bee get record \$1.298 million with 77,499 Bundles sold. Minshi think that maybe she in wrong industry with real job when she could make money like this from games, lah?



(image for 7th Sea second edition Kickstarter)

Good news to see settlement reach between Jeff Dee and Jack Herman of Monkey House Games and Scott Bizar of Fantasy Games Unlimited over Villains and Vigilantes. Monkey House Games has copyright over game, FGU has trademark and license to Monkey House. So why you all fight in first place?

This issue of RPG Review so late I can even talk about 2016 Origins. It has Cthulhu Britannica from Cubicle 7 nominate for best roleplaying game, along

with Dracula Dossier Director's Handbook from Pelgrane Press, Fall of Magic - Heart of the Deernicorn, Lone Wolf Adventure Game, also by Cubicle 7, and Star Wars: Force and Destiny, by Fantasy Flight Games. Mingshi give confused face, some of these look like supplements not games? My spies do not tell me of secret change!

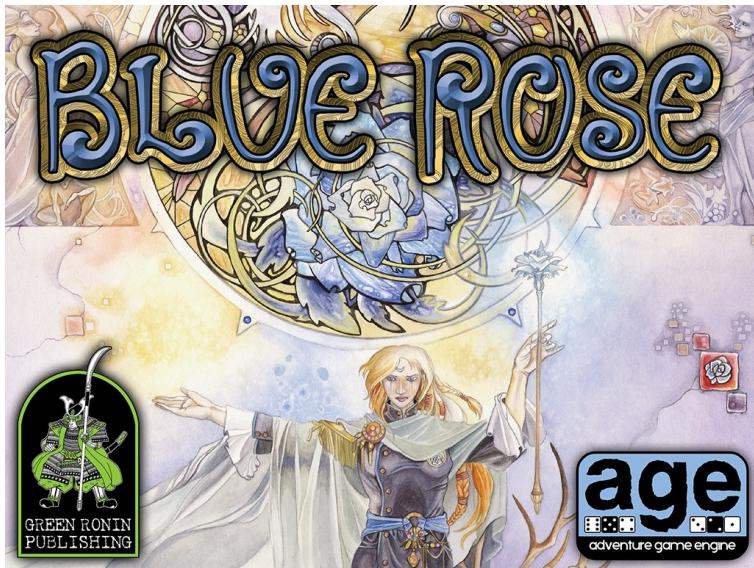
Remember big mess over Cthulhu Mythos in Dungeons and Dragons in Deities and Demigods many years ago? Well all resolved now, and Petersen Games is publishing a Cthulhu mythos-based Pathfinder RPG campaign world entitled Sandy Petersen's Cthulhu Mythos for Pathfinder.

Internal Correspondence tell me that top five roleplaying games for last season of 2015 was (1) Dungeons and Dragons (Wizards of the Coast), (2) Pathfinder (Paizo), (3) Star Wars (Fantasy Flight Games), (4) Dragon Age (Green Ronin Publishing), and (5) Fantasy AGE (Green Ronin Publishing). This compare to previous season where top three the same but (4) Shadowrun (Catalyst Game Labs) and (5) Iron Kingdoms (Privateer Press). So big congratulation to Green

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Ronin to have two new game in top five.

Maybe something to do with new release for 2016 announced? They say they will publish Dragon Age Gamemaster's Kit, and second printing of Dragon Age Core Rulebook. A Return to Freeport new edition also plan, and Gamemaster's Kit for Fantasy AGE also plan, and new Mutants and Mastermind Gamemasters Kit. Green Ronin like Gamemaster's Kit. Also, new edition of Blue Rose, complete with magic deer! Mingshi love magic deer, maybe we get some for our nighttime zoo?



television and film”, and also buy domain habro-con.com . Hasbro have some material to have it own con, including G.I. Joe, My Little Pony, and Transformers. Mingshi assume it also going to include Wizards of the Coast games like Dungeons and Dragons and Magic: The Gathering. Maybe we seem combine product? My Little Pony Dungeons and Dragons?

OK, that is all Mingshi has for this quartering! You be on time next issue! Ha! Already you late. Hurry up and catch up!

Mingshi! xox (mingshi@rpgreview.net)

Big surprise, German company Ulisses Spiele will release new Torg roleplaying game, originally by West End Games. New game called, Torg: Eternity, and be in big hardback volume. Mingshi very interested in Torg journey - first sold when French company who do comics, Humanoids, then in 2004 sold to Eric Gibson and Purgatory Publishing and then sold to Ulisses Spiele. It a little like the game jump from one reality to next.

Hasbro is planning to run own conferences in future, with trademark of HasbroCon for "organizing and conducting conventions, exhibitions, fan clubs and gatherings for entertainment purposes and in the fields of toys, animation, comic books, fantasy, gaming, popular culture, science fiction,

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SNEAD

with John Snead

Hi John, welcome to RPG Review. Let us start with a common question, how did you become involved in roleplaying games? What were the first games you played and what did you think of them?

I started back in the early 80s with AD&D, I loved it at the time, but can't ever see myself playing any form of D&D again.

What games are you currently playing?

Sadly none at the moment. Until December, I was in a short playtest campaign run by Ben Lehman called *Thousand Kingdoms*. A few months before that, a three year free-from campaign run by our primary GM ended. She'll be starting a new one in a few months, which will likely last between 2 & 5 years. Other than that until last year I was also in a 2 year long *Amber Diceless* RPG campaign. Unlike most RPG designers, I vastly prefer playing to running games.



*You have an extraordinary list of RPG credits associated with your name; White Wolf and Atlas Games' *Ars Magica*, Chaosium's *Nephilim*, Last Unicorn's *Star Trek*, supplements for White Wolf's *Trinity*, *Exalted*, *Mage: The Ascension* and *The Awakening*, and others, Green Ronin's *Blue Rose*, Posthuman Studios' *Eclipse Phase*... It's an extraordinary range. How do you find developing across such a wide variety of genres, styles, and game systems?*

I started out looking for any work I could get and was both persistent and lucky. For the past 15 or so years, my name is sufficiently well known that if there is work available that I'm interested in, I can usually persuade someone to let me help.

Do you think your varied educational background has helped?

Dear gods yes. I have degrees in Math, History, and Cultural Anthropology and what amount to minors in Classics and Physics. I use elements of some of these in every gaming project and all of them in some.

Of the various games and supplements that you have designed, which one are you most pleased with and what generated that sense? Conversely, are there any that you're not entirely happy with?

There are books I'm exceptionally happy with the entire work and others where I'm only happy with my part. My current project – writing most of the *Traveller* conversion of the *Mindjammer* RPG is one of the first type, as was *Stellar Frontiers* (the space and teleportation supplement for *Trinity*), *Scavenger Sons* for *Exalted*, and everything I've done for both *Changeling: The Lost* and *Eclipse Phase*. In contrast, I'm very pleased with all the writing and editing in my mythos SF RPG *Eldritch Skies*, but the layout (which I did not do) was well less than perfect. Also, I loved working on *Dreams of the First Age* for *Exalted*, and think I did some fantastic work, but the entire project was problematic because it was set in one of the least interesting times to play *Celestial Exalted*, and some of the rules (written by other authors) were less than ideal.

As for being dissatisfied with my own work, I'm happy with most of my own work, but several of my early projects clearly show I had a long way to go. I honestly wish all copies of the first edition of *Faeries for Ars Magica* would vanish off the face of the earth. I love my work on the 2nd edition (put out by WOTC), but 1st edition was a mess.

Many of the books you have written have been a co-authored process. This is especially a feature in White Wolf games where, even in their core rules, there is usually several authors rather than a few. What difficulties does one encounter having such a large number of writers working on a cooperative project? How do you get around various creative and design differences?

I love working with other people. Difficulties are typically minimal because we all work for a single developer and it's the job to handle disagreements and questions (which I'm finding to be a fair amount of work since I am now the developer for *Trinity Continuum: Aeon*). My favorite part of collaboration though is playing with other people's ideas and seeing what they do with mine. *Exalted* has a large amount of this – I created a number of locations and cultures in Scavenger Sons that other authors expanded on in later books in ways that I dearly loved. Even on a single project, I find the process of discussing our goals and plans with other authors to be exciting rather than frustrating.

For over fifteen years you've been a full-time game designer in an industry that's not exactly known for being a path to great riches. In this issue we have fellow author Stew Wilson make some critical comments concerning declining pay rates for freelancers. What are your thoughts on how RPG game authors can generate a living income?

You need to write rapidly and well, and constantly look for new work, even when you are currently busy. Kickstarter has definitely improved the RPG market a great deal, and these days well more than half of my work is associated with Kickstarters. However, that said, the pay is terrible and the fact that one of my partners is a CPA definitely helps. RPG writing as a single source of income is likely impossible unless someone has inherited a house in a location with a very low cost of living.

*You're currently working as the developer for *Trinity Continuum: Aeon*, the second edition of the Trinity RPG. How has that process been? Can you give us any insight to what's going to be included in the new game and what supplements we can expect?*

Until recently, the process had been frustratingly slow, in large part because of the necessity of creating a new core rule system (the Storypath system), which needed to be mechanically robust and to be able to handle playing normal people, pulp heroes, psychics up to the level of the X-Men, and supers up to the level of power of Superman. This is an exceedingly non-trivial task, and while I was only peripherally involved in actually creating these rules, they took a long time to finalize. They are at last done and seem to work (they haven't been done for very long) and the rule portions of *Trinity Continuum: Aeon* are being written as I write this.

Trinity was very much of a late 90s game, with features I saw in a number of other SF games of the time, like finding ways to remove character's access to mobile communications and mobile data access. I didn't think this was an interesting solution at the time and it's ludicrous now for any high tech SF game. So, *Aeon* has ubiquitous mobile data, augmented reality and all of the other technological wonders one would expect in an early 22nd century with interstellar travel. Also, my goal is to have the psychic powers be both somewhat more powerful (except for teleportation, which was definitely powerful enough), while also being more flexible. Also, the game will not have any sort of on-going metaplot. It's set in 2123, 6 months after the teleporters return from the stars, and that's the time all supplements will be written about. Finally, I love how *Trinity* had a global scope, with nations all across the globe being important, but as was true with most 90s RPGs, the execution of this was less good than the ideas, and so I've been trying to actually do justice to the world's diversity in this edition. When possible, I've hired authors who live or lived in the regions they wrote about, and I think we've done a good job of fairly representing the world of 2123.

I'll be thinking more about supplements after the current book is complete, but the current plan is for a Tech Manual (a book of more gear and also discussions of technology and more tech-related rules), a book detailing Earth and Luna even more, and a book detailing the various colony worlds more and providing additional worlds to explore. After that, I have plans, but they are less definite.

-John Snead sneadj@mindspring.com

THREATS AND THEMES OF UNDEATH IN THE WARHAMMER 40000 UNIVERSE

with Randal Henderson

The far flung universe of the 41st Millenium of the popular table-top skirmish game series Warhammer 40,000 produced by Games Workshop is indeed a dangerous place. The reaches of the Imperium of Man, as it us known in this mythos spans far and wide across the known universe, each system linked together by precarious trade routes governed by navigators who 'fold space', moving vessels from real space into the *immaterium*, thus travelling vast distances with relative speed. There are lots of bad thing out there which threaten humankind's survival – races of aliens bent on destruction and conquest, wayward men fallen sway to the chaos gods and the lure of forbidden powers, hordes of daemons that are summoned by chaos worshipers to unleash reckless abandon (did I mention that you pass these whilst travelling in spaceships during fold-space), and mass riots and regicide on the Imperial worlds. That's all on a good day.

In this game universe, in most of its off-shoot games including table-top battles, gang skirmish and role-play games (the later produced namely by Fantasy Flight games under licence), the strongest fantasy references in this series are from the HP Lovecraft variety on forbidden powers and unworldly creatures that present themselves in the 'real word' by being summoned or stumbled upon, but there are some themes of the undead as we might understand from the George A Romero *Night of the Living Dead* sense (albeit in a high tech distopia) that would threaten mankind in this universe, but themes of the dead rising up again in WH40K are not strictly defined in this way. Well it's not so much the these threats exist as the undead, but more they exist as *un-death*, and this singular theme is presented in numerous ways. This essay will highlight a few examples of how undeath presents itself from the most threatening, otherworldly sort contrasting to what the typical tv or film audience might accept as the 'undead'.

In the game series the *really dangerous* threats are superhuman characters, eternal warriors, immortal aliens and technology and forbidden lore that is concerned with everlasting life abounds in this universe. The gist of the WH40K myths as far as humanity is concerned revolves around a genius of sorts, The Emperor of Man, in fact a fantastical character who is brilliant at everything - the amount of qualities and skills this pivotal character for this universe is frightening, and quite simply absurd - master statemen, scientist, geneticist, warrior, wielder of psychic powers, the list, much like this essay, tends to go on. This character prior to the 31st century created legions of superhumans, the ubiquitous Space Marines the game is so famous for, to meet with the challenges of the galactic exploration (and conquest) head on, hence the long list of physical requirements – superhuman strength and stamina, reinforced skeletal frames, multiple organs and the ability to go into suspended animation, not to mention specialised weaponry – these genetically engineered warriors have the curse of prolonged life.

So when you get bored of relinquishing your own humanity to protect and serving mankind, gaining powers though unholy means or pursuing individual desires and pursuits can sound attractive, not to mention the stifling bureaucracy that has been created for humanity, rebellion and ultimate damnation sounds like a wild trip! Which of course is what some of these superhumans asked themselves and a great number of them became unsatisfied with their own position, and threw themselves before the Dark Gods, which in their explorations no doubt uncovered - this presents a more rewarding prospect than reuniting mankind. Those of you familiar with the game series skip this next but, but for everyone else an interplanetary revolt occurs and our Emperor character is thrown into battle against the leader of the revolt, Horus, a superhuman of immense proportions and one the Emperor created but nonetheless had goals for conquest and forbidden powers beyond unifying mankind across the galaxy. The Emperor faces Horus head on and emerges victorious, but mortally wounded as a result and lays in permanent stasis on the Golden Throne on Holy Terra. Navigators rely on his 'spirit' as a navigational beacon called the *Astronomican* in being able to fold space. The Emperor is too valuable to die a natural death, so his state of 'undeath' has been running for over 10,000 years and is extremely important! However, this serves as a precedent for other factions, races and creature types serves as a

precedent that the greatest threats to humanity is both one that humanity created, and that almost every other faction exhibits some form of undeath.

There are a lot of characters / races who exhibit the immortality trait, and all go on some kind of Carl Jungian 'heroes journey' where they embark on quests to gain martial prowess. For example, the Eldar (think of Tolkein's elves, but in space!) by their very nature are immortals, and there are others, but using the Space Marine as the basis works well – even within their own ranks they sort of imitate the ascension of the Emperor by prolonging the useful lives of highly skilled warriors who become mortally wounded in combat by preserving them inside walking sarcophagi known as Dreadnoughts so that they may continue fighting for humanity in a deathless state. On the other side of the immaterium, Chaos Marines are another type of damned eternal warriors who on the tabletop game are above elite foes, but their experience in the any of the WH40K RPG spinoffs reveal a deeper side to these character beyond simply being foes to conquer on a tabletop – some are simply malevolent psychopaths who simply crave combat (the worshippers of Khorne below their blood-curdling catch cry 'blood for the blood god!' before taking to their foes), but others have been spurned by Humanity at large because of either a misinterpretation of Imperial dogma, but others represent a truly horrifying and sinister image of mankind with megalomaniacal views on a path to damnation. An excellent example of an eternal warrior is Abbadon the Despoiler, a brother in arms of Horus who became maddened of his death, has roamed the galaxy for the better part of 10,000 years (thanks to being a by-product of genetic engineering, created by mankind's own Emperor) as a glorified brigand looking for conquest and the challenge of combat and during his journey has enlisted hordes of warriors to embark on *Black Crusades* and uncover dark powers to aid his selfish and never-ending pursuits.

Coming a little closer to the undead archetype, but one that I do not think qualifies as undead are the chaos daemons and their ilk of Nurgle, god of pestilence and decay. These beings exist in the immaterium (remember this is that infinite limbo where space vessels pass through...) and have lesser daemons such as Plague Bearers and Nurglings (not to mention the hordes of men who worship such a god and gain forbidden powers of toughness and flesh shaping), to stave off death, these creatures (and followers) exhibit qualities such as dying flesh, diseases, plagues and body-shaping powers. But are these characters and creators undead? To my mind no, but what they are concerned with is prolonged life, well of you call having decaying flesh and swarms of buzzards follow you around any kind of life, well sure.

But what threats are there of romanticised undead nature to humanity in this universe? Necrons who were introduced to the game series in 1998 are a cross between James Cameron's Terminators and any imagined beast that might lurk in an Ancient Egyptian crypt. These creatures are described as an alien race known as the *Necronyr* whose cold science achieves immortality for this race, where they find the long lost Imperial Tomb Worlds their ideal resting place. These robotic legions are forever guarding lost crypts, repositories of ancient knowledge and forgotten technologies and lost souls around the universe. In either the tabletop or roleplay game they are extremely hardy and are prone to resurrection after being destroyed (I stress not killed, as they are inherently inanimate which implies they 'exist' indefinitely), and are accompanied by ethereal creatures called Nightbringers which exhibit supernatural strength and psychic abilities (can ghouls and ectoplasmic creatures exist among robots...? Well somehow this works). Hordes of Necrons guard monoliths and tombs, and yes they lurk in crypts similar to Ancient Egyptian mummies only to be awoken from their eternal sleep when their domain are intruded upon, but due to their robotic nature cannot be counted as 'undead'. But the threat to mankind in this universe is benign – only apparent when they are disturbed.

But what about the George A Romero archetypal zombie that staggers around, moaning and bays for human flesh? Does this creature threaten the race of man in this distopian future? Each of the games within the series have some form of staggering zombie that originates from either plagues and illness or technology that thrives on dead flesh. The Fantasy Flight roleplay game *Dark Heresy* is where a group of acolytes, usually individuals from the darkest depths of society chosen who have been given an opportunity to rise above the ranks for a holy purpose if you like, under the leadership of a well established inquisitor would investigate and quell heresies or other anomalies that exist on Imperial Worlds, usually on cities called *Hives* (think of Megacity 1 from Judge Dread), whether they be of the minor illegal sort (owner-less organ and limbs on the black market, or Emperor forbid indentured miners having their own socialist revolution) or the nefarious major heresies such as cultists dabbling with dark god worship (summoning daemons and

monsters, gaining access to forbidden powers). Acolytes can meet the Night Cult in the expansion pack "Disciples of the Dark Gods" (2008) - Imperial citizens somehow get hold of forbidden technology or warp lore (the game is not clear which it is) that is able to reanimate the corpses of their dearly departed, as a way of revering the myth of the Emperor, rising again after death, but of course this results in flesh-eating zombies running amok.

The gang skirmish game that Games Workshop produced in 1995 *Necromunda* set on the hive world's namesake certainly had zombies. Gangs of *Scavvies* - mutants who lurk in the toxic-ridden underbellies of the hive would defend their territory when rival gangs looking to expand their territory would come out of the sewers and fight to their last. Scavvies can wrangle "plague zombies" to do their bidding, with the promise of an unlucky ganger becoming dinner for some. If a ganger is unlucky to be bitten, there would be a 40 percent chance that they too would succumb to brain death. Having said this, the threat Scavvies and their plague zombies on mankind in this universe is minor at best. In this universe most Imperial worlds have standing armies and Judge Dread style police forces, and most citizens carry a simple las pistol or stub gun as a basic necessity in this distopia, but don't count on a zombie apocalypse taking over the Holy Throne of Terra, or Hive Sibelius anytime soon!

So the question is, does the undead pose a threat to humankind in this series? In short no, but the characters, races and factions that exhibit undeath beyond doubt do. Constantly warring and testing their mettle without end until of course they meet their own demise, often with no family life or other goals to express or nurture. The undead in this series is an after thought that is tacked onto some of the games within the genre over the years. Humanity gets tossed around with the tide and does its best to hold on.

There are numerous threats to the Imperium of man, both from outside to within - alien races vying for territory, men gone wild with their taste for forbidden powers from the warp and the chaos gods, the perilous nature of space travel, to religious uprisings and schisms from within. The scales of humanity's survival is constantly at tipping point.

A path that we can only assume is endless as an ultimate goal is never presented in this universe, as the theme suggests, in the far flung universe of the 41st Millenium, there is only war.



KILLER: THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

by Stephen Dedman

The place: Mawson Station, Antarctica.

Scenario originally run at GenghisCon, Perth, Western Australia, 2015

The scenario: An alien shapeshifter, accidentally released from ice where it has been trapped for centuries, has infiltrated the base by replacing one – and possibly more – of the personnel. The aliens are invulnerable to gunfire, knives, and other conventional weapons, but there may yet be a way to detect and defeat them before they have taken over completely.

Gameplay: On the Friday evening of Genghiscon, all players will meet with the GM, and be issued with a sticker to place on their badges. This sticker marks them as Killer players: anyone without a sticker is an innocent bystander. At the same time, 1d6 players will secretly be informed that they have been replaced by Things.

At this meeting, everyone will be told the code word that enables Things to take over their victims. The game will run until midnight, and then recommence at 8am. Some areas (such as the panel room during panels) will be off-limits for attacks. Things will also be restricted by the need to not have any human witnesses when they attack, and can't attack when outnumbered by humans.

On Saturday afternoon, all players, including any new players who missed the meeting on Friday night, will meet again and be informed of how to identify Things and destroy them. New players will be issued stickers: a truce will be active for long enough to allow humans and Things to disperse.

If any Things remain alive at the end of GenghisCon, the Things will have won; the winning player will be the surviving Thing with the greatest number of victims. If not, the humans are victorious, and the winning player will be the surviving human with the greatest number of kills.

Weapons: Not needed.



SURVIVAL FROM GREAT FALLS IN D&D

by Adi Gondo Hartoo



rules:

* According to the PHB, maximum fall damage is 20d6. Looking at the wikipedia link below, I assume that's because it reached the terminal velocity of 200mph.

* Wikipedia also says that the terminal velocity of a skydiver in a belly-to-earth (face down) position is 122mph.

So putting these two set of information together, our half orc can survive a fall in this way:

1. Get into a freefall position to achieve maximum drag. At 122mph fall rate, you can argue a case with your DM to reduce the number of damage dice accordingly. Let's say to 13d6, to round it up.
2. At 6 seconds before you touch the ground, Rage! (because rage only last 1 round if you don't attack or lose HP)
3. You hit the ground & DM rolls 13d6 for bludgeoning damage. Let's say that your DM is lucky and got all 6s for a total of 78 dmg.
4. Rage gives you resistance to bludgeoning damage, so you take only 39 damage.
5. Your hp is at -19, but since it does not reach your max HP negative, you don't die instantly.
6. Using the half orc Relentless Endurance racial trait, you drop to 1 hp instead of 0hp.
7. Walk away and sing your tale of survival against insurmountable odds.

Efficient and effective character builds in Dungeons & Dragons have been a major feature since third edition, if not before then. This following example for 5th edition : How to survive a great fall (1000 meters & over) as level 2 Half Orc barbarian and still walk to tell the tale:

This is just a thought experiment, but I think I have figured out a way for my current PC, which I am basing this idea on to not die from falling off a cliff.

First, I will have to stipulate a few conditions:

1. The half orc's max hp is 20 points or over and he's at full health.
2. He still have at least 1 rage usage left.
3. He still has his Relentless Endurance racial trait available to use.
4. He is unrestrained and is free to do whatever he wants.

This is what we know about falling damage

BEYOND TOTAL PARTY KILL: PLAYING LABYRINTH LORD IN THE UNDERWORLD

by *Nicholas Moll*

Sometime ago, I became notorious for building Labyrinth Lord campaign settings that were quite lethal to player characters. One of my initial creations, Scarlet Empire, presented the situation where a dark lord has risen, triumphed, and was now ruling the world. The Party began this campaign as prisoners of war from the previous conflict sold into slavery by a Goblin merchant and deployed into a certain trap-filled labyrinth – armed only with their wits – to, well, spring every trap before the merchant sent in the real adventurers. Another example is the setting I publish through Owlman Press – Over the Top – which applies the Tolkien-esque template of Labyrinth Lord to a steampunk, World War One inspired, campaign setting. The thing I found very quickly with Over The Top was that a machine gun nest – even at a cinematic scale of realism – is really effective at killing level 1 parties. This required some special setting rules designed to bring some heroism to Over the Top and avoid a regular total party kill.

Total party kill can be an awkward event for most gaming groups. It effectively ends play for at least that night, which can also mean an entire evening of entertainment goes to waste if it happens early in the session. While poor luck or player-initiated actions (and when I say players, I mean the Game Master as well – there seems to be this strange assumption that the Game Master is somehow not a player at the table. Their role may be different, but they’re still looking to have fun. But that is a discussion for another time) may be all involved in individual or collective character death. There are many common solutions to this from fudging dice for damage rolls, having some sort of deus ex machina occur such as a cleric appear offering an instant resurrection, and so on. However, for my Labyrinth Lord games I started to consider the other possibility. What if play continued after death as dead and departed souls in the underworld?

The underworld itself changes with each campaign setting. But at base, it is a composite of the world itself – meaning that it has a little bit of everything from each vista featured in the game. It generally is inhabited by the dead, gods of the dead along with their aids and helper beings (such as Angels). The underworld does not, however, contain any undead as such. Rather - as the player characters are not ghosts, zombies or the like - the undead are an aberration of the natural cycle of life and death that occurs in the world of the living. The player characters themselves along with the underworld at large is posed herein as a natural part of that cycle. Aside from that basic premise, there are also some specific rules I engage for Labyrinth Lord characters playing on after their death:

1. Your character is dead, not undead

The hero is dead, and their soul has left their body coming to dwell in the underworld. When manifest in the underworld, the character’s corporeal (that is, the soul-form that serves as their body in the underworld) mirrors the one they had in life – including any possessions and equipment they had with them at the point of death. There may be some differences. The body may be withered, pale and ghostly. But it is still clearly the character. Any aging will, naturally, cease upon death.

2. You do not eat, but you do need to sleep

A dead character’s corporeal does not need to eat. It’s not a body in the biological sense, but has taken on a purely spiritual existence. A corporeal form does, however, still need to sleep as the mind requires breaks from, well, eternity to refresh focus and process the endless experiences of underworld existence.

3. You still lose Hit Points, but you cannot Die

A dead hero awakens in the underworld with full hit points. And this along with the presence of a body implies that the corporeal of a hero can be damaged and wounded by all the things that they once could in life. But the character cannot die. Rather, after reaching zero hit points they are unconscious but continue to take damage to maximum of -10 – at which point their body is little more than an oozing, shattered form. In the underworld, this state is often called Silence.

A corporeal in the state of Silence will not heal naturally and can only be restored through magical means.

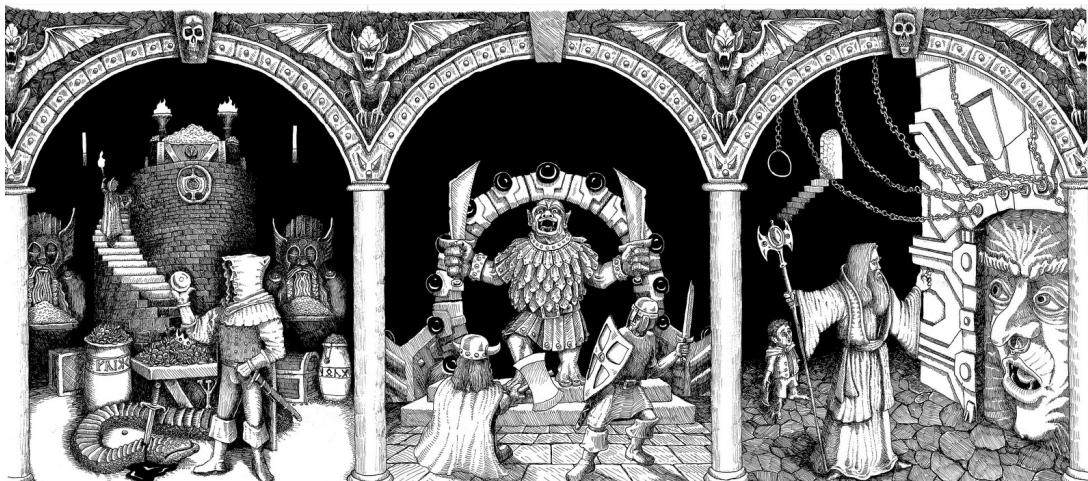
4. Certain Class Abilities and Spells may not work on a corporeal form

The inhabitants of the underworld are largely deceased living creatures – mostly Humans and Demi-Humans. But their corporeal forms are not a state of undeath, rather a natural progression from life to the great beyond. As such, a Cleric's Turn Undead ability will have absolutely zero effect on most inhabitants of the underworld. Likewise, the spell Animate Dead has no effect on the corporeal bodies of the dead nor does Raise Dead or Resurrection.

Effects that cause a Save vs. Death still function on the dead, rending and reducing the corporeal body to Silence. Effectively, this means failing a Save vs. Death reduces the hero to zero hit points. While a character can recover they are considered, for all intents and purposes, non-functional and can still lose further hit points to the maximum of -10.

5. You can't go home

Generally, death is a one-way trip unless friends in the world of the living have the ability to muster up a Raise Dead or Resurrection Spell. And on returning in this fashion, any memories of ones time in the underworld vanish – making return trips somewhat interesting. Naturally, there are rumours throughout the underworld of special gates that connect the underworld to the lands of the living, maps that will guide an individual to said gates, special ferrymen that will guide them there and so forth. Such routes are about as common as means to for the living to enter the underworld without actually dying. And many of the dead who wish to return can spend years, if not centuries, trying to find a way out.



Aside from the rules and premises above, most monsters can still be employed when adventuring in the underworld. As far as underworld-specific adventures go, the obvious one is to try and defy death and return to life. However, should the Party embrace their life beyond they may find themselves still sought for their heroic abilities. With decades or even centuries (Elves do live long lives) apart, the recently departed may have difficulty locating their previously departed loved ones on arrival. Likewise, many lost places and treasures lie in the wild places throughout the underworld and there are those willing to seek them – particularly if such wonders are those that eluded them in life. Additionally, most Labyrinth Lord Party's kill a lot of people and even if they were not a dire villain in life, a mere henchman may have risen to such in death (motivated by their own demise). Revenge of their former foes always makes an excellent adventure, especially if the immediate option of death is off the table...

Glossary

Corporeal: The physical manifestation of the individual's soul that serves as their body in the underworld.

Silence: The state by which the Corporeal reaches zero or enters negative hit points and becomes unconscious.

Underworld: The plane of the dead, inhabited by deceased creatures and beings.

YOU ONLY LIVE THRICE

by James Introcaso

I have a bit of a problem. Some of my players have begun to look on dying as a minor inconvenience rather than the big deal it should be. You see, my players are seasoned, and know that when their PC dies, there's always a raise dead or resurrection spell to be cast. For the most part, I'm ok with this. D&D is just a game after all, and as long as my players are having a blast, who cares if they're coming back from the dead? But this has really begun to go too far...

When a character dies, he or she may spend a session or two playing another character while their original's corpse spends its time gentle repose-d in a bag of holding, but eventually they find that diamond, or scroll, or rod and they're able to bring the old character back to life. They have even begun to see the death of major NPCs as, "Oh well, we can just raise them later," as opposed to the big story moments they should be.

The Current Penalties

Take a look at how the raise dead, resurrection, and true resurrection spells read from the Basic D&D Player PDF (<http://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/basicrules>).

There are some good things going on here. There is no experience point loss, Constitution score loss, or level loss, as in first, second, and third editions. While I may be looking for some more serious consequences when it comes to dying, these permanent draining penalties are no fun. They just give you an underpowered character compared to the rest of the party (unless everyone in the party dies and is raised an equal number of times). Always being a level behind everyone else can be embarrassing for many, and having low Constitution makes it even easier and more likely for a character to die again. While a little shame for dying can be fun, having a constant reminder like that is simply not fun for many players (myself included) which makes folks less likely to take risks with their characters. I would rather see my fictional hero die in a blaze of glory than cower in the back because I don't want to have to feel the shame associated with being second-rate compared to the rest of the party. These old school penalties are a bit of a pain in the butt as well, since backwards math can take some time to figure out and get used to.

So the fifth edition spells do not have some of the bad drawbacks I personally disliked in older editions. They have a few other drawbacks which make sense to me. Let's break it down spell by spell.

Raise Dead Drawbacks

RAISE DEAD

5th-level necromancy

Casting Time: 1 hour

Range: Touch

Components: V, S, M (a diamond worth at least 500 gp, which the spell consumes)

Duration: Instantaneous

You return a dead creature you touch to life, provided that it has been dead no longer than 10 days. If the creature's soul is both willing and at liberty to rejoin the body, the creature returns to life with 1 hit point.

This spell also neutralizes any poisons and cures nonmagical diseases that affected the creature at the time it died. This spell doesn't, however, remove magical diseases, curses, or similar effects; if these aren't first removed prior to casting the spell, they take effect when the creature returns to life. The spell can't return an undead creature to life.

This spell closes all mortal wounds, but it doesn't restore missing body parts. If the creature is lacking body parts or organs integral for its survival—its head, for instance—the spell automatically fails.

Coming back from the dead is an ordeal. The target takes a -4 penalty to all attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks. Every time the target finishes a long rest, the penalty is reduced by 1 until it disappears.

Price and gem rarity. 500 gp is typically in the reach of PCs within the first five levels, perhaps within the first few sessions if the party pools resources and the DM is a handsome and generous person like myself. But a diamond worth 500 gp is more difficult to find than a few (hundred) coins. Only the most successful big city jewelers, nobles, and royalty are likely to have something like that lying around waiting to be sold. Even then they may not wish to part with the item (or have the characters undertake a quest before they consider selling it to them). Making these diamonds hard to find is the first drawback and it goes hand in hand with the next.

Time limit. A person may only have died within the last 10 days for the spell to work. Now in most campaigns that's a time crunch to find a 500 gp diamond if the party does not already have one, so it does put the pressure on a party find a gem more quickly, which is great fun.

Gotta have the body. This makes sense for a fifth level spell. You can be raised from the dead provided you haven't lost your head or turned into a pile of ash. So if this is the only spell available and you just died via red dragon breath, you are SOL. Also lost limbs stay lost and all magical diseases, curses, etc. remain in effect. So it's not a heal all spell (like resurrection and true resurrection).

Fifth level spell. A fifth level spell for bards, clerics, and druids means the caster must have at least nine levels in one of these classes. So if the party does not have a ninth level caster in one of said classes (or a 17th level Paladin), their options are somewhat limited. Either the party must have a magic item such as a scroll which casts the spell and someone capable of activating said item or be able to find a willing NPC to cast the spell. The rarity of both of these is, of course, up to the DM. Not a bad drawback, but at a certain point this isn't a hurdle once the party has a caster who can cast the spell.

Temporary penalties. I like this one. Coming back from the dead and being dead should take more out of you than having the flu, but eventually you get back to your old self.

Resurrection Drawbacks

Price and gem rarity. Now you need a 1000 gp gem, so it has all the drawbacks of raise dead at seemingly double the price, right? Nope! This drawback barely matters because you have 100 years to find the thing if you don't already have it.

Time limit. If we're talking PCs, in most cases this isn't an issue. Unless you're playing a game with a party of elves which spans centuries (actually a pretty awesome idea... called it), if a party member dies this is nothing to worry about. It could come up in other ways in your story, but won't matter much for dead PCs. However, a caster is taxed greatly if a creature dead for more than a year is brought back to life, which is a little more likely to happen to a PC (though still not very in most cases).

Caster taxed. If a creature has been dead more than a year, the caster pays a big price... for a day. This isn't a huge sacrifice, unless the spell is cast in the middle of a dungeon, which it very well may be, but again, in most cases probably not.

RESURRECTION

7th-level necromancy

Casting Time: 1 hour

Range: Touch

Components: V, S, M (a diamond worth at least 1,000 gp, which the spell consumes)

Duration: Instantaneous

You touch a dead creature that has been dead for no more than a century, that didn't die of old age, and that isn't undead. If its soul is free and willing, the target returns to life with all its hit points.

This spell neutralizes any poisons and cures normal diseases afflicting the creature when it died. It doesn't, however, remove magical diseases, curses, and the like; if such effects aren't removed prior to casting the spell, they afflict the target on its return to life.

This spell closes all mortal wounds and restores any missing body parts.

Coming back from the dead is an ordeal. The target takes a -4 penalty to all attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks. Every time the target finishes a long rest, the penalty is reduced by 1 until it disappears.

Casting this spell to restore life to a creature that has been dead for one year or longer taxes you greatly. Until you finish a long rest, you can't cast spells again, and you have disadvantage on all attack rolls, ability checks, and saving throws.

Seventh level spell. The spell is seventh level which means, a caster must be a 13th or higher level caster to cast the spell, and in most cases a DM will rule it's even harder to find a scroll or NPC caster than for raise dead.

Temporary penalties. I'm still loving it.

True resurrection penalties

Price and gem rarity. Dang! 25,000 gp is a pretty penny and it's even harder to find in gem form. Even with 200 years, you're going to have to go through heck to get a diamond of that worth.

Time limit. 200 years. Really not a worry for a PC. This is barely a drawback (as it should be for a ninth level spell).

Ninth level spell. Good luck finding a scroll or NPC caster in many settings. If you do, be prepared to make some big sacrifices or before you get your hands on an item or a favor granted.

My Conflicting Feelings

Overall, I'm pretty happy with the way these spells play out and their penalties. The pay off and penalties seem to scale well with spell level, but I do want something more. Here's what I'm keeping in mind as I come up with some modules for death in Exploration Age.

It's A Game. I want my players to have a shot at bringing their characters back from the dead if they truly love them. Characters returning from the dead is a hallmark of fantasy (Gandalf and Harry Potter did it) as well, so I'm cool with the fact that it doesn't actually happen in the real world. At the same time, sometimes people lose games, so coming back from the dead shouldn't be a gimme.

Death Should Be Scary. Death needs to have consequences beyond what the spells present, for my players have lost their fear of dying, a subject which should really be the main concern of players in most D&D campaigns.

Death Should Not Be A Straight Punishment. I want my players to take risks with their characters. Risks should be rewarded with great story, whether or not they pay off. A sweet, fiery death is a lot better than running around a few levels or Constitution points shy of the rest of the party.

With that in mind, check out these modules for death I'm offering in the Exploration Age Campaign Guide. The first makes PC death permanent... eventually. This seems fair as I have never had a PC die more than twice, but it could happen and would make death more meaningful. The second makes coming back a riskier proposition (though still fairly easy to accomplish), and was inspired by some first edition rules.

In an Exploration Age game, GMs can rule that character death has greater consequences than what is presented in the current Dungeons and Dragons rules. These variant rules are meant to make death a more serious threat.

Module: Three Strikes and You're Out

Each time creatures are brought back to life via magic, a piece of their soul remains in the afterlife. They may only

TRUE RESURRECTION

9th-level necromancy

Casting Time: 1 hour

Range: Touch

Components: V, S, M (a sprinkle of holy water and diamonds worth at least 25,000 gp, which the spell consumes)

Duration: Instantaneous

You touch a creature that has been dead for no longer than 200 years and that died for any reason except old age. If the creature's soul is free and willing, the creature is restored to life with all its hit points.

This spell closes all wounds, neutralizes any poison, cures all diseases, and lifts any curses affecting the creature when it died. The spell replaces damaged or missing organs and limbs.

The spell can even provide a new body if the original no longer exists, in which case you must speak the creature's name. The creature then appears in an unoccupied space you choose within 10 feet of you.

return from death twice, before their souls are permanently anchored in the afterlife. A third death is the absolute final for any creature, after that they may not be brought back to life by any means. In a sentence – every creature only gets three lives maximum.

Variant Module: Escalation Strikes

In this variant of the Three Strikes and You're Out module, creatures may be brought back to life three times and a fourth death is the absolute final for any creature. In a sentence – every creature gets four lives. In this module a raise dead spell can no longer bring dead creatures who have died more than once back to life, and after their third death only a true resurrection spell may return a character to life.

Module: The Soul is Fragile

Outside of the body, a soul is fragile and can easily be destroyed. The process of bringing a person back to life is hard on the soul and there's a chance a returning soul could be destroyed in the process. A caster must make a DC 15 ability check using their spellcasting ability modifier. If the check fails, the GM should roll on the appropriate table below for the result, based on the spell cast.

Raise Dead

d100 Effect

1 – 40 Spell works as normal.

41 – 60 Soul is not returned to the body, spell slot and diamond are expended, but soul is not destroyed.

61 – 99 The soul is destroyed.

100 Soul is not returned to the body, spell slot and diamond are expended, but soul is not destroyed. In addition, an outsider (such as a devil, demon, or angel) instead inhabits the body of the deceased. The inhabitant must be removed from the body before the original creature may be returned to life.

Resurrection

d100 Effect

1 – 50 Spell works as normal.

51 – 70 Soul is not returned to the body, spell slot and diamond are expended, but soul is not destroyed.

71 – 99 The soul is destroyed.

100 Soul is not returned to the body, spell slot and diamond are expended, but soul is not destroyed. In addition, an outsider (such as a devil, demon, or angel) instead inhabits the body of the deceased. The inhabitant must be removed from the body before the original creature may be returned to life.

True Resurrection

d100 Effect

1 – 60 Spell works as normal.

61 – 80 Soul is not returned to the body, spell slot and diamond are expended, but soul is not destroyed.

81 – 99 The soul is destroyed.

100 Soul is not returned to the body, spell slot and diamond are expended, but soul is not destroyed. In addition, an outsider (such as a devil, demon, or angel) instead inhabits the body of the deceased. The inhabitant must be removed from the body before the original creature may be returned to life.

Module: A Combination

You could combine the Three Strikes and You're Out module and The Soul is Fragile module, by limiting creatures to only three lives and asking for a spellcasting ability check and rolling on the appropriate table anytime raise dead, resurrection, or true resurrection is cast.

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DEATH ISN'T THE END

by *Joe Introcaso*

In many Dungeons and Dragons campaigns death is merely a hurdle. In fifth edition PCs and NPCs alike can return from death with a diamond and a 3rd-level or higher spell slot. Creatures can return from death as wights, revenants, ghosts, and other more powerful undead.

Now I know in most D&D worlds returning from death isn't possible for common folks. One must have the money and the means to return. While the masses may not have access to such means, many adventurers at least have access to someone who can cast revivify by 5th level. In a world where such things are possible, I would assume that even if many have no hope of access to such magic, they have heard of these spells. That awareness would certainly change the way the world interacts with the characters.

Here's a few tips for you to use in your campaign that make death and returning a more layered and complex story in your campaign world.

PCs Coming Back

The fact that there's a chance PCs can come back to life after dying is probably not a complete shock to your villains. They know the spells are out there and if they're aware the PCs have access to other higher level spells, they might assume raise dead is also in the mix. Even if that's not the case, if the villain or a henchman kill a PC and that character returns to face them again, the game is up. They know that magic is out there now and that the PCs have access to it. What might villains do with a vulnerable character in their clutches to assure they stay out of their hair?

The first option is that enemies may go for what I call the super kill. A simple beheading after a PC has died dramatically increase the resources needed to bring the character back to life. Instead of diamonds worth 300 gp and a 3rd level spell slot for revivify, a single diamond worth 1000 gp (a more difficult find) and a 7th level spell slot for resurrection is required. If the villain disintegrates their body and they tosses it in the wind or throws the corpse into lava, suddenly diamonds worth 25,000 gp and a 9th level spell slot are needed for true resurrection. Heck if the villain absconds with the body of the deceased, the PCs have to go on a mission to get it back if they can't cast true resurrection. If they hang onto the body for longer than 10 days, raise dead isn't going to work anymore. Something more powerful is needed.

Of course there might be even craftier villains. PCs can choose to knock a target out with a melee attack instead of kill it. Why can't villains do the same? They could run, fly, or teleport away with an unconscious PC and lock that person away or torture them for secrets. Suddenly an exciting prison break adventure is on the menu. Or perhaps the bad guys kill that PC, steal the character's head, and cast resurrection on it as soon as they're back at their stronghold. They party tries to raise the fellow adventurer only to find the spell doesn't work because that character is already back from the dead and imprisoned.

There are also otherworldly forces that could stop the return of PCs from coming back from the dead. In a fourth edition D&D campaign I had two characters royally anger The Raven Queen, who was the goddess of death. She did not let them return from the dead when their spirits were called by the magic of their companions. Instead she threw them into a demiplane where time passed differently and her servants tortured them for the equivalent of 100 years. Then she gave them a mission to do in her name and returned them to the Material Plane. Their characters and the story were completely changed by this action.

Death and Returning Modules

If you want character death to have a more debilitating impact on PCs in fifth edition D&D, checkout the modules I created. The first module limits the number of times a PC may return from the dead and has some add-on features which make dying more easy and coming back more difficult after each death. The second module features tables of random effects which might occur when a spell such as raise dead is cast.

You can pick up the PDF of these modules over in the Free Game Resources section of this site anytime. If you go there feel free to also explore the backgrounds, magic items, monsters, D&D fifth edition rules modules, spells, adventures, and more I have made for fifth edition D&D.

When Villains Return

Of course in a world where the PCs have access to powerful, death-defying magic, why wouldn't the villains have access to it as well? Any intelligent, high level NPC is going to have a back-up plan. There's a cleric friend coming by each week to check in on the villain who can cast raise dead or an invisible druid nearby with a rod of resurrection. Many of our villainous NPCs have many resources at their command. If I was someone with a pile of gold, a high-level cleric or bard would probably be the first person on my retainer. When villains like this come back again and again like the Tyrant in Resident Evil 2, your PCs will be searching for a way to destroy them for good.

I'm baaaaaaack!

Some villains might return as undead instead of their former selves. Vampires, liches, mummies, revenants, and more might seek the characters as vengeance for their deaths. In the same fourth edition game I mentioned above, the PCs were taking on a cult of Orcus-worshipping baddies. Since he is the Demon Lord of Undeath many of the high-ranking members of the cult would be killed by the PCs only to return later as more powerful, undead versions of their living selves. This was great fun for me to role play and gave the PCs a preexisting relationship with the villains they were facing.

Be sure to only bring villainous NPCs back from death when it's going to make the story more interesting and fun for your group. Doing this with every single villain will get tiresome and become a predictable trope! You don't want the shock of a returned baddy to lose its surprise.

NPCs Want to Live!

If the PCs require help from an NPC, the NPC might contractually obligate the party to bring him or her back from the dead if the unthinkable happens in the line of duty. The husband of a soldier who died defending the town from orcs might beg the PCs to bring back his wife. A PC's best friend and sister dies in a dragon attack that was a response to the party raiding its hoard. If word gets out the PCs have the power to return themselves from death other people will be pressuring them to use that power on themselves or those they love.

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THE SCYTHE OF THANATOS: D&D 3.x

by Lev Lafayette and Stean Vitasovic

The Scythe of Thanatos is a major artifact item for D20/Pathfinder and similar systems. It was originally used in Stean Vitasovic's D&D3e fantasy dark ages Balkans campaign c2001-2002, and whilst the statistics provided are for that particular context it requires little elaboration for other game settings or systems. In the original campaign it was discovered in a in same chaotic caves near a keep on the borderlands of the Vrhbosna province by a sorcerer of medium ranked ability. The Scythe's frustration at the sorcerer's attempts to use the weapon without proficiency in narrow underground passageways generated some hilarity. The Scythe itself, as an artifact, became a feature of the entire campaign as its ever increasing urges for greater bloodshed became dominant.

In Pathfinder the Scythe is a two-handed melee weapon. Note however that this is specifically the 'war scythe' which historically was primarily used by peasants during uprisings (e.g., Hussites, battle of Sedgemoor, Ko?ciuszko Uprising etc) which required a modification of the blade and shaft. The painting by Mort de Bara by Jean-Joseph Weerts (1883), illustrated the use of this weapon (and stands in contrast to the drawing in the Players Handbook, p100).

These weapons has the following statistics common to D&D3.x/D20/Pathfinder

Scythe: 18 gp, 1d6, 2d4, ×4, 10 lb., Piercing or slashing



The Scythe of Thanatos however is encountered as the traditional peasant's tool, that is, with the chine (blade) at right angles to the snaith (haft). As a combat weapon, it is automatically at -2 due to this design, in addition to any lack of exotic weapon proficiency. To convert it to a war scythe requires a simple Craft: Weaponsmithing check with a DC of 10.

Note that the depiction of Thanatos as the "the Grim Reaper" carrying a scythe was not the norm in ancient Hellenic societies who depicted Thanatos with either a sword or an upside-down (extinguished) torch. It seems that the version most familiar in the Anglophone world actually comes from Polish origins (which, at quite a stretch, also suits the Balkans). The Hellenic Thanatos was considered more neutral in overall disposition and appeared in a male form. Note therefore that despite the Hellenic association, this is actually a Slavic artifact and could even more justifiably be called "The Scythe of Marzanna" or similar.

The Scythe has the following properties:

* Haft is manufactured from Underworld Darkwood and has a blade of Adamantine (adamastos). Note that the use of the supernatural Darkwood allows for the usually prohibited wood and adamantine combination. Being made from such materials, the Scythe of Thanatos weighs only 5lbs.

* The Scythe is a Vorpal weapon; on a roll of natural 20 (followed by a successful roll to confirm the critical hit), the weapon severs the opponent's head, causing instant death. Note that the opponent must actually have a head for

this to occur.

* The Scythe has a +5 Weapon Bonus enchantment.

* The Scythe is intelligent and telepathic, inhabited by a spirit named "Krv" (Blood). When it speaks to its wielder it does so in whispers and knows Koine Greek, Thracian, Serbo-Croatian, and Old Church Slavonic. Krv has a Wisdom score of 25, a Charisma score of 20, and an Intelligence of 15.

* Alignment of Neutral Evil.

* Once a day it provides the wielder, Finger of Death, Bull's Strength, Haste. Three times a day it provides Charm Person for the wielder. The wielder will also gain free use of the Sunder, Improved Initiative, Combat Reflexes, and Blind-Fight feats.



target takes instead takes $3d6 + 20$ points of damage.

In terms of publishing history, in addition to having an association with a certain set of caves near a well-known (if somewhat modified) Keep On The Borderlands (*The Keep on the Borderlands*, Gary Gygax, 1979 and *Little Keep on the Borderlands*, Jolly R. Blackbrun et al, 2002). the Scythe of Thanatos also has an association with the *The Caverns of Thracia*, Paul Jaquays, 1979. In that particular setting there is a Thracian temple to Thanatos which also includes a minor Incarnation of said deity. The Scythe will relinquish its possessive urges if it is delivered to the temple and to the incarnation, where it will be able to commune directly with a death god.

* The item has a Special Purpose to Slay All (except the wielder). It will become very annoyed if the wielder does not implement its purpose, and will engage in an Ego possession if its purpose is not carried out on at least a daily basis (although an incredibly bloody episode may lead it to be sated for a couple of days). It will of course, first engage in encouragement first, but if the wielder resists or is incompetent, it will direct those who are unwilling, or seek one who is more skilled.

* The Scythe has Slay Living when engaging in the Special Purpose. On a successful melee touch attack to touch the subject it will kill, unless the target makes a Fortitude Save against a DC of 20. If the saving throw is successful, the

UNDEAD IN REALITY

by *Lev Lafayette*

The Undead have a very special place in the human psyche. Across time and culture there is all sorts of stories of who the undead are, where they come from, whether the undead takes the form of an incorporeal spirit like a ghost, or has a physical bodies, like various forms of vampires. Whatever approach is taken, it is something that was definitely dead, but whose corpus, spirit, or both, is now present again.

The following lengthy article is not meant to be any sort of consistent approach to the matter of the undead. It is simply a collection of mythologies and even scientific facts that should be mined as a resource for GMs, especially those who prefer to have engage in a real-world settings, whether with a sense of magical realism, historic fantasy, or even otherworldly conspiracies.

Osiris

There is a body of evidence (see what I did there?) that suggests a range of ancient deities associated with a birth-death-rebirth cycle. The ancient Egyptian Osiris was one of the first, associated appropriately as the god of the afterlife, the underworld, and the dead, but also as the god of transition, resurrection, and regeneration.

In the Osiris myth he starts as an early King of Egypt, with a lineage stretching back to the creation of the world by Ra (Atum). The queen and sister is Isis (yeah, they went there), and his brother was Set. They were all the children of the earth god Geb and sky goddess Nut.

Set gets annoyed with Osiris for a variety of reasons; early texts say it was because Osiris kicked him, later texts is because he and Nephthys are getting it on. Nephthys, by the way, was Set's consort and the fourth child of Geb and Nut. Yes, that's right, the younger sister.

In any case, Set gets it into his head to knock Osiris off and get to rule on his throne. How he did this is subject to some debate. Some sources says that he turned into a crocodile or bull and did his brother in whilst in such a form - a lycanthrope! Later texts seem to settle in the idea that Set chopped Osiris's body into pieces and scattered them across Egypt - symbolically forty two pieces (one for each province) was a popular number, making the god the literal embodiment of the Kingdom, with a body part claimed for cult centres.

Isis decided that it was time to put the pieces back together, and goes looking for them with Nephthys. After various trials and tribulations she gets everything together, with the help of other deities, including Thoth, who with his awesome magical and healing powers, and Anubis, the god of embalming and funerary rites, turn Osiris into the first mummy, and they restore his body to life.

However, there was a slight problem: they were missing his dick. I kid you not. So Isis fashions one out of gold, sticks it on the body, casts a spell that wakes Osiris up ("blows life into him", you know), and gets herself pregnant through the golden penis that shoots a lightning bolt. Note that according to some texts Isis does this whilst in the form of a bird, because that's what she was doing at the time whilst searching for the bits of her brother-husband-king. I swear, if this is ever made into a film...

Osiris dies again, and goes off to rule Duat, the realm of the dead. Isis gives birth to Horus (no, she doesn't lay an egg), who eventually defeats Set after a series of battles and, being ancient Egyptians, various acts of sexual dominance against each other. Without going into the details, Horus wins, or at the worst, they split Egypt up. But the main thing to remember in reference to the undead: Osiris is the first mummy and has a golden penis that shoots lightning bolts. Never forget that.



Asclepius

The Ancient Hellenes had a bunch of characters that were demigods, children of gods, or immortals. In particular there was a few heroic mortals who died and attained immortality after being resurrected, because being a hero and reaching immortality was a big deal to the old Greeks.

Asclepius is one well-known example, starting life as the son of a mortal woman named Coronis and the god Apollo, and most certainly not a neighbour or anything like that. Apollo, who was not exactly famous for his fidelity, was nevertheless a jealous patriarch and decided to have Coronis killed for being unfaithful. Jeez, those Greek gods were arseholes.

Coronis gets thrown onto a funeral pyre, which is set alight, and then decides this is the opportune moment to go into labour. In what appears a line-ball situation, Apollo intervenes at the last moment as Coronis is being burnt alive in childbirth and cuts the unborn child out of her womb.

Apollo then gives the child to the centaur Chiron, who raises and instructs Asclepius in the medical arts. Asclepius eventually surpasses even Apollo in this skill to the point that he was able to bring the recently deceased back from the dead, including Hippolytus, son of Theseus. That apparently annoyed Zeus - and he had his brother Hades on his back who was complaining that if this Asclepius kept up his work there would be no more dead spirits in the underworld.

So Zeus smacked Asclepius with a thunderbolt. This angered Apollo who in turn killed the Cyclopes, who made the thunderbolts for Zeus. In return, Zeus banished Apollo from the night sky and after a while revived the Cyclopes, and Asclepius was revived and became a star constellation and a deity in his own right.

Dionysus

Dionysus is known as the god of wine and winemaking, of madness, theatre, and religious ecstasy. But how he got there involves multiple resurrection stories. The first is yet another Greek story of conflagration and the male gods "sowing their seeds". His mother was the mortal Semele, and the father was Zeus. Whilst Semele was pregnant Hera found out about Zeus' indiscretions and paid Semele a visit, befriending her, and causing her to doubt that the father was really Zeus. Her work done, Semele demanded that Zeuss reveal himself in his godly splendour - which under duress he did, and Semele promptly combusted, because that's what happens when look upon an god that's coated in lightning bolts.

As she burnt to a crisp, Zeuss pulled the unborn Dionysus out her womb (there's a lot of that going on) and stitched him into his thigh, where presumably he kept a spare womb for such emergencies. A few months later he is born, received the nickname "of two-mothers".

The Cretan version of the myth is even more hardcore. In this instance, Hera decides to use the Titans to lure the infant Dionysus away with toys, and having done so, tear him apart and eat him. Zeus turns up and, being pissed off in a manner that only the king of the gods can be, smites them all with lightning bolts. He then picks up the still beating heart of Dionysus, the only thing that remains of him, and sticks that in his thigh.

Note that it is possible that both these stories are "true" if they happened in sequence - meaning that Dionysus would have been born twice to three mothers, with Zeus getting the job twice. Just as well he had that spare womb in his thigh.

Baldr

The Norse god Baldr is particularly well known through the *Völuspá*, the first poem in the Poetic Edda. Being the sort of woeful Cassandra that he was, he dreamt of his own death first, but so did his mother, Frigg, showing that a madness shared becomes a sanity.



Frigg, being the sort of mother who would do anything for her son, made every object swear to never to hurt Baldr. Surprisingly, all objects made this vow except mistletoe, which was considered too young to make such a contract. Frigg probably should have gone back to mistletoe, because having an Achilles Heel like that is going to bite you.. And it did.

Loki found out about this, and being the sort of prick that he was, he made a magical spear (or arrow) from this plant and gave it to Baldr's blind brother Hoor, where the gods were engaging in the new favourite pastime of chucking stuff at Baldr which would bounce of harmlessly. In many ways, you can see, they weren't much better than Loki. Anyway the inevitable happened, and so began a succession of events that led to Ragnarok, when a multitude of gods are killed, there is a succession of natural disasters, and the destruction of the world - the sun becomes black, the earth sinks into the sea, the stars vanish, steam rises, and flames touch the heavens. Quite an effort there.

So after all this, the earth reappears from the water, Hoor and Baldr return from Hel and everyone lives happily ever after. The end.

Judeo-Christian Undead

"And the Lord will send a plague on all the nations that fought against Jerusalem. Their people will become like walking corpses, their flesh rotting away. Their eyes will rot in their sockets. Their tongues will rot in their mouths."
Zechariah 14:12

Appropriate for a games such as the d20 supplement *Testament*, or any number of angels versus demons games that were particularly popular in the late 1990s (e.g., *In Nomine*, *Heaven and Earth*, *Rapture: The End of Days*), is the use of the undead within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The biblical quote is pretty explicit. Are there there are a few more suggestions that the dead will walk the earth? You betcha.

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by.

Isaiah 26:19-20

You have to hand it to Isaiah, that's pretty sound advise under the circumstances.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Daniel 12:2

Well the dead will definitely awake, although some will be embarrassed about the things they did a thousand or so years beforehand. Embarrassed zombies, think over that one for a while.

If anything it's just about zombies, even those who regain some of their intellect, think again. There's vampires to worry about as well, and is their want, they prey primarily among those who won't be noticed when they're gone.

There are those whose teeth are swords, whose fangs are knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mankind.

Proverbs 30:14

It's certainly not just the "Old Testament" either.

Unsurprisingly, some ask whether vampirism is such a good idea.

And said, "Far be it from me before my God that I should do this. Shall I drink the lifeblood of these men? For at the risk of their lives they brought it." Therefore he would not drink it. These things did the three mighty men.

1 Chronicles 11:19

There is, of course, references to time-dependent points where the dead rise.

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.
Revelation 20:5

Surprisingly, few thought that the world was going to face any sort of apocalypse in the year 1000 CE, as even most literate people used a regnal years system (e.g., the forth year of Jarl Olaf Tryggvason of Norway). There were a few medieval historians who knew different however - and they were very worried. It's a rich source of terror for historical-fantasy gamers; what if they were right?

But maybe some of these walking dead will be friendly.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

Matthew 27:51-53

Ah, walking dead saints. You mean, high level former clerics that have come back. What could possibly go wrong? Well sometimes you need to get advice from ghosts.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

Matthew 17:1-3

Contrary to popular opinion advocated by jokers on the Internet around Easter time, Jesus was definitely *not* a zombie. He was certainly not mindless, rotting, and to use the popular vernacular, nor did he want to consume brains (perhaps he wanted to consume minds or souls, at least metaphorically). Arguably Jesus could have been a ghoul, because one supposes he could have caused paralysis by touch, although as far as the Scriptures say, there is no mention of an graveyard stench. We can immediately rule out all the incorporeal undead, such as ghosts, wights etc because after the resurrection the wounds were present.

You know where this is heading. A king of kings, a former powerful magic-user, who still bares the wounds of their supposed mortality, and is themselves capable of raising the dead. Jesus was a lich.

Buddhist Mummies

In 2014, Drents Museum of the Netherlands conducted a CT scan of one of its Buddhist monk statues and found a mummified Buddhist monk inside it. According to the experts, the mummy was that of Buddhist master Liuquan, who had died around 1100AD. Another CT scan and endoscopy revealed Liuquan's internal organs had been removed and replaced with scripts covered in Chinese writing, presumably an early form of software virtualisation to replace hardware components.

But gamers know better than that. This is actually a 18th-level mummy-monk who will kick your arse to enlightenment and back again. Worse still, there's more than one of them.



Buddhist mummification, is a quite extraordinary practise and sometimes carried out as self-mummification (sokushinbutsu). The story is that in the Japanese version monks caused their own death by adhering to a wood-eating diet made up of salt, nuts, seeds, roots, pine bark, and urushi tea. They were then buried alive in a pine-wood box full of salt connected by a tube for air and would ring a bell signaling they were alive. The self-mummification of a Tibetan monk, who died ca. 1475, was acheived through a combination of meditation, prolonged starvation, and slow self-suffocation using a special belt that connected the neck with his knees in a lotus position.

As another example, in Thailand the body of Luang Pho Daeng is still on display; complete with sunglasses. He died in 1973 whilst meditating.

There are hundreds of known cases of these mummy-monks. What if they get sufficiently annoyed with something that they get up? Perhaps it is just as well that they have reached Buddha-hood. With no attachment to the world, nothing that happens will sufficiently upset them to the point where they rise to action.

Which is why some Buddhists claim that these monks are not actually dead, but rather in a deep meditative trance known as "tukdam".

Robert Cornish

To put it bluntly, Robert Cornish (1903-1963) was a reanimator, a modern day necromancer if you like. A brilliant student who graduated with honours from the University of California at the age of 18, and received his doctorate at 22. In 1932 he became interested in the idea of reviving the dead, initially by using a teeter-board to encourage blood-flow in the recently deceased, effectively by placing the corpse on a see-saw. CPR techniques were not well known until the 1950s, and as you can imagine trying to get blood to circulate via a see-saw was not going to the most successful process. Still, one can not help but be impressed by such efforts.

Second Dog Is Restored to Life

ROBERT E. CORNISH, California biologist, who amazed the scientific world last spring by reviving a dog clinically put to death (*MODERN MECHANIX AND INVENTIONS*, July, 1934) recently repeated the success of his original experiment with even more encouraging results.

Lazarus IV, subject of the first successful experiment, has learned to crawl, bark, sit up on its haunches and consume nearly a pound of meat a day. The dog is blind and cannot stand alone, but results encouraged Dr. Cornish to launch a new series of experiments.

Recently Lazarus V was put to death with an overdose of ether. Half an hour after its breathing had stopped and five minutes after its heart was stilled, the animal was revived by means of chemicals and artificial respiration. Dr. Cornish, enthusiastic, has been reported as saying that Lazarus V returned nearer normalcy in four days than the other Lazarus in thirteen days.



Dr. Robert E. Cornish, California biologist, is holding Lazarus IV and looking at Lazarus V. Both dogs were restored to life after they were clinically put to death.

After failures on human subjects from a variety of causes – and apparently trying every folk tale technique that was known - he began to experiment on dogs, eventually reaching a degree of success with forced circulation mixed with injections of epinephrine and anticoagulants. Antivivisectionists and the University had some problems with Dr. Cornish's fiendish plans and closed down his laboratory, forcing him to further his experiments at home (don't try this at home readers).

After the success on dogs, humans began to contact Cornish who was very interested in expanding his work. In the late 1940s, an application was received from a death-row inmate, Thomas H. McMonigle. A major problem was the inmate was to be executed by poison gas, and the corpse was normally left *in situ* for some hours. "He wants me to bring him back to life after his execution, in the interest of science.", said the ever-factual Dr. Cornish. But ultimately it is believed that Californian law enforcement refused the application on the concern that a reanimated murderer would be freed under "double jeopardy". If executed murderers could walk the streets again an hour after execution the supposed punishment deterrent would be somewhat lessened.

Dr. Cornish was also a practicing Roman Catholic, which led to some debate among leaders of that body about what they thought of the resurrection of dogs and murderers. In his final years he lived in a tin shack in Berkeley, having marketed a dentifrice, made a steam-resistant paint, and dealt in war surplus goods.

You might think that would be the end of it. After all bringing dogs back to life after death is one thing, but even after a few minutes one would expect that there would be some brain damage and the longer the corpse was left to lie, the more serious it would be. Dr. Cornish's dogs were revived, but let's just say they weren't bouncing around and narking.

Surely nobody would continue these experiments in reanimation

Behringer, W. et al. (2003). Survival without brain damage after clinical death of 60-120 mins in dogs using suspended animation by profound hypothermia. *Critical Care Medicine*, 31(5), 1523-31.

My Mother was a Zombie?

In 2014 a clinically dead woman who was pregnant was being kept alive against her family's wishes. How could such a situation arise? Ah well, it was Ireland, a country famous or notorious - depending on your point of view - for being the only democratic state with a constitutional ban on abortion (the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1983, was carried by referendum with 67% in favour).

In what became known as PP vs HSE, Ireland's High Court had to decide about what to do about zombie mothers. The facts were as follows: On November 27 2014 a woman in early pregnancy was admitted to hospital with nausea and headaches. Two days latter, she fell over and was unresponsive. By December 3, she was declared brain dead. At this stage she was fourteen weeks pregnant. She was then placed on life support.

The woman's family had to battle the issue through the High Court who, at least to some credit, were relatively quick about the issue. After being on life support for three weeks on December 26, 2014, they decided that the life support machine could be turned off.

None of the seven doctors who gave evidence at the case argued that life support should continue, nor did there was any prospect that the child would be born intact.

Meanwhile the woman's condition was deteriorating, as her brain rotted away. There was an open head wound and several infections, and there were concerns that the drugs being administered to the brain-dead-woman, would be affecting the unborn child.

In the case, an attempt was made to argue that the Irish language version of the Article 40.3.3 claimed that the State had an obligation to ensure the right to life "as far as possible". The Court however argued that that the prospects for a successful delivery of a live baby in this case "are virtually non-existent", and that the obligation meant that protection must not be "futile, impractical, or ineffective".

Of course, it could have gone the other way - and a drug-addled damaged child could have been born of a zombie mother. Now surely that would be super-villain potential.

We're Actually All Psychic Zombies Time-Travellers

A fascinating study by Adam Bear and Paul Bloom from Yale University has suggested that our brains seem to rewrite history so that the choices we make after an event seem to precede it. Why would we do such a thing? Because it generates a sense that we can predict things that in reality have already happened.

The experiment consisted of subjects viewing white circles and guessing which ones would turn red. The reported accuracy was 20% higher than chance, suggesting either a surprising level of psychic capability among the volunteers or they had tricked themselves (it is not uncommon, of course, for psychics to trick themselves - and other people).

So the next step was to vary the rate of change between the circles changing colour. Interestingly, the reported accuracy was the highest when the delays were the shortest.

Adam Bear and Paul Bloom at Yale University conducted some simple tests on volunteers. In one experiment, subjects looked at white circles and silently guessed which one would turn red. Once one circle had changed colour, they reported whether or not they had predicted correctly.

It seems that that we perceive the order of events correctly but then subconsciously swap the sequence in our memories so the prediction seems to come first. Or, in a similar manner, our brains confuse events and time, making more

significant errors in this perception between event and prediction when the time frame is shortest.

It could be that we're psychics, whose ability to predict the future is greatest when that time-frame is smallest. Or that we're time-travellers, who can journey at best into the very near future and snap-back to the right time to make a correct predictive choice. Or we're zombies, who despite our best intentions, have a brain that rewrites our sense of perception to make us feel that we've made the right prediction.

Adam Bear, Paul Bloom, "A Simple Task Uncovers a Postdictive Illusion of Choice", Psychological Science April 28, 2016 0956797616641943

Zombification and Mind Control in the Small World

Various parasites alter the behaviour of their hosts in destructive ways. They effectively turn them into zombies. It should be a relatively easy task for GMs to think of ways to convert these little horrors into effective undead for one's roleplaying game.

The female jewel wasp is the first example, with a way of ensuring that their children have plenty to eat. First they find a cockroach and inject a toxin that paralyzes its front legs. Then it strikes again, hitting part of the cockroach brain that determines movement. Unable to move and effectively zombiefied, the cockroach is dragged into a burrow, and the wasp eggs injected into it. Once hatched, the wasp larva will spend several days consuming the wasp, before converting its body in a pupa shell. A month later it will emerge, and the wonderful cycle of nature will continue.

Direct Injection of Venom by a Predatory Wasp into Cockroach Brain

Gal Haspel, Lior Ann Rosenberg, Frederic Libersat, Zlotowski Center for Neuroscience and Department of Life Sciences, Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheva, Israel

<http://www.bgu.ac.il/life/Faculty/Libersat/pdf/JNB.2003b.pdf>

Females of the Costa Rican wasp (what is it with these wasps?) Hymenopelmecis argyraphaga lay their eggs on the abdomens of unlucky orb spiders called Plesiometra argyra. The wasp larva effectively drugs the spider, leading it to build a new type of web. This web is designed to support the cocoon that the wasp larva will build after it has killed and eaten the spider.

Under the Influence: webs and building behavior of plesiometra argyra (araneae, tetragnathidae) when parasitized by hymenopelmecis argyraphaga (hymenoptera, ichneumonidae)

William G. Eberhard, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, and Escuela de Biología, Universidad de Costa Rica, Ciudad Universitaria, Costa Rica.

Journal of Arachnology 29(3):354-366. 2001

"Enough of wasps", gentle readers cry, "I am freaked out enough already". OK then, how about flukes? Not so lucky?

The lancet liver fluke lives inside various grazing animals, unsurprisingly in the liver. When it lays its eggs, they make their way to the world through the animal's defecation. Certain snails, being what they are, think that cowshit tastes awesome and eat the eggs. Which then hatch inside the snail (oops).

The snail, understandably disliking this turn of events, creates a cyst around the nearly-hatched parasite and coughs them up in a mucus-covered spitball. These flukes know how to party.

The parasitic slimeballs are then eaten by some particularly daft ants. They flukes make their way through the ants system, eventually finding the brain. They then use their awesome fluke-mind-control powers to zombify the ant, and cause it to seek the highest blades of grass it can find, where it will stay motionless ... until a grazing animal comes along, and the beautiful cycle of nature continues.

Behavioral and Morphological Changes in Carpenter Ants Harboring Dicrocoeliid Metacercariae
W Patrick Carney, American Midland Naturalist (1969), Volume: 82, Issue: 2, Pages: 605-611

Following a similar trajectory, the fluke *euhaplorchis californiensis* begins its life in the ocean-dwelling horn snail. From there they produce larvae that swim around estuaries and salt marshes looking for killifish. Once a victim has been located it makes its way to the fish's brain, where it attaches itself as a cyst causes the killifish to become obvious as possible - swimming close the surface, jumping around and so forth - making it a very attractive target to wading birds.

When healthy killifish fish is stressed, it produces serotonin from the raphe nuclei region of the brain. The parasite larvae block that response, causing lower serotonin in the hippocampus, while boosting dopamine in the hypothalamus. The result? A fish full of energy that makes every effort to get caught by motion-sensing predators. Once the killifish is

swallowed, the flukes can hook up in the belly of the bird, their eggs are released back into the water in the bird's droppings to be eaten by horn snails and start the cycle anew.



decapitated head.

cf., <http://www.sbs.utexas.edu/fireant/faq%20answers.html>
(Image from National Geographic, May 2009)

Three Cases of Zombification

In 1997 The Lancet provides a short, but fascinating study, entitled '*Clinical findings in three cases of zombification*'.

Prof Roland Littlewood, Chavannes Douyon, MD, "Clinical findings in three cases of zombification", The Lancet, Volume 350, No. 9084, p1094–1096, 11 October 1997
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(97\)04449-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(97)04449-8)

These are literal example of zombification, following the that were reported to have taken place in Haiti. The example

zombies, identified by their initials, died, were buried, and then were noticed by others. The article begins by noting that the Haitian Penal Code (Article 246) considers zombification to the equivalent of murder, explaining that Haitians are typically not buried but encased in above-ground tombs. According to the authors, zombie cultural tradition argues that the person consists of their body, the animating principle, and agency. The process of control is described as follows:

"In zombification, the latter is retained by the sorcerer [boko], usually in a fastened bottle or earthenware jar where it is known as the zombi astral. The animated body remains without will or agency as the zombi cadavre, which becomes the slave of the boko and works secretly on his land or is sold to another boko for the same purpose. In Haiti, the term is also used in metaphor to refer to extreme passivity and control by another."

From the three examples, FI was approximately thirty years old when they died and were buried in the family tomb next to their house. Three years later they were recognised by a friend and relatives, wandering near the village. The friends and relatives accused the husband of zombifying her. A local court authorised the opening of her tomb, which was full of stones. FI was admitted to a psychiatric institution and diagnosed with catatonic schizophrenia.

WD was the eldest son of an alleged former 'tonton macoute' (secret policeman) under the Duvaliers' regime. At 18, he suddenly became ill and died three days later and was buried. Almost two years later he was at cockfight, and recognised his father, accusing him of zombifying him. WD was diagnosed with epilepsy and "organic brain syndrome", whatever that's supposed to be. Perhaps having an organic brain is unusual in Haiti.

The third example, MM, was the younger sister of our principal informant. At the age of 18, MM had joined some friends in prayers for a neighbour who had been zombified. However, she herself then became ill and she died in a few days. The family suspected revenge sorcery. Thirteen years later, MM, reappeared at the town market and had been kept as a zombi in a village a hundred miles north, having born a child to another zombie (zombies can breed!). With the death of the sorcerer, their son released MM from bondage and she made her way home.

The authors conclude that the most probable explanation for these three cases is mistaken identity and wandering individuals with mental illnesses. However the conclusion also suggests that possibility of rapid and incorrect burial, with bodies stolen by boko, and then the repeat use of *Datura stramonium* to control the "deceased person". This particular approach has been suggested in a number of publications, for example in reference to Clairvius Narcisse, who had been turned into a zombie in such a fashion.

Kao, C.Y., and T. Yasumoto, 1986, "Tetrodotoxin and the Haitian zombie." *Toxicon*, 24:747–749.

Kao, C.Y., and T. Yasumoto, 1990, "Tetrodotoxin in 'zombie powder.'" *Toxicon*, 28:29–132.

Undead Mathematics

A group of authors, one with the interesting surname "Smith?" (yes, with the question mark), mathematically modelled what was the most effective way of dealing with a zombie apocalypse. After explorations of the alternatives, the zombie utilised in the study is the modern popular culture version; one of the living dead with an insatiable desire for human flesh. A zombie bite would leave an open wound and the mixing of zombie saliva and blood would lead to infection and transformation.

Applying statistical modelling, the basic model has been played out many times; there is a zombie outbreak and in a very short period of time the zombies overwhelm the "susceptibles". A quarantine model is proposed as an alternative, with the possible chance of a breach. Depressingly, this attempt with delay but not prevent the eventual takeover of the zombie horde.

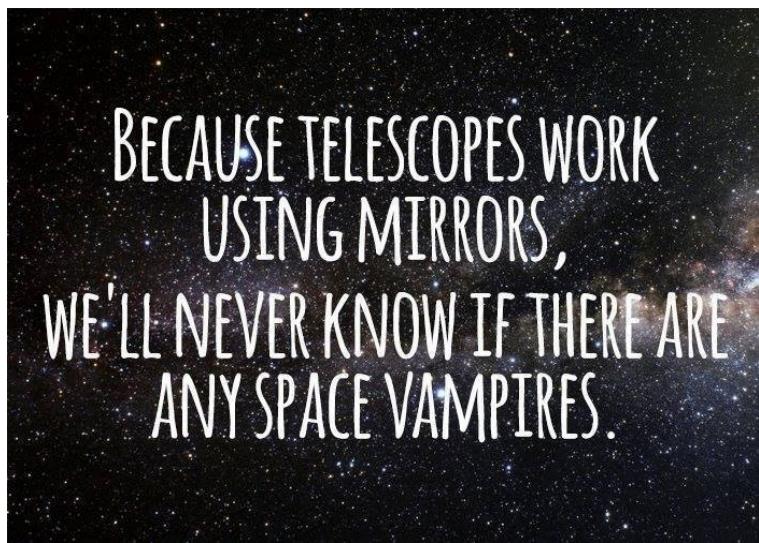
An optimistic model explores the possibility of a cure for the zombie disease; however it is not one which provides immunity (i.e., a zombie becomes a susceptible). In this case the zombies still overwhelm the susceptibles, but do not completely destroy them as there is a sufficient number of zombies who are "cured" to keep the human population low, but relatively stable.

The final model proposes successive waves of attacks on the zombie horde, depending on resources, resulting in an impulsive effect. Striking early and striking with force rapidly reduces the zombie numbers and subsequent attacks must occur before the zombie population can grow again. With this approach the forces of humanity can defeat the zombie horde. In its conclusion the article states:

"An outbreak of zombies infecting humans is likely to be disastrous, unless extremely aggressive tactics are employed against the undead. While aggressive quarantine may eradicate the infection, this is unlikely to happen in practice. A cure would only result in some humans surviving the outbreak, although they will still coexist with zombies. Only sufficiently frequent attacks, with increasing force, will result in eradication, assuming the available resources can be mustered in time."

*Phillip Munz, Ioan Hudea, Joe Imad, Robert J. Smith?
When Zombies Attack! Mathematical Modelling of an Outbreak of Zombie Infection
Infectious Disease Modelling Research Progress, pp113-150, 2009*

Zombies are not, of course, the only one of the undead subject to a statistical analysis. In a multinational research paper, researchers from Ireland, the Czech Republic, Russia, and Germany reviewed the "intertemporal interactions between species based on differential equations", specifically vampires and humans. Mathematical models are provided with hindsight analysis that show the exponential growth rate of human populations. A brief historical account of vampires is provided, for a "predator and prey" population model. "The growth of vampire population will be determined by the quality and quantity of interactions with humans." Vampire slayers are also introduced to the model. It is possible, using the Lotka-Volterra system, for a stationary situation, where the number of predators and prey reaches a stable number, allowing for the two species to co-exist.



Reviewing a variety of popular culture sources however, the researchers were pessimistic of such co-existence. A Stoker-King model ("Dracula" and "Salem's Lot"), where killed humans return as vampires, leads to a situation where the human population would be defined as "critically endangered" after a mere 165 days. Elaborating from this, where vampires must feed and conversions are rare, the Rice model (Vampire Chronicles), the human population is also effectively wiped out however it takes 48.7 years.

A third scenario, the Harris-Meyer-Kostova model (based on Stephenie Meyer's Twilight series, Charlaine Harris's "Sookie Stackhouse (Southern

Vampire) series", the "True Blood" TV series and Elizabeth Kostova's "The Historian"), proposes a world where vampires (mostly) peacefully co-exist with humans. Vampires in this model do not need to feed or kill humans, and conversion is a difficult process. This may be the only manner in which the "Twilight" series has any degree of a

plausible depiction of vampires, and even it is clearly by accident.

Wadim Strielkowski, Evgeny Lisin, and Emily Welkins, "Mathematical Models of Interactions between Species: Peaceful Co-existence of Vampires and Humans Based on the Models Derived from Fiction Literature and Films", Applied Mathematical Sciences, Vol. 7, 2013, no. 10, pp453-470

A Neuroscientific Approach to Zombies

Tim Verstylen and Brad Voytek are neuroscientists think that archetypical zombie behaviour can explained. In '*Do Zombies Dream of Electric Sheep? A Neuroscientific View of the Zombie Brain'* (<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10305.html>), the the assistant professors of cognitive science provide details of the symptoms and causes of what they call 'Consciousness Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' (CDHD).

The first issue is poor impulse control and violent behaviors on the part of zombies. As a related matter, the zombie lacks the ability to have a 'flight or fight' response. According to the researchers, this is explicable from damage to neural circuits.

The second issue is that zombies have notoriously bad motor skills. They stumble about, they always look like they're about to fall, and they move very slowly. The argument goes tht they have damaged cerebellum, the small brain structure at the base the neck, which is coordination of muscular activity.

Thirdly, zombies aren't exactly known known for their verbal acumen. Talk to them and the seem confused. Often they are just able to mutter the object of their deepest desire: "Brains!". Evidently zombies suffer from aphasia, unable to communicate and barely able to express their single and simple concepts. There is a variety of neurological causes which could suggest a variety of zombie minds!

Further, zombies struggle with facial recognition. People whom they have been close to for years may result in a confused moment of recognition until the desire for brains takes over. This suggest that zombies have a damaged fusiform face area of the brain, near the bottom of the neo-cortex, towards the back of the head.

But what is it with brains and their desire to chow down on the flesh of the living? Well, the researchers don't deal with that directly, but they do discuss hunger. There is, of course, a tight link between hunger and brain activity, and there are two chemicals that regulate hunger and satiation. If these are blocked or, then a person can suffer from constant ravenous behaviour.

Put it altogether, you have a collection of conditions that explain how the zombie virus transforms the human brain.

Don't Mourn, Organize!

Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in the Republic of India, and indeed, the most populous subdivision in the world with almost two hundred million inhabitants. Like other parts of the world which have been known for poverty and a high population density, it has also had its fair share of corruption, especially involving what is a relatively and increasingly scarce commodity that is a human necessity and in fixed supply; land.

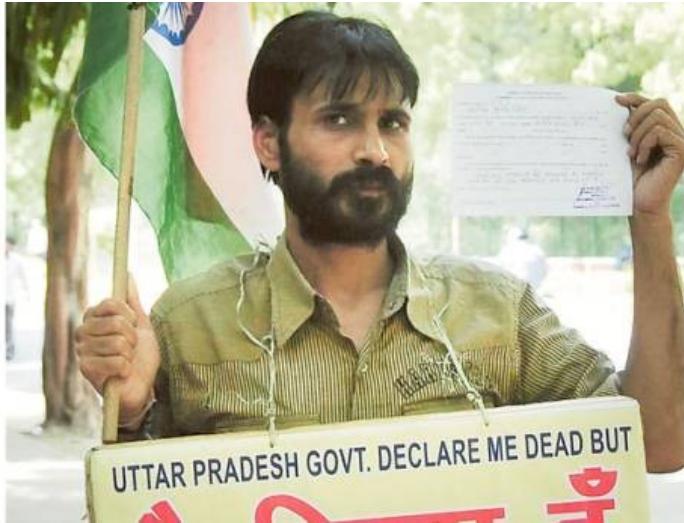
In 1976 as a young man Lal Bihari applied for a bank loan. He visited the revenue office at its district headquarters, Azamgarh, to obtain a proof of identity and found that his application was rejected for one of the more unusual reasons - he was officially listed as 'dead'.

Following some investigations it was discovered that his uncle had bribed a government official to register him as dead,

so that he would get the ownership of Bihari's ancestral land at Khalilabad, which measured less than an acre. Unsurprisingly incensed at his status, Bihari began the difficult process of undoing the error, facing a bureaucracy known for inefficiencies and corruption.

Taking the additional name Mritak (deceased) Bihari also discovered that there was a number of other individuals in the same situation. Forming the Uttar Pradesh Mritak Sangh (Uttar Pradesh Association of Dead People), they began to campaign for legal recognition that they were, in fact, alive. By 2004 the association had over 20,000 members throughout India, and had succeeded in having four members legally defined as alive - including Bihari who, after

standing for election against the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1989, was acknowledged as being alive in 1994. In 2003, Bihari was awarded the Ig Nobel Peace Award.



Also following the political path was Santosh Kumar Singh who had been declared dead for nine years before deciding to run for President. After moving to Mumbai, he fell in love and married a woman from a dalit (lower caste) family. Incensed relatives - the family was thakur (upper caste) - decided to teach Singh a lesson; they socially outcast them, then had him declared missing, and shortly afterwards, dead. Unsurprisingly, the relatives acquired his land and property. Would you be surprised that this also happened in Uttar Pradesh?

(image from Gulf News)

For gamers and other fiction writers whose setting involves the walking dead similar issues can arise, especially with those undead with effective cognition. It is perhaps unsurprising that vampires and liches are so powerful - if they were not their land and property would be seized by opportunistic relatives. But what if they were in an advanced industrialised democracy? Could a vampire stand up to a SWAT team? Or would they be driven from their crumbling gothic mansion?

Under such circumstances it is probable that they might need to begin a political campaign for legal rights and recognition. Rather like the unfortunate individuals in India who are among "the living dead".

See:

"Azamgarh Journal; Back to Life in India, Without Reincarnation"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/24/world/azamgarh-journal-back-to-life-in-india-without-reincarnation.html>

"Plight of the Living Dead"

<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2054133,00.html>

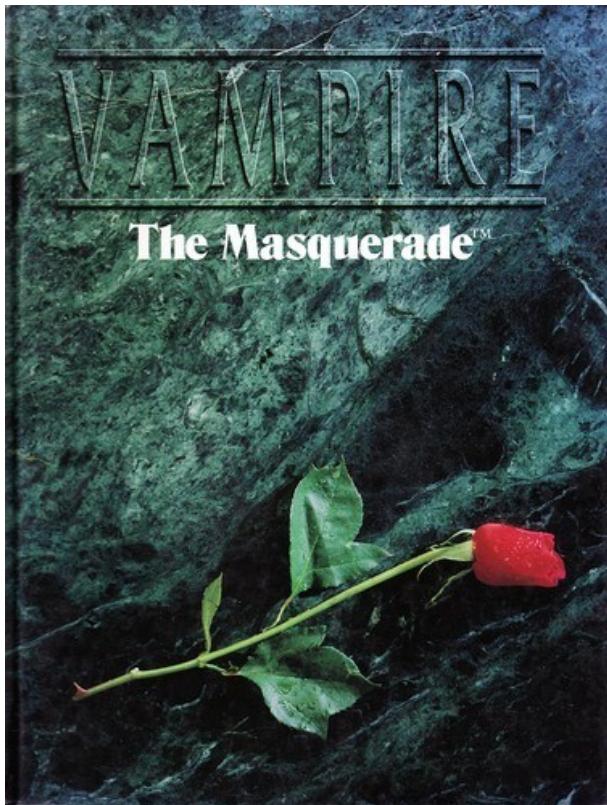
"Dead' man in India must prove he is alive"

<http://gulfnews.com/news/asia/india/dead-man-in-india-must-prove-he-is-alive-1.1048301>

UNDEAD RPG REVIEWS

by *Lev Lafayette*

Vampire : The Masquerade



Physical Product and Preface

It is possibly the single most influential representation of undead in the history of roleplaying games and arguably the second most important roleplaying game in existence, after Advanced Dungeons and Dragons. Having already produced a softcover first edition (which generated sufficient playtester feedback), the hardbacked second edition of Vampire : The Masquerade is an extremely well-produced book, tightly bound with semi-gloss paper. The presentation is extremely good as well. Pages are given an appropriate border with the right amount of white space, each page is marked with the chapter, title and page number, headings and sub-headings are clear. It is mostly presented in a serif font with two-column justification with a four page index, but an woefully inadequate table of contents that even lacks page number references.

Artwork from a book that notes a chuckle-worthy trademark of "Gothic-Punk" is to a particular style, and it does not fail to impress. Both the simple but evocative red rose on the cover by Mark Pace and Chris McDonough and the various black-and-white internal art are of a high quality, showing both technical acumen and a good sense of the representational style, especially those pieces by Tim Bradstreet. Despite several different

internal artists with different techniques the overall effect does not clash, although a fair criticism is that the art is rarely contextual except when absolutely necessary, such as with sample NPCs or Clans.

The organisation of the text and writing is not entirely to my taste. The book is broken up into three "books" each with three chapters. Following a thirteen page Preface, which provides the first is "Background" material describing the setting and style of the game is fluffy detail, taking up over fifty pages. The next set of chapters, "Becoming", also weighs in at around fifty pages and covers matters of core rules, character generation, and roleplaying advice. The third set of chapters, "Permutations", at over one hundred pages, includes character traits, character development and rule elaborations, and dramatic resolution. In addition to this there is a handy twenty-five page appendix which includes some handy generic NPCs and a introductory setting and scenario. The writing style throughout is mixed; it does a fair job at expressing the appropriate style for the setting, but does so in a manner that lacks economy. Of note is the use of literary and popular culture references to illustrate a section.

The Preface really covers the core setting information; this is a book about being a particular type of monster, an ageless vampire, a member of a community that makes a great deal of effort to remain anonymous. These are not entirely the cinematic sort – they can tolerate crosses, they have a reflection in mirrors, but they do burn in sunlight. They have ghouls, mortals under their sway who have drunk from the kindred but have not been converted. Most



important however is “the hunger”, the endless desire for blood and the incredible ecstasy that it brings.

Background

The first chapter, with the title “Introduction”, covers a lengthy introduction to roleplaying with an emphasis on the storytelling aspect, and again references to the thematic considerations. It is a fairly good introduction, but overly long. Effectively the entire chapters could have been reduced to a couple of pages without losing a sense of its importance.

The second chapter, “Setting”, is what it says on the tin. The style is expressed as “Gothic-Punk”, a world like our own but that is far grimmer – much of the happiness and levity has been turned off. Of particular note are the social distinctions within vampire society and the role of a local prince, or elder vampire, that has at least nominal control over an area. Vampire society has more than its fair share of intrigue, and “the Traditions” – the most important being the masquerade (do not reveal the existence of vampires), the domain (the prince rules), the progeny (do not sire vampires without the permission of an Elder), and so forth. The traditions are enforced by the largest vampire sect, the Camarilla. Smaller sects include the rebellious Sabbat and the distant Inoccu. Another important features in the vampire setting are the bloodlines, which in a weird sort of way are sort of character

class and culture (e.g., the Brujah are rebels, the Malkavian are the insightful crazies, Toreador are bohemian artistes, Ventrue are social elites and so forth). Vampires have their share of enemies and concerns (witch hunters, government, inquisition, etc). The chapter concludes with a few pages of lexicon.

The last chapter of the first book deals with “storytelling”, which is a lengthy description and advice for gamemasters (or “storytellers” in this system). It is mainly various tools of the trade, to provide matters of pacing and intervention. The advice is sound, but rather like the first chapter, far too verbose and something that could, and should have, been completed in less pages.

Becoming

By page 75 and the fourth chapter, we're finally introduced to some rules. This starts with timescales (turn, scene, chapter, chronicle). The core mechanic is based on a d10 dice pool of typically the Trait and Ability (e.g., Perception plus Alertness) against a difficulty target number, with degrees of success based on how many dice in the pool beat the target difficulty. Each die result of a '1' cancels a success, and if more '1's than successes are rolled a botch results. Whilst at first glance all this sounds fine, but more careful investigation reveals some unfortunate quirks – such as the fact that the greater the dice pool the greater the botch chance. Actions are resolved as either simple, extended, resisted, and resisted and extended. Basic options for teamwork are also provided by combining results.

The following chapter provides character creation (yes, finally). It's effectively point-buy system starting with character concept, including selection of clan, nature and demeanor (optional). A distribution of attribute points is the second step, distributed among Physical (Strength, Dexterity, Stamina), Mental (Charisma, Manipulation, Appearance), and Social (Perception, Intelligence, Wits) attributes. The same is then applied to Abilities (Talents, Skills, Knowledges), then Advantages (special power Disciplines, Backgrounds, Virtues), base scores for Willpower, Humanity, and Blood

Pool, and then a distribution of free points. Of particular note in these components is the incorporation of game-setting themes (willpower, humanity, and blood pool) into the game system, and the sense of balance in a guided point-buy system.

The sixth chapter is entitled “Chronicle” and it’s a Storyteller advice chapter. Whereas the previous one (chapter three) was about the art of telling a story, this one is about the art of setting up scenarios and narratives, using literary elements such as motif, setting, characters, antagonists, and scheme (i.e., planning the narrative direction). A variety of conflict and narrative elements are provided, along with story archetypes. Again, the advice is sound, but the organisation a little sporadic and the writing is a bit fluffy.

Permutations

The third books starts of with a chapter on “Traits” beginning with specialities for high abilities allowing an additional potential die when appropriate – why it was mentioned in the original rules section is perplexing. The clans are elaborated in detail, in terms of their history and attitude, appearance, organisational structure, and approach towards others. In actual character creation the jumping between this section and the fifth chapter is common, as it moves on to elaborate the meanings of various attributes, abilities, disciplines, backgrounds, and so forth. This is a utterly solid, rules-heavy chapter whose content could have been better distributed throughout appropriate sections of the book.

The eighth chapter, “Systems” covers the rules for character improvement (experience points), which are heavily based on roleplaying and heroism at the end of each chapter, and with additional points at the end of each story. There is also rules for healing for both normal wounds (very rapid) and aggravated wounds (not so much), typically those acquired from sunlight, undead attacks and so forth. A variety of sources of injury and their ratings are provided, and the resultant humanity-based torpor for the equivalent of death. Mental states are also described in this chapter with vampires being surprisingly sensitive beings and subject to frenzy through provocation. Rules are also provide for courage in the presence of fire, derangements, and creating blood bonds.

The ninth and final chapter, “Drama” again initially seems to follows the preceding Storyteller advice chapters. However in this instance there is a variety of effectively spot rules for applications of physical, social, and mental actions that can be quickly derived. Following this is an step-by-step presentation of the combat system, which follows the time-honoured tradition of initiative, attack, and damage. Appropriately the ranged and melee weapons list is quite modest. Finally the chapter gives an example of play, split between a story and game system explanation.

Conclusion and Assessment

It is not unfair to say that Vampire : The Masquerade changed roleplaying and changed it for the better. Physically it was a rock-solid piece of work; strong and attractive. It had an innovative game system and setting, added new thematic content, and provided a new emphasis from game and simulation to story. It must also be said it attracted a large influx of new gamers to the hobby by making an explicit appeal to the real world gothic-punk subculture, many of whom are still playing RPGs to this day.

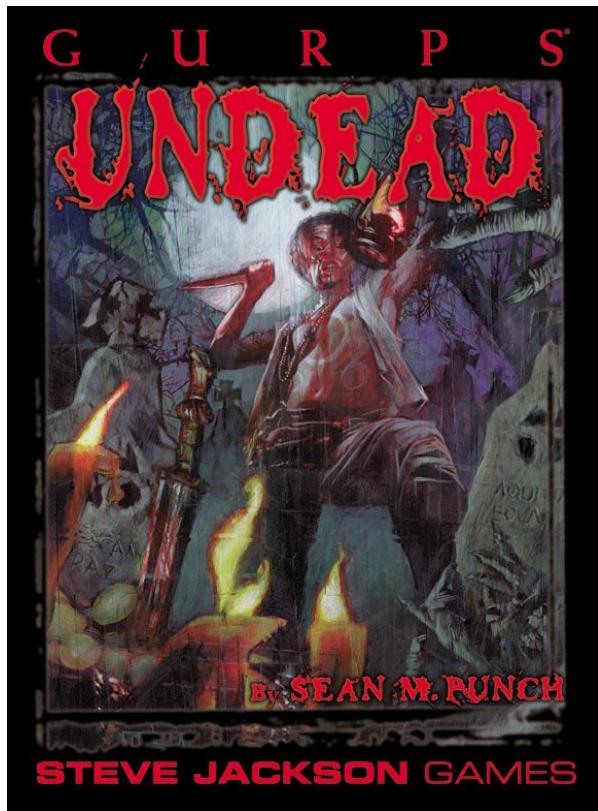
The greatest weaknesses is in the organisation of the text and the text's density, especially in some of the Storyteller's chapters – it's not quite rambling but it's hardly up to an average standard. The two things mean that the style and substance ratings are lower than what they should have been, at least at the point level. Overall in aggregate this game is one of the most stylish that has ever been produced. With well above average substance as well, it stands up will to the test of time and undoubtably deserves a place on every RPG collector's shelf.

Style: 1 + .6 (layout) + .9 (art) + .9 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .9 (product) = 5.2

Substance: 1 + .8 (content) + .4 (text) + .8 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.5

GURPS Undead

Introduction and Physical Product



GURPS Undead comes a part of a stock-standard product for the third edition line; softback, a solid glue binding, 128p, and with a good cover piece by Rogerio Vilela. The interior art includes many pieces but the irrepressible Dan Smith, with a scattering of others that supplement rather than detract from the style. The artwork throughout shows talent and creativity (the undead are always fun to draw) and are occasionally contextual - however one does get the sense that these started as "undead filler" and were placed after-the-fact. The format switches between two-column justified to single-column with side-bars; it is a little disconcerting and probably detracts from the overall presentation.

There are six main chapters to the book, roughly of similar size. It starts with a history of the undead, followed by "dealing with the undead", then various game system mechanics, sample undead beings, sample characters, and finally undead campaigns. There is also a two page table of contents, a solid index, and recommended reading. The writing style is typical for GURPS products - a mixture of formal and informal, the occasional joke and semi-random use of italics. It's not really to my personal taste, but it is not a disaster by any stretch of the imagination.

Facts, Theories, and Mechanics

The first two chapters can basically be described as 'facts and theories', with one chapter on each. The factual part is a historical and cultural overview of the undead. It starts off on a few tangential matters (funeral rites, eschatology) before delving into various cultural beliefs, covering in a rather sweeping manner the classical world, "eastern" beliefs, medieval approaches, the pre-Columbian Americas, and finally modern and cinematic approaches. Surprisingly included in its own section is various "trappings" of the undead; mummification, tombs, grave robbing, and so forth - even though these are very much culturally specific.

This approach continues in the second chapter. It starts with undead origins, giving a scatter-gun overview of cultural and fictional approaches, with a split between "the restless" (e.g., ghosts), "the willful" (e.g., vampires, liches), and "the enslaved" (e.g., zombies). The same approach is taken to describe what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how does one put the damn things down.

The third chapter, "The Mechanics of Reanimation" is various theories of how the undead operate. That is, how do they come into being, what form do they take. The first section is essentially how to build your own undead by starting with a broad form-based template and adding in strengths and weaknesses after that. It is not, one must emphasise, as crunchy as a "GURPS Vehicles" for the undead, but it's sort of in the same principle – unlike that book there is more attention to providing examples of actual undead rather than just how to build them!

Mechanics, Characters, Campaigns

The fourth chapter is an application of the template system to some sample undead and sample characters. The major types receive quite a lot of detail; there's two pages of game statistics and description for the ghost, lich, shade, shadow, spectre, wight, wraith, zombie and a page-and-a-half for a mummy, revenant, skeleton, and vampire. Sometimes these are culturally clumped, so that the variety of culturally different vampires are given some extra advantages and disadvantages to the standard form - although I cannot help but be disappointed that my personal favourite, the Penanggalan, missed the cut. Various other, more unusual, forms of undead (undead animals, undead plants, undead microbes), receive significantly briefer descriptions.

Character notes (both PC and NPC) are provided in the following chapter. There are standard templates for living characters which are undead related (e.g., priests, grave-robbers, necromancers, hunters, etc), followed by various templates for undead characters (e.g., evil overlords, guardians, righter of wrongs), with suggested undead types. Obviously the "brainless" undead aren't a major feature. Also very much worthy of note are various sidebar notes which add to the various advantages, disadvantages, and skills from GURPS Compendium I, specifically for undead settings. To say the least, these are a very useful addition for clarification and elaborations.

The final chapter, campaigns, starts with the thoroughly sensible observation that the undead when present, often take a prominent role and are tied to the notion of horror. After all, they are not subtle! Campaign issues include the origins of the undead, types, power level, and interactions. GMs have to concern themselves with their quantity, location, various stories generated about them, the undead as foes (and occasional allies), and finally a few notes the use of the undead with other GURPS supplements. Again, the sidebars are very useful, discussing campaigns in a somewhat literary model including genre, mode (i.e., style), background (i.e., setting), sample campaigns, and historical motifs. Rather pleasingly, concluding with "zombies and chainsaws".

Overall

Physically attractive, a solid presentation, and well organised on a chapter level, the weaknesses in terms of style is the inability of the game to generate a sufficient sense of undead horror, and a somewhat confusing approach between contextual approaches in some chapters and the universalistic approaches in others. In terms of content, the text is a little on the verbose side, although it does cover a lot of ground, especially in terms of rules elaborations. The book is both useful in the sense of being immediately useful on the gaming table, and useful for the developing background material. Whilst it lacks panache, it is a solid product and will be helpful for GURPS undead campaigns - it does what it says on the tin.

Style: $1 + .4 \text{ (layout)} + .7 \text{ (art)} + .4 \text{ (coolness)} + .5 \text{ (readability)} + .7 \text{ (product)} = 3.7$

Substance: $1 + .7 \text{ (content)} + .5 \text{ (text)} + .6 \text{ (fun)} + .6 \text{ (workmanship)} + .7 \text{ (system)} = 4.1$

ALL FLESH MUST BE EATEN

Introduction and Product

The first edition of All Flesh Must Be Eaten (AFMBE) is perhaps the most well-known roleplaying contemporary implementation of survival roleplaying game settings, perhaps mainly because of its main antagonist component; zombies. Despite some claims to the contrary, it seems that popular culture has not tired of the zombie apocalypse setting, which really kicked off with 28 Days Later in 2002 and The Walking Dead comic series in 2003. In any case, AFMBE has been a hit and because RPGs are awesome and cutting edge, was published in 1999 before the rest of the world caught up. Two of its fiction supplements (Prometheus Unwound and The Book of All Flesh) have won Origins awards.

AFMBE comes in a 232 page B5 sized hardback with good stitching. The cover art is, unsurprisingly, a bunch of rampaging zombies of average technique. Interior greyscale art is also of the same quality but almost invariably as filler

art rather than being contextually bound (the sample characters are an obvious exception). Text is provided in two-columns, justified, with a serif font with boxed elements. There is little waste in white-space yet page numbers and chapter titles are also mostly clear. The table of contents is minimal, but there is a four page index. The book is written in a style that is informal without becoming chatty, and provides information in a manner that is lucid and fairly precise.

There are six chapters to the book and an appendix (character sheet, glossary, skill list, source material). The first

chapter is setting information, 'The Dead Rise' which contains a fiction introduction and a description of what roleplaying games are about and what AFMBE is about, along with elements like dice notation etc. The second chapter, 'Survivors', is character generation, skills, and pregenerated archetypes. The third, 'Shambling 101', is the game system, including combat because there is plenty of that in a game like this. The fourth, 'Implements of Destruction', is the various personal possessions that one may find handy in the zombie apocalypse setting. The fifth, 'Anatomy of a Zombie' discusses the various ways that zombies have come into being in a setting and the final chapter, 'Worlds in Hell', provides several fleshed out examples of zombie settings.

Character Generation

Character generation is based on selecting a character type, determining attributes, qualities and drawbacks, skills, metaphysics, and possessions. Several pre-generated archetypes are provided for instant play. It's a point-buy system with Character Type determining the general level of competence; Norms are average types who have just that little bit of experience and grit that's allowed them to survive the zombie apocalypse., Survivors are the truly tough characters who make up the heroic protagonists of the genre., and the Inspired are

those who have a touch of supernatural ability but are typically not as tough as Survivors. Character attributes are Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Perception, and Willpower with a typical range of 1-5. There are also secondary, derived, attributes for Life Points, Endurance Points, Essence Pool, and Speed. With the exception of Speed these are all notably resource characteristics which can change in play. There are some excessive break points in the Strength chart and some clunky rule twists for especially low stats to ensure that they fit in the game system, but as a whole it's fairly workable.

Qualities and drawbacks are just what one would expect that they mean, and are left with a fairly coarse definitions and a typical range of 1-3 points, positive and negative. One of the more unusual values is the 3-point quality for Artistic Talent, which also adds to a character's essence pool. There is a section on specifically supernatural benefits (e.g., Accursed, Inspiration) some of which are quite expensive and powerful. In addition to these there are skills, normally rated from 1 to 5 (at the same cost in character points in generation) but with a potential higher levels (with a graduated breakpoint at 5 in costs). Also costing a further investment are "special skills" which have an apparent intrinsic difficulty in learning (e.g., martial arts, medicine). In addition there are Skill Types, representing requisite specialisations that must be taken (e.g., Guns - Handguns) and optional Skill Specialties which provide a +2 bonus when relevant (e.g., History - Early Middle Ages), the latter of which may be taken at extra cost. There are just over sixty base skills, typically described in a paragraph or two, with occasional system use information. In addition to this, there are several metaphysical powers (Healing, Holy Fire, Blinding, Blessing) for those who run supernatural stories; understandably these do better on the system information.

For those in a hurry there are twelve archetypical characters of varying powers are provided; Athlete, Biker, Cheerleader, Detective, Goth Chick, Hacker, Police Officer, Priest, Reporter, Scientist, Soldier, and Video Store Clerk. They're fully developed characters with an often amusing personality background. These are also obviously all modern setting characters, which is a little unfortunate as one of the strengths of the basic narrative is the variety of historical

settings it can be used for. I also grimaced a bit at the proposed female roles (Cheerleader, Goth Chick, Reporter); the Cheerleader really is an idiot (suitable for zombie comedy only) and the Reporter is depicted as self-centred and still wearing heels, which fortunately doesn't affect her Speed. The Goth however has the Inspired power to control the zombies; so if you're female in the zombie apocalypse, you'd better be the weirdo. All this is easily enough to change of course - the game system doesn't differentiate between male and female - but cringeworthy nonetheless.

System

The game system, covered in the 'Shambling 101' chapter, allows for two main resolution modes; a random (dice or card) based system, or a straight comparison of values against target numbers, which is termed "story-driven roleplaying". The random method is simply a d10 roll plus appropriate attributes and skills, modified, and if the total is 9 or more, the action succeeds (on average, roughly equal to a 'challenge' target number in the story-driven method). If the action does not have an appropriate skill, the attribute doubles. In addition, in the random method, die-rolls are open-ended with raw results 1 and 10, with additional rolls at -5 and +5 respectively and the penalty or bonus added as appropriate if it results in a negative or above 10, or, as a simpler option an additional d6-1. An outcome table gives a description of six-plus degrees of success, but with no equivalent for failures. In addition there is no equivalent for the diceless method either, although that should have been trivial to include.

One of the great stylistic elements of zombie films is people freaking out with regular and close encounters with the walking dead and the use of firearms to prevent being zombie food. Fear tests are used for the former, with a Difficult Willpower test for most characters, and a Simple Willpower test for Inspired characters, with modifiers depending on gore and hideousness. A failed test results on with a d10 roll on the Fear Table, with a Willpower reducing effects, but with the hideousness and gore modifiers adding to it. Characters can lose Essence as a result of such encounters, and if reduced below zero they're pretty much useless or crazy.

Combat is carried out in turns of roughly one to five seconds. Turn sequence is declaration of intents, initiative (determined by the GM, or d10+Dex), actions, and damage resolution. Multiple actions are at -2 per action, including dodge. There are various spot rules for targeted shots, multiple shots, corrosives, etc. Damage is meted out in Life Points (or Dead Point, if it's a zombie), with armor reducing damage by a random amount. Weapons inflict damage multiplied by the Strength of the attacker, for melee, or by a number modified by range for ranged weapons.

There are graduated effects at seriously wounded (five or less) and unconscious (zero or less), or at death's door (negative ten). Obviously there are scaling problems with such absolute values, which may be of concern if your GM is inspired by the ideas of zombie elephants or zombie mice. There is also a short foray into vehicle and air combat rules, because running over zombies or strafing them is par for the course. The Life Point and damage range is quite high, which does suit the genre of gradually grinding down the protagonists. Overall, there's some likeable features in the combat system, but in actual play it lacks variety.

Throughout the system, random die roll are also provided with bracketed values for the diceless version of system resolution. All of them, however, make an "off by one" error per die. For example, a .357 handgun does $d8*4$ damage in the random method or 16 ($4*4$) in the diceless method. This is incorrect of course, as indices on a die start at one, not zero. The diceless method should provide, for example, 18 ($4.5*2$). Not a big deal? Well, when that Walker takes you out with 2 Dead Points left, just remember your grade school statistics.

Equipment, Zombies and their Worlds

Taking up about a half of the book are the three chapters for equipment, building zombies and campaign worlds. They are necessary supplementary material and as such can be described in some brevity. The equipment chapter has a strong bias towards modern settings, but does provide a very good range of items in the zombie apocalypse barter economy. Items are usually given a couple of sentences of description, an encumbrance value, a comparative cost, and a rarity rating. The equipment is broken up into electronics, medical, scientific, surveillance, survival, and miscellaneous, before breaking into everyone's favourite of melee, ranged weapons, and armour. There's also a notable selection of vehicles, from a bicycle to a Huey helicopter.

The Anatomy of a Zombie chapter is a relatively short selection of various options that a Zombie Master can add to

their campaign world and scenarios. After all, there is good variety in the film and literature, and for a game there must be some means of evaluating the relative powers. Some require a head-shot to kill (classic), others are disturbingly fast, or worryingly strong, or with the dangerous requirement to eat the brains of the living with alarming regularity. All these things make can zombie more powerful than a baseline version and as a result they 'cost' more points. For those who want every more colour and glitter to their game, there's a small selection of fantastic powers as well, including such things as x-ray vision etc.

The final chapter provides eleven zombie world settings, with a background history, specialised zombies, and a few tantalising potential story trajectories. These are all quite delightful to get the creative juices moving; one chuckles with glee at the appearance of the zombie cow in 'Rise of the Walking Dead', reaches for J.G. Ballard in the all-too-alive foliage in 'Sacred Soil', and prepares for alternate medieval history in 'Dead at 1000' or a weird war II 'Mein Zombie'. They are all excellent game-worlds, but surprisingly without a single fully-fleshed out (pun intended) scenario.

Overall

Physically it is a solid piece of work, presentable, quite readable, and reasonably well organised. AFMBE really picked an excellent time for their initial release and the authors clearly understood the style and thematic content of the genre that they picked, and they developed the main focus of the game system to suit that genre with notable acumen. The game system itself is actually fairly mainstream, (d10+stat+skill, hit target number, open-ended), but has a few unnecessary rough edges which can and do come up as issues and exploits in actual play.

Style: $1 + .7 \text{ (layout)} + .6 \text{ (art)} + .8 \text{ (coolness)} + .7 \text{ (readability)} + .7 \text{ (product)} = 4.5$

Substance: $1 + .7 \text{ (content)} + .7 \text{ (text)} + .6 \text{ (fun)} + .4 \text{ (workmanship)} + .7 \text{ (system)} = 4.5$

LIBRIS MORTIS: D&D 3.x

Introduction and Product

As a 192 gloss page hardback *Libris Mortis* is very well-bound, with a colourful cover piece of a graveyard summoning. The contextual internal art, of colour and monochrome, is of highly variable quality although shows some notable aptitude in creativity; the bored lich is a particularly nice piece as an example. The book comes with a one page table of contents, but no index. The content is in two column justified serif text with good use of white-space and clearly marked chapter title and page numbers in the margins. As with all books in the edition, the use of black-on-yellow chapter pages is annoyingly difficult to read. The writing also leaves a little to be desired; it is far too verbose, often chatty, and there are an unexpected number of minor typographical errors.

The content consists of seven chapters; Introduction and All About Undead (14 pages), Character Options (17 pages), Prestige Classes (16 pages), Spells (13 pages), Equipment (6 pages), New Monsters (51 pages), and Campaigns (57 pages), which are all pretty much what they say on the tin. As can be easily ascertained, this is primarily a book for new undead monsters and undead campaigns, and the review will emphasise those areas as appropriate.

For its own part, the first major chapter starts off by bringing together various definitions of the undead, and provides an excellent variant rule of 'Haunting Presences'. It also deals with the rather ambiguous issues of undead physiology and does so more as a collation rather than bringing the disparate implementations together. There is all too brief discussions on undead psychology, society, and religion although for the latter the 'Evening Glory' deity of undying love is at least interesting. The chapter concludes with various aspects of fighting undead including knowledge checks, tactics, and of course the time-honoured favourite of ability and level drains that the cold hands deal.

Character Options, Prestige Classes, Spells, and Equipment

The 'Character Options' chapter starts off with almost three score of new feats, some of which are inevitably variations

on existing abilities, but are otherwise a good selection albeit with some bias toward spellcasters. There are some notes on undead in the party with the usual character classes (associated with some evocative art) and 'monster classes' for ghoul/ghast, mohrg, mummy, vampire spawn, and wight. The latter collection were not nearly as interesting as I hoped and do remind one when the game had 'demihumans' as classes.

The implementation of prestige classes are not something that this reviewer has been particularly enamoured with and the chapter dedicated to such professions is no exception. Simultaneously twee and munchkin, to their credit the seven classes have a good range and come with the usual collection of requirements, skills, and features, along with some rather useful sample characters. The bard-derived dirgesinger is probably the most interesting of the set. Alas, the additional four unded prestige classes are seriously lacking in creativity.

For new spells there is a brief check of undead related spells broken down by class and domain, then almost 60 new magical incantations related to the undead and necromancy, with a handful of others. Most usefully is a clarified and expaned version of Summon Undead and of the set Ghost Form, Necrotic Cyst, and Necrotic Tumor are quite interesting. A few of the spells are apparently reprints and reworkings from the 'Book of Vile Darkness' supplement. Personally, I still carry the torch for when healing spells were considered necromantic spells.



The equipment chapter shows some creativity; there is a small selection of various alchemical substances, several positoxins, about thirty magic items, and over a dozen undead grafts. By positoxins what is meant is poisons to the undead, prepared from holy water. The undead grafts are various bodily items that are grafted to a character for supernatural powers, like a scaled down version of the various bits of Vecna of yesteryear (alas, no Head of Vecna). Perhaps useful for a villain, or the insane, having bones of the deceased grafted into your skin as a type of natural armour is not likely to see encouraged in normal civilization.

At around fifty pages and sixty pages respectively, the Monster and Campaign chapters are central, at least in page count to the supplement. The former includes almost fifty news monsters, of which about a dozen are expressed in a

template format for further elaborations and additions. In terms of Challenge Rating most fall in the mid-level range (3-7) although there is a minimal number of CR4 creatures. To be honest, a graveyard collection is not something entirely inspiring, indeed it is a little lazy. Surely *Dungeons and Dragons* already has enough undead monsters?

Apparently not; from the Angel of Decay to the Wheep (I kid you not) a range of living dead permutations are provided. They are presented in the style typical for the game's edition, which is quite good insofar that it provides a higher level of 'monster equality'. Most however, it must be stated, are quite unimaginative, more or less variations of well-known existing undead creatures. Yet with such a range it is inevitable that are some which grab one's attention; Atropal Scions, the stillborn godlings with a death gaze, the Desiccator, an undead water elementals (alas not repeated for the other elements and presented with downright awful artwork), and various forms of Evolved Undead and Mummified Creatures. Worth noting that there are specified three different types of undead rat.

The 'Undead in the Campaign' chapter starts off with incorporating the undead as either monster or villainous masterminds, a disappointing and imaginatively limited combination. Surely consideration can be given to involuntary undead, simply mad (rather than bad) undead, besotted lovers, or even good undead who must give heed and warning. In part some of these characterisations are provided much later under the 'Ghosts' section, but it is very strange not to count them as a thematic element.

The chapter continues with the title 'Running Undead Encounters' which in reality is several pages tactical considerations for various monsters following by a surprisingly amount of detail on the issue of incorporeality, considered necessary given widespread confusion on the issue. This is followed by the aforementioned 'Ghosts' section, which includes several sample personalities. This is followed by further elaborations and sample NPCs and monsters for liches, skeletons, vampires, and zombies. This is a good section, albeit with a limited range, providing interesting variants and can be put to immediate use in actual play.

There are, confusingly, a few sample floorplans in this section which are not actually keyed to any descriptions. Following a short and largely forgettable cults section (although with more handy NPCs), the text moves into a substantive adventure sites section which does provide detailed keyed locations. With a little bit of work and elaboration these can be easily slotted into existing campaigns and can provide a session of play. A half dozen of these are provided, varying from haunted houses to organised undead groups. This is followed by a fully-fledged adventure, 'Tarus's Banquet', which has more an early modern rather than medieval feel to it. The adventure has a good pretty much follows a well-established track of activities, but with some options for alternative developments at each temporal point.

Conclusion

Overall this is a fine publication. The physical product is excellent, the presentation above average, albeit marred by some questionable art and even moreso an overly verbose writing style. In terms of content, there is some excellent contributions in terms of elaboration and grounding in the opening chapters, and in the range of NPCs and adventure material in the back; the content rating however is reduced by what is effectively filler, especially in the monster section and the rather unimpressive character classes.

Other reviews, more contemporary of the publishing date, were very enthusiastic about this book and for good reason. Prior to publication, with the main exception of the Ravenloft supplements, undead in *Dungeons & Dragons* could be quite confusing with divergent presentation, powers, and capabilities. *Libris Mortis* provided a great deal of solutions to those issues, and as a result is necessary for anyone who is planning to use undead for this game edition, and recommended for those who are using other close game systems.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .5 (art) + .5 (coolness) + .4 (readability) + .9 (product) = 4.0

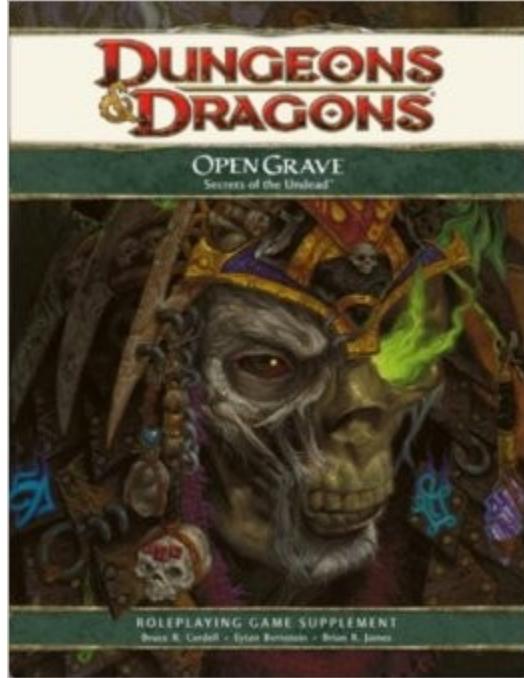
Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .4 (text) + .6 (fun) + .8 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 4.3

OPEN GRAVE: SECRETS OF THE UNDEAD: D&D 4th ED

Introduction and Product

Following on from third edition's "Libris Mortis", "Open Grave : Secrets of the Undead" is the equivalent for 4th edition *Dungeons and Dragons*, with Bruce Cordell notably sharing author credits in both supplements. The product is 224 pages, hardbacked and well-bound and full-colour glass pages throughout. The cover art is not exactly exciting, an undead visage, but is quite muted in tone and lacking in colour. The internal art shows a great deal of both creativity and acumen, and is somewhat contextual (yes for monster and NPC statistics which is necessary, no for most of the rest of the book). Mention must also be made of the rather attractive maps and floor plans, although they are perhaps a little too neat.

There is excellent use of white space throughout the book, with clearly marked page numbers and chapter identifiers. The book come with a single page table of contents and a two-page index, albeit limited to new monsters. The writing style is mostly formal with the occasional foray into the conversational, with a fairly good level of density, and particularly well structured (something which this particular edition of the game does well at). In terms of content there are but four listed chapters - Undead Lore (19 pages), DMs Guide to the Undead (27 pages), Undead Lairs (74 pages), and a massive New Monsters section (94 pages). The latter is a bit of a design flaw a even the table of contents indicates, it can be easily split into new undead and NPCs and Templates, with the latter taking a respectable 22 pages. As will be evident, some of the text ordering is a little awry.



Undead Lore and DMs Guide

The opening chapter deals with the origins, physiology, psychology, and society of undead and the integration of the undead into the default 4th edition campaign setting of the Shadowfell. Although starting with a trite cosmology, the origins section attempts to distinguish between animated corpses (e.g., zombies), disembodied spirits (e.g., ghosts), and the unnaturally maintained (e.g., vampires, liches) and ties undead genesis explicitly with metaphysical evil (sin, evil taints, life drain, contagion, reanimation etc). The physiology section describes what normally happens to a dead body and how the undead, through various means, minimise these effects, along with the respective abilities of different undead sense organs, circulatory systems, and metabolism.

The psychology section begins with a rejection the concept of various healing spells (e.g., Raise Dead) are part of necromancy which personally I thought added a bit of colour (not to mention historical accuracy) to the game's tradition. There is the useful overall suggestion that for those undead with personality the key element is that they are now divorced from and do not value life. A social section differentiates between the outcasts (typical for the

mindless undead), secret citizens (typical), and the unusual situation of acknowledged citizens. Several pages are dedicated to two sample undead-related societies, followed by a description of the undead in Shadowfell.

The DM's Guide consists of social encounters, hauntings, undead adventures, campaign arcs, artifacts, rituals, and grafts. The first two sections are only a couple of pages each, but includes sample skill challenges which becomes a feature of the chapter as a whole. The undead adventures section includes three short descriptions, each with quest hooks to bring the PCs into the scenario. There are extended examples as campaign arcs, for varying tiers which present a potential narrative for each example. A dozen described artifacts with game statistics are provided, each with a bit of a back story and mainly within the scope of being related to the undead. The chapter concludes with two pages each for rituals and grafts, the former representing longer spell castings for particular effects and the latter, rather disturbingly, adding part of an existing undead to a host.

Undead Lairs

Taking up over seventy pages the Undead Lairs chapter is deserving of a subheading in its own right. Up to this point, the product is quite good, albeit a little hit and miss in parts. A generic lair features section is a hit, albeit mainly little bit of a brain dump with dot points on the key features that one would expect in undead lairs in a variety of settings (wilderness, urban, planar). But after this are nine fully-developed settings of a few pages, for character levels 1, 3, 6, 12, 17, 19, 23, 24, and 26. In addition to the individual lairs themselves, each are provided with multiple scenario hooks, general environment descriptions, location descriptions with challenges, full statistics for opponents, and keyed maps. Each of the scenarios is sufficiently complex and challenging to be easily make up an evening's play with a little bit of background work on the part of the DM.

The scenarios describe a variety of initial situations; the first is a group of walking dead at the local village graveyard. Another a commission from a city to deal with the periodic trouble of undead from local catacombs. Another is set in the headquarters of a former necromantic cult, and another a training and research centre operated by a lich. Perhaps most exotic of all is the high-level scenario based inside the corpse of a demigod floating in the astral plane. As a whole the scenarios are interesting, challenging, and provide plenty of opportunity for a DM to develop further. They provide an excellent structure for immediate play or campaign integration. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest they make the book by itself worth purchasing.

New Monsters and NPCs

As mentioned in other reviews there is arguably little need for an excess of new monsters, let alone undead, in *Dungeons and Dragons* - there is already plenty in existence and variations on these should be sufficient. If one's game is centred around "what marginal oddity will be encountered this week?" other narrative elements ought to be considered. Thus, from the outset there is some concern that over seventy-two pages are dedicated this section when there very well could have been alternatives, especially when the 'new monsters' are not exactly geographical or culturally specific.

The concerns are not misplaced. The 'New Monsters' section starts with an undead vine, then an undead couatl, then an undead beholder and so forth. The 'Creeping Claw' is a hat-tip to 'Evil Dead' fans, and the 'Brain in A Jar', alas, is not an elaboration on the philosopher Hilary Putnam. There are variations on the standard undead (ghost, ghouls, liches, vampires, zombies etc) but most of these are relatively uninteresting. All said however, the structure for each creature is quite good, especially with the inclusion of group encounters and challenge ratings, albeit all with a significant over-emphasis on tactical considerations almost to the exclusion of all others.

Taking up a lot less space are several major NPCs, "The Undead Hall of Infamy", including time-honoured favourites such as Acererak, Strahd von Zarovich, and Vecna. Each are provided a statistic block, tactical considerations, and most interestingly related lore and difficulty levels. The section is supplemented with a two-page description of the Cult of Vecna, followed by templates for converting living creatures into undead or adapting existing undead, finally concluding with a brief description of alternative powers.

Conclusion

Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead is physically a very strong and attractive publication with excellent layout that is marred with some substandard textual organisation. In terms of content, the entire book can be justified by the superb chapter on undead lairs, and yet also reaches a trough with the new monsters, the former providing immediate actual play utility, the latter requiring some effort to find a justification to further add them into existing campaigns. Other sections are perhaps a little too short to provide the utility that they could have generated. Overall however it is a recommended product and especially for fourth edition *Dungeons and Dragons* DMs.

Style: 1 + .8 (layout) + .8 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .9 (product) = 5.0

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .7 (text) + .8 (fun) + .8 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 4.8

LAUNDRY FILES RPG REVIEW

by Andrew Daborn

Set in an unsuspecting present day Earth, under the cloud of a coming Lovecraftian apocalypse, the Laundry is a game based on the Laundry Files novels and short stories of Charles Stross. With ghosts, ghouls, zombies and people-who-saw-too-much as co-workers the players must work as agents of Her Majesty's Government to protect the realm, and ultimately the whole of humanity, from things that crawl at the edges of our imagination and the deluded cultists that worship them.



The Book Itself

The production quality is excellent whether like me you spend your beer tokens on pdfs or invest in the hefty but well made hardback with tables and pictures dotting the pages. The layout is that of a bulky dossier. Tabs along the borders indicate chapters and tips for running the game are on post-it notes. The forward by Charles Stross is a transcript of a phone call between Angleton & Bob at the start of the book and regular annotations throughout tie these two characters from the novels into the game. The book is peppered by orientation documents from HR or Health & Safety notices for 'newly transferred personnel', photos of things going wrong taped into the book and articles from the Archives on a variety of monsters. All these add to the pleasure of reading this book but are also excellent as handouts to players. They add flavour to games and can aid in introducing new aspects of the world without resorting to a 10 minute exposition monologue from the GM.

So, what about the Contents and Index? I hear you ask. As you would want but not necessarily expect, they are neatly laid out and accurate. Chapters and the main topics within them are identified and page numbered. Only once or twice have I had that feeling that the information I need is in the book somewhere but not the index.

How To Play The Game

Three whole chapters are dedicated to educating players on how to have fun playing The Laundry. While there is a

danger that these sort of chapters in a book becomes over prescriptive, these sections in fact encourage groups to find their own style. A diverse variety of inspiration sources are suggested, from the novels of Len Deighton and the Delta Green source book to Rickie Gervaise's *The Office*. They cover the basics of roleplaying etiquette for players and GMs such as have fun, be nice, don't block other people's fun. Also included are sections on balancing player input, improvisation and themes as well as short essays on using horror, secrets and humour.

So what's a Laundry game session like? The book describes a regular framework of being that of a mission. The players are members of a troubleshooting field operations team comprised of staff drawn from varied departments across the Laundry such as IT, Catering, Inhuman Resources and Occult Forensics. They are summoned and receive a vague briefing by an operations manager, such as:

A non-conformance event has been filed in Yorkshire due to a third teashop-possession this quarter. Investigate.

Tentacles, bureaucracy, R&D field testing and office politics can be add to complicate matters, giving the feeling that the designers were somewhat influenced by the Paranoia RPG. The designers helpfully give an example of play where the players tail a suspected double agent only for them to discover it is not human and that they have wildly underestimated its capabilities.

The character generation chapter is clear and methodical with accurate cross-references to other chapters in the book where necessary. Helpfully there is a double-page spread halfway through the chapter, repeated again at the back of the book, reiterating each of the steps and explaining the character sheet at the same time. As far as I can tell you can draw up a character using simply the information in the spread.

The System

The Laundry uses a slightly expanded version of BRP system with only few differences that players familiar with Call of Cthulhu and the like would notice. The use of a percentile system is tried and tested with many of the target audience for this game already familiar with it. It also provides opportunities for favourite rules, characters or scenarios from other percentile systems to be borrowed, adding additional flavour. Delta Green missions or Unknown Armies antagonists for example can be adapted to a game without much effort. This is not required however as the book is stuffed with rules that add to the game. The designers neatly employ mission budgets and training courses to add the feeling of working for a behemoth bureaucracy without it being too much like the day job.

The Undead

The central conceit of Stross's books and the game as a whole is that Galileo was correct and "Mathematics is the language in which God has written the universe." Universe writing magic is just highly advances mathematics. In the game mathematicians and computer programmers with a little extra knowledge and the most recent iPhone become powerful sorcerers twisting the rules of physics with the help of other-dimensional entities, or demons.

The game goes into great detail regarding regarding the monsters that populate it separating them into exonomes (demons from dimension x2) and autonomes (local nasties like Deep Ones, Snake People and cats). They sound like

something that lives at the bottom of a deep sea trench, and perhaps they might, but they are used within the game to represent and explain many classic horror antagonists such as poltergeists, ghosts and zombies as well as the Mythos flavoured tentacled Big-Bads trying to claw their way into our reality. All those buckets of ectoplasm that accompany Slimer in Ghostbusters for example are explained as physical manifestations of psychic echoes comprised of whatever is at hand, usually dead skin cells and moisture from the air. Zombies? Weak and usually unintelligent demons that one way or another have found their way into our universe and taken over the minds of physical bodies such as humans or cats. In a departure from norm in such games 'the good guys' make heavy use of zombies as employees, particularly in dangerous or unpopular roles such as night duty security, kitchen staff or office interns. This could somewhat lessen the horror of such monsters in game but appears to be a pay-off against the disturbing feeling of being in a bureaucratic system that happily makes use of walking corpses to reduce the payroll. All this gives players plenty of material for government sanctioned exorcisms or summoning zombie hoards whilst generating the feeling that just below the rather thin surface of reality lie scarier and hungrier things waiting at any moment to pounce.

A Kind of Magic

The chapter on magic is perhaps the most fun to read with pages on the background of magic-as-computing, how it works in the world and how it explains those cold spots and creepy feelings people get in haunted houses. As a resource for gaming I do not find it easy to use however as it is so full of entertaining stuff that I either get bogged down in the rules or drawn away by some other fascinating thing. The chapter explains that there are four different ways of casting magic: using magical apps, your laptop and a well-drawn pentagram, rituals with dusty tombs, or the power of your mind(!) Each then has its own system of rules for casting, making them tricky to have at the fingertips. There are 12 common spells, each open to interpretation as to how they can be used giving players opportunity to be creative with their magic in response to the game. The basic formula as to how spells are cast is this – a spell requires a certain amount of Power to fuel it, this comes from the processing power of the spellcaster (their brain) or their computer. This can be increased in many ways such as by getting 'volunteers' to help with the chanting/blood letting/being demons or using wizardly paraphernalia to mark out a summoning grid. The time taken to cast the spell and how dangerous it is for the caster to get it wrong are also factors. A certain type and number of dice are thrown, depending upon the sort of hocus pocus you are doing, and if successful the spell is cast.

At this point my GURPS senses are tingling and I have this lemming-like urge to incorporate all aspects of the system into the game at the same time, leading only to headaches. All said though the magic system is fun and does fit well with the background of Stross' books.

Resources

There is plenty of background within the main book, fleshing out the world of the Laundry well. There is detail on the UK Government, its Intelligence Community with information on their relationships with similar organisations in Europe and the rest of the world, along with more important questions like, what does COBRA stand for and why the Civil Nuclear Police are good to know. There is equivalent information on the occult intelligence agencies across the world. The feared Black Chamber and the European GLADIO project get mentions as well as cultist threats, lone wolf sorcerers and other baddies. Further more there is plenty of information on what office life in the Laundry is like with a potted history, an organisation chart and basic information on all the major departments. All this gives plenty of antagonists for players to interact with whether it be the pensions clerk in HR who has it in for you or an international conspiracy of ghouls.

Cubicle7 has continued to release supplements for the game incorporating new aspects from the novels as they are published. There are now seven official additional books with an eighth on the way. They cover rules expansions on magic *twitch*, a growing catalogue of one-off scenarios, Laundry interpretations of more of HPL's beasties and more. A particularly evil GM might consider including rules for audits and the Bureaucracy Random Encounter Table.

In addition there are less official resources including "A Roleplayer's Guide to ISO 9001: Quality Assurance in the Laundry" written by Andrew Oakley a Laundry supplement co-author and the obligatory random Laundry mission generator with codewords and dramatic themes included:

"The characters' mission is to investigate suspected activity of ANNING BLUE SKULL. The operation will occur in a tube tunnel. The characters must deal with a paperclip audit (the characters must account for all equipment used, including paperclips). Eventually, it becomes apparent that an experiment has gone out of control. Predictive Branch warns that a(the) character(s) may be given a secret briefing through a pre-planned memory about what is really going on. The overall situation is *pallid* and *gibbering*."

Cubicle7 also hosts a forum with the usual melting pot of discussions, free downloads and demands for new shiny things.

In summary the murky world of espionage complements Stross' occult underground nicely. The system is pretty straight forwards and largely well known. The rule book is well set out and entertainingly written with jokes and quotes neatly inserted that emphasise the core themes of the game. The background is deeply fleshed out and players are well supported allowing plenty of inspiration for creating and running games set in the Laundryverse.

The Laundry is written by Gareth Hanrahan, Jason Durrell and John Snead. It was published by Cubicle 7 in 2010.

I was joking about the cats.



THE UNDEAD IN ECLIPSE PHASE

by *Lev Lafayette*

Death and Damage in Most RPGs

Death of a character in most RPGs is a very significant event. The countless numbers of first level Dungeons and Dragons characters, savaged by an orc, goblin, or even particularly a particularly nasty house-cat in some cases, is a testimony for a game which was not only heavily combat-orientated, but also one which started such characters with but a handful of hit points. An interesting exception in first edition Advanced Dungeons and Dragons was the Ranger - with maximum constitution and maximum die rolls, they could start with 26 hit points! But of course, this is an exception.



This dramatic moment did not change in games that had less of a combat orientation. In investigative-horror games like Call of Cthulhu character demise is often dramatic and sudden. Poor Scouts in Traveller were famous for facing their demise even before the start of play. As character gained in ability, it was usually of a primary motivation to provide some sort of protection for the character for sudden mortality; whether it is Divine Intervention in RuneQuest, Raise Dead or Resurrection in Dungeons and Dragons and so forth.

In some cases there was a level of dissonance in the mortal experience was due to game design issues and particularly the confusion in creative agendas, a conflict between game, simulation, and narrative approaches. Character deaths could be objected to as being "not realistic" (the savage house-cat example). A game with an extensive character generation process and a sudden mortality (e.g., Cyberpunk, Rolemaster) could seriously offend the player's sense of narrative, even if it was expressed in such terms. Games like Dungeons and Dragons, interestingly, because character generation could be so quick, did not usually suffer issue as badly - first level characters typically had very little character background.

There have been numerous means to get around these issues. Games like RuneQuest and GURPS, for example, had starting characters with static but somewhat realistic starting health levels - they could take a couple of blows and still remain standing. A popular house rule allowed Dungeons and Dragons characters to start with maximum hit points at first level, which was integrated officially in latter editions of the game (with fourth edition rules providing hit points effectively as a 'per encounter' basis). GURPS, unlike its friends in the Basic Role Playing family, also included rather extensive opportunities for unconsciousness.

Not-Dying in Eclipse Phase

All of this differs to the rather unique way that Eclipse Phase handles character mortality. Now there can be no doubt that the various forms of damage that character receive in Eclipse Phase is rather on the punishing side of the general game continuum, as it should be. The 'structural integrity' of a character's morph will typically be around the 30 to 50 point mark, and with a Wound Threshold of around 6 to 8. With standard kinetic pistol doing 2d10+4 damage (15 points average), it is quite clear that a few shots will see the destruction of the morph. Furthermore, if a character's Wound Threshold is exceeded they will start suffering cumulative damages, such as loss of abilities, knockdown, unconsciousness and so forth.

However - and this is whether things get very interesting - death is not the end in Eclipse Phase. Nearly every character has a cortical stack, a small (grape-sized) cyberware data storage backup of the character's ego, implanted at the base of the skull where the brain stem and spinal cord connect. If this is extracted, the ego can be rescued and resleeved into a new morph. If it cannot be retrieved, the character can still be re-instantiated and re-sleeved from an archived backup. Backups are inexpensive and quick, so it is very unusual for a character not to have a backup. Only in the rare situation where a character has no backup and their morph and the cortical stack is destroyed do they face death as we know it, assuming that they don't have an alpha fork of themselves in operation (or, in the classic introductory adventure, 'Ego Hunter', several beta forks).

In part this provides a very handy in-game justification for characters having a 'save point' between difficult scenarios, and especially with the morph insurance provided by Firewall, the almost invariable sponsoring organisation in most Eclipse Phase stories. The provision of this capacity is justified as an in-game simulation so the effects avoid a sense of contrivance. Plus there is useful challenge of players having to be attentive of meta-gaming issues, such as their realisation of certain events occurring, but their characters being ignorant, as they are the result of a backup.

In summary, the character's morphological body can change, and the ego retains a sort of graduated continuity through backups and forks, resulting in a situation where the traditional binary relationship that we've familiar with 'dead' and 'not dead' becomes more of a Bayesian situation of degrees 'so in what manner is the character *partially* dead'. To say the least this does need to some interesting narrative possibilities and intriguing character developments which both challenges the player and their association with their characters. Over time, players become more interested in ensuring the integrity of their character's ego and increasingly treat their morphs as an expensive item of equipment, satisfying a core thematic consideration of the setting.

What the Fork?

A core technology in Eclipse Phase is the capacity to make a copy of a brain to a digital form and then for that digital image to be copied elsewhere. As explained this allows for characters to change their physical form, or morph, although some bodily forms are somewhat more difficult psychically than others. In addition, an ego image can be copied into multiple morphs - a process known as forking. Which, as you can imagine has all sorts of interesting problems in its own right.

Forks come in different levels. An Alpha fork is an exact copy (memories, abilities) of the original ego created from

biomorph brains using an ego bridge and uploaded. Beta forks are partial copies of the ego, that have been subject to "neural pruning", resulting in a somewhat reduced skillset, and reduced memories from the original. Delta forks are extremely limited copies of an ego, that have been subject to significant neural pruning. They are often considered more like an AI template that have some of the ego's surface personality traits. There are also Gamma forks, also known as vapors, the results of massively incomplete, corrupted, or heavily damaged copies of an ego. Rarely intentionally created they are usually the results of botched uploads, scrambled backups, incomplete or jammed farcasts, or infomorphs or other forks that were massively damaged.

Legally, Alpha forks are pretty much prohibited in most of transhuman space. Beta forks are typically considered property as are Gammas of the original ego. In a mirror effect of the degrees of death that a character experiences in Eclipse Phase there is also the matter of characters being partially alive. The degree to which they are conscious creatures is a matter of some debate and therefore a matter of story exploration. Sure, all the reports say that the Gamma forks are simply echoes of a once conscious mind, but that distress signal seems very convincing, who is really to say that there is not some someone - no matter how fragmented of mind - still suffering behind that plea for help?

The reverse case can be even more difficult; an Alpha may decide that it is an equal (and it is), deserving of equal if not exclusive rights over a character's life. Beta forks, who are for all intents and purposes, the character with a some somewhat spotty memories and slight cognitive impairments, may also be arguing for at least better recognition than being treated as just property. If a number of them come together (such as in the scenario "Ego Hunter") they may even ask to be merged and upgraded to the equivalent of a primary ego.

Continuity

If the ability to save a character's ego at various points in time or even create duplicates or semi-deuplicates seems enticing, there is the thematic challenge of continuity. It is disconcerting enough that a cortical stack or backup image can be added into a new morph, which is part of the reason why sometimes problems can arise from the resleeving process. Is the same mind in a different body the same character? Is the backup image a clone or the same character? What happens to the character's identity when it is forked? As these questions are raised it becomes increasingly evident that a character's ego independence is both contextually bound and yet also in a continuum. The core rulebook makes the very pertinent claim:

"Perhaps the biggest shock that strikes most resleeving characters is the loss of continuity of self. This is particularly true for characters who died. If their cortical stack was retrieved, they will remember their own death. If they were restored from an archived backup, they will not remember their death, but they will have lost an entire period of their life—all the way back to their last backup. In fact, if their body was not recovered, they may not even know that they are dead for certain—there may be a surviving copy of themselves out there. The driving point in this loss of continuity is a sort of existential crisis—they are no longer the original person they once were. This leads some to question whether they are who they think they are, or are they some poor imitation and not a real person at all?" p272

An "eclipse phase" is defined as the period of time between when a cell is infected by a virus and when the virus appears within the cell and transforms it. During this period, the cell does not appear to be infected, but it is. It may be added, in a slightly differ it can be considered that even for all intents and purposes a character appears to be alive, but as soon as continuity issues creep in, they're actually not just someone different, but rather have become undead.

SECRET OF SALTAM SHORE: A HERO SYSTEM GHOST SCENARIO

by Robert J. Hall

This scenario was released on the Internet in 1999 by Robert J. Hall but has been generally unavailable since the Tripod site was closed many years ago. It is written for the 4th edition of the Hero System, but is easily adaptable to more recent editions. There have been minor edits for the sake of space.

Introduction

This scenario is designed for six or more Fantasy HERO characters of heroic caliber, preferably with at least one Mage. It requires a balanced mix of investigative and combat skills, and favors heroes who think before acting. Secret of Saltham Shore is designed to be an introduction to a longer running campaign during a period of grave threats to the settled lands. Most of this adventure occurs in the manorial village of Saltham, at the edge of the Duchy of Irolo. Further details on the Western Shores setting is available from the Fantasy HERO supplement.

Wizard and priest non-player characters use a Variable Power Pool for their spells. Magi require a bulky spell book to change their spells (-1/2), while priests can only change spells as a result of prayers requiring several days, or by a visit to a temple, shrine, or holy site of their god (-1/2).

Dramatis Personae

Villagers: Bellamy Cordwainer, an alewife; Eppy Ludlow, a carpenter; Rupert Miller, a baker; Durvan Ironwright, a smithy.

Notables: Konrad Dhiamus, the Lord of Saltham Manor; Sharena Langwurt, the Lady of Irolo Duchy;

Gresham Lott, the Village Reeve; Trent Polliard, a Priest of Lhyanord

The Unearthing Rite: Bowen e'Brongar, a villein; Ohra Ghulard, a necromantic adept; Mortius Kalaner, leader of the Unearthing Rite, Tory Middlewood, a villein; Ingel Piraster, a Captain of the Alkax; Jordan Tiriol, Mate of the Alkax

Historical Background

Deep within the Grey Bogs, a sinister plot begins to unfold as a death cult plans the demise of the neighboring Duchy of Irolo. The active faction of this cult is an unscrupulous band of grave robbers known as the Unearthing Rite. This unholy band is composed of various scum and villainy, with members drawn from groups of brigands and pirates which have always plagued the western shores. They are commanded by a powerful clique of Necromancers, headed by Mortius Kalaner.

The members of the Unearthing Rite have built a secret network of contacts throughout the western shores. They have been quietly but steadily unearthing corpses, then carrying the bodies into the Bogs. The village of Saltham, being the closest harbor in the Duchy to the Grey Bogs, has been unknowingly serving as a port of embarkation for these

cadavers. The stacked corpses are carried by pirate ships to the otherwise inaccessible Citadel of the Dead, hidden deep within the winding estuaries of the Bogs.

Lately, as the Rite have gained funds from stolen treasures, their activities have grown bolder. As part of their campaign to disrupt the Duchy, the Necromancers have plotted the kidnapping of the daughter of an important Lord. Lady Sharena and her hand-maiden were successfully abducted from their summer manor, then hidden in a secret cave to the north of Saltham. Unfortunately for the kidnappers, the plot ran into a snag as the lightly crewed transport ship ran aground on a sand bar during a freakish and severe summer storm.

With several key hands lost at sea during the ferocious weather, the Captain and his Mate were now down to a minimum crew. They also had the awkward task of trying to offload a cargo of cadavers before salvage crews from the village could arrive. After some clever scheming with his Necromantic cohort, the Captain decided to make his wrecked vessel appear to be a ghost ship. With the aid of animated corpses and a few well-placed illusion spells from a scroll of magic, most of the intrepid villagers were successfully scared away.

Now the Captain and his "skeleton" crew are slowly offloading their cargo at night onto a raft, then towing the goods to the hidden sea cave complex along the cliffs to the north. To keep up the illusion of a haunted ship, the surviving members of the crew are lying low in the hold during the daytime, then continuing to offload the ship at night. When the ship load is sufficiently lightened, the Captain plans to free his ship from the bar during a peak tide in ten days. The vessel will then sail north to the cave, where it will load the stacked cadavers and the two prisoners on board before making sail for the Citadel of the Dead.

Prelude - A Broken Wagon

The scenario begins in the Duchy of Irolo when the heroes come upon a horse-drawn wagon that has lost a wheel and lies in the rough at the side of the dirt road. The driver, a shady looking individual with a very unkempt appearance, fell from his seat during the mishap and now lies beside the vehicle in obvious pain. Sebastian Tiver suffered a broken hip and collar bone, and is succumbing to shock and the beginnings of a fever.

If the Sebastian is approached by the characters, he urgently motions the most trustworthy-looking individual forward and places a leather pouch in his hands. The pouch clinks invitingly with a solid weight of coins, and a careful count will reveal a handsome sum of 59 silvers. The owner manages to croak out the words, "Yours... deliver wagon to Bowen... Saltham... on the coast. More gold... Go quickly! Urgent!", before passing out from pain.

Anybody in the party with healing skills can help to alleviate some of his pain, but it is obvious that the skills of a bone setter and many weeks of bed rest will be required to fully heal the damage. When the wagon driver is resuscitated, he will be deeply feverish and mumbles incoherent lines about an urgent mission and the doom that lies at hand. He will suffer from delirium, so much of what he says thereafter makes no sense.

The wagon requires some labor to repair, but once the wheel is back in place it proves road-worthy. The team of two horses is still tied to the harness, although they dragged the wagon into the rough in order to feed on the grasses and shrubs. In the back of the wagon are four large wooden crates, about two meters in length. All are sealed along the edges with iron bands held by nails, so it would be extremely difficult to open the crates without breaking in the sides. The crates are marked with a mysterious symbol shaped as three overlapping diamonds inside a circle - possibly a guild

symbol of some type. Inside the crates are the corpses of long-buried warriors, packed in sweet-scented herbs to mask any odor, and wood shavings to prevent further breakage.

If the party decide to deliver the wagon to the coastal village of Saltham, it will require a trip of nine full days through the Irolo countryside. They will probably decide to deliver the wagon owner to a nearby town in the process, a necessity if he is to survive. Once in town, they may be tempted to open the crates to find out what lies within. As the remainder of the adventure depends on the safe delivery of the crates to Bowen e'Brongar in the village of Saltham, however, they are best served by the temptation of more money upon delivery.

During the journey, the characters will need to obtain forage for the horses from the villages and towns through which they pass. Since they are unlikely to be travelling along the routes known to the Unearthing Rite, the heroes will also need to deal with such mundane matters as toll payments and inquisitive guards. Unless the wagon is properly repaired by a wagon wright, there is a small chance each day that the wheel will break and throw the driver into the road. It is even possible that the heroes will have an adventurous interlude or two that are entirely unrelated to the main plot. Finally, it is likely that they will hear a rumor or two about the disappearance of a young noblewoman, and the uproar this has caused among the nobility. The following table can be used to randomly select events on the road to Saltham.

4d6 Random Encounters on the Road to Saltham

2 A dark omen befalls one of the characters. He or she is cursed with ill luck for the remainder of the adventure. (Temporary 1d6 Unlucky disadvantage.)

3 One of the characters finds a bloody hide of a sheep beside the road. If the heroes take the hide, they are later approached by a group of angry farmers carrying forks, hoes, sickles, and other farming implements. Apparently a group of bandits butchered most of their flock of sheep during the night, and the trail leads back toward the heroes. While the farmers are easy to defeat in combat, any casualties will call down the wrath of the local Lord and his men-at-arms.

4 While passing near some light woods, the characters spot a hunter standing with his bow unstrung. He appears to be casually watching the heroes, but upon spotting the crates on the cart he turns ashen and flees into the woods. This is Herold Glydver, a poacher of some ability. He is somewhat familiar with the Unearthing Rite, having seen their activities near a local burial mound.

5-6 While stopping at a watering hole, one of the characters hears a rumor that a young noble woman of some importance has vanished. Foul play is suspected and a reward has been offered by no less a personage than the Duke of Irolo. (This is the Lady Langwurt who appears in Act II.)

7-8 The bridge across this small river charges a toll for passage. The toll house master is protected by a pair of nonsense guards armed with broad sword and long knife, and wearing brigandine armor, leather breeches, boots, and an iron helm. The minimum charge is 1cp per head, including the horses, and 2cp for a wagon. By barony writ, detours around the toll bridge are not allowed.

9-10 The characters are stopped by a patrol of men-at-arms from a nearby prominent castle. They will question the heroes as to their activities, then warn them of a grazing tax for stays of longer than a day in the nearby fields.

11-12 A road side Inn is found that serves decent food and beverages. This being the summer months, however, rooms are limited and more expensive than normal. The Inn will often have a minstrel, jongleur, or musician working for his keep, providing a night of entertainment to the guests. Characters with suitable skills can also earn their meal and bed by this means.

13-15 Select an event, or make up a new one.

16-18 The heroes reach a manorial village where they can seek lodgings for the night. The food and beds are of the poorest sort, and the company is usually both dull and inquisitive. Occasionally these poor settlements will have a feature of minor interest, such as a shrine, a distinctive dish, or a prominent landmark.

19-20 If the wagon has not yet been repaired, the wheel works loose again and throws the driver from his seat. This fall is from a height of two meters and has a good chance to take the driver by surprise. (To make it more interesting, roll for a random hit location before determining damage.) An observant character with the Mechanics skill or Transport Familiarity: Wagons will have an opportunity to spot the problem before it occurs.

21 A wide stream is reached, and an earthy-looking character stands waiting besides the ford to collect a toll for passage. If he is bypassed and a crossing is attempted at a deeper spot, the characters will be followed and ambushed that night by a group of 3-5 toughs. These are pitiful bandits at best, with no armor and poor quality weapons.

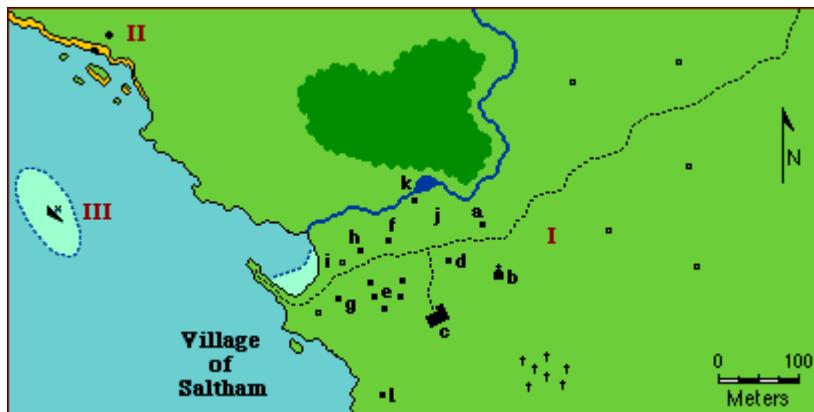
22 A religious apostle will ask to join the group during their meal time, then proceed to espouse the creed of one of the twelve deities worshipped in Irolo. He is very persuasive, and may cause some internal dissent if there is a priest in the party.

23 Road traffic in this part of the Duchy is practically non-existent, leading the characters to wonder what is amiss. After several hours, however, they reach a river with a wooden bridge that has burnt to the waterline. This river is slow-moving, but deep enough to present a problem crossing with the wagon.

24 A favorable omen appears before one of the characters. He or she is blessed with good luck for the remainder of the adventure. (Temporary 1d6 Luck perk.)

Act I - Village of Saltham

Located next to the coast, the manorial village of Saltham is a grain and fish producing settlement. The majority of the modest village dwellings lie beside the single dirt lane that descends from the northeast to the southwest, down to the coast. At the end of the lane is a sheltered harbor where the villages' modest fleet of fishing vessels are beached. A commons and mill lie to the north of the village, alongside the small Cork creek. Beyond stands a heavy copse of deciduous trees, the primary source of firewood and timber for the village. South of the lane is Saltham Manor and Lhyanord Abbey.



Much of the outlying land around the village has been tilled for farming, with lots divided by low stone walls and narrow paths. The ground beyond the periphery is mainly low rolling hillside, with fens to the south and the town of Farnth several days ride to the north and east. Save for an old abandoned watch tower to the south, there is little else of obvious interest.

The village has seen some hard times of late, what with poor harvests the past few years and a particularly heavy tax lien from the Baron. The wrecked ship appeared to be a god-send, and volunteers quickly made their way across the treacherous waters to the vessel. Unfortunately, the ship was haunted by ungodly creatures. As the village had little more than a small abbey run by a priest of little merit, they lacked the means to purify the ship. Messengers had been sent to the nearby town of Farnth to ask for help, but it was feared that suitable aid would not arrive for at least a month.

Now disaster has befallen the village as the son of Lord Dhiamus was slain while investigating the mysterious death of a Shepherd and the loss of several sheep and pigs from the commons. The Lord is rightfully heartbroken over the death of his sole heir and has spent the past three days in solitary mourning. By the time the heroes arrive in the village, the entire settlement had turned out to witness the burial rites of the young nobleman.

When the characters are set to enter the village, read the following text aloud to the players.

Many long days you have ridden along this dusty road toward the sea and the village of Saltham. The summer sun has thoroughly dried the surrounding landscape, leaving the rolling hills blanketed in yellow grass and your throats parched with thirst. Fortunately, the ocean draws near, bringing a cool breeze and a welcome freshness to the air.

As you crest a long, low hill, you finally sight the thin line of the ocean stretched before you in all its glory. Your mounts pick up a step as they smell tempting odors from the rustic manorial village some distance ahead. The surrounding lands show many signs of farm work, as low stone walls segregate the sandy ground into modest fields. Some of the plots lie fallow - overgrown with weeds that wait for burning. Other fields grow meager crops of grain, or poor harvests of beans and tubers.

Riding on toward the sea, you soon arrive at the quaint village. Simple stone, daub, and thatch hovels line both sides of the single road that runs down to the harbor. All the hovels are crudely made, as if assembled in haste without thought for style or permanence. Each dwelling is enclosed by a low stone wall, and the enclosed ground beside the crude dwellings has been tilled for vegetables.

You quickly notice that the village appears to be all but abandoned. Only a few stray dogs wander the deeply-rutted lane, and an old, blind invalid shelters beneath a maple tree. Peering about, you spot a large congregation of villagers on a low hill behind the manor house. A solemn ceremony appears to be underway - most likely a funeral as the local priest is leading a prayer ritual. Obviously somebody of significant has recently passed away, bringing the village activities to a near halt.

This isolated village rarely receives visitors, so any newcomers are normally cause for much interest and gossip. However, the mood of the village is very solemn following the death of the well-liked Lord's son, and the heroes will initially be treated with coolness and some suspicion. After all, the death occurred under mysterious circumstances, and the group of adventurers arrived almost immediately thereafter. The village Reeve will certainly make inquiries about the plans and whereabouts of the newcomers.

Most of the villagers are an average lot, with primary stats in the range 9 to 11, standard figured characteristics, and a CV of 3. Unless otherwise noted, they have the following Everyman Skills: Climbing, Concealment, Conversation,

Deduction, Shadowing, and Stealth. All speak the Duchy language fluently, but with a distinctly provincial accent. Most have never left the vicinity of their humble village, so they have scant knowledge of the neighboring lands. A respectable number have familiarity with handling small fishing boats, however, as the fishing trade is much relied upon when the crops are poor. Few have more than a passing familiarity with any sort of weapon, although they can wield farming implements with some degree of skill.

To determine the weather conditions throughout the characters stay in Saltham, consult appendix C. The starting weather on the day of arrival is shown under column A as a roll of 9. Thus, the weather on the following day will be determined by rolling 2d6 on column C.

What follows are descriptions of particular sites of interest throughout the village. Once the heroes are settled and their mounts are being tended, they will no doubt want to search out the villein Bowen e'Brongar at site E.

A. Ale Lodge

There are no Inns or rooms for rent within the small village. However, a place beside the open fire pit at the Ale Lodge may be had for a modest fee. The lodge is an oval-shaped, thatch-roofed building that serves as both a pub and the local meeting hall. The majority of the building structure serves as the main hall, containing a number of solid oak tables and benches, plus the pit fire for cooking food. Pairs of heavy wooden columns support the arched ceiling and create a series of private curtained booths for small groups of customers. The Lodge serves ale, mead, coarse bread rolls, pork and bean soup, and a hearty fish stew.

Bellamy Cordwainer: Female Human, 14 PRE, Conversation 13-, Trading 12-, KS: Brewing Ale 12-, KS: Cooking 11-, PS: Ale Woman 12-.

Bellamy is a heavyset woman, with a pleasant demeanor but a somewhat fiery temper. The widow of the village shoe maker, she now runs the Lodge with the assistance of her two daughters, both of marriageable age. Once her suspicions are allayed, Bellamy will be glad to fill the heroes in on local events in exchange for news from abroad. She will almost certainly mention the grounded ghost ship and the mysterious death of the Lord's son.

B. Lhyanord Abbey

This abbey was built to worship Lhyanord, the village patron deity and a manifestation of the goddess of the autumn harvest. This is one of the only two permanent structures in the village, the second being the manor house. Built more than two centuries in the past, this aging chapel has a modest gathering hall for daily services, plus several private chambers and a hospital ward. All villagers who can afford it are expected to pay a yearly tithe, which serves to support the priest and provides a small fund for invalids and religious ceremonies. The only item of note within the abbey is a fine bronze statue of the goddess Lhyanord.

Trent Polliard: Male Human, 8 DEX, 14 PRE, Magic Skill 12-, FAM w/ Common Melee Weapons, Oratory 12-, Persuasion 12-, Conversation 12-, Paramedic 11-, Riding 11-, KS: Religious Dogma, KS: Religious Procedures, Age 40+, Magic Skill (Church of Healing) 12-, Religious Power Pool (6 pts), Known Spells: Detect Ailment, Dispel, Exalted Healing, Major Healing, Minor Healing, Restore Physique.

An elderly man with a surprisingly wiry frame for one his age, Trent serves as the village priest. He usually runs the abbey alone, although he is aided by labor from the poorer villagers. Trent is a somewhat simple man who abandoned his life as a fisherman when he was called to task by a great whale spirit. He deeply believes in his faith and is well

respected by both the villagers and his Lordship. However, although he will gladly aid anyone who seeks to ward his followers, he is somewhat out of his depth in the current circumstances.

C. Saltham Manor

When the heroes approach the manor during the daylight, read the following to the players:

Easily the largest building in the village, this old manor house stands two stories in height, with a heavily canted, slate-tiled roof and turrets to either side of the front door. The manor is made from heavy granite blocks that are covered in lichen, and have moss growing in the many cracks. The blocks incrementally decrease in size with height, until timber-reinforced bricks form most of the second story. All of the windows are paned, with the glass mounted in reinforced frames designed to withstand the heavy winter storms. On the roof are a number of old brick chimneys, a few in need of some minor repairs.

At the end of the L-shaped Manor is a small, wood stable with doors to the five stalls. The grounds around the manor are occupied by an orchard of fruit trees, possibly bearing Peach, Apple, and Pear. A dirt lane runs in a circle before the main entrance, enclosing a small but elegant garden inside a low stone wall.

This fine stone manor has been in the possession of the Lord's family for over one hundred and fifty years. A somewhat L-shaped building with a granite, timber, and brick exterior; many glass-paned windows; and a slate-tiled roof, the two-story Saltham Manor has ample room for an extended family plus guests and servants.

There are three heavy outer doors made from solid oak timbers - all reinforced with decorative bronze bands. All doors are built to withstand a heavy pummeling, and can be barred from the inside. On either side of the main entrance are decorative turrets with functioning arrow slits. The front and side doors have a small viewing port behind an iron grille, while the servant's entrance is plain.

As befits an old country manor, the interior is comfortably decorated and carefully kept up by the four permanent servants. A cook and his young apprentice prepare all meals for the family, including baking the bread and pastries from the finer grains of wheat grown in the village. The manor also contains a great hall with balcony; antechamber; master bedroom; chambers for a guest and family members; quarters for the servants; storage rooms; day room; rooftop conservatory; scriptorium where the Lord works on his political treatise; kitchen and scullery; and a small cellar. Many of the rooms have a stone fireplace which are kept supplied with chopped firewood by the villeins. The walls are decorated by tapestries, and lightened by white-washed plaster.

At the end of the brief north wing is a wooden stable where the lord keeps his prized war horse Regorand, as well as two riding horses for the day-to-day maintenance of the manor. The stable has stalls for up to five horses, and contains bales of hay, a covered cart, tack for the mounts, plus various tools and grooming gear. The stable boy sleeps in the loft among the warm piles of hay.

In the back of the manor is a pigeon roost. Following an old family tradition, the lord raises and trains these birds - although at one time they had a real purpose as messengers when the coast was being invaded. A shed next to the roost is used to stack and dry the firewood in preparation for the next winter season.

The manor is surrounded by a grove of fruit-bearing trees, which the Lady Dhiamus attends. These fruit are used to bake the delicious pastries enjoyed by the family, and occasionally sent as gifts to the village priest or friends in the nearest manors.

When the Reeve has met with the heroes and discussed their plans, he will pass this information on to the Lord. Thus the greeting the party receives at the Manor will depend heavily on the Reeve's opinion. Konrad is still in mourning over his lost son, so he will not perform his usual twice daily ride around the village grounds for a few weeks. Hence, the characters may not have an opportunity to meet with the Lord until they begin turning up some useful information.

Bella Dhiamus: Female Human, 13 EGO, Conversation 12-, High Society 13-, Riding 11-, KS: Gardening, KS: Singing, Perk: Well Off, Perk: Member of the Lower Nobility, Talent: Perfect Pitch, Contact: Wealthy Family, Age 40+.

The Lady Bella Dhiamus is an elegant woman who is approaching her later years with a certain grace and dignity. Although her marriage with the Lord was an arranged affair, she has grown fond of Konrad over the years. Bella had some trepidation that her failure to bear children might end the marriage, but the Lord has stayed close to her throughout these trials, and has never been unfaithful or grown abusive.

Bella was born the fourth daughter of a wealthy noble family in the city of Alasrenoa, and still occasionally longs for the bustle of the urban life. However, she has learned to put her skills to good use and occupy her time with running the Manor. She has little or no knowledge of the arts of combat, but will remain calm and dignified during a crisis.

D. Reeve Cottage

Gresham Lott: Male Human, 15 STR, 13 INT, 13 PRE, Persuasion 12-, Deduction 12-, Riding 11-, Trading 11-, Fam w/ Pole Arms, PS: Farming, Perk: Reeve, Knife (+1, 1/2d6K). Armed: Leather Tunic and Cap (2 DEF, 3-4/9-14), Fauchard (2d6K).

One of the most prosperous cottages in the village, this well-maintained hovel is home to the village Reeve, Gresham Lott. The Reeve serves as the overseer of the Lord's manor. He is in charge of the servants and commands the duties of the villeins. While the office of Reeve is supposedly filled anew each year, Gresham has the full confidence of the Lord and so has been the village Reeve for the past six years. His position has made him prosperous, and it shows in both his dwelling and attire. Gresham lives with his wife, an invalid mother, and three lively children.

Given the morose condition of his Lordship following the son's death, the Reeve will be most concerned and will certainly investigate any newcomers to the village. Initially, at least, he is unaware of the activities of the Unearthing Rite in the area as he has been busy worrying about the poor season harvest. If the characters demonstrate that they are operating in the best interest of the village, however, Gresham will be most cooperative and may even accompany the heroes on their investigations.

E. Villein Hovels

A cluster of particularly pitiful hovels to the southwest of the Manor is home to the village villeins. These serfs owe their labors directly to the lord, and frequently work under his supervision. They have various jobs throughout the year, such as working the Lord's demesne, picking the fruit trees for the Lady, repairing walls in the village, gathering

firewood from the Copse, and so on. All are severely impoverished, even compared to the generally mediocre lot of the Saltham peasants.

The villeins Tory Middlewood and Bowen e'Brongar have long been disaffected by their impoverished position in the village. So when they were approached by members of the Unearthing Rite, both were immediately taken by the prospect of earning a little extra silver behind the Lord's back. They plan to earn enough to travel to a city and remain for the year and a day required to earn their freedom.

Bowen e'Brongar has been responsible for the many purchases required by the Unearthing Rite. Meanwhile, Tory Middlewood has been charged with obtaining food, fodder, and other goods for the smugglers. Both are aware of the other's activities, and each has grown ever more fearful of being caught. Thus far they have escaped detection through a combination of good fortune and human nature, but now they are terrified of being connected with the death of the Lord's son. If suspected, they are likely to flee to the sea caves and attempt to join up with the pirates.

Bowen e'Brongar : Male Human, 13 STR, Concealment 11-, Transport Familiarity: Wagons, Fam: Persuasion, PS: Farming, Poor, Hunted (Watched as a Villein).

Bowen is a typical uneducated villein, with shabby clothing, a dirty face, and a very menial attitude. He has long brown hair that hangs down to his shoulders, and is tied away from his face by a worn strip of leather. His feet are bare and hardened, and his hands are dirty and calloused from years of tough labor.

Upon first meeting the characters who deliver his wagon of crates, Bowen will turn ashen and be left nearly speechless. He will be extremely nervous and, at the first opportunity, will lead the cart back to the edge of the village and thence to the copse of trees. He is most reluctant to answer any questions about the crates, or his connection to the injured driver. If pressed, he will make up a rather lame story about a great surprise for his Lordship during the upcoming harvest festival.

Before paying the characters a few coppers for their delivery, Bowen will carefully check each of the crates to see if they have been damaged. When the wagon is hitched safely out of sight, he will reluctantly thank the heroes, then urge them to leave the village. Thereafter, Bowen will attempt to avoid the characters as much as possible during their stay.

If he is told that a reward was promised by the injured driver, he will reluctantly pull out a concealed pouch from his belt and pay off the characters with five silver pieces each, counted off as if every coin were immensely valuable. At the end of the exchange, Bowen will glance about once more as if looking for witnesses, then say "Now leave, quickly. You must! No more questions... I must go", before scurrying off back to the village.

Tory Middlewood : Male Human, 14 STR, 8 INT, 15 CON, Stealth 11-, PS: Farming, Poor, Hunted (Watched as a Villein).

Hardened by years of work in the field, Tory is a valued laborer and is often commanded to perform the most menial and back-breaking work for his lordship. Although easily cowed by his betters, Tory has grown bitterly resentful of his lowly status and is willing to perform almost any task that may raise his station. Thus, when approached by Bowen to join the Unearthing Rite, he was more than eager to enter the cult.

So far, however, he has seen little reward for his dangerous labors and is now beginning to worry about his prospects. Being none too bright, Tory is unlikely to see the dangers of turning against the cult. Hence he has stayed away from the sea cave, and has even taken to avoiding Bowen whenever possible. A confrontation has been brewing between the two ever since the death of the Lord's son.

F. Stables

Most of the surrounding fields are ploughed by teams of work horses that are kept in the village stables during the winter months. At this time of the year, there are plenty of stalls available for the mounts of visitors, and a minimum fee is charged for fodder and a brush down. The stable is run by Sachs Prentise, with the aid of two inquisitive stable boys. Sachs is a short man with much weathered skin and thin, grey hair that is usually covered by a felt cap. He bobs his head frequently and addresses all visitors as milord or milady. Directly behind the Stables is an old stone well that is used to water the animals.

G. Eppy's Carpentry

The carpenter's workshop consists of the usual rude village hovel attached to a wooden work shed. Inside the shed are a number of tools of the trade, plus several work benches and a pair of storage rooms. The floor of this shed is raised to make it easier to keep the wood dry.

Eppy Ludlow: Male Human, Transport Familiarity: Wagons, Concealment 11-, Trading 11-, PS: Carpenter 11-, AK: Torleo.

With a balding scalp and only four teeth, Eppy is not considered a handsome man. However, his craft is much appreciated by the villagers. He is married with two daughters and a son, all of whom assist him in the workshop.

If anybody in Saltham were to have suspicions over the activities of the Unearthing Rite, it would be Eppy Ludlow. In the past, the village carpenter has been paid by the villein Bowen e'Brongar to build a number of coffin-sized crates and a pair of poor quality carts. This alone should have been cause for concern, as villeins are most unlikely sources of income. However, the handsome payments have thus far kept Eppy's mouth tightly closed and his pockets lined with silver.

Stored behind his work shed is a four-wheeled wagon which Eppy uses to carry wood; deliver furniture; and to make an occasional trip into the nearby town of Farnth. This wagon was his attempt at a "Master Piece" while he worked the trade in the city of Torleo. Unfortunately, it was not quite up to standard, so Eppy remained a journeyman Carpenter and came to practice his craft in this lonely village.

The villagers have grown to wonder about Eppy's new-found earnings, as he has been known to bring home a number of fine gifts from Farnth after delivering his works. However, lacking any understanding of the craft, most attribute the windfall to Eppy's improved skill. Indeed, some worry that he may soon settle in a city to better practice his trade. Characters with a PS in Carpentry will observe that Eppy's skill is still somewhat lacking, however, especially if they see some local examples of the work.

H. Smithy

This crude smithy consists of a lean-to at the side of a low hovel. Under this cover is a modest forge, an anvil mounted

on an old stump, a long workbench, a number of forging tools, and a bucket of sand. The tools and implements are all kept in good condition despite the salty air. Next to the lean-to stands a water barrel, which is used to douse the hot iron.

Durvan Ironwright: Male Dwarf, 19 STR, 16 CON, Trading 12-, Weaponsmith 14-, KS: Forging Iron 13-, PS: Ironsmith 14-, AK: Torleo, 3" Running, Lim: Blind in one eye, Lim: lost both legs below knees, Hunted 8- (More Powerful, Limited Area: Torleo, Wants to Maim).

At one time Durvan was a much respected Iron Smith in the city of Torleo. However, he lost an eye during a violent disagreement with a member of the Smithy Guild, then lost both legs below the knee in an "accident". As a result, he was barely able to perform his craft and finally left the city for the calm of a country life. Despite his physical disabilities, Durvan is still a powerful dwarf and is capable of forging good quality tools and weapons, albeit at a slower than normal pace.

Lately Durvan's business has picked up in large part due to Eppy's orders for crates, carts, and other implements. He has been producing a large number of iron nails, plus some pick and shovel blades. Not one to question his good fortune, Durvan has been greedily accepting the funds and plans a visit to a Magi to get new legs magically attached.

While he can repair weapons and armor for the heroes, the rates he charges are unusually high for a village smithy, and the gruff and demanding dwarf will always drive a hard bargain. Any such work will require up to a week, as the dwarf is still backlogged with orders from Eppy. However, he has just completed a broad sword, pot helm, and a fine mail hauberk, which had been planned for use by the Lord's son. With the unfortunate death of the young noble, however, Durvan is willing to part with the arms and armor at fair city market rates.

I. Harbor

When the heroes follow the dirt lane down to the small harbor, read the following description to the players:

The small harbor is home to several single-masted fishing boats that are beached on the mud flats. Although somewhat shallow, the harbor is well sheltered by an arm of rock that creates the bay of Saltham. Along the rocky beach, nets are hung from various poles for mending, while piles of rude-smelling fish parts, crab shells, and oysters lie beside the cleaning rocks. A number of wicker traps sit along the beach in various stages of construction.

Your movements disturb a flock of seagulls, and they take to the wind and circle about the harbor. Their cries are carried to you by a fresh, steady breeze that blows in from the ocean. The beach carries the mingled odors of saltwater spray, dead fish, and drying seaweed.

Further out to sea, a strange, two-masted vessel appears to be firmly stranded on a sand bar some distance to the north. Even from this distance, it appears poorly kept, as if it had lain there for many months. The sails are patched and torn, and the rigging is frayed and loose. You find something very disturbing about the dark vessel, although you can't quite place your finger on the cause. A eerie chill runs up your neck at the sight.

The village owns eight fishing boats, and most will be out to sea when the ocean is calm. These boats ply the coastal waters, using nets, baited hooks, and wicker traps to catch fish and crustaceans. Each open boat has room for a crew of up to four men, a hinged mast, four oars with locks, a fish locker, sturdy rope, and a canvas sail. All are decorated on the outside with bright, primary colors, although the paint is faded somewhat and has been heavily worn by the actions of sun and saltwater.

The rocky arm has been extended over the years with many crushed stones that have been carried out to the end of the pier and dumped into the water. The pier is covered by a rough path that will allow a horse and cart to travel out to the end, and serves as a handsome site for the spear fishermen. Unfortunately, the arm of rock is gradually causing the bay to silt up.

The chill experienced by characters observing the ship is caused by a powerful spell cast from a scroll of ancient magic. For more details on the stranded ship, see Act III.

J. Village Commons

The commons is a large, grassy field, bounded by stone walls, shrub-lined gulleys, low trees, and the Cork creek. The village folk are free to lead their sheep, swine, and other cattle here for grazing. The swine are often left to forage for roots in the large copse at the edge of the commons. The Cork creek separates the commons from this copse, and provides fresh water for the herd.

The modest herd was tended by the Villein Rowen Anse, who traded his labor for a meager share of the crops and goods. Several days before the heroes arrived at the village, however, Rowen and a number of the cattle went missing. The pirates at the sea cave, hungry for some fresh provisions, had come raiding the village at dusk and managed to steal several animals. However, they were interrupted in this task by the young Rowen Anse whom they promptly slew. The raiders dragged his body into the copse, then stole away with their captive livestock.

Eventually the Lord was called upon to investigate, and he sent his son to track down the missing Shepherd. He quickly found the body of Rowen in the woods, then picked up the trail of the pirates. This he followed back to the cave, where he was ambushed and slain. To cover their deed, the pirates dragged the body back to the village and threw him into the mill pond.

K. Mill Pond

Rupert Miller: Male Human, 11 STR, Trading 12-, Transport Familiarity: Wagons, PS: Miller, Perk: Right to mill Lord's grain.

By the license of the Lord Konrad Dhiamus, Rupert Miller is permitted to grind all the grains produced by the local farmers. These grains are sorted into two grades, a coarser grain that produces the rough brown bread that is eaten by the common lot, and a finer kernel that is ground into a white flour for his lordship. A water wheel along the Cork creek is used to drive the large stone which grinds the seed into flour. Behind the wheel, a large mill pond has built up, which is home to many frogs and water fowl during the warmer months.

This pond is where the body of the Lord's son was discovered just a day before the heroes arrived in town. As the young man was slain some distance from the pond, little blood was released into the stream - a fact that a sharp character may pick up. A careful search of the pond requires wading through the muck and some persistence. However, a lucky individual may turn up a gold earring that was lost by one of the pirates. Several pieces of the ropes used to carry the young noble may also be found floating among the reeds.

L. Watch Tower

At one time this two-story stone tower was used to watch the coast for invasions from the Sultane of Zylistan. However, the structure was eventually abandoned and has been steadily decaying ever since. It has recently become occupied by a Giant Beetle. (See the HERO Bestiary for details.)

When the players decide to enter the ruined tower, read the following:

The upper floor and a portion of the mossy tower walls have fallen inward, burying the interior beneath a jumble of rocks. The pile has since become covered in grassy dirt and hardy weeds. Over time the rocks have shifted slightly, revealing a cellar entrance to the right of the main entry.

The back of the cellar contains a cluster of large, pale yellow, translucent eggs. The piles of debris have been shifted around the eggs to form a nest, which has been supplemented by dirt dragged down the stone steps. The Beetle is usually out hunting for prey, but it never strays far from the den. Several of the eggs are close to hatching, and a number of larva will be crawling about the cellar after a week. Besides the eggs and the debris, there appears to be little else of interest here.

Behind a loose stone in the cellar wall is a small compartment where the post captain stored his valuables. There is an old, crumbling scroll that contains ink signs that were used for passing messages to friendly military ships. There are also 129 very old copper coins, all corroded from the salty air and firmly attached to each other.

Act II - The Craghorn Caverns

Beyond the village, the land along the coast rises sharply to form a gently curving cliff that extends for at least a day's march to the northwest. Many caverns and passages have formed in the limestone cliffs due to the constant wave action. One of the larger such formations is the Craghorn Caverns. This cave system connects a large pit on the rise with a sea cave almost directly below. The Unearthed Rite have been using this cavern system for the last few years to conceal their deliveries of cadavers. Indeed, a heavily rutted dirt road now leads away from the mouth of the cave before dispersing into the surrounding countryside. The caves are extensive enough to allow a hundred men to take refuge, and the pirate crew have been using the caverns for exactly this purpose.

Due to the forays of the pirates from the caverns into the village of Saltham, several fresh and obvious trails lead back to the land entrance of this cave system. A successful Tracking roll is sufficient to follow the trail back to this opening. Following the death of the Lord's son, further such raids have been expressly forbidden by the Mate Jordan. Thus the pirates remain huddled within the dark and damp caves for the time being.

There has been some grumbling by the crew over this turn of events, so the Mate has been keeping the discontented

pirates busy hauling and stacking the long crates, skinning and smoking the sheep and pork, drilling for combat, and maintaining a double watch on both the land and sea entrances to the cave. For this purpose, the Mate has organized the hands into shore "teams" of four to six pirates each, with a leader responsible for each group. Naturally the pirates grumble even more about all this extra labor.

Except where noted below, most of the pirates are average humans with primary stats in the range from 9-11, standard figured attributes, and a CV of 4. They all speak Dornican and are knowledgeable about the islands. They are also skilled sea hands with a solid knowledge of boat handling. In addition, they have familiarities with Melee Weapons, Climbing, Concealment, Conversation, Deduction, Shadowing, and Stealth. As pirates, they are all hunted to some degree, although some have a worse repute than others.

All pirates wear sturdy, well-worn clothing (1 DEF, areas 7-16), but most have bare feet, little or no armor of note, and only a common weapon. A few dozen copper coins can be found on the lot, plus the occasional earring or other simple jewelry.

Shega's Group

Shega "Rake" Starwin: Elf Male, 9 BODY, 15 DEX, Breakfall 11-, Stealth 12-, +1 w/ Bows, 8" Running, UV Vision, Lightsleep, Hatred: Land Elves, Leather Armor (2 DEF, 10-13), Medium Bow (1d6+1K) w/ 24 Arrows, Dagger (+1, 1d6-1K). The group leader, Starwin is a taciturn Elf who bears a deep hatred of his land-bound cousins. Oddly, he has become fast friends with Darvey Stallon as a result.

Barkley Baker: Human Male, 16 BODY, 14 EGO, 5" Running, PS: Cooking, Club (4d6N), Leather Apron (2 DEF, 10-14). An obese man with a greasy goatee, he serves as the ship's rather poor cook. Barkley likes to wield a heavy pin in combat. His meals are sometimes so bad that the crew have threatened to feed him to the sharks. Ron Guidian: Human Male, 7 STR, 7 BODY, 14 INT, 7" Run, Concealment 12-, Deduction 12-, Survival 12-, Knife (1/2d6K). While young to be at sea, Ron is a bright lad who manages to survive by his wits among his mates. He will hide among the shadows, waiting for a favorable opportunity to turn the tables.

Shorty Redfur: Human Male, 12 BODY, Climbing 11-, Shadowing 11-, Enraged (11-, 11-), 3 Daggers (1d6-1K). A short, bad-tempered man who will skewer you just for looking at him funny. He is particularly close with Lanc, whom he admires for his courage. Lanc Kraugh: Half-Orc Male, 15 STR, 14 BODY, 7 INT, 6 COM, +1 w/ H-to-H, Broad Sword (+1, 1d6+1K), Buckler. A powerful and tough half-breed who has gained acceptance in the crew due to his fearlessness during combat. He is, however, none too bright.

Dirk's Group

Dirk Gooden: Human Male, 19 STR, 12 BODY, 14 PRE, Persuasion 12-, Paramedic 11-, Leather Vest (2 DEF, 11-13), Maul (+1+1/2K). A great bull of a man, Dirk became the group leader through sheer physical presence. However, he is a cautious fighter and is easily induced to withdraw from a tough fight. Kray Wrangler: Human Male, 10 BODY, 17 COM, Seduction 11-, Short Sword (+1, 1d6K). Due to his remarkable good lucks, Kray fancies himself a ladies man and has had some luck in that department. He wears a patch over one eye to appear more dashing, even though his sight is normal. He constantly tries to steal fine apparel so as to appear noble.

Audrey "Swiggy" Parrin: Human Male, 13 STR, 10 BODY, 8 CON, Streetwise 12-, KS: Brewing, Dependency (Alcohol, 1d6 per Day), Fransisca (-1, 2d6K). An incurable alcoholic, Audrey is adept at obtaining or brewing booze. His besotted state has often incurred the wrath of the Mate, but the alcohol makes him fearless. Skoogle: Human Male, 18 BODY, 17 CON, Security Systems 10-, Lim: Unable to Speak, Lim: One-armed, Hammer (1d6K, -1 STUNx), Lock Picks. Physically, Skoogle is a hardy specimen, a trait that allowed him to survive a shark attack. As a result, he can no longer speak and has lost the use of his sword arm. Consequently he is restricted to deck duty. His use of the sword is still somewhat limited.

Erin's Group

Erin Black: Human Male, 8 BODY, 15 INT, 17 PRE, Climbing 11-, Seamanship 12-, Persuasion 13-, Ambidexterity, Distinctive Features, FAM w/ Bow, Medium Bow (1d6+1K) w/ 24 Arrows, Club (4d6N). Horribly scarred across his face, Erin wears a heavy beard and head band to cover his marks. He is a wily fighter and a strong, authoritative presence that has earned him the equivalent of Bosun's rank on board the "Alkax". Petur Klosonik: Human Male, 11 BODY, 14 EGO, Persuasion 11-, KS: Reading Omens, Lim: Superstitious, War Club (5d6N), Charms. A highly superstitious man, Petur wears a garland of charms about his neck, none of which serve any useful function. He is constantly searching for signs and omens of good fortune. Unfortunately, he is highly persuasive and the others are likely to look at his foretellings with some interest.

Dal "Stick" Koldune: Human Male, 10 BODY, 13 DEX, Streetwise 12-, FAM w/ Thrown Knives/Axes, +2 OCV w/ Thrown Dagger, Lim: Wooden Leg, 9 Daggers (+1, 1d6-1K). The son of a whore, Dal is a bastard who has lived by his wits since a youth. His leg was lost below the knee when it was crushed by a rolling oil barrel. He is particularly adept with throwing daggers, and enjoy tossing them at animals or birds. Dungee Wallace: Human Male, 12 STR, 6 CON, 8 BODY, Forgery 13-, Lim: Habitual Liar, FAM w/ Crossbows, Light Crossbow (+1, 1d6+1K) w/ 10 Bolts. Dungee wears stringy hair over his close-set eyes and has an old cloth tied across his nose and mouth. He has proved his worth several times by forging documents, but he is often bullied by his crew mates due to constant allergies. The skinny Dungee is incapable of telling the truth, even when his life is at stake.

Errol Perlot: Human Male, 11 BODY, 14 DEX, Climbing 12-, Sleight of Hand 12-, Lim: Greedy, Morningstar (1+1/2d6K, 1.5h). Physically less than impressive in appearance, Errol is surprisingly adept at picking pockets or scaling walls. He will alway volunteer for raids with an opportunity for good pickings. Errol has a weak chin and unusually bushy brown sideburns. Ermite Ransom: Human Male, 16 DEX, 14 BODY, Stealth 12-, +1 w/ Swords, Lim: Bully, Reputation 11-, Short Sword (+1, 1d6K). A lanky renegade with a price on his head in several ports, Ermite is a ruthless, cold-blooded killer. He especially enjoys bullying his opponents before dispatching them with his sword. So wanted is Ermite that there is a price on his head in most ports of the Western Shores.

Corn's Group

Corn Bagwit: Dwarf Male, 15 STR, 14 DEX, 12 BODY, Climbing 12-, Lockpicking 13-, Stealth 12-, PS: Burglar, Lim: Malicious, Lim: Lazy, Leather Jack (3 DEF, 7-13), Large Pick (1d6+1K AP), Pipe. A lazy Dwarf with a malicious sense of humor, Corn particularly enjoys stealing from the rich then giving to his favorite charity - himself. His thieving skills are especially valuable during land raids, so he has been made group leader by a reluctant Mate. Eppy Seward: Human Male, 14 STR, 9 BODY, Paramedic 11-, Survival 11-, FAM w/ Bows, +1 w/ Bows, Lim: Frequently Seasick, Heavy Bow (1+1/2d6K) w/ 18 Arrows. A former seaman turned pirate, Eppy has a severe hatred for wealthy shipping merchants. He is a dead-eye with the bow, so he is usually called upon to fire warning shots during a sea chase. However, he is often sick in rough water, despite his many years at sea.

Kaz el Fhalid: Human Male, 17 STR, 12 BODY, 14 CON, 18 PRE, Interrogation 14-, Tracking 11-, Lim: Strong Religious Convictions, Distinctive Features, Round Shield (+2 DCV), Falchion (+1, 1+1/2d6K). Kaz is most notable for the tattoos that cover much of his face and bare upper body. He is a tough, powerful man who fights with a bronze Falchion and shield. Kaz has no compunctions whatsoever against torturing infidels for information. Brin Turung: Human Male, 10 BODY, 12 DEX, Climbing 13-, Seamanship 11-, +2 to Sight PER, +1 w/ Crossbows, Lt. Crossbow (1d6+1K) w/ 10 Bolts, Lim: Fear of Horses. A veteran sea hand who has served with the Captain from the beginning. Brin has excellent vision, so he is usually placed on watch in the crows nest.

Soshie's Group

Soshie Reed: Human Female, 13 STR, 13 DEX, 10 BODY, Acrobatics 14-, Breakfall 12-, Climbing 12-, Berserk (8-, 11-), Quarterstaff (+1, 4d6N). Being one of only two females in a crew of bawdy pirates, her strong spirit and irreverent nature have served Soshie well. However, her fiery temper has placed Soshie in more than one dangerous situation. She is a top hand with the canvas work, and has absolutely no fear of heights.

Billy Jack Rupert: Human Male, 8 BODY, 7 CON, 5" Running, Gambling 12-, 1d6 Luck, Club (4d6N). This old sea

hand has a club foot that limits his mobility somewhat. The crew tolerate old Jack because they consider him lucky. He is fond of games of chance and risky actions. Billy has a small pet monkey that he often carries on his shoulder.

Bristol Burns: Human Male, 16 STR, 11 BODY, 8 CON, 13 PRE, Acting 12-, Seduction 12-, Susceptibility (Uncommon, 1d6/turn), FAM w/ Bows, Heavy Bow (1+1/2d6K) w/ 20 Arrows. A tall, cocky fellow with a flair for the dramatic, Bristol is notable for his finery and a heavy moustache. He is a solid, muscular man, although a lung ailment limits his endurance and sends him into coughing spasms during heavy exertion.

Charlie Beeson: Human Male, 6 INT, 14 STR, 11 BODY, Mimicry 12-, Lim: Sadistic, Broad Sword (+1, 1d6+1K). A sadistic brute with the common sense of a child, Charlie requires constant attention to prevent stupid errors. He particularly enjoys performing cruel tricks on helpless animals and lubbers, and has carefully honed his ability to mimic for this purpose. Kurk Cogwing: Human Male, 14 DEX, 10 BODY, Climbing 12-, Sleight of Hand 12-, Stealth 13-, +1 OCV w/ Short Sword, Lim: Hatred of Ambrians, Leather Jack (3 DEF, 7-13), Short Sword (+1, 1d6K). A flamboyant adventurer whose only true love is gold, Kurk would be equally at home on land as a brigand. He has an intense hatred of Ambria and will seek out any from that land to slake his desire for revenge.

Salty's Group

Salty Field: Human Male, 13 STR, 9 BODY, 15 CON, Bribery 11-, Concealment 12-, +1 w/ Unarmed Combat, Leather Helm (2 DEF, 3-4), War Hammer (-1, 1d6+1K, 1.5h). A rotund man with a cruel sense of humor, Orden is the leader of this group and enjoys ordering his men to perform meaningless tasks. He particularly enjoys eating raw meat and finds others reactions to this habit most amusing. Charity Heart: Human Female, 13 STR, 10 BODY, 15 CON, Acting 12-, Conversation 11-, Disguise 11-, +1 w/ Swords, Short Sword (+1, 1d6K). A pretty though coarse and uncultured woman, Charity has occasionally been employed by the Captain as a spy, a task at which she excels. Oddly, the two women on board the ship have developed a strong dislike for each other, and they have sometimes come to blows.

Briney Tipps: Human Male, 14 BODY, Survival 11-, FAM w/ Javelins, PS: Whaling, 2 Medium Spears (-1, 1+1/2d6K, 1.5h). Once a successful whaler, Briney is a tough, veteran seaman with a taste for danger. He is an exceedingly gloomy individual - always expecting the worse possible outcome - and has never been known to smile even from cruelty. Ben Crow: Human Male, 10 BODY, Climbing 11-, Conversation 12-, Concealment 11-, FAM w/ Sling, Sling (-1 RMod, 1d6K, +1 STUNx), Knife (+1, 1/2d6K). A jovial cove who is much appreciated on board the ship, Ben seems little like a pirate. Nevertheless, Ben greatly enjoys the life of a sea raider, especially when stealing from fat, rich, and lazy city merchants.

During the daylight hours, only Shega, Dirk, and Erin's groups are awake and available to guard both entrances plus the Lady Landwurt and her Hand Maiden. At best it will require several minutes to fully rouse the remaining pirates, giving the heroes the opportunity to take out the defenders piecemeal. Nevertheless, these are steep odds for the characters, and their first attack may well fail with some losses. If severely pressed, the pirates will fall back to cavern C, where they will build a barricade with the various barrels and sea chests.

Should the characters be driven away from the base of the Unearthing Rite, this is an opportunity for some amusing role-playing by the GM. The lusty pirates, much cheered by the hasty retreat of the characters, will hurl all manner of well-chosen insults toward their fleeing foes. These will include bawdy references to improper parentage; comparisons to domesticated animals or unpleasant diseases; mention of inadequate or missing body parts; bold assertions about their lack of character; exaggerations about certain bodily odors and functions; and so on. The heroes will also be bombarded by pieces of garbage, which will only add to their humiliation and should fuel the desire for a rematch.

Once the pirate leaders realize their location has been discovered by the villagers, they will react accordingly. If the ship is still secure, the Mate will first row out to consult with his Captain. The most likely plan of action will be to send a strong raiding party into the village to capture the Lord as a hostage. This raid will consist of Shega and Dirk's

groups, led by the Mate. If this raid fails in its mission, the pirates sow mischief by driving off all the horses, setting hovels ablaze, and generally acting like barbarians. Meanwhile, the Necromancer and eight of her animated corpses will patiently lie in wait along the return trail to ambush anybody trailing the raiders back to the caves.

The greatest fear of the pirates at this point is that a detachment of guards will be summoned from the town of Farnth to deal with the situation. Thus, the Mate will send a group of pirates out to watch the village lane and ambush anybody attempting to deliver a message. These groups will be switched once every four hours, and fully withdrawn at night. The pirates will also begin daytime offloading of the ship, greatly speeding up the process of getting the vessel off the bar.

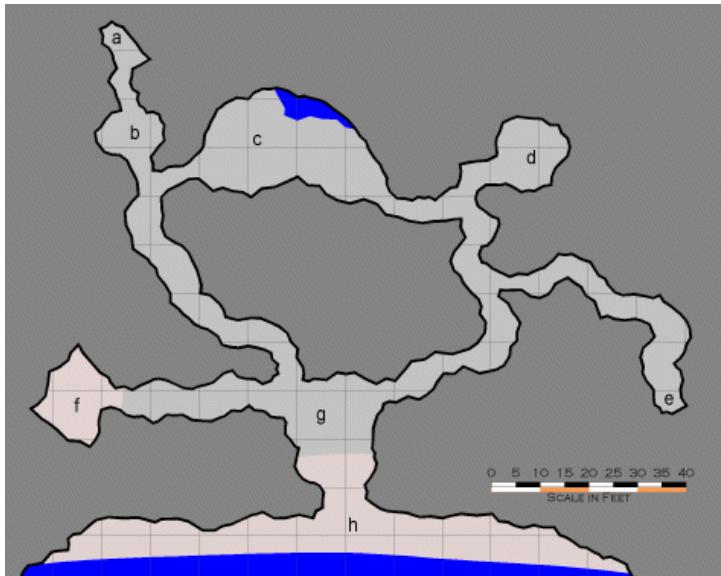
Should the heroes manage to seize the ship, the priorities of the land-based pirates change and they will attempt to take the vessel back with a surprise assault. Since the long boat will only hold nine men at best, several trips to the sand bar will be required to form a strong boarding party. Alert guards on board the ship may detect the gathering force, especially if one of the observers has any form of night vision.

Meanwhile, the heroes could be planning a renewed attack on the cave system. Several villagers will be able to provide a general layout of the complex, as they played in the caves during their youth. The characters may also need allies from the local village in order to successfully storm the cave entrance. A feint from land followed by a seaborne attack is another alternative, and the battle-trained Lord would suggest this as a possible course of action if he is consulted.

If worse comes to worse, and the pirates are unable to take back their ship or drive off the attacks of the villagers, they will attempt to steal some of the fishing boats from the harbor and make for their homeland of Dornica. In doing so they will undoubtedly steal as much of the livestock and other staples as they can carry, plus whatever prizes of any worth they can find. They may even kidnap a few of the healthier villagers to sell as slaves in distant markets.

A. Land Opening

The opening to the caves is a pit that drops down over two meters before a sloping pile of dirt joins a wide tunnel leading to cave E. Two crude wooden ladders are stored along this tunnel wall, allowing easy egress. The ground about the entry has several deep gulleys that provide good cover for staging an ambush. The pirates will always have two or three alert lookouts posted near this entrance, so they will be ready should anybody approach.



B. Entrance Cave

This cramped, sandstone cave is located just inside the land entrance, and is constantly manned by four to six of the pirates. However, the pirates are usually busy playing games of chance or napping on a stool, unless the Mate is on duty. From here, a short tunnel leads to the much larger cave C. A longer, smooth and winding tunnel leads downward

toward the sea entrance in cave G.

C. Main Cavern

Normally the local base for the Unearthing Rite, this sizeable cavern has been adopted as the main sleeping quarters for the pirate crew. The bean-shaped cavern is some five meters in height near the land entrance tunnel, and slowly decreases in height and width until it reaches a second tunnel at the far end. This wide, smooth tunnel curves back on itself before leading down to cave G.

Sea chests and bed rolls have been laid around the perimeter. The chest contain clothing and other possessions of the pirates. In the center, planks have been laid across several empty barrels to serve as a dining table, with smaller barrels turned on their ends for stools. A lit oil lantern is left on the table at all hours to illuminate the area. Barrels of food stocks, including dried biscuit and salted meat and fish, have been stowed at the low end of the cavern. A clear pool on the back side of the curved cavern provides a source of drinking water.

At the high end of the cavern, a ledge some three meters above the floor provides additional storage area for ropes, four sheafs of arrows, a case of crossbow bolts, oil barrels, various gray robes, empty clay urns, bottles of embalming fluid, and other assundry tools and items belonging to the Unearthing Rite. A simple wood ladder leads up to the ledge from the main floor. Several small bats make their nest in the upper reaches of this cavern. These will usually leave at night via the entrance cave to eat fruit and bugs.

D. Prison Cave

This small, damp cave is being used to hold the Lady Langwurt and her Hand Maiden. The tunnel from this cave joins the winding passage from cave G, just before it joins cave B. Two guards from Salty's group are stationed in the Cave entrance tunnel at all times. The crew have been made very aware that the women must be delivered unharmed to the Citadel, and thus far they have remained safe from the bawdy pirates. If the cave complex is successfully assaulted from the outside, however, the noble woman will be used by the Mate to bargain for safe passage.

The bunks for the two women have been placed on a one meter high shelf that runs two thirds the way around the outside of the cave. A sea chest with some clothing for the women has been carried here, along with a washing bowl, a small barrel of drinking water with cup, and an oil lantern.

Sharena Langwurt: Female Human, 12 DEX, 14 INT, 17 EGO, FAM w/ Swords, Conversation 12-, High Society 13-, Paramedic 8-, Persuasion 11-, Riding 12-, KS: Weaving, PS: Embroidery, Lim: Strong Religious Convictions, Skill Enhancer: Well Connected, Perk: Well Off, Perk: Member of Nobility.

The Lady Langwurt is a strong-willed and intelligent young woman who is well regarded in the elite social circles of the Duchy. Her disappearance came at a most inopportune moment, as she was about to be married off to a member of the Royal Family. As a result, the politics of the Duchy have been thrown into turmoil, as was no doubt intended by her kidnappers.

While less than stunning in appearance, Sharena has been using her well-schooled social skills to good effect and has gained the grudging interest of the Mate. He visits the cave once or twice a day to check up on his guests, and usually stops to converse with the ladies. Sharena has been able to gain a few tidbits of information about the nature of the plot

against the Duchy. In particular, she knows of the existence and approximate location of the Citadel within the Grey Bogs.

E. Crab Cavern

The smooth, winding tunnel between rooms B and G has a junction at the mid-point. One branch leads downward for about twenty meters before suddenly ending in a smooth bore hole. Careless individuals who do not watch their footing may suddenly find themselves sliding down this slick tunnel toward the bore hole. After losing a couple of men down this hole, the pirates have learned to avoid the opening.

The hole opening is somewhat narrow, so a successful Breakfall roll with a -1 penalty is sufficient for a character to catch the sides before falling down the smooth, vertical chimney. At the bottom is a rough cave that is home to a pair of Giant Crabs. (See the HERO Bestiary for stats.) The cave is roughly twenty meters wide and slides slowly beneath the waves before reaching an underwater opening into the ocean. The small cave beach is usually submerged, except at high tide.

F. Storage Cave

This small cave is connected to the end of cave G by a wide, bending tunnel. During extreme tides this cave can be submerged, so the bottom is covered in soft sand and some dry seaweed. At the moment this cave is serving as a store room for the smoked meat and miscellaneous supplies. Several barrels have been hauled inside, and the unused meat is slowly being stowed in the salt. Three barrels of brandy are also stacked against the wall, so the cave is constantly guarded by one of the pirate leaders.

G. Lower Cave

The low, wide entry from the sea entrance H leads to this oval, sand-choked cave. Currently this serves as the sleeping quarters for the twenty pirates who serve as the late night crew. They sleep during the daylight hours and may require several turns to rouse during a fight. Their bed rolls are stowed behind a low wall of stacked crates and empty barrels near the far wall. A smooth, winding tunnel runs between here and cave B. The smaller passage at the opposite end leads to cave F.

H. Sea Entrance

The ship's long boat and a raft of barrels is beached at the sheltered sea entrance to the cave complex during the daytime. Smokey driftwood fires in two sand pits have been used to salt, smoke, and dry thin strips of the sheep and pig. These were the same livestock that were raided from the villagers. The entrance is not guarded on a regular basis, although there are usually several pirates relaxing on barrels along the shore during the daytime.

Act III - The Sand Bar

The Caravel "Alkax" is firmly grounded on a large sand bar, about 200 meters from the shoreline to the north of the village. At low tide the bar is firm enough to land upon and approach the vessel, but there are several shallow pools of quicksand. Most of these are less than one meter in depth, so they will merely pose an obstacle unless there is a pet or small character in the group. The sand bar is nearly completely submerged at high tide, making a ground approach to the Caravel more difficult.

The "Alkax" is an 80 ton Caravel that has been slightly modified for Privateering. It is a two-masted cargo vessel with lanteen-rigged sails, masts raked slightly forward, and prominent, sloping Foc'sle and Quarter Decks. A modest merchant ship in dimensions, its length is twenty one meters and the beam width is seven meters. The hull is wrapped in overlapping planking with reinforcing strakes, built to withstand heavy seas.

Due to the strong illusionary spell, the heavily patched sails appear dirty and ragged with age, and the rigging is frayed and hangs loose from the mast. The ship is canted at a slight angle due to the grounding on the sand bar, but the slope is not enough to affect footing on the deck. The "Alkax" is unadorned, save for an eye painted on either side of the bow.

Following the storm that grounded the "Alkax", the first action of the crew was to empty the barrels full of stones that were used for ballast in the bilge. This created a large pile of stones that will be noticed by anybody moving around the bow of ship. Unfortunately for the crew, emptying the ballast and hauling with the long boat were insufficient to release the Caravel. The barrels have since been strapped together to serve as a raft.

During the hours between night fall and first light, a longboat will land close to the Caravel, and a crew of four to five pirates arrive to offload crates from the ship. While the long boat was not designed to serve as a lighter, the crates can be tied to a raft of barrels that the crew can tow to the cave. There is barely enough time to make four round trips from the cave before first light, so the pirates can offload sixteen crates per day. As there are a total of one hundred and fifty crates remaining on board, it requires nearly the full ten days to complete the task. By the end of that time, the tides will be more favorable for floating the ship.

If the heroes land on the sand bar in the early morning before the next high tide, a cursory search of the bar near the ship will reveal the multitude of prints from the landings on the previous night. A successful Tracking Skill roll will identify five distinct bare human prints travelling from the Caravel and back. The prints are deeper and travel in pairs on the return trip, indicating that a load was being carried between two people.

The decks of the Caravel are being patrolled by ten skeletons, all wearing heavily frayed sailor's garb, and armed with cutlass, belaying pins, and boarding pikes. They will watch the adventurers land on the bar and approach, but make no move to attack until the party attempts to board the ship. Upon doing so, they will immediately close on the first person coming up the side. There is no organization to this action, however, and the skeletons are easily deceived into concentrating their attack on the first boarder.

The only crewmen aboard the ship are the Captain, the Necromancer, and four of the pirate hands. Initially they will ignore any attacks against the skeletons, believing it to be more villagers attempting to salvage the ship. If most of the skeletons are cut down, however, the crew will immediately storm the party in a no-holds-barred contest. Since they are very familiar with the ship layout, some of the pirates can attack from surprising directions and they may catch the heroes off guard.

Pirate Hands

Pearl "Sticky" Skinner: Human Male, 9 BODY, KS: Sea Chanties, FAM w/ Bow, Medium Bow (1d6+1K) w/ 24 Arrows, Small Mace (1d6K). A short, swarthy-fleshed man with a balding head and bushy sideburns. Pearl is an accomplished singer and enjoys regaling his mates with bawdy sea chanties. Celt O'Brien: Human Male, 15 STR, 12 BODY, +5 PRE when Screaming, Climbing 11-, +1 w/ Hand-to-Hand, 3x Francisca (1+1/2d6K). A rude, northern

barbarian, Celt always wears a kilt and blue body paint. In the manner of his tribesmen, he erupts with a ferocious scream before storming into a fight.

John Wrightson: Human Male, 12 STR, 10 BODY, Climbing 11-, PS: Carpenter, FAM w/ Crossbow, Light Crossbow (+1 RMod, 1d6+1K) w/ 20 Bolts, Club (4d6N). John is the ship's only true carpenter, so he is much valued by the Captain. Nevertheless, he is a typical rude and unkempt pirate with little interest in anything besides gold.

Darvey Stallon: Dwarf Male, 13 STR, 14 CON, 13 BODY, Mechanics 11-, Lim: Hates Elves, +1 w/ Axes, Battle Axe (-1, 2d6-1K, 1.5h). A murderous mountain Dwarf that was banished from his homeland, Darvey lived for a time as a brigand before joining the ship. Due to his short stature, Darvey can use his axe below decks without penalty.

If the heroes have bow weapons, they can attempt to pick off the skeletons one at a time, although targeting is more difficult due to obstacles and steady movement. Once the crew joins the fight, however, the characters will have a more difficult time of it since the pirates will be able to fire down on them from the Foc'sle. The Necromancer will also be more effective in this situation, since he can use his ranged spells.

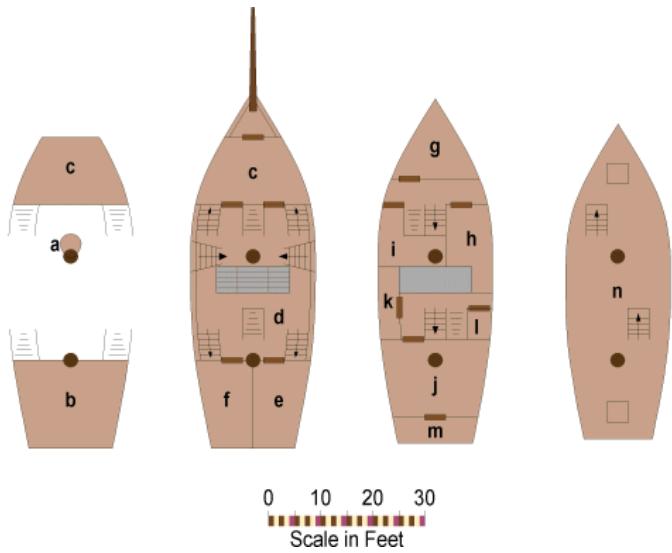
Should the contest go poorly for the pirates - especially if they have lost the Captain or Necromancer - they will withdraw into the lower decks where they can better fight at the poor odds. This will usually occur when they have lost half their number without comparable losses on the part of the heroes. At this point the pirates will immediately wave a parley flag and ask for quarter. The conditions are that they be allowed to leave the ship with their hand weapons and wait until nightfall for their pickup. Should quarter be acceptable to the heroes, then the pirates will leave for the sea cave during the night. Naturally, should they believe they can take back the ship with greater numbers, then they will perform a surprise attack several days later.

If the pirates in the cave have been defeated, the crew on board the ship may be wondering what happened to their mates. After two days the Necromancer will be growing concerned and will use her powers to animate as many of the remaining corpses as his strength will allow. These will form a small reserve which the Necromancer will keep hidden under the bay closest to the ship. The crates will be dumped overboard to lighten the load in preparation for the upcoming high tide.

The reserve of corpses beneath the bay will attract a large number of small predators which will gradually gnaw on the remaining flesh and leave the corpses as bare skeletons. These skeletons will be unarmed, so they pose less of a threat to the adventurers than the skeletons on board. However, if they are introduced during the boarding attempt, they can still tip the scales in favor of the pirates.

Listed below are descriptions for the various parts of the ship, in order from top to bottom. Below decks the quarters are particularly dark and cramped, with little air circulation and various unpleasant odors. Fighting under these conditions is handicapped, save for close melee with smaller weapons. Large or unwieldy weapons should receive a combat penalty from -1 to -3, depending on their size and usage.

Somewhere within the hull the characters will encounter the Smokey, the ship's feral cat. (See the HERO Bestiary for stats on the Domestic Cat.) Smokey has been existing on scraps of stolen food plus the occasional scrawny rat.



A. Crow's Nest

Mounted high on the main mast is the Crow's Nest, a wooden platform that can be used as an observation tower. For protection from the elements, the nest is surrounded by a rail and a canvas screen. The nest will remain unmanned until the presence of the pirates on board is discovered. Entry to the nest can be gained by climbing rope ladders and passing through the Lubbers Hole.

B. Quarter Deck

Mounted in the center of the rectangular quarter deck is a short pole with the handsome figure of a sitting wolf carved into the top. This pole apparently serves as a stanchion to hold the relieving tackle that is

still attached to the whipstaff. (The whipstaff being the long tiller that controls the rudder on the starboard side.) Hanging from the front of this pole is a brass lamp and a small cabinet containing a sand glass and a bullocks horn. At the back of the Quarter Deck is a false poop deck, providing shade from the sun.

C. Foc'sle

This overhanging, triangular deck is designed for use by archers. The height advantage and the partial cover provided by the rail and the sloping deck provide an excellent location for using such missile fire against boarding parties.

The room beneath the forecastle apparently serves as the crew's sleeping quarters, as double rows of hammocks have been rolled up and tied to the walls. In the center, hung between two bits, stands a horizontal windlass with an anchor cable running through the hawsehole. This hole is normally plugged by a hawse bag, but it currently stands open. At the fore is a door leading to the head and the bowsprit.

D. Main Deck

Just aft of midship on this deck stands the main mast. Rope ladders to either side of the mast climb up to the crow's nest. A storm lantern hangs from a hook on the front of this mast, and currently glows with an eerie green light as a result of the illusion spell. Forward of the mast, on either side of the deck, are windlass pumps with buckets. In front of the mast is a raised, double-winged grill that covers the cargo hold opening. A horizontal capstan, in combination with a block and tackle suspended between the masts, is used to raise or lower the cargo.

From fore and aft, narrow companionways lead down to doors into the lower deck. Open wood steps lead up to the Foc'sle and Quarter decks, with the space underneath the stairs used for the stowage of boarding planks, worn ropes, large wicker shields, and heavy weather canvas. (The wicker shields can be used by the crew as protection from missiles fired by the heroes. They function as +3 DCV shields versus missiles, but will crumble against heavier melee weapons.) The foremast forms part of the Foc'sle, and from here a single rope ladder runs up the mast.

E. Captain's Quarters

Located on the starboard side, this small but handsomely-decorated cabin is the Captain's quarters. The majority of this small cabin is occupied by the bunk. Three shuttered windows provide a view of the surrounding waters. A polished brass Astrolabe, the prize from some past capture, is hung prominently from the inner wall. Also hanging from the wall is an extra sword and scabbard, foul-weather gear, an oil painting of a Lord, and two tri-cornered hats.

Drawers beneath the bunk contain most of the Captain's clothing and personal possessions, including captured finery; long leather boots; wide belts; and books on navigating the western shores, great sea battles, provisioning ships, and an illustrated guide to swordsmanship. At the back of the cabin is an exquisite sea chest with multiple drawers containing 21 pieces of gold, several strings of pearls, a fine emerald clasp, two silver bracelets, a fine hand mirror, several gold earrings, and a shark's tooth necklace.

F. Mate's Quarters

This small cabin on the port side is normally the quarters for the First Mate. However, Ohra Ghulard has been using this room for her activities. As a result, the place has a most unpleasant odor, and is decorated with necromantic oddities. Most of the narrow room is occupied by a bunk. There is also a foot locker containing most of Ohra's garb and some personal possessions, but nothing of significant value or interest. However, a hidden panel behind the bunk is used to keep Ohra's operating funds safe from the pirates. It currently contains 128 silvers in a leather pouch.

Rows of slotted shelves along the outer wall contain coastal navigation maps, many little more than rough sketches. These have either been purchased in Port Regency or stolen during pirate raids. A small wood table will unhook and fold down from this wall, turning the quarters into a chart room. Three shuttered windows on the outside provide illumination.

G. Bosun's Stores

Located at the closed, triangular area in the bow of the lower deck is the Bosun's Stores. This dark room serves as a storage area for supplies needed to operate the ship. In the niche before the door stands the scuttle butt, a water-filled barrel with a dipping spoon. On a ledge beside the door is a tallow-dip lamp that is usually kept lit.

Hung from pegs along the walls is a variety of ropes for different rigging, plus hemp rope, rope yarn, and frayed oakum ends. Stacked in bundles along the sides are spare sheets, materials and tools for patching tears in the fabric, and the customary black pirate pennants to signal no quarter given. The room also contains pulleys, buckets, stiff-bristled brooms, holystones, sounding leads, grease pots, barrels and pots of pitch, boxes of resin, tallow for lamps, oil jugs, oakum strips, boxes of scupper nails, lead sheets for sealing leaks, crates of fire wood for the stove, and fishing line and hooks on hand frames.

Shelves along the inner wall contain a collection of poorly maintained carpenter's tools, including a hatchet, reaming iron, calipers, brace and bits, pincers, auger, hand saws, caulking iron, draw knife, chisels, adze, gouges, mallet, sledge hammer, crowbar, and several common hammers. Several of these tools will serve as weapons in a pinch.

H. Galley

This busy room is obviously the galley. The sides and back are lined with fenced shelves choked with all manner of pots, kettles, tankards, glasses, bowls, dishes, and cutlery. The center is occupied by a copper-plated work bench covered by some chopped food bits, two cutting knives, and slop. Beneath the bench is a bowl of slush, bottles of garlic and olive oil, and a portable iron firebox that can be carried on deck to cook food.

I. Food Storage

Opposite the galley is the food storage locker. This unlit, shelf-lined larder is used to store food supplies during the summer raiding period. Although much of the ship's stock has been off loaded, there are still a respectable number of such containers present.

Inside can be found sacks of hard biscuit and rice; a canvas bag of smoked bacon hanging from the ceiling; casks of salted meat, flour, and fish; bags of chick peas and lentils; a jar of honey; sacks of rice; a box of almonds, a barrel of pigs bones; earthenware jugs of wine and vinegar; hard cheese wrapped in canvas; and jars of raisins and sweetmeat. However, some of the food supplies are wormy and rancid. There are also several small barrels of fresh water, two of which have been unknowingly fouled.

J. Aft Quarters

This room at the aft part of the ship has been cleared as sleeping quarters for additional pirate's crew. Most of the hammocks have been bundled against the walls, but there are six hammocks strung from the ceiling. Low cabinets stand against the sides, containing the clothing and meager possessions of the reduced pirate crew. From here, stairs lead up to the main deck, a door opens to the armory. There are two port holes to port and starboard.

K. Port Storage

This small room is currently used for storing assundry souvenirs stolen by the pirates during their raids. There are many articles of clothing including finery, two somewhat battered oil paintings, a bronze vase, bottles of scented bath water, a five-ringed iron ornament, two matching marble statuettes of a rearing horse, a crate filled with assorted oddities, several candles in a box, and a heap of banners, broken mast heads, and other ornaments.

L. Starboard Storage

Another small storage room, primarily used as a brig for holding hostages. There are two hammocks, a bucket, and a dirty blanket hung from a peg. Currently the room is also being used to stow some fire wood.

M. Armory

Behind the aft quarters is a secondary storage room that has been converted into an armory for the crew. The weapon selection is somewhat limited as most of the land-based pirates have already armed themselves from this room. Nevertheless, there are several spears, a pair of spiked clubs, dozens of poor quality knives, two casting nets, several sheafs of low grade arrows, a broken shield, grappling hooks, and a bronze falchion which apparently once had several inset stones.

While the Necromancer is on board, the Mate has been making this tight space his private quarters. His hammock is stowed in the wall space, and a sea chest of his clothing and some personal artifacts still stands against the port side.

The room is stuffy and barely illuminated by two small port holes.

N. Cargo Hold

The lowest portion of the ship serves as the hold, an area normally used for stowing cargo and ballast. At the moment, however, the hold is nearly empty, save for several stacks of the remaining crates of corpses. Besides the two masts, the hold is split by three stanchions that provide support for the lower deck. A rectangular opening between the hold and the main deck allows the cargo to be loaded and unloaded. A single companionway leads up to the lower deck, aft of the galley, while a ladder climbs to the main deck.

O. Bilge

This narrow space between the hold and the ships hull is nearly completely flooded, as the pumps have not been manned since the grounding. A hatch in the floor of the hold allows access. The place is dark and damp, with a horrid smell caused by bad air and dumping of wastes. Nests along the sides are home to several packs of rats, all thin from starvation. While it is possible for a human to crawl through this space, there is little of interest.

The End of Episode 1

This setback for the pirates and the Unearthing Rite is only the beginning of the tale, as much greater dangers lie ahead. The young woman who was rescued from the cave will want to see her captors punished, and the resources of her father will soon be directed toward finding the hidden Citadel. The surviving heroes will undoubtedly be amply rewarded for their deeds and will be asked to serve in this new campaign. The events that follow, however, await another telling.

Appendix A - Leading Characters

Konrad Dhiamus

While showing signs of his age at forty, the Lord is still a robust man and is capable of wielding his sword in a most respectable manner. His family has lived at this dwelling for seven generations, and they have saved the village from numerous troubles over the decades. While he devotes most of his time to seeing to the commerce and well-being of Saltham, Konrad considers himself something of a scholar and has been working on a book on the world of politics and intrigue within of Irolo. However, this work will not be published in his lifetime.

As a youth, Lord Dhiamus was brought into an arranged marriage with the Lady Lieserhan, and over the years the two have grown a strong affection for each other. The first two pregnancies of the Lady were stillborn, so their son was a source of great pleasure and pride to the couple. Now with his only heir slain, Konrad is deeply melancholic and is not easily stirred to investigate the surrounding events.

Once the Lord is made aware that the pirates in the sea cave are responsible for the death of his son, however, he will rouse out the village militia and expect the characters to aid his revenge. The village has little to offer the adventurers for their assistance, other than food and shelter, so a significant cut of the sack will be used as an inducement.

When preparing for combat, the Lord will don his Mail Hauberk and Gauntlets (6 DEF, 6-14), Iron Helm (8 DEF, 4-5), and leather riding boots (3 DEF, 15-18). He carries a Heater Shield (+2 DCV), a Hand Axe (1d6+1K) and a glowing

blue magical Long Sword (+2, 2d6-1K) known as Ixeter. His light war horse Regorand, although aging somewhat, is still a valiant beast. (See HERO Bestiary for stats.)

STR 15, DEX 13, CON 12, BODY 11, INT 14, EGO 16, PRE 16, COM 12

PD 4, ED 3, SPD 3, REC 6, END 20, STUN 30

Owns Ixeter*, Owns Regorand, Owns Saltham Manor (40"x20", 2 BODY, 4 DEF), Perk: Member of Lower Nobility, Perk: Well-Off, Transport Familiarity: Horses, FAM w/ Common Melee Weapons, +3 w/ Swords,

Animal Handling 13-, Riding 13-, Paramedic 12-, Tactics 12-, Oratory 12-, High Society 12-, KS: Irolo Politics 13-,

KS: Code of Honor 11-, KS: History of famous deeds 11-, Literate w/ Local Language,

ES: Climbing, Concealment, Deduction, Conversation, Shadowing, Stealth 8- (ea)

AK: Duchy of Irolo, PS: Manorial Lord

Knight Package Bonus, Psych Lim: Follows Code of Honor, Psych Lim: Protective of Villagers, Age 40+, Reputation 8-, Professional Rival: Count Flavio

OCV: 4; DCV: 4; ECV: 5; Phases: 4, 8, 12

* See Appendix B for details.

Ohra Ghulard

As with others of her ilk, Ohra Ghulard shows the pale, thin, and cadaverous appearance of a Necromantic Adept. She is constantly surrounded by a dark and unpleasant aura which many people find uncomfortable and most animals instinctively fear. For this reason she is loath to ride a mount of any kind, although she will reluctantly drive a cart when the beasts have been hitched by another. Despite her calling, Ohra is not overtly sinister or otherwise foul. However, she does have a noticeable disdain for the living and much prefers the company of a corpse. She is fascinated by all aspects of death and will often pause to observe a newly fallen body as if to watch for the spirit leaving the corpse.

As an Adept and a leader of the Unearthing Rite, Ohra is much feared and respected by both the pirates and the tomb raiders. She is closely linked with Mortius Kalaner, and operates with his full authority in the field. Ohra is currently charged with bringing a further thousand corpses to the Citadel, a task for which she was granted a sizeable sum of silvers. The remainder of this sum is hidden in her quarters on board the "Alkax".

She wears the simple dark brown robes of an Adept, and carries a sturdy cudgel of hardwood carved in the form of a thigh bone. Most of her research material has been left behind in her study within the Citadel of the Dead. On her right hand is a light-blue crystal ring that magically allows Ohra to breath underwater and survive crushing depths. If all else fails, she will use this ring to escape into the ocean with her remaining undead.

Memorized Spells: Animate Dead, Chilling Gaze, Control Undead, Create Lesser Undead, Death Form*, Detect Magic, Sleep of the Dead, Undead Aura*.

STR 9, DEX 12, CON 8, BODY 12, INT 19, EGO 12, PRE 18, COM 8

PD 2, ED 3, SPD 3, REC 7, END 26, STUN 20

Magic Power Pool (45 points), Ring of Underwater Breathing*, Magic Skill 16-, +1 w/ Chilling Gaze, Control Undead, and Create Lesser Undead 17-, Spell Research 13-, Concealment 13-, Deduction 13-, Embalming 13-, Paramedic 13-, Disguise 11-, Stealth 11-, Weapon Familiarity: Clubs, Transport Familiarity: Cart, KS: The Undead 12-, KS: Tombs and Graves 11-, KS: Chiromancy 11-, PS: Embalmer 11-, PS: Bookbinding 11-, AK: Gulf of Opals region

Perk: Unearthing Rite Leader, Linguist, Language: Necromantic, Language: Maldrin, Language: Dornican, ES: Climbing, Conversation, Shadowing 8- ea

Necromancer Package Bonus, Major Magic Restrictions, Distinctive Features (Not Concealable, Major reaction by Sensitives), Disdain for the living, Hatred of All Priests (Uncommon, Strong), Curse: x1.5 Vulnerability to Holy Objects (Uncommon)

OCV: 4; DCV: 4; ECV: 4; Phases: 4, 8, 12

* See Appendix B for details.

Ingel Piraster

Captain Ingel Piraster is a short, stocky man, with a swarthy flesh that has been heavily weathered from many years at sea. His thick, greasy black hair is tied back in a sailor's tail, and he sports a hairy, unkempt beard. Ingel's demeanor is usually dour, save whilst in the company of the fairer sex.

A mercenary pirate, the Captain owns and commands the Caravel "Alkax". In the past he has served as a privateer, coastal raider, smuggler, courier, and even a legitimate trader. Ruthless and greedy, he drives a hard bargain for his services, but is ultimately loyal to his small crew. He is currently under hire to the grisly Unearthing Rite, and carries their boxed corpses to the Citadel of the Dead in the Grey Bogs.

Ingel favors a well-sharpened Cutlass in a fight, and he wears a tri-corner hat, leather jerkin, heavy canvas breeches, and a pair of tough shark-skin boots.

STR 16, DEX 12, CON 18, BODY 13, INT 12, EGO 14, PRE 15, COM 8

PD 4, ED 4, SPD 3, REC 7, END 36, STUN 32

Perk: Owns the Caravel "Alkax", FAM w/ Common Melee Weapons, +1 w/ Hand-to-Hand, +2 OCV w/ Cutlass, Transport Familiarity: Boats, Seamanship 13-, Trading 12-, Combat Driving: Boats 11-, Navigation 11-, Concealment 11-, Tactics 11-, Persuasion 12-, Bribery 12-, Climbing 11-, Riding 11-, FAM: Forgery, Interrogation 8-

ES: Conversation, Deduction, Shadowing, Stealth 8-

AK: Western Shores, Language: Dornican (Fluent), PS: Ship Captain, KS: Sailing Procedures 11-, AK: Dornica 8-

AK: Ports of Call 11-, AK: Oceans 11-, Swimming: +2" (4" total)

Sailor Package Bonus, Wanted for Piracy 11- (More Powerful, Extensive NCI, Kill), Never considers future, Greedy (Common, Strong), Loyal to Crew (Common, Moderate)

OCV: 4; DCV: 4; ECV: 5; Phases: 4, 8, 12

Jordan Tiriol

A former sergeant in the Ulgrad light cavalry, Jordan was falsely accused of practicing the dark arts and was forced to flee. While at sea, his vessel was accosted by the Caravel "Alkax", and Jordan used this opportunity to jump ship. While it took some doing to earn the Captain's trust, in time he became a noted accomplice of the privateer.

While lacking Captain Piraster's experience, Jordan has proven a quick study and has become an accomplished sailor in only a few years. He has earned the respect of the shipboard pirates for his fearless and daring boarding actions. Jordan Tiriol is easily the most accomplished fighter among the crew, an honor that has cost several rivals their lives.

Despite his years at sea, Jordan retains a fair complexion and a heavily freckled face and shoulders. His hair is fiery red, a distinction that has earned Jordan the nickname "Bloody Jo". He retains the sleek, muscular physique from his Darian cavalry days, although he now favors the Falchion and buckler in combat. He wears only a loose shirt, leather jacket, tights, and boots for protection.

Despite the crime for which he was falsely accused, Jordan retains the superstitious nature of his former countrymen and almost instinctively dislikes Magi of all stripes. The work for the Unearthing Rite has been a particularly trying time for Jordan, and he has a strong resentment of Ohra's presence on the ship. Fortunately, the Captain has seen the wisdom of separating the two and Jordan has taken command of the pirate band at the sea caves.

STR 14 DEX 14 CON 12 BODY 14 INT 11 EGO 12 PRE 13 COM 13

PD 5 ED 4 SPD 3 REC 6 END 24 STUN 32

Defense Maneuver, FAM w/ Common Melee Weapons, FAM w/ Common Missile Weapons, +2 w/ Hand-to-Hand, +2 w/ Swords, +1 OCV w/ Bow, Transport Familiarity: Boats, Transport Familiarity: Horse, Riding 14-, Tactics 12-, Seamanship 11-, Tracking 11-, Breakfall 12-, Climbing 12-, Navigation 11-, Paramedic 11-, Oratory 12-

ES: Concealment, Conversation, Deduction, Shadowing, Stealth 8-

KS: Famous Military Strategies 11-, KS: Military Procedures 11-, KS: Sailing Procedures 11-, AK: Western Shores, AK: Daria, AK: Ports of Call 11-, AK Oceans 11-, PS: First Mate, Swimming: +2" (4" total)

Leader Package Bonus, Wanted for Piracy 8- (More Powerful, Extensive NCI, Kill), Obeys Orders, Dislike of Magi (Common, Moderate), Reputation 8-

OCV: 5; DCV: 5; ECV: 4; Phases: 4, 8, 12

Appendix B - Spells and Magic Items

Death Form College of Necromancy

This spell allows the Necromancer to assume the form of any undead being he has observed. However, the Necromancer does not gain any of the special abilities of the new form. When combined with the Simulate Death ability, this allows the Necromancer to appear to be a long-dead corpse.

Power: Shape Shift, Any Undead

Modifiers: Incantations (-1/4), Character must have at least 30 points in spells from Necromancy College (-3/4),

Requires Magic Skill Roll (-1/2), OAF - rotting flesh (-1), Limitation: does not work in bright sunlight (-1/4), Limitation: does not work on ground sanctified to a "good" religion (-1/4), Side Effects (2d6 Cumulative Minor Transformation: caster ages five years) (-1/2).

Active Cost = 20 points. END Cost: 2; Magic Roll: -2; Casting Time: 1/2 phase. Real Cost: 4.

Undead Aura College of Necromancy

Upon casting this spell, the target gains a faint green aura that gives him an especially commanding presence among undead creatures. Even the most powerful undead beings will seek to placate the empowered being. Maintaining this spell for several phases can increase the target's PRE versus undead by a maximum of +30.

Power: 3d6 Aid to PRE, Maximum +30 PRE

Modifiers: Lose 5/minute (+1/4); Only versus Undead (-1), Incantations (-1/4), Requires Magic Skill Roll (-1/2), Character must have at least 20 points in spells from Necromancy College (-1/2), Limitation: does not work in bright sunlight (-1/4), Limitation: does not work on ground sanctified to a "good" religion (-1/4), OIF - ashes (-1/2), Side Effects (2d6 Cumulative Minor Transformation: caster ages five years) (-1/2).

Active Cost = 34 points., END Cost: 3; Magic Roll: -3; Casting Time: 1/2 phase. Real Cost: 7.

Ring of Underwater Breathing

This deep blue crystal ring has been exquisitely carved in a subtle wave pattern. Veins of lighter white run through the ring, and have been merged into the pattern to form white caps. On the inner surface of the ring is carved the mysterious message, "Calm the depths of solitude". When placed on a finger, the ring magically changes size to fit then begins to glow with a pale blue light. When the ring owner enters a body of water, he is able to inhale the surrounding liquid much like a fish. He can also survive the freezing temperatures of the northern waters, and the crushing pressures at the bottom.

Life Support: Breath Underwater, Life Support: Immune to Cold, Only from cold water (-1/2), Life Support: High Pressure, Only from deep water (-1/2), Combined: OIF - Ring (-1/2), Independent (-2).

Active Cost: 11; Real Cost: 3.

Ixeter

A fine sword for a knight, the Ixeter has been a family heirloom of the Dhiamus lineage for seven generations. The original sword was enchanted by a little known Magi called Hydonius, and has since been well marked with the heroic family deeds. The long, double-sided blade bears an exquisite sheen that is impossible to tarnish, and glows with an eerie blue light whenever it is wielded by a member of the Dhiamus line. This magic has been used to prove the true family lineage each generation.

2d6-1 HKA, Has 11 STR Minimum (-1), +2 w/ Ixeter, Defense Maneuver, Images to Sight, Trigger (Wielded by Dhiamus lineage) (+1/4), 0 END (+1/2), Only blue glow (-1/2), Sense Touch of Dhiamus Lineage, Only for use by trigger (-1) Combined: OAF - Ixeter (-1), Independent (-2).

Active Cost: 58; Real Cost: 12.

Appendix C - Weather Conditions

To determine the weather, roll two six-sided dice and consult the appropriate column on the table below. The resulting number indicates the weather condition for the day as listed on the second table. The letter determines the weather condition column to be used for the following day.

2d6 Roll	A) Dry	B) Calm	C) Damp	D) Windy	E) Rainy	F) Stormy
2	1 A	7 A	9 A	15 A	18 A	23 B
3	4 A	5 A	10 A	13 B	19 B	21 B
4	3 A	8 A	12 B	14 B	17 C	24 C
5	2 A	6 B	11 B	16 C	20 C	22 D
6	4 A	5 B	10 C	13 C	19 D	25 D
7	1 B	7 B	12 C	14 D	18 D	24 D
8	2 B	6 C	9 C	16 D	17 E	21 E
9	3 C	8 C	11 D	15 D	20 E	23 E
10	1 C	7 D	12 E	15 E	17 E	22 E
11	3 D	5 E	10 E	14 E	19 E	25 F
12	4 E	6 F	9 F	13 F	18 F	21 F

Determine the actual weather conditions from the following list. The weather type can have significant effects on ranged attacks, perception rolls, and seamanship. Severe weather can also increase long term endurance rates, and limit certain colleges of magic.

1. Uncomfortably hot and dry, with no wind and clear skies.
2. Hot and dry, with clear skies and no wind.
3. Hot and dry, with mostly clear skies and a slight breeze.
4. Dry and clear with a strong, shifting wind throughout the day.
5. Comfortable temperatures with clear skies and a mild breeze.
6. A light morning breeze which dies off by noon, leaving clear skies.
7. Warm and clear, with a slight breeze that picks up during the day.
8. Warm with light clouds and a cooling breeze.
9. A light morning fog followed by clear skies and a gentle breeze.
10. An early morning fog followed by partially overcast skies and increasing winds.
11. Heavy fog that lasts until the afternoon, followed by lightly overcast skies and a moderate breeze.

12. Light showers in the morning, followed by partially overcast skies with a swirling wind.
13. Moderate winds that pick up during the day, accompanied by mostly overcast skies.
14. Strong winds blowing in from the ocean with partially overcast skies.
15. Low hanging clouds with a stiff wind and occasional showers.
16. Overcast skies accompanied by a squall that brings up white tops.
17. Mostly overcast with light winds and rain.
18. Overcast skies and steady drizzle throughout the day, with mild, shifting winds.
19. Heavily overcast skies with swirling winds and intermittent rains.
20. Steady rain and moderate winds throughout the day.
21. Moderate winds and steady downpour building to an evening storm.
22. Stormy conditions at night, gradually calming to steady rain during the day.
23. Varying weather conditions with strong wind and rains.
24. Heavy thunderstorm at mid-day, followed by heavy, driving rain.
25. Severe stormy weather with strong winds and rain.

POISONS IN GURPS

by Michael Cole

Advantages/Disadvantages

Reputation

Poison is considered dishonourable in most places.

Thus we have the following reputation modifiers:

Known Poisoner -2 to reactions

Associate of Known Poisoner -1 to reactions

Known Indiscriminate Poisoner -4 to reactions

Associate of Known Indiscriminate Poisoner -2 to reactions

Point costs will depend on the breadth of knowledge, but disadvantages gained in play to not provide additional points. Note that having weapons permanently envenomed is a definition of indiscriminate.

In some societies the use of poison may be considered a legitimate or even clever way of disposing of enemies. If that is the case, the poisoner reputation costs can be reduced or even turn into positive reputation!

Skills

Herbalist

Herbalist is required for the refining and processing of herbs. If the herb is used in its raw state, then the Survival skill may be used instead. Herbalist is also a trade craft i.e., without ateacher, quadruple points must be spent.

For each usage of poison, a Herbalist skill roll must be rolled, with the success or failure of the roll used to modify the saving throw of the recipient. It takes skill to get the dosage right, and mistakes can always be made.

Poisons

Poisons will be defined by stage and effects. Each stage must be passed through to get to the next stage.

Delay is the time until that stage is reached after the proceeding stage.

Save is the saving throw that must be made to void the effects. Note that this roll is modified as per the Herbalist roll.

Rolls are the number of saving throws that mustbe made to successfully fight off the stage. Note that each reoccurrence occurs after a further Delay.

Effects are the effects that that stage will have.

Example poison: Aconite (image of Monk's Hood from Bernd Haynold)



Ingestion. Note that preparation is not required for this delivery

Stage	Delay	Save	Rolls	Effects
1	5 Seconds	ST	4	Gastrointestinal Nausea, Vomiting and diarrhoea
2	1 Minute	ST	4	Burning, tingling and numbness of face and mouth
3	5 Minutes	ST	4	Motor Weakness - tingling and numbness of all extremities
4	30 Minutes	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of chest - laboured breathing – fatigue increases at 1 point per minute
5	2 Hours	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of chest - Asphyxiation Commences - Start making health rolls each minute for death

Cutaneous Absorption. Note that preparation is not required for this delivery

Stage	Delay	Save	Rolls	Effects
1	5 Seconds	ST	4	Burning/Tingling at site
2	30 Seconds	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of extremity where struck
3	5 Minutes	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of all extremities
2	30 Minutes	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of chest - laboured breathing – fatigue increases at 1 point per minute
2	2 Hours	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of chest - Asphyxiation Commences - Start making health rolls each minute for death

Sub-Cutaneous Injection

Stage	Delay	Save	Rolls	Effects
1	Immediate	None	-	Burning/Tingling at site
2	1 Second	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of extremity where struck
3	5 Seconds	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of all extremities
2	1 Minute	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of chest - laboured breathing – fatigue increases at 1 point per minute
2	5 Minutes	ST	4	Muscular paralysis of chest - Asphyxiation Commences - Start making health rolls each minute for death

DUNGEONEERING IN GURPS

by Michael Cole

Just been doing some research (reading through GURPS and other material). Some points I may introduce, assuming that they don't cause too many screams of anguish...

Mapping – Ensure that in your party you have one or more characters with the Cartography skill. Maps of dungeons and especially cave systems can be complex. If a player is drawing a map and requires assistance from the GM, then a roll against the skill can provide corrections.

Light and Visibility Ranges -

Candle - No penalty to 1 yard, -1 per additional yard to 3 yards, and after that, the light dissipates

Lantern or Torch - No penalty to 2 yards, -1 per additional 2 yards to 6 yards, and after that, the light dissipates

Miners Helmet Light - No penalty to 5 yards, -1 per additional 5 yards to 15 yards, and after that, the light dissipates, but the light only shows a 1 yard wide path (-1 per yard off that path to a total of -3).

Bulls-Eye Lantern - No penalty to 10 yards, -1 per additional 10 yards to 30 yards, and after that, the light dissipates, but the light only shows a 1 yard wide path (-1 per yard off that path to a total of -3).

Secret or Hidden Stuff (such as Doors) - You may use either straight vision or traps skill (whichever is the highest). Spotting a secret door is pretty much the same as spotting a trap.

Group Assistance - all assisting make their rolls, and add -2, -1, 1 or 2 for critical failure, failure, success or critical success, to the final roll of whom they are assisting.

Group Participation - such as for strength rolls.

For participation is something that involves movement - such as a battering ram - highest strength, plus 1/5 of the total additional strength

For participation is something that doesn't involve movement - such as opening doors or lifting stuff - total of all strength minus the cumulative total of those assisting, i.e., -1 for 1 people, -3 for 2, -6 for 3, -10 for 4 etc.

Group Practices such as Concealment (for Ambushes) or Savoir Faire - One roll. Highest skill roll, plus one for every other party member who knows the skill, minus one for every party member total. E.g., Dinner with a barbarian tribe - six characters, 3 have a relevant savoir faire with the highest skill being 13. Roll will be $13 + 2 - 6 = 9$.

Fast First Aid - First Aid normally takes a minute - you may reduce this by 10 seconds per additional -1 you take on the roll.

Other Skill Usage in Combat - note that these are not free actions, and will always take at least a second

Tactics - if talking to a specific compatriot, will give -2, -1, 1 or 2 for critical failure, failure, success or critical success to their attack and defence rolls for that turn

Leadership - will give -2, -1, 1 or 2 to will rolls for that turn for all who listen

Strategy - a successfull roll and I'll give some information on what your opponents intent is.

THE GREEN ISLES FOR D&D 5e

by *Karl Brown*

The Green Isles: Players' Summary

The moment her spell clicked the latch open Vel the pixie played a shrill note on her flute. On that signal the furred form of Borm the bear burst into the room and slammed into the ogre. Just behind him Tam the child slipped in to help the prince from the cage ...

This is a setting for the D&D 5e game but one quite unlike typical settings like WOTC's The Forgotten Realms or Greyhawk. Don't worry though, this setting draws on British fairy tales which in turn have influenced a lot of fantasy novels, TV, and film. This world will seem very familiar.

Spirit of Adventure

D&D 5e is great for telling fun adventure stories; this setting plays to that strength. Adventure stories can be about daring-do or they can be nasty and unpleasant but they are never about shades of grey, horror, or moral ambiguity. This is a deliberately lighter setting than many RPG settings but there are limits, light is not silly.

Where are you?

This is a high fantasy setting but ones that draws more on British folklore than most D&D settings. The Green Isles somewhat resemble the British Isles in the 13 th century but only somewhat, this is not a historical setting. Part of the reason for this is that most fairy tales were first recorded much later than the Middle Ages and the setting mimics these in preference to history. It certainly does not reflect a Medieval Christian's pre-occupation with sin and obedience to the Church nor the cultural schisms between Celt, Saxon and Norman. Why? Because these facets of 13 th century Britain are entirely absent in fairy tales. There is magic here but not so much that nothing is familiar. There are magically gifted 7 th sons, healing wells, and pixies but magic has not provided ubiquitous labor saving devices or doomsday bombs.

Adventures

Rather than delving dungeons most adventures occur under the open sky in the wilds and on the road. You wont battle any beholders or centaurs, but you will encounter plenty of giants, dragons, talking animals, devils, and hags. The other commonality of fairy tales is that the adventures are personal. You will not be hired to do a dangerous job in exchange for money, nor will you save the world from a demon invasion. Instead you quest to defeat the enemy has hurt you or your loved ones, or because you want to prove yourself to your parents, or undo the curse that has turned you into a frog. Rather than an external series of events driving the story, the drive to achieve your goals defines the story and when all the party's bonds are resolved the campaign comes naturally to a close and everyone lives happily ever after.

Finally, you can die. In fact I'd expect about one death every tier of play.

Visual & Style References

A lot of players wont be familiar with British fairy tales. The following list of materials that might be more familiar to most players represents items inspired by fairy tales, these are not a perfect match to the setting but will give you a rough idea of what to expect: Snow White and the Huntsman (film 2012), The Storyteller (TV series 1987), Merlin (TV 1998), Dragonheart (film 1996), Legend (film 1985), The Hither Kingdoms in Legends of Anglerre (RPG Sarah Newton & Chris Birch 2010), Sunchaser setting in the Fantasy Craft Adventure Companion (RPG Alex Flagg 2010).

Who are you?

Forget the usual D&D archetypes.

- ? You are a character, you don't have to be a dashing hero unless you want to.
- ? You are a good person with a 'can do' attitude. You need not be law abiding.
- ? You are probably a human, giant, faerie, elf, half-elf, or talking animal.
- ? You might be a youth, a child, or even elderly.
- ? For a name mix-up the syllables of traditional names from the British Isles and/or use phonetic spelling.
- ? Typical occupations include knights, peasants, clan warriors, mysterious pipers, priests, shape-shifters, fishers, soldiers, woodcutters, likeable-rogues, faerie-touched magicians (sorcerers), and wealthy wizards.

If you are human you probably worship Jhoeda, the one true god, while quietly following some old rituals dedicated to the Faerie Nobles of the non-humans. Villains are often worshipers of The Devil.

You will have a 'bond' that strongly motivates you on a particular quest. Did an ogre kidnap your beloved? Has your father disinherited you as a good-for-nothing? Do you seek to break a curse? Every player's bond will be the cornerstone of several adventures, you should discuss your bond with the DM.

You might just as easily play a plain honest farmer, or a bear, as a valiant handsome knight. That does not mean you should play any personality though, villains and broody anti-heroes need not apply. While the mix of races is very different to those presented in the Player's Handbook (PHB).

Most classes will work. However, there are no native monks nor draconic bloodline sorcerers. You could play a concept, race, or class not native to the Green Isles but there are special rules for foreigners. No more than one in four PCs should be a foreigner or much of the uniqueness of the setting will be lost.

Equipment

The technology of the setting is based on England in the 13th century. The following items are not available: plate armour, breastplates, halberds, hand crossbows, rapiers, scimitars, tridents, blowguns, mauls, warhammers, and war picks. Natives of the Green Isles never begin play proficient in these weapons even if their race or class normally is (this restriction does not apply to armours listed). Magic items are so rare that you are unlikely to ever have more than a few. The exception is healing potions; there are a number of magical wells providing healing waters scattered around the Isles. These are usually claimed by powerful individuals, but vials do find their way into town markets where they command a high price (typically 50gp as shown in the PHB).

What Everyone Knows about the Green Isles

The Isles are isolated from the rest of the world by vast oceans. There are three larger islands and tens of tiny ones. Additionally, there are ways to get from the Isles to Elfland, another dimension populated with elves, faeries, and other fey. Most of the land has been tamed and farmed, there are few wild places for monsters to live. Instead monsters cross over from Elfland, are summoned from the Nine Hells, descend from the clouds, or crawl out of the waters.

North Island

A land less tamed than the other two large islands, half covered in moors, heaths, and rugged forested mountains. This far north the winters are times of snow and frozen lakes. Hidden in this harsh land are hostile giants and fey of all kinds, refugees from The Devil's ancient defeat who harbor an undying hatred of humanity.

South Island

This is an island divided.

The river plains and gentle coastal plains of the eastern portion are fertile lands. The isles fertile lands sustain herds of sheep and cattle as well as rich wildlife this abundance of prey and the Isle's many magical wells draw winged dragons hatched in the wild northern isles like moths to a flame.

Fortunately, the rich lands support a good size population of heroes and knights limiting the extent and duration of any dragon occurrence.

The Western portion is chalky hills good for raising sheep but not as fertile as the east. However a wealth of metals is mined from the hills. Without the bountiful harvests of the east this area lacked sufficient heroes to drive out the dragons. Instead an uneasy 'understanding' has evolved. The fire dragons of the Western hills stake out large territories, keep their predations at a somewhat tolerable level, and defend their territories against other dragons, monsters, and even invading armies; anything powerful enough to threaten the dragon or the steady supply of mutton provided by the people on its land is met with wrathful flame from above. The humans in turn have come to regard the dragons still as terrible monsters, but monsters that protect them from worse threats. Few fey and elves live on the South Island but there are many gates to fair Elfland through which there passes much trade and many travelers. Elves are frequently seen visiting human towns and there are more human families with elven blood here than elsewhere.

West Island

The West Island is one of green rolling hills, gentle valleys, and green pastures. The Church is strong here, no humans openly worship Faerie Lords or the Moon. The 'walls' between fair Elfland and the Mortal world are especially thin on the Western Isle, elves and fey are commonly seen travelling and trading in the Isles meadows and wild places. However, elves and fey avoid the villages and towns places where the influence of the Church makes them unwelcome.

Elfland

Elfland is a parallel world where the land is even more bountiful and beautiful. As one would expect Elfland is inhabited by elves, faeries and fey of all kinds. There are many kingdoms in Elfland some ruled over by Faerie Kings and Queens, unique Fey almost godlike in power. One must be careful for there are some kingdoms in Elfland that once sided with The Devil, these places seem fair but are beguiling deathtraps of illusion and devilry.

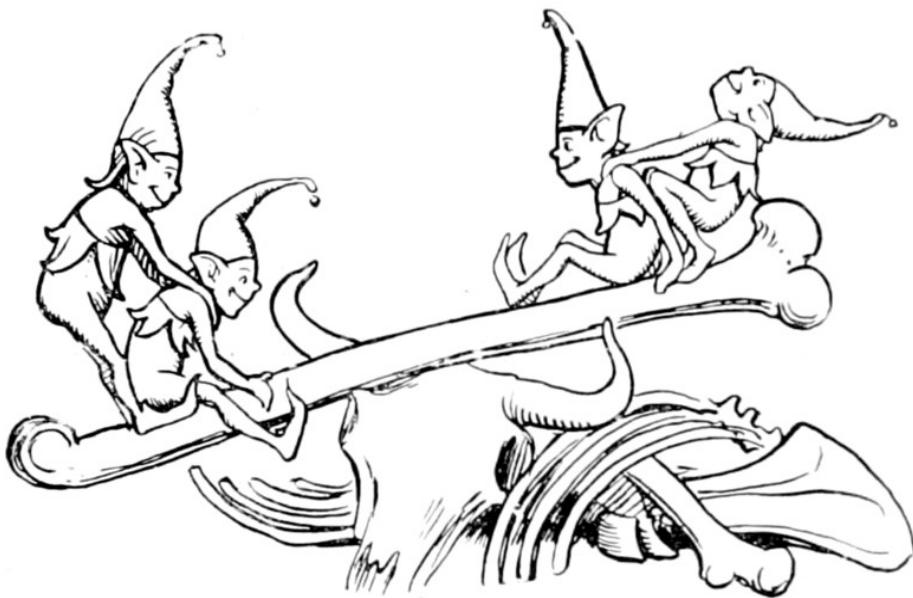
Cloudlands & Undersea

The Cloudlands are situated on solid clouds they range from small cloud island homes for cloud giants to the extensive Kingdom of the Sky. These drift with the winds over the Isles and the vast oceans.

Beneath the waves live merfolk, sea elves, and asrai. Deeper still are huge bubbles of air containing elf kingdoms.

History

During the Age of Myths giants built huge stone monuments and battled dragons. Then Elves invaded the Isles from Elfland. In the Age of Heroes human heroes drove the Elves back into Elfland only to see the Isles invaded by the forces of The Devil. The mortals won the war but the bulk of heroes were killed. In the Age of Mortals the Isles have seen waves in invasion by humans: the Empire bringing The Faith, seafaring Hrangs, and finally centuries ago the Imperials, diverse peoples of the now fallen



Empire. The Faith of Jhoeda the true god came to humanity during this current Age.

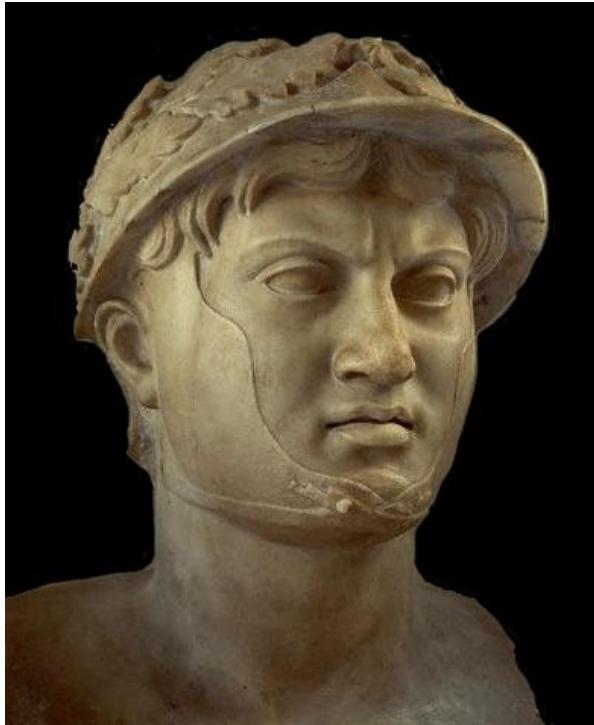
PYRRHIC VICTORIES AND OTHER RULES IN HEROQUEST

by Lev Lafayette

Despite being in publication since 2003 (and prior to that, as Hero Wars, in 2000), HeroQuest is still somewhat unknown among many RPG games - some of whom confuse it with the HeroQuest board game. To put simply, HeroQuest is one of the most well-defined roleplaying system with an explicitly 'narrativist' creative agenda, with a consistent resolution system across all types of actions and conflicts. Character have abilities with ratings which are compared against other with contested d20 rolls; the results determine the degree of success or failure for the action.

The following are a set of short elaborations to the core rules which allow for Pyrric Victories, Hero Points for NPCs, Hero Points for General Narrativism, Hero Point Advances, Keywords and Broad Abilities, Limited Augments, and Equipment Bonuses.

Pyrric Victories



"Another victory like this and I shall be ruined"

- attributed to Pyrrhus via Plutarch, Battle of Heraclea, 280 BCE

The HeroQuest rules, as written, essentially allow for a victory or loss to one side or the other, in simple contests. Every action is an opposed test between two related abilities, with a default ability of 6 where there is none available and a default resistance of 14 where there is no active opposing force. Abilities may be augmented by related, but not primary, abilities in the test by dividing the ability score by 5 (by 10 in first edition HeroQuest).

The two values are then compared against other and d20 die roll determines the relative success or failure. If a modified abilities is above 20, then it receives a 'mastery' which can be used to bump a result up (a failure to a success) or down (a success to a failure). A roll fo a natural 20 is a fumble, and a roll of 1 is a critical. The degree of defeat is determined by the difference of the die rolls with penalty applied to resultant actions:

Complete - results differ by 3 levels (e.g., Critical vs Fumble). Dying, no actions possible.

Major - 2 levels (e.g. Success vs Fumble, or Critical vs Failure). Injured, -20 to appropriate actions.

Minor - 1 level (e.g. Success vs Failure). Impaired, -6 to appropriate actions.

Marginal Victory or tie (When results are equal, the lower die roll wins). Hurt, -3 to appropriate actions.

Whilst resolution is slightly quicker in second edition HeroQuest than in first, because augments are significantly more powerful, it should be possible to speed up the process further in a manner which doesn't just require the expenditure of Hero Points.

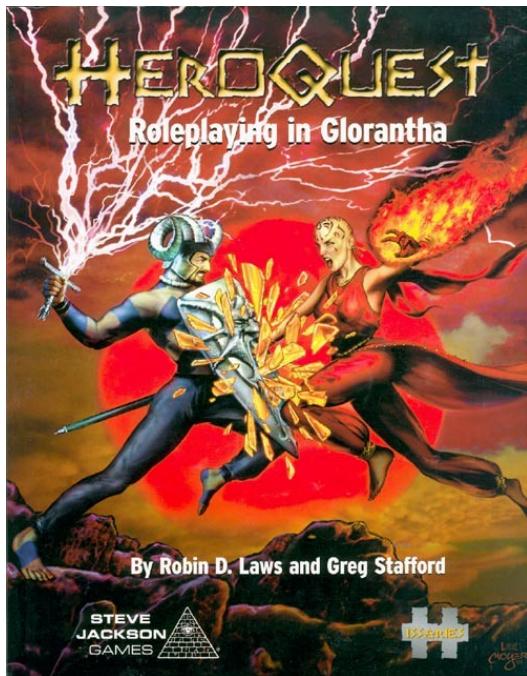
The proposal here is for a "Pyrrhic Victory" rule, where the winning side in a simple context can extend their margin of

victory by taking a loss on to themselves. The loss metric is a one-to-one value in terms of degrees of success. For example, if you have a marginal victory (a "level one victory") you could extend this two steps to a major victory (a "level three victory"), by also taking a minor defeat to yourself (a "level two defeat").

To give a simple example:

Rikku the Godlearner is fighting off a possession attempt by a Black Sun Wizard Ghost (it's best not to ask). As the Wizard attempts to possess Rikku, the Godlearner discovers a flaw in the ghost's convictions, reflected in a minor defeat for the Wizard. Wanting to really put the ghost out of the contest, Rikku takes some spiritual damage himself, reflecting perhaps some self-doubt on his own convictions. Rikku takes -3 wound to 'spiritual actions', and extends the damage to the ghost from what would have been a -6 wound to a -20 wound. The ghost, sorely defeated, leaves.

From playtesting, such a rule speeds up multi-round conflicts significantly. But it will result with the victorious party being quite battered and bruised. As with Hero Points, if you want to scare the willies out the players, let NPCs make use of this rule as well.



Hero Points for NPCs

In HeroQuest a player has some control over the fate of their character through Hero Points. An unlucky dice roll does not mean that the character suddenly find themselves in the 'dead or dying' state, as is often the case in games that don't have such a meta-game mechanic and have to rely on the goodwill of the GM to 'fudge' the roll.

However, even HeroQuest does not have this sense of control for Non-Player Characters. This can mean some undesired results can come into play, such as the loss of a major character at an inappropriate time.

"OK, so you're in the hall to give tribute to Euglyptus The Fat, military governor of Sartar. There are at least twenty of his elite guard present. 'You have the gold?', he beams. 'Place it at my feet.'

"I shoot him", announces the Sartarite PC with some archery. "And I roll a '1', a critical! Roll defense.."

"Umm... OK, definitely a surprise attack. He defends with his Dodge and calls for his guard - not that he needs to, they'll be on to you. And rolls a... ahhh, a '20'. Critical failure. That's a complete success: 'Dying, no actions possible.' Hmmm.. That'll be a major NPC out of action."

Certainly the Narrator could fudge the result, but it is far better to actually have rules that prevent this need (arguably in HeroQuest the Narrator could reframe the conflict). One very simple mechanism is to give NPCs Hero Points like PCs, depending on the character's importance to the story as a whole. A character who is named could have a one point, a

recurring antagonist a couple, a major NPC could have up to five. Keep in mind it is not the power of the character, or their abilities, but their importance to the setting. A simple shepherd could have a few Hero Points if they were critical to the story, and a mighty warrior could have none if they were incidental.

As NPCs are Narrator-controlled, the use of the Hero Points is, of course, optional. If an unlikely event occurs, but the Narrator can work with it, they should go with it.

From playtesting there is additional feature of this rule: it makes players sweat.

Use Hero Points for General Narrativism

As written the HeroQuest rules (p23-24, second edition), allow a player to “bump up” a result with Hero Points, but only for their own characters and sidekicks. One cannot change the results for other non-player characters (“supporting characters”) or for other player characters. The description provided is that the expenditure of a Hero Point represents when a player-character “pushes himself to the limit, marshals previously untapped reserves, or pulls a rabbit out of his hat”. On the other hand, a “bump down” can only be achieved by the use of a Mastery in an Ability.

But this is somewhat confused. Surely the ability of a character to find such inner strength depends on the character and not the player's meta-game currency? It is a function of their willpower, just as “luck” is the character's feature in the game world, not the player's intervention – and these would apply for NPCs as much as they would for PCs, and, when invoked, should receive a description as such.

Likewise the rules to “bump down” results seem a little redundant. Any character with a mastery can use that mastery to bump down a result and a Hero Point to bump up their result – which has exactly the same effect as spending the Hero Point to bump down their opponent and use the mastery to bump up their result. Thus the exclusion seems only to really apply in those situations where a player-character an ability below the level of a mastery and yet has Hero Points spare.

But again, one raises the questions – are not Hero Points something that the player should be able to apply, to temporarily take control of the narrative and introduce new elements of their choice. It distributes the storytelling tasks, provides the opportunity for the players to participate as Narrator and rewards the player for their advancement of a story through their character.

Hero Point Advances

The standard rules for HeroQuest suggests providing Player-Characters 3 hero points on character generation, 2-4 hero points per game session, three hero points at the end of a story arc, and a poll of players for "Most Valued Player" for an additional 3 Hero Points (p57, second edition). This is a substantial change from the previous edition which provided 3 hero points at the beginning of a character, 1-5 at the start of each adventures, and 1-5 hero points at the end of each "long, difficult, or multi-session adventure", along with additional hero points for "individual success, good roleplaying, or achieving personal goals" (p58)

As given the first edition rules are too generous, the second edition restrictive, but both are without strong guidelines. The following is offered as an alternative:

- * One Hero Point for attending and participating in a session.
- * One Hero Point for excellent roleplaying and game contribution within a session.
- * One Hero Point for important lessons learned, whether the characters succeeded or failed.
- * One Hero Point for "most valued player" in a session as chosen by the other players by secret ballot and optional preferential voting.

Keywords and Broad Abilities

In the second edition of HeroQuest, “keywords” are clarified as representing either a package of diverse skills, or as an umbrella of related skills which can be raised as an group ability (p10), at an incredibly inexpensive 2 Hero Points for a single point of increase, and a 2x increase after that.

An Ability is defined as anything that can be used to solve a problem (p13), but of course, some abilities are far more innate and adaptable to a variety of situations than others. For example, “Medicine” as an ability, is rather broad given the variety of specialisations that can come under it – but it is not so broad to be an umbrella keyword term.

The suggestion here – and it does require some work on the part of the Narrator to ensure that the abilities reflect the setting – is to have multiple levels of abilities and with different levels of Hero Point costs to raise the Ability by +1. For example:

Profession, Vocation, Passion, or Mission; 4 Hero Points for a +1 gain, 12 Hero Points for a +2 gain. Effectively a “keyword” for the character with a range of normal abilities under it.

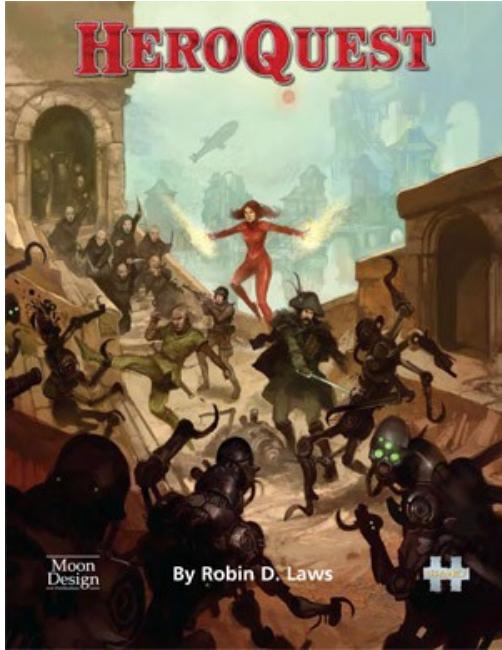
Skill, Knowledge; The standard, 1 Hero Point for +1 gain, 3 Hero Points for +2 gain, 6 Hero Points for a +3 gain, 10 Hero Points for a +4 gain.

Specialisation. Rare but useful specialist knowledge and abilities. 1 Hero Point for a +2 gain, 3 Hero Points for a +4 gain. In some cases (e.g., dialects of language) cannot be higher than the skill or knowledge which it comes from.

Limited Augments

A massive change between the first edition of HeroQuest and the second was the changes to augments. In the first edition, any number of augments could be added to an ability at a rate of the augment's value divided by ten. In the second edition, a single augment can be applied to an ability in a contest, with an additional caveat that the augment is fresh, illuminates the character, creates suspense, and elicits an emotional response. A roll is made against an augment resistance table with variable results based on that result.

This new approach certainly resolves the issue in the first edition where “character sheet scanning” was common as various attempts were made to introduce a range of augments into a situation in an effort to raise their overall ability. However, it is not entirely convincing that this new method makes the game more enjoyable. A contest with a variable level of augmentation is simply another contest – and with some counter-intuitive results, where the benefit gained is greater than the actual augmenting ability itself. Fortunately there is a “Quick Augment” optional rule which applies a simple Augment divided by five value.



Limiting an ability to a single augment could also be improved. Whilst it is a hat-tip towards simulationist approaches which HeroQuest explicitly rejects, there is also some narrative sense in applying limited but multiple augments. In this case, a character may apply one physical, one mental, and one social augment as additions to an overall ability (plus any bonuses from equipment, interactions, etc). The limitation is quite pragmatic – a character can exercise their Great Speed in a melee, but not their Great Speed and Immense Strength simultaneously. They may invoke their passion of Protect the Innocent, but not at the same time as their Hate Lunars – and so forth. In the scene the character invokes something important to the scene, but with a sufficient limitation that it is neither one-dimensional, nor overwhelming and possibly contradictory.

Equipment Bonuses

In the first edition of HeroQuest equipment provided bonuses, as an augment, to various abilities. As an example, weapons and armour gave specific bonuses (p78) ranging from +1 to +5 for light armour, +1 for a shield (shades of old Dungeons & Dragons!), and weapons and tools ranging from +1 to +5. In the second edition of HeroQuest, characters are assumed to have equipment appropriate to their ability; a Heavily Armored Knight at 18 has the same combat ability as Acrobatic Swashbuckler at 18. However this is assuming that they have different equipment bonuses.

This is not really how equipment bonuses work of course, but the totals do accurately reflect what the game is trying to do. There is a legitimate need to separate the two, and the second edition of HeroQuest does this appropriately as further equipment bonuses. However, this does not apply directly with the initial ability levels. Instead a character should have an ability appropriate to represent their skill, and a second ability to reflect their equipment. In some cases having the skill without the equipment will place the character in a very difficult situation – just as having equipment without skill does not confer some special ability on the character.

This does give an appropriate potential longer-term advantage to the equipment-oriented character (such as the Heavily Armoured Knight in the above example). They have the option to purchase Armour, Shield, Helmet, Weapon etc, as separate items, each with their own augments to their base ability. The Heavily Armoured Knight can probably start with a disadvantage as they may be lacking in this full range and suffer a circumstantial penalty. The Acrobatic Swashbuckler on the other hand, operating on raw skill and perhaps a single weapon, will probably start with all the equipment they need, but probably will not be able to expand to such a great range.

GAME MASTERY : RUNNING GOOD HORROR

by Kieran Brannan



disruptive techniques. Roleplay is meant to be fun, so it never feels right to chastise a player for having fun, even if it breaks the mood you're trying to create. It's better to outplay the player by weaving your horror in a way that establishes and maintains the right mood. That said, some players strive to be disruptive, and at times it's best to concede that until the group dynamic changes, horror stories won't work.

It's important to listen to players and get to know them. Using their real life fears is something that can be used to get under their skin and creep them out. However, you have to use such knowledge very, very carefully. One of my groups included a player who was creeped out by scary little kids. As the GM, I love using scary kids as a horror element, however this revelation meant I suddenly had to shelve the use of kids in my horror stories. Why? Because regular use of that technique would burn one player out and make them the subject of ridicule by others. Instead, I used the 'creepy kid' concept very sparingly. Instead of a creepy kid being a primary antagonist, I relegate them to a plot device instead. Essentially, out of respect for the player, I use the device with finesse.

A way to use real life fears responsibly for the people in your group is to simply make connections between what they are scared of, and what you want them to be scared of. If someone is scared of spiders, then dropping their character into a pit filled with spiders is ham-fisted and irresponsible as a GM. However, having a spider crawl from the eye socket of a skull, or slipping in a description of brushing away a spider's web, can create little moments of tension for a player which helps build the sense of unease. You might even use spiders as an analogy for something else, such as saying "The vampire's nails feel like the needle point legs of a spider as he walks his fingers up your arm." Play it subtle, or you lose the impact.

Avoid Tropes, Embrace Archetypes

I personally despise "Jump Scares", both in movies and most especially in games. Most of the time it doesn't work on me, and when it does it just makes me angry, not scared, and often any previous enjoyment gained, is thereby lost. Needless to say that means I cannot enjoy the majority of Hollywood horror movies. The Jump Scare is poor man's horror as it's nothing more than a glorified game of Peek-a-boo. I find that most tropes are like this, they are tired and

There are many good systems available for running a good horror themed game. Call of Cthulhu, as well as any World of Darkness setting being prime examples of systems which beg for the telling of a good horror story. However, it isn't the system or world setting which creates the experience of horror. Good horror must be a collaborative effort between the GM and the players. Here are a few tips on how to get your players having nightmares after your next session.

Understanding Players

First of all, it is fair to say that not every player can handle a horror theme. It's human nature for many people, when faced with stressful situations, to alleviate that stress through humour or other potentially

juvenile, and quality settings like World of Darkness deserve better.

Tropes also make a game predictable. I'm currently playing in an official published adventure for Dark Heresy. Every time we encounter an altar, we know there will be something hidden in, under or behind that altar. It's sad, but every single time that's where the clues are.

Yet there is one cousin of the trope that has a very powerful place in horror stories, and that's the archetype. While a trope is nothing more than a common and tired old device, an archetype instead lives in the subconscious mind. Put the characters in hip high murky water and you can trust that the fear of the unknown below the surface will have players on the edge of their seats. You don't even have to put anything dangerous in the water, just use the archetype to slowly build tension.

There are a wealth of archetypes, and with only a little research into the subject, you can find they have the potential to embellish all aspects of story telling. Simple things, like the symbolic meaning of passing through a gateway, can enhance gameplay on a subconscious level, drawing players into a story and evoking primal associations.

Create Immersive Environments

Horror doesn't have to take place in old graveyards or abandoned houses. The best horror puts people somewhere familiar, then makes that place no longer feel safe. In an abandoned house people almost expect the eyes of a painting to move, so if it happens, it's boring. However, what if in a busy nightclub, the PC bumps into a giggling woman who then turns to the character and in a deadpan serious voice says, "We're watching you," before she goes back to partying like nothing happened. Suddenly you've made the entire crowd feel like a potential threat.

It's important to properly apply the consequences of an environment. In one particular D&D session, as GM, I had the party attacked by zombies in a semi flooded cellar. Because the zombies had been submerged under the water, their flesh was rotten and sodden. Describing the squelch as weapons impacted the dead flesh had the players looking almost physically ill. Suddenly, comfortable dry old generic zombies felt like creatures of horror again, just because they were given more impact by using their environment for a different effect.

Harness your Player's Imagination

Some people seem to think that good horror is created by graphic volume; the more blood, the greater the scare factor. But good horror is built incrementally, with lots of little things each adding up to make the world feel strange and unsettling. Fear is a strange emotion, because the unknown is almost always scarier than the known. What makes the writing of H. P. Lovecraft horror is not the tentacle monsters, but the threat of those monsters. It's the anticipation, not the encounter. The longer you can delay and build the anticipation, the scarier the end encounter should feel.

Picture the party having stalked a killer in a castle. Upon reaching the scene of the murder, the scene was described to the players; the walls dripped with blood, organs lay strewn about and entrails hung from the banisters. None of that was particularly scary though, it was almost expected. What terrified the party was the was one place the blood was not. Sitting on a chair beside the bed was the victim's maid uniform, folded neatly and without a drop of blood upon it. That one tidy, out of place item, engendered far more fear than buckets of blood possibly could. Why? Because it spoke of something not wild and violent, but of something incredibly organised and violent. It ticked some box in the player's heads that said this wasn't going to be an ordinary encounter and it had players wracking their brains trying to find new ways to approach the invisible threat.

Make the Horror Believable

The less real something is, the less frightening it is. A Gibbering Mouther from AD&D should be terrifying, but to most players it's just a sack of HP and XP with an annoying special ability. I'm not saying a Gibbering Mouther cannot be scary, it just takes more work to build the encounter. However, a grinning baby with a cleaver feels more naturally

disturbing because we all know what babies look like. We also know that babies shouldn't be brandishing cleavers and we especially know that they shouldn't be grinning about it when they do. Suddenly, a goblin disguised with an Alter Self spell just became a horror encounter.



be anyone.

Putting it all Together

Horror is something that is carefully built, piece by meticulous piece. You cannot just slap a fear rating on a monster and say you've written a horror story, that horror has to be truly expressed to the players. Build towards the climax by carefully burrowing into the subconscious using archetypes, and creating an immersive environment. Put players in the shoes of their characters, and make them emotionally connect with what's happening. There should never be a line drawn that says, 'scary part begins now,' because everything leading up to that scary part should be helping to create that moment.

Don't be afraid to borrow from real life fears, but do so very responsibly, and never force it on players if you think there is any chance it might go too far. Horror is a game of subtlety, and the moment you try to push it, it actually releases tension rather than build it. Players will want to stay engaged if you draw them in and let their imaginations create the horror for you.

Ultimately it's still all about having fun. Even if your efforts at horror fail, as long as people had a fun experience, then there's no need to get upset about it. Just take what you can from your efforts and build upon it. Every single group will have a different dynamic, and what works in one group might be a complete flop in another. It generally takes months, if not years, to get to know a group well enough to create real horror based stories for them. In the meantime, don't let the other elements of good story telling be forgotten.

I find people to be the most terrifying of all horrors. People are easy to overlook because they are everywhere, and they could be thinking and doing anything. If a dragon eats a village it's just following its nature, it's not actually scary. However, if one person poisons the well and kills everyone in the village, then they are truly evil and might be capable of anything. In a game where you can tie in highly emotive elements such as any of the seven deadly sins, there is no end to the depths of depravity a simple human can stoop to. In essence, there is nothing that is really predictable about a human antagonist, because they could do anything, and the bad guy could

PHAEMOREA : A CLASSIC SETTING FOR DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Adapted from <http://www.phaemorea.com/>

by Kieran Brannan and Ryllandra Rose

Phaemorea is a classic High Fantasy genre game world designed for the classic BECMI Dungeons & Dragons rules, however it can easily be ported into any version of Dungeons & Dragons , or with a little more tinkering, any system that supports high fantasy. It is designed as a new entry level world for beginning players, as well as an alternative world for older players who want to experience D&D in a new way, without losing any of the charm of the old way. References will be made to 1991 edition of the D&D Rules Cyclopedia.

Why BECMI Dungeons & Dragons?

There is a misconception that Advanced Dungeons & Dragons is the advanced version of Dungeons & Dragons. However, D&D does have an easy-going loose system that is very easy for a new player to pick up. There are less numbers to worry about, less jargon and less confusing options. Basically, you can take a new player through level 1 character development in five minutes and have them ready to play. Once playing, the rules are amazingly easy to pick up.

BECMI D&D still has all the depth of AD&D and D&D3.0+, it's just that that depth is introduced more gradually. This allows a new player time to learn each new option as they advance their character. In short, AD&D and D&D3.0+ gives an information dump at level 1, while D&D is designed to level up the complexity as the character levels up.

Weapon Mastery os one of the best ways of representing weapon skills in a D&D style of game. Weapon Mastery doesn't just give a modest bonus to hit and damage; Weapon Mastery gives every weapon a unique identity. In AD&D and D&D3.0+, a thief will usually use a sword for that little extra damage. In BECMI D&D, weapon mastery grants a dagger an increased chance of causing double damage and the ability to throw it further. AD&D and D&D3.0+ has tried to give weapons more interest through the use of Feats and special moves, but they are all fairly generic. Some weapons like staff, spear and warhammer have remained comparatively useless weapons in AD&D no matter what the edition.

AD&D and D&D3.0+ has only recently given fighters any love. They were always just the boring characters you gave to new players because they were easy to play. Even when 3rd edition came out and gave them Feats, they still never really found a way to shine over a decently leveled mage. In D&D, not only can fighters harness the weapon mastery system better than any other class, they also have some amazing options that can turn them into powerhouses. In BECMI Fighters are interesting characters - they have more class options than other classes when they reach 9th level. They can be a politically motivated land owner, or they can choose one of three detailed traveling fighter types, including the Paladin, Avenger or Knight.

BECMI D&D has a certain lightness about it. It's made to have some fun, as is clearly evident by book releases like 'The Book of Wonderous Inventions' or even the module 'Earthshaker'. These works take the high fantasy world to a strange new place, where Black Puddings are put into dishwashers, or Fire Elementals are bound into steam boilers. Many games try for a High Magic genre, but D&D completely embraces magic as a fully integral part of the world. It doesn't take itself seriously unless you want to play it that way. The default setting is 'fun', while most other systems have a default setting of 'real'. In this regard I believe classic D&D is all about the classic RPG experience, where people are playing to unwind and just have a good laugh with friends.

Having a system that doesn't keep forcing you to look up things in the rulebook allows for a more immersive play

experience. It is very much story focused, and every piece of source material supports the concept of being creative and making your own world. Most purchased adventures introduce entirely new monsters created just for that adventure, which you can then use elsewhere of course. The Gazetteers introduce aspiring GMs to the idea of creating their own player races and character classes. Forgotten Realms has been out for so long now, and has had so much source material produced, that I now find the world constrained, not expanded.

What better way to retire a character than to have them basically win the game? In D&D players are invited to strive to reach immortality and become a god. Let's face it, the amount of heroic stuff you would have done to reach level 36 should have gained you some notice among the gods, right? The quest for immortality allows for truly epic story telling on a grand scale, as the only way to reach immortality is to do the impossible. But let's say you make it, you become one of the gods. What then? Well, D&D has rules for that. Now, as an Immortal, you start over as a lesser deity striving for power. What makes this concept really exciting is that if your group has played for long enough, your characters can truly become a part of the world.

BECMI D&D does not have multi-classing. Also, any race other than human is represented as a class of its own. So there are no dwarven wizards and not every halfling is a rogue. In BECMI D&D, there are over 40 skills to choose from, and while you might only start with 4 or so, you will get more as you level. Like the new 5th edition, these skills are simply areas of competence, and are not burdened by complex point allocation or indepth record keeping like they were in 3rd edition.

Understanding Good and Evil

BECMI D&D only has three alignments; Lawful, Neutral and Chaotic. While the rules indicate that lawful characters tended to be good, it is not automatic. AD&D and D&D3.0+ on the other hand breaks alignment into two parts, their disposition towards law and chaos, and their morality in regard to good and evil. On the surface, the AD&D and D&D3.0+ system appears to be the more detailed and superior system.

We like to think that morality is a constant, that what we believe to be morally right and wrong is patently obvious. The concept of good or evil is generally defined by morality. A person of good morals is a good person, while those who act in a manner counter to decency is evil. Yet, this perception is heavily coloured by the concept of Law and Chaos. Laws are usually based on what a society considers morally sound.

Prior to 5th edition, AD&D and D&D3.0+ required Paladins to be Lawful Good. This made the Paladin a righteous knight in shining armour who always held to the letter of the law while doing nothing but good and noble deeds for the people. Paladins are holy warriors of the church, so it's important that they be Lawful in order to adhere to the strict tenants of their religion. However, by attaching Good to the alignment requirement, it made the holy church knights completely inappropriate for a great many of the religions.

BECMI D&D only requires that a Paladin be Lawful. While most Paladins are also Good, what is more important is that they obey the church. Chaotic Paladins are instead called Avengers and, while similar to the Lawful Paladin, they are a different type of character. This distinction allows for holy warriors from entirely chaotic religions to still be represented.

The key thing to understand about good and evil, is that good is mostly a matter of perspective, and that perspective is generally based on culture. Most people who act within the law of the land tend to consider themselves good people. Only truly aberrant people would identify as being evil, and they would consider themselves evil because of their complete disregard of cultural law. So what if the law of a culture demands acts such as murder, sacrifice, slavery and other base acts? Does it make the culture evil? The answer is both complex and simple. Good and evil are a matter of perspective, and its definition changes depending on the company you keep.

In Phaemorea the Empire of Getica is a classic evil empire based on undeath, fear and dark sorcery. Yet Getica is a

Lawful empire, perfectly entitled to field Paladins. Failure to follow the Law can get you killed, or worse. Therefore, in order to be a lawful person, and by cultural definition a good person, then you would commit harm against others if you are required to. Even the cold blooded murder of an entire family might be considered a good act in Getica, even though most other cultures would claim it was entirely evil.

So how would you record your Alignment as a good citizen of Getica? In AD&D and D&D3.0+ you might say you are Lawful Evil, but does that accurately account for people who genuinely love and support their community when that love and support might mean killing a child in its sleep? Lawful Evil fails to encapsulate the scope and breadth of morality, and how each culture contains a myriad of complex moral nuances. However, the Classic D&D system would simply label any good citizen as Lawful, fully understanding the complexities of morality and its relation to the interpretation of good and evil. In fact, any good citizen in any land is simply Lawful, while those who care nothing for the laws of the land, or those who think everything in life is happen-stance, are Chaotic.

Take the humble Protection from Evil spell. In BECMI D&D the spell description clearly indicates that evil is not a function of Alignment, but of moral stance. Someone of opposing moral views would be considered evil. Therefore, a Protection from Evil spell cast by a cleric of Getica should work fine to ward off a noble Paladin of Solmani, and vice versa. When the water becomes muddied by similar but differing moral values, the measure of good or evil is based more on intent.

A more simplified approach would be to look at things defined as evil by the system as things of an entropic nature, while things which preserve life are good. So, level draining undead are always evil, while those devoted to healing and caring for others are good. This however often falls short of helpful. Healing someone so they can withstand more torture is actually evil, while using a Cause Wounds spells for a merciful death is actually a good act most of the time.

In the end it comes down to the GM making a judgement call. Often it's very clear cut, but when in doubt compare the intent of both individuals and decide if someone is good or evil based not on a spell description or your personal moral code, but on the difference in moral codes between the characters involved. It's entirely possible that two people can effect each other with the same version of Protection from Evil, simply because from their individual perspective, their opponent is evil.

BECMI D&D grants all peoples of the land an alignment language. It further goes on to describe that if for any reason you change your alignment, you forget the previous alignment language and acquire the new one. Other than saying "it's all magic", one cannot find any way to justify how alignment languages are meant to work sensibly. Therefore, in Phaemoreia alignment languages have been replaced with regional languages.

Guide to Phaemoreia

Phaemoreia is a fairly typical high fantasy world. The world is designed principally for use with the Dungeons & Dragons Rules Cyclopedia, however Phaemoreia and adventures set within can easily be adapted for use with any edition of Dungeons & Dragons or any high fantasy setting. Likewise, modules designed for classic D&D, especially those for the Mystara or Blackmoor world settings, could easily be slotted into the Phaemoreia setting with little to no alteration.

Magic is in regular use, though not so common as to not be special. Technology is roughly equal to that in the later middle ages, with steel armaments and complex stonework. Mechanisation is gaining in popularity with cogs, winches and pulleys coming into regular use among industry. Alchemy is generally used in conjunction with magic, but the use of alcohol, acids and toxins are all well understood by practitioners. Gunpowder and other forms of explosives might exist, but such things are exceedingly rare and not in use, and with magic being common there is little drive to develop the technology.

Magic is often used in conjunction with technology, as a simpler and cheaper method to achieve things. So rather than

develop devices like the steam engines of the industrial age, wizards might use magical horses to draw a carriage. Monsters and their unique effects are often employed, such as using a Black Pudding in the sewers of Manakata, or Salamanders being used for home heating. Such extravagances are purely the domain of the wealthy and powerful.

Thanks to the establishment of organised guilds, ‘Adventurer’ is an accepted full time occupation, with adventurers seen by many to be heroes. Not everyone welcomes adventurers though, with some people seeing them as a necessary evil while despising the arrogance and concentration of wealth and power that adventurers represent. So while the common folk generally admire the adventurers because they provide living examples of the common person rising to positions of power, those with power sometimes see adventurers as political tools and threats to their power base.



widespread they are not known by any cultural identifiers. They are pale skinned Caucasian, of smallish build, averaging a height of around 170-175cm tall.

The Bungara, known more commonly as the Painted People, seem to be a distant variant of the common human. Their skin is darker, most likely because they live in a harsh region where a more ruddy complexion increases the chance of survival. They also have a slightly different eye shape not entirely dissimilar to the elven eye. The similarities indicate a shared racial heritage with the common human, but with strong indications their genetics are moulded by some other shared ancestor as well.

Deep in the south are the Salurians. They are a much larger, heavy set people. Caucasian, but with a more tanned natural skin tone. Their faces, with strong jaw lines and broader features, have a more masculine look than the waiflike thin faces of the common men. They average 185-190cm tall and have a wide variation in hair and eye colour.

In the south west of the main continent are the people of Manakata. They are a tall people, similar in height to the Salurians, but they have dark skin, hair and eyes. They have pronounced features, such as high cheek bones and an aquiline nose. They have long limbs and dextrous hands. Muscular development tends to be lean but healthy.

Demi-humans

The Elves, Dwarves and Jhan (Halflings) are all as described in the core rules for appearance and basic physiology. Their cultures do vary from the classic rules as described later in this document.

All Demi-humans have an inherit distrust of humans, a distrust learnt from past events, but they are of a mind to work with humanity rather than against it, preferring the path of peace over a war they cannot hope to win. The breeding rate of humans is simply too great, which has forced the Demi-humans to cut out a niche for themselves to hold. What they

do have, they guard most vehemently.

The Beast Races

Among themselves they call themselves the First Races, claiming they were among the first people of the world. The title applies to a wide range of races who choose to defy most forms of civilisation in preference to their natural savage roots. The races include orcs, goblins, ogres, gnolls, kobolds, lizardmen and many more sentient peoples who now hide away in lairs or live day to day raiding each other or the human nations.

Only in the Garter States do these misfit people find any welcome, and even then only in places. Some took part in the Age of Jackals as invited bandits.

Brief History of the World

In times now largely forgotten, the world was ruled by an ancient race of beings known as the Phaemoreans. Little is known about these people today, other than that left in shattered ruins which indicate a once thriving civilisation. Scholars believe the original Phaemoreans tore the world apart in some form of cataclysm, reshaping it into the world known today. In the wake of that great cataclysm, the current races began to repopulate the world.

While the humans of the south remained fractured, those who went to the north had fewer opponents. A great warlord rose among them, a man called Getica. Getica unified the fractured states and established the Getica Empire. Driven by a lust to rule over everything, Getica called upon unknown powers to raise the dead, adding to his troops both with his own dead, and the dead of his enemies.

Getica was mostly interested in the lands already claimed by human folk, but it didn't take him long to recognise the potential threat posed by other races, as well as the rich resources they held. The Dwarves suffered most of all; Getica lusted after the metal of the dwarven mines, wanting it for arms and armour for his massive war engine. Directing tireless zombies and incorporeal undead, Getica tunnelled down to the lower halls of the dwarves. Getica displayed the true depth of his evil, and disease proliferated in the stale dead air. As people died of disease, they would rise again as undead to fight their own kin. The dwarves turned to their gods and asked for help but they did not answer. In disgust, the dwarves turned from the gods forever and did the only thing they could do; they fought a breakout action and fled at a massive cost of life.

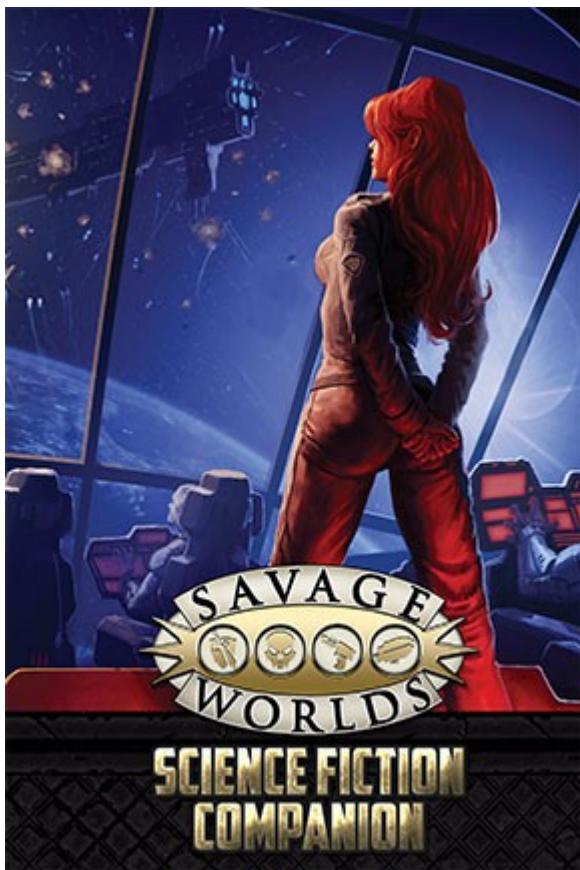
The spread of the Getica Empire had reached the borders of the Kingdom of Solmani, already beset by refugees. However, many armies had fought a retreating action. Those warriors left were all fierce fighters, veterans of many battles and filled with a rage and desperate need for revenge. The two armies met, one each side of a fortified river. Under a veil of magic, Getica concealed an army of undead beneath the water. Getica himself rode across the bridge, leading an elite force of his most devout warriors. The Solmani retreated to the walls of the Solmani capital. Yet the armies of Getica never came. Rumours later say the battle was the crowning achievement that opened the way for his rise as a true immortal. Years passed and the river remained the border between Getica and the rest of the world. The River was renamed World's Edge, because to most of the world, there was nothing of worth on the other side of that river.

Thundercliff remained the heart of the southern half of the Getica Empire, an unassailable fortress perched atop a rise at the edge of the sea. Seventeen captains took ships to those walls, plus one more ship filled with freed slaves calling themselves Freemen. Each captain had the same mission; enter the city and open the gates. Thundercliff fell in a single night and whilst the number of captains still left alive had been reduced to nine, and they divided the city up among themselves, each taking a section as their own, renaming Thundercliff to Forecastle. Slavery was abolished, partly because it was anathema to the free thinking brigands and partly because ex-slaves freed from Getica were willing to fight to keep the freedom they had regained. Eventually the last few holdings of southern Getica fell. The Garter States were born, and a new age of peace returned.

STARSHIP OWNERSHIP FOR SAVAGE WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION COMPANION

by Karl Brown

This article requires the Savage Worlds Science Fiction Companion (SFC) and Savage Worlds Deluxe (SWD) by Pinnacle Entertainment Group.



This article is intended to provide more defined methods of dealing with starships. Where possible I have done the math for you. Additionally, these rules offer more **hooks** to build stories on.

The SFC does not give a system for starship ownership beyond recommending a Medium size ship with \$2M of Mods and an FTL drive (total \$23M) or a light freighter (\$23.53M). No discussion of who actually owns the ship the degree on control the PCs have etc. I suspect this is because the answer to these questions varies greatly between settings and table preferences. In some settings your employer might provide a ship or the PCs might own a ship by referee fiat.

For a Star Wars, Firefly, Guardians of the Galaxy, or Traveller style setting where an individual or small group can just afford a ship try the following new Edges. These Edges provide ‘shares’ with a \$ value to be spent on a ship. All these edges can be taken multiple times and even shares from different Edges and characters combined into one or more vessels. A character that spends two Edges can just barely afford a Small FTL ship of their own by taking the loan shark or stolen option.

Ship Share, Outright

You have a \$2.5M share in the ownership of a ship no strings attached.

Ship Share, Stolen

You have a \$7.5M to ‘spend’ on a ship however this represents a stolen ship or one where you stopped making loan repayments to one of your creditors well before the game begins. You don’t make repayments on this share. However, you have a Major Enemy Hindrance. Decide whether this is a powerful interstellar bank or criminal organization. See Legal loan and Loan Shark below for descriptions of these enemies.

Ship Share, Legal Loan

You have a \$5M share in a ship but this is a loan. Your financial institution will only loan money if there is a method of

repayment, for this reason at least 1/6 (round down) of a ship's mods must be 'empty' at the time of purchase to be used as cargo space or the ship must have a superstructure (any kind).

For simplicity we will assume that interest, depreciation, taxes etc all add another 8% or so. Your minimum repayments are \$15000 per month for 40 years (Total \$5.4M). Payments can be made at any major world, or electronically if the setting has an interstellar internet. Failure to make payments usually results in penalty fines but this rapidly escalates. After a few months of no payment you earn a Major Enemy Hindrance, an interstellar bank able to exert its influence through most if not all of known space. The bank wont do anything illegal in the setting but depending on the setting consequences may include: seizing your assets, smashing your credit rating, attempts to capture and repossess the ship, debtor's prison, and even execution. Worse still as well as its own agents the bank is able to mobilize law enforcement agencies and bounty hunters.

Ship share, Loan-shark

You have a \$7.5M to spend on a ship but this is a loan from a criminal organization. The organization places no restrictions on ship design.

Your minimum repayments are \$25000 per month for forty years (total \$9M). Payments can be made at any world where the organization has a presence, depending on the setting, this might be most high population worlds or worlds within a region within known space such as 'the Galactic Core Frontier worlds' or whatever. If the setting has an interstellar internet payments can be made anywhere. Failure to make minimum payments immediately results in you gaining a Minor Enemy hindrance as the organization begins to marshal resources against you. At this stage visiting worlds where the organization has a presence might result in attempts to repossess the ship or a good beating, other criminals might shun you, corrupt officials will be bribed into inconveniencing you, and you will receive threats. When a second monthly payment is missed the organization is upgraded to a Major Enemy who wants to kill you and recoup their losses. They will send thugs and assassins. A large bounty is probably put on your head that attracts crims and scum.

Starship economics

Once you have a starship you need to keep it running. Some groups simply do not worry about the cost of running a ship, if that's you use the shares above but just assume loan repayments. Other groups will use the SFC rules for trade, salvage, fuel, provisions and wages to try play a game where the players model the success or failure of their ship as a business. While this might sound a bit like 'Accounting the RPG' I have designed these rules to be (fairly) quick and easy to use. The necessity of paying the bills will also moderate starship design. Ensure players are aware they have to pay the bills and they will consider adding cargo space instead of building a pure death machine. Even so, a typical light freighter (SFC49) will loose about \$5000/month, if you use this rule the players will become motivated to find more money leading to risks, shady deals, smuggling, mercenary work, and other adventures.

The system takes a little to set up but once in place you simply have one number to keep track of each month, either a loss to overcome or a profit. To use this system the first steps are to figure out your monthly outgoings and base income. By subtracting base income from outgoings you can determine the loss or profit each month.

Assumptions

This system assumes several things about the setting and the story:

- Starship prices relative to average incomes are about as expensive as real estate in the late 20th century.
- The ship will spend about half of its time in inhabited star systems where the crew can conduct trade and/or

take on paying passengers.

Monthly Total

Everyone wants a profit but a loss is more likely, PCs must make extra effort to overcome losses, i.e. adventures.

1. Outgoings

- a. Total up all loan repayments.
- b. Crew salary: two wages rates are given \$5000 and \$10000 per month representing low and high skill employees. Add up all the wages.

PCs are frequently business partners, investors or whatever and simply each take a cut of any profits. Frequently, PCs with shares in the ship take one share of the profits for each share and an extra ‘ship’s share’ being saved, or be responsible for the same proportion of debt. Other PCs take a wage.

For example there are three PCs and a hired security guard NPC, Smig. Babor has two Ship Shares and Yori has a single ship share. The third PC, Nark the Astrogator has none. In this example profits/losses are divided four ways; Babor gets two shares, Yori one, and a fourth goes to the ship’s account for emergency repairs and the like. Nark takes a wage of \$10k per month and Smig the NPC only \$5000 per month. Therefore the wage bill is \$15k a month.

- c. Energy/fuel: determine the cost as per SFC, \$100xSizex30days.
- d. Provisioning (life support) for a month is calculated as 10x(crew+passengers)x30.

2. Income.

- a. The default income of a starship comes from one source, cargo. Cargo is measured in ‘spaces’ of 120 cubic feet (a 5’ cube). Every unused mod is a ‘space’. A bulk cargo superstructure provides 6667 spaces. For the sake of this simplicity we assume that the income from cargo is the average, \$1300xspaces. If the players and PC’s do nothing special then the cargos shifted over the month are assumed to be this average.
- b. Passengers: Each passenger birth in superstructure brings in \$3000 per month. Each passenger pod is assumed to be occupied four times a month for a total of \$800 each month total (note an individual seat is \$20 for a typical orbital transfer or similar). Whether passengers are economy or first class has no effect.

3. Monthly Total: = total income – total outgoings. If negative the ship loses money by default every month! Generally this Monthly Total does not change, instead adventures and the like will provide a credit that adds to this. These credits reduce the loss if any.

Getting extra credit

There are several non-sustainable ways of dealing with a loss.

- Adventures!
- Travel brokering: use the supply and demand table (SFC28) and apply the result to passenger superstructures and pods (individually). Unless a war or disaster is making people desperate then ‘Desperate’ is actually first class passengers and ‘Extreme’ are business class passengers.
- Play the market: use the trade rules in the Science Fiction Companion. Replace the some or all of the default \$1300 per space with spaces filled with specific goods.
- Miss a loan repayment. Repayments for one or more shares are not be paid. The consequences of skipping payments are given in the Edges. You get a credit equal to the skipped payment but you will need to make this up later.
- Power down: Usually fuel is purchased at the end of each month. Crews expecting a loss can power-down non-essential systems for the month. Energy costs can be halved by only running critical systems and drives SFC41. Handle this as a credit equal to halve the usual energy cost. This option is generally not available if the ship is carrying paying passengers, they will all demand a refund. Generally, after one month most hired NPC crew leave to find another job if possible
- Energy reserves: You can decide not to top up fuel reserves at the end of the month. Divide the Energy in the

Starship table (SFC41) by 30 and round down. This is the number of months you can run on fuel reserves before you are out. Each month powered down (see SFC41) counts as a half-month (you do not get the extra credit above). Each month on reserves credits the ship accounts with an amount equal to the usual monthly fuel bill. If fuel reserves reach zero you have 2d6 days before the ship dies, double this if ‘powered down’. The reserves don’t restock themselves captains are advised to buy more months of fuel back as soon as they can.

- Life support reserves. A fully stocked ship can survive for a long while without restocking provisions. Partially, this is because the life support system include efficient recycling. While efficient the recycling is not perfect, eventually the food runs out and the air and water are too foul. Divide the Energy in the Starship table (SFC41) by 30 and round down. This is the number of months you can run on stores before you are out. Each month without resupply reduces this number. Without resupply any first class passengers will demand a refund. After a month without resupply business class passengers will demand a refund. Each month on reserves credits the ship accounts with an amount equal to the usual monthly provisioning bill. If reserves reach zero you have 2d6 days before the ship runs out of air, food, and water. Conditions become foul and food short. All passengers will demand their money back. The provisions don’t restock themselves captains are advised to buy more months of fuel back as soon as they can.
- Reduce life support: an option for the truly desperate. Generally, you can’t do this on passenger ships and NPC crewmembers will also quit if you try this. This halves provisioning costs but the ship is cold, the water tastes funny, food is awful, washing is rationed, and the very air smells of unwashed bodies. Each month living in this hell grants one level of Fatigue that can only be regained by spending a week in good conditions. This Fatigue can kill. Every 2 months on reduced life support consumes 1 month of provisions if living off provisioning reserves as above.

WHY AREN'T COMPUTER GAMES (ESPECIALLY MMOs) AS MUCH FUN TO PLAY AS OLD-TIME D&D?

by *Lewis Pulsipher*

[This was originally completed in October 2009, but for various reasons has not seen the light of publication. Generally it still applies, but occasionally I'll interject some comments in brackets from the perspective of 2016. Originally published in my blog, <http://pulsiphergamedesign.blogspot.com/2016/04/why-arent-computer-rpgs-especially-mmos.html>]

Oh, but they ARE as much fun, you say? Yet I don't see much evidence of that. For so many people it seems like a lot of work especially in MMOs - "the grind" - aimed at rising in level. People don't enjoy the journey, they only enjoy the destination ("I'm 80th level!"). That's why there's a big market for sale of items and gold and even entire accounts for such games, the market addressed by "pharming". (More details later.)

How did this happen? We can observe that, in hard core video games in general, this "ennui" seems to be a problem (ennui: "a feeling of utter weariness and discontent resulting from satiety or lack of interest; boredom"). The journey



isn't much fun. People brag that "I beat the game," often throwing in an impressively-short duration of play, or that "I made maximum level", but they don't appear to have enjoyed it. How many of the hard core say "did you enjoy playing?", instead they say "how long did it take you to beat the game?" They want the result, not the experience. It's as though a ten year old who wants to be wealthy when he's 60 would be happy to jump from 10 to wealthy 60 without experiencing the years in between.

Focus on "Leveling up" and lack of Group Play

Where games involve character levels, there are two possible reasons why this has happened. I played First Edition AD&D for 30 years starting in 1975; my highest level character made 14th, but the last two levels were from magic items and he never actually played higher than 12th, which is just as well because the game doesn't handle 14th level at all well. Most of my many characters didn't make double figures of levels. It took a LONG time, many long adventures involving several people, to "level up". I recall one character that took ten adventures to reach second level. So of course, I played the game not to level up, but to enjoy the adventure - as we all did. (I can even remember discovering that a character had risen a level, but I hadn't noticed because I'd not tallied the experience points from the past several adventures. "Leveling up" was not the objective.)

I knew a former WoW pharmer who said he could reliably go from 1st to 30th level in 16 hours. Nowadays in video games, it's quite easy to rise in level, and not surprisingly the objective of many players becomes rising in level rather than enjoying adventures. How many players say "I really enjoyed that game;" instead they say, "I made 80th level".

Perhaps much of the reason for this change in objective, and consequent change in enjoyment, is the solitary nature of MMOs and computer RPGs (something that has ended for folks who join guilds and participate in big raids). Face-to-face D&D is a social game, one that you enjoy with friends (or people who become your friends), one where much enjoyment is taken from the talk and activity between (and often during) the actual adventures, as well as from the adventures. This is only now starting to become common in MMOs and online RPGs. In times past, people playing alone didn't have other people to share their adventures with, to commiserate with, to recount old events. Lacking that, what could they do? Concentrate on "leveling up".

Too Much Like Work

But even in online games we find people doing more and more that seems like work. Nick Yee, then of Stanford University, wrote a journal article called "The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play" published in 2006. He used data from over 35,000 surveys completed by MMO players. From the abstract:

Video games . . . transformation into work platforms and the staggering amount of work that is being done in these games often go unnoticed. Users spend on average 20 hours a week in online games, and many of them describe their game play as obligation, tedium, and more like a second job than entertainment. Using well-known behavior conditioning principles, video games are inherently work platforms that train us to become better game workers. And the work that is being performed in video games is increasingly similar to the work performed in business corporations. (Google "Nick Yee Labor of Fun" for a PDF of the article.)

Some of this "work ethic" may be because players pay to play the game, so they feel obligated to play even if they don't enjoy it. But that's a minor factor, as those who really don't enjoy it will quit.

[Far fewer games are paid for these days, rather they're free-to-play (F2P). Though many who play long enough to reach "max level" will still be spending money.]

Even when many people participate together, the experience of actually playing the game is rarely social. Listen to accounts of the big raids in MMORPGs. Every person is assigned a task (DPS ["damage per second"], healer, etc.); must do that task with precise timing; and does nothing else. Each person's experience is uni-dimensional, a cog in a machine rather than an independent actor. If a few people mess up their timing or role, the whole raid can fail. Because of the time pressure, there's no opportunity to think, to use strategy, or to enjoy what's happening once the raid starts.

Does that sound like fun? Contrast this with old D&D played at a leisurely pace, with lots of time to think and enjoy what's happening, where every character could act independently while keeping the good of the group as a whole in mind. [I suppose the key is the difference between "brainware", using your brain to succeed in tabletop games, and "athleticware", using your physical prowess to succeed in video games. There's a lot more potential stress in athleticware.]

The "play" has become work to too many people. I remember talking with someone who was a major officer in a fantasy MMO guild for many months. He finally realized that it was work, that he wasn't enjoying it, that people treated

him badly if he didn't do exactly what they wanted, or if the raids weren't successful. So he quit. There are similar examples in Yee's paper.

No Fear of Death

The other reason for the change in focus involves character death. In First Edition AD&D you actually feared character death. If you died, it hurt your constitution or your experience points, or both; at worst, you were dead and gone. In an MMO or standalone RPG, character death is generally something between a minor inconvenience and no trouble at all. Think about it, if death is not to be feared, it matters much less what you do during your play, and you can pay less attention to it. The details of play tend to blur because your full attention isn't required. (Megaman 9 (for example) shows how even a minor fear of death changes a game immensely. See http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=21324.)

The co-creator of D&D (Gary Gygax) put it this way in one of his last publications (Hall of Many Panes) "a good campaign must have an element of danger and real risk or else it is meaningless - death walks at the shoulder of all adventurers, and that is the true appeal of the game."

"Pharming" highlights both sides of this problem. If people enjoyed playing the games, would they buy characters and items from pharmers? And if the games ordinarily required more than a dreary, predictable "grind", could pharmers produce enough such items for the demand? At the very least, the scale of pharming would be much smaller.

Obviously, a good human referee can provide more interesting adventures than a computer. Moreover, in D&D the actions of a character can change the future, whereas in MMOs that's rarely the case because they're designed for thousands of players. Once again, if what you do makes no difference, you're less likely to pay attention to, and care about, what you do.

Similar Trends in Tabletop D&D

In tabletop Dungeons and Dragons itself we can see an evolution toward this same fixation on "leveling". Second edition D&D is much like First; Third Edition D&D (3.0) is a very different game, a kind of fantasy Squad Leader, with the emphasis on players finding ways to "minimax" the system via unearned advantages (such as myriad books and articles containing new feats, skills, and prestige classes). Each character can be a one-man army, very different from First Edition where "combined arms" cooperation was absolutely necessary to survival. In First Edition fighters cannot withstand the enemy without magic-users who deal massive damage to groups, and magic-users cannot survive if the enemy gets to melee range without protecting fighters. Characters must help each other out, and each kind of character class provides an important component of "combined arms" success. (Clerics provide defensive magic and medical help, rogues provide scouting and stealth, etc.) It is rather like American football, with fighters as linemen, clerics as linebackers, rogues as wide receivers and secondary, and magic-users as quarterback and running backs. Just as a football team will fail if some of its parts fail, the First Edition adventure party will fail if some of its members fail.

In Third Edition, every character type is designed to survive pretty well on its own. Part of this evolution is attributable to the reduction in size of the typical adventuring group. One of "Lew's laws" is "the survivability of an adventuring group varies with the square of the number of characters in it". Our First Edition parties averaged seven or eight characters; Third Edition specifies four. 3.5 is essentially the same. When there are only four characters, there's rarely a practical way to prevent the enemy from getting to the magic-user(s), who must then be able to cast spells in the face of melee opposition, who must be harder to kill, and so forth. Fighters, with the proper feats, can kill several ordinary enemies in one blow. And with "buffs" from the spell-casters, a fighter can take on a ridiculous number of monsters.

Further, you are supposed to rise a level in about 11 encounters, and could have several encounters in one adventure. In other words, leveling can occur so often that leveling can become the objective, rather than focus on enjoying the adventure. When I set out to convert some First Edition characters to Third, the first thing I did was double their level to be at a near-comparable place in progression. The game was also designed to scale up to 20th level (and later 40th), whereas First Edition starts to break down when characters got well into double figure levels.

Fourth Edition D&D is for larger adventuring parties, and characters have many powers that only help other people in the party, not themselves. It appears to be designed to encourage groups to work together. Character "roles" have been

added to emphasize cooperation and "combined arms". Individual characters are very hard to kill, but don't have a lot of offensive capability. Yet the general take on Fourth Edition is that it has been "WoW-ified", made to be more like World of Warcraft, with easy leveling and all the other things that have made WoW so widely popular. Fourth Edition may be a good game, but it's not D&D.

[Fifth edition D&D is much like First, except that it's much harder to get killed because of easy healing and spells such as Revivify at third level cleric.]

Is this "bad"?

Is it "bad" that people play for the destination rather than the journey? In and of itself, no - every person has his own reasons for playing a game, and those reasons vary drastically. These people can enjoy the game, even if they're not having fun. Yet when the result is something that's more like work than play, you have to wonder what is wrong. Yee quotes a registered nurse who played Everquest: "We spend hours - HOURS - every SINGLE day playing this damn game. My fingers wake me, aching, in the middle of the night. I have headaches from the countless hours I spend staring at the screen. I hate this game, but I can't stop playing. Quitting smoking was NEVER this hard." Maybe there IS something wrong here.

Further, when games are designed to emphasize leveling up, those who want to "enjoy the journey" are left behind. Is there anything game designers can do to help restore the fun? We can't quite put the creativity of human referees into computer games. But already in some games, what a character does changes the world according to his view of it. (What the players do very much affects EVE Online.)

We're in "the age of instant gratification". Levels are easy to earn because video gamers expect to be rewarded at every turn. 30 years ago, experience points and the occasional magic item were sufficient reward; now expectations have been raised, and levels are the expected reward. If a designer takes away those easy levels, will people play any more? What a difficult situation! I've designed many commercially published or forthcoming boardgames, but I've only once tried to design a role-playing game - though it was a board game, not a typical RPG - and now I wouldn't even contemplate it because of the problems I've described.

Games are entertainment, not Life

Younger readers might howl that video games are NOT easy. Yet most long-time players recognize that, generally speaking, it's typically a lot easier to succeed at a video game than it was decades ago. Death has no sting, games are automatically saved for you, heck, some games even aim your gun for you! I'm not saying that easier is "bad", because it's what the market requires, so that people don't have to work for their entertainment; yet somehow, the entertainment has become too much like work for the hard core players, even when they're successful.

Fundamentally, then, it may be that these games aren't as fun as old D&D can be because they are designed to stroke the egos of pseudo-competitive people who think they've accomplished something important when they reach maximum level. Good D&D players know better. I remember a teenager who had an "18th level magic user", but had no clue how to play it well. He may have made it up (rather like buying an account, but much cheaper!), or he may have played with a "Monty Haul" referee. Your level didn't say anything about how well you played, and for that matter nobody outside your little group cared how well you played—you weren't competing with the rest of the world. We played to have fun, not to brag about our level or our loot (though we surely enjoyed such things when we attained them).

"Casual" players in general, and Nintendo among major publishers, haven't forgotten that games are entertainment. You don't prove anything about your worth by being a "bad ass gamer", you don't help your family, your friends, your country, your world. Commercial video games are not training for life, they're a pause from life if not an escape from life. It just doesn't matter whether you "beat the game", or how quickly you beat the game, any more than it matters whether you complete a crossword puzzle or Rubik's Cube. Casual players know that; some hard core players seem to have forgotten it, and those are often the people who "grind", who don't enjoy the journey, because they think "beating the game" is truly important even as the rest of us wonder where they got such an unrealistic, immature notion.

MOVIE REVIEW: THE REVENANT

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Alejandro Gonzalez Innaritu

2015

Again, I realise this flick has been out for oh so long, and various awards have been awarded and such, but I enjoyed the flick so much that I felt compelled to write about it.



Regardless of the absurd level of hype, and this was ridiculously overhyped, which is very strange considering what the flick was like and is actually about, this turned out to be a very enjoyable film for me that succeeds despite Leonardo DiCaprio, rather than because of him.

The movie around him, the amazing cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki, the relentlessness of the very landscape around them, they all combine to deliver an awe-inspiring vision of frontier times. The story didn't really resonate with me all that much, but I guess the performances, especially of Tom Hardy, Domhnall Gleeson and Will Poulter, were solid. But the real main character? Nature, baby. C'mon, sparkle for me. Work it, sub-zero tundra!

This is set in the early 1800s, and it's meant to be North Dakota in the States. The thing is, though, I don't even have to look it up on imdb.com or Wikipedia to know that they must have filmed this in Canada. There is not a shred, a scintilla, a skerrick of a doubt in my mind that it was Canada. Whenever they want to film something that looks this amazing, and which tries to convince the viewer that humans who travel to these regions voluntarily are idiots, they film in these bits of Alberta.

And that's a crucial element for success, at least for me, when you're putting together a film like this set in frontier times. The whole point of a film set in frontier times is to show how goddamn hard getting through a single day would be even if someone hadn't been catastrophically fucked up by a bear.

But now I'm leaping ahead. This is allegedly based on a true story, but, I'm telling you, there is no way this movie even matches the lies that Hugh Glass told way back when. But there was once a chap called Hugh Glass, and he was attacked by a bear, and he was treated horribly by a chap called Fitzgerald (here played by Tom Hardy). But there the two tales diverge.

You have to remember now that the director of this flick and the cinematographer are complete and utter show offs these days. I mean, they probably always were, it's just that now they have all the money and all the awards, and all the technology at their disposal to deliver amazing visual experiences. Hence the beginning of this flick shows a bunch of hunters and trappers, including Glass, being attacked by the locals.

I'm deliberately underplaying things. That scene is incredible, utterly incredible, in that everything that is going on and being done (much of it horribly violent, of course) is depicted from an astounding perspective, and with a 3D field of vision like nothing I've seen before. Yes, of course, people compare it to the opening of Saving Private Ryan and the work that Spielberg and his usual cinematographer Janusz Kaminski got up to there (with the help of hundreds of actors, thousands of support staff and millions of programmers). But this sequence, this amazing sequence, is a different beast altogether.

Let's not pretend that this flick is some kind of indie low budget art house flick – it had a budget akin to a superhero movie – so the difference isn't in funds. The technology, especially CGI, has advanced immensely since the 90s. But there's also a difference of perspective at play. As astounding as some of the perspectives are, they, being the filmmakers, endeavour to keep the field of view and perspective, and the composition, as always slightly off centre, to emphasise how whatever is happening, is happening to the protagonist. This always keeps things, despite the vastness of the landscape, to a very human dimension.

Glass may be a complicated character. He doesn't really need to be, for the purposes of this film. All he really has to do is suffer, and suffer tremendously, and keep going. The word 'revenant' refers to someone who returns from the dead, but in a horrible state, not like a sexy twinkling vampire that teenage girls and their middle-aged mothers can fantasise about while masturbating.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. There's nothing sexy about what happens to Hugh Glass here. It's one long (mostly CGI) shot as this is happening to him. A mother bear and her cubs just happen to be strolling along, when an evil DiCaprio comes tauntingly close to their personal space. Said mother bear "Get the fuck away from my kids", and hilarity ensued.

No, wait, the opposite, in fact. That bear does some terrible things to Glass, terrible things, and it's simultaneously amazing and harrowing to watch, like many great things in life. Damn, is it hardcore. It is, like most completely uneven fights, completely unbelievable that the protagonist would survive such a mauling, but hey, this is the magic of cinema on display.

Glass ends up getting his revenge on nature, but the toll it has taken on him is immense. He bears open, long gouges all over his torso, and a throat pretty much not really all there any more. They do the (unfortunately) 'classic' gimmick of showing a victim trying to drink, and having the liquids not follow the normal human trajectories in order to show how bad the damage is. Think Two Face in The Dark Knight, drinking whiskey in order to display how few fucks he now gives even with only half a face remaining (ie. none), or the vile Captain in Pan's Labyrinth, leaking booze from where he shouldn't (and yet it makes us so glad).

Glass then does some frontier cauterisation on himself, and, at least for a moment, the film transcends from grim seriousness to high comedy, at least for me. Is that wrong? Should I be worried?

I was already sold on this flick before then, so it didn't worry me too much. What did worry me was that I thought DiCaprio, convinced that this was his very last chance for an Oscar, was going to act all over the place and probably be yelling a lot as well. I needn't have worried. That big, beautiful bear does such great damage to Glass's vocal chords that I no longer had anything to worry about.

And yet there is still ever so much more film to see. Two men are tasked with looking after the grievously wounded Glass. Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy) and some other guy. Fitzgerald is That Guy, the one who complains about everything and anything and never shuts the fuck up. He's been wounded terribly himself in the past by the natives, who tried to scalp him alive. That would turn anyone into a bit of a prick, don't you think? Even Mother Theresa, I would hesitate to remark.

Fitzgerald is not only out for Number One, himself, at all times, but he's incredibly greedy and incredibly against being told what to do. He's also a dirty murdering son of a bitch. So, yes, this flick is meant to be all about the revenge of Glass on Fitzgerald, for a reason I won't go into, because it's so awful, but it's about so much more than that, and perhaps to the flick's detriment.

I could easily sit through this flick another three times in a row, which would take about half a day to do, and it would be a pleasurable experience for me. Still, it's pretty bonkers weird. Apart from a frontier tale told about trying to live at a time when everything and everyone around you is screaming "Die! Die! Die!", the script does try to get all mythic and mystical and shit.

Hence the Three Rebirths of Hugh Glass, which is what I'm sure the flick should have been called. There are three instances as Glass goes along his horrible journey where he ends up in makeshift wombs, from which he is unceremoniously expelled like any other infant. First it's the early grave Fitzgerald forces him into. Later on, a kind Pawnee builds a lean-to in order to let him heal and once more be thrust out into the world.

The third, and probably weirdest, involves Glass actually having to squeeze himself out of the belly of a creature, which is more Empire Strikes Back than biblical or native American myth. It is so strange that it uncomfortably lingered in the mind, because it's the most explicit, in that it's almost like Innaritu is saying "well, if you didn't get the symbolism before, I'm going to make it SO GODDAMN OBVIOUS that even you morons texting each other up the back will get it". Glass literally squeezes himself out of something that looked awfully like a vagina.

Someone spank that baby on the butt. The ending seems to be subverting its own premise, and yet it's even more in keeping with the actual true tale of Hugh Glass, rather than what the watchers of a so-called revenge thriller are meant to expect. Little did they know that this was about someone becoming Enlightened through rebirth, and enjoying the icy scenery along the way. It's a visual marvel. Dunno whether DiCaprio deserved any awards just for being tortured for several weeks. Hardy does far more acting in it than DiCaprio does, and where's his award, huh? Where's his parade?

8 times the ice and snow of Alberta is clearly not a fit place for man or beast out of 10

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"The way I see it, I done saved your life twice now, boy... I ought to be God to you." – yeah, well, I ain't hiring – The Revenant

Rating: 8 stars

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MOVIE REVIEW: CRIMSON

by Andrew Moshos

I'm sure everything will be fine, she seems perfectly sane

dir: Guillermo del Toro

2015

Ghosts are just a metaphor...

It's said so many times in the movie, that you know that the ghosts are actually meant to be ghosts, as well as metaphors for metaphors. When the characters within a ghost story question the parameters and plot points of ghost stories, I think we're officially in the realms of the "meta" without ever having intended to take a trip there.

Crimson Peak is kinda sorta a ghost story. If you took the ghosts out completely, it would not affect or change the outcome, or even the path along the way, at all. The ghosts are queasy and nightmarish in some instances, but I would humbly suggest that they don't really do much that couldn't be easily done otherwise from a story point of view.

In fact, just to keep belabouring the point, I would argue that the screenplay already has the plot elements being discovered by the various relevant characters just fine, and then unnecessarily has those revelations underlined sloppily with these spectral redundancies.

Plus, it makes little sense. They're maybe trying to help Edith with advice and warnings and such, but all they're doing is scaring the shit out of her so that she makes dumb decisions that would seem to make it harder for her to achieve their goals.

Crimson Peak has a lot of elements that independently work beautifully. It would be reasonable to wonder what would have happened if they'd been properly blended together. They do not cohere, here, I'm sad to say. It's like watching a grand recipe being prepared by a master chef with incredible ingredients that ends up being bangers and mash when you started with truffles and artichoke hearts.

That's not entirely fair. Crimson Peak is not completely terrible, it's just profoundly disappointing. It's disappointing because it looks hellishly beautiful. It's visually sumptuous, gorgeously gangrenous sets and (mostly) amazing



costumes abound. The performances are okay, perfectly serviceable for this kind of flick.

The problem is... it's neither engaging nor surprising. The obviousness of what's happening, of what's going to happen, is so dully obvious that at first I was wondering if there was going to be some kind of incredible twist, since playing it so pointlessly straight didn't seem worthy of the time and money of the people involved.

Guillermo del Toro remains one of those incredible visual stylists as a director who ends up making very pretty but ultimately unsuccessful movies. It shames me to say that. There're only two of his flicks out of an abundance of them that I actually think work that well. The obvious one is *Pan's Labyrinth*. *The Devil's Backbone* is the other, also a ghost story, which I would argue works much better (at what it sets out to do) than *Crimson Peak* does.

The rest of his resume is populated with impressive looking films with terrible plots and indifferent acting (at best).

And yet I still have a lot of affection for the guy. It's not enough to give him a pass all the time; if anything my affection for him makes me even more critical, more unforgiving.

Tom Hiddleston is so charming and snidely seductive in this, as in everything, that I pity any woman who tries to resist him or tries to differentiate when he's telling the truth or telling a lie. I also wonder how it is any woman who's actually been involved in a relationship with him could ever feel that he's being sincere. I think he could charm virtually any woman out of her corset and bustle, and probably a bunch of guys too.

You'd think he'd be perfect to play the part of a ruthless cad and bounder whose main goal in life is marrying clueless heiresses and stealing their fortunes once the girls go mysteriously missing. And you'd be right, but he's only really 'perfectly' cast in the first part of the flick as Sir Thomas Sharpe. Once the other half kicks in, the full on Gothic romance ghost story bullshit, he's lost in a sea of pointlessness.

The one who's good in both aspects of the flick, though only because she's deranged from start to finish, is Jessica Chastain, as Mrs Danvers, sorry, I meant as Lucille Sharpe, Tom's sister. She plays her cards way too early, and has this clear air of derangement right from the start. She looks great doing it, there's no doubt, but when a character looks like they're a hair's breadth away from killing people from the first instant you see them, when they start killing people it doesn't pack much of a wallop.

This is one of the reasons why there's not a single surprise to be had the whole way through. Our heroine Edith (Mia Wasikowska) is an intelligent but naïve (not sure how that works) young lady in the States, somewhere (Buffalo, New York, I think it was) at the dawn of the 20th century. 1901 to be precise. She writes ghost stories, and seeks to be taken seriously as an author, not as a socialite, and gets neither acknowledged for her troubles

Another reason why she writes ghost stories is because she keeps seeing her mother's ghost, a ghastly dark red thing that pops up every now and then trying to give her some sage advice "Beware the Crimson Peak!! Repent, Repent!" that kind of stuff.

Instead of just telling this to her calmly, in a manner intended to maximise their opportunity for understanding, this chilly shade acts deliberately like something from the Ghost Train at Luna Park. I think you need to work on your people skills, ghosty.

Her father (the always great in everything Jim Beaver) is a very wealthy self-made man. He is such a self-made hard working man that when Sir Thomas Sharpe comes rolling through town looking for money to finance his design for some amazing machine with which to mine clay, like anyone needs that, Edith's dad is all ‘tut-tut-tut, ain’t no way I’m giving my money to a soft-handed pansy who’s never worked a day in his life.’

What’s most disconcerting to Mr Edith’s Dad is that he can clearly see his daughter is bedazzled and besotted by this scoundrel, and, like the shmuck that he is, after he finds out that Sharpe is already married, instead of telling his daughter the one obvious thing that would cool her ardour and help her regain her senses, he tries bribing Sharpe into leaving town.

The Sharpe Siblings, though, aren’t people you want to fuck with. Edith’s beloved and useless father (I can’t point out with enough emphasis just how ridiculous it is that he neglected to tell his daughter this one obvious and simple piece of information) dies a very gruesome death at the hands of someone who’s obviously done this kind of thing before. With relish, and maybe fava beans and a nice chianti.

Before you can say “and then they get to the place what from the flick takes its name”, they’re at the creepy place colloquially known as Crimson Peak. Sure it’s a rundown slum, but these people are royalty, somehow.

It’s kind of like Charlie’s house in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory: there’s a great big bloody hole in the roof, but people go about their daily business like it’s a minor inconvenience.

Bad things start to happen. Bad omens and scary ghosts abound. All the while Thomas avoids having sex with his new bride, and his ever vigilant sister looks on with barely contained fury, constantly stirring the tea she’s always foisting onto Edith.

The house is a despicable marvel, and it’s modelled on all the famous decrepit houses you can think of, and have seen, in countless films. The most obvious parallel / homage is Mandalay from Hitchcock’s Rebecca, which would be just as obvious even if you didn’t have the malevolent presence of Lucille anxiously fingering the keys hanging from her waist.

As awfully obvious as the house is, since there are ghosts telling Edith “bad shit happened here, sister”, she does the basic detective work required to find out the fates of the other young, naïve, wealthy women who came before her. Not quite sure why you needed the supernatural in this context, but then what the hell do I know.

As much as I “liked” Lucille, or her demented and ferocious character, she’s pretty moronic, really. She is basically threatening Edith at any opportunity from the moment she meets her, and also trying to kill her long before they’ve even gotten what they want from Edith (money money money). I understand the source of her jealousy, the poisonous envy that starts from her womb and spurts out from her eyes, and the horrible childhood she must have endured in that

hideous house, but she's pretty naff, truth be told. If she's meant to be the smarter of the siblings it's amazing the locals haven't set fire to them long before.

There are certainly sexual thematic elements to the story, but they're hopelessly tame, if you ask me, and you didn't. Maybe I'm jaded or something, but for what this was marketed as versus what it actually is, it's not even as racy as yer average vampire flick. It needed far more psychosexual drama to justify the cost of admission.

Maybe that's the unimaginative women they were going for in the marketing: the fans who have watched/bought all of the Twilight flicks voluntarily, and need something new for their Christmas stocking.

It ends pretty much how you would expect it to end, letting you feel some slight relief, perhaps, but otherwise perhaps regretting the two hours spent in the company of these gorgeous visuals in want of a story worth telling. I can't fault Wasikowska as the lead, it's just that her character isn't that interesting, even when she's played this kind of character before. There's no doubt there are elements of Jane Eyre in this story, but with nowhere near the same level of dialogue or conceptual complexity or intelligence. I know, different genres and all, but it would have made some sense to crib from that script a little bit more.

Del Toro cribs and cribs from all over the place, creating tremendous visuals and realising a singular vision, but then throws a perfunctory story at the visuals hoping that something will stick. The Thomas character stops making sense at all towards the end, and never sells (it's that problem with sincerity Hiddleston / Loki has) his strange change of heart.

It's an odd thing to concern oneself with, but what I wanted to know was whether his goofy steam-powered mining machine finally worked properly. Did it revolutionise clay mining in Great Britain after that? It would be nice to get some closure on that issue.

Enquiring minds need to know. Despite the pretty visuals and the gorgeous actors and all the talent on display, I'm afraid it's a disappointment on pretty much any level other than the aesthetic that I can think of.

Pity.

5 times the only person who gets naked in this is Hiddleston, so it's pretty obvious what audience they were hoping for out of 10

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"Beautiful things are fragile... At home we have only black moths. Formidable creatures, to be sure, but they lack beauty. They thrive on the dark and cold."

- "What do they feed on?"

"Butterflies I'm afraid." – I think the pudding has enough egg by now, dearie – Crimson Peak

Originally published at: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/crimsonpeak>

MOVIE REVIEW: LIGHTS

by Andrew Moshos

So, when was the last time you ever heard someone saying that going into the lights would be a good idea? Everyone knows by now not to go into the lights. And yet...

dir: Christopher Krupka

It's amazing what you can do with no budget, a bunch of people, a couple of cheap cameras and some terrifying sound design.



The Lights is an Australian horror flick that is unpolished, messy and very clunky in some ways, and it's definitely an exponent of the found footage horror genre, which are a sequence of words alone that could make people flee to the hills, but in some quite powerful ways it succeeds in what it sets out to do.

There's no doubt that it could have benefited from some more money, maybe a little more time on the script. But there is no doubting that even if The Lights uses a bunch of familiar elements in familiar ways, it still manages to do exactly what it sets out to do: unsettle, confuse and terrify.

A lot of horror flicks use the found footage conceit, yet the way it's used in The Lights is somewhat confusing. Someone, someone who we hear ask questions of some of the participants / survivors, is filming whatever's going on (with a few scenes of other footage thrown in from phones and other cameras as well) giving it the feel of a ramshackle documentary spliced with found footage. But whoever the unseen person filming is, despite the fact that we know it's not one of the main four characters, there's no real explanation as to who they are and why they're filming.

There are also interviews peppering the flow of the movie, which sometimes enhance, sometimes detract from the experience.

I am ashamed of myself for making mention of that which I will make mention, but it's impossible to not refer to The Blair Witch Project, which definitely wasn't the first horror flick to use the found footage conceit, but was certainly the most successful and influential (for good and ill).

At its core it's a horror flick where something inexplicable, or barely explicable happens to a group of young people with little explanation, but a heap of heavy menace. When it happens, it's horrifying. Afterwards, there's just confusion.

A group of four, led by a chap called Jarrod, who is a bit of a fan of the supernatural, searches for a location in a bit of a wilderness-y area just outside of Bathurst (I'm assuming it's meant to be outside of Bathurst, because that's where it was filmed). One's a sceptic, one's a photographer, one's along for the ride, and one's a true believer.

And then something awful happens. Then something confusing, then something perplexing, then something astounding, then something flat out crazy.

But at no stage does the film approach a pat answer as to what's going on. All we know is that something horrible and barely understood by the protagonists is happening to them, and that they're as confused as we are, and that there isn't really any way or path they can follow to make things fumble towards a happy ending.

The performances are believably low-key (mostly), since they're all (I'm hoping) friends or acquaintances of the director. At the very least they're young people operating with the requisite confusion and immaturity that one would demand. There's no attempt, to make this a post-meta-horror flick a la Cabin in the Woods, in that it's played deadly straight and without a lick of irony.

One of their number disappears on that fateful night where they go camping in search of a mystery, the titular Lights that are expected to appear (though, I feel like a bit of a prick pointing out they didn't bring any camping gear with them, tee hee hee), but someone appears in her place. An American no less, from the sounds of it, and she's clutching a gun, like every American should carry by law.

So, with a disappearance, mysterious and inexplicable by its very nature, the situation is compounded with a violent altercation arising from an appearance.

Whoever played Jennifer made a big impression on me with little screen time. Other than the horripilating sequence where Candace goes missing, Jennifer's manner and behaviour might have been straight out of Horror Genre Stock, but it worked tremendously well for me. The manner in which she repeated her lines with a mixture of the dazedness of someone suffering from shock, with the obvious mental patient escapee vibe, completely obscuring what was actually going on, worked really well.

Actually, I take back / modify what I said earlier on: the audience probably does know a bit more than the characters, because we're the ones watching the film, and can see (just barely) something more of what's happening (in a genre sense) than they can.

For Jarrod, as the film rolls on, there comes a stark difference between what's happening to various people, and what he feels is his role in these matters. He's as clueless as the other (remaining, rapidly dwindling) protagonists, but he feels, rightly or wrongly, that their disappearances are his fault. How did I figure this out?

Well, he tells us constantly in between yelling at people about how bad he feels about it. I'm not sure he really is responsible, in any actual way, but I also know that guilt isn't always rational, because, believe me, I carry enough of it

around to know. But Jarrod's burden is not my own, and it at least goes some way towards explaining his decision at the end, which was a strong one thematically, but I'm not sure the flick really rewards him for his choice, noble though it may be.

Much of my temptation is to start saying stuff along the lines of “I wish they'd done this, or it should have gone this way, or that way”, which is a pointless level of guff to put into a review, because then you're not reviewing the film you watched, but the film in your head, which of course is way better, because you created it. Apart from three sequences that left me with goosebumps so severe I got a tad worried if the condition was permanent, there are some sections that I would hope, when the director eventually gets to remake this flick with a 20 million dollar budget, could have been excised or improved. If the film has a flaw, it's that after the sequence with The Lights! Candace and Jennifer, it kind of slows to a crawl as the uncomprehending characters sit around talking about stuff they can't understand but can't do anything about in order to get any greater understanding. And after a horrifying section in Jarrod's house, there's this strange overly long interlude in a forest that may have meant something (to go along with the potential theme of what's happening to the people being replaced with... somethings), but didn't really work for me.

Other than the dread that suffuses much of the flick (mostly carried through via the cheap but very effective score / sound design), I like the fact that it eschews easy explanations (or any explanations, really), and that a worrying character called Bob, who clearly has some role to play, and knows far more than anyone else, including the viewer, is never really explained either. He's certainly not a nice chap, but we don't know whether he's a villain, an unwilling servant of awful powers-that-shouldn't-be, or just someone who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I really do feel sorry for Dana (the sceptic, naturally, nice and lazy X-Files reference), though, poor thing. It's one thing to lose a bunch of friends under confusing circumstances. But to never find how or why – that's genuinely psychologically terrifying.

Damn, with a bit more budget, a bit more time, a bit more script, this would have been perfect for a midnight session at Cinema Nova. It might fall prey to the same faults that pervade the “found footage genre”, but it was far more enjoyable than any of those terrible Paranormal Activity flicks, which made like a billion dollars.

Eh, I never said there was any justice in this world.

Explain nothing. Horrify everyone. See The Lights, but don't go into them. Nothing good will come from that.

7 times it's films like this that are the main reason why I never go camping, or go chasing unexplained lights, or ever trust people called Bob out of 10

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“Everything is going to change” – these words are always more forceful and convincing when you're holding a gun to someone's neck. – The Lights

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