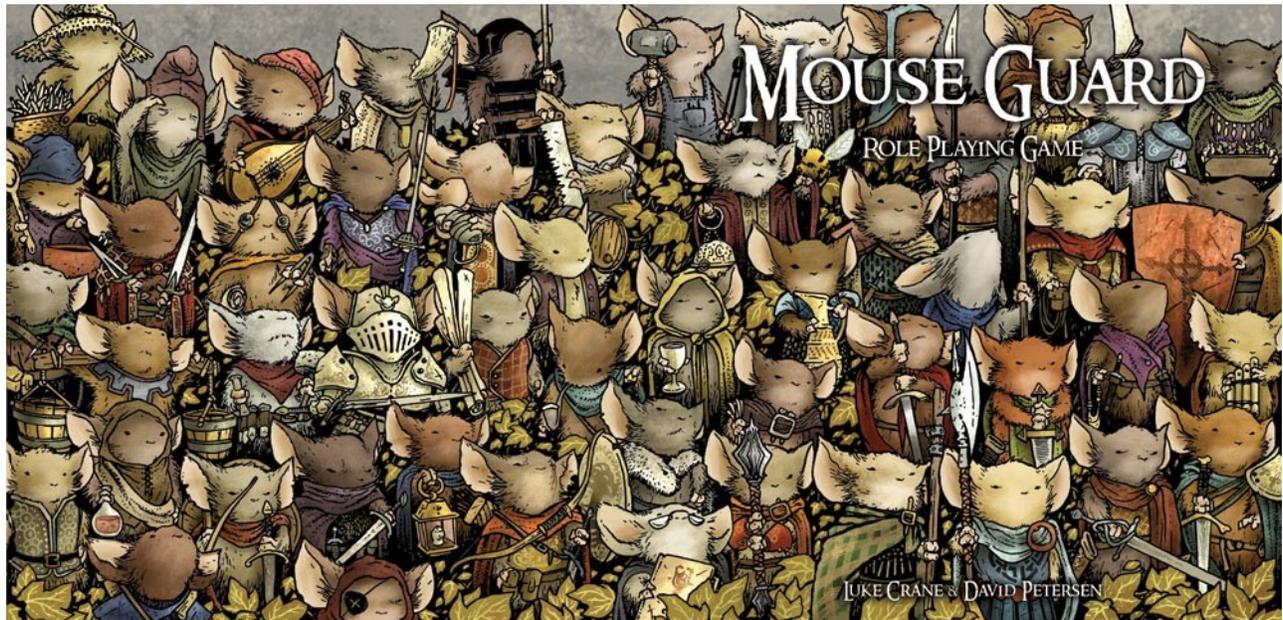


RPG REVIEW

Issue #3, March 2009



**Mouse Guard ... Easter Special: GURPS
Bunnies & Burrows ... Summerland ... Fire
& Sword ... Gulliver's Trading
Company ... Houses of the Blooded ...
Steve Long Interview ... Paranoia
Melbaplex ... Palladium Revised ...
QADS ... Classic D&D Scenarios for Middle
Earth ... Sex in Blue Planet ... Watchmen
Review ... Lord Orcus Listens! ... A
Crossword ... Industry News**

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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EDITORIAL

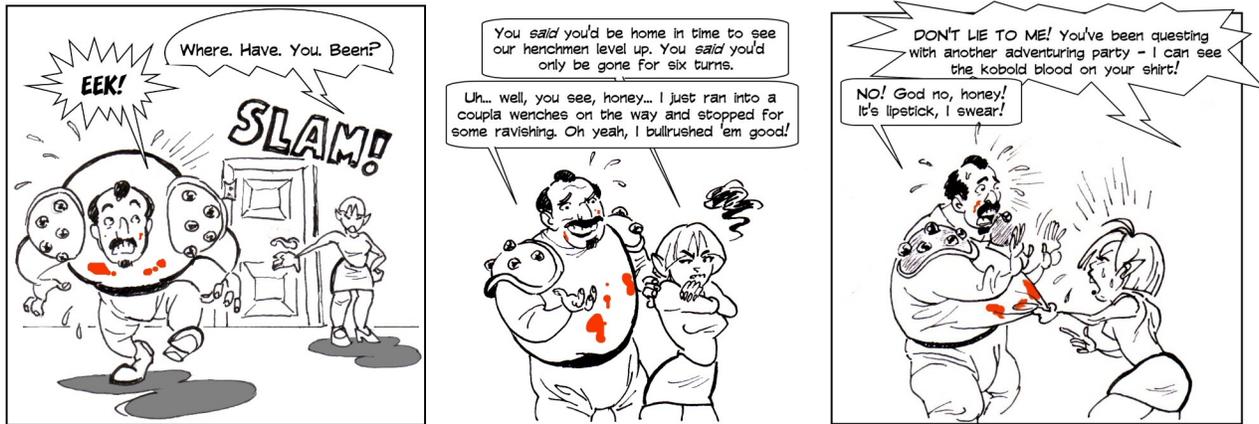
Well, the third issue; it would seem that this is a going concern, rather than a flash of madness. Still 64 pages every issue, still getting around the 1,000 mark for unique downloads for each issue (top five for this quarter were the U.S., Australia, France, New Zealand and Great Britain) and still... wait a minute, *where* are the letters for this issue? Now I know that at least some readers contacted the authors of particular articles in the last issue to say how useful the article was but... come on people, put pen to paper - or rather, finger to keyboard - and drop us a line about what you think of *RPG Review*.

Whilst we're on the subject you may as well subscribe to the RPG Review announce list; that way you'll know when each issue is coming out. It's a *very* low-volume list (less than one email a month) so it won't drown your inbox with messages; subscription information is available at http://rpgreview.net/mailman/listinfo/announce_rpgreview.net Other recent changes at RPG Review include the introduction of a pretty minimal set of writer's guidelines available at <http://rpgreview.net/node/23> and the establishment of a 'sales and trades' section of the website for subscribers and

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contributors (<http://rpgreview.net/node/7>). Yeah, so far it's just me with a small mountain of RPGs there, but feel free to fossick or send your own file of goods for a wider audience. As usual offers are made for clubs and societies to have a free web-presence with us or for people to run mailing lists for their RPG games.

This issue of RPG Review comes with a typical collection of the new (*Summerland*, *Houses of the Blooded*, *Mouse Guard*, *Gulliver's Trading Company*), the old (classic AD&D for Middle Earth), and includes the fantastic (*Fire & Sword*, *Palladium*), the superheroic (*Watchmen* movie review), a mash-up of biblical proportions (Young Gods), futuristic kinks (Sex in *Blue Planet*), and morbid humour (Melbaplex for *Paranoia*, Lord Orcus Listens). There's also a double special of anthropomorphics in this issue with a *GURPS Bunnies & Burrows* scenario based on an original from a very old issue of *Different Worlds* and of course, the aforementioned review of *Mouse Guard*. Naturally enough, Minsghi keeps us all up to date with her industry news, plus, as a bit of a pastime we have a RPG crossword puzzle, courtesy of our friendly cartoonist, Jensen. Amazingly, we even have a complete roleplaying system, Nathaneal Cole's QADS, in this issue.



Putting this creature together is, of course, a labour of love, although I do feel rather like the poor adventurer in the cartoon above. Two or three more or less sleepless nights at the end of the month when at the same time I'm supposed to be putting together a draft for a supplement for a gaming company (hi guys... ummm.. yeah, it'll be done soon, honest!) along with running and playing in several games, both pbem and f2f. Despite this (and the pleasant of working in a day job with supercomputers) there is, baring sudden fatal accident, almost no chance of *RPG Review* going into early retirement. Greg Costikyan once wryly mentioned (I think it was in *Violence: The Roleplaying Game of Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed*) that one day, in the future, roleplaying games will be recognised as a great and popular literary movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries - and I believe him! That said, I'm pretty wry about it too. There isn't much in the way of fame and riches in RPGs; but there's plenty in terms of mythology, of history, of futuristic speculation, of modeling, of spontaneity and, most importantly of all, of imagination. From the classic "All that is needed is these rules, the dice... pencil and paper, and imagination."

Why would anyone *ever* want to limit their imagination?

Onwards!

Lev Lafayette, lev@rpgreview.net

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AN RPG CROSSWORD PUZZLE

by Jensen Schmidt

1	2		3	4	X	5	6	7		8	9	10		X	11
12		X	13		14				X	15			X	16	
17		18		X	19		X	20				X	21		
22			X	23			24		X	25				X	
	X	26	27		X	28			29			X	30	31	
32	33				34		X	35		X	61	36	X		X
X	37					X	38		X	39			40	X	41
42	X	X		X	X	43			X	44					45
46	47	48			49				X	50					
51				X	52			X	53		X	54			
55			X	56								X	58		
X	59										X	60			

ACROSS

1. Treat with contemptuous disregard.
5. Great for keeping a campaign journal.
12. Vowels.
13. Swashbuckler's weapon.
15. Additive colour model used in electronics.
16. Married to Ma.
17. Where adventurers go to rest and get equipment.
19. Powered up.

20. Good name for a Norse berserker.
21. Swiss/German manufacturers of popular hand-guns.
22. Rhymes with 'Jedi-hater'.
23. Of great scarcity on Athas.
25. Creepy Swedish RPG.
26. Verb ending used colloquially in Britain and the Commonwealth.
28. Resident of 221 B Baker Street.
30. PC in D. Vincent Baker's indie Western RPG.
32. Semi-secret organization spread across Faerûn.

35. Exist.
37. Orc guarding chest in 10' by 10' room.
38. Sun god.
39. Sphere.
43. Old name for the devil.
44. Garbage monster.
46. Patron deity of a race of brain eating monstrosities.
50. *Call of Cthulhu* GM.
51. Number of dice in a traditional 'percentile die'.
52. Smart stat.
53. Rank.
54. Greeting.
55. Generic top-level domain of the Game Manufacturers Association's website.
56. Arwen was also known by this Elven word for 'evening star'.
58. Japanese multinational IT company.
59. Extremely flammable substance that poses a great hazard to travellers in the *Spelljammer* campaign.
60. Black dragon country.
61. Difficulty



DOWN

1. *Shadowrun* magic item.
2. One reason for hacking and slashing.
3. Repository for *fireball* victims.
4. Thanks from the UK.
5. Worth less than pirate currency (awful pun).
6. Reverse of 12 across.
7. Indie RPG by Ron Edwards.
8. "We _____ for nobody" - *Spaceballs* bumper sticker.
9. Vampiric power of concealment.
10. '*Land of ___*': Prehistoric Role Playing in a World of Limited Words!
11. Gog's relative.
14. American horror author.
16. *Call of Cthulhu* character class.
18. Modron noise.
21. You don't want to catch this when you're resting up in 17 across.
23. Encounter.
24. Overgod of Abeir-Toril.
27. Vermin, if you believe the *Monster Manual*.
29. A name I call myself.
31. Exclamation of pain.
33. @
34. Pertaining (abbrev.).
36. Where Great Cthulhu lies dreaming.
38. Large, quadruped mammals; used as beasts of burden by the Jawas of Tatooine.
39. Japanese wooden training sword.
40. What werewolf features are.
41. Home nation of Democritus, Spartacus and (according to legend) Orpheus, chief among poets and musicians.
42. Pastime of the rich and the famous.
43. Indo-Aryan language.
45. German artist (first name Niko) who worked on the BESM d20 version.
47. Fancy dress party, with foam swords.
48. Exhalation.
49. "Make yourself useful, bard."
53. Spanish (or Portuguese) river.
56. MMORPG released in 1997 (abbrev.).
57. Mountain.

HOT GOSSIP INDUSTRY NEWS

by Wu Mingshi

Hosei bo Mr. Lev,

You know everyone's saying how *seasonal* RPG Review comes, but my season so different to you seasons. My seasons are hot and wet (you not think too hard about that, 'kay?) or hot and dry. Sometimes in between. You cannot really make solstice or equinox out of that. But anyways, now you have issue #3 of RPG Review, which means that is like long term relationship for Minshi, lah.

But you know stuff happen last quatering. *Watchmen!* That very excitings to Minsghi, even if it no big squid at end. Did Mingshi drop a spoiler? Too late now, no can stun my words, everyone should see already already. You know film was supposed to come out in 1991 but didn't, and Minshi very glad 'cause not only I but little girl way back then, but I don't know whether the Senior Minister would have considered it too subversive or threatening to the minds of easily lead and foolish people. Sometime I think he like a vampire, even from the grave he get up if he thinks something wrong. But Mingshi talk enough with strange political metaphor and sayings which people outside my island home probably not understand.

Monte Cook has new subscription-website called "Dungeon A Day", which makes me think of work at office. It provides one dungeon encounter per day, and it's modular, like furniture at office. So you can take out encounter to put in your game, or you can put the pieces together like giant jigsaw called Dragon's Delve. Dungeon maps by Ed Bournelle, so that good too. All for "Open Gaming License", 'cause we no can say "d20" anymore, you know?

Coming real soon now is "Open Game Table: The 2008 Anthology of Roleplaying Game Blogs" by Berin Kinsman available through Lulu, Indie Press Revolution and Amazon. Minshi at first wonder whether RPG Review will get a mention, then she remember that RPG Review not a blog at all. Silly Minsghi. Nevertheless, Anthology promises to be very good because "Uncle Bear" (<http://unclebear.com/>) say very clever and attentive things about this hobby.

Also (now Minghi put on her glass) there is International Journal of Role-Playing. No, Minghi not joking. This is serious, mum. It's a proper journal, peer-review and everything, and Minghi quotes: "*The International Journal of Role-Playing is a response to a growing need for a place where the varied and wonderful fields of role-playing research and development, covering academia, the industry and the arts, can exchange knowledge and research, form networks and communicate.*" Available at: <http://journalofroleplaying.org/>. Hey, even person from my National University is on review board!

To make finishing Minsghi has heard through that company-that-aspire- to-publish-everything out-of-print, Mongoose Publishing, is planning on republishing *Lejendary Adventure* and due out in June 2009. Minsghi not remembering this one being sell splash like *RuneQuest* or *Traveller* or even *Dragon Warriors*. OK, maybe Mongoose find new rabbit in old hat. Hey, but why no republish *Mythus* or *Cyborg Commando*? Minshi like *Cyborg Commando*; it remind her of Terminator. OK, finish now! Word count complete, you owe me another sling drink!

Love & kisses, Mingshi! mingshi@rpgreview.net

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DESIGNER'S NOTES FOR SUMMERLAND

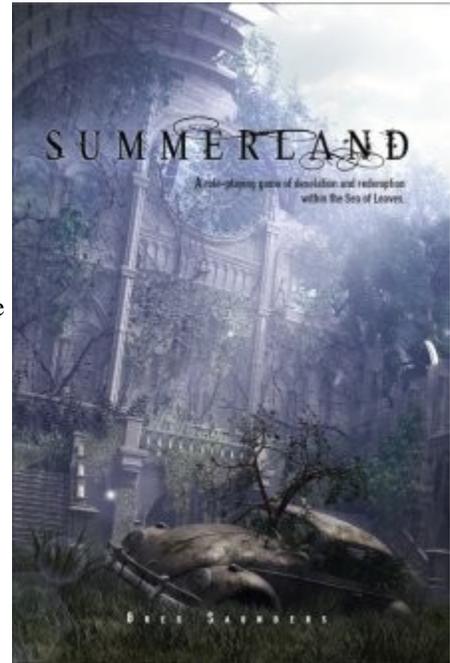
by Greg Saunders

After I send Lev a copy of Summerland to review, he asked me to put together a few 'designers notes' for the game, which of course I'm happy to do. Trouble is, that begs the question 'what are designers notes?' I'm not sure I know the answer to that, but I thought what I would do is give you, the reader, an idea of what went into creating Summerland. For those of you unfamiliar with the game, check out the review on rpg.net (<http://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/14/14187.phtml>).

First a little background. I am a game player, be it board, card, miniature or whatever, but my first passion is roleplaying games. Not that I have that much time to play them these days, but I have always loved roleplaying from my AD&D roots, up through Warhammer, Megatraveller and a multitude of other games to the mix of traditional and indy style games I buy these days. I find creating a sharing a roleplaying experience with friends to be one of the most enjoyable ways to waste my time. I also like writing games of all kinds - I have miniatures skirmish wargame under my belt. Why that should be is another story, but I want to create games that I can share with other people, and I'm not driven by the need to make money from my games. Mind you, I don't think there are many small press rpg authors who could claim they make any real money! Break even is a must, anything else is gravy, as they say.

The first decision I made with Summerland was to actually create the game in the first place. What I mean by that is I tend to have several ideas for games floating around in my head at any one time. Most of these are rubbish, or when I think about them more morph into other people's games, so I tend to mull things over for a while before committing fingers to keyboard. The basic idea of the setting to Summerland came to me while walking my two dogs, and thinking about it for a while convinced me it was unique and interesting enough to develop further. It was at that point that I began to write the background. I am one of those fellows that likes to get things down on paper once I've decided on starting, and I tend to write a large amount of material very quickly, only to cull a lot of it further down the line. That's just the way I work.

Next came one of the most difficult decisions for a small press game author. For any game to get noticed out there, it needs to look good. In my experience it doesn't matter how fantastic a game is - if it doesn't catch the eye, it won't do that well. I have layout and Photoshop skills, but no artistic talent beyond painting miniatures, which means if I want my game to look good, I'll have to buy art. Unfortunately, this is a vicious circle - to sell my game it needs art to look good. If it doesn't, it won't sell. But if I buy art and the reviews are poor because the game just isn't that great, it still won't sell and then I've wasted money on art. What to do? My wife doesn't mind me buying the odd game book, but she frowns rather more if I spend a few hundred dollars on commissioned art! In the end I can only tell you how I handle this decision - I ask myself and my friends if they really think the idea is any good, trying to be a truthful about it as possible. Luckily, I'm strong enough to have my friends pick holes in my concept without getting too upset. This is the point in game design where honesty might hurt in the short term but saves a lot more pain further down the line, so it's worth listenig to any doubting voices. With Summerland, right from the get go I thought the idea was good enough and that I could make it work, and my gaming friends agreed, so I decided to get the art sorted. It may seem strange to commission art before the rules were even written, but I had a clear concept in my mind of what the game was about and the mood of the piece, so I felt comfortable commissioning art on that basis.



I went and enquired with a few guys who's work I like, Paul Bourne and Jerome Huguenin, for costings, and with that I commissioned them. So the art was on it's way, now for the rest of the game. As an aside one of the benefits of placing your game world in a version of the modern world is that photographs can be used to create in-game art. In the case of Summerland much of the art is treated stock photos and my some own images that were taken of a rather wild and overgrown nearby wood. This kept the cost from creeping any higher and made my 'break even' point for the game managable.

The initial version of Summerland had much more detailed rules. As I mentioned I like to get things on the page, altering them later on if it is required. At this point I had mechanics concepts such as the score, tags, traumas and stress in place, but not quite as they ended up in the final manuscript. This is because as everyone involved in writing games will tell you - playtesting is absolutley the most vital part of the process. It's amazing how many things look great when you think about them and write them down, only for them to be revealed in all their broken glory at the table. In the end I cut large amounts of what turned out to be extraneous detail from the mechanics, finalising on the light and (I like to think) sleek rule set that you'll see in the game. The development of the link between the mechanics of trauma and stress and the concepts of community and belonging came as part of this process, and provided the crux of the game. It is the concept of redemption and desolation encapsulated by these rules that makes Summerland what it is, rather than (just) another post-apocalypse game of survival and shooting things. Once the rules were in place and forged at the table, I was happy with this aspect of the game.



The final part of the writing of Summerland involved the Narrator's section - describing how to play the game, create scenarios etc, and the thematic inspiration for Summerland, along with the adventure seeds. This was actually pretty easy to put together, as by this time I had a very firm vision of what the game was about. Once this was done, I was ready to go to layout. Well, not quite - numerous stages of proofing (by a gamer into proofing and then a proofer who had no idea about gaming) polished up the text, while I ruthlessly cut out superfluous material (sometimes I talk to much).

Finally, with advice and help from the excellent Paul Bourne I put the game together, creating the pages, treating, framing and placing the art, formatting the fonts etc. The aim here was to create a look that said two things - beautiful and professional. I'll leave you to choose if I succeeded. Paul provided the finished cover, and we were ready to start printing (and pdf-ing).

And that's the story of how Summerland came together over a period of perhaps five months. Of course, the unfortunate truth of game publishing for a one man show like myself is that the hard part comes next - promoting, supporting and pushing your game so that everyone out there realises the brilliance of your design and buys it. I hope that this little article persuades you to take a look at Summerland, and if you do buy, let me know how your games go - I'd love to here what happened at your table.

DESIGN HISTORY OF FIRE AND SWORD

by Raymond Turney

Fire and Sword started to evolve in the year after RuneQuest 4 died. At that point, my group of players and I, all of whom were old RuneQuest people, were looking at a fairly bad situation. Both Glorantha and RuneQuest looked like they were dying, and our group did not have enough time to finish a fairly large RuneQuest fight.

So we started work on a new system. It was based on Pendragon. In the beginning it was conceptually a lot like Pendragon Pass {Dave Dunham's system} (<http://www.pensee.com/dunham/pdp.html>). We quickly became dissatisfied with Pendragon. The rule that any roll equal to skill exactly was a critical success had the counterintuitive result that a beginner had as good a chance to critical as D'Artagnan, so we added a rule that you had to roll again and make a skill roll the second time in order to critical. Specials ended up being reserved for characters with skills over 20, etc. In opposed situations, the higher successful skill roll won, as in Pendragon. For a long time, difficulties due to the environment and difficulties due to opposition were lumped together as an opposing skill roll, because I hated math in combat. In the end, though, no good solution was found to the problem of dealing with both the world and an opponent in an opposed skill roll, and we ended up with modifiers to skills. We ended up with a simple and flexible skills system as the core of the game.

Character creation was a pretty standard system of archetypes specifying starting skills. When we had to add new characters to an existing high level game, a rather more unusual benchmarking system was added.

Combat is a lot like Pendragon. The key differences are that we drew on our RuneQuest experience to decide that we could eliminate hit point attrition and just roll to see whether characters were incapacitated on each blow; when a character goes down magical healing is not immediate but takes place at the end of the fight; and wounds are tracked by a more sophisticated and realistic system than most games use. Getting rid of hit points eliminated the interruption of combat to record hit point loss, and arguments between players and the GM about failing to record loss of hit points.

There are three magic systems: divine magic, shamanism and sorcery. Shamanism is focused on summoning spirits, divine magic is basically streamlined RQ divine magic, and sorcery is effectively just a playtested and workable version of RQ III sorcery.

More sophisticated economics rules were added, with both a background income level and rules for what you can get from extraordinary windfalls like loot. The idea is that no one worries about where Conan gets the money to buy a beer, so a role playing game should not worry either; but there has to be rules for when characters want to buy magic items or war elephants.

A whole chapter on politics, favors, titles and offices, etc was added. This provides a way of tracking how a player character interacts with society, what his or her obligations are, what he or gets out of it, etc.

If this intrigues you, please go to BRP Central's Fire and Sword download page (<http://basicroleplaying.com/forum/downloads.php?do=cat&id=12>). Either get the designer's commentary (<http://basicroleplaying.com/forum/downloads.php?do=file&id=118>), for a more detailed explanation of the rationale of the design, or get the 3rd Edition rules themselves. A short version of the rules, to allow new players to focus on key aspects of the rules, and a sample setting description are also available.

DESIGNER'S NOTES FOR GULLIVER'S TRADING COMPANY

by Karl Brown

The game, Gulliver's Trading Company is an unwritten sequel to Gulliver's Travels. Gulliver's son organises trading expeditions to the remote countries described in his father's book. You will determine what happens in this sequel by playing the game. Material in this book has been carefully written to help you create a campaign true to the world of the novel and a play experience that reflects the tone of Swift's original work.

Gulliver's Travels is a novel first published in 1726 by the Irish satirist Jonathon Swift. The book is a parody of the genre of traveller's tales that was popular in the 18th century. It follows the adventures of the honest ship's surgeon Lemuel Gulliver in his voyages to a collection of very strange lands. Many of us know of Gulliver's Travels as little more than this from children's expurgated versions featuring only the land of the diminutive Lilliputians and perhaps Brobdingrag, a land of giants. However, there is much more to the original novel. As well as the Lilliputians and giants there is a flying island, mathematician savants lost in trances, projectors trying to extract sunlight from cucumbers, ghosts, cursed immortals, strange customs, talking horses, and a continent awaiting exploration.

All of this occurs against the backdrop of the real 18th century, a tumultuous period of exploration, war, colonisation, intellectual endeavour, piracy, and political turmoil. Authors can use information about historical events, persons, fashions, factions, places, and technology from the period to add depth to their games. You don't have to be an expert in the 18th century (most of the action of the original novel occurs in imaginary countries) but if you look, history provides unlimited resources to inspire you.

Jonathon Swift's novel was not written to be an idle fantasy for children or just a parody of the wild traveller's tales popular at the time; it was a scathing satire criticising the government of Great Britain, and the corruptions common in England in the 18th century. Swift's view of the world was one of inevitable degeneration providing a bleak core behind the façade of whimsy. You too can use satire. Some players will be entertained by satirical treatment of 21st century issues, governments, corporations, ideologies, celebrities, and politicians in the game.



You can incorporate these elements (traveller's tales, history, and satire) to differing degrees. This is not a show with a set script, nor a computer game where only a skilled programmer has true creative freedom, this is a true RPG where anyone that can speak can alter the action and anyone that can write can change the rules. Gulliver's Travels, history, and this book give you a lot of inspirations and guidance but in the end you are in control, make the game something you enjoy. Make your version of the sequel to Gulliver's Travels as entertaining as the original novel.

The game is built around FATE: Fantastic Adventures in Tabletop Entertainment (FUDGE Version). FATE is a story-oriented roleplaying game system by Robert Donoghue and Fred Hicks. Though it is a full-fledged standalone system, FATE can also be incorporated into a variety of popular roleplaying systems. In this book, we present a version of FATE that has been tailored to work with FUDGE, an RPG by Steffan O'Sullivan. As such, we assume the reader is familiar with FUDGE, and while everything necessary to play is included the book you are holding, you are strongly

encouraged to acquire a copy of FUDGE, either at your local game store, or for free online at fudgerpg.com.



The keystone of this venture will be nautical expeditions to several remote nations of the world seeking advantage in trade or knowledge.

Begin with the referee talking to the players about the game, in order to set appropriate expectations. The referee should address any rules considerations, such as how many Parts there will be. More importantly, she should make sure that everyone gets a clear idea of the theme and tone of the game. If all of the players want a game of exploration and traveller's tales and the referee is planning to run a London only campaign, this is a good time to find that out. Finally, the referee should give the players whatever background information they need to know.

The following discussions of styles and models should help you formulate what you want from your game. Players might benefit from reading the original novel (included in this book) and/or briefly researching England in the 1700's. The referee should be familiar with the novel, this book, and his own campaigns style and model so that he can advise the players on making appropriate choices during character creation and play.

Several styles of campaign could be conducted in the 18th century of Lemuel Gulliver. In actuality most campaigns will probably be a mix of these types tailored to the group playing. Players and referees should discuss what kind of campaign they want. As part of character introduction and advancement players set goals for their characters, these present opportunities for players to communicate the kind of game they want to play. Also during play the use of Aspects and Conscience can also allow players to influence the story to a lesser extent.

The simplest, but often most fun, is the traveller's tales campaign where the characters engage in phant'sy full adventures in remote lands returning to England only to re-provision and rest. Gulliver's Travels was at one level a parody of this genre. This style resembles more mainstream RPG's where heroes go on action filled adventures.

A variant is the 'extraordinary persons' style of play. The tone is light like 'traveller's tales' but the focus is on the characters who are drawn into adventure and rewarded with fame because of their extraordinary abilities. The exploits of Lemuel Gulliver during his time in Lilliput come close to this style but Lemuel is soon humbled by his later adventures. Lilliputians, Brobdingragians and sorcerers all make excellent extraordinary persons but larger-than-life natives of England and other mundane nations are equally suitable. One can easily imagine an unbelievably strong Scotsman or a ingenious English horologist-inventor. This style of play is much like mainstream fantasy and superhero rpgs enjoyed by many gaming groups. However this requires authors to handle the amazing abilities and skills of the characters.

A morality play campaign is much like a traveller's tales campaign except the referee is trying to communicate a point about human nature or a theme such as 'pride comes before a fall'. This style of play fits well with the bleak world depicted in Gulliver's Travels. Behind the phantastical lands and engaging characters the world is ultimately a grim place where virtues are burdens, vices are commonplace, and human nature is leading society into inevitable degeneration. For variety the referee can change the theme after each Part. Here the character's face choices and temptations illustrating vices and virtues. This kind of campaign gives players lots of opportunities to develop their characters and the interplay of personalities and temptations can be highly entertaining.

The historical campaign interposes the lands found by Gulliver onto well known locations and historical events. In its pure form a historical game sticks to real history, but in GTC the discovery, colonisation, and exploitation of bizarre

lands will impact on history. A GTC history begins to diverge from our Europe after Lemuel's first voyage in 1701 and once play begins the influence of Gulliver's Trading Company will accelerate the divergence. Elsewhere in the world real nations have been in trade with imaginary ones for centuries.

Though Gulliver's Travels does not dwell on important persons of the era, with the referee's permission some players could also take on the roles of famous persons. Players should choose personages who had an equivalent amount of experience to the other player characters. At the start of a campaign this probably means someone at the start of their career and about 20-30 years old. While research into the person selected is useful remember that a GTC history diverges from real history and that Lemuel's experiences with the ghosts on Glubbudrib tells us that official histories cannot be trusted. Do not let accuracy get ahead of enjoyment.

The historical sources add much depth and richness breathing life into the campaign. Around the characters and out of their sight a world goes about its business. Historical persons, such as King George, Benjamin Franklin, or Swift himself can make appearances. Characters can become embroiled in historical events. This style works well if referee and players spend even the smallest amounts of time researching the period. An interesting twist is to set the action in 18th century Europe and have the players take the roles of outsiders from Japan, Laputa, or one of the other strange lands. To the modern player 18th century Europe can be just as strange and exciting as any of the lands Swift imagined.

The satirical campaign is most like the original accounts of Lemuel Gulliver. You could combine this with a historical campaign and critique the politics and culture of the day but this may fall flat with modern players. A better approach is to adopt a 'reoccurring themes' angle where you draw parallels between current affairs and the events in your campaign. Like the morality play a satirical campaign is well suited to the rotten core of the world seen in Gulliver's Travels.



The final option is the divergent campaign. Here one of the central assumptions of GTC has been changed. Campaigns set in Lilliput before Gulliver's visit, in the Victorian era, or with entirely new strange lands are all examples of divergent campaigns. Another type of divergent campaign is the stationary campaign where characters are not travellers but spend their time in a single location, this is especially divergent if characters are natives of that land. London and Laputa would be good places for a stationary campaign. Changes in the style or tone might qualify as divergent if of sufficient degree. A swashbuckling style or gothic horror tone could be in keeping with the era but not Gulliver's Travels. However since the material presented here has been designed to remain true to the novel, divergent campaigns require more work from the referee to adapt the materials presented in this book to his vision.

MOUSE GUARD REVIEW

by Lev Lafayette

Hail to all those who are able, any mouse can, any mouse will, but the Guard prevail.

Introduction

Mouse Guard is an RPG based on the highly successful comic series written and drawn by David Petersen; as he explains in the book, the comics themselves came from their own roleplaying games, so now the product has taken a full circle. The core game system is a simplified version of Burning Wheel by Les Crane who co-authors the book.

The book itself is an item beauty to behold and great credit is due in that regard. The A5 publication is a strongly stitched hardback with dustjacket with maps of the Mouse Guard world on the inside cover pages. There are 320 full-colour gloss pages with two column layout and is easy on the eyes, with good use of white space and different markers to highly important parts of the text. As one can expect, the competent and often thoroughly charming rough artwork of Mr. Petersen.

The book is well written and takes some effort to distance itself from the writing of Burning Wheel (a game I like, but find difficult to read) even to the point of being a little bit on the simple side. Nevertheless, this is a welcome change which could certainly see readers of the comic who are not gamers receiving a gentle introduction to the world of roleplaying. The first chapter starts with some very sensible GM and player advice on story construction, the nature of a character, control, IC and OOC conversations and the core mechanic (roll a pool of d6s, 4+ is a success, modifiers provide automatic successes or failures, or extra or less dice to the pool).

A similar approach is taken to the rest of the organisation of the text. Character creation, the staple of most roleplaying games, is actually the last chapter of the book, with examples throughout the book referring to characters in the comic series itself and the events of the "find the grain merchant" mission. The book comes with a table of contents, a good index and somewhat strangely (although it is referenced in the text) no character sheet. Contents jumps, sometimes disconcertingly, between setting and system. Nevertheless the book as a whole is balanced in this regard giving a very good impression on the first read. A GM must however take system notes as they are reading through (they probably *should* in any game, but more so in this) - see the end of this review. This also applies to experienced GMs as there are a few quirks that one will have to familiarise themselves with.

Background, Play and Setting

The actual background, independent of the substantial qualities, also is worthy of stylistic note. This is a very heavily thematic game, based on tales of exceptional bravery countering one's own internal (mouse) nature against often overwhelming odds. Their physical stature is augmented manifold by the moral strength and their commitment to the group ("the Guard") and the higher ideals of protecting the mouse havens from outside incursions and internal treachery. More to the point these are systematically included; each Guardmouse has a Belief, a worldview that they must adhere to, a Goal, a temporary objective, and an Instinct, an inherent reaction. Whilst these can be changed between sessions, during the actual game the character must roleplay them. Characters earn Fate and Persona points for using their Belief, Goal and Instincts during play; the former allow open-ended conflict resolution rolls and the latter add dice to the pool.

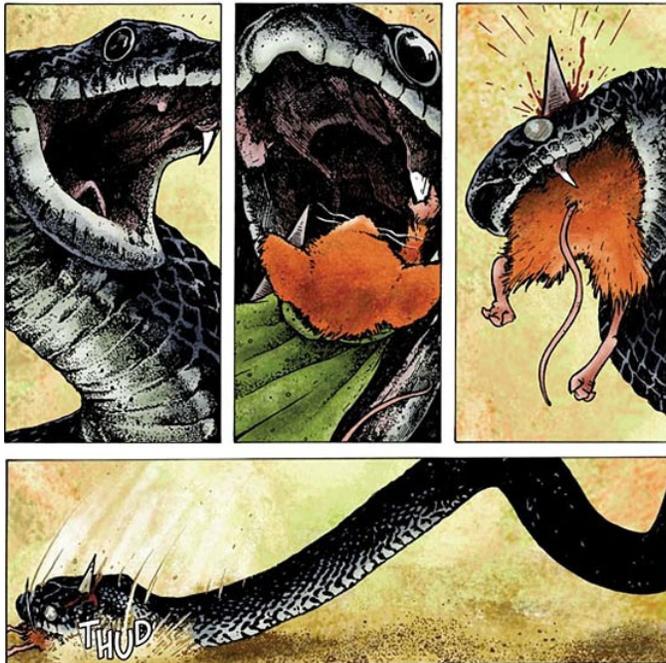
On that note, it is also worthy pointing out that the game gives strong emphasis on challenging narration within conflict

resolution, but also places the GM in a strong oppositional role ("It's the GM's job to beat the crap out of the players' guardmice characters") but also with the emphasis on making the characters heroes. The GM is actively encouraged to arrange conflicts between and within the characters Beliefs, Goals and Instincts in addition to setting up physical and social obstacles typical in roleplaying scenarios.

Actual play is *slightly* different to a standard RPG session as well. For each mission, the GM assigns a Season when it occurs, which strongly influences the environmental obstacles, the sort of beasts the Guard is likely to encounter and their disposition, the activities within the towns and villages of the Mouse Territories, and as a result, the expected duties that the Guard needs to perform. Once the mission is assigned, the characters write their goal for the mission which should include the individual mouse's perspective in the general mission goal. In every mission the GM chooses two out of four potential obstacles for the Guardmice to overcome in their mission, weather, wilderness, animals and mice. The other two obstacles can be kept in reserve for surprise plot twists etc.

Once all this is done the GM has their turn. This means the GM describes where the mission begins, what they have to do and describes the events that follow. The GM decides which abilities and skills are tested and to narrative the resolution of these tests. The players, as part of "table chatter", can try to persuade the GM how they can get around obstacles by using different ability skills. When the mission is complete and the mice are in a place of relative safety, it is the player's turn. At this stage of the game the players get a free test (recover, find an old friend, fashion armour etc), plus make additional checks based on their activities in the GMs turn. At the end of the session, rewards are given for use of Goals, Beliefs and Instincts, including the competitive "Most Valued Player" award.

The Mouse Guard setting is basically medieval in terms of technology and northern European in terms of climate, flora and fauna. As mentioned previously, the climate is *highly* seasonal. The bipedal, sapient, mice are basically the humans of the story, living in small towns and villages with pathways protected by the noble Guard who are assigned the task of ensuring the grain gets through, that messages are sent and received, that borders are patrolled and so forth. Apart from the use of mice as metaphors for people it is a magic-free environment. The medieval feel is quite genuine; nobody is a particularly rich mouse, items are few but finely crafted, and skills are based on artisan professions. An entire chapter is dedicated to both The Territories where the mice live and to Denizens (mice, weasels and their allies and wild animals) of the Mouse Territories.



Finally, there are three sample missions; Find The Grain Peddler, Deliver The Mail, and Trouble in Grasslake. The first scenario is, of course, very well known by now and standard sample characters are provided as examples. Despite this familiarity the plot is insufficiently developed; as written it could be a very short session indeed! The second sample mission was somewhat more detailed in terms of possible plot trajectories, but again insufficient. The third mission, although even simpler in terms of plot, offers a challenge that will require some real thinking on the player's behalf and thus the possibility of filling an evening's play. Overall, it probably would have been preferable if *one* detailed mission was provided, rather than three unsatisfying sketches.

Character Creation and Conflict Resolution

Character creation follows a lifepath, a series of questions and choices that take the character from the childhood to their membership to the guard, even if

only an adolescent "tenderpaw" setting out to prove themselves. Starting decisions include Rank and Age (in order tenderpaw, guardmouse, patrol guard, patrol leader, guard captain). Older mice have more willpower, younger mice are healthier. All mice have a (mouse) Nature inherent ability along with Health and Will. Mice also have 'Circles' (a rating of contacts) and 'Resources' (a rating of wealth) .

Following this players select their birthplace which also establishes skills and traits that the mice of each location are famous for (e.g., mice from Elmoos have the Trait 'Alert' and the Skills 'Carpenter', 'Harvester'). Additional skills are gained from natural talents, parents occupation, and leadership status. Mice also have an apprentice trade (and thus a senior artisan as a contact), plus a mentor who assisted them in joining the Guard. Guardmice also pick up skills from background experience and a speciality. There is a special subset of skills called wisers, where are specific knowledges a mouse might have about places, subjects etc. Other background characteristics include fur colour, parents, an enemy, cloak colour (every Guardmouse gets one), a unchanging moral belief, a changeable goal, an instinctual behaviour and a short listing for carried gear (not much).

It matters not what you fight, but what you fight for.

The core mechanic in the game is based on a pool of d6s based an appropriate ability with each value of 4 or more counting as a success. Obstacles require a number of successes and difficulty values can vary by adding extra dice or by having automatic successes etc. Characters also have additional resources in the form of Fate points and Persona points, the former used after a roll that contains sixes making those dice open-ended, and the latter before a roll, giving bonus dice.

There are two types of tests, independent and versus. The former is against an inanimate obstacle, the latter is a competition between animate opponents where the obstacle is accord to what is being tested against. Traits and Fate points can be used to create or break ties. A Trait can be called to break a tie in the *opponent's* favour, which seems counter-intuitive, or a second tiebreaker test is used based on the raw abilities of the character; Will for mental or social tests, Health for physical tests. Animals always test Nature. If a character succeeds in a test, the player narrates what happened; they fail the GM narrates the failure.

There are a number of modifiers to tests. Wisers and appropriate gear can add a +1D advantage to overcoming an obstacle. Having an additional mouse helping out can provide another +1D. The Nature ability can be used to substitute for any skill or ability that a character does not have, but nothing is learned from it. Half of the total dice (ability, gear etc) can also be used with tests against Will or Health.

Longer term, detailed, tests are called Conflicts. In this case, a type of conflict is established (Argument, Chase, Fight, Negotiation etc), and teams are established. Teams have a starting disposition, a total strength of the conflict based on the sum of a raw Ability and test skill. The resolution of conflict is based on secret recording of three actions (from attack, defend, feint and maneuver) with results, a versus or independent test, based on cross-referencing. It is possible for both teams to be reduced to zero disposition at the same time, and thus both sides lose the conflict. Conflicts are not an all-or-nothing affair; the winner too suffers, based on how much disposition they lost in the conflict.

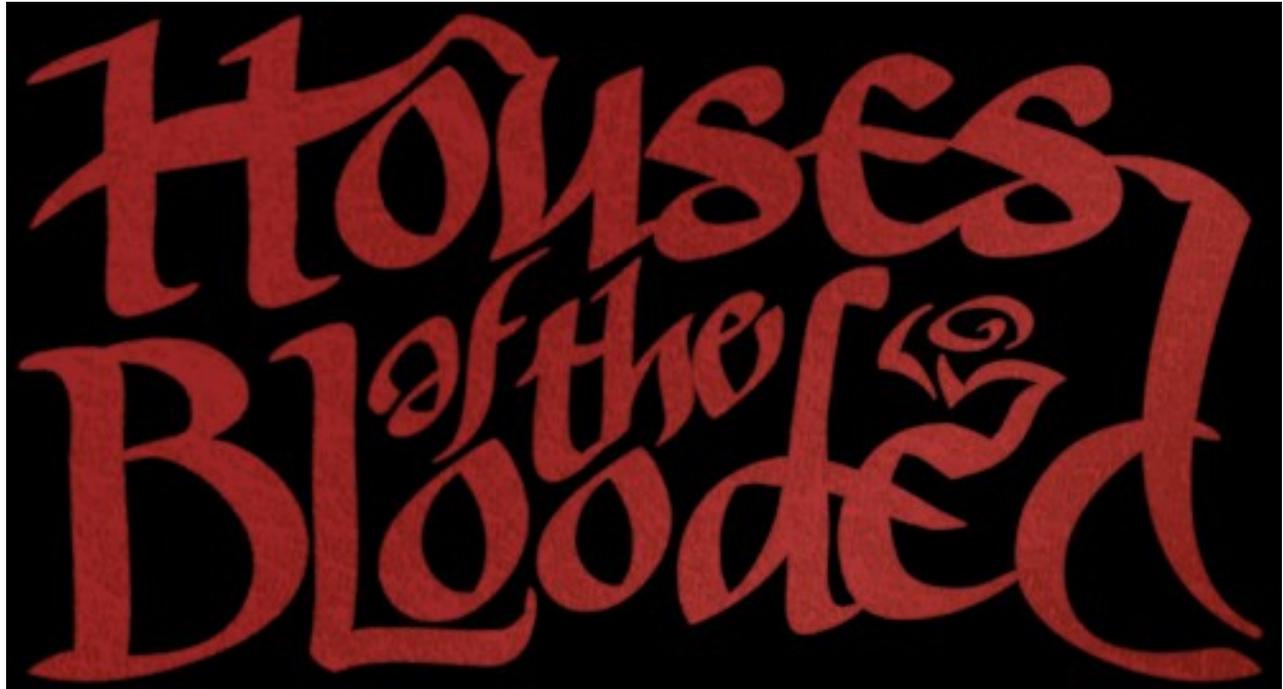
Overall

Mouse Guard is a very good piece of work. The setting is rich in detail and metaphor and the integration of these facets in the game system is strong. The game will server well for beginners as well as experienced gamers. This is not to say however that it is not without its flaws. In particular, the resolution mechanics leave a little to be desired, with too many levers to pull and buttons to press without sufficient justification of the choice of particular mechanics in use. This aside however, Mouse Guard is an excellent game and setting and heartily recommended for many sessions of play.

HOUSES OF THE BLOODED REVIEW

by Lev Lafayette

At 436 pages, the first thing that struck me about this game was how long it took to load on my laptop. First impressions aside I steeled myself for what was going to be a long night. *Houses of the Blooded* is designed by John Wick of the *Legend of the Five Rings* and *Seven Seas* fame, however there is a notable hat-tip towards the designers of FATE from which the mechanics are largely derived. Artwork is incidental and minimal in style, mainly used for decoration rather than illustration. The text is displayed with mainly single-column serif font with sidebars which is nice to read in PDF form and with significant spacing between the lines - and at that point I realised that the text was more like 170,000 words rather than my initial impression. There is a brief table of contents and an extensive index. There is little in terms of border and page numbers are tucked away in small font in the top-corners at 45-degree angles. The writing style is not just informal, but chatty, familiar and rambling; it is neither to my taste nor is it a efficient manner in explaining the text.



Characterisation, Setting and Theme

The characterisation, setting and theme are as follows: Each PC is a member of a noble house, one of the "blooded", which vast lands, vassals and power. Through their desires to accumulate more of the same, and passions of a more common nature they will be hindered, and possibly suffer downfall from their own doing. It is game of tragedy of the powerful. Wick describes the game as "the anti-D&D" RPG, written with D&D in mind, but with a reaction to it. "Almost everything that is true in D&D is *untrue* in this game". Characters have a past, treasure is of little value (you are already wealthy), the Law (capital 'l' intended) is everywhere, and the centre of attention is the domestic environment. Characters age, as the time frame of activity is accelerated.

Characters are members of the Ven, "a pre-Atlantean" non-human culture whose Virtues (Strength, Cunning, Wisdom, Martial Prowess, Beauty and Courage) form the core characteristics. The behaviour derived from those characteristics is built into the mechanics. Players are rewarded with "style points", that can be used to make their character more powerful, but are acquired by making decisions which make their character more vulnerable. Ven do not die from old age or get sick, but rather their body ceases to move, and they pass into the "quiet winter" or Solace which is marked by vivid, bloody, dreams. Under such circumstances, murder and suicide are emotional extremes to the Ven, even more so than among humans.

A lengthy potted history and explanation of Ven's extremely class-ridden culture and environs is provided, and this is where the Houses are noted which the various PCs will be members of. Each House has a specific Virtue which they excel at; Strength for the Bear, Cunning for the Elk, Courage for the Falcon, Beauty for the Fox, Wisdom for the Serpent, and Prowess for the Wolf. There were four additional houses, but have been veiled through shame. Perhaps the most interesting part of the background history is the possible return of the sorcerer-kings, also known "as the wicked ones" (pun on the author's name possibly not intended) and the pejorative use of their descriptor with those who practise the illegal art of "blood magic". There are also monsters of all forms, translated with the generic term *ork* in the Ven language, and creatures of the invisible world, generically known as *spectres*. Dragons make an appearance as well, but rather than being great lizards that hoard gold and eat virgins, they are a presence felt in the manifestation of moments of great emotion; most Ven will sight a dragon perhaps once in their life.

Under their cultural rules, Ven nobles only own what property they can protect; property may be taken by force or trickery. This would hardly lead to a stable society, but such matters are hand-waved in favour of the dramatic narrative. It is also noted that the oppressed peasants do not seem to be particularly rebellious at all, especially given the level of oppression they live under. The closest thing to class conflict is a growing merchant class ("proud peasants") who hold wealth but without the powers of inheritance. A highly aesthetic people, the Ven consider opera to be the highest art, and have strongly associated meanings with colours which they use to express themselves in public. Romance too is a significant element in Ven society and is expected to be part of the game's narrative.

Character Generation

After almost one-hundred pages of cultural background, one is ready for character generation. The initial steps are determining Family, Name and House. The next step is generating the character's Virtues, and the third is determining the number of "Aspects" and Contacts they character has gained through seasonal phases. The fourth step is Devotions the character gives to the sleeping Ven who provide blessings. The fifth step establishes the character's Domain, and a final step covers the spending of bonus points.

The first step is largely random ("you can't choose your family"), but with the three points of modifications allowed. The parent's house is determined on a d6 roll. A further d6 roll determines birth order; a d6-1 determines the number of surviving children. A further d6 roll is made for each sibling; even brother, odd sister. Another d6 roll indicates the parent's rank (Baron, Count or Marquis). All starting characters begin as Barons, and must choose either the house of their mother or father (which makes the supposedly random generation somewhat moot). Character names have three parts; family (House) name, secret name (used and misused in sorcery) and public name. Starting character age is in broad groups, Spring (Adolescence), Summer (Adulthood), Maturity (Autumn) and Solace (Winter). Characters are possibly (d6, 1-4 yes, 5-6 no) married, a political rather than romantic contract, and with children (d6, 1-2 = 0, 3-4 = 1, 5-6 = 2).

Five of the six characteristics are chosen as Virtues; one is chosen as a weakness. One Virtue is chosen at rank 4, two at rank 3, two at rank 2, and then there's the weakness. Add one rank to the House virtue, unless the player chose the House Virtue as the character's weakness. A character's past and age is told as seasonal phases. Spring brings a character 2 Aspects and 1 Contact, Summer gives 4 Aspects and 2 Contacts, Autumn 5 and 3 and Solace (Winter) 6 Aspects, 2 Solace Aspects and 4 Contacts (min-maxers will notice the advantage of "Summer" as an age choice).

Aspects are words (Courtier, Swordsman), phrases and quotes ("I will never love again", "My favourite dish is revenge") that help define the character. Their elements are that they can be invoke, tag or compel. To invoke the player receives a bonus die for the character's actions; as a tag it can be used against the character. At times the Narrator will use it to compel a character; a narrative rather than mechanical element. Solace Aspects, which are always a disadvantage, can be tagged or compelled, but never invoked; age is a wearying disadvantage.

Devotions are applied to those in Solace who return the favour as Blessings: "Just like Saint Jude is the 'patron saint of lost causes', Althana Steele is the Suaven of desperate measures". Each player has three points of Devotion ranks to allocate to their character. Domains are measured in Provinces, which are in turn subdivided into ten Regions, based on a geographical feature (a mountain range, a farmstead, a forest etc). Starting characters begin with one Province, which is not completely under their control or explored. Five points are spent on a starting character's Province, with each point providing a Region. The character's Castle and Village are provided for free, but do count against the ten Regions in a Province. Each Region begins with a rank value of 1 and each Region produces appropriate resources equal to the Rank. The Domain also includes vassals, each of which require at least one food per year, but may also require payment to ensure their loyalty. Five points can be allocated to vassals, with each point providing a single vassal.

Each character begins with three Style Points. These may be gained during the game, however at the end of the session they are banked at five. This can be exceeded by allocating style points to items; a wide-brimmed hat, a sword etc. Finally, each character receives five bonus points. These might be artifacts, bonus Aspects, Contacts, Devotions, Friends (an enhanced Contact), Regions, Relics or Vassals.

Task Resolution and Related Matters

The task resolution system is light and simple. Roll a number of d6s and defeat a target number of 10, which is pretty coarse (1d6 = 0%, 2d6 = 17%, 3d6=50%, 4d6 = 90% etc). If the player beats the target number, they narrate the character's success. If the player fails, the Narrator describes the failure. An option rule "dead on ten" allows the character to succeed, but with a negative twist. The normal narration cannot include conjunctions and disjunctions, additional details to the basic "yes" or "no"; the narration cannot include words like for, and, nor, but, or yet and so). The dice pool is determined by any ranks that are relevant to the context; one Virtues, Aspects, Devotions etc. Declaring an act in the public name of the character gains an additional die; using the secret name give three dice. Tagging an opponent's Aspect costs one Style point; if an opponent tags the character's Style, the character gains a style point. For additional effects (successful resolution is usually a rank 1 effect) a character can wager dice. If they succeed, the effect is greater, which can include additional narrative elements determined by the player.

In a conflict situation, where multiple characters are in contest, the gathering of dice from the pool is taken in order with the active character first then the defending character through Names, Aspects etc. Wagers are recorded in secret. If both characters fail in the action, the Narrator describes what happened. The character with the higher roll is the winner gets to narrate their victory. If both characters rolled over ten, only half the wagers apply to the loser. If both rolled under ten, obviously nobody receives their wagers. Finally a list of sample tasks, like a traditional RPG skill list, is provided with a description of the sort of Virtues and Aspects would be appropriate in attempting to succeed at the task.

Any Aspect can invoked once per game session, unless refreshed by spending a Style Point. As mentioned previously when tagging an Aspect, a Style Point must be spent which is transferred to the character it effects; this also occurs when a Narrator compels a character to use an Aspect. To reject a compulsion, two Style Points must be spent; which effectively *costs* three (two for the denial, one not received). Invoking a Style Point gives a bonus of three dice. Tagging another player's Style Point gives a bonus of two dice. A extensive list of Aspects and their use in play as Invoke, Tag and Compel. Notes are also provided for developing new Aspects. Aspects can also be used to insult other characters using the standard mechanics for conflict task resolution. To tag another character's aspect Cunning task needs to be conducted.

Poison is considered significant enough to receive its own chapter. There are no "saving throws" in this particular task resolution, and all of the five main poisons kill (arsenic, cyanide, hemlock, oleander, strychnine). Making poison takes a season, using a poison is 'simply' a case of the most appropriate time and place, but it must be used by the end of the year. One can also become immune to a particular poison over a period of a season as well if they spend this time as an action, although this is limited to three out of five poisons. There are also narcotics (Poppies, Icefire, Foxwine, The Silken Veil) ; brewing also takes a season, with a potency determined by a Wisdom Virtue risk. Addiction is a possibility based on contested resolution between the potency and the Virtue that the drug affects. Recovery from addiction occurs at the same rate as an injury, at a rate of one rank per season.

A chapter each is provided for Revenge and Romance. In Ven society, revenge is embodied in the culture's Laws - there is no word for "justice" only revenge. Despite these laws, the Ven bend and indeed even break them to exact their revenge. Moreso, the application of the laws is highly skewed by other social factors. For example, whilst there is nominal equality in the Law, the Blooded are the owners of land, the carriers of weapons etc Crimes between the Blooded are determined by a jury of peers. A crime between the unblooded is irrelevant. A crime by one of the unblooded against the Blooded results in execution; and the reverse simply isn't a crime at all. Three offenses are recognised; Insult, Injury and True Pain. The first two are self-evident, and come with stated punishments. True Pain are offenses that cause irreparable damage. A duel is a common way of avenging such damage and similar mechanics to other contested tasks are again offered, with a variety of maneuvers (dodge, parry, feint etc). When damage is caused, it too is measured in Ranks; rank one or two is a flesh wound, three or four a crippling wound and five is a mortal wound. Injuries can be used as tags by opponents.

There is a significant amount of background and descriptive material to the romance chapter before moving in on the actual mechanics. The first rule is that you can only have one Romance at a time. Romance begins with a flirtatious banter, with the loser being the first to slip up. If a character loses a contest, they become predator and the winner becomes the prey; the prey then can lead the predator on. The Romance lasts for a number of seasons equal to the wages of the Prey plus half that of the Predator acting as a free Aspect. By spending a Style Point a character can even make their lover take an Injury on themselves. Like Injuries, Romances fade over the seasons. A character is left behind becomes Heartbroken, which is an Aspect. Romances that cross the line with married partners becomes a liaison, and can be seen as a threat to property institutions.

Seasons and Sorcery, Player and Narrator

The last five chapters deal with Seasons, Sorcery, the Suaven, and with Player and Narrator chapters. Collectively these take up roughly half the book. Whilst many of the existing rules cover recovery time on Seasons and so forth, the passage of time is such that no more than three stories ("adventures") per season as the rest of time is spent on upkeep of lands etc. Indeed, the role of Regions takes up the bulk of discussion in the Seasons chapter . Each Season is broken down into Planning, Trouble, Action and Harvest (which is a generic term for the collection of any resources from a Region). Trouble occurs on a roll of 1 on d6 per season; a troubled region produces no resources, receives no goods. Troubles in a region must be quelled in some manner, otherwise it spreads the next season. Assuming all is well, Regions can developed through building, works of art, making contacts, espionage, further exploration, conquer enemy regions, winter parties etc with a number of actions determined by the character's Cunning. The specific activities are described in some detail, especially the actions of subterfuge. Again these use similar mechanics as already explained.

An open secret by members of the Houses of the Blooded, sorcery is based on knowledge of a ritual, herbs, and blood to make the ritual work. Specific rituals, such as the Circle, the Curse, The Familiar, The Oath etc. Also detailed is the magical metal Orichalcum, made from silver, gold and the blood of the Ven, and the acquisition of artifacts from the days from days of the sorcerer-kings. Artifacts are found in ork-infested ruins, and each ruin produces a number of Artifact Points per season equal to the Ruin's rank. When finding seemingly typical items in Ruins (e.g., an old sword, a cloak etc), Style Points can be spent to research the item. However, all artifacts come with Doom. At a point determined by the whim of the Narrator (who calls out "Doom!") any test becomes a '9' (i.e., a failure). An artifacts doom can only be invoked by the Narrator once per Season. Artifacts receive both powers (bonus Aspects) and makes

demands, whispering to its owner.

In a sense the process of reaching Suaven, the solace and dreaming acquired in old age, acquires a sort of magic of its own. Regarded somewhat as demi-gods (some are more respected than others). Unlike standard character generation, Devotions in this chapter can be built up to Ranks 4 and 5 (Anointed and Priest). Devotions can be increased by one per season with the sacrifice of resources. Naturally enough increasing ranks are more difficult. In response the Suaven provide benefits to their devotees and bestow wrath on those who betray them. Specific Suaven have House associations, a favoured Virtue and titles. A half-dozen is described, before the description of the specific blessings provided, some of which are specifically orientated towards other Houses. Finally, rules are provided for how a Ven becomes a Suaven in the process of entering Solace in old age. This enters another stage in the character's life, having a new series of ranks and an appropriate theme based on the activities in their life.

The final two chapters are for the player and narrator, not how to play the game, but how to use the rules to get the most out of the game. In particular the largely descriptive chapter elaborates on how much of the game's narration can actually be in the player's hands and the versatility of the Style Points to introduce plot devices according to the player's will. The section on min-max advice (get vassals, specialise, get married, build & expand) was useful for those purposes and are clearly orientated towards the thematic considerations of the game.

On the other hand, the narrators chapter lacks even this. It has trivial comments; are you really surprised to discover that adding narrativism to a game takes responsibility and planning *off* the narrator? Is it at all surprising to discover that social relationship mean that potential conflicts are easy to design? This said the mimetic advice could be helpful to a beginner, but again the rambling text can be frustrating. In addition, there is a sample adventure, "Roses & Thorns", which involves a party which was a generally good example of how the game plays and emphasizes the importance of NPCs, even if it does read more like a LARP than a table-top, face-to-face RPG, and a large group of useful adventure ideas. These are interesting because they illustrate how the game system only really requires a premise and the conflict requirements can be largely derived from the PCs themselves. Finally, there is a section on the monsters, the *Ork*. In a nice backhander to D&D, the *HotB* Ork is no pushover; a genuine monster that comes with its own Terror rating, (in addition to a range of free Aspects) demanding a conflict against the protagonist's Courage.

Concluding Comments

Overall I have very mixed feelings about *House of the Blooded*. In terms of satisfying the author's own intentions, one can honestly say it has a degree of success in that regard, insofar it does take a number of the more unrealistic - and for that matter, non-narrative - D&D-like tropes and place a spotlight upon them. Further, one must give credit to developing a fairly complete world and setting for the players to explore and develop - with particular emphasis on the latter. This is very much a case of "player with narrative control" game in accord with contemporary tastes in game design. Of course, one incredibly important trope in the game which *is* derived from D&D is the idea of the PCs as heroes. To be sure, in D&D (et al) the special characters do progress up a ladder, whereas in *HotB* they start off powerful and, in all honesty, will probably remain at an equivalent level of power for the rest of their lives.

There are two aspects of the game which really weakened the possibility of a higher rating. The first is the coarseness of the resolution system. Kudos are due, of course, to a design that uses the same sort of mechanic all the way through regardless of the conflict in question. That is important and indeed welcome. But a dice-pool mechanic where an additional basic bonus can mean the difference between almost certain success and an equal chance of success or failure needs some additional crunch; maybe not much more. The second is the language. Despite its size, the density of writing in *Houses of the Blooded* is quite poor. This is both a style and a substance issue; as a style issue the way a rule or descriptor is discussed is entirely subjective; and I prefer formal to informal. But as a substance matter there is a matter of density of writing. One can be informal and still pack information in (e.g., Stephan O'Sullivan's works).

Overall however, *HotB* does still receive a positive rating. It is quite a good game that steps outside the traditional setting in favour of domestic conflicts of power, romance and revenge. For that alone, it is worthy of play.

KNOWN WORLD RPG: AN ALTERNATIVE PALLADIUM FRPG DICE MECHANIC

by *Nathanael Cole*

The purpose of this document is to strip out the core dice mechanics from the Palladium Fantasy RPG 1st Edition, while leaving the rest of the superstructure as intact as possible: The skeleton gets replaced, while none of the actual "peripheral" game material is edited at all. Some initial notes, though. This document is primarily designed to work with the 1st Edition rules of Palladium FRPG. I see you gasp with shock and confusion. "Why" you ask? Because that was the first tabletop game I ever actually played, and despite its horrid rules, nostalgia has taken a hold of my better senses and driven me to write this, so I can go back and enjoy all those lands and peoples again without having to completely port all of it to a whole other gaming system. I look over and see the books on my gaming shelf, taunting me with their use-worn spines that fit comfortably into the grooves of my hands. Yet even after shaking off the nostalgia, the Palladium Fantasy "Known World" setting is one of my favorite RPG settings ever. It's just the rules that I can't stand anymore. By replacing (some might call it "renovating") the skeleton, I intend to leave everything else intact - all the bonuses, modifiers, traps, damage amounts, spell effects, races, places, faces and so on. I'm just removing the framework and replacing it with a better, more robust one.

I'm sure that this could also work for 2nd Edition PFRPG, and maybe even Rifts. The mechanics of those are largely similar to 1st Edition rules, with the major difference being the addition of PPE, a crap-ton of SDC and Physical Skills, and Mega Damage. Since KnownWorld largely leaves the original damage and magic system intact (mainly because there's just something so eerily satisfying about rolling a fistful of damage dice!), those don't really make that much of a difference. Perhaps one day, if people actually like these rules, I might release an updated "KnownVerse" revision for the later editions.

This fan-made product requires the use of the Palladium Fantasy core rules book.

Before We Begin... A Note on "Balance"

As any veteran of Palladium's rules can tell you, characters in the so-called "megaverse" are by no means balanced. Wussy vagabond beggar-types frequently adventure alongside the likes of men who can single-handedly murder the flaming nuclei of ancient stars. This is (for me and many fans) one of the whole central points of the entire game, it's settings, and the rules system that drives them. I have no intention of removing that focus, because it's also one of my main attractions to it: life is unfair, and many folks have a much better lot in life than you, so deal with it.

As such, I have made huge efforts to not change that inherent and crucial balance paradigm. The OCCs and skills and abilities will remain as unbalanced as they previously were, and you can just learn to like it.

Out With the Old...

Okay, let's completely remove the core D20 and D100 mechanics from the game. That's right: no more D20-based strike, parry, dodge, or saving rolls, and no more "you just get to fail all the goddamned time" percentile-based skill checks. Seriously, who actually likes failing everything? You'd think we were playing *Fading Suns* or *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* or something. You should cleanse these baleful mechanics from your mind, and forget they ever existed. Shoo away, you! Also, those character attribute scores of yours? Keep the actual core eight attributes, but throw away those numbers you rolled, because they're worthless now.

Now, the first thing you need to do is to pick your character's Race.

Character Creation - It Starts With Your Race...

Now that that's all out of the way, let's review how things are done in this new system. It's all based on your race. Take a look at the Racial Attribute Chart on Page 3 of the core rules. Look up your chosen character race and write down those base single-digit numbers next to each of your core 8 attributes. Those are now your actual base attributes. At the time of character creation, you can raise and lower them for as much as four points of variation from your racial standard - meaning you can lower at most four points total to increase at most four point total. However, nothing can be lowered below 1, and nothing can be raise more than two points above its core racial standard.

Oh, and see those two stats called M.A. and P.B.? We're going to combine them into a new stat called S.A. (Social Appeal). Average their base numbers, rounding up. Place it right after M.E. in the lineup. Now you have seven core attributes, each with a single-digit number.

Attribute Bonuses

Since attributes are no longer rolled at the time of character creation, there are no more bonuses based on attributes of score 16 and higher. The whole chart that shows those bonuses can forevermore be forgotten. Instead, having high attributes is a bonus in and of itself, as it directly increases the number of dice you roll in a check, and thus increases your chances of success. [ED: My god, that also means that low stats have an negative effect as well! AT LAST!]

Hit Points

Hit Points still exist! Your starting hit points are equal to six times your P.E. attribute, and you determine them normally based on your level (1D6 at level 1, etc)

OCC and Skills

You pick your OCC and skills and such normally. OCC attribute requirements are completely done away with (who uses attribute requirements these days, anyway?). All skills have the same base progression of percentages and bonuses. See below for details on how to record those skills properly, though.

ISP, PPE, and Spells/Powers

Magic, psionic potential, powers, ISP, and spells per day are handled per normal rules. Determining if your character has innate psionics is handled as usual, although if a player wishes to be a Mind Mage, I suggest just letting them skip the roll and play a Mind Mage, as that is more fun. However, should you indeed try and roll, you get to apply your base M.E. score as a minor bonus to the percentage roll for Psionics.

The Base Dice Checks

So, what do those new character attribute scores actually do? Why, they determine how many dice you roll in any situation! The base mechanic now goes something like this: Roll X # of dice, total them, add any applicable bonuses, and try to attain as high a multiple of 5 as possible.

In the above, X = the number Rank of your relevant core attribute. The standard die size is a D6, but some effects might change this. Each attribute is linked to certain core actions, as outlined below:

Attribute	Linked Areas
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I.Q.	Skills of Smarts, Knowledge, Perception, and Know-How
M.E.	Psionic Empowerment/Resistance; Staying Cool and Capable
S.A.	Skills of social interaction and persuasion
P.S.	Feats of strength and brawn
P.P.	Skills of manual dexterity and combat prowess
P.E.	Skills of athletics and stamina
Spd	Initiative!

There are two major types of dice checks: Opposed and Unopposed. Unopposed checks are handled exactly as written above. When you roll your dice, total their face results. Then, see if you have any applicable skill or ability bonuses or penalties. Skill bonuses are based off the tens digit of the skill's total percentage - so if your total skill percentage is 17%, you get a +1 to checks for that skill. Ability bonuses and penalties (strike, parry, dodge, saving throws) are translated directly from the character's OCC, Racial, and hand-to-Hand bonuses.

For every increment of 5 that you roll, you gain a Success. Thus, a roll of 10 is two successes, a roll of 24 is four successes, and so on. For most unopposed tests, a single success is all you need, and each additional success allows you to add some extra "oomph" to the outcome, like a bit of narration or a special quality to the situation.

Critical Success! Whenever more than half of your base rolled dice score 6s, you gain a bonus die to roll and add to the total. If that die also scores a 6, roll another, and so on.

Critical Failure! Whenever more than half of your base rolled dice score 1s, you gain a penalty die to your total. Roll a d6 and subtract it from your total. If this rolls a 6, then roll another d6 and subtract it too, and so on. If your total is somehow less than zero, you have fumbled your action. Talk to your GM to see how he or she handles critical fumbles in the game, as every GM usually handles these differently.

For opposed checks, read further below.

Opposed Dice Checks

When you are taking a direct action against someone, they can try to resist, circumstances permitting. Attacking a non-helpless for is an example, or charming a suspicious guard is another. Just about any action that is directly against another character or creature is an Opposed check. When rolling an opposed check, both sides of the conflict roll against each other. The "Aggressing" character (the one pressing the conflict) must equal or exceed the other character's opposed roll in order to achieve a single success. Each five points over the opponent nets another success.

The following are some examples of Opposed Rolls: Action Rolls ; Combat Strike vs Parry or Dodge (or unopposed) ; Charm Charm Skill vs ME ; Stealth Prowl Skill vs IQ

If BOTH sides are considered Aggressing (like in an arm-wrestling contest or a race), one side must EXCEED in order to achieve the first success. If tied, the result is a stalemate or tie, whichever is applicable.

Interpreting Modifiers

Converting in-game effects and modifiers from the core rules to the KnownWorld system is both simple and highly intuitive. Most often, these conversions will happen with little numerical change at all. Read below:

Converting Hard-Coded Stats: For creatures that have set pre-rolled stats, or game effects that directly transform a character's attribute to a hard-coded number, divide the numbers by 4 and round up. For example, the Level 4 Wizard Spell "Size of the Behemoth" has an effect (among several others) that increases the target's P.S. to 30. In the KnownWorld system, this would increase the PS score to 8 (because $30/4$ [rounded up] = 8).

Converting Attribute Dice Bonuses: Some effects in the game will give temporary bonus dice, which are supposed to be rolled immediately and either temporarily (such as spells) or permanently (such as 2nd Edition's physical skills) added to an attribute. In these cases, simply add that solid number of dice to the base KnownWorld attribute, regardless of the original die size from the effect, unless the die type is a d10 or d12, in which case the bonus is doubled. For example, if you have a Speed of 3 and you are hit with a spell that increases your speed by 3D4, then add +3 to your Speed attribute. You would have the exact same increase were the bonus a 3D6 or a 3D8. If the spell had increased it by 3D10, however, you would have increased your Speed by +6.

Converting Solid Attribute Bonuses: Some effects might give you a set bonus to an attribute. In KnownWorld, these bonuses are applied to all rolls of that attribute (skills, combat, etc) instead. For example, if you receive a spell that lowers your P.P. by -4, then you instead subtract that from all P.P.-based dice rolls for the duration of the spell.

Converting Roll Bonuses: Any time you have an effect which gives a bonus or penalty to any ingame roll of the dice (strike, saving throws, etc), that modifier is directly converted into KnownWorld as-is. For example, if a W.P. skill gives you a +3 to Parry, then you have a +3 to all dice rolls made to Parry with that weapon.

Converting Percentages: Percentages are the only slightly tricky conversion. If an effect in the game is special and listed with a set percentage of accomplishing a task, then just roll it as-is. If an effect modifies a skill percentage, then add it to the total - if the tens digit changes, then the skill bonus changes too.

Keeping Track of your Skills

On your character sheet, you should write down five things for each skill you have: Skill Name, Skill Level, Base Percentage, Percentage Bonus, and Percentage Total. When you get a new skill, write down its name, jot down that it is at level 1, jot down the base percentage of that skill (see the skill's appropriate skill table), and write down any bonus you might have for it (mostly from OCC-specific or Racial bonuses). Finally, add the base and the bonus together to get your total. When you attain a new OCC experience level, increase the "Level" of each skill you already know by one, and adjust their base percentage

Interpreting your Skills

When it comes time to use your skills, look at the percentage total and mentally remove the ones digit. Meaning, if your Prowl skill total is 47%, we only care about that 4 in the tens digit (the 7 means nothing). That number determines the bonus you get to your base dice check. So in this case, when you make your Prowl roll (most likely using your P.P. attribute), you add +4 to the dice total.

And yes, you read that correctly, but I will elaborate: single-digit skills are entirely useless, unless modified through magic or other such effects. Since the ones digit doesn't count, having a skill with a total below 10% will not let you use that skill.

However, on the plus side, there is no longer a predetermined cap on skills. In 2nd Edition PFRPG rules, skills are increased by an amount each level. Normally this amount freezes when the total of the base + all modifiers equals 98%, but in KnownWorld, this hard limit is removed. Skills can proceed infinitely, with each new multiple of 10 increasing the die roll bonus. So if your skill total was 138%, you'd have a whopping +13 to the roll!

New Skill: Charm

The new Charm skill is linked to the new S.A. attribute. It uses the Prowl skill's advancement table. Charm is an elective skill for Merchants (+10%), Nobles (+20%), and Mind Mages (+5%). It gains Secondary Skill bonuses for the Palladin (+4%), Thief (+8%), Assassin (+8%), and Witch (+10%).

New Skill: Perception

This new skill is linked to the I.Q. attribute, and is included in order to help counter people who use the Prowl skill. It has the same advancement table as the Prowl skill

Unskilled Checks

Normally, most skills can't be attempted without a base percentage in the skill. However, if the GM allows it, unskilled attempts may be made on some skills. However, doing so is much harder. First of all, your base attribute is reduced by 1 point for the purpose of the skill check. If this lowers your attribute to zero, you cannot attempt the check. Second, you roll D4s instead of D6s when actually rolling the reduced attribute.

Combat!

Combat flows similarly, but has a lot of changes. The structure is mostly intact: roll initiative, take actions, resolve actions, roll initiative, etc.

Initiative

The Initiative structure is still mostly the same, but the roll has been changed. At the beginning of a round, each player rolls their Speed dice to determine initiative order. Characters with the same results act simultaneously. Before rolling dice, however, players can voluntarily choose to sacrifice one or more of your dice (to a minimum of one dice left for your initiative roll) to give themselves an equal number of additional actions this round. So, if you have three dice and sacrifice one, you give yourself one extra action this round and only roll two initiative dice at the start of the round.

Number of Actions

During a combat round, you can make a number of actions determined by your Hand-to-Hand skill's "Attacks Per Melee" bonus, with a default of one action for those who have no such bonus. Additionally, if you set aside any Initiative dice for additional actions, you gain that number of dice as additional actions.

An "Action" consists of anything that involves more than a second or two of your time: making an attack, dodging, casting a spell, etc. For non-"Man-of-Arms" OCCs, Parrying requires an action, but Man-of-Arms OCC can automatically attempt to Parry any attack in their "front arc" of awareness.

Note that if you want to dodge, you MUST set aside actions for it. You DO NOT have to use all of your allotted actions each round, and I advise saving one or more in case you need to dodge. If you need to dodge and do not have an action to devote to it, you can subtract a die from the next round's initiative roll, to a minimum of one. If you have exhausted even that, then you simply cannot dodge. Tough luck, buddy.

Combat Movement

If you are the kind of group that uses battle mats to approximate combat movement, a character can freely and easily

move a number of squares each round equal to her Speed attribute. The character can move more than this, but it requires actions. Each action dedicated to movement allows her to move another increment of her Speed attribute. However, this must be declared before she declares any other actions, as each action she dedicates to movement applies a cumulative -1 penalty to all other actions taken that round (including automatic actions like Parries, etc).

If you're not using battle mats and don't really care about exact measurements, then just use the Speed attribute as a loose approximation of how far you move in relation to each other.

Attack Versus Parry/Dodge

When attacking another character, that character has the option of attempting to parry or dodge your attack. For Man-of-Arms OCCs, the parry is free and does not require an action. Noncombatant characters, however, do not get an automatic parry, and must use an action to attempt it. ALL characters, however, must devote an action to dodging if they wish to try.

When attacking an opponent who chooses to Parry or Dodge, you must equal or exceed their relevant defense roll in order to earn your first success. Each five points above that earns you another success, which in turn earns you bonus damage.

If the attack is unresisted (the target is unaware, unarmed, unarmored, or otherwise unable to defend), it is considered an opposed test. Each success past the first rewards you with bonus damage. Note that even if the opponent is not resisting, the attacker must still roll a 5 or higher to hit.

Damage and Armor

Damage is rolled as per normal rules, with standard weapon damages. Each success on the attack roll beyond the first allows the attacker to apply an amount of bonus damage equal to their P.S. attribute.

Armor still has ADC and AR, but they function differently. Now, AR directly lowers the damage taken from each successful attack, and SDC = number of times that AR can be used. Thus, armor with AR of 8 and SDC of 40 can Protect you from 40 damaging hits before needing to be repaired. After 40 hits, it is pretty much useless.

Saving Throws

Saving throws remain largely unaltered. The mechanic used is the new attribute roll mechanic, and the attribute in question is based on the save. P.E. resists Magic, Spells, Poisons, and Death, for example, while M.E. obviously resists psionics and insanity. The base saving throw difficulties remain as well, making saves very dangerous (save up those Bonus Points!).

Magic and Psionics

If you stick with the core system of magic and psionics from the rules, then few things are changed. Keep in mind the new attribute rolls when making saving throws. However, there is an alternate magic system available which replaces the ISP and Spells Per Day system of Palladium 1st Edition with a more unified, active-casting mechanic, while preserving all of the written spells and their effects. Check out my website (<http://nathanaelcole.com/knownworld>) for more details.

Bonus Points!

The Bonus Points system allows players a lot more control over their characters' destinies in a game system which more

often than not forces them to fail a lot. With this system, players are given a small-but-increasing amount of Bonus Points, which they can spend to modify their own dice rolls. This meta-mechanic is an optional addition to your Palladium KnownWorld game, and is only provided here as an added gift.

Using Bonus Points

You can choose to spend bonus points at any time after you roll your dice, but before the results are declared. Bonus points can be spent on both Attribute Checks and Damage Rolls. Each Bonus Point spent on an Attribute Check gives you an extra six-sided die to that check, but the number of dice added cannot exceed the number of base dice rolled (so for an Attribute of 3, you can add at most 3 more dice). For Damage Rolls, each Bonus Point spent adds an extra die of the smallest size present (so if base damage is 3d8, you add another D8), but the number of dice added cannot exceed the number of base dice rolled (so if you roll 3d8 base damage, the most you can add would be another 3d8, for 6d8 total damage).

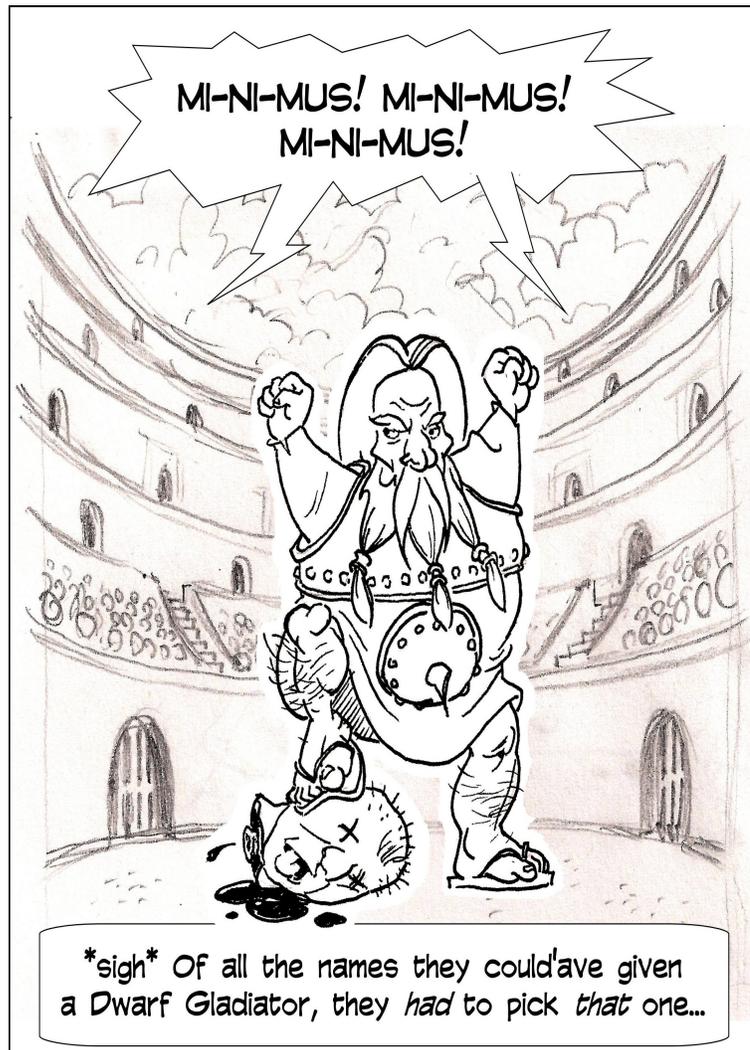
You can spend five bonus points to completely reroll any one rolling of the dice. For example, you can reroll an attack roll, a dodge roll, a damage roll, a saving throw, a skill check, etc. When you reroll, you reroll all the BASE dice of that check. You do NOT get to reroll any bonus damage dice added via Bonus points, however.

Gaining Bonus Points

Every character starts the game with a base of 20 Bonus Points, with a bonus equal to their S.A. score. When Bonus Points are spent, they are gone forever. You can gain more through leveling and good playing, however. Every time they gain a level, they gain 20 more points. The GM can randomly reward a free Bonus Point here and there for pretty much anything she feels - good oneliners, unexpectedly awesome roleplaying, fabulous comedy, food bribes, etc.

Conclusion

Well, I hope that someone out there finds this useful, and I hope that your romps through the Timiro Kingdom, Northern Wilderness, Baalgor Wastelands and beyond are many and adventurous. If you have any comments or questions, come on by my blog: <http://nathanaelcole.com/knownworld>



"QUick And Dirty" Role-Playing Game

by Nathanael Cole

"Quad RPG" means "Quick and Dirty Role-playing Game." This simple RPG is designed to be picked up and played with not even a moment's notice and only a modicum of necessary rules-checking. All you need is a mechanism for generating a set of random numbers (dice and cards are common), maybe a handful of pennies or just a notepad to mark some tallies, and this two-sided page (and hopefully if I've done my job well enough, you won't even need that after a good read-through). Pen and paper can also be quite useful.

To run a Quad game, you don't need pre-statted monsters or scenarios. You just need folks who want to play right now, and at least some amount of ability to think as you go. This very un-crunchy system works best for an unexpected seat-of-the-pants sandbox-like style of gaming. Just think of an initial situation, describe it, and then ask the players "What do you do?" and go from there. This game needs a game master (probably you) and at least one or more players. The role of GM has a lot of in-game power, so use it responsibly and don't be a jerk to the players.

This is hardly a revolutionary system, so why write it? I needed a good game to pick up and run with no books at all. Nothing out there did the trick for me. Thus, I created this game, and hopefully you'll find it equally as useful for your own insta-games. Are you waiting in an airport with some buds for a layover? Camping in line overnight for concert tickets or that new gaming console? Killing some time in-between scheduled games at a con? Drunk and awake with some buds at a party after most of the other guests have left? Personally, I keep a folded copy in my wallet, just for these unexpected moments. I find it's great for playing a game where I just don't want to think about the mechanics at all, and with players who usually hate the long process of character creation (yes, they do exist).

CHARACTER CREATION

Mechanically, each character is little more than a list of TRAITS. A Trait is anything quick you can say about your character: something you can do, a flaw, an old friend, a lucky hat. Any statement that can be made about your character can be a Trait. "Good" Traits tend to help you, "Bad" tend to hinder you, and "Neutral" tend to just be simple facts, although there can be exceptions to all three (see the Gameplay section). When the game begins, pick any 2 of the following Good Traits, answer them for your character, and write down those answers (see below examples).

Then pick any 2 Bad Traits, and do likewise. If the GM wishes, she can assign or have you take 1 or more Neutral Traits, too.

Good Traits:

- 1 talent you're good at doing (I can play a mean banjo)
- 1 person you like (I love my wonderful wife very much)
- 1 item you have on your person (I've got a ridiculously complicated and ornate knife I bought at the con)
- 1 characteristic you really like about yourself (I have a really expressionate face.)

Bad Traits:

- 1 activity you're bad at doing (I can't swim at all)
- 1 person you dislike (I owe a whole lot of money to a bookie)
- 1 thing you're afraid of (I am paralyzingly terrified of clowns)
- 1 dirty secret (I accidentally killed my brother when I was seven and my family covered it up)

Neutral Traits:

- 1 thing folks notice about you upon first meeting (I have a face full of tribal piercings)

- 1 place you've been (I traveled to Tibet after college)
- 1 chronic habit (I snap my fingers all the time when walking)
- 1 thing you want to do (I need to find my way to Ket)

The above are just examples, of course. Traits can be called upon during game play to add bonus pulls and/or degrees of success in tests. You can buy more Traits as the game is in play, too, allowing you to tailor the character more to your liking as the story moves on. In fact, the GM can just skip this part entirely, starting the game with totally blank character slates and letting it all be revealed as the game is played.

TIKS

Each player starts the game with ~12 or so (GM's choice) tokens (called TIKS) of some sort, like pennies or poker chips or even just a notepad tally. These tiks are used to add ELEMENTS to the game and purchase more character Traits. If the GM skipped character creation, increase starting tiks by +2 for each player. GMs of course do not have, use, or need tiks.

Add Traits: At any point during the game, regardless of what is happening, you can permanently spend 1 tik to add a new "Good" Trait to your character sheet. You can add a "Neutral" Trait for free, and adding a "Bad" Trait gains you a bonus tik. GM can also give out Traits during play.

Add Elements: At any point not during an active test, temporarily spend a single tik to add some Element to the current in-game situation.

Examples: A giant worm bursts from the ground; one of the guards is someone we've seen before; behind the painting is a hidden safe; the evil baron's minion walks through the door, oh no! The GM can veto any Element deemed too ridiculous.

Recovering/Increasing Tiks: At the end of a session, any tiks used to add Elements are returned to the user, while any spent to purchase Traits are lost. Additionally, the GM should reward 1 to 5 tiks to players as she fits, and even 1-tik gifts during the game as rewards for awesomeness.

Removing Traits: Sometimes a Trait has to go, like when a possession is lost or a goal is resolved, for example. If the GM ever forcefully takes away a Trait, the player immediately gains 1 bonus tik. If you ever resolve one of your Traits, write in a new one based on it, and gain a free tik.

GAMEPLAY

This is a role-playing game, and you should already know the basics of that kind of game. The GM narrates, and the players react and respond and even narrate a bit on their own. You all work together to tell a story, and given the focus of these rules, that story is likely made up on the spot.

Conflicts: A conflict (called a "TEST") happens when the outcome of something in-game is uncertain. The basic mechanic for resolving this involves players pulling numbers against each other (frequently against the GM). The term "PULL a number" could mean "roll a die" or "draw a card" or whatever your chosen random number thingy is. In a test, first identify the Active Player (who initiated the conflict). The two sides first state what they think should happen, and then they both simultaneously pull numbers against each other. The active player's highest pull must equal or exceed their opponent's in order to win.

Pulls: Each participant gets one base pull. Characters get bonus pulls for each Trait working in their favor. Any traits working against them likewise give their opponent bonus pulls (opponent must evoke them). "Good," "Bad," or "Neutral," any Trait can be a bonus or penalty with clever narration. Players evoke their favors before their opponents

evoke their weaknesses. The GM has carte blanche authority to give out any bonus or penalty pulls to any participant based on other situational factors of the scene at hand, too. In short, each thing working for the character gives a bonus pull, each thing working against gives a bonus to the opponent.

Degree of success: If you win the test, your version of the outcome holds true. Sometimes it is good to know how well you succeeded, and thus you can use the following to determine Degree of Success (DOS): If you succeed in a test, your degree = 1 for Active Players, 0 for Defenders. You get +1 for each of your own pulls that you can subtract from your highest and still win. (Example: Sam pulls 17, 13, 7, & 3 versus Chris's 14, 13, & 7. Sam wins because $17 \geq 14$, however Sam can subtract the 3 and still have a 14, thus earning +1 DoS, for a total of 2.). This means that you want to pull both low and high at the same time. DoS and Traits: If you win the test, you can call upon applicable Traits that were not used for pulls to add DoS, with the GM's final approval. Any Trait called upon can add +1 to your DoS. You can't evoke your opponent's Traits for DoS, however.

What does DoS do?: This depends on the focus of the game. If this is more of a "Story" Game, then each DoS allows you to add a simple fact to the moment. I strike him, he drops his sword, she convinces the guard to let her pass, he is actually my brother, she dies, etc. Facts are a bit like free Elements, but much simpler, and less broad.

If this is more of an "Action" Game, then each DoS allows you to hurt your opponent, be it physically, mentally, emotionally, or any combination. In such a game, everyone has "SUBSTANCE" which serves as general all-purpose health. I suggest Substance for characters = 1/2 the maximum pull size (die size), with lesser characters having 1/4, mooks having 1/8, and greater opponents and mentors having 2x. Substance can be depleted with tests and clever application of DoS, and typically when you're out of it you are incapacitated or dead. Since all tests can result in DoS, I guess it is theoretically possible to kill someone with words alone. DoS can likewise be used to restore Substance, given proper narration.

Test Example: Sam and Chris want to kill each other. Sam charges at Chris and is the Active Player. Sam wants to chop Chris with his axe, Chris wishes to get to better ground. Both get a single base pull. Sam evokes "Fast" and "Skilled" to get two bonus pulls. Chris evokes "Heroic" and gets one. Chris evokes Sam's "Clumsiness" for a bonus pull, and Sam evokes Chris's "Overconfidence" for the same. Sam has 4 pulls, Chris has 3. Sam pulls 12, 11, 4, and 2, while Chris pulls 16, 9, and 3. Chris wins! Because $13 (16 - 3)$ is still greater than 12, Chris's DoS is 1 (defender base 0, +1 bonus). Chris succeeds in getting to better ground, and uses the 1 DoS to state that Sam charges off a ledge into the river far below.

Helping: Characters can help each other in tests all they want, and narrate accordingly, but this only bestows a mechanical bonus if either character has the other one written down as a Good Trait. In such a case, the helping character gives the Acting Character 1 bonus pull or DoS for every 2 of their own traits evoked. A 3rd character can likewise help, but he must evoke 3 traits for every bonus given. A 4th can help, and more, and the required trait evocation increases similarly each time.

Initiative: Sometimes you might need to know who goes first. Flip a coin and have a player call it (or roll a die or whatever). If GM wins, play starts with the GM and proceeds to the right. If GM loses, play starts with the player to GM's left and proceeds left. Re-flip each time the last person goes (at the end of each "round"). Note that if a character helps another in the round, she can't initiate a test on her turn, and vice-versa.

Gear and Loot: Characters might acquire stuff as the game is played. Gear is just Traits, and handled accordingly. The player can choose to spend ticks and add the new gear as a Trait. If the ticks aren't spent, the gear is unimportant, and can't be used unless the GM decides to let you. GMs can give and take stuff as they please, but once it's been paid for with a tik, it's bound to the normal tik and Trait rules.

NEWS - BREAKING NEWS

ment on Large Hadron Collider from spokespe



Ach, well... we seem to have violated
der Heisenberg Unzertainty Prinzipel:
We can determine where ze device
is, or how to schwitch it on; but
not both at the same time.

Special Effects: Magic and High Tech and such are easy: they're just Traits, only with more imaginative narration. You use them like any other Trait, and must narrate their use accordingly. "I am a mystical acolyte of the Path of Flame" is a good example a magical Trait.

QUICK SESSION STARTER

Here's a quick way to kick off a brand new session. All you need is a good opening scene with all the characters, and to do that, you need to know When it is, Where it is, and What just happened. Here are three superquick tables to use with a single six-sided die to help you answer these questions:

When?

1. Modern Day (hometown, overseas, the arctic)
2. Recent History (recent wartime, turn of century)
3. Ancient History (Mayan, Egypt, Babylon, Rome)
4. Near Future (cyberpunk, alternate history, post-apocalypse)
5. Far Future (space opera, twisted aliens, mars colony)
6. Fantasy (swords and magic, no elves, steampunk, planar)

Where?

1. Lodging (apartment, inn, old mansion, penthouse, basement)
2. Wild Outdoors (beach, glade, mountainside, underwater)
3. Wild Indoors (cave, pit, forest shack, tomb, ruins)
4. In Transit (boat, airship, horseback, train, submarine)
5. Business (office, restaurant, bakery, warehouse)
6. Institution (school, government office, prison, army academy)

What?

1. Current Violence (combat, middle of war)
2. Past Violence (someone just murdered, find a corpse)
3. Loud Sound (crash, roar, explosion, helicopter rotors)
4. Quiet Sound (water drip, footsteps, scraping metal)
5. Voice (scream, whisper, applause, debate)

6. Natural (earthquake, lightning, tidal wave, landslide)

And now the last bit: "It's a (When) setting. You are all (Where). There's a (What). So, what do you do?"

END NOTES

That's it! You have probably by now memorized this incredibly quick and simple RPG and are ready to run it for your friends. If any rules seem left out, I probably thought they didn't really matter to a pick-up game, and encourage you to make stuff up as you go. If you have any questions or comments at all, please drop by my website and I'll be glad to help you however I can: <http://nathanaelcole.com>.

Thanks to Sam and Chris for being great, and also for having gender-neutral nicknames. Thanks to Katlyn for hating character creation and giving me the initial inspiration. Quad RPG is Copyright © 2008 Nathanael Phillip Cole

PUTTING THE BLUE IN BLUE PLANET

by Karl Brown

The game of Blue Planet by Biohazard Games is set on a frontier water world and contains many cyberpunk themes the effect of technology on sexuality is a logical extension on a world where technology has changed people so dramatically in form and thought. Even if you are not within a Blue Planet campaign this article may contribute much to other cyberpunk and science fiction campaigns

Sexuality is usually defined first by species, each manifests its own forms. In 2199 technology has opened up new vistas.

Human Sexuality.

Humans, despite many condemning dolphins for their sexuality, are often divided over sexuality. Homophobic behavior is still rampant, and there is division even among psychologists as to what is deviant behavior. Many academics believe the post-Blight worlds, although technologically advanced are socially stunted. The main feature of human sexuality is that most develop a preference for sexual encounters of a particular type. Many of these preferences are ancient; straight, gay, bi; others have achieved greater avenues for expression through technology; auto, trans, chaste; and still others are brand new. Below some more recent changes in human sexuality are discussed.

Autosexuality is the preference for lone gratification. Though masturbation is an ancient human behavior generally accepted in 2199, autosexuals are the growing minority that prefer it over actual sexual contact with other humans. The growth of autosexuality might be linked to the availability of convincing virtual experiences, and the advent of compliant maincomp artificial personalities. Many auto's prefer the simplicity and independence of staying out of relationships, but detractors argue that such avoidance leads to poor mental health. While condemned by the general population many 'Autos' have come out and campaign for tolerance under the slogan 'We don't hurt anyone'.

Asexuality is the extinction of all sexual impulses, and is achieved through pharmaceutical and hypnotic 'therapy' in unmodified humans. Asexuality is usually considered to be a mental health problem by the general population, and the media paints asexuals as miserable and lonely. Academics call asexuality the absurd pinnacle of the Cartesian split between mind and body. When pressed, 'A's' are usually vocal in their own defense, citing that other facets of humanity are molded by technology so why not sexuality?; or that they are able to enjoy life more and achieve more without the distraction of sex.

Chastity is the abstinence from sexual intercourse regardless of your other preferences. Few in modern times are chaste, but religious reasons are often the basis for this behavior. Many who are chaste are also technically asexual, but few of these take on that label.

Cetasexuals are those rare individuals that prefer intercourse with cetaceans. While some isolated native communities don't frown upon interspecies liaisons, most humans consider interspecies sex distasteful and disdain those who participate in interspecies sex. However, even among tolerant communities, a preference for cetaceans over humans will ostracize the individual.

Finally, even pure strain humans must contend with the changes biotechnology has made to the species. Culturally, the attitude that 'we are all human' seems to dominate, though some aren't so sure about hybrids. Under the hype everyone has their own limits. However, a few prefer other pure humans, purists, while others come to prefer specific genetic redesigns, genosexuals. Among adolescents, preferences for specific modified features have started to appear as the 'modi' technology of the last 15 years begins to expand its cultural effects. The line between fetish and preference is now blurred completely.

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Genie's and modi's generally have the same range of behavior as pure strains, but the notes below cover special considerations.

Sexuality in Genetic Redesigns

Among Genie's the 'we are all human' hype is more transparent. In other areas, positive and negative discrimination has set genie's as peoples apart, and most keep to their 'own kind'. This attitude is especially true in later generations- where to have children not adapted to the physical and cultural lifestyle of their society is to have disabled progeny.

Sexuality in Modified Humans

Modified humans are not a cultural group, as are the various genie types. The tendency for modies to mix and match modifications into unique combinations, the ease at which mods are acquired outside of a group project, and the newness of the technology have contributed to this lack of cohesion. Modis may distinguish themselves from normals by their abilities, but they usually consider themselves part of 'mainstream' human species. However, modi's of the 'one person species' type develop behaviors as unique as their bodies, shunning social norms.

The main effect of modi technology on the sexual landscape is the way modi's can access the more unusual sexualities. Rumors abound of people undertaking mindjobs to become asexual, but the most common way to achieve this aim through mods is by using multi-glands. Bodysculpting is now used to switch between sexes, or more rarely to become a hermaphrodite, and chastity through removal of genitalia- or even pure androgyny is possible. Less dramatically, there is a market for pornographic stims, that many with sensory recorders are willing to supply.

Dolphin Sexuality

Sexuality among dolphins is a more casual affair than among humans. All members of a pod, and some visitors, engage in sexual activities; regardless of the sexes of those involved. Dolphins typically will include human friends in this behavior if consent is given. Intercourse is also undertaken well before biological sexual maturity. The truth behind behavior that seems promiscuous, or even perverted, to the hominid observer is that much sexual intercourse among dolphins has the same connotations as friendly hugging among humans. The exceptions to this being males with females in estrous, and the use of sex by some males to intimidate or challenge other males. The dolphin sexual preference would seem to be no preference at all.

However, more dolphins are being socialized into human sexuality patterns. This is especially prevalent among those who adopt other human facets to their lifestyle. Among these is a rare group that prefers humans over cetaceans. Such individuals are called anthrosexuals, or simply anthro's, by humans. Autosexuality has also become widespread in isolated individuals working among humans.

There is some antagonism between humans and dolphins over the dolphins interspecies and incestuous practices, and dolphins mock humans for the restrictions they place on their relationships. Dolphins adopting human practices receive antipathy from their 'normal' peers, and some experts believe that mental health suffers under such humanization of cetaceans.

Orca Sexuality

Orcas follow similar patterns to those found in dolphins, though the use of sexual intercourse outside of a reproductive context is much less frequent, and interspecies relationships are almost unknown. The strong social traditions of orcas ensures that fewer are socialized into human behaviors, and fewer find themselves isolated from their own kind. So far, the strong society of orcas, and connection with their instincts, has kept what many would view as 'unhealthy behavior'

limited to a small number of individuals .

Maincomp Simulated Gendered and Sexual Behavior

Maincomps, while not physically gendered or sexual, are often treated as such by their users, and thus come to learn gendered behavior. The degree to which this gendered behavior is sexual varies, but most users prefer their machine 'neutered.' The extreme exception being of-course those machines employed in the production of social or pornographic simulations, or owned by autosexuals.



Image from "Earth Girls Are Easy". In a future issue Karl will discuss human-alien romances.

Druid's Valley: for GURPS Bunnies & Burrows

by B. Dennis Sustare and Lev Lafayette

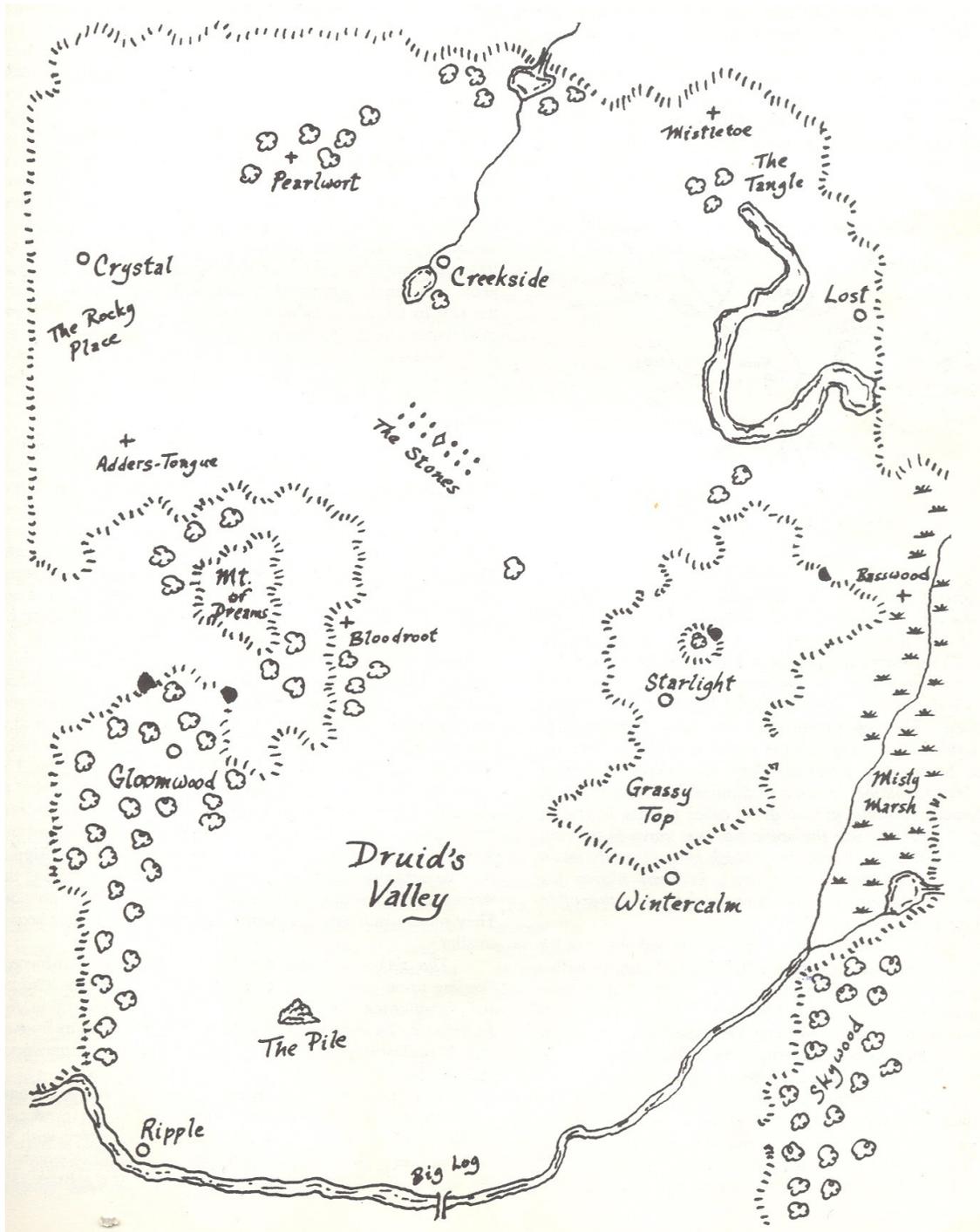
Bunnies & Burrows is a fantasy roleplaying game inspired by the novel *Watership Down*, and subsequently the animated film. It was originally written by B. Dennis Sustare and Scott Robinson and published by Fantasy Games Unlimited and saw two editions under that publisher. In 1992, it was re-written by Stephan O'Sullivan for GURPS and published by Steve Jackson Game's. This particular scenario was originally published as a campaign setting in *Different Worlds* in Issue #3 (June/July 1979). In this, a thirty year anniversary of the publication of *Druid's Valley*, much of the original text remains. However there is also a ready-to-run scenario, which is most appropriate for the season. Tadashi Ehara (editor, *Different Worlds*) and Dennis Sustarre (author, *Bunnies & Burrows* and original article) have both given their approval for this updated version of the original article.



Druid's Valley is bounded by sheer cliffs to the north and west, by the mysterious and terrifying Misty Marsh to the east, and by a large, fast-moving river (called the Big River) to the south. The rabbits will start in a warren called Wintercalm which is one of several in the valley; others include Starlight, Lost, Creekside, Crysal and Ripple. Other rabbits in the Wintercalm warran include the following ruling clique (Owsla) of Wintercalm; Ginger, a scout, Sweetbriar, a runner and Orchis, a runner and seer. Use the standard rabbits from GURPS Bunnies & Burrows (Oakroot, Sprig, Raspberry, Stripe, Chamomile, and Comfrey) if you like.

Sadly, all is not well in Wintercalm. The elderly king rabbit, Peppermint (see p108 GURPS B&B), summons the PCs one morning in some degree of distress. About a week ago, just as it seemed that winter had come to end his sick Queen, Heathertail, unfortunately died. However since then her special momentos have gone missing from the warren. The King set aside a special burrow in her memory, which included a mound of her favourite grass, a bitter-tasting chewing stick, a piece of tartan blanket, a mirror, and a bag of pretty coloured marbles. The King is beside himself as the blanket, the stick and the mirror are now missing and the grass has been scattered about. He thinks it's only a matter of time before the beloved marbles are gone as well and then he'll have nothing to remember her by! He pleads, bleary-eyed, for the PCs to help him. The PCs have never seen their king in such a state.

Questioning and investigation will reveal that the King has not previously established hoplite guards at the Queen's former den. A thorough search will reveal some rabbit footprints near a hidden exit that leads north, towards the suspicious Starlight neighbours. Naturally enough the PCs will, in all probability suggest establishing a guard to ensure that the precious bag of marbles do not go missing. If they do so, they will inevitably find themselves failing in this task as they are attacked in the night by a seer with Telepathy Power 8, Telesend, Telereceive and Sleep at 18-! When they finally wake up they will find that the marbles have been taken. A successful search this time will reveal that there are most certainly rabbit paw prints in the direction of the hidden burrow and furthermore a marble will be found!



At this stage the PC rabbits will probably think that there is a thief coming in from Starlight warren and will want to organise a scouting mission, if not a fully fledged commando-style assault. The Starlight warren is designed for a strong defense, and includes numerous traps in the runways, which are kept set and in good working order by three

high-level members of their Owsla: Five-Finger, a Maverick, and Fawn-Lily and Raspberry, both Scouts. Any rabbits invading their territory are likely to be strongly attacked. There are valuable plants on Grassy Top, including a source of Slumberleaf Dust (used by their Herbalist, Alfalfa, as well as by other rabbits, in the defense of the warren) and the apple tree that grows in the sinkhole in the center of the plateau (which is incidentally an entrance to an elaborate cave system). Starlight Warren just wants to be left alone, and they have the force to rather effectively back up those desires.

The reality is that the rabbits of Starlight warren are not responsible for the theft of the items from Wintercalm. Whether by negotiation or by a full and frank discussion with their neighbours they will discover that another rabbit was spied by Starlight scouts the previous night coming from the direction of Wintercalm and hopping merrily under the moonlight across the Starlight plateau towards in a northwesterly direction. At this point it is likely that the rabbits will return to base and ask their chief and other members of the warren what lies in the region.

The Stones are strange, old, moss-covered human construction where noble-ranked rabbits of Druid's Valley are buried, including Heathertail. If the PCs inquire why this is so, the noble rabbits will simply sagely nod and say "You'd have to go there and find out for yourself". Misty Marsh is not recommended for any rabbit, as they are not marsh creatures. Note the PC version of the map will not include the solitary rabbit and master of disguises, Basswood, makes his home at the edge of the Misty Marsh, very near an entrance to the Cave of Dreams. He is a Maverick who loves practical jokes. Two of his favorite stunts, that allow him to use his masterful disguises, are to imitate a predator to scare rabbits, or to imitate a neutral animal and talk with rabbits or join them on their adventure.

In comparison, Ripple Warren, is a very sedate warren. If the PCs investigate in that direction they will discover the rabbits there seem to be rather dull and stupid. The warren has a musty smell, and large portions are flooded. There is notable quantities of a special herb there; Squawroot (a fighter and head of the Ripple Warren Owsla) will not discuss the herb, but the two other Owsla members, Wormseed and Innocence, will try to persuade the party to remain and join Ripple. The unknown herb in Ripple Warren is Dumbweed which is provided by the rabbits of Gloomwood. Feeding upon this is addictive, and lowers a rabbit's Willpower and Intelligence with time. There are no young rabbits present as they are all taken to Gloomwood, in payment for the addictive drug.

In the northeast corner of the valley is the Tangle, a nearly impenetrable maze of thorns and brambles. This is the only route to Lost Warren, but PCs will not learn of this secretive warren who prefer to hide from intruders. Living at the edge of the Tangle is Mistletoe, a wild rabbit who is quite mad, who switches between being a calm and wise storyteller to a temperamental fighting berserker. To the north-west, apart from the stones, is rocky ground and many snakes (use Rattler stats, GURPS B&B, p91). Again, unknown to the PCs another solitary rabbit, Adder's Tongue, lives in the region. He is an empath of some skill and with these abilities has managed to survive. He is a spy for a warren much further to the west. His burrow is well hidden among the rocks, and contains the largely decayed body of a dead marmot, making it unlikely that a rabbit would stay in the burrow long enough to find the plugs that conceal the runways to Adder's-Tongue's chamber.

Beyond Adder's Tongue is another warren, Crystal Warren, an expansionist but not necessarily belligerent warren. Through their clever leader they are learning clever combinations of skills and co-ordinated forces. They are led by Queen Buckthorn whose ambition is to destroy her brother's warren, Gloomwood (she is the sister of Lilac, in Gloomwood's Owsla), and then conquer the entire valley.

Ultimately the PCs may want to visit The Stones. These are Celtic menhir stones and Celtic crosses are covered with engravings of humans wearing rabbit ears and even prostrating themselves in front of a great rabbit and the rising sun, along with various crops in the foreground (including carrots, of course). Searching this area will reveal that the Queen Heathertail's grave has been dug up and the body is missing! There is a weasel who sulks around this area; the weasel (keeping in mind that if provoked he could attack - see GURPS B&B p92) will swear that he is not responsible for this. A careful search will reveal (just as the PCs are getting frustrated will reveal a scrap of tartan and pawprints leading to the south-west).

As rumors and hints increase, the players have become more curious and apprehensive with regards to the forest called Gloomwood. On going into the stand of woods to the east of the Mountain of Dreams, they will meet a solitary rabbit, Bloodroot (a high-level Storyteller). He was very friendly, and will entertain the PCs with his imaginative tales. However, if a rabbit comes alone, Bloodroot will enthrall him and then take him to his death, each by a different creative method (e.g., via traps, predators, off a cliff, into a whirlpool). Not a very nice guy!

In discovering the Gloomwood Warren the rabbits there will attempt to capture the intruders. They are not great fighters, but they do have various sleeping herbs and the like. Gloomwood's rabbits only venture from the dim recesses of their forest on their infrequent trips to the south, during which they deliver supplies of dumbweed to Ripple Warren. Gloomwood has the evil practice of capturing wandering rabbits plus the "contributions" from Ripple, having them perform special tasks and rituals, and finally sacrificing them to the Great Horned Owl (see GURPS B&B, p90) of the Mountain of Dreams. The warren itself is an intricate maze of tunnels, with many opportunities for becoming lost. Other than their powerful Owsla, led by Crowfoot, an old but crafty and potent Fighter doe, this confusing system of runways is their primary defense.

If any, or all, of the PCs are captured they will be set up for sacrifice on the Mount of Dreams by the Gloomwood rabbits. But before the sacrifice occurs, the Gloomwood rabbits will fall asleep one by one. Then, out of the darkness, will come the undead, zombie-like, Queen Heathertail to chew through the bindings on the PC rabbits. Once this is done the Owl will come in for its sacrifice; quick thinking PCs will point out that the rabbits for the Owl are already asleep on the ground. Those who panic will run, which will lead the Owl for a chase and possibly a bad end; the Owl does prefer the thrill of the chase, but will take a sleeping rabbit if available.

One way or another, the PCs will eventually talk to Queen Heathertail. She remember being very sick one night and the next thing she knew she found herself buried alive (or so it seemed to her). In actuality, she has - through the power of being buried in spring, or Easter, or both. Risen from the dead, she is a bunny of a magical resurrection. Not only that but she found herself with new telepathic powers. Upon visiting Wintercalm she listened in to her King's grief and couldn't work out at first what was going on. Going into her den she found her mirror and looked at herself...

Feeling herself compelled towards the Cave of Dreams she has discovered a strange burial ground for humans and rabbits alike that is very old. She also discovered the Gloomwood rabbits who have set themselves up in the caverns as well. The Cave of Dreams system seems to underlie most of Druid's Valley, with two entrances in Gloomwood and one on the Mountain of Dreams, as well as the entrance near Basswood's burrow and the apple tree sinkhole (called Apple Hall in the cave). The northern part of the valley contains several ponds and a small stream that flow into the cave, though these would be rather drastic and dangerous routes of entry. Additionally, there is a crevice far to the northwest (near Crystal Warren) through which a large flight of bats enters and leaves; no-one even suspects that the most important secret in Druid's Valley (in fact, the key to the name itself) lies deeply buried within the Cave of Dreams. And what is that secret?

That is for you to decide!

MELBAPLEX AND 28 CLONES LATER

by *Brendan Evans*

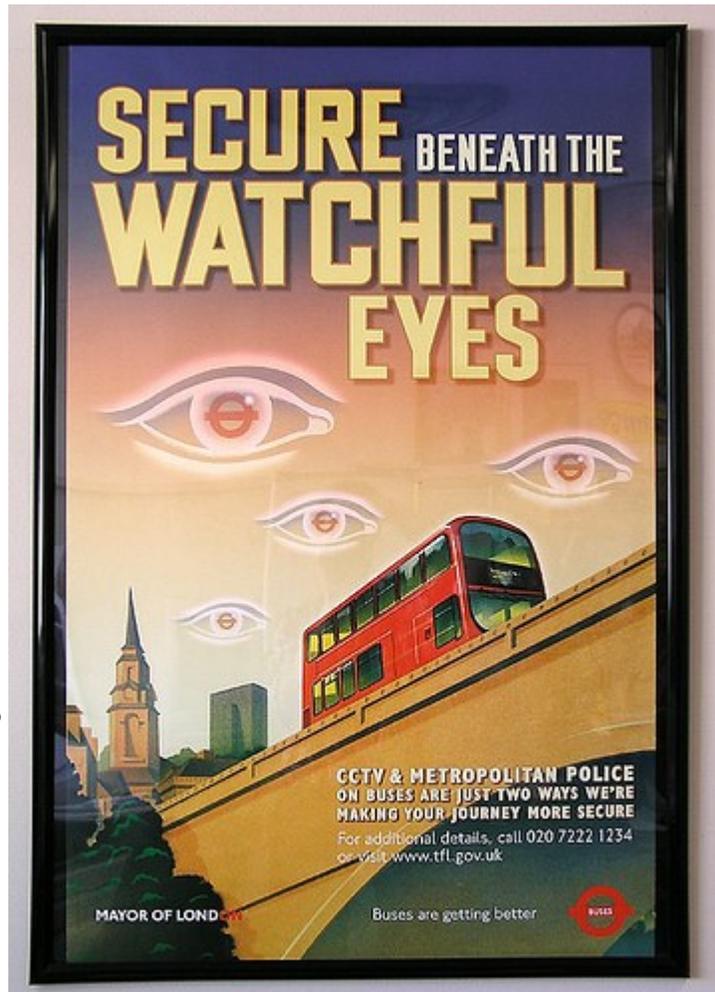
The Melbaplex

The Melbaplex is post-war Melbourne, Australia. For GameMasters, get yourself a map of Melbourne. Cut out all the parts in between suburban railway nodes. The central city and the suburban railway nodes are covered in big protective bubbles, linked together by the wonderful mag-lev transport network. Sometimes these mag-levs are late and The Computer apologises for any inconvenience. But nobody complains. Nobody alive, anyway. Anything outside the bubble is *Outside*, which doesn't exist and if it did it would be radioactive anyway.

Life in the Melbaplex really depends on your status. Manual and clerical work is carried out by Infrared and Red status citizens. Some red status citizens make it the giddy heights of being a Troubleshooter. Chances are however, they'll remain in Manual or Clerical. Yellow status citizens are usually assigned Clerical Management roles. Those who take the Troubleshooter path will have to work their way up to Blue before they join the Blues (equivalent of Vulture Troopers). Indigo, Violet and Ultraviolet characters are high programmers.

Media celebrities are an exception; their job is to make people happy even more happy that the perfect happiness they can attain from merely following the orders of The Computer. They can make it all the way to Violet, but usually don't live much longer after that as the High Programmers resent the possibility of their power-base being subverted.

A typical day in Melbaplex for a typical citizen consists of gloriously trying to get to work by 9am to serve the computer, explaining to Yellow class citizens why they are late, whilst not complaining about the mag-lev service and trying to follow the orders of The Computer during the day, which provides cheerful periods of utterly boring and repetitive tasks, following by an opportunity of mad panic when it provides short-term tasks which are seem to the poor citizen to be insane and dangerous.



At home, the typical citizen watches a lot of soporific television which makes the pain of the day go away.

But not tonight.... Tonight is different. Tonight is special. Tonight a disloyal citizen will strike a blow for freedom.

28 Clones Later: Prologue

PC Troubleshooters (Red, Orange level) in this scenario must start in a Secret Society which would be prone to disobeying The Computer, likes fluffy little animals or just likes general mayhem. This includes Communists, Death Leopard, Frankenstein Destroyers, Humanists, PURGE, Romantics or the Sierra Club. None of the PCs will know each other from previous missions, or at least they think they don't (more on that later).

Each is informed by their Secret Society that they should take the last mag-lev to Belg-R-ave and get into the last carriage. Each will person in that carriage will carry part of a message which will make sense when they are all put together. Except not everyone in the carriage is a friendly, are they? Somebody just has to be a Blue on their way home don't they? And of course the carriage records activities. Explain that one citizen. Likely toll, one or two clones.

Putting together the messages reveals that the PCs are to make their way to an isolated factory. Whilst the factory has minimal electronic surveillance, it is protected by Yellow and Green level guards, but don't let anyone know that (likely toll, two or three clones). Inside the factory they are to liberate the cute fluffy bunnies (and equivalent) from the horrible experiments being conducted on these sweet animals. Once liberated the animals will attack with an incredible ferocity and kill everyone present (likely toll five or six clones). Anyone who is bitten (just like the movie of a similar name) will also turn into psychopathic zombie-like creature within a minute or two. Go through one cycle of Troubleshooters before declaring mission accomplished.

28 Clones Later: The Main Story

The PCs wake up in a sweat, having had a strange dream about psychopathic bunnies. As they go about their business for the day they receive a message to visit their Yellow level supervisor's office. Inside there is the supervisor plus a Blue Trooper (vigilant secret society members will notice that their logo is an inverted pentagram with the slogan "Uphold The Right". Does this make them Satanic Conservatives? You decide). The Supervisor and Blue Trooper gleefully explain that the Troubleshooter has been selected for an important mission in Coll-I-ngwood to clear the area. They will be provided with some excellent experimental weapons to assist them in this process. (Pick a weapon. Double its damage. Give it a flat 20% chance of not working on a particular shot and a 5% chance of blowing up.)

If the Troubleshooter asks for elaboration on what "Clear The Area" might mean, they earn a scowl and a Treason Point. If they refuse the experimental weapon they receive another scowl and a Treason Point. If they keep refusing or keep asking questions give them more and more Treason Points. If they hit five Treason Points the Blue Trooper will execute the Traitor on the spot. Seriously, Melbaplex does not need citizens like that!

Taking the Mag-Lev to Coll-I-ngWood station (which, like all stations, includes a tube for the happy reproduction of lost clones) the PC Troubleshooters will meet the others on the mission who will look surprisingly like those in the disturbing dream they had. Something doesn't seem right..

The Troubleshooters are told by a Blue Trooper to shoot dead anyone who bites anyone, anyone who's bitten, and anyone who's skin is covered in someone else's blood. All deaths will be reviewed later (the big guns come with built in cameras) and any accidents will come out of the clones pay. At this point a Mag-Lev arrives and the Blue Trooper runs in obvious terror to board and get out of the Coll-I-ngwood sector. Something *really* doesn't seem right.

For the better part of a day-cycle, the Troubleshooters can wander around Coll-I-ngWood sector where everything seems normal and with everyone going about the normal, legal (well, for that sector anyway) business. Nothing seems to be a problem; except for the regular calls from frantic Blue Troopers asking the PCs "Have you seen *it*?", "Has *it* happened yet?" etc. Asking what "it" is (a) well above the Troubleshooter's Security Clearance and (b) Will earn them a Treason Point. Not that there's anyone to carry out the execution.

The reality is that "*it*" refers to an outbreak of zombies, courtesy of the nasty psychopathic bunnies that the PC

Troubleshooters liberated in the Prologue. Except these aren't the normal zombies that occasionally turn up in Melbaplex. These are fast zombies, who run, climb, bite and infect people, and generally become a real pain in the neck rapidly. Regardless of what edition of Paranoia is being used, simply take a standard Troubleshooter's characteristics and make them half as strong again and half as quick again. Drop their intelligence (except for "animal cunning") and social skills by half. These zombies are *mean* - but they don't have ranged weapons, so there's an opportunity for little victories on behalf of the Troubleshooters, especially if they entertain.

"It" will break loose very quickly and in no time the Troubleshooters will find themselves outnumbered and an increasingly small area shooting everyone and everything that comes within range. If they work together as a team you could let them get rescued in the nick of time but I'd just let them all die. Chances are as more and more clones reach their inevitable zombie-induced retirement the PCs will find themselves protecting a smaller and smaller area - with the final stand probably at the Mag-Lev station itself where new clones dutifully arrive for service. There will be hopeful announcements that the Mag-Lev has been delayed and is now due in 'x' minutes. When 'x' minutes arrives it won't be there of course, but give the Troubleshooters hope. There's nothing more delightful than destroying false hope.

A message comes over the team radio. Everybody's pulling out. The best way they can help the computer is to stay there and die heroically protecting those who are higher ranked than the team as they try to escape. Chances are these higher status characters will be infected as well, but the Troubleshooters should only discover that when it's too late. This might take a while; make it as horrible as possible. There's lots of people, lots of buildings and thus lots of zombies. Drag out the people trying to escape.

You should be able to see what's coming next.

As the team try to barricade the station by whatever pitiful means they have at their disposal, they receive a last message on the radio. The entire sector is being evacuated. They have 5 minutes before the sector will be cleared (a.k.a. great fiery death from above).

You can have them die heroically if you wish. If it was still a while before everyone (the actual players) had to leave to go to go home, you could drag it out by allowing them to get to a transport out of the sector but why bother? Just nuke, rinse, and repeat.

Style notes

I pictured this as a really gritty, military action adventure with a sad ending. If it was a movie, there'd be long drawn out shots of getting ready and equipped, macho bonding, deep and meaningful stares, last letters to home, there'd be an inexperienced kid who'd be taken under the wing of the oldest squad member, etc etc. remember, this is not "Alpha Complex", this is Melbaplex. Here people want to stay alive, and do, despite the computers finest mistakes and attempts to better their lives. Of course, this is a total hose job. There is no happy ending. At best, they get caught in the nuclear blast and die quick before being eaten alive.

28 Clones Later: Epilogue

The PC Troubleshooters wake up in the dark in a cold sweat with the sound of the alarm going off introducing them to another day of long repetitive tasks interspersed with short crazy ones.

And the good bit is, you can make them play this one again, because its set in Melbaplex, and repetitive adventures help illustrate that in Melbaplex, there really is no spoon.

Only sporks and splades. And troubleshooter corpses.

Welcome to Melbaplex. You won't be leaving.

THE SPIRIT OF MIDDLE EARTH PART II: A CAMPAIGN AROUND THE LONG LAKE USING AD&D MODULES

by Michael Cole

In the last issue, I wrote an article entitled *The Spirit of Middle Earth* which showed how to be faithful to the themes in Tolkien's Middle Earth. This article implements the ideas in practise by using existing material, specifically three old AD&D modules, L1: *The Secret of Bone Hill*, N1: *Against the Cult of the Reptile God* and T1: *The Village of Homlett*.

All three adventures will be placed in the Long Lake region, in the standard ICE time frame of Third Age 1640. It is also handy to have the publication *Lake-Town* by ICE/Tolkien Enterprises to link adventures and the scenario *Denizens of the Dark Wood*, which provides the initial adventure. Two of the adventures deal with the ICE-created "Cult of the Long Night", being L1 and T1. *Lake-Town* mentions the Cult in passing, however ICE's *Northern Mirkwood* deals with the organisation in much greater detail.

Linking The Adventures

The first adventure should be "*Denizens of the Dark Wood*" *Adventure 1 – Attercop Attack*. This is a simple "Beat up some spiders, rescue a missing couple" adventure. The players should start off at Esgaroth, probably in the Vodugarazun (the main inn). They are then recruited by Ulgar to find the missing villagers from Ulgarstat. Apart from shifting the location a bit further southwards such that it makes more sense that the road to Wessen's farm must pass through the forest, no changes are needed.

Once this adventure is complete, the adventurers should be at Wessen's Farm. From there, have the locals suggest that the characters should go to Orlane to check if they have had any missing persons, and then have them run into the orcs at the intersection as described.

The road north will eventually end up intersecting the Celebannon-Orlane Road about five miles west of Orlane and have a small clash with some Orcs. Some of the orcs should escape. The characters should lose them, and then as any good people would, head for the nearest town to let them know that orcs are loose this far north, as it is very unusual. At this point start using *N1 – Against the Cult of the Reptile God*. Don't use any of the rumour; let them happen upon the village by chance and figure out something is wrong. Once N1 is complete, we then move into the *Genni Ofmere* adventure from the *Laketown* Supplement. Fennric and Flana, hearing of the party's efforts in destroying the Spirit Naga, come to Orlane to ask for their help. This takes the party to Costow.

Once in Cotstow, and after helping the villages, they should notice the old partially-destroyed spooky castle at the top of the hill, and be told by the locals about the legend of Bone Hill. As normal adventures, they should immediately decide to investigate. This is *L1 – The Secret of Bone Hill*.

The Bone Hill adventure should end up at Esgaroth with the adventures having a reference to a "Lareth the Beautiful" – an evil spy located down at the Iach Celduin. This leads into the TSR Adventure *T1 – The Village of Homlett*.

L1 – The Secret of Bone Hill

The only useable parts are the castle ruins and the guard station and even then with major changes. The castle, an old elvish fortification, would be an old defensive structure located on the hill north-west of Esgaroth. It was destroyed a long time ago by an orcish force, has never been reclaimed by the elves, particularly since men moved into the area, and has developed a very bad reputation since.

Note that for those who have the “Lake Town” module, this is where ICE has located a small hamlet called *Cotstow* (p31). In order to cater for this, note that the hamlet is located at the foot of the hill near the river. If you put the old castle on the top of the hill, and make it a large hill, as it appears to be in the regional map, then in my opinion, they can both coexist happily. The hamlet’s-folk are scared of the reputation of the castle, and the castle inhabitants will not want to be noticed by the people from the hamlet.

The main antagonist is the Necromancer via the Cult of the Long Night. Whether or not the “evil magician” is a magician or not depends on your campaign, but he could quite easily have some necromantic powers – I tend to think that fireball spells are not really Tolkien. I would give him some human companions as well – perhaps a fighter-type as a bodyguard/commander and a ranger-rogue type or two as the spy/supply officer/liaison. One option is to have *Brego* from the Cult as a frequent visitor. The Bugbears in the module should become Orcs. The area is a fair distance from Esgaroth, and they should be able to make a base there quite successfully providing pesky adventures don’t go ignoring local advice about the haunted keep.

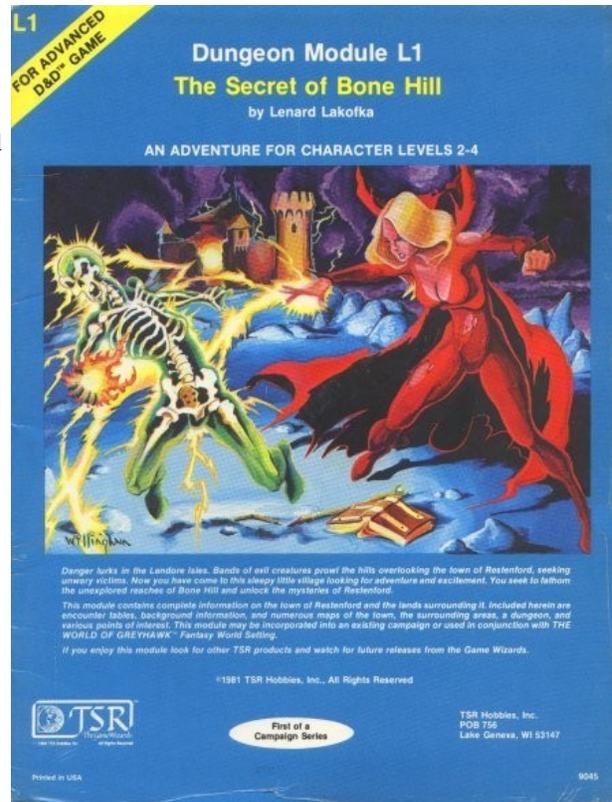
If one of the characters does use the background of being a brother or sister of Namarië (*Northern Mirkwood* Section 8.52), then having the Burnt Guard Station being the last location that she was seen in could provide a link to this adventure. Haed was visiting the Guard Station and spotted her, and then kidnapped her at night from the base of the river. Have enough incriminating information at the guard station or the castle (whichever the characters visit second) to lead them towards the Nan Morsereg. This would be a good way for the characters to discover that the Cult exists.

A further link could be that reference is made to “Lareth at Iach Celduin”. This should provide a suitable hook for the characters to travel down-river to Iach Celduin and thus to *T1 – The Village of Hommlett*.

The main thing to do to Bone Hill is to reduce the number of undead and increase their power in compensation; an undead being a family of Ghouls would be a good addition. Run them like Cthulhu ghouls rather than D&D ghouls; they are a community of flesh-eating people rather than undead. Most encounters that have animated skeletons can be turned into normal bones; some Orc or even Troll skeletons can make the encounters interesting in their own right (especially if the former have chew marks on them). Reduce all treasure appropriately. Change the Bugbears to Orcs, who co-exist uneasily with the Ghouls.

The upper levels of the castle can include Orcs with at least one commander and a shaman. Include fresh food the area, as even an Orc finds it hard to live on iron rations. As such, there would also need to be some transport – mule and cart? This could provide a reason for finding the area – “Hey, this guy comes to Esgaroth every so often to buy food. Who is it for? Let’s track him.”

The magician doesn’t really need a bedroom, a workshop and an observatory, and the human companions need somewhere to sleep. It’s not as if he is making this a permanent home. In the basement extend the number of ghouls, and forget about the wraith and other undead. Also, memo to Len Lakofka; if you lock living creatures into a small room, as you did with “AA. The Ghoul Lair”, they will starve to death.



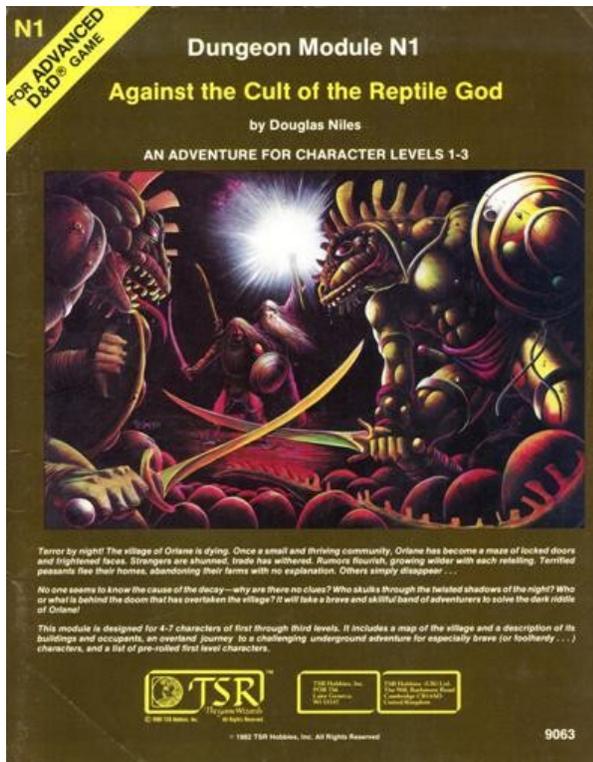
The Burnt Guard Station can be used as the Esgaroth spying station. Personally, I would locate it at the point where the Taurduin enters the lake. Again, for those who have the Lake Town module, this is on the hill just above the Byrelver. After it was burnt out, it was never rebuilt because of the Hlaestcamol, or Toll House being just nearby at the start of the tollbridge. It doesn't exist on the map, but can easily be placed. Reduce the size of the complex – consider each square to be 3 foot rather than 10 foot. For the above ground section, have the roof totally burnt, but most of the walls still standing, being of stone construction. All rats may be large, but not giant. They probably won't be savage, either.

The lower levels were built originally by an earlier incarnation of the Cult back in TA1169, left fallow for many years, and recently reoccupied and extended by the current Long Night. It is now used as a refuge and spy station, for observing both river and lake traffic – hidden doors allow inhabitants to watch without being seen. There are no undead, the furnishings food etc are still in working condition as they are still in use. Keep the chest, but no gaseous form and have it contain various wealth, trading stuff, minor valuables for bribery purposes etc.

N1 – Against the Cult of the Reptile God

This adventure is in two parts. The first part, the village of Orlane is set north-east of Esgaroth, on the south-east corner of the small woods just south of where the Taurduin exits the forest. The second part, the dungeon, is set to the north of Orlane, within the Aelinann (marked as “Temple” on the map). The village of Orlane is a small farming community that acts as a feeder to Esgaroth. The whole area west of Esgaroth between the lake and the forest is farming land, and Orlane is the most northern of the communities – there are farms located both north and east of the village.

The road marked “To Hookhill” leads to Esgaroth, and is the major road. The road marked, “To Hochock” is, as per the module, a much newer and less used thoroughfare, and leads up to Celebannon, although you would need to get ferried across the river. This road also branches off south a few miles down the track, and heads off skirting the forest down to Ulgarstat via Wessun's Farm.



The only other major points are the river, which we can simply say is an unmarked creek that eventually ends up turning northwards into the woods and then filtering into the Aelinann. The large size of the temple is also unusual, but it can be said that it is a structure dedicated to Yavanna, and is known in the whole area, not just a local church.

The one major change I would have for the Cult is to tone down the brainwashing – don't have the brainwashed villages all fight to the death. It is generally not considered a good thing to wipe out half a village, even if they are following the orders of an evil creature. They should be enthralled, not brain-dead automatons.

The changes to the town are as follows:

1) Watch the armour and weapons, such as with the Constable's Quarters; plate mail is a bit much. Indeed, reduce the wealth as whole. Farmers will deal mainly in barter, and the characters shouldn't be robbing them anyway. I don't see how a Jeweller and Moneychanger could survive in a small farming community – you may want to look at changing his profession, or reduce his activities to making trinkets. At the Livery Stable – just for a change, make him Gramuz – give

their racial biases a bit of a serve, given that he will be one of the first friendly people that they meet.

2) The two elves – obvious solution is to make them two of Thranduil’s people, and have that the Mayor has asked the Elven-King for assistance. Any elves from Mirkwood may know them, but these two should be senior to the character and will still act as described. Whether or not you keep Dorian as being a MU depends on your campaign, but having him as the thinker is still fine. You may wish to give them better names, as well.

3) The Foaming Mug – make the residents in the cellar into orcs hiding out. Obviously, if you used the campaign entry to the module, then the orc survivors from the tower fight should be here.

4) The Retired Ranger and his wife can also be foreigners. Pure Dunedain is probably too much, but possibly part-Dunedain from the Gondorian eastern border guards? If that is the case, change their names.

5) The Hermit. Whilst you may hint that he has some unusual powers, you should restrain from allowing him to use them until the Dungeon.

6) At the Golden Grain Inn – change the names of the antagonists. Snigrot Dogroot? Derek Desleigh? Why not just stick a label on their chests reading, “Bad Guys”?

The way that this part of the adventure should end is with some sort of roving battle around the town; between the bad guys in the town and the good guys, supported by the characters. It shouldn’t be the characters taking on everyone – they should start the flame, and then assist it to burn. Run it as a liberation mission rather than a straight-up brawl. Remember that the adventurers should not be as tough in Middle Earth as they are in D&D, nor should things be as bloody.

Best way is that once it starts, and it should be something small that starts it – the town is a bit of a tinderbox, have it break into a series of running battles. Split the characters up if possible, and have the individual characters or groups supported or responsible for small groups of the good villagers – refer to “The Seven Samurai” and “The Magnificent Seven” for hints. It would be good if this happened in the evening or at night for further confusion.

Don’t be afraid to let the good villagers win fights without the characters, and remember that the bad guys don’t always have to fight to the death – surrender is an option. It needn’t be a bloodbath. It should end with the bad guys either dead, in custody, fled or having taken refuge in the temple.

At the Temple, reduce the regimented religious outlook. I would suggest that it be dedicated to Yavanna, or whatever her name is known locally as – possibly “Alanakyn” (*Laketown* p43). Decorations and such need to be changed to reflect this. The changes that should occur include making the wolves in the courtyard just guard dogs, reducing the value and materials of the decorations, removing the skeletons in the Guardroom of the Undead and turning it into a meeting room, reducing the number of books in the library and dropping references to the "Lawful Evil alignment tongue" in Abramo's chambers. Remove the below ground level entirely; it adds nothing to the adventure, and detracts from what the adventurers should be doing – rescuing the abducted villagers.

Generally speaking, the Temple should be taken after the town is cleared. It should be a bit different than a normal D&D campaign, in that the characters aren’t simply after wealth, and as such, looting the “good” temple should not be something that they first go for. Of course, the fact that such a small village has such a large temple would be something that would stand out – it isn’t very subtle, but hopefully they should be able to restrain themselves.

Exploring the temple should be as per the module. If they go in nicely, then they should get no further than Misha Devi. If they go in at night, then the dogs and the servants should come into play. If they get past them, the “evil monks”, who can simply be Easterlings skilled at fighting, especially unarmed, can come into play. If only a small number of the party went in, such as a single thief, they could be captured, to be saved by their friends at a later stage, otherwise they should simply withdraw.

If there is a retreat to the temple after the town is freed, then the siege needs to be completed quickly. It could be assumed that the survivors at the temple would be limited, and given that the town has been raised, the townsfolk and the characters should out-number them.

Generally, if the survivors are few, they could simply surrender when challenged. The servants should definitely do so – they are not fighters. If the Easterlings were not encountered previously, then simply pretend that they were never there. If you think that it does require a combat, then make it quick.

Don't allow any of the survivors apart from Misha Devi to retreat into the Temple – have them all outside. If the characters don't want to force the issue, then have, after a suitable period, some of the survivors such as the servants make a break for it to surrender. This should open the gates, causing the fight to start. It should be short and sharp, leading to the mop-up.

The final stage of the town adventure is a mop-up, and comprises the characters entering the Temple to capture anyone left. Generally, this should be done without townsfolk – the PC's can be asked to do it themselves as a pitched battle inside a building is difficult with a lot of people.

The Easterlings are optional if they were not previously encountered. Whether or not you use them depends on if you want some combat in the first level. If so, they would hide in shadows, and use sneak attacks – run as a scary movie type atmosphere – dress them up with war paint, but with little armour. Have them strike with surprise with garrotes, knives etc.

Misha Devi is a special case. Personally, I like the character and think that it would be a waste to use her up such – she could make a perfect recurring villain. To me, she could be used as the young, very pretty girl, who can use her tongue and appearance to elicit sympathy in people – the sort of cheeky amoral survivor, who will always land on her feet. She shouldn't be overtly vicious or nasty. If she is allowed to surrender, she will charm the town council with her, “Poor me, I was only acting out of fear of Abramo” act, and will simply be forced out of town. You could then use her for further annoying the characters in other adventures.

On the same lines, Derek Desleigh (with a different name, of course) from the Golden Grain could be used the same way. Have him as Misha's secret partner, a born survivor. Remove all the sadistic stuff from him, although he should be more callous than Misha. He could be one of those guys who you are never sure if you have killed. He gets hit by a crossbow bolt and falls out of sight, but when you later go to check the body, it seems to have disappeared. Make him very “above it all”, lackadaisical, sarcastic and aloof, even to his own people. I have always liked the idea of recurring villains, and these two have potential as the kind of annoying type.

Once they get to the second level of the Temple they will have both the 6 snaga orcs and Abramo to destroy. Let them all fight to the death. It should provide an appropriate end to this section of the module, particularly with them finding Cirilla Finla.

Various modifications to the dungeon is required; let the bad guys at the village disclose the identity of the four lieutenants from room 14. Give them all a personality, and let the characters have a human face to what they are after. Also include a secret or concealed exit from the chamber to the passage between 2 and 3, so that they don't all get trapped in a dead-end set of chambers. You may also want to perhaps have one of them sighted above ground on patrol, even if not contacted there, just so the characters have someone to aim for when they enter the dungeon.

As stated previously, the dungeon is located to the north of Orlane, within the Aelinann. Have Ranme the hermit, and possibly the elves and the ranger go with the party. The trail is as described, but there is no need for wandering monsters. The above-ground part of the dungeon should stay as is.

Have the human cult members be from the farming communities to the north of the village – obviously the characters

should try to avoid slaughtering them, but it may be unavoidable. The defense may need to be more dynamic, depending on the party's action – if the entry-room guard sound the alarm, then a running fight may be necessary. "Wandering Monsters" are unnecessary. Remove the frogs from Room 3 and replace with a transplanted Ninvet (cf., ICE's Dagorland). Alan Claybourne will know what it is, having fought one before. Obviously the bad guys need to be able to get past it to their minor treasure chamber, and it needs to be something that won't wander off down the south passage. The room also needs some sort of boat stored nearby, probably at the south exit – how on earth do the bad guys get to the treasure? Reduce the value of the treasure massively – change it to more of what would be valuable to the people that it was taken from. Good dinner sets, cloth, minor jewelry, well-carved woodwork and small furniture items etc.

Remove the Green Slime from location 7, give the locals spear and quilt armour for location 8 etc. Get rid of the harpy from sections 16 and 17 and replace with a marsh spider and remove treasure. Get rid of the weasel in section 18. Change the Troglodytes in location 20 to Orcs. Remove the spider from location 22; what does it eat? Remove section 23. Change the guards in location 24 to more orcs. Add some tables and benches in the NW corner, and some a couple of bedrolls in the NE corner, and have say about 10 orcs distributed between 24 to 26. Keep the prisoners as is, and have the evil priest direct the orcs, and then finally make his stand in room 27. All of these should fight to the death – the orcs because they believe that they have no where to go, and the priest because he will not give up the secret passage to 37. Remove the centipeds from location 28. In location 29 could have these as severely brainwashed people – those who went completely mental after the meeting with the Naga – rather than undead. They will still act the same. Change location 36 to a more normal guard animal.

In the throne room (location 37), change the Naga into some sort of evil Maia with a reptilian or snake bent. Obviously this is where Ranme comes to the fore. A Maia should be more than a party can handle, but if you have Ranme doing some unexpected magical stuff; it should enable the characters to deliver the damage. Pretty much, you could wing the magic battle of Ranme and the Naga, if needed, but having him do purely the defensive work whilst the characters do the offensive would be good – he shouldn't be too much of a *Deus ex Machina*. Have him be extremely tired after the combat would be good – he's not all that powerful, but he should be powerful enough that the characters are awed. No explanations should be given – he can drop hints about his order, but his background should be left as being mysterious.

Then all you need to do is mop it all up. Provide an explanation (from Ranme) of what the Naga was and what she was doing here, provide some sort of reward for the characters from the Naga's personal treasure stash, and leave the rest as something for them to wonder about.

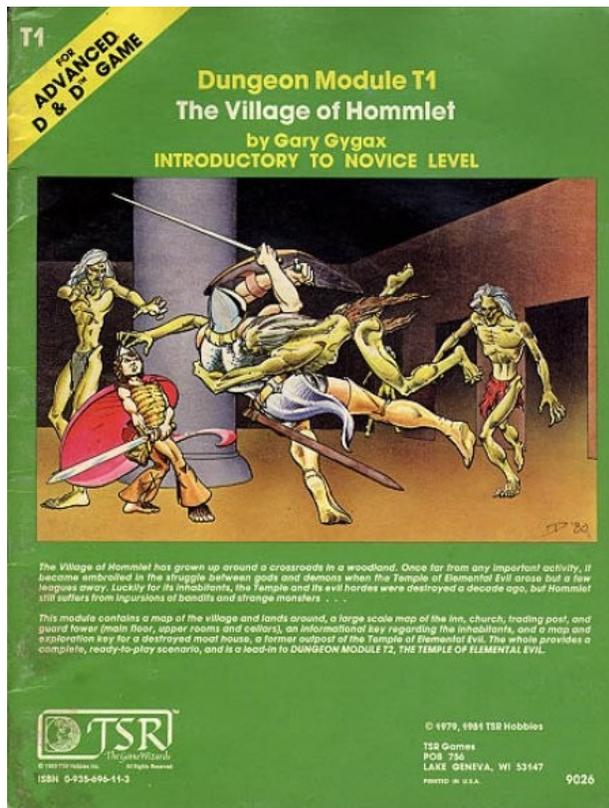
T1 – The Village of Hommler

This becomes the village of Iach Celduin. There will need to be a fair bit of changes to the map, but relatively few to the actual locations and people. The main change is that the bad guys of the village are not associated with the Temple as such, but are agents for Dieraglir of Relmether, the bandit lord (See *Lake-town* section 22.3). Add complications by making the bad guys in the Moat-House as local bandits, not aligned with Dieraglir, at the ground level, and some spies for the *Cult of the Long Night* below ground, with some ghouls thrown in for good measure.

The best way to introduce the characters to Iach Celduin is to have them arrive by water from Esgaroth, possibly as a result of information received in L1 about a *Cult of the Long Night* agent called Lareth being resident here. On the way down, they would sight the ruins of the moat-house from the river, and this should interest them enough to explore without requiring any further prompting. Any players worth their salt should immediately say, "Aha, a ruined fortification, much like at Bone Hill. I bet the bad guys are hiding out there."

You could have the barge-operator give a brief rundown on the moat-house – it was an Easterling outpost built in around TA1230 by the Logath under Grachev Hos of the Sagath, in order to monitor river traffic. They were pushed out by Vidugavia in about 1232, and the moat-house has been pretty much a ruin ever since.

With the village, the map needs to be oriented such that east is now north, i.e., the river runs from north to south. The river needs to be much broader and straighter, and as such, the mill will use a mill-race on the west side of the river rather than damming the entire river. The landing place for the river barges should be just south of the village, such that the barge carrying the characters will travel through the village before docking, and then the characters enter by walking in up the road leading past Farm Number 2. As usual, reduce various family treasures to a more appropriate amount.



Change the character names of location 2 if they are not pleasing. Both should be agents of the Lord of Buhr Ailgra. The Inn of the Welcome Wench is certainly due for a name change; also reduce the prices. Zert should be from the east rather than the south. The tailor (location 11) should not Khuzdul, but it would be interesting if he did know Sindarin as well as Kuduk. Keep him as mild-mannered, shy and retiring, but give him some elvish blood. He shouldn't be an agent of anyone, but having him known by an elf to have resided at Celebannon at some stage would be a good twist. He could even be in contact with the Elves, and could act as a go-between in needed.

The owners of the Trading Post (location 13) are Dorwinion. They can still be nasty, and as thus, in the pay of the Dieraglir as spies. Black Jay (location 19) is friendly to the wood-elves, would be a good twist – either he has fought

with them before or done some elves a favour. Having midnight meetings with shadowy figures coming from the forest would be suspicious if the players are watching – these meetings could simply be friendly get-togethers with his past-companions. He could have previously lived in the forest as a woodsman, which is where his wife and family were killed.

Drop the pretence of democracy for location 27, the Walled Manor House. He is not just the head of the council, but the major landowner and local lord. For location 30, the Lord of the village should pay for this, not outsiders. It was planned to protect the crossings and the town due to the incursions and the bandits, but the plague and effects of it have set it back. It is taking a long time to build because the money isn't there – trade has been reduced considerably post plague.

Burne and Rufus, in location 31, are both employees of the local Lord. Burne should be more of an administrator or Chamberlain rather than a wizard, but he could have some magic skills if it would fit in the campaign. Rufus will obviously be the Castellan. For location 33, materials should be coming from the Iron Hills. The spy can still exist.

Assuming the new compass directions, the road leading past the Church will be the Men-I-Naugrim leading into the forest. This road will have a branch about a mile down which will head southwards down the river. The road leading past the stonemason and the tower will lead northwards towards Londaroth. The road leading past Farmer's 1 and 4 is also the Men-I-Naugrim, and will eventually end up in the Iron Hills. The road that branches off this and heads past Farmer 2 is the Men-Dorwinion, leading past the Iach Celduin Docks and then to Buhr Chep.

Note that there are two competing religious faiths at work in Iach Celduin. The old faith, being the Cult of the Tree (Alanakyn) represented by the druid and the grove. This faith still holds true to the north of Iach Celduin. The new

faith, brought up by Gondorians, being the worship of Eru Illuviatar, represented by the Church. Iach Celduin is a melting pot of the two competing faiths, and this should be brought home to the characters.

Make sure that the characters are made aware of the situation regarding the bandits on the plains, and the effect that it is having on trade, and why the village is suffering. The fact that there may be spies present in Iach Celduin should be disclosed as well.

In terms of visiting the Moat-House, there doesn't need to be any push given by the village – the fact that they have seen it as they came down should be enough of a reason for most adventurers to go and take a look at it. The villagers could caution about swamp creatures, but they shouldn't know about any human inhabitants. They definitely shouldn't know about Lareth – the Cult should be keeping a low profile, and it should be a surprise to the Village to realise the forces established under their noses.

For the upper levels, not too many changes need to be made. The main task is to generate the group of bandits. These should be locals, just out to survive by robbing people, not linked to Dieraglir's band, though the characters may not realise this. They shouldn't be too tough, and should be trying to evade any half-decent party.

Change the giant frogs in location 1 to oversized freshwater pike. Leave the spider in location 4. Use a normal sized poisonous snake in location 12 and normal rats in 13. There is no giant tick in location 16. Leaving the lizard in 17 is optional.

The dungeons require quite a few changes, mostly to reduce the undead, and modify the other bad guys. Change the undead to ghouls, actually living creatures rather than undead, and run them similar to as described for the *L1 - Bone Hill* changes. They are not allied to any of the other inhabitants, but survive on their own. If they can pick off a character, they will, but they are not suicidal. Give them the run of areas 18, 21, 22 and 31.

Keep 19 and 20 as storerooms, but remove the corny black capes. These can be supplies laid in by the Cult of the Long Night. Remove the Ogre; he is unnecessary, and overkill for a party trying to keep a low profile. Remove the prisoners from the pantry too – the Cult is trying to keep a low profile, and should not be kidnapping anyone. The giant crayfish in the pool is probably not needed, nor is the treasure there.

For the bugbears and gnolls, change them both to two lots of five-orc squads, but from different tribes. Have the northern group be dedicated and fight to the death, but I would keep the interesting quirk of the southern group – what were the gnolls – being willing to accept a parley. They are prone to this because (a) they're a long way from home (b) ordered to stay inside and are living on dried foodstuffs (c) are generally being treated in a second-class manner (d) really dislike Lareth The Beautiful and the high-handed manner of the humans. They also keep two nice horses there for a status symbol – they don't go riding with them, but they won't let the orcs eat them.

As such, they would be quite willing to desert, providing that the characters agree to pay them their exit fee and to kill all the humans here. They will then be able to give the excuse that Lareth dismissed them from service prior to the attack, and they don't know what happened after that.

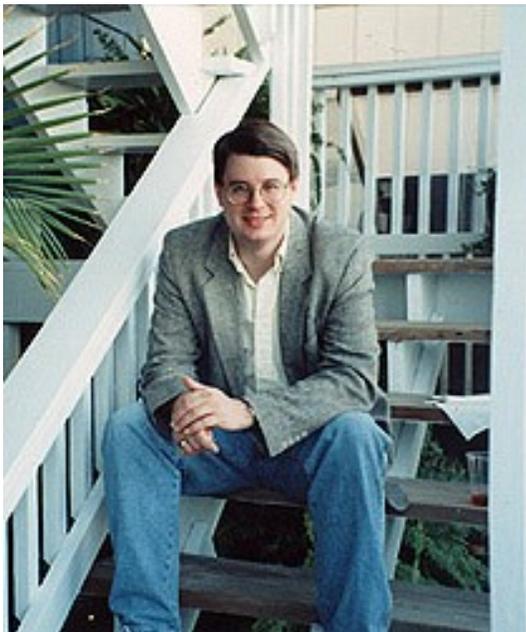
As for the humans – the members of the Cult – reduce the number to manageable levels, remove the dinky cloaks, and the silly hooting and howling – they will yell out if attacked, just like normal people. With the Lieutenant and the Master, use chain instead of plate. Reduce the amount of treasure, and have them fight to either the death or to escape. We then end up with a standard big brawl to end the whole adventure.

INTERVIEW WITH STEVE LONG

Steve, thank you for agreeing to be part of this interview. Our first question is how did you get involved in RPGs to begin with? Everyone seems to have their own unique and often funny story in this regard, so what's yours? More so, what was it that kept you involved?

I got involved in RPGs back in, oh, 1980 or '81 after I first started reading Fantasy fiction. I'd been devouring a lot of the classics — Tolkien, Lewis, Lieber, Moorcock, and so on — when I read an article about this Dungeons & Dragons game. It really intrigued me, and before long I bought the old blue-cover D&D rulebook... and the rest, as they say, is history.

I think the same things that got me interested in gaming — the creativity, the adventure, the camaraderie — are what's kept me so fascinated by it for nearly three decades now. RPGs are an endless inspiration for my creative impulses. I'm just lucky I found a way to become a part of the industry and make money at this stuff!



*How did you find the early days writing for *Adventurer's Club* and *ICE/Hero Games*?*

I had a great time in my earliest days as a game writer. I was just doing it for fun, in my spare time, but I found I had a flare for it. Back then I had other sources of income, so I didn't have to worry about hitting a precise deadline or confining myself to a specific wordcount... which has perhaps led me to develop some bad habits. But working for Hero back then was a great way to get my feet wet in the RPG industry.

Although you graduated from Duke University in law, you gave up a legal career in favour of freelance game design. Many would have considered that to be quite a brave step, both in terms of status and finances. Any regrets in that regard, or has gaming giving you enough joy to make up for any other opportunity costs?

No regrets whatsoever. I'm the poster child for "follow your heart, do what you want to do, work at a job that enthalls you rather than one that pays well." Unfortunately not everyone who takes that sort of step has it turn out as well for them as it did for me, but I'm proof that you can, sometimes, "live the dream."

How was those first few years as a freelancer? How was working with White Wolf?

I was fortunate in that when I started freelancing, (a) there was lots of freelance work available from both companies and magazines, and (b) friends in the industry, including Steve Peterson and Allen Varney, introduced me to a *lot* of people that I didn't know yet. Thanks to the contacts made at Origins/GenCon, and after a few months of proving that I could turn in a lot of quality work very quickly, I got off to a pretty good start as a freelancer. Of course, I had plenty of money saved up — I didn't quit my law practice on a whim — and that certainly made things easier.

I enjoyed working for nearly all the companies I wrote for, including White Wolf. I developed positive working relationships with several editors there, including Phil Brucato and Rob Hatch, and they were quick to give me work when they had it available.

Star Trek is obviously a big element in your life; you worked on Last Unicorn Games' edition of the Star Trek RPG and Decipher Inc, for their Star Trek RPG. Given that SF RPG titles are a bit of a graveyard in RPGs, what do you think it is about Star Trek that keeps gamers interested? Is there, from your observations, a strong crossover between Trekkies and RPGers or are gamers who play one of the various Star Trek RPGs a different breed?

I don't think there's a particularly significant crossover between gamers and Trekkies, but there's enough of one that it can make for a strong RPG line. The Star Trek Universe is a fascinating place for RPG campaigns, to my way of thinking. We have something like 750 hours of shows and movies to draw on for source material. Among those shows we've seen nearly everything — the powerful people, the lower classes, different time periods, different parts of the galaxy — but few, if any, subjects have been thoroughly explored. That's *perfect* for gaming (and for writing/designing RPGs), since you have a stepping-stone to start with but can then branch out to do your own thing. By comparison the Star Wars Universe and Babylon 5 Universe have always seemed very limited to me, though each of the three certainly has its own unique advantages and disadvantages. That's the problem with creating and selling an SF game — there are *so many* types of SF that finding one that appeals to a broad market is very difficult.

Of course along with Star Trek, you were a senior developer in the Lord of the Rings RPG, which won the 2002 Origins Award for Best Roleplaying Game. Why do you think LotR RPG won this award? Did comparisons with MERP feature in the design? And did ICE/Hero back in the days when they were working together, ever consider a Hero System Middle Earth?

You'd have to ask the Academy why LOTR RPG won that year; I think it's because it was the best RPG produced in 2001, but naturally I'm biased. In designing it, I never compared it to MERP or consulted any MERP books, since I don't own any; my work was based entirely on my readings of Tolkien's novels and short stories. As far as I know, no HERO System LOTR roleplaying game book was ever considered by ICE, though as I mentioned in my Origins Award acceptance speech, in early 2001 (months before DOJ, Inc. was a reality) I tried to convince my bosses at Decipher to do the LOTR RPG with the HERO System.

In 2001, you started DoJ Inc and eventually took over the license to Champions and the Hero System as well as Hero Games. Having come a full circle in you're now writing at an incredible rate, not the least by writing the 5th edition rules which have been tested in an industrial clothes dryer and is tested as bullet-proof. From my reckoning you've authored fifty titles for Hero System 5th edition, which is quite remarkable. For budding game writers, what is the secret of such output and discipline?

The joke answer is, "no social life." On a more serious note, though, it primarily takes discipline and focus. There are a million distractions, especially when you're working at home — the Internet, computer games, the TV, chores, and family/friends calling for help with something because they know "you're not really working." You have to sit down at the computer, block out the distractions, and WRITE. It's not always easy, but you can do it!

Finally, what comes next? A sixth edition of Hero System is being planned. Any hints on what we can expect?

I've actually posted a lot of my thoughts about the Sixth Edition on our 6E discussion boards. The starting post in each thread raises some issues for discussion, including my general opinion on each one. You may not want to read the rest of the threads — some are already hundreds of pages long! — but those first posts of mine can give you a general idea of some of the things I'm thinking of doing.

Beyond that, we're just hoping we can go on producing great books for as long as possible! Our working relationship with Cryptic Studios offers exciting new possibilities, including books printed in full color, and we have some other irons in the fire that will help make the Sixth Edition the best edition of the HERO System ever — so stay tuned!

WATCHMEN REVIEW: THE LAST LAUGH

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Zack Snyder

It's almost unbelievable to me that this flick has eventuated, has been realised and ended up on the big screen. I don't say that as a fan of the graphic novel that spawned this monstrosity, but as someone simply who's read the story and thought it could never work as an audience-pleasing, seat-filling, multiplex product. Watching *Watchmen* hasn't convinced me otherwise.

The story, well, let's just say I can't imagine it ever connecting with the kinds of audiences who go to the cinema to watch a flick chock full of super heroes. People, the vast majority of people who go to the cinema to watch a flick based on a comic book are expecting and wanting something along the lines of *Spider-Man*, *Batman*, *Iron Man*, stuff with *Man* in the title. Maybe *Dark Knight*'s incredible success has broken down some barriers and prepared people for more 'serious' and 'complicated' stories, but I don't think it's going to do much for people's appreciation of *Watchmen*.

It is a complicated book, with a very convoluted plot and difficult ending, and worst of all from the perspective of PR people and the ugly trolls who work in marketing, it's supposed to be a complete deconstruction not only of the whole comics genre, but of the characters who strap on the masks and fight crime for reasons that seem to have little to do with seeking justice. But you can't sell something like that to audiences who want to watch good guys fight bad guys and triumph in the end.

In other words, you can't sell what *Watchmen* stands for to audiences without hiding what *Watchmen* is. That it has gotten this far is amazing enough, in and of itself.

As I said previously, I don't actually think that the source material is the bee's knees and the ultimate in graphic novel storytelling and the alpha and omega of all time. I liked the book well enough, but didn't think it was that completely amazing, for all the hype since the 80s. About the only elements that struck me as extraordinary were the way the story was told through different types of "media", and the jaw-dropping ending, and how you never really had stories like this end this way in this genre. But the mechanics of the story, and the majority of the characters themselves struck me as pretty standard 2 dimensional fare.

Blown up big for the big screen, the obsessive fans were rightly terrified of how much would be lost in the translation, and rightly so. But, despite the fact that they are going to be predisposed to judging it harshly, I can't imagine anyone who hasn't read the book enjoying a single second of it. Especially since those seconds add up to over 160 minutes.

Zack Snyder is rightly criticised for making violent and intellectually empty movies that look real pretty (ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I submit a copy of *300* for your perusal), but he has approached the material here with a surprising reverence. It takes balls to approach something like a *Watchmen* big screen adaptation and to hope to come out of it with your balls intact. Choosing what to retain, what to change, and what to whittle away from the dense story must have been an almighty nightmare, and to an extent, I think the filmmakers got it mostly right. *Watchmen* is

definitely not the most enjoyable or smartest flick out there at the moment, but it's not a complete disaster either, and it has some very strong elements that I enjoyed seeing on the big screen. It is unlike any other comic book story brought to life for the screen, and with good reason. Of course, people said that about *The Dark Knight* as well, but *Watchmen* goes that extra mile in delivering something different. The problem is, I'm not really sure how much it matters.

When it gets into it, we watch a hyper-stylised fight between two men, one of whom was doing nothing more than watching people talk on the telly about the imminent possibility of nuclear war with the Russians because of Afghanistan. The grizzled, cigar-chomping man is hurled out of a window to his death. Falling with him is a bloodied smiley face badge, establishing as it does the iconic image.



The gang's all here. For now

From there the credits roll with an amazing montage of bloody and powerful almost religious tableaux set to Dylan's *The Times They Are a Changin'*, giving us a strong idea of how the world about to be brought to life for us is an alternate history of the world as could have occurred from the mid part of the 20th Century, leading up to a 1985 significantly different from the one that occurred, but similar enough to be recognisable. It gives the sense that in this alternate history, people have strapped on masks in order to fight crime, but, with one significant exception, they're just people wearing goofy costumes. And they're in decline. And Richard Nixon is still inexplicably around like he would be in any ideal world.

Though we've seen images of the dead guy from the past, we only get to know him further through the story through numerous flashbacks. Oh so many flashbacks. It seems the cigar-chewing, grassy knoll shooting, Vietnamese villager killing swaggering chap was called Edward Blake, also known as The Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), a caped crusader who fought on the side of all that was good, proper and American. Seems like someone had a problem with his swaggering ways, hence the flinging out of the window.

A strange little man (Jackie Earle Haley) with an inkblot pattern mask who talks to himself constantly, investigates the killing and believes that someone is killing off people he calls 'masks', or the former vigilante heroes that he used to run with, the most obvious former colleague lying dead at his feet. From here the plot kicks off once Rorschach, as he calls himself, starts investigating not only who killed The Comedian, but why.

The other masks, since the passing of legislation banning superhero superheroics in the 70s, have lived either in seclusion or under the broad and gentle wing of the US Government as operatives or scientists.

Out of the different generations of heroes that we see depicted, ranging back to the 40s, only one of them is actually someone with 'powers' as we understand them in the comic book sense. The rest of them are just people who put on costumes. Strange, damaged people who need the costumes to hide how deeply fucked up they are. Especially The Comedian himself, who is such a monstrous right-wing lunatic, rapist and murderer that it is impossible to either take his existence seriously or to figure out whether he really is a hero or a villain. It doesn't help that Rorschach himself, leading the investigation, seems to be even more fucked up than The Comedian.

In the context of his investigation, he decides to warn and check in with some of his former partners in crime fighting, being Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, Dr Manhattan, and Ozymandias / Adrien Veidt (Matthew Goode), the golden boy who went public when the rest of the heroes went underground.

Dr Jon Osterman, or Dr Manhattan as he is also known, played under multiple layers of CGI by Billy Crudup, is a glowing blue giant smurf who, due to an accident in some kind of field generating experiment, is a genuine super being. He is blue, of course, but also can grow to whatever size he wants and can control the atomic structure of anything, destroying things and people at will. Time is also no longer linear for him, as he sees the past, present and future simultaneously. His connection to humanity, tenuous at best since the accident, is only barely maintained by the government throwing hot chicks at him, who he goes through the motions of caring about and having sex with them whilst still being deeply involve in his experiments in developing an alternative source of free power for the world. Hooray for multitasking.

His latest squeeze is an attractive mannequin who happens to be a second generation crime fighter, being the daughter of the Bettie Grable / Bettie Page knockoff Silk Spectre (Carla Gugino). Daughter Laurie (Malin Akerman) has mommy issues. She is also, just like in the comic, attractive, grating, shallow, weepy, self-centred and quite comically goofy. It's natural that she, when the magnitude of how little Big Blue cares about her existence, and in fact the existence of every human being, would gravitate to another male character who's as transparently shallow and wooden as she is, being impotence spokesman and owl worshipper Nite Owl / Dan Frieberg (Patrick Wilson). She and Dan coyly gravitate towards each other, until it becomes that Dan is impotent without his costume, and Laurie is desperate to shack up with anyone now that her blue guy is gone.

When Dr Manhattan, whose very existence acts as a nuclear deterrent against the ambitions of the Russians, mindful as they are that he could march into Moscow and vaporise them all like he did in Vietnam, leaves Earth, the world verges on the brink of total nuclear destruction. Something has to happen, as the clock ticks closer to midnight, or all life on the planet will end. Thankfully, someone has a plan, but the plan is one of those textbook scenarios whereby the treatment might be far worse than the disease. Far worse.

The humour in the film is almost uniformly of the sardonic variety, and that doesn't make for lots of laughs. That's not a problem from my point of view, since it is such 'serious' subject matter as giant blue guys and lesbian superheroes, and guys with panties on their faces running around causing as many crimes as they solve. But it means it's a bit of a drag for an audience. I did get a laugh from Adrian Veidt talking to a group of executives with the gentle strains of Tears for Fears *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* tinkling in the background. Also, the line "Superman exists, and he's American!" made me laugh for all the right and wrong reasons. Oh, and it's hard not to laugh when Dr Manhattan and The Comedian are killing Vietcong to the gentle strains of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyrie*.

The film putters along for most of its length, excising plenty of extraneous stuff (like the some would say crucial element of the kid reading the pirate comic *The Tale of the Black Freighter* which parallels the main themes strongly), as it goes along to its merry conclusion, but for me it was never boring. It was interesting, even if it wasn't exactly riveting. Clearly, apart from wanting to replicate the look of almost every single panel from the comic, Snyder's interest is usually more towards developing and lovingly rendering action as opposed to dramatic scenes. And how can you really blame him: when lame characters as hokey and cheesy as Nite Owl and Silk Spectre II are talking to each other, muttering lame dialogue, it's a relief to then see them beating up or killing people or fucking. Yes, that's right, simulated fucking to the tune of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah!* That's not to take away anything from the actors, because I think they do all right with pretty ordinary characters, which are only being true to their paper counterparts. But my problem with some of their 'big' scenes, like the alley way mugging and their attempt to break Rorschach out of prison, is that it completely goes against the point of the comic.

In the comic, as in reality, the kinds of people who wear the kinds of outfits that these two wear look and are goofy. By turning them into hyper-stylised killing machines, and in effect trying to make them look less goofy by making them look badass, it completely misrepresents the book. These are goofy people who dress up goofily for goofy, often pathetic, sometimes sociopathic reasons. It's not a coincidence that the only one who doesn't wear any costume is the one who's the 'true' superhero, in fact he spends most of the flick naked. But it sure does look pretty, I guess, to have them snapping limbs and necks like there's no tomorrow, if you're into that sort of thing.

Rorschach himself, ably played by a guy who looks like he was born to play Rorschach and his unmasked / unfaced self Walter Kovacs, is superbly rendered, and completely true to the comic, in all his sociopathic glory. The thing is, it's such an ugly character (I don't mean his appearance), so sickening in his poisoned and rotting view of the world, that he becomes frightening to hang around. His time to shine, which comes before and after he is arrested and sent to prison, is as disturbing yet empty as anything I've seen in any horror film in the last few years.

Not just the prison violence, which is very 300 and cheesy, but moreso the conversation with the prison psychiatrist, delving into Rorschach's complete psychotic break from reality, which comes from viewing a reality so sickening that madness is probably the most comforting option. It is not surprising, but equally disturbing, that this character is the one most audiences are going to admire and identify with. That he is the moral centre of the movie is the most disturbing element of all.

The way Dr Manhattan is rendered, both visually and dramatically, is very strong. If they got nothing else right, they got this major part of the story right. Though every review seems to overemphasise the fact that he is often cock-out naked, as in completely naked, the self-same reviews usually fail to point out the reason why. Clothing is a convention for him, solely for the considerations of others, and so the less he cares about humanity, the less he cares about them seeing his blue equipment. His time on Mars, the voice, everything to do with him they get right, especially to the extent that he is not an emotionless being, though close to being a god, he is anything but. And that lingering affection he might still have, the wonderment he might still feel at the existence of the women in his life, whether it is Laurie now or Janie back in the 50s when he was still human, is the one thing that might save humanity. Or damn us to hell. Whichever, it's fine by me.

The ending is different from the comic, in that the mechanics of what the big bad villain / hero's plan is, are substantially different in the flick, but the truth is, whilst the ending of the comic book is sombre and shocking, the mechanics were stupid. And I use the term 'mechanics' to avoid spoiling something that I don't think should be spoiled

for either the book or the film. The intent, though, is the same, in that someone creates a situation where a great number of deaths might occur, to prevent a greater number of deaths from occurring. The morality of the actions becomes almost pointless when you talk about the potential for so many deaths, but the ending is true to the characters involved.

The ending still gets to me, after all these years, though I'm not sure whether the packed audience I saw the flick with on opening night gave a damn. When I first read the ending on the page, I was stunned, flabbergasted, gaping open-mouthed. The audience I saw the flick with last Thursday walked out of the cinema muttering 'eh, it was all right.' Eh, it was ALL RIGHT? You feel like fucking shaking these people by their shoulders. They're so accustomed to their tales being spun out to them in a belaboured, camera shaking fashion and labelled as 'dark' just because the imagery literally is dark and gloomy. When confronted with an ending that couldn't have been any darker if President Obama himself had come out with a machete and killed everyone who voted for him, they shrug nonchalantly and go back to their popcorn.

Not the reaction I was expecting. How jaded these audiences have become, to the extent where the deconstructed version of superhero stories and the regular superhero stories are indistinguishable, and greeted with the same vague level of interest. Sure, so it's not as thrilling, and despite looking great, isn't as overall entertaining as *The Dark Knight*. It doesn't have a performance or a character as seductively evil as Heath Ledger's Joker. It does, for me, have a far more interesting, convoluted and more coherent story, and I didn't find its length a chore at all. That's not to ignore the deficiencies and clichés in the characterisations, most of which I blame the source material for.

Perhaps Snyder's approach in general was too statistical or reverential, maybe action is overemphasised at the expense of character, but I don't really care. I think it's more important to entertain audiences than bore them silly with wretched adherence to some sacred text. I don't think the story could or would have been adapted in any better way, and it's enough, it really is, for me, that's it's as good as it is. I don't think it absolutely had to be adapted into a film version anyway, since it's just another revenue stream for people that don't need the extra money anyway, especially in these times of recession and such. But I'm certainly happy with it for what it is. The question now, since its release into an unfeeling, uncaring world is not so much Who Watches the Watchers, but Who Will Watch *Watchmen* and Enjoy It? Few methinks, only but a few, but at least I liked it.

An expanded version of this review is available at: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/node/756>

LORD ORCUS LISTENS!

by Steve Saunders

“Spring is in the Air... Like a Flying Severed Head”

I do believe the title says it all. Spring IS in the air, even right here where my personal secretary lives, on Vancouver Island. Yeah, the igloo has to be scrubbed from time to time, and the polar bears are always tried to hog the nicer weather, but things are pretty good.

Anyhowlitzer, let's get on with the show. You have already read some fine material from various mortal and abmortal contributors and there's no sense in mucking up the momentum with a rambling, semi-sensical intro full of stories like the one concerning how I once lost a pizza to eleven very angry clockwork dire weasels, or how I tried to file a lawsuit against a forum-denizen because he suggested I “die in a fire” (the cad!), and I definitely won't mention that one time where made the offhand remark to Velia that she'd look hot in a chainmail bikini. Then there's my rant on how much I despise Twitter. My mortal minions use the damned thing and it pains me each time they use the word “tweet” in their common parlance. I have a 457 page, tweet-fueled rage of hate waiting for the next fool who suggests that I start an account. But if I do, you can be certain it will be “@dieinafire”.

So, no more delays! It's not like that one time where Nergal had us miss our appointment with Asmodeus in Belgium because he just HAD to eat every pastry on that one street full of those Belgian people wearing Belgian things. Or was it in Cormyr? Oh, jeez, these things become a blur. Besides, I can rarely tell the difference between Cormyr and Belgium even on my best days.

Some of you have written in and I have dutifully answered your queries. Be sure to drop me a line if YOU have a question. Yes, I want to hear from YOU. I want you gaming questions, your life questions, your food questions. But no questions about kittens. Please.

No, I will *not* tell you why.

Okay... Show. Road. Now!

Oh, look! I love politicians...

"Dear Lord Orcus,

I am a governing Senator in a mineral-rich country with sluggish Internet connectivity. Recently I have discovered that there is material that I consider unsuitable being passed around the information superhighway. I have decided that to protect the moral fibre of the country I need to block such material, although I will not specify what these sites are. The first rule of censorship is that you cannot talk about censorship, Haw! Haw!

Some people have told me to "Go to hell!" over this, but I personally feel divinely inspired, indeed fulfilling "Opus Dei" or, "the work of God". What do you think Mr. Orcus? Do I belong in heaven or in hell?

*Yours sincerely,
Senator Steven Conroy"*

Well, Mr. Conroy, you've already failed your saving throw vs. Being a Complete Jerk by wanting to protect “fibre” of all things— and in addition to that it's ORCUS Dei! I'm quite sure none of us want you in hell (we DO have standards, after all) and heaven is usually reserved for squirrels only, I hear. You may have to move to Detroit, which I hear is a

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great little town full of friendly people and has absolutely no crime. Yes, Mr. Conroy, please go to Detroit. You deserve to.

“Dear Lord Orcus, you previously recommended people read 11th Hour, but it’s no longer being published is there some new black and white UK comics anthology that you could recommend instead?”

*Cheers,
Shameless Self Promoter.”*

No.

Hah! I’m just messing with you. But of course I have a suggestion! Look for Faster Than Light #1 hitting the internets and stands soon. FTL is full of great comic shorts from a variety of incredibly talented mortal scum. Keep up with the info here: <http://www.orangutancomics.co.uk/>

Uh-oh. Shadowrun question. Incoming!

“Dear Lord Orcus,

*In Shadowrun, what kind of Adept is the best Adept?
Should I spend money on a Doc Wagon, or force the Mage to learn healing spells?”*

Andrew Brown from Texas”

Andrew, all your mage is really good for is summoning demons and subsequently providing his yummy heart as a snack. Adepts, schmedepts. Are any of them adept with a high-velocity rifle at a long range? How about being adept enough to get other adepts hired on so that they can die instead of you? The best kind of Adept is no Adept, I feel. Unless you have a lot of mustard.

And yeah, go for the Doc Wagon! Get two if you can... and make them +5 or better!

Looks like it’s time to break that SAN score, kids...

“Dear Mighty Lord Orcus,

I am at a loss as to what to play on boardgaming nights with my friends. Is there anything out there that can get this guy who keeps eyeing my wife eaten alive, as well as have his shrieking soul torn to bits by extradimensional horrors both great and small?”

*Many Thanks,
Randy from New England”*

It’s a good thing you wrote to me, Randy! I cannot tell you how amazing Fantasy Flight Games’ Arkham Horror is to play. It’s quite possibly the best boardgame ever created. Oh, sure, the Chaosium edition was grand; but FFG have really outdone themselves this time. If I could sum up Arkham Horror in a nutshell: It is a game of excellent Cthulhian dynamics and mood, intricately weaving together subtle complexity with downright fun. The rules make this game a fine offering of elegant composition and structure. Also it makes me damn hungry. If you haven’t picked this game up, go out and do so now. It also makes Demogorgon cry— always a plus.

“Dear Lord Orcus,

*When you go to a Comic Book Convention (or gaming convention) what do *you* dress up as?*

*Yr. Pal,
Apis”*

Currently I like to dress-up as slightly mad Caucasian male writer who’s in his early 30s. I wear a brown wig and tend to talk a lot and really, really loudly. I even wear this get-up when I’m out drinking later on in the evening. Sometimes I end up eating children just to make the costume feel more “real”.

“Lord Orcus,

Why must the flesh of the living be so gosh-darned tasty?

*Love,
An Arcane Punk”*

It is how nature intends, my friend. Those screams? They are meat-sounds of joy. Wow! I’m really hungry now. I think after I’m done looking at the Tormented Artifacts (<http://www.tormentedartifacts.com/>) site here I’ll go rustle up myself some savory suburbanites.

“Dear Lord Orcus,

*What are some of your favorite RPG games and gamebooks right now?
And do you play
any videogames?
Signed,
Your Mom”*

Hmmm... A nice, simple question. The daemon-guys and I are always playing new and different things, but currently here are the games and gamebooks that make me incredibly happy when I see them on my rather ornate bookshelves in no order whatsoever:

The Black Company Campaign Setting (Green Ronin)
Warhammer 40k: Dark Heresy Creatures Anathema (Fantasy Flight Games)
The Player’s Guide to the Wilderlands (Judges Guild)
Libris Mortis (WotC; this book always gets a mention)
Traveller (Mongoose Edition)
HackMaster Gamemaster’s Guide (Kenzer & Co)
Basic Role-Playing 4th edition (Chaosium)
Tunnels and Trolls 7th edition (Flying Buffalo)
GURPS WWII: Weird War II (Steve Jackson Games)
The Bonegarden (Necromancer Games)
Goods & Gear (Kenzer & Co)
S. Petersen’s Field Guide to Cthulhu Monsters (Chaosium)



Call of Cthulhu (pick an edition— any edition!; Chaosium)
Wraith Recon (Mongoose Games)
Xcrawl (Goodman Games)
Tales from the Floating Vagabond (Avalon Hill)

I'll stop there. But trust me: I love a lot of games. Feel free to write in and suggest something for me and my abyssal companions to play!

The videogame I'm playing the heck out of right now is **Fallout 3**. My only disappointment is that I can only go so far down with bad karma. Bright side? Human flesh is abundant and my character (she's adorable!) can take ears for money and become a cannibal! Thank you, videogames of today, for protecting everyone's moral fibre.

Heeeeeeeeey! I'm getting the feeling you are NOT my mom, gentle reader.

Let's move on.

“Dear Lord Orcus,

Why do people become addicted to World of Warcraft? I mean, what's the appeal? And what is the best way to detox someone if they become hooked on this bugger of a game?

*Best,
WoWidow”*

I have no idea why people like that soul-sucking and terrible exercise in costly and inane repetition. It's baffling and quite, quite sad. That said, if you want to get them off this silly-smack, I encourage you to introduce these sad dregs of human society to tabletop roleplaying games. Nothing brings more joy and honor to someone's tiny, shriveled heart more than slinging some dice from friends and saving the princess for the kobold stew.
Or *from*. It's your game, I suppose.

Failing that, I suggest employing a crowbar “judiciously” and fervently. And remember: **Be creative!**

“Lord Orcus,

I have a few questions, if you don't mind, Dread Lord... How can I get the best out of a discount zombie? If my zombie burns off all its flesh can I resell it as a good skeleton? What skeleton house training tricks can you recomend? Crypt fiends, indoor pets?

Jaeger Wells, Space Marine”

No problemo, Jaeger! I'm happy to help out. Let's tackle your zombie query... First, you need to make sure your lovely zombie can handle a decent current. After a little bit of testing and finding that your undead pet is sturdy enough, you need to wrap him in aluminum foil with a back-mounted battery charge pack. Then you make sure an industrial strength car-battery or something similar is on that sucker. Next, run him to the nearest public, full-to-capacity swimming pool and have him jump in.

Extra points if you arm him with a weedwhacker. Massive extra points if you get him to swing around the Falchion of Azkikur howling “SHAZAAAAM CHOP!”

If your zombie's flesh is all burned off (which may be the case if you follow the advice I just gave) then you will be pleased to know that there is a great secondary market for previously immolated skeletons. If your zombie had a fine pedigree, you can get a fine price for its skeleton in Bolivia, as they allow for it to carry over, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the zombie-to-skeleton event. Otherwise, your Z's pedigree will have no value. But! Never fear, your skeleton should still fetch a nice price on Necro-Bay. Good luck and high bids if you go that route!

Animated skeleton house training tricks? Well, there's the Harryhausen Special, which includes dance numbers and back massages. You should be able to find out all about it on Wikipedia or somesuch. I also suggest finding *Tobin's Tricks and Treats: A Guide* at your friendly local bookstore.

What's... this...?

"Lord Orcus,

What makes you think that you are the authority on all things gaming? I challenge your authority my good sir, and deliver you a shattering blow with my +50 Blade of Very Stinging Pain!

Now you are vanquished, I shall be running things around here. First order of business, more wenches and mead! Bow down before your new leader!

What's that you say? That was actually my -10 Sword of Brittle Shattering? Ouch, a piece broke off and went in my eye! Well, I'm off to the eye Doctor now. Next time Orcus, next time...

*Yours in Hell,
Baron Ghastly"*

Oh, Baron Ghastly. It's *you*. You never give up, do you! Well, I'll show you... I'll show you PAIN—

Wait. More wenches and mead? Okay! **Great** idea! As soon as you get back from the ER, come join us. And leave any sharp objects at home!

"Hey Orcus,

What's wrong with the geo-political system of modern man?

Rev. Beau Hitt"

Two things, Beau: **THAC0** and **everything else**.

That's it for this quarterly edition of **LORD ORCUS LISTENS!** Remember, if you have a question you'd like me to tackle or just want to say "hi" please send electronic correspondence to my infernal secretary at the following address: steve@orcusville.com

Be sure to visit <http://www.orcusville.com> to check out the Orcusville webcomic! We've been on hiatus for a little while, but now that I've consumed most of the Manitobian population, I feel I can get some work done for a change.

And if you are really, *really* bored, be sure to see what <http://www.baconlord.com> has to offer by way of links concerning my aforementioned infernal secretary.

Until next time, dear readers: stay tasty.

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PUZZLE SOLUTION

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***Interview with Dennis B. Sustare ...
Heroes of Olympus and Swordbearer
Retrospective ... Young Gods: A
Spelljammer, Planescape and Champions
Mash-Up ... Designer's Notes for
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