RPG REVIEW

Issue #31, June 2016

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The Old School Revolution

Interview with Ken St. Andre ... Reviews of Castles & Crusades, OSRIC, Basic Fantasy, Backswords & Bucklers... Papers and Paychecks Designer's Notes ... The Green Isles for D&D ... Tunnels & Trolls Bestiary ... RuneQuest Skill Quality ... Dreamscape for Labyrinth Lord ... The Thing with Dragons ... John Carter RPG Playtest ... Retro Computer Games ... Pride and Prejudice with Zombies ... and much more!

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Editorial and Letters

RPG Review Cooperative News

The RPG Review Cooperative has had another good several weeks since our last journal report. The newsletter, *Crux Australi*, and our monthly movie nights for those based where our Association is founded. We continue to operate our Github for design, operate an online store for members to sell their surplus gaming items, and advertise a dozen existing game sessions organised by members. Following donations by several members, our library is seeing some use now. With our ISSN the journal is now part of the Australian National Library archives, and with the purchase of a bulk of ISBNs we're now in the (cooperative) publishing business as well.

A social occasion (and training) with the Melbourne Swordplay Guild (the directory of the Guild is a new member of the Cooperative) was a fascinating evening out and taught us a great deal about one of the games reviewed here – Backswords and Bucklers.

Our big issue we want to promote between now and the next issue is our inaugural publication (Papers and Paychecks), which will feature cover-art from RPG artist Dan "Smif" Smith, famous for his work with GURPS third edition and associated supplements. Dan has also his own product coming out and we're making every effort to promote it as well:

Battle of the Bands is, an all ages, fun, "screw you" type card/dice game for 2-6 players. (with expansions, up to 10 players!) Start your band and destroy your opponents onstage! (And win, if you need to do that sort of

thing.)

https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/150522358/battle-of-the-bands-the-deluxe-edition-card-game

Letter; Philosophical Zombies of Eclipse Phase

I myself was unaware of *Eclipse Phase* RPG, the premise is outstanding, it pushes a key issue of role-playing experience to a whole brave new world (one, as that of the novel, simultaneously stimulating and horrific). It remembers me of the Theseus ship paradox. From my side I'm inclined to believe that the continuity of identity over different consciences or bodies is a issue to be determined in a case by case basis; when the new conscience remembers everything that her original knew until the moment of death, from a materialist point of view the identity or individual should be considered one and the same; on the other hand, when a backup is used and the new consciences know nothing about a lot the has happened to the original in a significant period of time, from the same point of view the identity or individual cleraly should not be considered the one and the same with the original - an undead as yourself put it, we could say. There are other ways to see/resolve the issue. For instance, up to date philosophy is unable to affirm if, even from one instants to another, for sure, an individual remains the same, given that in each passing moment he is, if not completely, at least practically or a little different...

Fábio Romeiro Gullo, Sao Paulo, Brazil

There are many ways to interpret the problem of consciousness in *Eclipse Phase*. As it is written it assumes a degree of relatively problem free transference of consciousness between bodies (subject to various assimilation issues). Of course, a GM can take an aspect of the title – referring to an infection of a cell prior to identification of that infection – and gradually a reduced consciousness among those who have had a bodily transfer until they act like people, talk like people, but have no intuition or sense of qualitative experience. They are "dead" inside.

Editorial; The Old School Revolution

Welcome to the thirty-first issue of RPG Review with a special emphasis on the "Old School Revolution [Reference, Revival, Renaissance, Reformation, Resurrection]". Of course there is argument about what the term means, and what should be included. Is is restricted to tabletop RPGs alone? If it is limited to tabletop RPGs what games should be included? Dungeons and Dragons is invariably included, but what others? Tunnels and Trolls? RuneQuest? Traveller? How big is this OSR movement? How long will it last? What will come after it, if anything?

It would be very remiss of RPG Review not to engage in this discussion, after all there are now several significant RPGs that unambigiously come under the "Old School" label such as Castles and Crusades, the explicitly-entitled Old School Index and Resource Compilation, Hackmaster, and Labyrinth Lord. According to an EnWorld's regular aggregator (http://www.enworld.org/forum/hotgames.php) places OSR games are the fourth-most popular system in online game-related discussions, behind D&D5thEd, Pathfinder, and WoD and ahead of D&D3/3.5, Exalted, Savage Worlds, GURPS, etc. Mind you, OSR itself is an aggregate of over 150 games so that probably has something to do with it.

So let's start with some definitions. "Old school" is a vernacular term to refer to something that is from a previous or originating era - a related term being "classic". It is a term of respect as it associates that there are elements from that period, operating without a filter of years of experience, which are held in high regard because people were trying to find their way. It is, of course, referenced extensively in contemporary popular music whether as "Old-school Hip Hop" or as the Alice Cooper collection.

That's the relatively easy part of the definition. What does the "R" stand for? Well, as the various references suggested, it varies. For some it is a "revival", recapturing the nostaligic feeling of "this is what it was like when the industry was

younger", and the intellectual spirit as "renaissance". Part of that definition, and usually left-out, is "reaction", a sense of opposition to contemporary trends in design, and, as a response "revolution", seeking to overthrow the established order of things.

These things in consideration some initial suggestions can be offered. The OSR is a primarily reaction against the rules-heavy detail of Dungeons and Dragons 3.x and yet, also inspired by the flexibility that was allowed by the Open Game License to create the opportunity in the first place. There's a beautiful separation between game system and business system from the outset.

From the game system side of the equation, it wanted a return to the degree of flexibility that was often available in older games, where by necessity a referee was required to make off-the-cuff decisions to continue play. For others there was a need for continuity. They had been playing D&D/AD&D for decades and when D&D 3.x came out, backwards compatibility became a great deal of harder. To express in business terms, the OSR filled a niche that was missing in the D&D3.x/4 th edition flavour.

From the business side of the equation there was an adherence to the independent game design approach. Not to say that the bigger OSR games are not marching along in their own right as a serious (if small) business, but rather that a lot have a certain street-level punk-rock independence, and sometimes even aesthetic. Which does raise the question of their capacity as an on-going concern. Ron Edward's famous sympathetic essay of 2002, on "Fantasy Heartbreakers" describes games from the preceding decade which were variants on Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. Edwards made the point that he didn't think any of these were sufficiently innovative to be a lasting business proposition. Of course, as independent game designers the Forge-era would now know with added clarity, with patronage models it longer matters if a game isn't popular in a year's time - it's paid for its own publishing costs. Which is just fine if you don't intend to be running a major game company. If you do want to break big, you need be developing something that is innovative, comprehensive, and has substantial financial backing. To cite (extensively) from the essay:

I*t is killing, just killing, to contemplate the authors' naivete about the actual market and nature of RPGs as a business. Consider their status from the perspective of the three-tier system of marketing. As fantasy games, they were competing with TSR. As "lines," they were competing not only with TSR but also with such aggressive line-developers as White Wolf, AEG, and FASA (at the time). As lower-budget labors of love, they offer neither the coffee-table degree of glitz as single objects, nor the promise of multiple sequential objects, that the bigger companies presented.*

So economics is the second reason that these games break my heart: basically, they were and are doomed. The world of the 1990s was no longer a place in which a house-rules variant of D&D can take wings in the marketplace and fly. They're dead. The older ones' websites are fading or absent, and the books are in the half-off boxes. I very much fear that the more recent ones will go the same way.

Why? Because they are not selling direct to end-users, they are selling to the tiers...

Of course, in encouraging "Heart Breakers" (and it's often overlooked that Edwards was doing that), or "Old School Revolution" games, it is important to be aware of the deficincies of both their source material and their contemporary expressions. The radical turn in D&D3.x occurred for good design reasons and indeed was a necessity revival in the industry in its own right. For example a greater consistency in design and the way various rules fitted together, a removal of arbitrary limits, and of strange edge case complexity made significant differences to the way the game has been played. There were few people who played with the weapon modifiers versus armour class in AD&D, fewer still who used weapon speed factor, and close to nobody who used the unarmed combat rules.

When people are nostalgic about AD&D, they must remember that a great deal of "house rules" and "hand waving" was carried out due to system complexity, contradictions, and confusion. The following is a famous example from Issue 133 of *Dragon* magazine which describes an impossible situation:

Balin, the fearless svirfneblin, moved quietly down the corridor. Somewhere ahead lurked his foe, a drow elf. Balin carefully edged around a corner and was suddenly face-to-face with his foe. . . .
Player 1: "Okay, Balin surprises on 9 in 10. Is he surprised?"
Player 2: "Hey, wait a minute! I've got a drow elf who's only surprised on 1 in 8. How can Balin surprise my drow on 9 in 10?"
DM: "Well, uh, um. . . ."

But "Old School" in roleplaying doesn't just mean AD&D. There was various incarnations of D&D before and after that publication for starters, and OSR games often find inspiration from them (indeed, in an almost "holier-than-thou" approach, there has been at one claim that the real old-school ended with the introduction of the Thief character class and its skills). But outside these games, one may wonder why there hasn't been and old-school Tunnels & Trolls, whereas there are plenty of old-school Traveller fans ("classic Traveller"), just as there are "classic Rolemaster" (first and second) versus more modern editions, and certainly an ongoing "classic RuneQuest" (second and third editions).

In part this is arguably due to "grognard capture", to use Greg Costikyan's phrase. Grognards, the old veteran soldiers, the Napoleonic Imperial Guard (Grenadiers à pied de la Garde Impériale), can capture a game and by being the most dedicated and experienced players - they can exclude others and their innovations. Tunnels & Trolls has managed to avoid this by engaging in incremental change with a high level of backwards compatibility. By comparison, for Rolemaster the trend was more tragic; the first edition - despite being a thing of great beauty - needed a second edition, which then took the path of several Companions of optional rules. Which was fine in itself, but it also meant that after several years it become bifurcated several times over and was increasingly unwieldy. A reboot was arguably necessary, but it also split the game's allegiences.

Traveller is an interesting and mixed case. The original game came across as setting-light and with a innovative rules system. The following implementation of the game, MegaTraveller, was an extension of the game and the setting whilst whilst providing some glorious additionl detail also provided extra complexity. Traveller The New Era was another radical twist in the game setting and an entirely different ruleset. Then there was T4, GURPS Traveller, Traveller 20, Traveller Hero, Mongoose Traveller (arguably an OSR for Traveller), and Traveller5. It is not surprising that there are those who wish to harken back to days when things were simpler.

All this said, this issue of the RPG Review journal will do its level best to to engage in a critical review and provide useful supplements for a variety of OSR-aligned games. Following our usual Cooperative update, we are deeply honoured to have Ken St Andre, author of Tunnels and Trolls, the second modern role-playing game ever published, as a our subject. This is followed by a small number of reviews (OSRIC, Castles and Crusades, Mongoose Traveller) by yours truly, plus some designer's notes for a new OSR game, Papers and Paychecks.

This is followed by a review of the Elizabethean-era OSR game Backswords and Bucklers by Andrew Daborn, a player's guide for the Green Isles D&D 5th edition game both by Karl Brown, a skill quality system for RQ2 by Ian Bordhart, a fascinating conversation of Hackmaster by Paul Smith and friends, a terrifying setting for Labyrinth Lord by Nicolas Moll, a humour piece about D&D from Ursula Vernon, playtest notes for the John Carter RPG by Martin Plowman, and finally a old-school computer games review by Andrew Pam, and a review of Pride and Prejudice with Zombies by Andrew Moshos.

As you can see, the issue is heavily orientated towards several major OSR games, but also with a couple of bordlerline cases (e.g., D&D 5th edition arguably includes a lot of OSR elements). There are exceptions (Ursula's piece is based around D&D 3.x, but you'll soon see why that is not the issue), and of course, there is a hat-tip to some entirely new game approaches, the John Carter RPG.

Lev Lafayette, lev@rpgreview.net

Ken St. Andrew Interview

with Ken St. Andre

Ken St. Andre is one of the earliest RPG game designers, responsible for the second RPG to be published, after Dungeons & Dragons, with Tunnels and Trolls. That game has undergone may editions, which can be broadly categorized as 7 different versions, and Ken was responsible for ten different scenario supplements for that game as well. In addition, he is the co-author of Stormbringer with Steve Perrin, the author of Monsters! Monsters!, the Tunnels and Trolls spin-off, the second science fiction RPG (after Metamorphosis Alpha), Starfaring. Ken was also the lead author to the Shadowrun scenario pack, Harlequin, and lead designer for the computer roleplaying game Wasteland, 1988.

Hi Ken, welcome to RPG Review.

Thank you, Lev, glad to be here.

This first question has been asked many times, and it is the stuff of legend. Nevertheless it is worth repeating here. The story is that you encountered Dungeons & Dragons in 1975, found the rules less than optimal, and so you wrote, printed, your own game in April 1975, and eventually leading Flying Buffalo Inc. to release a second edition in June 1975. This must of have been pretty heady days. Can you describe your thinking when you encountered D&D and the inspiration to design your own game?

I have always been a big fantasy fan. I was reading Conan stories in Gnome Press editions as early as 1964. I had already invented my own Tarzan, John Carter, and Star Trek board games before 1970. I started hearing about D & D in December 1974. It sounded like something I would enjoy playing. I finally saw a white box copy on a Friday night in April of 1974. I sat down and examined it for a couple of hours. A lot of it made no sense to me. Why were they moving in inches? Where did they get all the weird poly-dice and why use them anyway? Why warriors, wizards, and clerics? Why did wizards forget spells after using them once? I remember saying to myself, "What a great idea! What a terrible way to do it! I will make a game that I can play."

Tunnels & Trolls included a lot of rules modifications, simplifications, and efficiencies - it only uses d6s, it has a simple set of character classes, it uses armour absorption for damage, and spell points for magic. These latter two cases are of interest as it appears that they made their way into RuneQuest. Did you have much communication with the authors of that game prior to its publication?

At that time I had no communication with Chaosium though we were all sort of in science fiction fandom, and I had seen Greg Stafford's White Bear and Red Moon Dragon Pass game. The first edition of Runequest was dedicated to Gary and Dave and me, and I was immensely pleased to be included. I don't know how much influence I had on Greg's game design, but he was quite capable of coming up with all the ideas in the game on his own. Later I met Greg Stafford, and Steve Perrin, and Charley Krank and Ray Greer and George MacDonald and Steve Henderson and Bruce Harlick and all those California guys and became good friends with them all.

Later on you would go to co-author Stormbringer with Steve Perrin. Whilst your other games have a degree of "impish humour", Stormbringer has a rather different disposition. Was it a significant change to design an RPG that was so different in style? What were you main contributions to that game? It is rumoured that you added encouragement to the rather high level of randomness.

All of the basic ideas for the Stormbringer game were mine except the structure of the Law vs. Chaos deity systems. I based my game designs on the fiction of Michael Moorcock and what Greg had already done with Runequest. I rebelled against the basic D20 structure of the game and turned it into a true D100 game—the first D100 game, I think. I wanted the game to have the same tone as Moorcock's writings, so bringing a comical approach to the game the way I did with T & T was never an option.

Humour has been a very big part of your games - perhaps most famously the spell names of Tunnels and Trolls - but also evident in Starfaring and in the whimsical descriptions in Monster! Monsters!, yet this also had the serious issue of "monster equality" in the game. What do you see as the role of humour and whimsy in RPGs? How would your approach differ to, say, Greg Costikyan?

I don't know. I don't have any deep philosophy on this. T & T was always meant to be a game, not a simulation. Games should be fun, and you know people are having fun when they're laughing. The Starfaring rules as I wrote them were not all that funny, but I met Ernest Hogan at a California sf convention, loved his wacky art, and tapped him to do original illustrations for Starfaring. When you integrate his bold cartoonish illos with my text dealing with tentacle slish monsters, star crystals, and intelligent ships, you get something pretty wild and funny.

Of course, the setting of the computer game Wasteland (1988) is not exactly a work of humour. How different was designing that game to writing an RPG? What were your contributions and those of your fellow designers, Liz Danforth and Mike Stackpole?

Doing Wasteland was primarily a job of story writing and level design. For example, I designed everything in the town of Qwartz and also Las Vegas, and a lot of what was in Needles. That's basic scenario design. Start with graph paper, draw things on it—streets, buildings, obstacles, then fill it in with characters. I sold Bryan Fargo on Wasteland when I told him the basic story that made good use of all corners of the map. The map got more complicated when Mike Stackpole, Liz Danforth, and Dan Carver each added their own special places to it, but even so they mostly filled in with obstacles and characters that made the game longer and deeper. The actual game rules were T & T combat and saving rolls along with MSPE skills. Alan Pavlish and his friends turned my tabletop mechanics into computer mechanics and Wasteland was created.

Because of its era, Wasteland was a single-player game. Likewise Tunnels & Trolls became famous for its provision of solo game adventures. In our highly-connected world, it would seem that the solo adventure game has run its race. Or do you think there is some potential for such games in this time? What format would they take?

The solo adventure is, imho, by no means at the end of its lifespan. In fact, I'll be part of a team that is bringing it back in a big way later this year. Go take a look at http://www.metaarcade.com to get early news on the T & T phone app that will

enable players to play deep interactive rpg adventures on their phones & tablets. The first prototype demonstration application will be my Naked Doom dungeon, originally written in 1976 and coming back for new life now in 2016

What is it with the edition and publication ordering of Tunnels & Trolls? I understand that there was some strain between yourself and Flying Buffalo at certain points at the game's publication, but it has become very hard to follow - there seems to be three current editions available "The Mythical Sixth edition" (Outlaw Press, 2007, 2009), the seventh edition (Fiery Dragon, 2008), and the fifth edition (and 5.5) (Flying Buffalo, 2005). What is the current state of publication and future plans?

While Rick Loomis, CEO of Flying Buffao, and I have had differences of opinion from time to time, we always remained friends and found ways to work out our disagreements. Your estimate of what is currently available for Tunnels & Trolls is wildly inaccurate. Right now the only legitimate current version of T & T in print is Deluxe Tunnels and Trolls. Flying Buffalo printed and expanded & corrected edition of the 5th edition in 2005, the same time that Fiery Dragon brought out the 30th anniversary (ie.) 7th edition. 7th edition was changed slightly to a 7.5 edition in 2008. Both 5.5 and 7.5 went out of print in 2012.

In 2013, the Fellowship of the Troll, consisting of Rick Loomis, Liz Danforth, Steve Crompton, and me did a kickstarter to produce the ultimate best version of T & T ever. That project raised $125,000 based on our initial ask of just $25,000. It was probably the most successful rpg kickstarter up to that point, although it has been wildly eclipsed by other games that came in later. That proved harder than we thought it would be, but we finished the project at last in August of 2015. Deluxe T & T is currently available through some game stores, from Flying Buffalo, and from drivethrurpg.com in pdf format. It is a massive tome, and next year we will probably cut it in half and publish just the rules in one book, and the world sourcebook information in a second volume. If we can do that in a ring-bound edition so the new books will lie flat and never break the spine or lose pages, I think it will be very popular.

In addition to that the FOTT has entered a partnership with David Reid of MetaArcade to use the T & T rules system as the basic engine for a mobile computing app to enable players to plsy and enjoy T & T on their mobile devices as well as possibly create their own games for that platform. We will be demonstrating the prototype at GenCon in a couple of weeks and again at PAX in Seattle this Fall. Exciting things are in the future for Tunnels and Trolls and its players.

In addition to that I am doing small publishing of new T & T materials including fiction and rules supplements through my newly created publishing house, Trollhalla Press, available at drivethrurpg.com. Please take a look at some of newest work at http://drivethrurpg.com/browse.php?keywords=Trollhalla+Press

In addition I am doing some writing to support various T & T related projects for Flying Buffalo, MetaArcade, and Goodman Games. Here's some covers for stuff in the pipeline.

Finally, this issue of RPG Review is centered around the idea of an "Old School Revolution". Whilst a lot of this is a revival in early versions of Dungeons & Dragons, what do you think the OSR approach could learn from Tunnels & Trolls. Is Tunnels & Trolls a

part of the OSR or has it held the line through the decades?
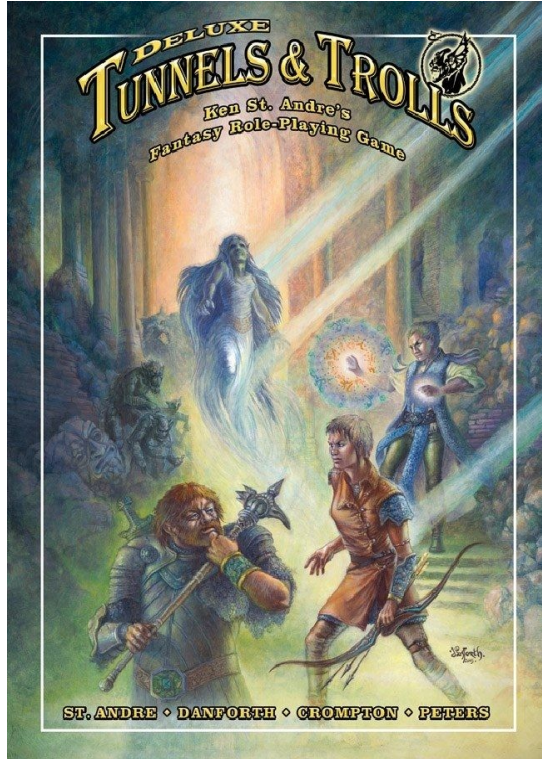
I don't know, Lev. Labels like OSR don't really apply to T & T. Some people call it Old School because T & T has been around since the beginning, and hasn't really changed that much. That's an illusion. In fact the game has evolved quite a lot, and the differences between 1983's 5th edition and 2015's Deluxe T & T would make a major game article by itself. Every game designer is an individual. Today's designers are so much more sophisticated than we were back in the 70s and 80s, and I don't think they really have that much to learn from me or any other fossil from the 20th century. I think OSR is a marketing label. If it helps a game sell by calling it an OSR product, then good tor the designer and the company, but in the end I think every game, every product stands or falls on its own merits.

Thank you very much for your time Ken!

Thanks for asking me, Lev, and giving me a chance to sound off about my favorite rpg.

Note: There are a number of unauthorised commercial editions and supplements for Tunnels and Trolls on the market, as the following news items illustrate. Please avoid these products and stay with the recommendations of Ken St. Andre.

http://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/09/19/scamwatch-james-l-shipman-ii-and-outlaw-press/

https://geek-related.com/2010/01/19/outlaw-pressjim-shipman-sinks-to-demented-pathetic-new-lows-in-art-theft-scandal/

http://esotericmurmurs.blogspot.com/2010/10/spam-from-tunnels-trollss-favorite.html J

Old School Revival RPG Reviews

by Lev Lafayette

Castles and Crusades : 'Players Handbook' (2012) and 'Monsters and Treasure' (2009)

Introduction and Product

The product being reviewed here is an double-book, a printing of the 2012 edition of the Castle and Crusades 'Players Handbook' at 144 pages and on the flip-side, the 2009 edition of 'Monsters and Treasure' at 128 pages. The binding is tight, impressively so for the size of the publication. The full-colour cover art is very impressive in technique, although somewhat generic in content, albeit the angles of perspective provide a bit of fun. The interior black and white art is also of a good quality, and contextually appropriate, especially for the latter book (thankfully). The game is presented in both books as a dense written, two-column justified serif text, that is not particularly friendly on the eyes. Both books have a single-page table of contents and no index.

The game itself is explicitly dedicated to the tradition of Dungeons and Dragons under Gary Gygax and is named after the gaming club of the same founded by that author. It both makes use of the Open Game License and argues in the preface to be a "rules-light, adaptable" game system where "roll playing and role playing meet". This is, of course, quite a challenge as various editions of Dungeons and Dragons have been rules heavy whether by elaboration and exception.

Character Generation and Magic

After a usual introduction to "what is roleplaying", with an emphasis on storytelling, fun, and cooperation, the game delves into character generation. It starts with the traditional six attributes (Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constition, and Charisma) which are generated on 3d6 and distributed according to the player's wishes. According to one of the thirteen classes selected by the player, one attribute will be a "primary ability". 'Demi-human' characters (Dwarf, Elf, Gnome, Halfling, Half-Orc, Half-Elf) may select one other attribute, whereas humans may select two. For various attribute checks, primary abilities have a default rating of 12, and others (secondary abilities) have a default of 18. Success on checks are based on a core d20 roll-over mechanic. Modifiers are consistent across all attributes.

The thirteen character classes are Fighter, Ranger, Rogue, Assassin, Barbarian, Monk, Wizard, Illusionist, Cleric, Druid, Knight, Paladin, and Bard, all of which are familiar. It's a class and level system where the different character classes have different rates of advancement, different hit die per level, various class-specific abilities and restrictions (e.g., armour), divergent gains in "to hit" bonuses and special abilities. There are no level restrictions according to race, no class restrictions according to race, and notably the various races are somewhat balanced in their benefits and restrictions. Alignment follows the traditional law-chaos and good-evil matrix. Starting wealth is determined randomly and by class and equipment has a graduated encumbrance value - several small items is a lot less cost-efficient than a few large items.

Magic is differentiated into Arcane (Wizard, Illusionist) and Divine (Cleric, Druid) and by spell level, and spells may

have verbal, somatic, and material components, all of which go to the 9th spell level. Available spells are determined by rest, preparation, and daily slots based on class and level. A summary of available spells is provided with page references before offering them in a more complete description in alphabetical order. The usual classic collection of spells are available, although there is a notable difference in the ability of Illusionists to cast healing spells. Each spells is pretty much an entity within itself with a great deal of variation on the basic components required, casting time, range, duration, and so forth.

Actions and The Keepers Sections

After the spells the Castles and Crusades manual moves into a Keeper's section which has some verbose GMs advice on mood, style, pacing, scale etc. After several pages of such text, one moves back into game content, specifically an elaboration of the skill-check system referred to as the SIEGE engine. To reiterate, roll d20 add level, add attribute modifier, and compare against target number. The target number is a base 12 for the primary attribute(s) of a character or 18 for secondary attributes, plus difficulty modifier. In a sense, this represents a massive simplification from the standard d20 rules and is closer to the classic AD&D style. It certainly makes character design easier, but it lacks the a level of fine-grained development which some players would prefer. More frustrating however is the lack of sufficient detail on what exactly constitutes modifiers that would have otherwise have been expressed as skill target numbers or feats.

The combat system is a tradition initiative (d10), roll to hit (d20, plus bonuses) versus an armour class target number, roll damage, remove from hit points, zero hit points equals unconsciousness, -10 equals death. These are, of course, very familiar. It's a fairly simply system, and allows for a handful of special cases (situational modifiers, cover, charging, weapon reach etc). Undead turning is a resolved as a special ability and attribute check for clerics, and to a lesser extent paladins. Plus there are general rules for vision. A selection of optional rules allow for multiclassing (easier for humans than non-humans!), effectively a combination of two or three classes, and a "class and a half", where a character is of one class but with half the level benefits of a second.

Monsters

Monsters are explicitly designed in Castles & Crusades as "background material" or "the goal of the adventure". Either way they are meant to have their own interests and objectives, although this intention arguably given very short attention in the actual descriptions. A rather traditional layout of characteristics into a stat block is provided for each creature, typically taking around a third of the description : Number Encountered, Size, Hit Dice, Move, Armor Class, Attacks, Special (abilities), Saves, Intelligence, Alignment, Type, Treasure, and Experience Points. Later in an appendix alternative experience point awards, apart from defeating monsters (such as treasure values) are included.

Around 150 monsters in total are described, pretty much a collection of favourites from the AD&D Monster Manual, first edition. Some archetypal creatures, like elementals, dragons, giants, and lycanthropes, receive their own sections with several different strains coming under the more general block with their own specific abilities. In general, the descriptions are utterly insufficient in describing the ecology of the various creatures with the overwhelming attention paid to their combat abilities and tactics - which is particularly frustrating with the creatures of more complex social organisation, such as bugbears, goblins, orcs, etc. Some of the more interesting creatures of prior publications are included such as the shambling mound and the xorn, as are some of the more risible creatures, like the gelatinous cube.

Treasure

Treasure in Castle and Crusades is the typical spoils for defeating monsters, plundering forgotten dungeons and tombs, or the rewards from employers for such engagements. It is broken up into Coinage, Extraordinary Items (e.g., artworks), Jewellery, Unworked Precious Metals and Stones, Magical Items, Land and Titles, and Services. Magical items are, of course, the most interesting items and a relevant amount of consideration is dedication to their various subtypes, being potions, scrolls, weapons, armour and shields, rings, wands, staves, wands, the ever-varied

miscellaneous magical items, and great artefacts. Rules are provided for the creation of magical items, based around an experience point cost associated with the power in question. There is brief description and tables for sentient magical items, the provision of land, title, and services, before moving into the meaty consideration of the stuff that defeated monsters have according to their treasure type and the aforementioned treasure categories.

The bulk of the chapter is, as expected, descriptions of magical items. Potions, scrolls, weapons, and armor, as can be expected, something that can be described fairly quickly as they replicate spells or provide straight-forward bonuses, except for those which have special abilities. Of greater descriptive requirement are the miscellaneous magical items, staves etc, and artifacts. Some classics appear in these descriptions, such as figurines of wondrous power, horn of Valhalla, ioun stones, wand of wonder. A special section is given on cursed items, before moving onto artifacts, which is where the Deck of Many Things, Sphere of Annihilation, and Staff of the Magi, are now included.

Evaluation

Castles and Crusades is physically a good production and with solid writing, albeit with some issues in layout and general design. As for a rules system, it both inherits much of the questionable narrow focus from Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, but with an interesting option for expanding a more general resolution system for other activities which, despite a great deal of potential, were not followed through as completely as they could have been. Yes, ready recognition is provided of supplementary texts that expand on the game and its environs, but they are not what is being reviewed here. This said, much of what is the game of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, is included here in a manner that is far less verbose and does quite well in the signal-to-noise ratio. The inclusion of many aspects of the greater mechanical consistency in the d20/D&D3.x is extremely advantageous, and to do so without the heavyweight rules is quite pleasing. Overall, it is certainly one of the more positive iterations from the AD&D line of game-design - certainly old school but also more consistent and streamlined.

Style: 1 + .3 (layout) + .6 (art) + .4 (coolness) + .6 (readability) + .7 (product) = 3.6
Substance: 1 + .4 (content) + .6 (text) + .5 (fun) + .6 (workmanship) + .3 (system) = 2.9
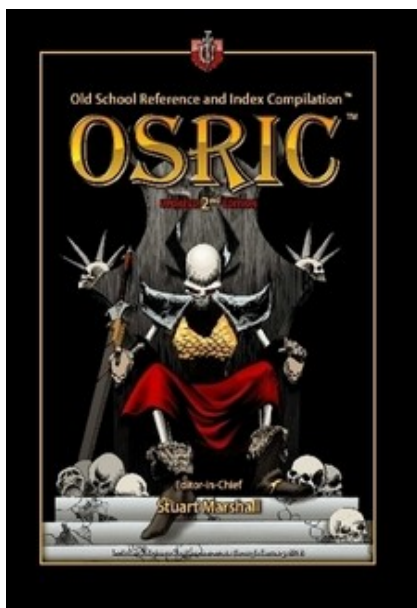
Old School Reference and Index Compilation (OSRIC)

Introduction and Product

OSRIC states its purpose quite upfront; "a compilation of rules for old-school-style fantasy gameing.. intended to reproduce underlying rules used in the late 1970s to early 1980s" whilst avoiding copyright issues. It should be mentioned it is not any set of rules from that time period, but rather Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, 1st edition, minus anything that actually says that it's AD&D 1st edition.

The updated second edition of OSRIC comes as a spiral-bound 400 A5-page publication with a cardstock cover by Usherwood Publishing. There are other editions, such as the hardcover by Black Blade which may be of better production qualities. Whilst the large spiral-binding does lie beautifully flat, it also comes across as a little cheap and is hardly designed to last heavy use at the game table.

With a hefty table of contents, a second list of spells, list of monsters, and list of magic items. and an index and index of tables, plus an appendix of major tables, the game scores very well in

helping the reader find what they are looking for. Indeed, other professional productions could look carefully at this example. The writing style throughout is formal and clear, absent of rambling arguments on why OSRIC is better than everything else on the market, but also absent of purple prose. There isn't much in the way of artwork but what does exist is contextual, and whilst not technically brilliant, shows some creativity and occasional whimsy.

As a compilation, there is one book rather than the traditional three, broken up into six chapters: Creating A Character (34 pages), Spells (85 pages), How To Play (34 pages), Dungeons, Towns, and Wilderness (34 pages), Monsters (128 pages), and Treasure (53 pages). As can be seen, the overwhelming majority of the the compilation is data (spells, monsters, treasure) rather than game system.

Character Creation and Spells

Old-school games will be familiar with the character character process. Generate abilities (STR, DEX, CON, INT, WIS, CHA), select a race, select a class. Abilities scores are 3d6; either in order, or distributed according to the player, or 4d6 drop one. All that was good, bad, and downright weird from AD&D1e is included; percentile STR, no effective difference in DEX from 7 to 14, or WIS from 8 to 14, various level limits for "demihumans" (except as thieves, and then except for half-orcs) but with multiclass options, but with the strange exclusions (e.g., no Elven Druids or Rangers) It's a class-level system with varying rates of advancement and class-specific abilities. Classes are Assassin, Cleric, Druid, Fighter, Magic User, Paladin, Ranger, and Thief; note that there is no Bard. Characters must also choose one of the nine canonical alignments along the Lawful-Neutral-Chaos axis and the Good-Neutral-Evil axis.

Starting money depends on character class. The equipment list includes a range of general items, weapons, and armour. There is no huge list of diverse pole-arms, there is "halberd" and "pole arm". Missile weapons have an increment which generates a -2 to hit. There is variant damage for weapons vs S-M and large opponents, but no weapon modifiers versus armour type (which does mean that weapons like the crossbow are significantly weakened and weapons like the club are stronger than the original game). Shields, as per the notoriety, provide only a +1 improvement to AC.

The massive spell section is pretty much entirely derived from the original books, however, some specific spells subject to copyright and identification renamed (e.g., "Mage's Faithful Hound"). Spells are memorised, and effectively become slots which are determined by class and level. Spell ranges, magical resistance (saving throws), area of effect, and casting time varies according to the individual spell, which typically requires verbal, somatic, or material components. Material components are not specified in OSRIC and left to the GM to determine. If there is any changes in the actual content of the spells, it hasn't been noticed - they seem identical (e.g., even with the rough harsh cost of -1 CON for creating a +1 dagger).

How To Play and How The Game is Run

Time measurement is based on 10-minute turns, 1 minute rounds, and six-second segments and movement is based on 120ft/round, modified by encumbrance - a painfully slow pace (and 1/10th of that if they are moving cautiously or mapping). Combat is based one-minute rounds. Surprise determines whether there are bonus segments to act. Initiative is d6 contested between opposing sides; the winner goes first and losers operate on that segment. Spell casting time is added to the segment that a party acts. Standard attacks are a roll against armour class then a roll for damage, Unarmed combat, rather than the unbelievably complex and unplayable original rules, are simply treated the same as any other weapon. Damage is subtracted from hit points, causing unconsciousness and bleeding at 0 hit points and death at negative ten.

Rather than stand and fight to the bitter end, monsters have a moral rating and may decide that discretion is better than valour. In addition to combat, Clerics and Paladins have the option of "turning" (or destroying) undead, based on traditional charts. One of the benefit of combat is that it slaying enemies provides experience points as does recovering treasure from various hoards, which results in level gains - the game truly remains "kill the monsters and take their stuff". In addition to the more prosaic damage there is also brief rules for poisons, disease, and insanity. Poisons are of

the "save or die" variety. Disease rules lack the monthly check, and insanity is provided a table of options.

Several pages is spent of hirelings and henchmen, the former in gainful employment to their provider and latter with a special sort of camp follower arrangement. Again it is pretty much out from the original rules, although it is noted that the assassin option for Spies has been taken out, and the henchmen rules are clearer and compiled. This is followed up by the general sequence of adventure activity with clear statements of activity and opportunities in an order of play for dungeon crawling, and for wilderness explorations. It is in the latter that aerial agility grades are given. There are minimal notes for town adventures, and extraplanar adventures are deliberately left open. The chapter concludes with a sample dungeon exploration and map, and whilst both are separately very good their connection with each other is less than clear.

The chapter for "Dungeons, Towns, and Wilderness" begins with various dungeon effects tables which is a waste of space for all but the most creatively challenged GMs, and the following Traps and Tricks tables aren't much better. The Random Dungeon Generator is reminiscent of the programming logic used in the era of the Zilog-80, and suitable for solitaire play. The Random Dungeon Encounters restates the gamist-narrativism of the original rules; the deeper you go, the tougher the monsters, as the plot evolves, and reflecting the medieval mindset of hell literally being deeper underground. The random urban encounters are also directly from the original rules including the somewhat distasteful descriptives of the "Red Light District" encounters. With a far more simulationist orientation, the Wilderness encounter tables are based on the relative distribution of the creature in question according to number and ecology.

Monsters and Treasure

Taking up almost half the book a review of the final two chapters is necessarily briefer than this proportion would indicate as they are largely data files. Monsters are provided a stat-block of Frequency, No. Encountered, Size, Move, Armour Class, Hit Dice, Attacks, Damage, Special Attacks, Special Defences, Magic Resistance, Lair Probability, Intelligence, Alignment, and Level/XP Value. There are brief notes on tribal spell-casters for the various humanoid (goblins, orcs, giants etc) races, before moving into the monster descriptions according to encounter groups. This begins with of various humans, demi-humans, and humanoids. From there it the various types of dragon (metallic good, chromatic bad), the chaotic evil demons and lawful evil devils, then dinosaurs, golems, lycanthropes, sylvan and faerie creatures, various types of undead, several pages of animals, and a catch-all category of "other creatures". Some of the associations are a little odd; one is not entirely sure a giant ant is "other" and a giant toad is "animal".

It's important to emphasise that certain creatures from the classic rules are not included here, as per the requirements of the OGL and SRD. There are no Mind Flayers for example. By the same time, there is a significant number of creatures that did not appear in the original monster collection. The creatures themselves are a strange collection of interesting choices from mythology and fiction, and some rather odd products of the imagination. Their presentation as a whole however is disappointingly narrow. Like the original, sheer quantity and mindless violence utterly outweighs any other assessment.

In addition to monsters to kill, there is stuff to take. The treasure chapter examines these, starting with maps, coin, gemstones, and jewellry, before moving on to magic items. The reputed magical properties of various gemstones is unfortunately not included in OSRIC, adopting a preference to a minimalist approach favoured by many gamers who adopt greedy algorithms. Magic items of course receive several tables in their own right for weapons, armour and shield, weapon special properties, rods, staves, and wands, scrolls, potions, and several types of miscellaneous magic items, the latter perhaps offering the most interesting combinations from myth and legend. A few pages of minor artifacts include classics such as the Book of Infinite Spells, the Deck of Many Things, and the Sphere of Annhilation. Major artifacts are not included in the game.

Evaluation

OSRIC is very much what it says on the tin. It delivers a reformatted and revised (but not in a system or data sense) of

first edition Advanced Dungeons and Dragons without mentioning it by name. The fact that it is a thorough revision of the presentation is tribute to the editing skills of the authors who have managed to bring a great deal of three large books into approximately a third of the word count.

Overall, the authors have done a good job. The game system itself is faithfully replicated with all its incredulous warts and arbitrariness, but it is also a familiar set of rules. One cannot say that the production qualities are up to scratch, least of all in this edition, but at least it is a clearer presentation. A ringing endorsement as a new game obviously cannot be provided; but as a retrospective compilation of another game, it performs admirably.

Style: 1 + .6 (layout) + .6 (art) + .2 (coolness) + .8 (readability) + .1 (product) = 3.3
Substance: 1 + .3 (content) + .5 (text) + .3 (fun) + .2 (workmanship) + .1 (system) = 2.4

Basic Fantasy RPG

Introduction and Product

Basic Fantasy, deriving from the Open Game License, describes itself as an old school game where the rules and size of the game are much lighter – it also recommends that you *don't* buy the book until you've read the free version on the publisher's website. This second edition of Basic Fantasy, like other editions, comes in a spiral bound A4 book with a fairly light cardstock cover. Whilst there are some advantages to this format (it lies really flat), the 154 page book is not really designed for heavy use. The text is presented in two-column justified throughout with a serif font and a good use of white-space. Page numbers and chapter titles are clearly marked, and there is a single-page table of contents and another single page alphabetical index. The writing style throughout is formal. Erik Wilson's evocative cover art of a red dragon is quite a lovely piece, whereas the cover art is of a fair standard in terms of technique and creativity, and is usually contextual. There are eight chapters ("parts") to the book; a two page introduction, a player character information chapters, spells, an adventure chapter, encounters, monsters, treasure, and finally game master information. The introduction is as simple as one can get – this is a roleplaying game, and this is how the dice are used.

Character Generation and Magic

Character generation is 3d6 in order (albeit with GM options) for the abilities Strength, Intelligence, Dexterity, Wisdom, Constitution, and Charisma. Bonuses for high or low abilities is as per the d20 model. Available character races are Dwarves, Elves, Halflings, and Humans. The non-human races have various restrictions, well-versed in traditional RPGs – humans have the benefit of a 10% bonus to experience points as they learn quickly. Character classes, with race restrictions, are Cleric, Fighter, Magic User, and Thief, with the latter receiving the traditional slot of percentile skills. Rates of advancement (along with hit dice, obviously) varies by class. An equipment list covers the basics of general adventuring activities, including armour and shields, weapons, beasts of burden, and larger vehicles and siege engines for wilderness adventures.

There are six levels of Cleric and Magic User spells with eight spells available for each level for Clerics and twelve for Magic Users from levels one to four and ten for levels five to six. Magic is a daily-slot based method, with Clerics praying for their spells, and Magic Users studying their spellbooks. The spells themselves are presented in alphabetical order with the varying characteristics of range, duration, etc. All spells universally have verbal and somatic requirements, but material components are not considered. The spells are derived directly from Basic and Expert D&D with minimal changes and each requiring a couple of paragraphs of explanation.

Adventures and Encounters

The timescale of the game is ten second combat round and ten minute turns. Distances are measured in feet in dungeon adventures and in yards in wilderness environs for movement and missile weapon ranges, however spell ranges remain

the same. Carrying capacity and movement rate depends on the race of the character and their Strength, with a single-level breakpoint between zero and the maximum. Dungeon-adventure spot rules are provided for lighting, darkvision, doors, traps, secret doors, and food and water. For the wilderness, movement rates are provided for miles per day and modified by terrain. Waterborne travel has a random table for wind direction (a terrible idea) and wind strength. A spot rule for becoming lost is provided. A fairly hefty (by this game's standards) degree of detail is spent on retainers, their loyalty, and their hiring of specialists and mercenaries. Experience points are provided for defeating monsters, and with other challenges "as the GM sees fit".

The Encounter chapter is concerned with the order of tactical time, form surprise, to monster reactions, to initiative, movement and combat. Spot rules exist for three-dimensional actions, evasion, charging, defensive movement, missile misses, subdual damage, unarmed combat (brawling and wrestling), oil, holy water, and morale. Combat is d20, roll high, defeat armour class TN, with an attack bonus determined by class and level. Damage is based on the weapon, subtracts from hit points, and if a character reaches zero, they are dead (and all-or-nothing result). With the ever-popular undead, there are rules for turning, energy drain, along with Constitution losses, and healing rates, and in a rather odd order, falling, deafness and blindness, vehicular combat, and then saving throws against the traditional values (i.e., Death Ray, Wands, Paralysis, Dragon Breath, Spells).

Monsters and Treasure

Taking up almost 80 pages of the 154 page book, the Monsters and Treaures chapters are exactly what one would expect. The former is primarily a stat-block of the monster's name, armor class, hit dice, attacks, damage, number appearing, save as, morale, treasure type, and experience point value. Most are described in a few paragraphs, mainly in terms of their combative abilities, and with scant attention to their ecology or biology (the dragons at least get a age category modifier); it's kill things and take their stuff, although this said the monsters are a combination of classic D&D and with a range of mythological sources included.

Monsters also typically come with a letter-based treasure type (individual and lair) which generates a random collection of coin, gems, jewelry, and magic items. The most interesting are, of course, the magic items, which are subject to several random rolls to determine, the type (weapon, armour, potion, scroll etc), and precisely what sort of subtable should then be followed to determine exactly what sort of potion, what spells are on the scroll, what sort of magic power is with the ring etc. The miscellaneous magic items are, as usual, the most interesting, although the list provided here is quite slim.

Game Master Information

The final chapter of the book starts with tables for dungeon encounters according to level (the deeper you go, the tougher it gets), wilderness encounters (according to terrain type), and urban encounters (according to time of day). Suggestions are provided for creating NPC parties according to activity (adventurers, bandits, merchants etc) along with some optional rules. These provide some welcome flexibility and realism (e.g., negative hit points, slower acting poisons, ability checks) at the cost of a minor amount of complexity and should be considered. A rather hefty amount of space is spent on spell research, before concluding on dungeon design, wilderness design, and strongholds.

Conclusion and Evaluation

Like most OSR games, this game is highly derivative. As should be evident from the review for those familiar with the games this is a lot more derived from Basic and Expert D&D (but not beyond that), rather than AD&D, or from d20. It comes with all the problems and benefits associated with those products, which primarily means a simpler version of D&D conducted in a lesser word count.

Style: 1 + .5 (layout) + .5 (art) + .4 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .2 (product) = 3.1
Substance: 1 + .3 (content) + .6 (text) + .4 (fun) + .3 (workmanship) + .3 (system) = 2.9

Papers and Paychecks Designer's Notes

by Lev Lafayette

"It's a great new fantasy role-playing game. We pretend we're workers and students in an industrialized and technological society."

Motivation

Welcome to "Papers and Paychecks: The Roleplaying Game of and Industrialized and Technological Society" *in which you play the part of workers and students glorious trying to succeed against a world of antagonists, and antagonistic world.*

The title of this OSR-influenced game comes from the memorable artwork of Will McLean in the first edition of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide. A cursorary search will reveal that on more than one occasion the thought has entered the heads of others that *"Papers and Paychecks"* would make a great roleplaying game, but this is the first time that the idea will be brought to completion.

Unfortunately Will McLean died in October last year, meaning that he will never see *Papers & Paychecks* released. In sincere memory of his contribution, the Kickstarter for the game will be released on the anniversary of his passing. Proceeds from the Kickstarter will go to the RPG Review Cooperative, Inc., as a non-profit incorporated association dedicated to promoting design and advocating the RPG hobby. One can justly suspect that Will would have approved. As an item of extra awesomeness Dan "Smif" Smith has kindly offered to provide cover art for the game as well.

System

The system of *Papers & Paychecks* is primarily influenced by traditional OSR-styles but also includes some elements of contemporary player-determined aspects of the narrative. For example character generation, "the genetic die", is based on the historic hair-tearing 3d6 roll in-order of the usual ability scores. However, a player may change any random die-roll in the game to any value that they want, according to their Luck value. Luck starts at 3 and at the end of each session The World Boss (aka, the GM) will award 1-3 new points of Luck to each *player*.

This is a "class and level" based game. Class is literal, determining background features (wealth and contacts). Profession is what the character does. Character professions and their primary abilities include the following: Labourer (Strength), Scientist (Intelligence), Administrator (Wisdom), Tradesperson (Dexterity), Researcher (Constitution), and Manager (Charisma). Characters, in the course of their career, may have multiple professions.

Levels are gained by accumulating experience points. Experience points equate with earnings in a profession (a gold piece system!) and are gained through the course of a character's normal work experiences, but also significantly with

projects, the special annual scenarios where a character has the opportunity to receive significant pay bonuses, which may lead to a promotion. As a rough rule of thumb, a character's level equates with the number of years they've spent in the profession.

As the original cartoon shows, *Papers & Paychecks* uses 2d6 for task and research resolution. This roll, modified by the character's abilities and skills, is against a target number modified by difficulty, rather like classic *Traveller*. The degree of success against the target number determines the effect. In character vs character conflict this can result in damage to abilities! A character who has a rating of 0 or less in ability will find that they are unable to use it, and a negative value represents their demise. Different abilities have different healing rates. "Task and Research" also represent the two main game time-scales when characters are engaging in a project.

Style

The style of *Papers & Paychecks* is a dense product with a maximum amount of information packed in a fast-flowing text. It's like a speeding bullet! By necessity it contains humour, and often of the absurd variety. Unlike many RPG settings where the universe is passive at worst, surprisingly kind at best, the world of Papers & Paychecks is founded on the metaphysical claim of *resistentialism*. The basic principle is that the inanimate universe is malicious towards people: *Les choses sont contre nous* - The things are against us. The World Boss is expected to encourage hilarity by operating on the principle of resistentialism, ranging anywhere from gallows humour to slapstick. Using all the truths of demotivational posters and their unerring honesty, we gain insight on how dreams are destroyed in the corporate world.

Original article on Resistentialism from 1948 is available at the following URL:
http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/23rd-april-1948/11/report-on-resistentialism-h-atred-of-ones-father-a

Papers & Paychecks is inspired by a number of workplace-related situational comedies: *I Love Lucy*, *Laverne & Shirley, 9 to 5, Workaholic, Corner Gas, Are You Being Served?, KYTV, Drop The Dead Donkey, Frontline, Swift and Shift Couriers, Utopia, Gliding On, Market Forces, Interns (Интерны),* and many others. Indeed, players are encouraged to bring in real-life experiences from the own workplaces, including coworkers (cow orkers) make them *even worse* (this game has artistic license after all) and use them as Non-Player Characters. Ever wanted to punch your boss in the face? Surely not! But here's a great chance to live out that fantasy!

CONSULTING

IF YOU'RE NOT A PART OF THE SOLUTION, THERE'S GOOD MONEY TO BE MADE IN PROLONGING THE PROBLEM.

Playtesting

Before the Kickstarter is officially launched, playtesting and drafting of *Papers & Paychecks* is underway. The RPG Review Cooperative has sponsored a mailman list for those interested and can be contacted through the editor if one wishes to join. The first draft will be ready in time for the Kickstarter and the final draft two months after that.

Backswords and Bucklers Review

by Andrew Daborn

Backswords and Bucklers is the game of Elizabethan skulduggery and mischief-making on the mean streets of 16th century London. You play ruffians, ne?er-do-wells and whip-jacks causing strife, solving problems and just getting by in Cheapside. Inspired by both memories of White Box D&D and 'Gloriana' by Michael Moorcock this game is set at turning point in the history of England in one of the greatest cities if the time, seasoned with a little supernatural spice.

I must start this review with a note of caution. I thoroughly enjoy this game and find it difficult to approach this review critically so this might be less balanced than you deserve, dear reader.
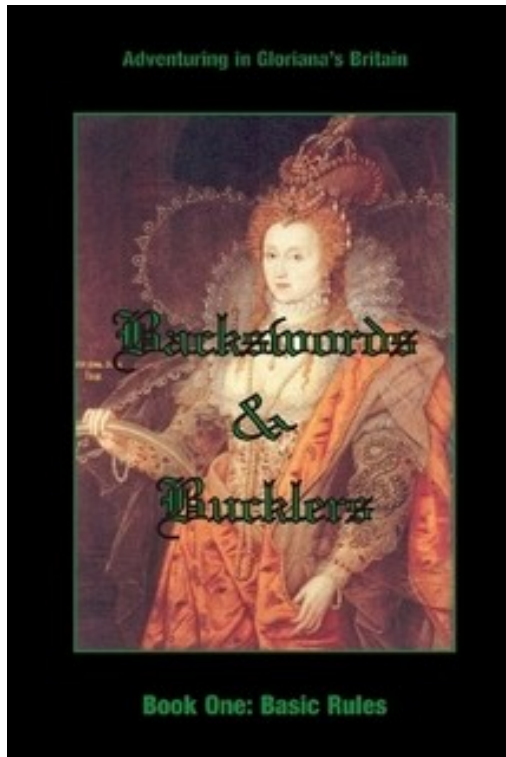
The Book Itself

Book One: Basic Rules is a 54 page A5 staple bound volume with simple, well laid out rules, an informative contents page and a rather stunning portrait of Queen Elizabeth I on the front. Gothic script headings and occasional period woodcuts illustrate the flavour of the setting as well as break up the tables and text enough to make this an easy read.

On the dichotomy of reference book versus instructional manual Basic Rules falls not surprisingly towards the manual end in layout. After a brief introduction to set the flavour of expected play the text explains the basic elements of the game and provides helpful definitions for key gaming terms. Equipment and money followed by the three character classes are explored next with combat rules following.

Incidental rules such as currency, experience and armour are fitting neatly allowing for easy 'pick up and play' style character generation. Following the instructions through the first 30 pages won't take long and will leave you with a starting character and a good grasp of the rules.

Due to a reasonable contents page and the overall shortness of the book, mid-game session checks for rules are unlikely to take long or break the flow of a session.

The pages are efficiently laid out and well titled making subjects easy to find with casual flicks through the book. Additionally, as will be explored later, the rules are reasonably light so there's little point looking up grappling rules as your PC tackles a lace smuggler to the ground in Billingsgate or how much henchmen cost to hire as you advertise for a second-story man for the heist on the French embassy, they're not there.

Overall the book has been thoughtfully put together to quickly convey the tone and rules of the game while hinting enough at the setting to prompt imaginations.

Setting

The choice of fantasy Elizabethan England as setting is an inspired one. It is likely that through the works of Philippa Gregory, David Starkey, Blackadder II, Shakespeare and countless other sources players will have at least a rough concept of Elizabethan life.

Historical books on this period make full use of phrases like 'social upheaval' and 'political unrest' and with good reason. During Elizabeth I's reign London grew from a fair sized city of around 70,000 to a metropolis of 200,000 as many came from the countryside looking for work. With the invention of the printing press and the demands of a growing society for bureaucrats, literacy grew rapidly. News of current events, religions and political ideas could be disseminated swiftly to swelling audiences. Laws of the land were changing regularly, at different periods in the 16th Century both Catholic and Puritan Christian denominations were persecuted for their faith. There were several attempted insurrections against the Queen by foreign powers and Catholics nobles. New fears of Jesuit missionaries infiltrating society mixed in with older superstitions of witches, necromancy and evil things in the woods over the hill paint a picture of society rife with change and suspicion. Cats and dogs living together etc... Overall, plenty of opportunity for adventure in the capital city!

The fantasy element allows for yet more flexibility. Whilst deep backgrounds can be appealing the designers give licence for players to be lose with historical accuracy. Not only is the referee encouraged to pit the players against

supernatural foes from the superstitions of the time ? daemons, revenants and boggles oh my! ? but also to not worry about things like accurately portraying gender inequality. That's not what this game is about.

Notable historic figures of Elizabethan England make for flavourful NPCs such as Sir Francis Walsingham, Christopher Marlow and John Dee. Equally events of the time like the Spanis Amarda, the Northern Rebellion or any of the countless plots against Elizabeth make for entertaining backdrops. Cursory research of the period can bring up many more. Given the amount for historic material and the turbulent nature of life at this time it is surprising that there are only a few RPGs set during the Renaissance.

How To Play The Game

Running throughout the core book is the tale of Tobias Farquahersen and James Blome (Basterds for Hyre!) who take on what seems a simple shake-down job for an old friend only to rapidly find themselves battling for their lives with shodowy forces. Fiction and illustrations in rules books are excellent indicators of how the designers intended the game to be run. This is especially important for Backswords and Bucklers whose rules set is clearly tailored to short and brutal adventures in London's 16th century underworld. The story has three distinct elements, that are key to the narrative the designers have for this game.

*A patron, or agent of same, approaches the group in their local tavern.

*He has a job for them which they agree on for a fair price.

*It goes horribly wrong as someone or something complicates this spectacularly.

This activity is referred to as 'Tavern Trawling' and the designers suggest that a few of these episodes are played out in one game session, encouraging a fast approach to play. Although the emphasis is on pick-up-and-play the players are

encouraged to build a tavern for their base, from which to explore London. This allows them to come back to the same streets, plot arcs and familiar faces of the locals, if their inn hasn't burnt down that is...

The System

The system is, to quote Barbarossa from Pirates of the Caribbean ?more what you'd call 'guidelines' than actual rules?. Backswords and Bucklers is based on the Swords and Wizardry: White Box rules by Mythmere Games. Both Swords and Wizardry and Backswords and Bucklers are keen for referees to utilise the rules lite approach to calibrate the game to the players needs. All this and the liberal use of tables throughout adds to the nostalgic element aimed at those who grew up on the original D&D. It must be noted however that there are a disappointingly low number of polearms in the game.

The book clearly emphasises Rule Number One: the referee's right to make up rules as needed. Encouraged to tinker around referees can bring in different house rules to fit the style of play each group wants, whether that be design complex duelling beforehand or patch up an unforeseen circumstance the players throw about, like insisting on joining up with crew of The Pelican on it's global circumnavigation!   That being said the book contains both sturdy core rules that will deal with most situations and also neat mechanics that lay out the feel of the game.

The core mechanic is to roll equal to or over the target number with a d20, whether that is someone's defence in combat or a character's saving throw for other heroic actions. The designers are laissez-faire even as far as this, suggesting alternative methods are equally acceptable to capture the style of game required.

Combat feels realistically brutal with one good hit quite likely to take you or your opponent out. Weapons a dangerous, all doing d6 damage, which is about the same number as a starting character's hit points. Moreover surviving combat when defeated is certainly possible but depends as much on what weapon you were struck by, compare a club to a pistol, as whether your opponent is magnanimous.

To keep the game focused on the enjoyable slice of underworld the system provides subtle motivations These are for the characters, money to pay rent, and goals specific to the character class that will gain them XP, the only documented way they can!

With a lean three classes to choose from one brought up on hernia-inducing bags of splat books might start getting twitchy, there's no way you're going to be playing a mystic theurge with a list of feats and spells. These limitations bring opportunities for creativity in roleplaying forcing you to make your Fighting Man different from the next. Each class is lovingly, but simply, constructed to tie in setting appropriate fun with just enough rules to get by.

The Fighting Man, inspired perhaps by Eryol Flynn or maybe Baldrick, is capable of serious swashbuckling holding off a number of foes with his swordwork. The Scoundrel only advances after spending wealth. It doesn't matter how many

Spaniards she disarms, her experience is gained in the tavern afterwards buying rounds of ale. The Wise Women / Cunning Man class rounds out the trio. This is no Vancian magic user, but a well researched profession in line with what the lower class and underworld denizens of Elizabethan London would have encountered - someone with

charms, spells and potions to resolve their daily problems.

But what about epic levels? What happens to my 10th level scoundrel when he's seduced Good Queen Bess? Well, all the best trying to get there. I've had many hours of fun with a number of gaming groups and not yet managed to see a character hit level two.   I wouldn?t worry about it. If you get there ? make it up. That seems to be the philosophy of the designers.

Resources
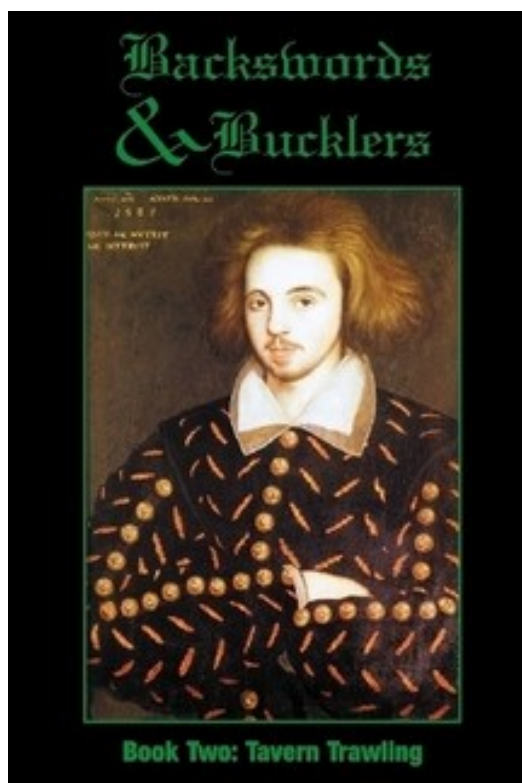
Tied To A Kite have released two further books for B&B. Book Two: Tavern Trawling with a natty picture of Christopher Marlow on the front ? having supposedly been killed in a knife fight over the bill for supper he is something of the patron saint of B&B. This book gives advice on running campaigns in this setting and more tables

for randomised fun. Additionally there are a dozen story seeds or 'jobs' and a short campaign.

Adventure Book One, the third of the books, decorated with another picture of Queenie is the shortest and gives yet more jobs. These are all well written and easily illustrate the style of play the designers try to emulate. Other books have also been promised ? the titles being something of a give-away - detailing more classes and tables, but I'm not aware of any plans to release any more yet.

The pdf of B&B is free and available at lulu.com if you search for Christopher Cale as the creator, with Book One and Adventure Book One available as print on demand. I can't find Book Two for sale currently.

On the subject of websites, the publisher's, http://tiedtoakite.com are well worth a visit.

The Green Isles For D&D: Player's Guide
by Karl Brown

Part 1

The Players' Summary (issue 28 RPG Review) provides enough orientation for players to create characters with the guidance of a dungeon master who has digested this entire article. **Reading this guide is optional for players** but if you want to be further informed about character options and the setting this series of articles is for you. This article is requires the D&D 5e rules (Wizards of The Coast) for full use. Page numbers refer to specific books: Players' Handbook (PHB), Dungeon Master's Guide (DMG), Monster Manual (MM), Elemental Evil Player's Companion (EEPC). Additionally The Book of Lost Spells (BLS) Fifth Edition Foes (FEF) from Necromancer Games have been used. This article by Karl David Brown (c) 2016. Play testing by the Green Isles Group at Gatekeeper Games including: Adam De Pasquale, David Clarke, Deansy, Evie Cowling, Gus Cowling, Marisa Clarke, Paul Blandon, Tyrone McElvenny, and others. We acknowledge the assistance of Gatekeeper Games of North Fitzroy Melbourne Australia who provided an excellent venue for our playtesting sessions.

Characters

In this article we provide an overview of producing characters suitable for a Green Isles campaign. After this we discuss the first step in the process, crafting a concept. This section provides new rules for playing children and foreigners. After deciding on a Concept the next step is to choose a Background. Changes to the standard rules for Backgrounds including Languages and Bonds are explained. With the Players' Summary from issue 28 and the PHB you can now create a range of characters suitable for the Green Isles. Future articles will expand your options with new races and further discussion of character options for the Isles.

Overview

The first step is decide on what kind of character you want to play; I don't mean a combination of race/class like 'elf/fighter' but a few words to describe a character that suits the setting. Something like 'peasant lad run away to seek his fortune' or 'boastful giant knight' or 'a princess of Elfland turned into a frog'. Many archetypal character concepts from British fairy tales such as giants and talking animals require new races that will be published in future articles. Read the section of the Player's Summary called 'who are you', the 'Concept' section below. Build characters around your concept. An appropriate concept will guide you when making the numerous choices required during character generation.

I advise choosing a Background first (PHB127+), then a race, then class.

Since the technology of the Green Isles is equivalent to that of Britain in 1300CE, I f your PC is a native of the Green Isles you do not begin play proficient in halberds, hand-crossbows, rapiers, scimitars, tridents, blowguns, mauls, warhammers, and war picks even if your class normally is proficient in these weapons. Similarly, some races, such as talking animals, have low Tool Use scores, such characters are never proficient in weapons and tools they cannot use in their natural form. A full explanation of the Tool Use rules will be in a future article in the series. Plate and breastplate armour is unknown in the Green Isles and natives cannot begin play owning these items, however they are considered proficient if their class or other character options allow.

You may use either the 'pick and mix' method or starting funds. If you use 'pick and mix' you are reimbursed the PHB coin value of any item not invented in this setting (see below) or not usable due to your Tool Use trait adding to your purse of coins. If you use starting funds then do not roll for gold pieces, use the maximum.

Restrictions on party composition

There are restrictions on party composition based on tool using ability and to limit the number of foreigners.

Tool Use is rated from 1 (no fingers like a wolf) to 5 (humanoid). At least 25% of the party should be tool use 4 or 5. Tool use 5 is not typically noted in the race description and is human equivalent. Lower tool use races include talking animals and dragons; these will appear in future articles. A character is never proficient in a weapon or tool they cannot use in their natural form regardless of normal class and feat proficiencies.

At least 75% of the party should be of native races and 'good' cultures native to the Green Isles; up to 25% could be of kindred that are rare, foreign, or born to evil cultures.

Death and replacement characters

The Green Isles was designed for my own preferences regarding risk to PCs. I personally favour difficult fights, roll where the players can see my rolls, and never 'fudge' die rolls. I would expect that if you play from 1st to 20th there will be four or more deaths along the way. You are unlikely to finish with the character you started with. If you die or retire a PC then you begin one level lower than the *mode* average level of the remaining PCs and have zero experience points. What's a mode average? Google it!

Concept

Most PCs should be modelled on the protagonists of British fairy tales and their allies. The protagonists in British fairy tales are frequently youths or elderly people; sometimes even children. The protagonist is as frequently very poor as they are nobles. The protagonist rarely has any magical powers of her own (in game terms they are fighters or more often rogues). While the central character generally does not possess magical powers they are frequently joined by magical allies including, but not limited too, shape shifting elves and giantesses, magicians, and talking animals. All of these are suitable PCs.

Here are some example concepts:

Poor but adventurous human peasant's son	Talking frog spy for the King of Frogs
Old, poor, dirty, but spry human woman	Youth whose elf ancestor's blood grants magic
Human child prince run away from home	Faerie who aids heroes with powerful magic
Human princess disowned for her stupidity	Dragon promised land and gold by another PC
A handsome, but bloodthirsty giant knight	Saint who's holiness puts fear into devils

Likeable human thief who burgles giants' homes	Talking bear with a terrible temper
Elf piper who's music is charming magic	Middle-aged human soldier down on his luck
Shape shifting giantess who can befriend birds	Human woodcutter who knows the forest well
Rich scholarly human magician's apprentice	Human child who learns magic from the Faeries
Human king turned into a mouse by a curse	Henwife who knows an oral magic tradition

Elderly

Old men and women often feature as protagonists in fairy tales and therefore elderly PCs are in keeping with this setting's flavour. No special rules are required to play an elderly PC, simply assign lower values to STR, DEX, and CON. Note that Elves and Faeries are immortal and never elderly.

Children

Like the elderly, children are often protagonists in fairy tales. This template can be applied any Medium sized tool use 3 or above race to represent a child character.

Ability Scores: first apply the adjustments for your race then the following as well. The numbers in brackets give the allowed range. Where your race also has an allowed range use the lowest values.

Str -1 {3-11}, Dex +1 {3-20}, Con -1 {3-11}, Int +0 {3-20}, Wis +0 {3-20}, Cha +0 {3-20}.

Traits: Change Size to Small . Add Lucky And Nimble as per Halfling (PHB28). Reduce land speed by -5ft.

Growing up. During a month or longer of downtime a player can announce his character is no longer a child. When this occurs the template is removed i.e. the character raises Str and Con by 1, reduces Dex by 1, loses Lucky and Nimble, gains 5ft of land speed, and the limits for Str and Con become the usual {3-20}. Even after this the youth will tend towards lower STR and CON unless the player assigns ability score increases to PC as they gain levels representing the character 'filling out' as they mature further. The PC is then Medium.

Rules for Children created with "Building New Races and Feats for Fifth Edition v1.07" developed over a year with input from various online communities and playtesters (https://rpggeek.com/filepage/120857/reverse-engineering-wotcs-race-creation-system-opt).

Bonds

Rather than a bond from your Background, every PC should instead have one bond that relates to a previous event in your past that gives you a reason to travel. The Bond should be something that you can act on; a parent dead of an illness does not give you anything to do, one kidnapped by an evil elf lord does. Each adventure will relate to one PCs bond.

Additionally you might gain additional bonds during the course of play. These will typically be 'quests' or relationships introduced during play. As with your initial bond these should have a defined end-point even if that is only to live happily ever after with your true love. Ideally, these should be few in number and represent defining events in the

character's evolving story.

When a bond is resolved it is removed from play. When your PC's bond(s) are resolved you can elect to have them happily retire or to continue on out of friendship for their companions. When all of the party's bonds have been resolved the campaign naturally comes to a close and everyone lives happily ever after.

Enemies

Some bonds might include an adversary of some kind. This could be someone who has done or intends physical violence against you or it might be someone who is spreading gossip about you, or trying to bankrupt you etc. Later, when you choose a class if you choose Ranger, then you will also need to name a Favoured Enemy. The following is a list of D&D Types useful for choosing a setting appropriate bond enemy or Ranger Favoured Enemy.

Giants (includes Thurse, Ogres, and many other larger and sometimes monstrous people)

Beasts (includes normal and talking animals of all kinds from ants to whales)

Dragons (includes drakons, wurms, wyverns, sea serpents, and all other dragons)

Fey (as well as fairies, includes some hags, fairy nobles, etc, in this setting elves are Fey not Humanoids. Fey can be good or evil)

Fiends (including imps, innumerable kinds of devils, and of course The Devil)

Plants: (malicious animated trees are encountered in British folklore)

Undead (including ghosts, wights, revenants, talking severed heads etc.)

Additionally

Boggies: This is a not a Monster Manual 'Type' but a broad group that rangers can select as a favoured enemy. Bogies are malicious and (to human eyes) ugly humanoids. The smallest of these are goblins but there are other kinds that the people of the isles simply lump together and call 'Boggies'. Boggies are generally uglier than Fey and know little to no magic but the two groups shade into each other.

Foreigners

Some races, classes, and concepts are not native to the Green Isles. These include dwarves, drow, monks, and samurai. If you want to play a character like this you are a foreigner. Foreigners have disadvantage on some checks as follows:

?   All foreigners: History and Religion. Additionally, your broken Common places a Disadvantage on any verbal attempts at Deception, Intimidation and Persuasion. However, you do list your native language or the trade language of your homeland as a bonus language. As long as you have a Disadvantage it applies to locals who interact with you too.

?   Those who are not pseudo-European: Arcana, and Performance.

?   Those who do not come from an 'Old World' temperate region: Nature. This would include fantasy versions of Southern Indians, Lapps, Native Americans, Africans, and Australian Aborigines.

Mark these skills with a 'd' on your character sheet.

These disadvantages obviously do not apply when dealing with your homeland or other expatriates. Every even numbered career level you may remove one skill from the list of skills you character has disadvantage on.

Background

Since your background is your role in society, the choice of background and race flows very naturally from concept and

so should be the next thing you decide well before class and ability scores. Remember don't use the Bonds tables given for your background (see Bonds above). Unless you are a foreigner you should make any language choices from the list below.

The Common Tongue

The Common language of the Green Isles is only distantly related to the languages known as 'Common' elsewhere in the world. Scholars call the Common Tongue of the Green Isles Hranglic. It is a based on the old tongue of the Hrangs but has absorbed loan words from the native Elvish, Sylvan, Giant, and Kortic as well as Imperial and even a little Celestial. The centuries of homogenising human cultures in the Isles have made 'Common' the native tongue of all humans and a second language to most non-humans (translators never appear in fairy tales). When strangers are around almost everyone speaks Hranglic unless they have reason not to. Generally, it is considered very rude to not speak Hranglic when strangers are about. Script: Hranglic script, a blend of Hrang runes smoothed into Elven style pen writing.

Other languages

Languages other than Common are very rarely needed by travellers .

Animal Tongues: the communications of normal brute animals. Intelligent animals speak these but use other languages for sophisticated communication. Each category of animal has it's own pseudo-language. Script: the closest thing to script would be natural musks and the like used by some beasts.

Raja·Rasalu·plays·chaupur
with·Raja·Sarkap.

Celestial: The language of the ancient history of the Imperials and of the Holy Canon of Jhoeda. Celestial has become the language of scholars of all kinds. Script: Celestial.

Draconic: Many dragons do not speak but most that do use this language. The language of dragons cannot be properly pronounced by most other folk. Draconic is a bestial tongue with a limited vocabulary suited to those who live like antisocial predatory beasts. It is of no use for magic or scholarly pursuits. Script: nil.

Elvish: virtually all elves speak Common as well but any diplomat or spy in Elfland would be well served by a knowledge of this tongue. Much arcane knowledge is kept within the books of the High Elves making elvish a language learned by many wizards regardless of kindred. Script: Elvish

Giant: a tongue little heard outside of the homes of giants. Giantish is all but useless for travel, trade, or diplomacy. Some scholars of very ancient history find it useful for learning ancient sagas. Some isolated giants of the Northern wilds speak nothing else. Script: Giant Oghram

Goblin: A harsh tongue derived from Infernal, also called 'Gutter Infernal' or 'Bogie'. Goblin has many loan words taken from Sylvan and Elvish. Script: Infernal

Old Hrang: The humans of a few isolated wind-swept northern islands still speak the tongue of their tall sea-faring ancestors. The language is also learned by some historians, poets, and storytellers so they can read the centuries old epic saga poems of the Heroic Age. Script: Hrang Runes

Imperial: Descended from Celestial this was the language of the later Imperials. Today it is used among nobles and in

legal contracts in human lands. Script: Celestial.

Kortic: The human tales of the Mythic Age are in this language and this rich oral history has kept Kortic alive as the second language of many humans, particularly in the North and West Isles as well as the rugged hill region of the South Isle. Script: Giant Oghram (rarely used).

Sylvan: The language of the fey and the godlike Faerie Nobles. Most arcane writings gifted to Warlocks tutored by the Faerie Nobles are written in Sylvan. Script: Elvish.

Infernal: Spoken by devils, witches in their service (Warlocks), some goblinoids, and those Fey and elves who deal with devils. Knowledge of this language is forbidden by Jhoeda's canon and Church Law in human kingdoms punishable by branding and banishment. However, since knowledge of this language is so rare among humans proving someone knows it is very difficult. Script: Infernal.

Ability Scores

Once background, kindred, and class have been chosen, use the point buy or standard array to determine ability scores (PHB12).

Kindred

What the D&D rules call 'races' are really a fantasy species, in the Green Isles these are called 'kindred'. The setting has a different mix of kindred to most D&D games. Just as the PHB lists 6 common races and 3 uncommon races, there are 6 common kindred and 4 uncommon kindred of the Green Isles.

The common PC kindreds are humans, elves, half elves, faeries, 11 foot tall giants, and talking animals. Talking animals are actually a number of races each somewhat rare but as a group quite common.

Uncommon kindred include those who, while human, are blessed by the 'One True God' (Aasimar in game terms (DMG286)). Conversely, some humans have the a devil in their bloodline yet, like Merlin, can pass as human. Larger kinds of giant are in this group because they are as often foes as allies. Dragons are also in this group because, surprisingly, they do occasionally appear as uneasy allies of the protagonist in British Fairy Tales.

Other kindred

There are also kindred that are rarely allies of heroes. This group includes rare creatures like good natured walking apple trees, but also goblins, obviously devil-blooded persons (teiflings), and other kindred that are usually foes of humanity. Finally, the referee may allow other races to be present as foreigners.

Finally?

Humans, elves and half elves can be created using the PHB. The other kindred of the Green Isles will be featured in future articles. There will also be further information on characters and the setting. However, This current article and the players' summary from last issue provide enough information for you to start your own fairy tale adventures in the Green Isles.

Tunnels & Trolls 5.5e Bestiary H-O

by Karl Brown

This is yet another article in a series of materials for the classic T&T. Previous articles appeared in issues: 12, 15, 18, 19, 20, and 22. Since issue 20 the 7th edition of T&T has been produced. The 7th edition is a mighty tome that has different solutions for some of the situations covered by the house rules in this series of articles. Though written for edition 5.5, this series of articles is largely compatible with the 7th edition.

Tunnels & Trolls edition 5.5 was written by Ken St. Andre and published by Flying Buffalo Inc.

'*' Monsters are ones I might consider as PCs. As a guideline add up all the attribute modifiers (yes negative CHR subtracts) and if under 8 the kin may be suitable for use as a player character. An average IQ of at least 5 is also recommended unless you want to play a beast. Guidelines for role-playing monsters appeared in issue 15.

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

Creatures marked # could also be used as awakened beasts (issue 15) if that rule is in use. All awakened beasts have IQx1 rather than the value listed.

Dexterity: monsters without hands, tentacles or other manipulators have dexterity of zero. Agility has been subsumed into Luck and reaction time is covered by Speed.

#Horse

MR 30 Dice 4 Adds 15

Natural Weapons: Four kicks for 1d each. Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 36 (x3.5) IQ 3 (x0.5) LK 10 (x1) CON 30 (x3) DEX 0 (x0) max 0 CHR 7 (x0.5) SP 26 (x2.5)

Length x1.5 Weight x5.5 Starting Age: 4 Old at: 20

This represents riding horses and light warhorses. Were horses are very rare, found mostly in the eastern steppe.

Horse, Heavy

MR 120 Dice 13 Adds 60

Natural Weapons: Four kicks for 3d each bite for 1d. Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 70 (x7) IQ 3 (x0.5) LK 8 (x0.75) CON 120 (x12) DEX 0 (x0) max 0 CHR 7 (x0.5) SP 22 (x2.25)

Length x1.5 Weight x5.5 Starting Age: 4 Old at: 20

Represents draft horses and heavy war horses.

*Human, Average

MR 1:10 Dice 1 Adds 0

Natural Weapons: unarmed 1d Natural Armour: Nil

Special Attacks: Nil Special Defences: Nil

ST 10 (x1) IQ 10 (x1) LK 10 (x1) CON 10 (x1) DEX 10 (x1) CHR 10 (x1) SP 10 (x1)

Height x1 Weight x1 Starting Age: 3d+10 Old at: 70

An average human good for angry mobs, tavern brawlers, busy market places etc.

Imp

MR 7 Dice 1 Adds 4

Natural Weapons: Bite 1d Natural Armour leathery hide 6

Special Attacks may have spells Special Defences may have spells

ST 5 (x0.5) IQ 12 (x1) LK 14 (x1.5) CON 10 (x1) DEX 18 (x2) CHR -3 (x-0.5) SP 22 (x2) flies at this speed also

Height x0.3 Weight x0.03 Starting Age: 0 Old at: never

A magical spell known to some fiends enables them to create a servant that buds off their own flesh small but fully formed and full grown. The resulting creature is an imp. The creature has a malicious free-will but is magically compelled to obey it's parent. Sometimes imps are ordered to obey some servant of the parent fiend as a reward for that servant's evil work. Unable to disobey gifted imps remain obedient but will seek ways to kill off their new master without disobeying orders. Imps do not age but immediately die if their infernal parent is killed. If the parent fiend knows any spells or other useful knowledge he may imbue the imp with some of this at the time of creation.

Invisible Fiend

MR Varies Dice Varies Adds Varies

Natural Weapons: two sets of poison dripping claws and poisoned bite. Dice are distributed evenly over the three attacks. Natural Armour Nil

Special Attacks: If any of the fiends physical damage gets through the victims armour and defences then roll one die for every 10pt of CON the victim has to give the number of turns the character has to nullify the poison before they suddenly drop dead Special Defences: immune to all kinds of poisons.

ST 12 plus 1/3 of adds IQ 15 (x1.5) LK 12 plus 1/3 of adds CON 320 (x32) DEX 12 plus 1/3 of adds CHR -1xAdds SP 12 (x1)

Height x1.25 Weight x1.5 Starting Age: Not applicable Old at: Not applicable

This is the description for the devious fiends summoned by the 13th level invisible fiend spell. The fiends allow themselves to be summoned on the grounds that they are given an opportunity to spill blood. If someone casts detect magic or makes the invisible visible then the fiends appear as tall muscular red humanoids with slick hairless skin, a snout filled with shark-like teeth, and oversized claws on their hands.

Jotnar (Frost Giant)

MR 320 Dice 32 Adds 160

Natural Weapons: two fists and two kicks 8d each (including 1d of cold damage) Natural Armour thick ice encrusted

skin 10

Special Attacks: if the giant grabs a character it automatically does 1d of cold damage each combat turn until the character is freed. Special Defences: nil

ST 172 (x17) IQ 15 (x1.5) LK 10 (x1) CON 320 (x32) DEX 10 (x1) CHR -90 (x-9) SP 18 (x2)

Height x4 Weight x68 Starting Age: 3d+40 Old at: 150

Huge giants of the icy north the jotnar have cold bodies adapted to arctic conditions. Their skin, hair and cloths become encrusted with frost and icicles. Jotnar are tribal living in huge longhouses built of pine, ice and stone. The chieftains of a jotnar lodge are called jarls. Most tribes have a 'mystic' who is of the rogue type.

*Knockers

MR 10 Dice 2 Adds 5

Natural Weapons: two claws 1d Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 6 (x0.5) IQ 12 (x1) LK 15 (x1.5) CON 10 (x1) DEX 15 (x1.5) CHR 3 (x0.5) SP 15 (x1.5)

Height x0.5 Weight x0.125 Starting Age: 3d+5 Old at: 30

Knockers are faeries related to goblins but unlike goblins these secretive folk often aid human miners in exchange for privacy, food and a little ore. They can be distinguished from goblins by their habits and their homely rather than ugly appearance. Knockers avoid being seen by other kin and value privacy. The surest way to drive these helpers out of a mine is to try to observe them as they work at night or seek out the concealed entrances to their dwellings within the mine. Some knockers become rogues or, more rarely, even wizards. Some referee's may allow knocker player characters. Such knockers will probably be less private than usual and will have to put up with occasionally being mistaken for a goblin.

Leach, Huge

MR 3 Dice 1 Adds 2

Natural Weapons: bite 1d Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks blood drain. After its first successful attack that gets past armour, the leach is assumed to have squirmed its way under any armour and clothing and latched onto bare flesh. Every round after that, the leach the leach drains 2pt of CON from its victim. This does not hurt since the leach's saliva is a potent anaesthetic. The referee secretly keeps track of these deductions. At 2 CON the character feels weak and their current CON is revealed. After the leach has drained 6pts the bloated parasite drops off the victim and attempts to wiggle away. Special Defences nil

ST 2 (x0.5) IQ 1 (x0.5) LK 26 (x2.5) CON 8 (x1) DEX 0 (x0.5) CHR 1 (x0.1) SP 15 (x1.5)

Length x0.1 Weight x0.001 Starting Age: 1d6 months Old at: 1 year

A leach as large as a rat. Leaches can be surprising agile whether swimming or flipping and wriggling on land. To remove an attached leach make a level 1 DEX save to hold on to the slippery writhing leach and a level one ST save pull it off (does 1 damage to patient if successful). Alternatively, apply salt or an ember.

Lion

MR 180 Dice 19 Adds 90

Natural Weapons: four claws 3d each, bite 7d Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks choke attack, the lion can roll dice for two claws and bite only (simultaneous attacks) against a single opponent if the cat wins then the lion automatically does bite damage each combat round against that opponent and the opponent must pass a CON save each round to remain conscious (1st level save in the first round, 2nd in the second round, etc. escalating each round). Special Defences nil

ST 90 (x9) IQ 5 (x 1/2) LK 28 (x3) CON 180 (x18) DEX 0 (x 0) CHR 14 (x1.5) SP 26 (x2.5)

Length x 1 without tail Weight x 2 Starting Age: 5 Old at: 16

Lions once were found throughout the west as well as in the Dark Continent to the south but over history most have been hunted down in the west and only a few now survive in the most remote wilds. Lions remain common to the south.

Lion weres are very rare in the West but are found in greater number to the south. Families of lion weres are generally powerful rulers of nations on the Dark Continent. Were lions are always NPCs (they are too powerful for PC use).

Mandrake

MR 30 Dice 3 Adds 12

Natural Weapons: bite 1d, two claws 1d, tail-slap 1d Natural Armour Scales 2

Special Attacks: breaths a bolt of flame melee range 30' for 3d. Treat as a missile attack. This takes concentration and is taxing may not launch any melee attacks in the same round. Special Defences nil

ST 24 (x2.5) IQ 9 (x1) LK 20 (x2) CON 30 (x3) DEX 10 (x1) CHR -15 (x-1.5)

SP 10 (x1) can fly.

Height x1.5 Weight x2 Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 120

Mandrakes are tall lean humanoid dragons with long necks.

Manticore

MR 190 Dice 20 Adds 95

Natural Weapons: four claws 2d each, bite 3d, sting 2d and 7d poison damage. Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks the tail sting is actually a collection of spines which can be released with a flick of the tail to act as a missile weapon. A flicked spine does 1d and 3d poison damage. The range of the spines is only 30'. Special Defences nil

ST 92 (x9) IQ 4 (x 1/2) max 5 LK 31 (x3) CON 180 (x18) DEX 0 (x 0) CHR -2 (x-0.25) SP 26 (x2.5)

Length x 1 without tail Weight x 2 Starting Age: 1d+10 Old at: 50

A lion-like predator of the tropical islands of the east. Unlike a lion the manticore has a head that looks like an ugly man's with a wild mane and beard. The jaws have three rows of shark-like teeth. The tail of the manticore ends in a cluster of hard spines. Male and female manticores look alike to non-manticores. The manticore may have a human-like face but it is actually not as cunning as even a lion, perhaps because it relies on its missile weapon or because it is a solitary rather than social creature.

*Nymph

MR 8 Dice 1 Adds 4

Natural Weapons: Normal unarmed combat Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 9 (x1) IQ 12 (x1) LK 16 (x1.5) CON 8 (x1) DEX 12 (x1) CHR 12 or 30 (x1 or x3) use second number when dealing those attracted to females. SP 12 (x1)

Height x9/10 Weight x2/3 but never overweight or skinny Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 200

Also known as korrigan and lamignac, nymphs are the yin to the satyr yang. All nymphs are female their natural mates are satyrs. Male offspring are born satyrs and female offspring are nymphs. Just as satyrs seem to be over-masculine, nymphs are brimming over with female essence. As young maids they are more adventurous and are most often seen by outsiders in their youth. As mature women they are caring and charismatic, as elders they offer wisdom and leadership. They look exactly like well proportioned and beautiful human females. It may not be apparent to others that they are dealing with a nymph and not an attractive human female. Nymphs often take lovers from the other good kin any offspring of such unions are full nymphs if female and attractive but sterile half breeds if male. Nymphs are fairy kindred and have a high aptitude for magic. Some referee's may allow nymph player characters. Nymph culture disdains violence and warfare and so produces no warriors. All nymphs are wizards or rogues.

Octopus

MR 170 Dice 18 Adds 85

Natural Weapons: bite 3d, eight tentacles 2d each. Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks a tentacle attack doing 7 or more points of damage indicates the octopus has wrapped a tentacle around the victim. The victim must make a 2nd level Luck save to have hands free. A wrapped victim receives 2d damage each round and is likely to be bitten as well. To escape beat the creature in a competitive save in STR. Special Defences: Camouflage, the octopus can alter its colouration and texture to look like a pile of stones, clump of seaweed or just about anything else in its environment. A character must pass a 4th level LK save to spot the creature before wandering within 30' tentacle reach. A camouflaged octopus is likely to gain surprise attacks.

ST 91 (x9) IQ 8 (x1) LK 20 (x2) CON 170 (x17) DEX 7 (x0.5) CHR -2 (x-0.1) SP 20 (x2) in water half this on land

Height x5 Weight x4 Starting Age: 1d Old at: 10

A huge octopus with 30' tentacles. The creature's length is mostly tentacles so it masses less than you might expect.

Ogre

MR 84 Dice 9 Adds 42

Natural Weapons: bite 1d, two fists 4d each (may substitute kicks for punches doing 4d). Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 52 (x5) IQ 7 (x0.5) LK 7 (x0.5) CON 84 (x8.5) DEX 7 (x0.5) CHR -37 (x-3.5) SP 10 (x1)

Height x2 Weight x10 Starting Age: 3d+5 Old at: 40

Where trolls are long limbed and cunning ogres are dumb, bestial and massively built. Ogres are creatures of cruel instincts. They are fiercely territorial predators that kill and eat intruders. To ogres the smell of blood rouses deep hunger and soon after most battles ogres feast upon the raw flesh of their enemies. Ogres also feel that to eat their enemies and defecate them out is the ultimate victory. Ogres are usually solitary unless dominated by creature of even greater physical power. Similarly, ogres can sometimes intimidate of small groups of orcs or goblins into servitude.

*Orc

MR 25 Dice 3 Adds 12

Natural Weapons: bite 1d, two claws 1d each. Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 20 (x2) IQ 9 (x1) LK 16 (x1.5) CON 25 (x2.5) DEX 10 (x1) CHR -10 (x-1) SP 10 (x1)

Height x1 Weight x1.25 Starting Age: 3d+5 Old at: 35

Orcs are brutish and ape-like so therefore are stronger and more agile than humans but not greatly so. Some referee's may allow orc player characters

RuneQuest Skill Quality Results

by Ian Bordhart

This hack is a variant I used to use for RQ2, based on some earlier discussions with Scott Martin and others.

When someone decides to use a skill in Runequest they decide the quality of the result they are seeking. This provides them with a Quality Factor with which they multiply their skill. This also affects their chance of a critical or special success. Their chance of fumbling, however should remain the same as normal.

Student (x4): This is the quality of work expected from a student or a hobbyist. The result is mostly functional but almost certainly not well-formed, and never ever very decorative.

Apprentice (x3): This is the quality of work expected from an apprentice that knows the fundamentals but lacks practice and experience. The result is simple and functional, but usually not particularly well-formed or decorative. The product quality is typical cheap apprentice work.

Journeyman (x2): This is the quality of work expected from a journeyman (day worker) or professional. Solid competent work, functional and well-made, with some artistry. Your typical good or item - munition quality weapons and armour for example.

Master (x1): This is the quality of work expected of a master (and also the measure of the ability to teach the skill). Excellent skilled work, with a strong consideration of aesthetics. Good quality merchandise (generally gaining no bonus, just better).

When a character undertakes a task they choose the quality of the effort they wish to put into it. Sometimes the quality will be mandated by the nature of the project. A woodworker carving a simple peg would obviously be Student quality, whilst attempting to carve a gothic glass-fronted cabinet would be Master quality work.

Note that criticals, specials, and failures do not affect the quality of the work. Instead they produce an excellent, good, or flawed example of that quality of good.

This also applies to other skills like combat skills. The active player (the attacker) decides the quality of the attack they are going to use. The defender gets to use the same quality to make their defensive rolls. Note that when the would-be defender responds they may choose their own quality (they do not need to fight at the same level of their opponent. Or as my unarmed combat instructor once said "stop coming at me as if you were my maiden aunt and if you really mean it this time."

When a skill check is made the Quality Factor is recorded. Lower Quality Factors replace higher. When the experience check is made, use the Quality Factor of the test.

Hackmaster Experiences

by **with Paul Smith, Russell Andrews, certified Hackmaster GM, and Richie Cyngler, player**
Plus John Miller-Williams, player Kyle Schuant, player for one session before intentionally offing himself

Paul: How did you get into Hackmaster? Do you recall who was the instigator?

Rich: [laughter] I think Russell was definitely the instigator and that's a very good word to use.

Russell: Let's see I was reading Knights of the Dinner Table. Some friends of mine in New Zealand who I'm now playing with were playing Hackmaster and having a fantastic time with it. I read the rules and they were hilarious. I think I ran a one off at Renaissance Role-Playing and it went down quite well.

Rich: Is that what happened? I mean we met at Renaissance Role-Playing but I think the Hackmaster thing started after that, didn't it?

Russell: You're right, it did. But I ran a game at Renaissance Role-Playing. I think that was before or after I met you, and I think we were playing Hong Kong Action Theatre when I met you.

Rich: Yes we did - first game that I played with you running it.

Russell: Anyway, so I ran this Hackmaster game 'Night of the Hobbits' and that was fun, and I tried to convince Rich and John Miller-Williams to play it. I think John wasn't terribly keen but Rich said, yeah I'd be up for that and the rest as they say is history. We started with two players and we went on from there.

Rich: No, Kyle was also there.

Russell: Was he there? Yes that's right! I remember yes he lasted a session then his character died in a pool of fetid water and he didn't come back.

Rich: Yes he suicided his character in probably the most epic showing of forethought that I've ever seen in...

Russell: How did he do it?

Rich: He fell off his horse. He had a character called Homely who was a female fighter I think.

Russell: With appearance as a dump stat.

Paul: How enthusiastic were the rest of the group?

Rich: I mean I don't remember how enthusiastic I was at the beginning.

Russell: I think you were kind of like oh, that could be fun. You weren't like hugely enthusiastic but I think you really enjoyed it to begin with. I don't think it was ever your favourite game but yet I think you had fun at the beginning. I think John had a lot of fun at the beginning as well as he liked to roll up these really stupid characters and I think Kyle hated it from the start so...

Rich: Yeah, it took me... I was much slower to hate it.

Russell: You learned to hate it.

Rich: I suspect I probably hate it more than Kyle now.

Russell: Yeah. But you you had a lot of fun with Slippy-Slop, I remember, which was your Pixie Fairy magic user and I think you really really enjoyed that character, he had terrible...

Rich: He was one of my favourite characters of all time.

Paul: What had you played previously?

Russell: Well John and I met up in Melbourne and I hadn't played for years and years.

Rich: I didn't know that, I thought you'd been at the Renaissance club for quite a while.

Russell: This is before the Renaissance club. I turned up there and had been going for about six months and sort of you know running games and playing games and that was kind of fun.

Rich: I hadn't played for years either before Renaissance and thought I want to do this again and so I found the Renaissance club in Brunswick run by Ian Borchardt.

Russell: He was an interesting guy. Had a massive TV.

Rich: Yeah, he's quite active on Google Plus these days.

Paul: How did you find getting into HM? How steep was the learning curve?

Russell: the learning curve is insanely steep. But if you know AD&D you're pretty much a tenth of the way there. [laughter] No that's not true. Maybe like a third of the way there. The advice they give you is don't do it all at once. You start with the basic rules, and every session you introduce a new rule, and then at about the third or fourth session hit them with an Encumbrance Audit, and then the fifth session hit them with an Alignment Audit and then you're good to go. You slowly introduce more rules as you go to get up to speed. It's a massive game, it's just insane. I was doing so much, I was doing so much homework. It was great. Rich, which was your experience like?

Rich: My answer is uh, yeah it's basically second edition AD&D with a lot more bells and whistles added onto it to further complexify most of the rules. So for me the learning curve wasn't that steep because I grew up with it but it kind of makes you want to do it less the longer you do it. [laughter] It's kind of like an inverse learning curve. The more you learn the more you don't want to be doing it.

Russell: I found the opposite which is that I really enjoyed it more.

Paul: Can you tell me about some of your adventures and characters?

Russell: This is taking me back a bit. Rich, can you remember? You did Robinloft [parody of Ravenloft] I seem to remember. The classic one was the Caves of Chaos, where-

Rich: Yeah, Little Keep on the Borderlands.

Russell: Little Keep on the Borderlands, where you re-christened the Caves of Chaos the Caves of Happiness in a sort of marketing ploy to get hirelings. Somebody – I can't remember who it was - built a tavern and then sacked all the Elven exotic dancers and it went bankrupt. It was an attempt at a heist, I think, between two characters, one of whom was an anthrax-ridden rabbit and they didn't share a language...

Rich: There was a lot of PVP stuff. The game basically makes you hate everyone else at the table.

Russell: Yeah, kind of, and a lot of God Oaths which backfired horribly so...

Rich: That reminds me! So we had this huge charter - actually had this written down and published and signed, with serious ramifications if you broke it because we'd fucked over each other so badly. We had to have it invoked probably about half-way of or three-quarters of the way... I mean how long it was the campaign, four years?

Russell: Tt was massive, it was something like that.

Rich: The charter was invoked, and one of John's characters was reduced to a smoking boot. I don't think any of us were the same after that. It was a vicious kind of... I mean we'd all done terrible shit that deserved it but we'd never really invoked it before that point.

Russell: Do you remember, there was one session where you guys... there was an earthquake in the city and you fell down this big crevasse and there were all these fish men, and you fought the fish men, and at the end of the fish men you fought this giant fish man and all the while John's character was sitting on a little toadstool in the back of the cabin watching the entire fight while the rest of you slugged your guts out.

Rich: I did a picture of that! It's one of my favourite game drawings that I've ever done. A gigantic fish creature with all the party members.

Russell: It was great. The best thing was John watching the whole thing, and that's Hackmaster for you. I mean he was Chaotic Evil.

Rich: Yeah, John would play evil characters that want to be... that were unabashedly evil but who were not stupid. I think he was properly playing Hackmaster the most in a way.

Russell: He was playing his alignment and that's the way you should play Hackmaster.

Rich: The best adventure we played was one that Russell wrote where there were a bunch of halflings and their cursed biscuits or something.

Russell: Cheese, it was a zombie cheese.

Rich: The biscuits - spoilers - the biscuits were the antidote.

Russell: That's right, the crackers were the antidote. You can see I slaved over that one.

Rich: It was great, it was my favourite ever.

Russell: Yeah that was the first one I ever wrote. You're basically saying it was all downhill from there!

Rich: Before that first one you wrote we went through a lot of the published adventures. There was that terrible haunted house one [K1 Slaughterhouse Indigo], the Caves of Chaos...

Russell: Oh, yeah.

Rich: There were a bunch. It was at least a year or so in that you wrote your own.
Russell: I think when you run the game you really need to write your own adventures because it is so much more fun.

The dungeon crawling is less fun than other types of adventures I think.

Paul: Can you recall any amusing character deaths?

Russell: There was one guy who we dropped a windmill on...

Rich: That's right, was that Barney?

Russell: No that wasn't Barney. Barney was taken over by a... he was charmed by a magic user and had to be hacked to death. Barney was a remarkable character. He was basically John trying to see how many Flaws I would let him take, and I let him take them all. He was this horribly flawed, monstrously strong indestructible idiot who was prone to psychotic bouts and multiple personalities, like a little old lady or elf. The aforementioned guy who became a smoking boot. Who else had a horrible death? There were a few.

Rich: Yeah there were. I don't remember the character deaths so much as poignant moments.

Russell: Oh really? There were There were poignant moments? It was a multicoloured tapestry of narrative.

Rich: I think was one of Russell's favourites was my character whose ambition was to become a werewolf.

Russell: [laughter] Ah that was so funny, that was classic.

Rich: We had a particular scene where he went naked into a pool of water and there were all these... I think Russell kept give me all these red herrings about how I might become a werewolf when he was just enjoying torturing me.

Russell: You were beside the pool, stripped yourself off and you did this ceremony and waited for the werewolves to come. The werewolves came and tore you to pieces. Good times.

Rich: Yeah but, one thing I'll say for Hackmaster is that it engenders... I mean our game was more like Knights of the Dinner Table than Knights of the Dinner Table. It engendered the play it was intended to engender.

Russell: It does exactly what it says on the tin, which is that you will be the worst most rules lawyering, dumbest adventuring group ever and nothing will make any sense but I don't think I've ever laughed as much as I have playing Hackmaster, it's just hilarious. It's just stupidity dialled up to eleven.

Paul: Did anyone else try GMing?

Rich: Well Russell in good old school classic GM style wouldn't let anyone else read the DMG! It says in the book. There would be fire and brimstone if you did.

Russell: Yeah you needed to be a certified GM. There was a quiz that you could do online.

Rich: We also all joined the Hackmaster Players Association and paid money to get badges. We used the vouchers printed in the books and took them really seriously.

Russell: The vouchers were great actually. Still got my badge.

Rich: The vouchers could get you benefits for dice rolls and they were worth more than money.

Paul: What were your highlights of the published modules you ran? Low-lights?
Russell: I think Little Keep is really good because it's a sandbox. You can go adventuring in and out of the Keep. The

rest of them are not really my cup of tea. They were good to use because there is so much prep involved in Hackmaster, so it's good to have adventures handy but I much preferred to follow the Player Characters and see where they were going. Massive epic dungeon crawls are quite exhausting to GM and after a while I think everyone's attention sort of waned. Hackmaster suits smaller shorter dungeons much better.
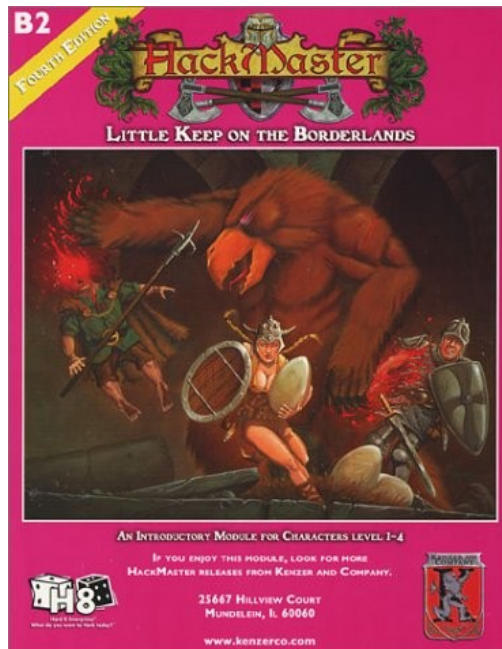
Rich: I hadn't had much experience with old school modules. When I was playing as a kid we just ad-libbed everything basically, so I wasn't really familiar with them. Some of the references you kinda picked up.

Paul: Can you recall any particular strengths or weaknesses of the setting, Garweeze Wurld?

Russell: Garweeze Wurld... well are not really, I mean there is nothing hugely special about Garweeze Wurld. I think it is just that it's part of the joke that you're playing in Garweeze Wurld, it's just a silly place and nothing really makes any sense. You know these monsters are rampaging through the farmlands and yet somehow everybody goes on as normal.

Paul: Did you try any alternative settings, eg. HackJammer [HM parody of SpellJammer]? Your own worlds?

Russell: We didn't try HackJammer, we didn't try our own worlds really. Not because of any specific ideology, it's just that I picked it up and Garweeze Wurld was the setting.

Paul: Do you have any favourite original HM monsters? Best monster adapted/parodied from D&D?

Russell: I've got to say the Gristle Golem is a favourite. It's just ridiculous and awesome and powerful.

Rich: I don't remember any monsters other than the gigantic fish monster.

Russell: The best monsters are the ones that - you had this monster supplement [Hacklopedia Field Manual] which has all these additional rules that you can add to monsters. So you can make them silver versions and giant versions and retarded versions and just apply all these templates to them and you can individualise them. You can make like a giant super genius magic-using orc and go from there. It's quite neat. I had a real soft spot for flesh-eating pixie fairies as well.

Rich: I think the the reason I can't remember many monsters is we were kind of our own worst enemies, most of the time fighting against ourselves.

Russell: [laughter] So true!

Rich: The other characters were the biggest threat to your life, to your wealth.

Russell: To your honour! To your honour.

Rich: That was totally the current that ran through the whole thing.
Paul: Favourite character classes or sub-classes? Are some more effective than others?

Rich: Pixie Fairies hands down. Russell, you must have played with someone else running, because you had some game-breaking PCs.

Russell: Oh yeah! I don't know who was running but I did have a pirate Pixie Fairy for a while. Swashbucklers are great, Swashbucklers are just load and loads of fun. They're like May flies, they last like five minutes and then you roll a new one but they're great. Oh dear, do you remember Paragon the Paladin?

Rich: God I hate Paladins and Paladins in Hackmaster make it even worse.

Russell: Yeah his name was Paragon. Paragon was in the habit of taking taking his helmet off and rubbing his temples out of frustration because of all the stupidity and banality around him. He got stabbed to death by a hobgoblin in the Caves of Chaos.

Paul: Is min-maxing character builds an important part of playing HM? Does it make it more or less fun?

Rich: That's the only thing it's for, and it makes it both more and less fun. [laughter] You take all the Quirks and Flaws you possibly can like the character we mentioned, Barney, who was like a massive, like half-orc or something and he was basically for all intents and purposes a vegetable. Couldn't do anything but he was a destruction machine. He had far worse effects on the party than on anything else. So we coined the term Barneyism as a result of this character, meaning when taking all the Quirks and Flaws you can end up making a character that is completely unplayable.

Russell: There is a point at which a min/max character is just completely unplayable and Barney... he was like this force of nature, completely unpredictable. But a thing about Quirks and Flaws is the more Flaws you take the more power you give to the GM to fuck with your character and that's a bad thing.

Rich: Yes, that's true.

Russell: Barney, he had multiple personalities in stress situations and what isn't a stress situation in Hackmaster? He had three separate personalities. One was an elf called Elfy Welfy because he had no idea what an elf actually was because he was so stupid, and one was an old lady and one was a... it was just bonkers.

Rich: At the time it was just fucking horrible.

Russell: It was insane. He had narcolepsy! In one situation, because he was immensely strong he lifted the Player Characters' carriage over his head and fell asleep! I was just sitting there going, 'and you fall asleep right?' So he rolled a Wisdom check to stay awake. It was just ridiculous, you can't get anything done. But hilarious, I mean absolutely hilarious.

Rich: It's more extreme than min/maxing or munchkinism because it's just fucked up.

Russell: Yeah, it's not min/maxing it's just Barneyism.

Paul: Is rules-lawyering an important part of playing HM?

Russell: Not really. We didn't do a lot of that, did we? I mean we argued over some things but we were generally trying to reach a workable solution most of the time.

Rich: No, the problem with Hackmaster is that there is no rules lawyering because the GM has the ultimate power. So that's what it's about. We sort of all got into the... it's kinda got a rules lawyery vibe where if you try to follow the rules to the letter of the law you're playing the game right. The intent was, play everything to the book.

Russell: John was quite good at this because John was really good at throwing the Player's Handbook back in your face. He could point to a rule in the Player's Handbook and say no, Russell you're wrong.

Paul: What are your thoughts on the Honor mechanics in Hackmaster?

Russell: Brilliant. It makes the game, it is the game. The Honor mechanics are Hackmaster, Hackmaster is the Honor rules. Without the honour rules there is no Hackmaster. It's a different game. Honor drives almost all the insane behaviour that Player Characters get up to.

Paul: What about the Build Points [character creation] system, Quirks & Flaws?

Rich: Terrible. Terrible.

Russell: It's great. I mean it's really really good. It enables you to have a really kick-ass character to start with but at the same time a really hopeless character, or a character who is both, which is a huge amount of fun. Every Superman has his Kryptonite.

Rich: Every Kryptonite in this case.

Russell: But you can have too much of a good thing.

Paul: The skill system?

Russell: Useless. Hopeless.

Paul: Really?

Rich: I can't remember it.

Russell: It was just so hard to get a skill up to any meaningful level. Tt was a terrible system. It was a nice idea but I don't think they did well enough. Part of the game is you kind of screw the characters on every little bit of advantage but it demands that you have all these skills. It doesn't really give you a path to do them and your skills grow so slowly that even at tenth level you have no skills. Very weak part of the game.

Paul: What about some of the accessories, like the GM Shield?

Rich: I have to give it to them for the GM Shield, it's great. Amazing.

Russell: It really is the best.

Rich: And I had the Player - effectively the Player's Shield. Funny but also somewhat useful. The thing I liked the most about it was the double doors at the front so you could roll your dice through the doors.

Russell: Yeah, I mean the GM shield is absolutely essential but you need Velcro tabs.

Paul: The Combat Wheel [used to calculate to-hit target numbers]?

Russell: The Combat Wheel... ah yeah, it's kind of useful.

Paul: To what extent does the writing style ("Gary-speak") of Hackmaster affect the way it's played?

Russell: I don't know, you sort of puff your chest out and you play this macho bravado I guess. But it just devolved into silliness really. What I like about it is you take this position, in-game when you're playing and you're heavily into it, and we were so into this, and I think that that annoyed the shit out of a lot of people. That Hackmaster is the greatest game in the universe and all other games are just not as good, and you should be playing Hackmaster; if you're not you're a

second-class citizen. That's fun to do, it's quite a lot of fun to be playing the best game in the world and pretending you believe it. That's a lot of fun.

Do you think Hackmaster would still work if it weren't written [for legal reasons] as a parody of D&D?

Russell: No. And the reason why is because they've done it. They've done a new version of Hackmaster [5th] and it doesn't work. It's no fun, it's too serious.
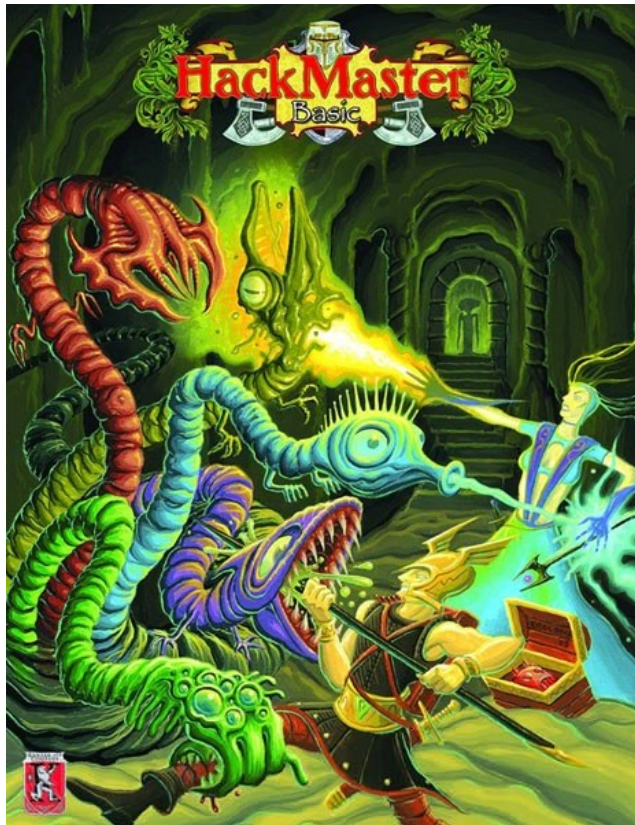
Rich: It's rubbish basically, yeah?

Russell: Yes because they play it straight. It's not a parody, it's just no fun. It's just another fantasy heartbreaker.

Rich: I flipped through it, that's it. But you know given that I was... by the time I saw Hackmaster 5th I was like, I never want to see another Hackmaster. I couldn't really give it a fair shake.

Paul: Russell, the group gave you the Hackmaster 5th Hacklopedia as a going away present, right?

Russell: Yes, and it's a beautiful book but... it's just there's nothing special about it. It's just another fantasy game. It doesn't do it for me.

Paul: I've never played either [4th or 5th] Hackmaster but what I like about the books of the original Hackmaster is just being able to go through and read, and the new one doesn't have that appeal to me. The new Hacklopedia is a really nice coffee table book but it has like 50 creatures and they're all the traditional D&D monsters, owl bears and the like...

Russell: Yeah, that's exactly right. The original Hacklopedias are awesome, and you can line the covers all up and it makes a fantastic picture. It's just a huge amount of fun, I used to love thumbing through them and finding an interesting monster you can throw at the characters and it was great.

Rich: It's pretty obvious that Hackmaster [4th] was trying to... it's both a parody but it's also kind of like... you know, you've got the D&D rules and at the end of the day they happened in all the basements of all the privileged white boys in the English-speaking world and some other places. The whole point of Hackmaster is that those games were all quite different from each other. Because the rules as written... you end up playing some version of that. Hackmaster is kind of like one version of what happened for a bunch of extremely maladjusted people like you see in Knights of the Dinner Table. [laughter] But I think in a sense they're also trying to say, okay there are these rules, but that this is actually how

the game plays, which is kind of the appeal of the parody. It kind of makes you look back at your own old school play with both fondness and criticism. Now I think [Goodman Games'] Dungeon Crawl Classics is doing a similar thing but they're going for a different... so Hackmaster is going for 'this is how it actually played' and DCC is going 'this is what it could have been.' And both of them are... I don't think DCC is a parody like Hackmaster is, but I don't think Hackmaster is quite a parody either. I think they're both kind of a love letter to the original game in their own way. I think they're a good comparison, the three rule sets. The original D&D, there is none of that emotion written into it but both Hackmaster and DCC have all of this reference material. [To Russell] I'm actually really surprised you don't like DCC.

Russell: DCC... for me it's not crunchy enough. I you know [Moon Design's] Heroquest, right? I mean I love Heroquest as the game but if I play it or run it I just feel awash in this sensory deprivation tank.

Rich: Interesting.

Paul: Russell, what OSR games have you played?

Russell: I've not played any others. I played D&D first edition back in the day and that's the reason why I like Hackmaster. I don't really like those games though, I hate those games in fact. Hackmaster's the only game that I like along those lines. My gaming love is all hollowed out in the middle... which is that I really like Hackmaster and that extreme 'gamist' style and then there's not really any middleground, and then I really like narrativist style like [Luke Crane's] Burning Wheel and sort of ilk of thing. [Pelgrane Press's] Trail of Cthulhu, [Crane & Jared Sorensen's] Freemarket... I mean Freemarket for me is fantastic. So you know, both those ends of the scale but nothing in the middle I guess.

Rich: Yeah Freemarket is one of my favourite games. The game that you ran and we played is probably my favourite campaign I've ever played in.

Paul: Have your thoughts on Hackmaster changed since you originally played it?

Rich: Well there were moments, there were times when I was playing it that I enjoyed it but I've gotta say that largely I found it pretty... I mean it was just not that fun, and since then if I was playing a game where I was looking for it to be fun, if there might be a few moments of fun than I probably wouldn't be playing Hackmaster these days. [laughter] Not to say that... on the other hand the group, I'd still like to be playing games with Russell and John and that group is my favourite group ever. It's just Hackmaster... in fact I think if the group wasn't as strong as it was we wouldn't have survived that game. There is no question in my mind about that actually.

Paul: Russell, how have your recent Hackmaster games compared with the original campaign?

Russell: Well the game I ran over here [NZ]... firstly I think it was a better game because they played it before but also because I wrote all the adventures, so there was none of those standard adventures. It was good, it plays pretty well. But those guys... I think if you took in some some people who couldn't...

Rich: But when you first got back over here you were talking about how you are disappointed they just wanted to do the old school thing and sort of relive the heyday, and weren't really that interested in doing interesting things?

Russell: It was more about my experience, because I wanted to recapture that experience that we had. But at the end of it I had a really good time and I think if you... you've got to be in on the joke, right? I mean that's the thing, and part of being in on the joke is that you have to have been exposed to that sort of old school gaming to get it. If you're not in on the joke you will never enjoy it. Hackmaster is a hugely frustrating game. I mean it's enormously frustrating, but that's part of the rewarding nature of it, you know? And I don't think you'd push that through that frustration unless you understand that you're sort of in a maze of irony and self referentiality.

Dreamscape: A Plane for Labyrinth Lord

by Nicolas Moll

One of my all-time favourite Dungeons and Dragons modules is The Nightmare Lands. A second edition Ravenloft module written by Shane Lacy Hensley of Deadlands fame, the module takes the Party deep into a twisted, malleable, dream world ruled over by a twisted entity - the Nightmare Man. In high school, when me and several of my tabletop companions were all trying our very hardest to be goth, experimenting with questionable art, and the Sandman comics were at their height, this amazing figure and his dream-realm made it into every level of our Dungeons and Dragons games. So, when I started running Labyrinth Lord, those fond memories prompted me to scribe a homage to The Nightmare Lands for use in or games: The Dreamscape.

The Dreamscape itself is a vast, alternate dimension built of the collective unconscious of all sentient inhabitants of the world. The Dreamscape thus literally a smaller parallel and parasitical world, made of dreams that are projected outwards across the astral planes. Most of the Dreamscape a sleeper encounters thus matches that of the world near exactly, albeit interpreted though an expressionist lenses. The deeper one journeys into the Dreamscape, the more unique and alien the terrain becomes. This is because, while built of dreams, the Dreamscape hosts many indigenous creatures and organically arisen structures and places. Of particular note are the Somnambulists, the natural humanoids of the Dreamscape.

Locations that are inhabited by the indigenous peoples of the Dreamscape are called Collectives; places that have arisen from the imaginings focused on places of great significance to the sentient mind, such as cities, but grown to take on a life of their own. Most Collectives are inhabited by Somnambulists and function, for all intents and purposes, as city-states in their own right.

Generally speaking, people do not enter the Dreamscape consciously. While individuals from the world exist as a Noctrumba (or Dream-Shade) while they sleep, the acts and deeds undertaken are quite literally dreams sprung from an unconscious mind, lucid and only semi-remembered by the waking self. Due to its variant nature, the Dreamscape operates by distinct rules:

●—You go there every night

Every time one sleeps, they enter the Dreamscape – typically as a Noctumbra. The Noctumbra is the individuals dreaming self that simply drifts through the Dreamscape. Noctumbra create and shape the Dreamscape – creating rare wonders – re-molding their surroundings to suit their dreams. Because Noctrumbra literally created the Dreamscape, ability makes a sleeping-self the most valuable resource in the Dreamscape. Since Noctumbra themselves lay dormant when their sleeper is awake, however, they are quite easy to capture and hold – making trade in Noctumbra key to the Dreamscape's economy. Due to the fact they unconsciously warp reality around them, Noctumbra are often kept in dungeons or other less invasive places. Noctumbra are generated and formed by sleeping individuals in the world. Thus should the Noctumbra be slain or fall to some other hazard, the Dreaming-self, a new one will be generated after D6 days. During this time, however, any sleep the character undertakes is troubled and requires a Save vs. Paralysis to derive any rest.

●──The landscape itself is malleable

The terrain within the Dreamscape is changeable within reason. All it requires is a Wisdom Check can be used to reshape terrain and landscapes. The effect reshapes terrain within a 5' foot square and can only reshape solids, transform solid to liquid, or liquid to gas (or vice versa). This means that doors can be smoothed into the walls, knives can be sharpened and lengthened to swords and other manipulations of already established surroundings. This must be done in an adjacent space to the Party member.

●──The mirror is twisted and pale

Just about everything ever thought of, experienced or visualized can be found in the Dreamscape. This means that, in addition to its inhabitants and native creatures, the Dreamscape has humans, dragons, Elves and countless other monsters and beings made from the collective dreams of the world. Such entities are known as Simulacrum and while they largely match their waking-world counter-part, are simply just a dream and cannot ever leave the Dreamscape. Places and objects real, lost, forgotten and dreamed of can be found in the Dreamscape. But, like the Simulacrum, have been left to run wild and run their course in the Dreamscape. And as a result, have ceased to resemble the expectations or form of the original dreamer in all but the most palest and remote reflection.

Dreamweaver

These enormous spiders are native to the Dreamscape and have learned to use the nature of the environment to their advantage. The Dreamweaver spins a web, waiting for sleeping souls and other prey to wanter in. Once in contact with the webs, the victim enters a catatonic state, allowing the Dreamweaver to drain their consciousness. In game terms, the web of a Dreamweaver counts as a trap which, if caught in, the victim must make a Save Versus Paralysis or be rendered catatonic. In this state, if attacked by a Dreamweaver, the victim must make a Save versus Death or be devoured. While caught in the web, the victim is assailed by visions of joy and happiness to keep them docile and from which the Dreamweaver derives their name. A Wisdom Check is required to see through the visions and re-attempt the Save Versus Paralysis to escape.

	Dreamweaver
No. Enc.:	1d4 (1D4)
Alignment:	Neutral
Movement:	120' (40')
Armour Class:	7
Hit Dice:	2
Attacks:	1
Damage:	1d8, hallucinations.
Save:	F1
Morale:	7
Hoard Class:	VI
XP:	38
Notes:	The bite of a Dreamweaver will inject venom into a victim, causing the same effect as being caught in its webs. A Save Versus Paralysis is necessary, with a Wisdom Check to re-check the save.

Knightmare

With their quadrupedal lower quarters and their humanoid upper torso, Knightmares resemble a Centaur in conception. The similarity ends there, however, with the Knightmare's body being entirely encased in an insectoid exoskeleton. The

Knightmare tend to be a creature of rudimentary intelligence, capable of tribal civilizations of hunters and killers. Many become enslaved as war-mounts for Somnambulists.

	Knightmare
No. Enc.:	1D4 (2D10)
Alignment:	Chaotic
Movement:	180' (60')
Armour Class:	6
Hit Dice:	1+1
Attacks:	3 (1 claw, 2 pincers)
Damage:	1d4/1d6/1d6
Save:	F2
Morale:	7
Hoard Class:	III (XX)
XP:	5
Notes:	

Morphiend

The winged fiends of the Dreamscape, Morphiends are large, dog-like humanoids with enormous bat-like wings stretching from their backs. Animalistic and savage, Morphiends are often found in the service of Somnambulists for whom they act as war-beasts. In the wild, Morphiends are often found in the rawest and least formed areas of the Dreamscape, corresponding to the less populated regions of the world.

	Morphiend
No. Enc.:	1d6 (2D4)
Alignment:	Neutral
Movement:	120' (40')
Armour Class:	7
Hit Dice:	2
Attacks:	2 (Claw, Claw)
Damage:	1d4/1d4
Save:	F2
Morale:	7
Hoard Class:	None.
XP:	13
Notes:	Morphiends possess vast wings that allow them to fly at a pace of 180' (60').

Noctrumbra

The sleeping selves of dreaming sentient beings from the world, Noctrumbra are largely unaware of their surroundings or even the existence of the Dreamscape. They exist wrapped, somewhat like a mummy, in a hardened shell of dream stuff – projecting their unwinding unconscious outward into their surroundings. Due to their nature, then, Noctrumbra are not treated as a monster per say, but a part of the terrain and, in terms of encounters, a trap. While Noctrumbra occupy a single square of the encounter map, they tend to unconsciously warp the area around them within a 10 foot radius. To see what effect a Noctrumbra is having on the landscape, roll on the table below:

Roll (1d4)

- Colours that kill. A swirling mass of primary colours engulfs the area. Each round characters within the area must make a Save vs. Death or die instantly).
- Gloopy Gasses. Thick, clingy gasses hang in the air about the Noctrumbra. Each round characters within the area must make a Save vs. Petrify or are rendered immobile. While all other actions can take place as normal, the character cannot move from their spot.
- Razor Storm. Any character who enters the area must make a Save versus Petrify or suffer 1D6 damage and be pushed backwards 10 feet.
- Walls of Sleep. The area surrounding the Noctrumbra is walled off.

Somnambulist

Known as Dreamwalkers, Somnambulists are the natural humanoids of the Dreamscape. They are silent, bald-headed and pale-skinned humanoids shrouded in dark clothing. They typically dwell in stable settlements across the Dreamscape, typically in the Consciousness of cities and other gatherings of dreamers, whose nightly sojourns they sample.

	Somnambulist
No. Enc.:	1d4 (1d10+4)
Alignment:	Neutral
Movement:	120' (40')
Armour Class:	5
Hit Dice:	2
Attacks:	1
Damage:	1d8
Save:	F2
Morale:	8
Hoard Class:	XIX
XP:	20
Notes:	Once per Encounter, a Somnambulist may reshape a Dreamscape within a 5' foot square and can only reshape solids, transform solid to liquid, or liquid to gas (or vice versa). This must be done in an adjacent space to the Somnambulist member.

D&D: The Thing With Dragons

by Ursula Vernon

So our latest D&D adventure has us being tested by Rooster the paladin's god, the Silver Weasel, to see if we are tough enough to go on his quest for...whatever the hell it is.

Each test is individually tailored. This one was for our thief, Ceri.

We found ourselves on a ledge in a vast cavern full of lava. There was a keyhole in the wall and a rope overhead. The rope was only tangible to our thief, Ceri.

Now, obviously Ceri was supposed to go on the rope to god knows what by herself, but no. The party does not play that. Our druid used his Polymorph spell, turning the party into hummingbirds, and we rode to adventure clinging to Ceri's hat.

The rope led to a chamber of ridiculous riches, with writing on the wall saying "TAKE ONLY WHAT YOU NEED."

Ceri has something of an impulse control problem when it comes to shiny things. We remained hummingbirds. This led to the intriguing scenario of Ceri hanging from the ceiling by her wall-walking boots while we clung to her earlobes.

CERI: Awww! I have hummingbird earrings!
GNOLL WARRIOR: I don't wanna be an accessory...

CERI: But I NEED the shiny things! All of them!
PALADIN: I ride on her ear and stab her with my beak.
DRUID: I ride on her other ear and do the same.
CERI: Fine, I'm going, quit beaking me!

We searched the room. Sort of.

GM: It's a bin full of jeweled vegetables.
GNOME: Cabbages!
GM: Not...just...cabbages.
PALADIN: Okay, what vegetable does the key most resemble?
GM: I...what....uh...starfruit, I guess?

We continued searching the room.

GM: You have found the key. The key of all keys! The key that will open any lock!
PARTY: 'Kay.
GM: The Fabio of keys.
FEMALE MEMBERS OF PARTY: ...ew.
PALADIN'S PLAYER: Like...old and sort of gross?
GM: The Eighties Fabio of keys. Any lock would open for this key.
FEMALE MEMBERS OF PARTY: ...no. We don't know what locks see in this key.
GM: The Alan Rickman of keys.
PALADIN'S PLAYER: Well, I'm on board.
GM: The Vin Diesel of keys?

PALADIN'S PLAYER: Awww yeah.
RANGER'S PLAYER: This is the first one you've said that worked for me.

Eventually we found the correct key, our thief shimmied back across the rope, used the key, the lava receded, and there were two volcanic dragons and a two-headed giant. They were displeased with our presence.

CERI: We're being tested by the Weasel!
DRAGON: The Weasel who keeps sending people here? Did you touch our stuff?!
CERI: No! Well...brushed up against it...maybe...

PALADIN: Hey, do you know the elder brass dragon that lives under our castle?
DRAGON: Are you implying that all dragons must know each other?!
PALADIN: ...no, that's why I asked.
DRAGON: No.
PALADIN: How about a blue dragon with an army of giants and kobolds and stuff?
DRAGON: Oh, the one obsessed with shoes.
DRAGONBORN RANGER: *is glad she's a hummingbird and no one can see her feet*
DRAGON: Yeah, he's a cautionary tale.
PALADIN: Hi! We're the caution!

Some largely unfruitful discussion ensues, and then...

PALADIN: I use diplomacy!
PALADIN: *rolls a 37*
DRAGON: *is unimpressed*
PALADIN'S PLAYER: No! That was a 37. I demand you roll against i!
GM: ....
PALADIN'S PLAYER: I AM ONE SEXY HALF-ELF!
PALADIN'S PLAYER: IN FACT, I ATTEMPT TO SEDUCE THE DRAGON!
DRUID'S PLAYER: To Twitter!
GM: ...wut
PALADIN'S PLAYER: You heard me.
GM: ....
DRAGONBORN RANGER: Wouldn't...I mean...even if you succeed...I mean...how...
PALADIN'S PLAYER: They're cloacal mammals! Reptiles! Thingies! It'll be fine!
DRAGONBORN RANGER: What if they're not into that?
PALADIN'S PLAYER: Did I mention that I rolled a 37!?
GM: Seven years we've had this campaign, and this is the first time this has happened. Honestly, I'm surprised it took this long.

PALADIN's PLAYER: Well?
GM: I...ah...the dragons are astonished.
GM: They are gazing at you with astonishment.
PALADIN: I go up and run my finger up one's chest scales and say "So, you come here often?"
GM: ....
PARTY: ....
PALADIN: IT WAS A 37!
GM: I'm just...I'm seeing Rooster leaning on the dragon and..I...I...
PALADIN: Look, if you need to fade to black, it's okay.
GM: No. No, the dragon is looking at you with pity. Like...err...someone much younger...
DRAGONBORN RANGER: Like if a high school kid hit on you!

PALADIN'S PLAYER: With a Charisma of 20!?
GM: The dragon is holding you at arm's length and saying "It's...uh...look, you're very nice, but..."
PALADIN: *bursts into tears*
PALADIN: *sob* Why can't I find someone who wants to cuddle? I...I feel like I have a lot to offer...
PARTY: *horrified hummingbirds*
GM: ...
PALADIN: *gestures to party behind back* Get to the door!
PARTY: Well, we're hummingbirds, we just buzz to the door...
CERI: I sneak to the door!
PALADIN: I just...I'm such a loser...
DRAGON: Okay, now you're negging yourself. This is not going to lead to pity sex.
PALADIN: No...no, you're a good person...It's not like that...*sob*

GM: There's like a bunch of locks on the door.
CERI: *rolls a 20* You were saying?

GM: The dragon is trying to disentangle itself.
PALADIN: *eases past dragon* I...thanks...I'm sorry...just...err...don't tell anyone, okay?
DRAGON: No, no...god, no!
DRAGON 2: I'm telling EVERYONE.
PALADIN: *sob* It's...it's what I deserve...

GM: Well, the door's almost open. Roll Diplomacy one more time--
PALADIN'S PLAYER: *rolls a 1*
EVERYONE: *stares at the 1*
PALADIN'S PLAYER: ...oh, crap. Well, I read CreepyPMs...there's only one thing they ever say on a total seduction botch...
PALADIN: Eh, you were fat anyway.*
DRAGON: WHAT DID YOU SAY?
PARTY: *cringe*
PALADIN: Go, go, everbody go, just get through the door!
DRAGONBORN RANGER: I will salvage the situation.
DRAGONBORN RANGER: Honey! Honey, are you--
PALADIN: ...
DRAGONBORN RANGER: OH MY GOD YOU WERE HITTING ON ANOTHER DRAGON WEREN'T YOU!?
PALADIN: ...
GM: ...
DRAGON: ....
DRAGON 2: *gets out popcorn*
DRAGONBORN RANGER: This is the third time this month! My mother warned me about men like you!
PALADIN: I...uh...uh...no, honey! I thought she was you! You...err....look identical...?
DRAGON: ...
GM: ...
DRAGONBORN RANGER: *grabs paladin by the ear* You're coming with me! *marches toward door* I don't know why I put up with you!
GM: They're not quite buying it. If Rooster plays along...
PALADIN: I...um...I have a sex addiction! To dragons! I'm seeing a therapist!
DRAGONBORN RANGER: Oh, yeah, sure! That's what you always say!
GM: The dragons are staring at you. This is some General Hospital shit right here.
PARTY: But are they trying to stop us?
GM: No. They're horrified and cannot look away. I mean, they know you're hamming it up, but they just want this to

end.
GNOME: We've never won a battle through sheer awkward before.
DRAGONBORN RANGER: Is the door open yet?
CERI: Oh, the door's been open for ages. I just didn't want to interrupt.
PALADIN: *blows a kiss to dragons on the doorstep*
DOOR: *slams*
GM: ....
GM: ....
PARTY: ......
PARTY: ....
DRAGONBORN RANGER: NEVER make me do that again.
PALADIN: Look, did we have to fight the dragon? No, we did not!
GM: So, you were supposed to get 8500 XP, but I'm rounding up to an even 10,000 for sheer....for...yeah....

GM: ...I expected that battle to last for three weeks.
PALADIN'S PLAYER: I regret nothing.

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THE KISS THAT GAVE THE VICTORY

John Carter RPG Playtest

by Martin Plowman

Recently I was lucky enough to be involved in the playtest for the upcoming John Carter RPG, due to be released by UK-based Modiphius Entertainment in 2017. As a longtime fan of the original Edgar Rice Burroughs' Martian novels on which the game is based, I'd been waiting for a chance to play this ever since I heard the game was in development. I mean, what better way is there to spend a Friday night after work than pretending you're a 12-foot tall, four-armed, green-skinned, bug-eyed Martian warrior named Tars Tarkas?

My first impressions of the game were very favourable. I think it captures the heroic, swashbuckling spirit of the books admirably well, and Modiphius's patented 2d20 LITE game system does a good job of resolving combat and player character actions. It's not without its bugs though, particularly the amount of mathematical bookkeeping that's required to run combat. But given this is only phase 1 of the playtest that's not surprising. There's heaps of promise in the John Carter RPG, and more importantly it's a lot of fun.

To give some background, John Carter appears to be a licensed tie-in with the movie of the same name released in 2012. The film, however, was based on the 1912 novel A Princess of Mars, written by pulp author Edgar Rice Burroughs. Burroughs would also write Tarzan of the Apes in the same year, so expect a Tarzan RPG anytime soon, 'cos it's way overdue.JohnCarter2

Burroughs (who's still known as "ERB" to his legions of fans) wrote a total of 11 books set on Mars or "Barsoom," as it was called in the rudimentary but pioneering constructed language he devised for his stories. Burroughs' vision of Mars was based on the scientific consensus of the time, which imagined Mars as being much older than Earth with dwindling water supplies that forced its inhabitants to construct a vast system of planetary-wide canals.

But whatever effort he might have gone to for scientific realism, Burroughs' stories themselves were pure swashbuckling adventure. John Carter, the main character in the first three books (his descendants feature in later volumes) is a former captain in the Confederate Army mysteriously transported to Mars via astral projection. On Mars he becomes an early version of Superman, literally able to leap tall buildings in a single bound thanks to the lower Martian gravity. He's also as naked as the day he was born, as are all civilized races of Barsoom, a feature of the books that didn't quite make it into the Disney film. Which struck me as a touch hypocritical given that Donald Duck never wears any pants.

The various Martian cultures are invariably exotic and constantly at war. The Red Martians, who live in scattered city states of which Helium is preeminent, appear the most human-like except that they are oviparous, which is to say they lay eggs (Barsoomian dating tip #1: Never make an omelette to impress a Martian lady). The Green Martians, with their multiple limbs and swiveling eyes, are the original Bug Eyed Monsters. There's other colour-coded Martians as well, including Yellow, Black and White Martians, all of whom take turns as adversaries of John Carter and Dejah Thoris of Helium, the Martian princess whom he marries (IMHO Carter was punching above his weight, but there you go).

Why am I telling you all this? Indeed, some readers will be seething with impatience by now. "We know this backstory, get to the game!" Hold your thoats, friends. I'm getting there.

The thing about Burroughs is that while some people know a lot about Barsoom, many more have never heard of it. Burrough's Martian stories are pretty much where Lovecraft was 10-15 years ago, before the so-called "Lovecraft Renaissance." Although the books have a passionate and enduring fan-base a century after their publication, Burroughs' vision of Mars remains relatively obscure in wider popular culture. And this despite the immense influence of Barsoom and its moss-covered dead sea bottoms. The late great Carl Sagan was inspired by Burroughs' Martian stories to become a scientist; campus lore has it that Sagan hung a map of Barsoom on the wall outside his office at Cornell University. George Lucas was also heavily influenced by Burroughs while devising Star Wars in the mid-1970s. Words that are now practically part of the popular lexicon such as "Jedi" and "padawan" are actually thinly veiled borrowings of the Barsoomian jed (a ruler) and padwan (a lieutenant).

So it might be that the John Carter RPG will appeal hugely to fans who already know Barsoom, but it remains to be seen how it will go attracting players new to the universe. Certainly, this seemed to be a factor behind the apparent box office failure of the 2012 film. (Critics also blamed a misguided and ineffective marketing campaign, but it couldn't have helped that the film was banned in the cities of Zodanga, Thark and Warhoon on the grounds of negative portrayals of Martian culture.)

So, to the playtest. We had six players in our group, including myself. Each of us took a pre-gen character provided in the playtest kit. Lev, president of the Melbourne-based journal RPG Review, played the feisty Martian Princess Dejah Thoris; Liz, also from RGP Review, took on a Red Martian guard described in the notes as "looking to make a name for himself" which Liz cheerfully interpreted to mean "Kill everything in sight!"; Simon, co-owner of Gatekeeper Games where the playtest was held, offered a counterpoint to all the heroism with a cowardly nobleman that he dubbed "Captain Squealy Pants"; Dave, who played an elite but sadly nameless Martian pilot; and Adam, who took on the role of none other than John Carter of Virginia himself, Warlord of Mars. Our gamesmaster was Karl, also from RPG Review, who will be familiar to roleplayers in Melbourne as a GM of talent and skill, particularly when it comes to running complex combat scenes involving large numbers of characters and NPCs.

As I mentioned earlier I played Tars Tarkas, Jeddak of the Tharks, most powerful of the many warlike hordes of Green Martians who roam the dry sea bottoms of Barsoom on their six legged thoats. Ask me if I could have squeezed any more in-universe names into that last sentence, 'cos the answer would be Calot ha dar phai karsof jeddak. (Though I wouldn't dare repeat this to a Dothraki, who share a likely pop cultural lineage with the Tharks, despite having only one pair of arms.)

The scenario we played was fairly basic, and designed I suppose to test the core mechanics of the game. Returning from a diplomatic mission, our party's airship is rammed mid-air by a black-hulled ship full of First Born, jet-black Martians living near the planet's north pole known for their piratical activities. A boarding party of First Born swarm over the

deck and attempt to abduct Dejah Thoris. Mayhem ensues.

Given that this was a phase 1 of the playtest I won't attempt a comprehensive overview of the game system, as I expect it will change a fair bit before the final game is released. Characters have six attributes – Aggression, Might, Empathy, Reason, Passion and Daring – which are rated from 4 to 12, where 4 is considered average and 12 virtually godlike. To give an idea, my 12-foot tall Tars Tarkas, considered one of the greatest fighters of Barsoom, had a Might of 8 and an Aggression of 6.

Straight away I liked the choice of these attributes, because they described character traits rather than simple physical capabilities like, say, Dexterity or Constitution. When attempting any significant action, players must make a skill test by choosing a combination of two of their character's attributes. The GM then assigns a Difficulty rating to the particular test; in our game, Karl set most Difficulty ratings in the 1-3 range. Rolling 2d20, the player then checks which (if any) of the dice were lower than the lowest, highest and combined scores of the two attributes chosen for that action. This determines how many raw Successes the PC has achieved, against which the Difficulty level must be subtracted. Any Successes left over can be used to resolve the outcome of the PC's chosen action, or stored for future actions as Momentum points. Opposed actions against NPCs work similarly, with both sides choosing two attributes, rolling 2d20 and then comparing their respective Successes to determine which party comes out on top.

What's really interesting is the way the two attributes chosen by the PC have a very real bearing on both the roleplay and gameplay aspects of the game. The player has to justify or describe in game terms how their character is using the combination of attributes to perform an action. This took a little getting used to, for which having a GM as experienced as Karl was a great advantage for us first-time players. But once we got the hang of it, thinking in terms of the in-game consequences of choosing two specific attributes became second nature.

To give an example, at one point in the melee Tars Tarkas found himself in danger of being overwhelmed by the First Born mooks, who'd decided that ganging up to attack the Thark in something like 8-to-1 odds wasn't actually against the pirates' code of honour after all. "How are you going to respond, Tars?" Karl asked me.

I decided I wanted to use a combination of Might and Daring, mainly because it gave me the highest odds of succeeding against the cowardly pirates. But I was less certain of how to justify this combination, because while "Might" refers to brute strength, "Daring" in combat usually means speed or agility.

"I'm not quite sure," I replied, honestly enough.

Karl thought about my problem for a moment. "Ok," he said, coming to a solution. "How about this: Tars Tarkas lowers his great green head with its enormous tusks and roars, bull-rushing straight at the pirates. So that would be using Might for the show of intimidating strength, and Daring for the charge. I think that would work."

I rolled 2d20. Indeed, it worked, and with spectacular results. After comparing opposed rolls the mooks were so terrified by the spectacle of a not-so-jolly-green-giant charging straight for them that they fled in panic, scrabbling desperately to escape in the nearest lifeboat. Which was unfortunate for Simon's cowardly noble Captain Squealy Pants, who was already in said lifeboat trying to save his unworthy hide when nobody was looking. And we all know how that turned out for him … let's just say that gravity is still gravity from 500 feet up in the air, whether you're

above Earth or Barsoom.

(You know, I just knew I'd love playing a Green Martian, who are roughly equivalent to barbarians in this game system. And I've always enjoyed playing barbarians. Many years ago now I came to terms with the realisation that when it comes to RPGs I actually quite enjoy hitting things as a way to resolve problems. Which, interestingly, is pretty much the exact opposite to my real world character type of ENFJ. "Hey, guys, before we go any further can we please find consensus on whether we want to melee. Let's talk, ok?")

For me, the core mechanic of using two attributes to resolve an action was a standout aspect of the game, as it led to a really expressive style of gameplay that not only provided a highly flexible core game mechanic, but also functioned as a virtual engine for storytelling. I also thought that the attributes used in the game were well suited to the heroic feel of the source material. For instance, there's no attribute for "Sneaking" or "Stealth" in John Carter, which on Barsoom would be considered cowardly and dishonourable (unless you were playing Captain Squealy Pants. Sorry Simon, I'll stop now). Instead there's "Daring", much more suited to the spirit of the original books.

The other players in our group were also impressed with this core mechanic. As Dave said during our discussion at the end of the adventure, "I really enjoyed the stats for the characters, because it made it less 'I'm going to smash this' and more 'I'm going to leap over here and twirl around and carry this guy off the edge of the boat.' Which then let you choose which two stats you were going to use." Liz was of a similar opinion. "Yeah, I also liked it how the choice of stats gave you angles for your character," she said. "That's if you were really playing your character – which I wasn't, 'cos I came in late and was like 'Kill everyone!'" (Actually, the system worked pretty well for that too.)

The playtest wasn't without glitches, which is to be expected for the first round of testing. Though the maths isn't particularly complicated – there's no resistance tables or formulae – there's actually quite a lot of it. This is especially evident when making opposed rolls, where PCs and the GM are both rolling against their attributes then subtracting Difficulty, then subtracting the PCs' Successes against the NPCs' Successes, then adding Momentum. It's a lot to keep track of, and as Simon jokingly suggested at one point, having an abacus on hand would probably help.

Our group also noted that it seemed quite difficult to defeat opponents. As Adam put it, "Without knowing the full intention of what you're able to do in the game, it seemed a little too difficult to be able to kill someone. But then, like in this situation [of the pirate attack] where you got to the point if you thought about it to just throw [a pirate] over the edge of the boat, that just got rid of him a lot easier. So it was the difference between us attacking and attacking and trying to kill them, and then just realizing, 'We just toss them over the side of the boat.' It's almost way too hard and a little too easy."

As GM, Karl had also noted this. "Yeah, I found the non-player characters virtually indestructible," he agreed. "Especially the lead bad guys who are started out kind of like PCs, as opposed to the mooks. The mooks are tough enough to kill, but the lead bad guys are virtually impossible … If we'd been riding thoats across the plain, we wouldn't have had the option of tossing [pirates] over the side. We could've been here on Tuesday! [all laugh]"

Liz's suggestion to resolve this apparent design bug was to roleplay more creatively. "To kill the lead bad guys, would we have had to play the characters harder? Like, be more heroic? Because I was just, 'I'm going to shoot the nearest bad guy.' Would I have had to do something big and stupid to kill a lead bad guy? Is the combat more character driven?" It's hard to tell whether this was the intention behind the game design, i.e. to make PCs use roleplay to resolve

combat actions instead of crunching numbers. But either way the combat could become quite drawn out as we attempted to whittle down our opponents' stats incrementally into submission.

My feeling is that the glitches our group identified should most likely be ironed out in further development. As I said at the start of this review, overall I thought that John Carter has great potential to be a top-rate RPG. When it comes to reviewing roleplaying games I have three very broad and subjective criteria that I always come back to:

Was it immersive?

Yes, the game does a great job of capturing the spirit and detail of Burroughs' Martian novels. The core mechanic of using two attributes for significant actions also offered for a pleasing depth and complexity of roleplay possibilities.

Was it fun to play?

Yes, even with the sometimes drawn-out combat taken into consideration.

Would I play it again?

Definitely, although next time I want to be Princess Dejah Thoris. Just don't ask me to come dressed in character. Nobody needs to see that on a Friday night, ok?

Well done to Modiphius for bringing John Carter into the realm of RPGs. I'll be looking forward to the next round of playtesting, and to the final game itself. Now if you excuse me I have to go and see a man about a calot …
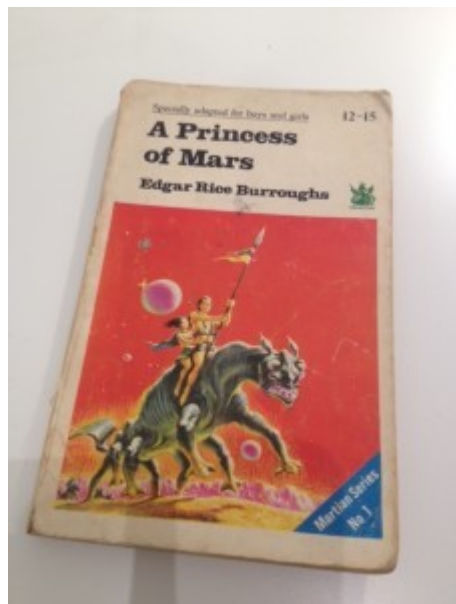
John Carter the Roleplaying Game will be released by Modiphius Entertainment in 2017. For more details go to Modiphius' website. If you want to have a go at playtesting, Karl will be running the game again at Gatecon VI on Saturday 20 August at Gatekeeper Games.

Games vs Play wishes to thank Modiphius Entertainment for the use of images in this blog. Except for the photos I took of my old battered copy of A Princess of Mars, which I read and then promptly stole from my Grade 5 classroom back in 1985. That's just how I rolled when I was 11.

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Computer RPGs Old School Revival

by *Andrew Pam*

Before the recent rise of crowdfunding, few computer roleplaying games other than first-person action hybrids were able to make enough profit to get support from game development studios and publishers. However thanks to Kickstarter, Indiegogo, Pozible and many other crowdfunding sites there has been a resurgence in CRPGs since around 2011. While some of these have been entirely new properties, one fruitful approach has been to leverage the nostalgia of gamers for great classics by producing new sequels to old games, or even new games in a retro style. Both the 8-bit (1983–87) and 16-bit (1987–93) eras are now considered part of the "Golden Age" of CRPGs and consequently there have been quite a few games emulating those styles.

One early entry was *Cthulhu Saves the World* from **Zeboyd Games**, a parody of 16-bit Japanese RPGs made with less than US$7,000 of funding in 2011. The success of this game encouraged Zeboyd to crowdfund a second 16-bit style RPG, *Cosmic Star Heroine* which raised well over US$100,000 in 2013 and is now in beta, due for release at the end of 2016.

Another early crowdfunding success which I highly recommend is *Wasteland 2* from **inXile Entertainment**, a long-awaited sequel to their popular 1988 post-apocalyptic RPG *Wasteland* which inspired the very successful *Fallout* series of games. Implemented with modern isometric graphics, their unexpected success (raising nearly US$3M) meant they were able to release a "Director's Cut" with many enhancements free to everyone who bought Wasteland 2. They returned to Kickstarter in 2013 to raise over US$4M for a second game, *Torment: Tides of Numenera* which is set in Monte Cook's new *Numenera* setting inspired by the much-loved classic D&D CRPG *Planescape: Torment*. This game is currently in beta and in Early Access on Steam, and is due for release at the beginning of 2017.

Just a couple of weeks after the successful funding of Wasteland 2 in early 2012, **Harebrained Schemes** (founded by Jordan Weisman of classic RPG company **FASA**, a *Traveller* licensee and creator of the *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* RPGs) decided to crowdfund a new Shadowrun CRPG called *Shadowrun Returns*, successfully raising almost US$2M. This was an excellent game and a huge success, and was swiftly followed by two sequels, *Shadowrun: Dragonfall* and *Shadowrun: Hong Kong*. Each sequel improved on the last, and each included authoring software with new isometric scenery tiles and other elements so that fans could create their own modules and share them online. Arguably the fan-made *Antumbra Saga* and its sequel *The Caldecott Caper* are just as good as the official campaigns! In 2015 HBS raised funds for a *Battletech/Mechwarrior* CRPG which is due in 2017.


Towards the end of 2012, well-known CRPG studio **Obsidian Entertainment** (famous for making sequels to **Bioware** CRPGs such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* and *Neverwinter Nights 2*) decided to crowdfund their own old-school isometric D&D CRPG inspired by the legendary *Baldur's Gate*, and after raising their initial funding goal on the first day went on to collect nearly US$4M. Like Wasteland 2, this has allowed them to produce a two-part expansion for their *Pillars of Eternity* game called *The*

White March (free to original crowdfunders!) which increases the level cap and adds multi-classing, new companions and new abilities.

Seeing the renewed popularity of old-school CRPGs, Bioware co-founder Trent Oster and lead programmer Cameron Tofer released updated "Enhanced Editions" of their well-loved Infinity Engine 2nd edition D&D games *Baldur's Gate* (EE released 2012), *Baldur's Gate II* (EE released 2013) and *Icewind Dale* (EE released 2014) from a divison of their **Beamdog** studio called **Overhaul Games** which allow the original art to be displayed on modern graphic resolutions, incorporate bug fixes and the best fan patches, port to MacOS, Linux, iPads and Android tablets, and add new party members, new class kits, subraces and locations and new game modes including online cross-platform multiplayer. These have been successful and encouraged them to also create a brand new expansion pack that takes place between Baldur's Gate and Baldur's Gate II called *Siege of Dragonspear*, released March 2016. Notably this expansion introduced a transgender character, which was supported by *Forgotten Realms* creator Ed Greenwood after criticism from some gamers.

Right at the end of 2012, **WaterMelon** raised over US$200,000 to do an HD remake and port of their homebrew 16-bit Sega MegaDrive RPG, *Pier Solar and the Great Architects*, released as *Pier Solar HD* in September 2014.
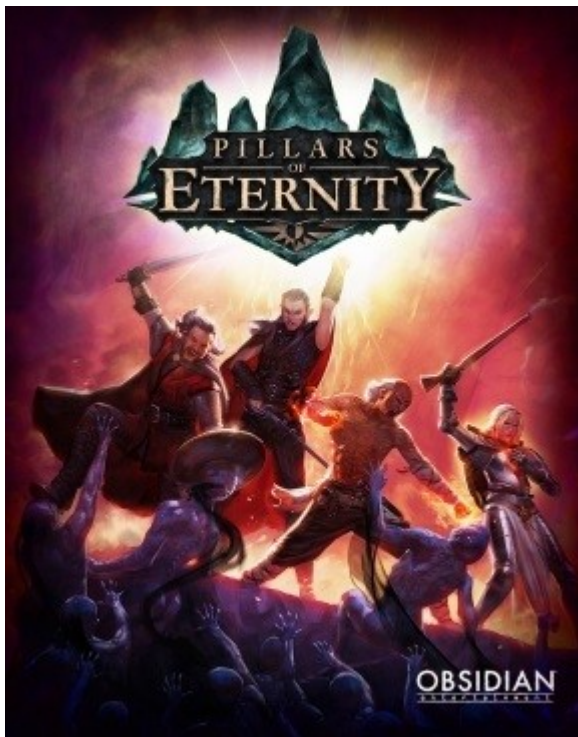
In 2013, **Larian Studios** raised nearly US$1M for *Divinity: Original Sin*, an isometric prequel to their first CRPG, *Divine Divinity* (2002). It was released in mid 2014 complete with the game editor allowing fans to create and publish their own single and multi-player adventures. It supports cooperative multiplayer where two players can each control their own party members in the same game. A mod allows four players to each control one character. Following the excellent tradition started by Wasteland 2 and Pillars of Eternity, in 2015 they released an "Enhanced Edition" with new content free to original purchasers. A sequel is in production and due for release in December 2016.

Lords of Xulima (2014) from Spanish indie studio **Numantian Games** combines isometric exploration with a turn-based first-person combat view in the style of early CRPGs such as the *Wizardry* games.

Something a little different is *Chroma Squad* from **Behold Studios,** a tactical RPG in a pixel art style released in 2015 and inspired by Super Sentai TV shows, especially *Power Rangers*. The game follows a team of stunt actors that start their own show and fight villians and monsters (sometimes with a giant robot) in a series of episodes while trying to get the ratings to stay on air and please their sponsors.

Serpent in the Staglands (2015) from **Whalenought Studios** is a 1990s style isometric CRPG resembling *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Darklands* with no classes, open world sandbox exploration, a nonlinear storyline, and a gritty, realistic and dark tone inspired by the Bronze Age and mediaeval Translyvania. An expansion pack is currently under development, and they're also working on a new retro-style cyberpunk CRPG called *Copper Dreams*.

Dex (2015) from Czech developer **Dreadlocks Ltd.** is an open-world side-scrolling action RPG set in a cyberpunk

world. While it is a "platform game" it emphasises the RPG elements, including the ability to develop hacking and other skills as an alternative to combat.

Perhaps one of the biggest retro RPG successes has to be *Undertale* by Toby Fox, an 8-bit top-down style game with a compelling plot that raised over US$50,000 in 2013 and was released to massive popular acclaim in September 2015. Undertale has won multiple game awards and inspired a huge amount of fanworks including art, fiction, videos and crossovers with other franchises.

Tabletop Simulator (2015) from **Beserk Games** is just what it sounds like – it's a tool that allows you to play tabletop games including classic pen and paper RPGs online, including in VR! You can create dice, dungeon tiles, character figurines and so forth and manipulate them on a shared simulated tabletop with realistic physics.

Celestian Tales: Old North (2015) from **Ekuator Games** is the first of a planned trilogy inspired by classic Japanese RPGs with separate story arcs for each of the six party members so that you can experience a different perspective depending on which starting character you choose.

Dragon Fin Soup (2015) from **Grimm Bros.** is an action RPG influenced by "roguelike" games with 16-bit style graphics and featuring some prodecural generation and randomly generated climate. The story follows Red Robin, an alcoholic yet cheerful mercenary, is set on a world situated on the back of an enormous dragon-turtle and uses elements from classic fairy tales.

Moon Hunters (2016) from **Kitfox Games** is a 2D action RPG with cooperative multiplayer for up to four players in a fantasy world featuring procedurally generated content, which the creators describe as a "personality test".

There are many more crowdfunded old-school and retro CRPGs that are in production but have not yet been released, and I will be happy to write about them once they come out. In the meantime this article should give you plenty of great games to try, each of which will give you many hours of enjoyment!

If you'd like to create your own old-school CRPG campaign, do try one of the games that has an editor such as the Shadowrun games, Divinity: Original Sin or Neverwinter Nights (2002) and Neverwinter Nights 2 (2006). The first NWN uses 3rd edition D&D rules and can support persistent worlds with up to 64 players, while NWN2 uses 3.5 edition D&D rules and can support up to 96 players! You can find new campaigns and useful elements for your own campaigns at neverwintervault.org and a list of online persistent worlds at www.nwnlist.com.

If you have programming skills or would like to learn, there are plenty of excellent free tools available for creating your own entire game: In alphabetical order, EasyRPG (easyrpg.org), FIFE Engine (fifengine.net), FLARE (flarerpg.org), GemRB (http://www.gemrb.org/wiki/doku.php?id=newgame:newgame), Official Hamster Republic Role Playing Game Construction Engine (http://rpg.hamsterrepublic.com/ohrrpgce/Main_Page), OpenMW-CS (https://openmw.org/faq/), RPG BOSS (rpgboss.com) and Solarus (www.solarus-games.org).

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

by Andrew Moshos

Oh what a lovely day I had before I watched this monstrosity

dir: Burr Steers (2016)

It should have been more fun than this.

It should have been more… something, anything than this.

There's no argument that the world needs more versions of Pride and Prejudice. We don't. Thanks, we've had plenty, there's no more room at the inn.

I say that yet I happily watch any of them whenever they appear on cable. Especially that one, you know the one, the one that's sex on a stick, with Colin Firth as Darcy and Jennifer Ehle as Lizzy Bennett. Even the ones I don't like I still watch, like that one with the stick insect and the other guy, or that Bollywood 'inspired' one, or any of the literally one million other versions.

We further don't need more of them because virtually every romantic thing aimed at those humans who drink red wine / read / masturbate in the bath is pretty much based on Pride & Prejudice anyway. How so, you ask, as you sip from your second glass of wine for the night, and eat your third Tim Tam?

Well, as far as I can tell, virtually all romantic 'literature' is based on a woman meeting a gorgeous guy who at first acts like a complete piece of shit, who over time is revealed to be incredibly wealthy, immensely thoughtful and caring and probably has a ten-inch-dick to boot. And that initial impression, which has to do with difficult childhoods and previous awful girlfriends, gives way to perfect understanding and eternal devotion and everything her heart and vagina could ever possibly desire.

The single most important thing, after all, is that a female character should never, ever have to admit that her first impressions about a guy were wrong. Entire plots should be devoted to proving her right, but right from the start, such that she was never wrong, and all of her protestations to the contrary should be manipulated around until the world itself supports their being together for no good or healthy reason other than that People Must Be in Couples or They Should Just Die Already.

Pointlessly combative, that's what I'm being. I do, even after all that, even after all the iterations and versions, even after watching this shemozzle, I do still love the character of Lizzy Bennett and romance in general. I can't help it, I'm a deranged romantic myself who believes, despite the bewildering array of evidence to the contrary, in the transformative power of love. I also love female characters who fight against social strictures and oppressive cultural conformities in their pursuit of a Room of their Own – before they get married and have kids and stuff.

Sometimes all you can do is fight the patriarchy for as long as you can before giving in, in sweet and optimistic ways. What's all this got to do with the film being reviewed?

Not much, to be honest. Had this exact same inept movie come out eight years ago, at the height of the literary mash-up era (the book this is based on was the 'first' of that bunch of Quirk Books, so had this come along back then maybe someone might have given a damn), but now it has the perverse distinction of looking like it's trying to ride the coattails of Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter, what, with the tremendous success that dumb flick had.

Huh? What tremendous success? Sarcasm. There should be a font for it.

So now that we've established that no-one cares, and that this seems to have been made more out of a feeling of obligation rather than any great opportunity or groundswell of public fandom, what we're left with is a flick that fails at both of the low concept ideas it tries to juggle, though it isn't a complete failure.

I mean, it's a failure by any actual metric you care to mention or think of, in terms of whether audiences cared or whether it made any money, but it did garner at least three good actors for lead roles, and that has to count for something?

Lily James has probably been good in stuff, Sam Riley has definitely been good in (underappreciated) stuff, especially On the Road, which virtually no-one saw or liked, but Charles Dance and Lena Heady? Even if you exclude the sheer magnitude of the awesomeness they've brought to the table as father and daughter Lannister in Game of Thrones, they've done oh so many other most excellent things as well.

Still, as okay as most of these actors are, even they cannot save, survive or transcend something so completely empty and misguided. Maybe, I'll grant, just maybe in book form this had some kind of jokey appeal. But getting to the screen in this tardy and half-arsed, maybe not even quarter-arsed fashion is just the height of naffness.

It's ever so naff. Maybe, just maybe, you can thrill to the notion that much of it might be just like in the book, with the simmering tension, sexual or otherwise, between Lizzy and Darcy, punctuated with sword fights and zombie attacks and such, but still telling ultimately the same story. But this is such a cheap and nasty version of something that was a cheap and nasty mashup in the first place. I don't know how much they squandered on this, but whatever it was, it looks like crap. The CGI is not even at a Sharknado level of quality, even though, really, I wouldn't have thought this would have needed that much CGI at all.

If there was meant to be something of a thrill in watching the Bennett sisters not be helpless ditzes, well, it retains some of that. I mean, the younger Bennet girls are still annoying, but there are a fair few comical scenes where they reveal

just how not in distress these damsels might be, what with their hidden weaponry and such in every nook and cranny.

But the fight choreography is subpar. I would have cut the flick a great deal of slack had they gotten any of the fighting done well, even adequately. The simple fact is that in the book the incongruity of having these gentle lords and ladies of the Regency era also fighting with swords like Shaolin and ninja masters is funny, but getting it to look believable enough on the screen would have taken a lot of money and talent that these makers clearly were never going to get.

And boy does it look shoddy. The script, which leaves out most of the book anyway, makes inexplicable changes to the story which don't make a lot of sense even as you consider that they were perpetually scaling back on their ambitions the further this cursed production stumbled along.

Wait, maybe I'm judging it on criteria that it doesn't even deserve. Maybe all I should bother with is whether we buy the central relationship between this bizarro-world Darcy and this pretty much exactly the same Lizzy Bennett. Well, yes, it's buyable, I mean, they're competent actors, and they've done probably oodles of period piece stuff. Lily James was fine in that recent War and Peace adaptation mini-series that I enjoyed watching, and Sam Riley is Sam Riley, and should be the next Orson Welles or Shia Labouef or something. They kinda sorta sell this hate that becomes love because, hell, we've bought it so many times before, why not buy it all over again?

We're programmed to accept it, but then it's never made that hard for us to accept. Based as it is on misunderstanding and such, and it's always generally two fairly attractive people, well, why shouldn't they be together? Attractive people should be with other attractive people, and let no zombies keep them apart.

Maybe part of my disdain for this stems from the fact that I did kinda sorta 'like' the book, but seeing it like this on the big screen kinda sorta totally made me feel embarrassed for ever liking the idea in the first place. I really should have known better, and they should have known too.

It's a fucking idiotic idea, and it should never have been made.

2 times I can't wait for the next threatened mash-up of Pride & Prejudice & Predator out of 10

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"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains." – it is also a truth that should be universally acknowledged that throwing money at a bad idea only results the lack of brains in the first place – Pride & Prejudice & Zombies

NEXT ISSUE OF RPG REVIEW

TSR: The Company, the Worlds, and Its Games

D&D, Empire of the Petal Throne, Boot Hill, Gamma World, Gangbusters, Star Frontiers, Top Secret, Indiana Jones, Conan RPG, Marvel SH, Buck Rogers, Amazing Engine, Alternity... and more!