

RPG REVIEW

Issue #45, December 2019

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MONSTERS!

Tunnels & Trolls Bestiary AD&D Council of Wyrms ... C&S Saurians ... Role Aids Monsters of Myth and Legend ... GURPS Monsters ... Monsters and Other Childish Things ... Darkest Dungeon CRPG... HyperLite CRPG ... Hereditary and Parasite Movie Reviews ... Megatraveller 'Blog ... and much more!

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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EDITORIAL, COOPERATIVE NEWS, LETTERS

Editorial

Welcome to another issue of RPG Review, now in its 11th year, which is not so terrible for a fanzine. To be sure, this issue is late, very late, but that's not terrible unusual for us. It is meant to come out at the end of December 2019. Let's just say it's a little later than that.

This issue is dedicated to the subject of *monsters*, a word that is common in RPG history as an antagonist, but which has a deeper meaning for consideration. The word comes from *monstrum* (moneo- "advice, warn" and -trum, second declension forming instrument nouns), and has been associated with creatures that are large, grotesque, causing fear and awe, "contrary to nature", and thus were associated with evil. We will see this in English with words like "demonstrate". Often with the simplistic approach was to assign the position of monster with the tag of "inherent evil", and of a certain challenge to defeat in mortal conflict. The symbolic perspective that its presence could provide some sort of warning (metaphorical or literal in a fantastic setting) is typically overlooked. This is also the very troubling component that humans and non-human animals born with birth defects were often described as "monsters". In this "normal is normative" approach, physical differences are evil.

But what if we change it around a little bit, and make it so the physical appearance is not so much the defining quality of what is a monster, but rather the moral reasoning that is employed? We can understand this in terms of "monstrous behaviour", which surely is far more wicked than an ogre-sized humanoid with a big nose. I must take this opportunity to point out some recent remarks from the inheritors of the Judges Guild line and title, Robert Bledsaw II and III can fit into this category. It is certainly one thing to make an inappropriate slip of the tongue, or to make an awkwardly ignorant comment, or even to say something that has absolutely no bad intention but can be interpreted in a negative fashion.

It is a consistent intention of hatred, and a continuing wilful ignorance that leads to remarks of a “Jewish media conspiracy”, a “holohoax” are monstrous, Bledsaw II and III are monsters, and under these circumstances it is utterly impossible to suggest to anyone that they purchase anything from Judges Guild. . It is also worth mentioning that Judge's Guild ran a Kickstarter for the classic "City State of the Invincible Overlord", which raised pledges of \$85,130 in 2014. The last update, of October 30, 2019 included: "These are projects that have been on hold since 2016, but unless I get more funds here, the wait will continue."



I am sure there will be more to report on this matter in the next issue. In the meantime however, let's return to the real subject at hand, that being monsters and specifically those creatures of myth and legend, or perhaps even science fiction. Contributing to this issue is the ever-impressive output of Karl Brown, who contributes three major pieces to the journal; a review and perspective of A Council of Wyrm, the AD&D supplement from 1994, a further extension of his ongoing series of a bestiary for Tunnels & Trolls, and, on a completely different tack, part two of his review of Traveller 5.1. On that note there is a return of the Megatraveller Pirates of Drinax ‘blog, which has been absent for several issues - about time for a catch-up!

In addition to this we have two computer game reviews by Dorchadas with many monsters by Hyper Light Drifter and Darkest Dungeon, and to add to the multimedia experience two movie reviews by Andrew Moshos, Hereditary and Parasite, which both, in their own way, are monster-themes, albeit in a modern setting. Last, and probably least, is my own contributions to the topic of monsters, being a number of RPG supplement reviews of a monster-bent, starting with a very old classic, Saurians for Chivalry & Sorcery, the three volumes of Monsters of Myth and Legend by Role Aids for Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, GURPS Monsters, and Monsters and Other Childish Things.

Mention must also be made that this is the second issue of RPG Review with “Monsters” as its main subject matter. Issue 20, way back in 2013 was a “Monsters and Aliens” issue (http://rpgreview.net/files/rpgreview_20.pdf) which included reviews of Monsters! Monsters!, the AD&D first edition Monster Manual, the AD&D second edition Monstrous Compendium, GURPS Aliens, and Hunter : The Reckoning by White Wolf, Anaxial's Roster for Hero Wars, and Call of Cthulhu's "Malleus Monstrorum".

In addition there was an article for aliens in Eclipse Phase, an Over The Edge scenario "Bunnies & Burroughs", a Pathfinder Planescape NPC Modron "The Administrator", a Tunnels & Trolls Bestiary for F-G, a selection of classic monsters for OpenQuest (and RuneQuest), Monsters by Email, Stalked by Death for Star Frontiers, Lizardmen in Space 1889, and three monster-and-alien based movie reviews; Epic, Monster University, and Star Trek Into Darkness.

And that will bring us to a conclusion of this issue. I will take the opportunity to announce the main topic of the next issue, being various incarnations of FUDGE and FATE RPG systems. Every so often we dedicate an issue to a particular game system. In the past, for example, we've had special issues for D&D, D20, GURPS, RuneQuest, and we have been somewhat remiss in not having one for FUDGE and FATE. Given the many interesting variations that have come out for these games and not to mention the massive influence that the latter in particular has had on narrative play, it will be quite exciting to see an issue dedicated to the game.

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Lev Lafayette (lev@rpgreview.net)

Co-operative News

The Annual General Meeting for The RPG Review Cooperative, Inc. was held on Sunday 12th January 2020 at The Rose Hotel, Fitzroy, which indeed was a fine a sensible location to hold it, rather than trying to get it done during Arcanacon itself as we foolishly did last year.

Shaun Hately retired from the committee this year and he is deeply thanked for his contributions. Elections were held for the new committee which looked a little bit like the old committee: Lev Lafayette as president, Michael Cole as vice-president, Liz Bowman as treasurer, Andrew Daborn as Secretary and with Adrian Smith, Karl Brown, Andrew McPherson, and Pete Tracy as ordinary committee members. Adrian is our West Australian representative, and Pete is new to the committee.

The following are our extremely exciting committee and financial reports.

Committee Report

The RPG Review Cooperative held its founding meeting in December 2015, and was subsequently incorporated by the State of Victoria on January 7th, 2016. The following is a review of our fourth year of activities. All activities have been in strict accordance with our objectives. The committee members for 2019 were Lev Lafayette (President), Michael Cole (Vice-President), Andrew Daborn (Secretary), Liz Bowman (Treasurer), and Andrew McPherson, Karl Brown, and Sean Hately (ordinary members), with Karl taking up the role of Diversity Officer.

In the past year, we have published three issues of the RPG Review journal (Issues 42-44 inclusive), with issue 45, the December 2019 edition (Issue 45) coming soon. This constitutes 192 pages of gaming material, with interviews with Jeff Barber of Biohazard Games (Blue Planet), and Jason Durall of Chaosium (Deluxe Basic Role Playing). We also had a special print edition for Issue 44, coinciding with RuneQuest Glorantha Con Down Under IV. Copies of this print edition are available to all members of the Cooperative, gratis. All copies of the ISSN-registered RPG Review journal have been submitted to the National Library of Australia. The RPG Review website received 41,586 unique visitors in 2019, a decrease of 17%, with the top downloads for RPG Review being Issue 37 receiving 1767 downloads, Issue 41 receiving 1276, and Issue 6 receiving 1080. These are the PDF downloads only, rather than any views of HTML pages.

The Cooperative has also published (mostly) a monthly newsletter for members and potential members, 'Crux Australi'. This newsletter has outlined the various RPG campaigns being run by members, which increased from 27 to 38 this year, increasing life members from 6 to 8. There are 182 subscribers to our newsletter, Crux Australi, up from 173. The opportunity is also taken here to mention the loss of a foundation member, Rick Barker, who joined our hobby quite late in life and passed away at 72 years of age. Through Karl Brown, the Cooperative's Diversity Officer, a survey of readers and members was undertaken and reviewed according to various ABS categories.

Continuing with our existing services, the Cooperative has also organised about visits to the Astor Cinema as a regular non-gaming social event, along with what is now our annual BBQ. In addition, the Cooperative offers an online store for members to sell their second-hand or new games to the public. We also provide various IT support mechanisms (github, mailman mailing lists etc) with hosting donated from one of our members.

Following the establishment of an RPG library for members in April 2016 we reached some 350 items by the end of that year, and by the end of 2019 we had a very substantial 723 items. This year we have 743 games, 95 magazines, and 3 fiction works, totaling 841 items, with a very substantial donation from Nicholas Moll, along with notable donations from Gareth Hodges and Rodney Brown. For game authors, we also offer discount ISBNs which we gain an advantage from bulk purchasing. This year the Cooperative published the first supplement for "Papers & Paychecks", "Cow-Orkers in the Scary Devil Monastery".

The single most important event for the Cooperative in 2019 however, had to be our organisation of RuneQuest Glorantha Con Down Under IV, held at the University of Melbourne. The two-day conference, which included Jason Durall as an international guest (who also hosted a special session of Call of Cthulhu at the former Kew Asylum), and saw over fifty people in attendance and sponsorship of prizes Chaosium, along with game sessions of RuneQuest, Pendragon, HeroQuest, and Glorantha 13th Age, Khan of Khans, Glorantha The Gods War, and History of Peloria, a two-round auction, and panels on Glorantha game systems and Glorantha the setting. In addition to the RuneQuest Glorantha Con Down Under, the Cooperative also participated in Arcanacon with both a panel speaker and holding a second-hand stall, which was noted in particular as being one of the most popular events at the convention. It was after Arcanacon that we purchased a Square Credit Card reader that proved very popular at RQGDU IV.

At the 2019 AGM the association set several objectives for the year. It is pleasing to say that we have completed all of them, with only RPG Review itself - a target of four publications and three being released - falling short. We have increased our membership, expanded our library, released new publications, held and participated in conventions, and have a very good financial position for a relatively small organisation.

Financial Statement

2019 Profit and Loss Statement

Income		
Membership	505	
PDF Sales	97.90	
Stock Sales	180	
RQG Con (Registrations, Auction)	5462.87	
Subtotal	6245.77	
Expenses		
Administration (Registration, PO Box, Internet)		210.98
PDF Royalties		73
Annual BBQ		100
Library		40
RQG Con (GoH Airfares, Con Expenses)		5561.48
Subtotal		5985.46

Surplus	260.31	

2019 Balance Sheet

Assets	
Bank	6614.13
PDF Account (DriveThruRPG and DmsGuild)	262.80
Library (Estimated value from 742 games, 95 magazines)	8000
RPG Review (Issues 40 and 44, c85 copies)	425
Book stock (Estimated at 200 spare copies of Papers & Paychecks)	2000
Liabilities	
Kickstarter (Estimated printing cost for Cow-Orkers supplement)	2350
Capital	14951.93

Notes: Bank balance includes RuneQuest Glorantha Con Trust of \$3915.39

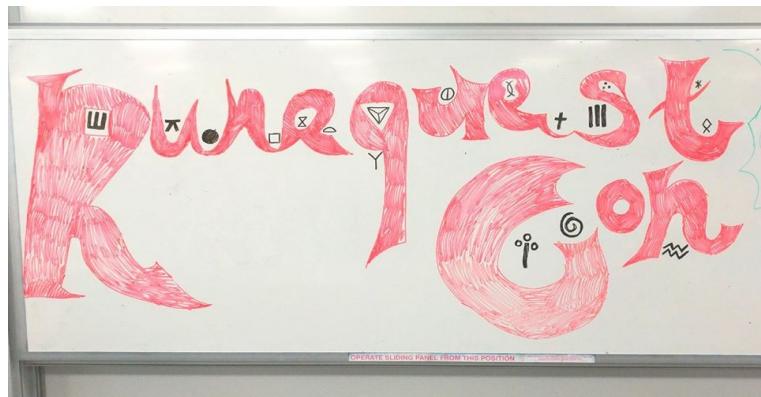
RuneQuest Glorantha Con Down Under IV

The RPG Review Cooperative hosted RQG DU IV at the University of Melbourne on November 23 (Sat) and 24 (Sun), with each day running from 10am to 5pm in the afternoon, and fully catered. In terms of total hours, this was about a 1/3 longer than the previous convention last year at Kyral Castle in Ballarat for the same price, although one must quickly add that the Ballarat convention did have the excellent stream of castle activities (including the unforgettable joust!) and some rather impressive food. This was of simpler fare, but with a community just as enthusiastic.

Whilst a full review and report will be in the next special conference issue of RPG Review in 2020, a short report is provided here here. The Convention included two major gaming sessions, with each scenario able to be run separately but in a combined and sequential manner. The scenarios, "Last Night of the Vigiles and A Branch of Evil", was produced with statistics for RuneQuest Roleplaying in Glorantha, Pendragon, HeroQuest Glorantha, and 13th Age Glorantha. In addition there were boardgames for Khan of Khans, God's War Glorantha, and History of Peloria.

The convention featured two major panel discussions, RuneQuest and Other Systems in Glorantha, and Secrets of Glorantha, along with a special presentation by International Guest of Honour, Jason Durall, on Writing for Chaosium. In addition there were two auction sessions and a silent auction for a rare pre-print copies of Gods of Glorantha and the Red Book of Magic provided by Pete Tracey.

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Letters

I was just now reading the Glorantha/Pendragon scenario in issue 44, and found that the last paragraph of page 36 cuts off in mid sentence.

"A single page, from the back of the book, has been torn out and cannot be located (this page will reveal how the "Any change to get the missing text, please?
Otherwise a most entertaining issue!

Andreas Davour

Hi Andreas,

Thank you for the kind words.

You're quite right, I noticed that the error, too! After it was printed, of course.

The sentence should continue.

"... other members of the Society have been accurately determined by Erastus, using various spies on his suspects".

All the best,

Lev Lafayette

MEGATRAVELLER PIRATES OF DRINAX 'BLOG

with Andrew Daborn

"Farewell an' adieu to you fair Spanish ladies,
Farewell an' adieu to you ladies of Spain,
For we've received orders for to sail for old England,
An' hope very shortly to see you again..."
A traditional shantie for when homeward bound.

103:117 Theev - Early the morning after...

Mira Silverhand, under interrogation from Vinny and Pytor agreed to work with the Drinax privateers for the life of Redthayne, leading the two ships to Redthayne's hideout.

110:117 Palindrome

The Skopa and Mercifuge approach Redthayne's hideout, and once again the silver-tongued crew manage to talk the maverick pirate into joining their ranks. The 200dtion Far Trader, Janal Tork joins their regatta!

The Janal Tork and Mercifuge, with attending crew are now part of the company and added onto the payroll.

The first order of business is to resolve Redthayne's bounty. Jacob suggests that Redthayne travel to Thalassa and bring Dr Thorkan, much wanted geneticist to Torpol, thus winning their favour.

After some negotiation the new group of ships leaves for Salif-Homestead-Thalassa.

117-120:117 Salif

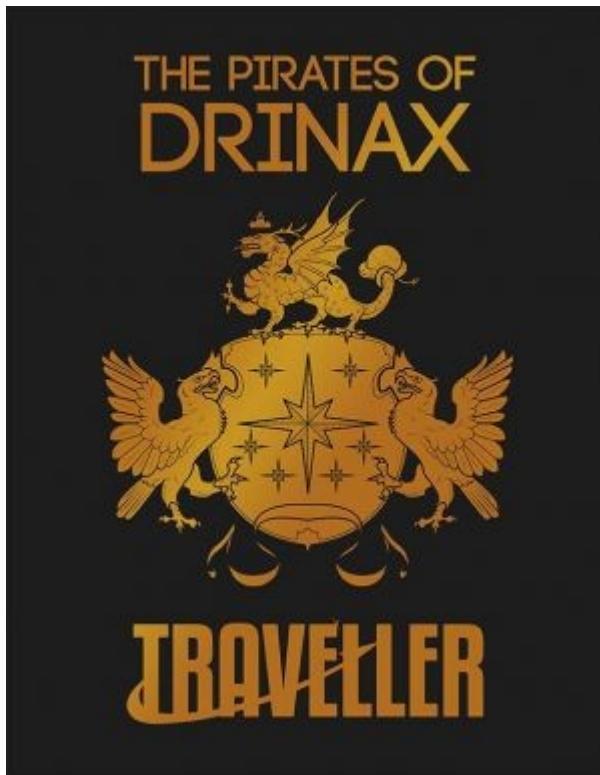
The ships arrive at the desolate planet of Salif, with surprisingly we managed starport. Buying up whatever freight they can, 26 dtons for Homestead and 12 dtons of 2D images of speculative cargo for Thalassa.

127-131:117 Homestead

The ships pass on to Homestead, a much greener planet. Their they drop off their freight and buy 30 dtons of live quail for transport back to Salif.

138-141:117 Thalassa

After making a small profit on their investment in 2d images (blueprints and technical readouts - not Hiver porn...) the Skopa lingers behind with Vinny, Anya and Jacob first hunting down and then recruiting Dr Thorkan to their ranks with promises of tenure and lucrative contracts with Torpol free from the bureaucratic miasma of Thalassa.



Feeling pretty pleased with themselves and managing to out-run the planet's air-defence, the Skopa is about to jump out at the 100D mark, following Janal Torsk and Mercifuge who have left for Homestead.

Nearing their jump point the pirates are intercepted by a mercenary patrol cruiser and ordered to stand down.

The Skopa will have to fight it's way past the military ship to escape the system!

"I am sorry to see you here, but if you had fought like a man, you needn't be hanged like a dog."

- Anne Bonny to "Calico Jack" Rackham in prison after he had decided to surrender to pirate hunters instead of fight.

Thalassa (Suspicious to Hostile) - 141-145:1117

Defeated The mercenary ship G4S-09 and accepted surrender of crew and prize. Ransomed ship and crew back to the interstellar security company G4S for 13.874Mcr. G4S attitude towards pirates is now Hostile.

Homestead (Tolerant) - 152-159:1117

The fleet regrouped and refuelled before jumping to Salif.

Salif (Suspicious) - 166-173:1117

30 dtions of quails sold at Salif (60,000cr).

The Baron sends 1.3875Mcr on his ImpEx card to King Oleb of Drinax as tribute.

At the shipyards the Skopa was booked in for major repairs to the J-drive, M-drive, hull and weapon hardpoint costing 7.5Mcr.

Officer Elie, Engineer Manya, Lt. Col. Lyonid and his marines remain with the Skopa to guard the ship and fly her back to Drinax after repairs are made. Lt. Col. Lyonid has a thorough training program for his marines. Officer Elie estimates that the Skopa should return to Drinax system by 260:117

The renamed pirate vessels leave the Skopa and travel on towards Torpol. The 400-tonne Mercifuge is renamed the Kirov Ushakov. The 200-tonne Far Trader, the Janal Torsk, becomes Anatoli Bugorski. Remaining crew are evenly mixed and split between the two ships. Absolutely no mutiny is reported.

Number 1 (Suspicious) - 180-184:1117

Freight from Salif dropped off making 85,000cr gross profit.

Noricum (Hostile) - 191-196:1117

The fleet briefly survey the capital planet, previously known as Sindal, before refueling and jumping out.

Borite (Tolerant) - 203-207:1117

The fleet briefly scout for Oghma pirates and finding none, refuel and jump out.

Torpol (Unfriendly to Neutral)- 214-221:1117

Freight from Number One dropped off making 84,000cr gross profit. Feryk Redthayne is brought before the authorities

of Torpol with Dr Thorkan and a biological specimen from Thalassa. Vinny, Anya, Pyotr and Jacob manage to convince Torpol to drop Redthayne's bounty in exchange for access to the bio-tech Dr Thorkan has to offer. After some wrangling Dr Thorkan is contracted out to Torpol to develop their next generation of floating cities! Torpol and Clarke drop all charges, scrapping the bounty, and are left with a favourable impression of the Drinax crew.

There is much planning of new ship lanes and actions:

The Skopa (Скора); Harrier - gunboat being repaired at Salif
George Gamow - rented out to technology company from Drinax working in Torpol
The Potemkin plus Eisentsein boat - base yacht - (Drinax to Pourne to Clarke to Drinax)
The Flaming Lambourghini, plus boat Slippery Nipple - acquired yacht ship (Drinax and Torpol)
Kirov Ushakov - 400 tonne salvage hauler with guns (Khusai to Asim to Drinax to Pourne)
Anatoli Bugorski - Far Trader going to Blue for psionic institute

Next step, break Ogmha's piracy of Marduk and Borite!

"When the Moon is in the Seventh House
And Jupiter aligns with Mars,
Then peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars..."

- 5th Dimension

Blue (Suspicious) 228-249:1117

After much data analysis Jacob and Vinnyy concludes that there is a hidden psionic institute on Blue, in the guise of The Viven Burr Institute, a languages school with a youth detention wing...

Disguising themselves as Drinax nobles on safari the team skirt past the more unfriendly of the planetary officials. A pleasant jaunt through the beautiful, if tainted, wine-making region of Blue takes our crew to the mountain monastery-fortress and the entrepreneurial welcome of Professor Harre. A certain amount of double-speak and prospectus perusing eventually led to an acknowledgement by their host of a more advanced 'practical' curriculum.

The terms are set: 5000cr for a two week analysis of psionic potential, and for those wishing to go on, a three month intensive course to explore unlock the potential of their minds, for a mear 100,000cr per applicant.

While the whole team undertakes the analysis (costing 25000cr), only Jacob and Lena, Pyotr's marine p.a., show significant potential worthy of developing further. The neophytes remain on Blue (costing 200,000cr) and the crew return to the 'Anatoli Burgoski' in orbit setting course for Drinax.

The Psionic Training Course will last four months, finishing in 361:1117, the last week of the year.

Torpol (Neutral) (256-263:1117)

The 'Anatoli Burgoski' skips through Torpol with some haste, not keen to remind the natives of the recent acts of piracy.

Drinax (Haven) (270-277:1117)

Leaving Torpol the 'Anatoli Burgoski' returns to Drinax, to rest and recuperate. Somehow Ferrik Redthane gets an ermine trimmed cloak and busies himself with promenading the halls and generally being embarrassing.

Kasiyl finds himself his old corner near a heat vent and naps. The crew have a relaxed day of shore leave.

The period of peace is short lived however, barely have reports been submitted to the Throne or new orders issued to the company when Lady Anya received a curious request. A midnight black microcomputer, somehow smuggled into her personal luggage comes to life. A hologram of a humanoid figure, features concealed behind a silvery mask appears and relays this message:

+++Greetings. Your presence is requested - discreetly - on Tech-World, where matters of mutual interest and profitability may be discussed. We offer you this gift as a mark of our respect, in the hopes of future friendship.+++

There is a little dramatic static then the message ends and is replaced by the likeness of a droyne, a short pterodactyl-like humanoid who reports his name is 'Mal' an AI with deep knowledge of social sciences.

With good happen-stance High Psychopomp Harrick is due his yearly check-up/debug and is in-system awaiting escort to Tech-World. The Prince's yacht 'Stanislav Petrov', with a contingent of bodyguards jumps alongside the far trader. Harrick chooses to travel with the 'Anatoli Burgoski'

With little fanfare the convoy embarks for Tech-World.

Hilfe (Hostile) (284-290:1117)

A brief stop over in Hilfe to refuel, (a full tank of unrefined hydrogen for 15000cr, perhaps three times more expensive than one would expect). The planet is torn apart by endless sectarian wars and there is little trust of travellers. The people here are tough and born of war. Pytor supposes that they would make an excellent army and spends a little time bribing local officials (5000cr) to put the word out to local militias looking for work.

As the 'Anatoli Burgoski' and 'Stanislav Petrov' leave orbit a number of eyes track their progress with interest.

Tech-World (Neutral) (298:1117)

The ships jump in and with little fuss arrive at Tech-World a mostly rust-red and barren planet, with one huge ultra-tech city like an unblinking eye on its surface.

On landing, through what appears to be a nanotech wall, an angelic android is awaiting on their pad. Harrick's eyes show recognition - "Sophia!"

A flight of steel eagles tearing by
The ripped-silk screaming of the rendered sky
Flame on through sound and make time fly
What a good way to go
What a good way to go
In the aerospaceage inferno

- Robert Calvert

Tech-World (Neutral) (298-299:1117)

With the seraph shaped android 'Sophia' as their guide the crew are shown the wonders of the Tech-World space-port plaza! All the TL15 capitalist fantasies one could wish for!

Anya gets her hair done, which with a little effort can change length and colour at will. Piotr buys a new glaze on his uniform, which now seems to match the colours and textures of any background it is held against.

Herrick, and his retinue disappear, presumably to get his oil changed.

Sophia then leads our shoppers 'down Plot Lane' to a mysterious meeting in a secluded warehouse. There they meet the governing committee of Tech-World, (Drs Hodal, Astor and Darke) who have a proposition:

Tech-World is under the protection of GeDeCo, help us to break free of them by getting us protection!

Provide for Tech-World:

- Regular shipments of cheap Basic Consumables, Basic Raw Materials, Biochemicals, Petrochemicals, Radioactives and Uncommon Raw Materials.
- At least four System Defence Boats or equivalent, massing at least 300 tons each.
- Protection against any reprisals from GeDeCo.
- A contract that ensures that Tech-World will be free to carry out any sort of scientific research without restrictions, even in sensitive fields like psionics or artificial intelligence (Dr. Darke has some really interesting theories about silicon lifeforms on Cymbeline...).

Tech-World will then become an untra-tech ally of the resurgent Drinax.

A few hours later, whilst sleeping on this proposal the heroes are interrupted by Hodal who announces that Dr Astor has been infected by nanotech, after an accident at one of her labs. He informs then that she seems to have gone mad and escaped on a stolen starship, carrying a nano-plague with her!

Investigating her lab seems to indicate sabotage, and a phrase 'Shield Church' etched into the wall. Accompanied by Lemuel Vinus, Astor's assistant the heroes race back to their ship and chase after the stolen far trader, the Lord Gerald's Fancy , only to see it jump out before it can be reached.

After discussions with Lemuel, and some deduction of Astor's neutrino trail, the crew determine she is heading to the Exe system, on a path to Neumann.

Exe (Tolerant) (307:1117)

Another week, another interstellar gas station. The planet of Exe Prime is a dead rock, with a toxic atmosphere and a large orbiting space-port that services the Aslan-Imperial trade lanes.

Somewhere in this system is a clue to the nano-plague ship and the errant Dr Astor!

And while these steps have been vital to our national defence, they're really only a beginning.

They're only a beginning of meeting the rising security threats our nation faces in space today and in the future. As President Trump has said, in his words,



Walter Shaub @waltshaub
Have you been to a part of space where this camouflage would blend in?

Kolley Kibber @camcamdamn
Come on, Jim. You know how difficult it is to defeat Ewoks in battle.

Dylan Taylor @SpaceAdvisor
Sorry for the question but why do we need camo in space?

"It is not enough to merely have an American presence in space; we must have American dominance in space."

And so we will.

- Michael Pence

Exe (Tolerant) (307:1117)

It has been a long day. The crew of the Anatoli Bugorski swiftly identify the gas giant - Artobin - as a potential hiding spot for Dr Jali Astor, the fleeing nano-freak/scientist.

Scanners initially find no trace of Lord Gerald's Fancy, but did intercept Vagabond

Soul, a powered down and Farfar trader in a decaying orbit around the planet. Intrigued, and finding eight faint life signs a boarding party headed by Lord Piotr, is mustered and investigates.

The apparently nano-haunted ship rapidly turns deadly as the party is ambushed and there is bitter fighting with Piotr throwing grenades around with impunity. Captain Tryst freezes in the middle and is rescued from certain death by Lt. Sabryn Rock's quick thinking. Piotr trips over an important clue indicating that Astor may be going to the Mirage system (0509 Gazulin), not Neumann as previously presumed. A noble sacrifice from Dimitri Molotov allows his crewmates to escape without him.

Vinny assists in coordinating the retreat with pinpoint scanning of the ship. "They're coming through the walls!" Gunner Reza's sharp skills drill an errant zombie with the ship's lasers as it crawls over the Vagabond Soul's surface after the fleeing marines. A weapon turret is prematurely melted in an expensive collateral incident.

Lady Anya carefully scans the nano infection risk on the returned marines, but finds no cause for alarm. With a lull in the fighting gunner Reza, a keen self-promoter, then contrives to tow the plague ship out of the gravitational well of the gas giant, buying time to plan a second assault.

Frustrated by the loss of one of his crew Captain Redthayne demands to join the second assault alongside his marines and Piotr. Forewarned is forearmed, and the marines fight fearless, but are bottlenecked and Captain Tryst is exterminated horribly in front of the Baron. Sabres flashing in the thin atmosphere and emergency lighting, the remaining crew cut down the hideous remains of the infected crews.

At some point in the midst of the fighting Vinny notices that Jali's ship, Lord Gerard's Fancy, jumps system at the 100D mark from Artobin. There is little option for immediate chase.

With Lady Anya tending the the scrapes and cuts of the surviving crew the two ships limp to Exe up-port to claim their salvage rewards and plan their next move.

"Space is infinite, it is dark
 Space is neutral, it is cold
 Stars occupy minute areas of space
 They are clustered a few billion here
 And a few billion there
 As if seeking consolation in numbers
 Space does not care, space does not threaten
 Space does not comfort
 It does not speak, it does not wake
 It does not dream
 It does not know, it does not fear
 It does not love, it does not hate
 It does not encourage any of these qualities
 Space cannot be measured, it cannot be
 Angered, it cannot be placated
 It cannot be summed up, space is there
 Space is not large and it is not small
 It does not live and it does not die
 It does not offer truth and neither does it lie
 Space is a remorseless, senseless, impersonal
 fact
 Space is the absence of time and of matter"
 - Hawkwind



Exe (Tolerant) (307-308:1117)

Somewhere out there is a crazed Dr Jali Astor with nanites and some bizarre plan on her mind. In the balance is the life of a brilliant scientist, and an alliance with the most technologically advanced world in the sub-sector! The crew must tack her down in the Mirage system. Plotting the most reasonable path for a similar ship to them the crew plan to follow the Hirate trade route to Imperial space.

Cordan (Suspicious) (315-317:1117)

While gathering supplies the Anatoli Burgoski come across an Aslan cruiser is standing off with Florian traders, trying to use the gas giant to refuel. There is an increasing presence of small time traders gathering around the planet. Alya and Vinny manage to persuade the Aslans to stand down long enough for ships to fly under her guns and scoop the much needed jump-fuel.

Wildeman (Neutral) (324-324:1117)

"They say Wildman system is haunted!" - a particularly crusty spacer once told you...
 Before jumping to Fist and into the Imperial Domain of Deneb, Redthayne - aware of an Imperial bounty on his ship - re-programmes the IFF transponder with an alias, 'John Murray Spear'

Fist (Tolerant) (331-332:1117)

A somewhat soft border to the Third Imperium, known for its six colossal nickel-iron fist shaped asteroids! Nobody bats an eyelid when the legitimate far trader jumps in, refuels at one of the gas giants and leaps out. Nobody asks questions and it is easy to pick up supplies.

Imissa (Suspicious) (339-340:1117)

This is where the real border is, Imperial Naval base running regular escorts for the megacorp convoys to the Hirate. The pirate ship sails through with surprisingly little issue... for now. Redthayne is keen to spend a little time as possible here and pushes the crew to refuel quick sharp.

917-857 (Tolerant) (347-348:1117)

Nothing here, just the Anatoli Burgoski and a handful of other lost souls passing through.

Saurus (Neutral) (355-356:1117)

Over the last two months Asaf has been running an increasingly elaborate campaign of practical jokes against Maryana. Apple-pie beds, space weevils in her vacc suit, swapping out the salt and sugar, there is nothing he won't stoop to! The usually stoic Maryana is a boiling inferno, kept only in check by the full schedule of routine maintenance and continued professional development.

Online e-war and community radio training programs have kept her fury focused, while Asaf's enquiring mind went into programming his heartbreaker MUD. Redthayne's masterly timetabled education program for the crew has significantly reduced the heavy drinking, knife fights and dance-offs.

Darchona (Tolerant) (363-364:1117)

Water world. They prefer it if you steal the hydrogen from the gas giant, not the ocean.

Susanawo (Tolerant) (006-007:1118)

The crew celebrate the annual new year Holiday in J-Space. There is more drinking. The party mood is somewhat soured on the arrival in Susanawo system, home to an infamous prison colony. No chance of running into ex-crewmates here though, the penalty for piracy in Imperial space is death. Sullen, the crew make swift progress through the system. No authorities seem to be looking too closely here and there are no problems moving on.

Mirage (Suspicious) (14:1118)

11 weeks and 5 days (1968 hours or 118080 or approximatly 7084800 seconds spent in a maddeningly tiny merchant starship stuffed full of increasingly bored killers with nothing but a privilaged doctor, a baron and a brace of scientists for entertainment...) later the John Murray Spear arrrives in system and touches down on Mirage Prime on the third day of GodCon!

The space-lanes are busy with ships of religions, cults, denominations and sects from across the sector. Initial communication with port authorities seems not to get far - they seem to have other things on their mind. Equally, contact with the delegation of the Shield Church brings little joy, but does introduce the venerable Archon Dreek.

The crew make contact with representatives of the Psychopomp of Clarke who help reunite the crew with Jacob Ondracek, newly awoken psionicist. The pirates identify the 'Lord Gerald's Fancy', parked in a dirt at the far end of the makeshift downport that has grown up alongside GodCon.

Jacob's mind probes and Vinny's scans identify faint signs of life, both inside and out of the ship. A brief forey finds a naked man who says he is a driver for Dreek's party. Realising that there has been a classic swicheroo the crew race to get to Dreek at his condo, before Dr Jali does.

Dr Jali is somehow intercepted and reasoned with, somewhat. There is an intense standoff, words are exchanged. Jali explains why she wants Dreek's nanites. Dreek, however rushes in ready to cleanse with fire... Anya and Piotr double team Dreek, pinning him down and 'extracting' a sample of nanites from his supply. Whith this present, Jali leaves with her assistant Lemuel in tow.

A furious Dreek stakes a 1MCr bounty on Jali's head, desperately trying to regain control of the situation. In the distance 'Lord Gerald's Fancy' lifts off.

In South Australia I was born
To me heave away, haul away
In South Australia round Cape Horn

We're bound for South Australia
Haul away you rolling kings
To me heave away, haul away
Haul away, you'll hear me sing
We're bound for South Australia
- Traditional Shanty.

Mirage (Suspicious) (014-016:1118)

Emboldened to chase the fleeing Dr Astor and her assistant the team refuel with haste and head for Neumann chasing the bounty on Astor's head, if nothing else.

Fintor (Neutral) (023-026:1118)

The travellers pass through the Fintor system swiftly, unimpressed by the dustbowl that is the primary planet.

Peridot (Neutral) (032-034:1118) and Iscand (Neutral) (045-048:1118)

Both these systems immediately feel more Imperial than the majority of these backward borderlands. Huge military vessels of tens of thousands of dtons dominate the naval bases here and to the trained eyes of Piotr these are Imperial battle groups on manoveurs preparing for war.

The scuttlebutt at the fuel pump in Iscand is that the majority of the sector fleet has travelled coreward to defend against Zhodani and Vagyr incursions into Deneb. The bar staff, ground crew and attendants who will talk are unanimously more fearful of an Aslan invasion from spinward across the Reach...

Neumann (Suspicious) (041:1118)

The far-trader wisely skips past the forbidden 627-301 system and jumps to Neumann, the destination!

The pirates make their was directly to Neumann, to the primary planet. Tens of billions of people crowd into the shining cities of Neumann. Here is technology at its height – buildings float on gravity platforms, servitor drones flit through the crowds, and every imaginable wonder is at hand. If Gazulin with its museums and fashion houses and high culture is the Paris of the Trojan Reach, then Neumann is a million Akihabaras crammed onto a single world, a cybernetic hive of virtually infinite complexity. Everything is incredibly clean and precisely organised; it is a world of straight lines and engineered curves, of polished metal and chrome.

Out beyond the hermetic perfection of the steel cities is the swarm zone. Ships descending to Neumann usually switch

off their external cameras, to avoid showing visitors the disturbing view. More than half the planet is covered in swarm-zone. Imagine a churning ocean of grey goo that boils and sets and sublimes once again, shifting shape and colour and state faster than the eye can follow. Forms emerge out of the churning slime, then fall back again, dissolving. Buildings, structures, machines- people too - are partially born out of the formless chaos and then vanish again, leaving parts or traces of themselves behind to be recombined again. This is the aftermath of the grey goo disaster that wiped out Neumann's golden age. This is what the Immortal Protector guards against.

The decent to the surface is interrupted by traffic control, who becoming increasingly suspicious dispatch a heavily armed system defence boat after them. Some phenomenally impressive piloting and atmospheric skimming give the ship enough time to get to the location of Astor's ship.

A node, atop a fortress against the grey goo seas beyond it's sun-gun defended walls. Beside a far trader, two figures stand arguing furiously with each other. the pirates arrive to find loyal assistant Lemuel trying to prevent Dr Jali Astor from releasing her improved nanites into the node, and thus the grey goo. He insists that this will cause a huge backlash as the hostile nanites become increasingly hostile threatening all people on this planet.

Jali, merely screams at him that he is wrong, and that her calculations are correct. She pounds furiously at a keyboard on the node intent on completing her input. Jacob, fellow scientist, tries vainly to reason with Jali, could she test some of her nanites on a small sample of grey-goo? She aggressively rebukes him. Lemuel tries to persuade the travellers to stop her, but sensing that they are unsure tries a new tac. He draws a previously hidden fusion gun and claims he is no other than the Immortal Protector, Saviour-God of Neumann.

Further confused by this new revelation the crew interrogate both antagonists, Jacob probes their minds and the others question the two. It appears that there are two options, to allow Jali to release her nanites, or stop her.

In the paralysis of the moment Lemuel/Immortal Protector levels his gun and screams his intent to destroy Jali. Jacob quickly shunts his gun from his hands with the very power of his mind. He drops his hold on the gun and leaps towards Jali pinning her to the floor in a strangle hold.

Jali screams, realisation on her face. She tells the pirates that it was none other than Lemuel that sabotaged her work on Tech World. He is responsible for this all! Ever heroic Vinny lays down a fortuitously precise burst from his smg, knocking Lemuel down.

Jali staggers to the console and continue. There is one less player in the game, but the stakes are still high. Through bloody lips Lemuel pleads with the crew that Jali must die to save Neumann. He explains that he in deed planned this from the beginning but she did not do a good enough job of reworking the nanites.

Lemuel tells them that Jali has only a 40% of succeeding, not nearly high enough odds to risk the fate of a world on surely!

As the team ponder their next move, high over the sounds of crashing nanite waves comes the roar of a gunboat. Either way. This is going to end soon. Jali screams that she is nearly finished, and the pirates decide.

With a final keystroke the nanites are released into the goo. The nanotech swarm slows, then begins to act with purpose. Slowly, it begins to restore the structures it pulled apart. Building that were devoured centuries ago reform, like seashells left behind by a retreating tide. In other places, the characters see the swarms build up human corpses, layer by layer, shaping bones, then laying muscle and fat and nerve tissue down, creating perfect corpses of people who

died 1500 years ago.

Jali is grabbed and the crew board both ships, clumsily lifting them both off the planet, as the incoming customs ship slows and hovers on the horizon, apparently paralysed by the events unfolding on the ground.

As the two ships begin to gain altitude the ripples of what they have done begin to play out. Patches in the grey goo see become islands and slowly reach out to each other to form cities, highways, spaceports, monuments of a bygone age.

The Tale of the Immortal Protector

Once upon a time, the scientists of Neumann believed that machines could solve all their problems. They built thinking machines to do their thinking for them, and building machines to make everything they needed. Their whole world became one great union of machines, and people just seemed like an unnecessary distraction.

Then something went wrong. The building machines turned on the people, and went mad. They killed billions and billions of people, dissolving them into goo and using their remains to build more building machines. The thinking machines could not see a way to solve the problem, and kept thinking and thinking until the building machines devoured them too.

Now, one of the people killed in that plague was a woman, a traveller from afar, named Nuwia, and as she died, she called out the name of her lover. That name is forgotten, for now we know him only as the Immortal Protector.

Then the Immortal Protector came down from the stars, in a ship of silver fire. He was a wanderer and a hero. Some say he was the last Emperor of the First Imperium, exiled from his throne by the Solomani upstarts. Others say he was half-human, and half-Ancient, that his mother was an archaeologist who found an Ancient tomb on a deserted dead world. Whoever he was, he was a man without peer.

He stood eight feet tall, and wielded a FGMP in each hand. He burned back the swarms with the fury of his fusion guns, and fought his way to the last laboratory. There, he found more slumbering swarms, and – for he was as great a scholar as he was a warrior – he commanded the swarms to block the building machines from encroaching any further onto Neumann. The surviving scientists were made to swear an oath never to interfere with the protections set in place by the Protector, and he established the Shield Church to watch over his work. So it is by his grace that everyone on Neumann lives to this very day!

Neumann (Suspicious) (041-043:1118)

A momentous day for Neumann. The tide turns against the grey goo! As was foretold by the Psychopomp of Clarke! Making use of the systemic shock caused by their actions the crew of the John Murray spear act swiftly.

Lemuel Volin needs little prompting to reveal himself to the confused crowds as the Immortal Protector! Within minutes he is shaking off the mortal wounds inflicted by Vyyny's SMG and is in a planet wide address clad in Piotr's second best dress uniform. In the chaos sown by the release of Dr Jali's cure power structures of Neumann gladly exalt Lemuel as their leader.

"A strong hand in a time of disorder" is the mantra of the day.

Under cover of all this two rather battered far traders, with relief crews scoot out of orbit and make the jump.

Lemuel's bloodied and bullet ridden cloak lies on the floor of the sick-bay. A discarded relic.

Peridot (Neutral) (050-053:1118)

Fintor (Neutral) (060-063:1118)

Mirage (Suspicious) (070-073:1118)

John Murray spear's crew reunites from shore leave. Brief espionage assignments the crew took on indicate significant fear among the hight and mighty, gathered for GodCon '18. The Archduke's fleets are leaving their bases and travelling to the Corridor to defend against fighting from the civil war, and the threats of Zhodani, and Vagyr. This leave the to Trojan Reach poorly defended against Aslan incursions, which everyone is predicting are about to start.

Susanawo (Tolerant) (079-082:1118)

Darchona (Tolerant) (089-092:1118)

Saurus (Neutral) (100-103:1118)

Ardasii (Neutral) (110-113:1118)

Imisaa (Suspicious) (120-123:1118)

Fist (Tolerant) (130-133:1118)

The ships leave Imperial space.

Wildeman (Neutral) (140-143:1118)

In Wildeman a drunken belter / dwarven prospector, propositions the crew. Klim Gobbo claims he stumbled upon the hidden base of the dread pirate Captain Tamby Dour, famed for terrorising the shipping lanes a century ago.

Gobbo will show the crew of the John Murray Spear where the hidden base is, if they find Dour's last surviving scion. Goob explains that Dour's treasure vault is in the base and Gobbo will split the contents with them if they bring the last scion to unlock the NA encrypted door...

Goob hears that Dour spent much of her time on Theeve.

Cordan (Suspicious) (150-153:1118)

The garden world of Cordon Prime has a reputation for cut-throat politics. The ships pass swiftly on.

Exe (Tolerant to Friendly) (160-163:1118)

With some ease the crew manage to find a representative of Lord Gerald's Fancy and arrange a modest salvage fee. Careful examination of the dozen or so staff on this gas-station indicates a business opportunity. With a fistful of credits and the promise of regular entertainment shipments the ground-crew are bought.

Tech-World (Neutral) (170:1118)

After 127 long days, Dr Jali Astor is returned to her planet, her colleagues, her family. The relief and gratitude shines from the faces of the remaining councillors.

What of the promises made to Tech-World of defence and supplies in their secret attempts to leave the clutches of GeDeCo? What of the Aslan threats? What of the promises made to the people of Borite?

AD&D COUNCIL OF WYRMS PERSPECTIVE AND REVIEW

by Karl Brown

Council of Wryms by Bill Slavicsek for TSR 1994, and 1999. Though long out-of-print the boxed set is still readily available for purchase as a pdf at a reasonable price. This article based on a review and conversion to D&D 5e I produced on the fan forum The Piazza

<http://www.thepiazza.org.uk/bb/viewtopic.php?f=103&t=18746&sid=b2f7952c0e2066a5a53a1148ded1ff92>

Abbreviations: 1e: first edition of AD&D, 2e: second edition of AD&D, 3e third edition of D&D, 5e: 5th edition of D&D, CWA: Council of Wryms Book 1, CWB: Council of Wryms Book 2, CWC: Council of Wryms Book 3, C#: Council of Wryms boxed set card, DMG: Dungeon Master's Guide, MM: Monster Manual, WOTC: Wizards of the Coast.

This classic setting from the 2e era enabled people to play dragons in D&D for the first time. PC dragons begin as hatchlings and grew to ancient wryms over a campaign spanning centuries. While the general idea was a great one, the boxed set was plagued by a number of issues. That said the setting and it's author had a major impact on future editions of D&D.



This review is based on the 1994 boxed set. I have not seen the 1999 single volume hardback (pictured).

This review is written for fans of any edition of D&D considering using the Council of Wryms setting.

What's in the box?

The box is printed in colour and moderately sturdy construction. Despite being out of print for so long the boxes of many secondhand copies are still structurally intact. The contents fill up a good portion of the box giving a good first impression. Inside are three 64 page books with colour covers, minimal colour within (single colour borders and headings), and black and white interior illustrations. There are 12 large colour cards, of these some are character sheets and most people will photocopy these rather than use the originals. If playing in 2e the cards detailing important NPCs will get use and the cards for random encounter tables are useful for play in any edition. The three colour posters are a map, a dragon size comparison chart, and list of dragon clans with

their claw-runes. This last is of marginal use in play. The size comparison chart can give new players a feel for the size of D&D dragons and the map is invaluable to playing in the setting.

PDF copies from WOTC are readily available from the Drive Thru RPG website and unlike some scans of this era are crisp good quality scans of unmarked copies with bookmarks and OCR.

Why the Wryms?

There are three reasons why you might want to check out the Council of Wryms. The first is to play a dragon. The second for the intriguing setting. The third to appreciate the influence of Council of Wryms on future generations of D&D.

Characters

In a standard Council of Wryms game each player controls either a single half-dragon OR a dragon and a normal long-lived humanoid (a ‘kindred’). Dwarves, elves and gnomes are available as kindred. When making your choice bear in mind that a Council of Wryms campaign is an epic story spanning over a thousand years; several kindred or half-dragon lifetimes. Only dragons live long enough to survive the whole campaign. Due to the weak telepathic bond between dragon and kindred (described CWA35), a player playing a dragon/kindred set divides earned xp as described at CWA35 when only one of the set is present on an adventure.

A foreign humanoid seeing a dragon of the Io’s Blood for the first time could not mistake her for one of the uncivilized dragons of his homeland. The dragons of the Io’s Blood adorn themselves with rings bracelets, necklaces, silk pennants and other jewelry (CWB49 and various illustrations). Furthermore, some dragons have elaborately carved scales or artful tattoos. These are not cultureless destructive beasts wearing nothing but their hides. The Io’s Blood dragons are something far more frightening, an entire culture of organized dragons!

Dragon characters begin as hatchlings fostered out to the Custodians, an order that serves the Council of Wryms, a kind of dragon United Nations. The Council of Wryms published adventures assume that the PCs support the Council’s goal of avoiding dragon-war and promoting stability. Those wanting to run a different kind of campaign, such as all PCs belonging to the same clan, will need to rework the published adventures. The boxed set allowed PCs of Metallic (good) and Gem (neutral) breeds but disruptive evil chromatic breeds.

The half-dragons of Council of Wryms are very different to the half-dragons described in later editions of D&D. Io’s Blood half-dragons are descended from gold, silver, and bronze dragon fathers and humanoid mothers only. They grow into tall and lean but otherwise normal elf, dwarf or gnome children and then after adolescence a slow transformation begins. They become a tall slender humanoid with metallic skin and hair, claws for nails and snake-like eyes. NOT a humanoid dragon. Half-dragons have no wings, no tails, and no scales. Half dragons are seen as abhorrent by most natives and get by as vagabond outcasts or the patronage of a dragon. Kits provide rules to model the shunned half-dragon’s place in society and whether they are supported or disowned by their dragon sire.

Themes

I have identified five themes that I believe are the foundations of the Council of Wryms setting and make it such a compelling place to play in.

Dragons dominate

Dragons not only rule the Council of Wryms they dominate everything about the setting. PCs are dragons or dragon-blooded, dragon culture is the focus of the setting, adventures are designed for dragon protagonists, and everywhere you look there are NPC dragons. All the powerful NPCs will be dragons, there are no equivalents to Merlin or King Arthur, ultimate magical, martial, and political power rests in the talons of dragons.

Humanoids generally show deference to dragons. Vassals and humanoid tribes who recognize dragon domination address any adult dragon, 101 years old or older, as ‘Grand Master’ or, presumably, ‘Grand Mistress’ (Dungeon issue 48). Dragons over 25 years old are addressed as ‘Dominate’.

A non-human world

A striking difference to other worlds is that humans are essentially a ‘monster’ species. The dominant cultures of the Io’s Blood are those of elves, dwarves, and gnomes all unified by dragon rule. Other native peoples are on the fringes of this culture as allies of the dragons or hiding in the wilderness. Thus, the Io’s Blood setting is not just about dragons, it also showcases elves, dwarves, and gnomes. It is a place where the specialist roles found in these non-human cultures belong in the mainstream (as evidenced by the kits listed for use in the boxed set CWB61).

Humans are rare and shunned or even hunted. If one grows to be a potent hero then that individual will definitely be tracked and killed. Humans of the Isles are not true natives; they are the feral descendants of survivors from the dragon slayer armies that invaded in ancient times. They live in hiding as primitives in the icy wastes of the far north and the deserts and jungles of the south. If ever a human tribe show signs of becoming more advanced the Council of Wryms would urge for utter extermination of that tribe.

Dragon minds

Dragons are not just flying engines of terror. The boxed set discusses how to role-play the psychology of dragons. Dragons are portrayed as arrogant and having a long view that enables them to patiently pursue plans that will take centuries to complete. Rules that require dragons to magically bond treasure to grow will motivate players to hoard treasure as dragons do are included.

Threats within and without

From the moment of hatching dragons of the Io’s Blood Isles face threats from within and without. Giants raid coastal areas and everyone dreads another invading army of fanatical human dragon slayers. Wild lands full of enormous predators must be tamed as territory for the next generation of your clan. Other dragons though are your greatest foes; they look upon your lands, hoard, and vassals with avarice. At the first sign of weakness other dragons will take what they can from you by threats, politics, or murder.

Slow rise to power taking centuries

Gaining respect and rank in dragon factions is dependent on age and great deeds but the rewards can be as great as ruling over your own clan of dragons or being a councillor who steers all of dragonkind.

Preventing war

In the past so many greedy, territorial, dragons stomping about like gods made flesh resulted in violence easily igniting and spreading. To prevent the terrible dragon-wars of the past from happening again, the dragon god Io created the Council of Wryms to prevent war by debate, rulings, and formal duels of wing and claw. While most epic fantasy campaigns and fiction are about winning the war against evil, the Council of Wryms campaign is about preventing the war and co-existing with evil.

The Origin and Legacy of The Council of Wryms

The 2e era saw the introduction of many iconic campaign settings. These introduced many ideas, especially character races, that influenced later editions of D&D including the current 5e. While Council of Wryms never had the popularity of Planescape or Ravenloft, Council of Wryms has also greatly influenced later editions. Council of Wryms did win the 1994 Origins Award for Best Roleplaying Adventure. Unlike other settings Council of Wryms was only ever intended to be a single boxed set, though there were a number of articles for the setting in Dragon and Dungeon magazines.

I think the first mention of playing dragons as PCs in an official D&D book was in the 1e DMG. Gygax mentioned shapeshifting gold dragons as a monster likely to join a band of adventurers and then proceeded to try to convince you not to do it. No rules were provided. Despite Gary's advice numerous fans tried to write home brew AD&D dragon PC rules. My version of dragon PCs for AD&D 2e can be found in RPG Review Issue 9 (http://rpgreview.net/files/rpgreview_9.pdf). At the time I was play-testing my version Bill Slavicsek was writing the first official D&D PC dragon rules, the Council of Wryms. Bill's Dragons were a *monstrous* race class presaging those seen in Savage Species of 3e. Dragons as a PC race would re-emerge during the 3e era in Savage Species, the Draconomicon, and Dragon magazine issue 320. The rules for PC dragons in the 3e Draconomicon included sudden increases in power on attaining age categories like those in Council of Wryms and also suggests each player controls two PCs (one dragon, one humanoid) as is done in Council of Wryms. The idea of dragons ascending to become godlike appears the Council of Wryms and is made a prestige class in the 3e Draconomicon. The Draconomicon also included a Dragon Kith prestige class that was a 3e version of the bonded humanoids called 'kindred' in Council of Wryms. Towards the end of the 3e era WOTC released 'Dragon Magic' which despite the title is a guide to settings heavily influence by dragons or living under dragon rule. Notably, Bill Slavicsek, the author of Council of Wryms, was 'Director of RPG R&D' for WOTC during this period.

Council of Wryms also introduced the earliest half-dragons. These were a PC race of humanoids who undergo a slow transformation into a humanoid creature with dragon powers, quite unlike the 'bipedal dragon' versions seen in later editions. Council of Wryms half dragons were a design ancestor of today's dragonborn who were originally members of other races who transformed in Races of the Dragon for 3e. They became a true independent race in 4e. The 4e backstory of the dragonborn also included an empire ruled by dragons though it differed greatly from the Council of Wryms.

Issues

I have a love-hate relationship with the Council of Wryms. I loved the idea of playing dragons and lands under dragon rule. However, based on cursory inspection many details of the execution of these themes left a bad taste in my mouth. Several times after its release I had opportunity to purchase the boxed set but I turned down the product in favour of my own home-brew rules for dragons and custom built worlds (see RPG Review issue 9 http://rpgreview.net/files/rpgreview_9.pdf).

Now, years later, I'm time-poor so a box full of a setting and adventures is more appealing. The handouts, especially the map, are also much better than anything I could produce myself. Reading the books carefully brought me to an appreciation of the sophistication of the themes embedded in the setting (discussed above) and has led me to regard the boxed set in a better light.

Poor compatibility *within* AD&D

Rather than power-down dragons to match other PC races and classes, the Council of Wryms built a setting to match dragon bodies and lifespans, the Io's Blood Isles ruled by dragons. Each level of the dragon class was more potent than one in other classes and overall PC dragons, and, to a lesser extent, half dragons, were overpowered compared to other

character types. This prevented the use of dragon PCs in other campaign settings and created a substantial barrier to having PCs from the world beyond the Io's Blood Isles visit the setting. There was no *clear* way to compare dragons and other races to determine when they would be equivalent. In all a curious design decision given that the re-release as a hardback volume was promoted as ‘campaign option’ intended to be dropped into any campaign world (Dragon Magazine issue 315). Some speculate that Mr Slaviscik always intended the setting to be stand-alone and the ‘campaign option’ idea emerged out of the marketing department. The statement that the setting might be in the distant past (CWA6) and the unusual year and month lengths (CWB40) support this theory.

The dragon race-class was not alone in having more power per level. Prior to the 3e era classes were not equivalent at the same level. Classes also had different xp requirements to advance. Some advanced slowly but had greater power per level, others gained levels quickly but were not as potent at high level. What made the dragon race-class unique was the degree, no other class began with so much power nor could match a high-level dragon. Dragons also had only 12 levels, to match the age categories in the 2e MM, rather than the usual 20 (or more in 2e). Dragons alone of the 2e classes had multiple hit die per level. It may have been better if Mr Slavicsek had based dragon levels on hit die rather than age category, this would have made dragon levels closer in power to those of other classes.

3e introduced the standardised level where all classes paid the same xp to advance in level and all were *intended* to be of equivalent power at any given level. This was the tool required for powerful races to be compared to regular classes; Savage Species (2003) assigned level equivalents to monster races including dragons so you could know what level to introduce a dragon PC and be fair to other players. The 3e Draconomicon tweaked this system to allow PC dragons to advance in Age Category. Finally, Dragon magazine issue 320 presented dragons as race-classes with 20 levels for 3e.

AD&D game-design

In 1e and 2e to enable powerful monsters like dragons to challenge high-level heroes the monsters had numerous spells and powers. Dragons in particular were festooned with spells and powers rather than just having their iconic breath weapon. The PC dragons in the Council of Wryms boxed set emulated those of the 2e MM. Spells, psionics, and the AD&D tendency to use different dice rolls for every part of the game and different xp tables for every class resulted book 1 of the boxed set being half filled with charts and tables; all unnecessarily inconsistent and complex.

While a criticism of AD&D itself rather than of Council of Wryms this complexity is worth mentioning given the streamlined nature of 5e and other modern RPGs.

Art

The producers of the boxed set made stylistic choices that left me cold. The cover illustrations by Easley for the box and the individual books are high quality. The execution of interior black and white art and the coloured art on the cards is less impressive. The map however is one of my favourites of all the old school hex maps. Another issue is the anatomy of the dragons. Sometime around the release of 3e WOTC artists hit on the idea of dragon anatomy based off that of big cats but with large powerful extra shoulder muscles to drive the wings; a pleasing representation of dragons as proud predators. Rather than lion-like, the anatomy of the dragons in the boxed set suggests humans in rubber suits or overweight lizards. In both kinds the wings are unsupported afterthoughts that don’t even look like they could function.

Order of presentation

Book 1 seems to set out to give you all the new material you need to create characters for the setting but then at the back of book 2 we find player character kits that are absolutely essential for character generation. These kits should have been in book 1 instead of the rules for dragon combat.

Missing details

Most boxed set settings of the 2e era had numerous supplementary books detailing specific regions or facets of the setting. In contrast, Council of Wryms was planned as a single release. With only three 64 page books to describe a

whole region, its people, history, and culture it is no wonder that much detail is missing. Most clans and places are nothing more than names. Quote: “*It falls upon the shoulders of both Dungeon Masters and players to expand the world and fill in the blanks with rich, personalised details*” (CWB52). We are told almost nothing of the culture of the humanoids living under dragon rule. Do they worship their own gods or those of the dragons? We are not told, at least not directly. However, a great deal about how Slavicsek imagined the setting can be inferred from what is included and what is excluded. The most obvious example is the PC races; as well as dragons there are elves, dwarves, and gnomes. The exclusion of humans, halflings, half elves, and half orcs tells us a lot about the setting. Similarly, lists of allowed kits for humanoids tell us much about their religion and culture. Kits of 2e were something like subclasses or archetypes of later editions. The random encounter tables tell us who and what inhabit the isles and who is missing; there are no orcs!

Naming Conventions

Clan names like Triumph, High-jump, and Foul-grove as well as places like Blaze Town and Top-Town have a juvenile ring to them which is not to my liking.

Poor use of themes in adventures

A criticism that applies to all the adventures in Book 3 is that they make no use of the political background of the Clans and Custodians struggling to preserve peace that Book 2 describes. None of the adventures feature political intrigues to sway the Council or covert missions against rival clans. The last adventure in particular is a rather uninspired dungeon full of deathtraps. This is especially disappointing given that most players would have first encountered the setting through playing one of these adventures perhaps contributing to the lower popularity of the setting compared to say Ravenloft.

Another issue is that the adventures in the boxed set proscribe whether dragon or vassal PCs are used and are written as if no one is playing a half-dragon. Most players will understandably use all their characters on most adventures. Dragon and kindred are supposed to be psychically bound afterall.

The three adventures provided are nowhere near a full campaign. You will have to create a lot more bespoke material to fill in your campaign. A good start is using the provided random wilderness encounters to fill-out the journeys to the adventure sites. The books and reference cards are also dripping with numerous adventure hooks including psionic bullywugs, dracolich cults, weird underdark slavers, giant raiders, covert raids against or by enemy dragon clans, waring humanoid tribes, yuanti plots, political intrigues at the Council of Wryms, Godzilla-sized monsters, and ritual combat.

Verdict

Council of Wryms is an intriguing setting populated by non-humans, dominated by dragons, and ripe with adventure, tough moral choices and intrigues. The choice of playing a dragon or one of the setting’s unusual half-dragons is interesting and roleplaying either of these is supported by the rules and material in the box. This could be a very good seed for a great campaign. However, the adventures provided are not enough to fill out the campaign, are not great, and make poor use of the campaigns interesting society. Furthermore, the boxed set is plagued by poor presentation. You also can’t use the dragon PCs in other campaign settings due to power issues.

While I’m personally somewhat obsessed by dragons and the Council of Wryms when recommending it to others I’m going to have to give it only 3 stars out of 5.

SEVERAL MONSTER RPG REVIEWS

by Lev Lafayette

Saurians (1979)

Wes Ives and Edward E. Simbaalist

Introduction and Physical Product

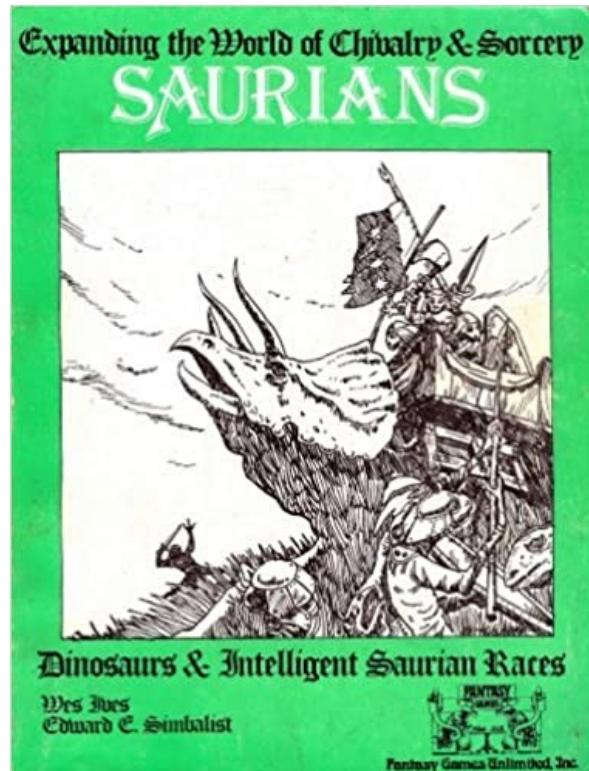
Saurians is a supplement for Chivalry & Sorcery, expanding the game to include "dinosaurs and intelligent saurian races" and coming from the dinosaur-age of roleplaying it has a degree of rarity. Like other supplements of the first edition of Chivalry & Sorcery the production qualities are about as old-school as one is likely to find. The 170 page book has a cardstock cover, and is glue-bound, leading some inventive character to staple the pages in place. I suspect that has provided it a saving grace as it doesn't look very hardy by itself. The cover art by Mike Gilbert, of a triceratops and mount, combines both the medieval-realist feel of C&S with the subject-matter of the book, so kudos for that. The internal art, although fairly sparse, is fairly good and contextually appropriate. The publication is tight single-column ragged-right throughout, with the same typed font-size used throughout except for major sections which use a gothic-styled script. There is a pretty solid table of contents, but no index, and from the table of contents one can discern pretty much two major subjects of the book - as the subtitle said - a number of sections related to dinosaurs and a number of sections related to intelligent saurians, the

Hss'Taathi and the Kulun'Ssaatha. The writing style alternates between chatty and formal, but does not waste words in the provision of useful information.

Dinosaurs and Pleistocene

The authors begin the text with a thoroughly sensible discussion of why one would have dinosaurs in their campaign world, how they got there, where they would want to live, and so forth. They mention quite outright that there is certainly nothing realistic about lumping together species that were separated by scores of millions of years, but such is the nature and expectations of the game setting - at least aspire to realism in other areas. This means paying attention to the basics of dinosaur biomechanics, such as their love of warm, lush regions with plentiful plant-life (for the herbivores to eat and, by extension, for the carnivores to follow the herbivores), and the fact that dinosaurs tend to be around on low-lying land, as carrying their large carcasses up and down hills and mountains is something they would certainly prefer to avoid. This of course leaves the challenge of how to combine ice-age game settings with its exotic creatures with the equally desired dinosaur species - and some thought and recommendations goes into that as well (e.g., larger world with lower density, providing greater range of climatic regions). These is a thorough introduction to a commendable level of logical explanation which would encourage any budding world-designer to think in terms of how things would make sense.

In addition there is a large section dedicated first to descriptions and then to statistic blocs for the various creatures so-



described, separated by carnivorous and herbivorous. The game boasts that there is over two hundred creatures provided, but to be fair, most of which are described in a couple of paragraphs at best, and some as little as a sentence. The information provided is certainly useful, but is more inspirational for looking up further detail in other sources which is certainly easier today than it was at the time of publication. Naturally enough, human knowledge of dinosaurs has improved significantly since 1979, and the text is openly heavily influenced by Desmond's "The Hot-Blooded Dinosaurs" (1975), which was pretty advanced for the time. Nevertheless, the plateosaurus is described as a frugivore, whereas contemporary opinion suggests that omnivore is more probable. Some of the weights of various creatures are not close to current estimations, and so forth. Another matter of note is that true to the design style of the time every case is a special case; the rules for encountering a Tyrannosaurus are very particular for that type of dinosaur. About a dozen pages is dedicated to describing the Pleistocene creatures, and all the favourites are there as expected, including the sabre-toothed tiger, cave bears, glyptodonts, giant beavers, giant camels and the like. In addition, when it comes to the statistic blocks, the game is kind enough to provide equivalent armour translation for Dungeons & Dragons and RuneQuest. A particularly impressive inclusion is damage multipliers for bites and kicks which may vary from the creatures actual size and strength. With quite a level of crunchy detail there is fatigue points costs for extended chases and species-movement rates for particular types of terrain. Overall, however, this is a great collection of dinosaurs and pleistocene creatures provided in a clear, evocative, and sensible manner.

The Saurian Races

The sections on the Saurian 'races' begins with fairly colourful background material (history and religion) from the perspective of a human archimage on the Dragonlords, the Hss'Taathi, who have managed to control dragons. The Hss'Taathi are a warm-blooded species, descendants of smaller pack-hunting dinosaurs, highly intelligent and civilised, with insignificant sexual dimorphism. They love tattoos, cosmetics, and jewellery, but wear little in the way of clothing. Their sensory systems are very different to the human norm and are explained in some detail. They also have a structured caste society, with four warrior castes, a hunting caste, priest and mage castes, and a numerous servant/slave caste; after all, someone has to do the work. As can be expected there are different sumptuary rights for each caste, and in a somewhat contrived manner, differing characteristic requirements. Very much in the style of early RPGs one finds a detailed and differentiated means for character generation with specific caste-based skills and progressions. Regardless of how clunky all this is, it also is an opportunity to introduce some of the cultural weapons, tools, and magic of the Hss'Taathi, which itself leads into an extensive discussion of their social organisation, their towns and cities, noble challenges (the Hold) and so forth. This is all very high quality content from the dawn-period of RPGs and is probably one of the reasons why the Saurians book is highly sought-after. The detail provided for a genuinely different alien race and culture is, of course, relatively rare from these times. Sadly, the crocodilian Kulun'Ssaatha species is largely described as being equivalent in all regards to the Hss'Taathi, and whilst over sixty pages is dedicated to the Hss'Taathi, a mere three is granted to the Kulun'Ssaatha.

Conclusion

Whilst the presentation, format, and physical product of Saurians is pretty primitive which lowers its overall ratings, its strength lies in its content. It is Chivalry & Sorcery, which has a pretty steep learning curve at the best of times, and the game design structure is frankly something that game archeologists would be more interested in these days than for actual regular play, there is great joy in the descriptive content. One could even largely ignore the actual mechanics that the supplement provides just to get a general rule of thumb from they provide and take it from there. With evocative and logical explanation of the world of dinosaurs and beasts of the Pleistocene, to the remarkably alien yet still accessible intelligent Saurian species, there is material that is highly worthwhile.

Style: 1 + .2 (layout) + .5 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .6 (readability) + .3 (product) = 3.4

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .7 (text) + .7 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .3 (system) = 3.9

Monsters of Myth and Legend (1984), Volume II (1989), Volume III (1992)

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(Greg Gordon and Neill Randall, volume I; Laurel Nicholson and John Keefe, volume II, Alan Hammack, volume III)

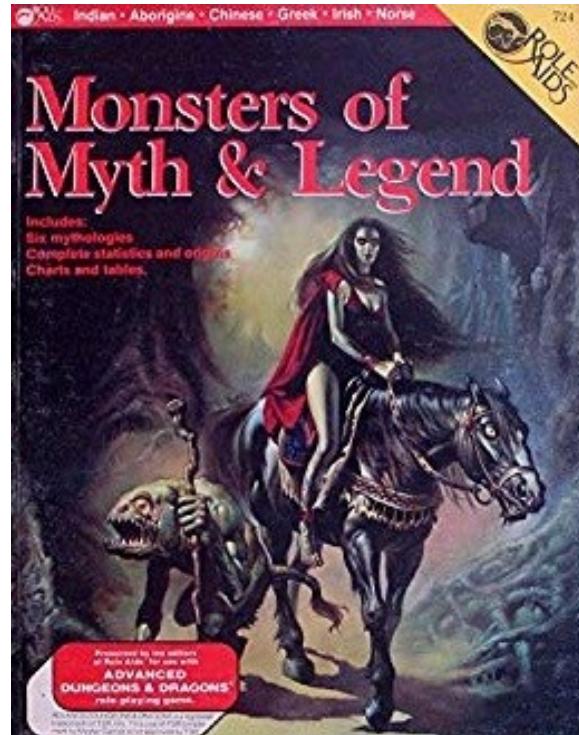
Introduction and Physical Product

Monsters of Myth and Legend was a three-part series of books produced by Mayfair Games under the Role Aids line, each of 96 pages, cardstock cover and with solid glue binding. The products were designed for use with Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, although the statistical blocs aren't an enormous feature of the creature descriptions and can be readily imported into any game system. As the title suggests each of the books covers various mythological creatures for legends according to ethnicity.

Each book has two column justified layout with serif text, reasonable layout, and with clear page numbers - the third book goes a step further and includes the chapter title on the footer of each page. The first and second books have a table of contents by alphabetic order and ethnic origin, whilst the third book has by ethnic origin alone. Quite famously, the first and second books have colour cover art by Boris Vallejo and the third by Dave Dorman; interior art is by Tenna Byerts and Robin Wood (Book One), Timothy D. Zon (Book II), and Steve Fiorella. In all cases the interior artwork is quite evocative and contextual, and moderately good in terms of technique and creativity in the first and third volume, but really quite poor in second (despite a deceptively awesome cover). It could be argued that perhaps the illustrators went a little too creative (or perhaps a bit ignorant) by the illustration of an Australian aborigine bugen enchanting a sword in the first volume.

Volume I

The first volume covers American ("American Indian" in the text), Australian Aborigine, Chinese, Greek, Irish, and Norse mythologies. Each monster of legend is described from anywhere from a third to more than a page, with three separate areas; a statistical bloc, designed for Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, a general description of the creature with some references to abilities in the game system, and a "legend", a story associated with the creature, often provided in narrative style. In this manner, some one-hundred and twenty-five monsters of myth and legend are described ranging from just eleven for the Irish (and in only four pages) to twenty-seven for the Chinese. "Irish" probably should have been extended to "Celtic" and "Norse" to "Scandinavian". On the positive side, what makes the volume so enjoyable is that the creatures selected are done so from their value of narrative interest to the encounter, and each ethnic collection is introduced with a core mythology of the culture. Unlike many monsters in various roleplaying games where the most interesting thing is the value as a combatative opponent in Monsters of Myth and Legend the game system supplements the monster for being interesting in its own right. The Coyote (from American mythology) is not just a statistical bloc to be defeated, but is described in terms of its personality, with appropriate and interesting special powers (in this case, the ability to Raise Dead and Fulfil Wish as a 20th level Cleric or Magic-User, respectively).



Even with source materials noted, it is to be expected that there are some inexact representations, especially when one engages in strong aggregations of very different cultures or across time. "Australian aborigine" is an obvious example and "Kurrijarra" is but one of many example representations of the Rainbow Serpent, in the singular and diety level

rather than the "Common" frequency provided for a mid-level monster. Or in the Chinese case, hardly a homogenous people, the Children of Chiyou is also prone to such difficulties, with the namesake having multiple origins, affiliations, and representations. A Calypso is 'Rare', although the text notes that only one is encountered in Greek legend. In a short book, one version has to be chosen of course, and sensitivity to alternative representations is recommended. But this aside there is little doubt of the fact that the monsters of myth and legend are of the most interesting collection, which does lead to one other problem; the overwhelming majority of creatures provided as of the rare, very rare, unique frequencies, whereas common and uncommon are less so. This is less of a criticism but more of an observation and a note to GMs that the encounters should reflect both these representations and seek out more common beings from core rules.

Volume II

The second volume take a fairly broad sweep of affairs with the ethnic groups of monsters of legend being Africa, Central and South America, The Eskimos, Japan, and the Middle-East. Distribution is again an issue, ranging from twenty from African mythology to nine from the Middle-East. In addition, the second volume makes a further differentiation between "deities" and "monsters", with a number of high-powered unique beings of less general utility, even if they make a useful indirect cultural and sociological contribution, and not really what the book says on the cover. The "Middle East" group in particular, already short on numbers, suffers from this with four of the nine entries not actually "monsters" but unique deities. Also, a number of genuine creatures (e.g., polar bear) are likewise included, rather than monsters as such. The broad sweep of cultures lumped under "Africa" is pretty extreme (especially considering that "Irish" was considered a single example in the previous book), and surely "Central and South America" could be differentiated by Aztec, Mayan, Incan whose cultures are legends are as different as the Celtic and Hellenic.

This said, all told there is some 75 monsters so described. The most interesting are, of course, the African and Eskimo, both of which there is relatively sparse RPG source material. This said, cultural biases and accuracy is not always a strong point, so use with caution. Poor Anansi, the famous were-spider of African lore is provided an alignment of Chaotic Evil and an "INSight" statistic of a mere 14. So much for being the liberator of the oppressed and the clever trickster. The less said of the comically-bad associated artwork the better, and it not even the worst example. Like the first volume each monster is provided a statistic block, a general description which includes game-system abilities, and a legendary story, and each ethnic group chapter is introduced with a mythological background. This is by no means as well-researched as the first text and tends towards unfairly stereotyping the cultures. For example; "The driving force that spawned many Eskimo legends and myths is fear. Eskimos fear everything... These fears are fanned by a taboo system". To say the least, this is a little inaccurate, ignoring the shamanic spiritualism to call upon helpful spirits or the prevalence of multi-soul beings.

Volume III

By the third volume the perspective of ethnic had tightened into something quite balanced. The ethnic groups covered are the Egyptian, Finnish, Indian, Oceanic, Persian, Roman, Slavic, Teutonic, and Tibetan. In addition, the index also specifies special items and new spells. This is pretty much a perfect balance between engaging in sweeps that are too broad (e.g., Africa) or too narrow (e.g., Irish) for a text of this size. From the collection the Egyptian has the smallest contribution with a mere ten monsters, of which eight are deities. In comparison some thirty Indian monsters are provided, of which only ten are deities. The Finnish collection is an interesting one as a significant number of Halde and Haltia are noted under deities when they are types of nature spirits. Also of significance in this volume is the appearance of a number of relative common monsters, such as aforementioned Finnish Haltia, Indian Rakshasa, Oceanic Con-tinh, Persian Daevas, Roman Geniuses (very common!), Slavik Banniks, Teutonic Kobolds, and Tibetan Lha.

Another evident feature of the third book is how the collection is relatively exotic. Certainly they include what one would assume to be fairly common ethnic groups in staple RPGs (Teutonic, Roman, Egyptian), but there's plenty here

that's pretty exotic in comparison and is presented reasonably well, although requisite caution is recommended again - as one example, the Indian goddess Kali is described as Chaotic evil and worshipped by the Thugee, until they were suppressed by British rule. This seems more based on a certain Indian Jones movie than an anthropological assessment. In reality, Kali fought against demons, and the thugee were bands of robbers, with no particular association with Kali worship. It is true however, that the British made quite a deal of suppressing the thugee, real or imagined. Also of some note is a general reduction in the column inches dedicated to each of the monsters, such is a function of having quite a few more in total. Also, the Legend section of each monster is significantly shorter as well.

Concluding Remarks

Overall the three volumes of Monsters of Myth and Legend are an extremely worthwhile, if significantly flawed, contribution to historical fantasy with a multi-ethnic orientation. The objective is of course commendable, and as a spur to further and more accurate research they are superb. However, as they are writ there are far too many concerns with matters of accuracy and bias for them to receive a strong recommendation. Inevitably, comparisons with similar Advanced Dungeons & Dragons products should be made; overall they are indeed better in most regards to say, the Monster Manual by at least suggesting some sense of separation of geographically dispersed groups, and to a mixed extent, Deities & Demigods. In part they do manage to capture some sense of the cultural outlooks, but nowhere as deep as they could have. In an ordered manner, one would recommend the first book highest, then the third, and the second last.

Style: 1 + .5 (layout) + .5 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .6 (readability) + .6 (product) = 4.0

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .6 (text) + .5 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .3 (system) = 3.5

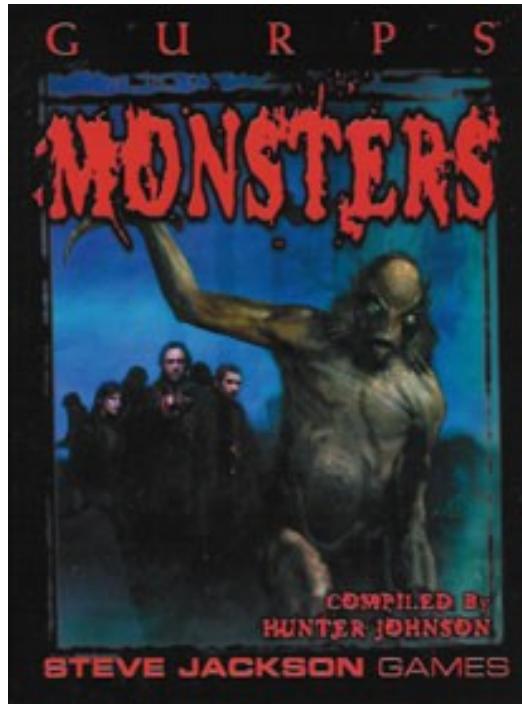
GURPS Monsters (2001)

(compiled by Hunter Johnson)

Introduction and Physical Product

GURPS Monsters is a compiled sourcebook of many "things vile and murderous" produced in the standard manner for third-edition line of sourcebooks; a solidly bound softcover, 128 pages in length. The cover has a version Gill-Man from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. The internal art, mainly in grey-scale, is invariably of good quality, and usually contextual, and yet also astoundingly without much in the way evocative creativity, which is pretty unforgivable given the subject matter, although there is sometimes an accompanying literary quote that serves as substitute. The "back-cover blurb" gives one a good impression of the content that follows: "Some creatures are tragically misunderstood - fearsome in appearance, but basically harmless, or even good. But the ones in this book are just plain rotten.. 48 of the meanest, vilest people, animals, and things to infest this (or any other world".

To structure these monsters, the book's chapters are divided into "A Mythological Menagerie", "The Cryptzo", "Legends of Literature", "Original Monsters", "Monsters & Monster Hunters", along with a brief introduction and bibliography. There's a one-page table-of-contents and index, the text is two-



column justified with a serif-font plus occasional side-bar, with chapter titles and page-numbers marked on each page. The introduction sets the criteria for GURPS Monsters; they must be unnatural to the setting (so excluding orcs, as they natural to the fantasy setting), excluding humans which are monstrous in their behaviour (see GURPS Villains), the monsters are horrific with no noble intentions, and the monster are all mythic in origin. The Phantom of the Opera is expressly an exception of the non-human rule, and I would have thought that Gill-man would also constitute being natural, misunderstood (especially the version in *The Shape of Water*). I wonder how it the Golem could be described as non-noble as well, given its existence is to protect Jews from the violence of the blood-libel.

Content

The opening chapter has eleven creatures from myth and legend, which has a pretty heavy bias from the Judeo-Egyptian-Hellenic origins, the Curupira from Brazil providing an interesting alternative. Even the mythological monsters can have their own biases, Amenhotep The Mummy is a Hollywood version. It serves as a good example, because the monster is pretty tough (at 380 points) but there are also a scaled-down version (at 125 points). Monsters, in addition to the stat-block, are provided biographical details, motivations, and encounter options, with the detail providing an explanation of why there is relatively few monsters in the book, with each monster receiving a couple of pages each. Encounter options and variations often provide examples and references to other books in the mighty and extensive library of GURPS tomes. Asterius the Minotaur, for example, has references to GURPS Places of Mystery, GURPS Voodoo, GURPS Greece, and GURPS In Nomine. A number of the monsters are also provided with a short biography of their own.

Monsters have, of course, appeared in prior GURPS publications and thankfully enough this text doesn't entirely replicate content that is found from elsewhere. So whilst the chapter on cryptzoology potentially would have the Loch Ness Monster, for example, there is instead a reference to GURPS Warehouse 23. Surprisingly, this doesn't take away too many of the great monsters of zoology; The Beast of Le Gévaudan is in the book, along with Bigfoot (albeit with reference to the previously published versions as The Abominable Snowman), which is one of a few North American derived cryptzoology monsters, which is perhaps a bit of an item of cultural anthropology in its own right. Although in the aid of Americo-Australian relations, the early 20th century hoax of The Jersey Devil (a kangaroo with attached claws and wings) certainly gains a bonus for being beautifully silly.

Arguably cryptzoology is the monster literature of the modern time, as it is typically pseudo-scientific as well. The literature chapter is more of the outright fictions, including the Grendel from Beowulf (but why isn't it from myth and legend?) and the Geryon from Dante's Inferno. There is also a few items from children's literature, as where would you be without The Big Bad Wolf? Sadly that reference doesn't include the more mature version expressed in the film, The Company of Wolves. As a remarkable 993 point character, Dracula is one of the most powerful characters in the book but still comes with a section on "Dracula Is Too Weak" for well-resourced and knowledgeable PCs (and is counterposed with "Dracula Is Too Strong"). A curious and amusing, inclusion in the literature section is "Shub-Internet" which appears in The Jargon Files; I guess that constitutes literature, too.

The chapter on contributor provided monsters includes possessing spirits via a brain-in-a-jar, a cartoon animated fox (think of Space Jam), an atomic lich, Gill-Man, a human-shaped swarm of bees, a writhing mass of tentacles with a maw, six humanoid monsters of various types, an alien composite humanoid, a giant ape, an undead dragon, an animated doll, and a blob. The atomic lich is probably the most frightening opponent in terms of various combat and magic abilities, has a horde of minions. The giant maw, pretty much an order of magnitude, is the most powerful character, points-wise (10,452). Disappointingly, none of the monsters really have interesting motivations; they're mindlessly following their nature, or insane, or power-hungry. The best is the undead dragon, which has a degree of tragedy to it.

The final chapter is "Monsters and Monster Hunters", which starts off by providing some guidelines for creating

monster characters. The suggestions are quite sensible, and include the sound advice "Monsters are other, and their twisted and hideous visages often match their psyches", which alas the book itself does not usually follow with any degree of complexity, if at all. Several archetypes are offered; antihero, beast, gentle giant, guardian, master, minion, recluse, stranger and victim, along with commentary on standard and new advantages and disadvantages (Extra Head for 25 points per head is quite a bargain!), and a nice advantage is Terror, that is, the character causes Fright Checks in others. Despite the chapter title, there isn't much in the way of Monster Hunters.

Conclusion

In many ways, GURPS Monsters is a standard third-edition GURPS book which belongs with the scores of others. It serves as both a reference for particular game system features, or it can serve as a sourcebook for a number of short campaigns where a particular monster is the focus - which is actually recommended. In other ways however it is a bit of a filler, including various beasts that should have been in more setting specific sourcebooks, and misses the mark in not really generating psychologically satisfying beings, even if they can present an interesting challenge as an opponent to be defeated, the storylines of the monsters is going to be quite thin. As a result, whilst there is a good deal of content that is presented here in an excellent format, a mixed positive recommendation can be given for GURPS Monsters; it is one of those books which I rate due to its individual components higher than I think of the whole.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .5 (art) + .3 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .7 (product) = 3.6

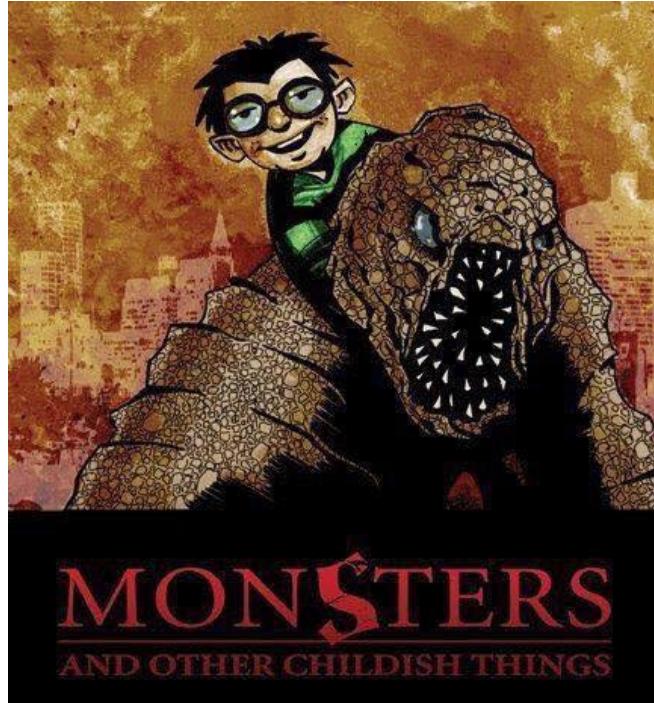
Substance: 1 + .4 (content) + .5 (text) + .4 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 3.7

Monsters and Other Childish Things (2010)

(Benjamin Baugh)

Introduction and Physical Product

Monsters and Other Childish Things is an RPG where the player-characters are children (a range from pre-school to senior high) with an extremely powerful monster as their bestest friend for all time and will get them into a lot of trouble, all the time. The book comes in a trade paperback form at 266 pages, although apparently there is also hardback at 192 pages. The game system is based on Greg Stolze's multiple-dice d10 One Roll Engine, which is quite proves quite adaptable in this setting. The book comes a bit of a variety of chapters but which can be broadly combined as an introduction, chapters for character generation, conflict, monsters, NPCs, and other campaign elements. The page layout has a nice faux-notebook style, which page numbers and chapter titles on each page, with the main weakness is a poor use of whitespace at times. The cartoon artwork was quite charming at times, and the writing style was informal and amusing. Even at this very high level, there is evidence of a quality game, both in terms of the theme and content.



It must also be mentioned there is an incredibly verbose introduction to roleplaying in the game, which is curious as it is pretty implausible that this is an entry-point for people into the hobby. It does contain some good elements as one would hope for the page-count that it covers, but it is surprising that proof-readers and pre-publication reviewers didn't suggest that the author pull back a little.

Character Generation

Child characters in Monsters et al., have three main groups of characteristics; Stats, Skills, and Relationships. The Stats are "kinds" of things that the character is good at, skills are more specialist abilities and knowledges, and Relationships are the strength of commitment towards others. The Stats are described in physical terms, rather like a classic small-press RPG called "All-Adventure Action Roleplay Game! (AAARG!)" from the 90s; Feet (for moving your body), Guts (for toughness), Hands (for fine dexterity), Face (for cool and clever), and Brains (for mental retention). All Stat dice start at 1 and up to 10 more dice can be distributed. The game provides three base skills associated with each Stat, so for Feet there's P.E., Kicking, and Dodging, for Guts there's Wind, Courage, and Wrestling, for Hands there's Shop, Punching, and Blocking and so forth. It is possible to include different Skills associated with a Stat, such as the suggested "Mad L33T Hacking Skillz", although there should have been some discussion of awareness of the narrow versus broad selections. All Skills start at 0 and some 15 dice can be added, whilst 6 dice are for Relationships, with 1 additional die added a Monster Bond. Characters come with a background as well; a Name, an Age, a Favorite Thing, a Bad Thing they did, and a Good Thing they did. Character advancement is based on experience points, as determined by the GM; one experience point will buy a Skill die, two a Relationship die, three a Stat die, and five for a new die on a monster's hit location. In particularly dramatic circumstances these can be spent in-game, but are usually reserved for the "What I Did During Summer Vacation" phase.

Monster Bonding is a special relationship that a kid character has with their Monster. The starting level is 1, but as it increases there is an increasing mental connection between the two, reaching levels of telepathy and ultimately "one being with two bodies". The disadvantage is if the monster gets hurt, so does the character. The main features of Monsters is that they're alien, they try their best to look after their kids, they are very good at hiding in a movie-like fashion (a character's truck-sized monster could shrink to the size of a toy truck, for example), they cannot die (except by eaten by another monster), or be stopped (except by another monster), and they are aware of other monsters. Monster generation is based around 10 hit locations, with a maximum of four locations and a maximum of four numbers applied to the location (from 10). Each hit location number has five dice linked to it. Each location (an eyestalk, a maw, a mass of tentacles), starts with one special monster quality and can have additional qualities at a cost of one die each. Qualities are types of attack, defense, or general utility (e.g., See Invisible), and can include things like especially harmful damage (Gnarly), increased speed (Wicked Fast) and so forth. Monsters also have a Favourite Thing, which can serve as both incentive for the player and an opportunity for trouble with the GM.

Game System

The game system starts with a deceptively simple Stat plus Skill in d10s, and try to acquire matches. Any number of matches is a success; the number of dice is the width and the number on the matching dice is the "height" of the success. For example, a roll that ends up with three dice with a five, would have a width of three and a height of five. Whilst the width indicates the raw power in terms of success, the height indicates the degree of finesse. Which is more important depends on the circumstances; a 100-yard rush on the track would depend on raw power, whilst in a crowded street it would be height. It's an important difference and one that is not sufficiently explored in RPG mechanics (some alternatives are to use a different stat plus skill combination, or change the degree of randomness). In addition to Stat plus Skill, Relationships can optionally be added to the d10 pool (such as Mom 4d). If a character fails after adding the Relationship dice, they suffer a Shock to the relationship and it is temporarily reduced by 1; if it is reduced to 0, the relationship is in a Crisis and can be permanently reduced. Quality Time with the person of the relationship can recover Shock points, which can become a contest when someone is actively trying to prevent the repair.

Conflicts are carried out in three-second rounds. An initiative system is based on declaration of actions from lowest

Attention plus Out-Thinking pool to highest. Skill and stat is rolled first, and after this, the player may add additional dice by drawing upon the Relationships, where appropriate. After this, from highest width to lowest, results are resolved. Each Stat is linked to a location, indicated by the height of an attack, and damage is applied according to the width of the roll, and note that various mental or social attacks are just as capable at reducing a character to a ball of tears as a physical punches. A two-dice damage to the Hands reduces that Stat until healed, for example. It shouldn't always be interpreted too literally in terms of the physical location, but it does indicate a reduction in capability. A successful defense roll (e.g., dodge) can reduce any attack die from a set that has an equal or lower width or height. If the width of the defense roll is equal to or greater than the attacker's but the height isn't good enough, the result is a flinch, allowing for the location to be shifted, based on the difference in the width. Damage is based on width minus one, and is differentiated between Shock and Scars; shock damage is being scared, or punched, scar damage is being terrified or stabbed. Shock damage is recovered at the end of scene; scarring damage requires professional attention. A particularly interesting feature comes into play with monster conflict; typically they withdraw when any one of their hit locations is reduced to zero dice from damage. However the winner of such a conflict takes away a bit of the defeated, acquiring permanent die or ability.

Campaign Resources

Monsters etc., provides an extensive collection of GM resources to work with. The main impetus in the game is monster conflicts (because monsters usually end up in a conflict with other monsters), and various relationships. The game provides three broad age categories to set games in from elementary, junior high, and senior high, each with their own issues, thematic content etc. There is also an impressive list of antagonist NPCs and monsters that can be introduced in play at appropriate times, with their famous quote and PC point-of-view, the real deal behind the persona, and their modus operandi, and how they appear at various grade levels, along with their statistical information. These include such delightful souls as The Creepy Guy, The Excruciator (a teacher turned monster), the Mad Science Teacher, the MIB, and so forth. Each of these characters is well-described and have sufficient interesting abilities and personalities that the descriptions themselves perform the role of being an "adventure seed" in their own right. On a less powerful level the "everybody else" NPC list includes all the unfortunate adults who aren't antagonists or aren't monsters; regular teachers, school bullies, the gym coach, the local geek, your crush etc. The various NPCs are provided their own, non-standard skills, so the Excruciator has Hit Without Leaving a Mark +4, the Geek has Dungeon Master +3, whereas Your Crush has a 3 levels of Relationship with Somebody Other Than You.

A set of sample "campaign jumpstarts" is provided. A range of themes, default grade level, plot hooks etc is provided before diving into the succession of scenarios which make ample use of the aforementioned antagonists and everybody else collection. One is based around Pluto, California, which "went from a sleepy, comfortably run-down cottage community to a more popular beach town, and came into its own as the center of weirdness, scandal, class rivalry, and sensational murder on the American West Coast", because that's the right sort of setting for a game like this. Another is an the issues surrounding an Extreme Monster Fighting League. All in all, there's a plenty of background material in these to provide the impetus towards a single-session of play - albeit without much in terms of narrative direction - and whilst they are good quality settings, the GM will have do plenty of work.

Conclusion

Monsters etc is an attractive and well-executed game with some good, albeit edgy, thematic qualities. Its use of the ORE is quite workable, although a lot more effort could have been spent on workmanship rather than just being funny. The campaign resources are impressive, but do require a fair bit of work before being ready for actual play. One aspect that was not really well developed was the aging system, and it would have been worthwhile to tie increasing experience with a gradual distancing between the child and monster (such as the loss of innocence in Little Fears). Overall however, this is a very worthwhile addition to one's collection.

Style: 1 + .6 (layout) + .6 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .7 (product) = 4.2

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .4 (text) + .8 (fun) + .5 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 4.3

TUNNELS & TROLLS 5.5e BESTIARY P-U

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, 22, 31, and 41. Since these articles were first drafted 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.

** 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 wereform. 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.

Pech

MR 110 Dice 12 Adds 55

Natural Weapons: pechs attack unarmed usually by grabbing and crushing, or slapping with their hands. Each hand does 6d.

Natural Armour 2 tough hide Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 65 (x6.5) IQ 7 (0.5) LK 12 (x1) CON 110 (x11) DEX 15 (x1.5) CHR 7 (x0.5) SP 12 (x1)

Height x0.5 Weight x0.5

Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 150

Pronounced ‘pekh’ the ‘ch’ is as in loch. Pechs are short black haired leather skinned humanoids with huge black eyes and oversized hands and feet. Pechs see as well as a human in daylight by the dimmest light but are blinded by daylight, their eyes recover in the dark. Pech are the fairy builders. Typically, their method is to cut all the stone to shape in the quarry then carry and erect the building in what seems like a miraculously short time. Their great strength aids them in this work since each pech can lift a half tonne of stone. Most Pech live within tunnels and windowless towers within fairy mounds. They speak the language of elves but aren’t good conversationalists since their minds are largely preoccupied with stone and building. In fact they seem to be like idiot savants of architecture, socially inept, not too bright, but able build fairy castles of astounding beauty.

*Pixie

MR 9 Dice 1 Adds 5

Natural Weapons: unarmed 1d Natural Armour 0 Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 4 (x0.5) IQ 13 (x1.5) LK 17 (x1.5) CON 9 (x1) DEX 17 (x1.5) CHR 12 (x1) SP 12 (x1)

Size x1/3 Weight x3.5% Starting Age: 3d+40 Old at: 180

By virtue of a bitter civil war centuries ago the rebellious pixies had their own country before the coming of the dwarves. They still expect the old treaties to be respected and no elves or winged fairies to enter the land the pixies once owned outright. (see Briggs). Pixies are often rogues but rarely wizards since the Guild is viewed as an elf institution. Pixie wizards are outcasts among their own kind. Traditionally pixies wear green as camouflage in woods and verdant country but if out socially they consider it polite to wear a bright red hat. They are red headed with pointy ears and noses. Pixies are nocturnal and can see twice as far as humans from any source of light. They squint in sunlight but are otherwise unaffected. Pixies are experts at magical guerrilla warfare and typical pixie rogue tactics is to employ mirage and conceal to way-lay enemies and ambush them. Since these spells are so common in pixie society a pixie rogue in her homeland can buy these as if a wizard.

Quintessential (Magic Storm)

MR spell level squared see below. Dice determine from MR Adds determine from MR

Natural Weapons: Nil Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks no physical attacks, spells Special Defences cannot be harmed by physical weapons or attacks. This includes physical and normal energy (eg. flame) created by spells Mana bolt and other pure magical energy attacks add damage to MR. Only curses and other direct magical attacks work.

ST 0 IQ 10 see below LK equal to half MR CON equal to MR DEX 0 CHR 0 (x0.25)

SP equal to MR Size 1 cubic yard per MR Weight 0

There is much debate among arcane scholars whether the untamed magical energies released sometimes in magical accidents are an entity or merely a phenomena. Those that favour the theory of an entity call these beings quintessentials, theorising they elementals comprised of the fifth element; quintessence the very stuff of being. Those favouring the 'storm' theory claim the effects are due to a leak of raw magic discharging and dissipating. A few have claimed to have detected a tormented confused mind in a magic storm using wizards speech but telepathic evidence is subjective at best. Quintessentials are invisible but if a detect magic is cast they appear as a 'blob' of insubstantial magic that can extend thick pseudo pods (1 yard diameter) and pass through ordinary matter. A referee using miniatures can represent this with a 1 yard square piece of paper for every 1MR. A quintessential is always hostile and concentrates its attacks on the most magical character present; first wizards, then magical creatures including winged fairies, then rogues that know spells. Those that hold the quintessential is an entity say this is because the physical world is painful for a creature of pure quintessence and it lashes out against those most likely to be responsible for its predicament. Those who don't believe there is any intelligence have complex laws showing basically that like attracts like and the magic discharge is attracted to magic users. The quintessential casts spells to attack. Ranges are calculated from the nearest edge of the cloud. The highest level spell a quintessential can use is equal to square root of MR. Magic spell cost is taken from the CON and MR but does not recuperate with time. A quintessential eventually burns all of its own mana in a frenzy of destruction. Since not all magical accidents summon a magic storm and it is invisible to normal senses the first attack is often a surprise. It may take some time for characters to figure out what is attacking them, wizards should be allowed a first level IQ roll each round to represent them recalling the debate over quintessentials from their formal training.

The magical accident that created the quintessential could have been a miss-cast spell (rarely), a failed magical experiment to create a new spell or item, destruction of a magic item or any other magically charged event. The MR of the quintessential created is determined from the highest spell level involved (assign spell level equivalents to magic items etc.).

#Rat

MR 4 Dice 1 Adds 2 Natural Weapons: bite 1d Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 2 (x0.25) IQ 3 (x0.5) LK 24 (x2.5) CON 4 (x1/2) DEX 2 (x0.25) CHR 2 (x0.25) SP 15 (x1.5)

Length x0.1 Weight x1/190 Starting Age: 1 year Old at: 2 years

#Rat, Huge

MR 8 Dice 1 Adds 4 Natural Weapons: bite 1d Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 4 (x0.5) IQ 3 (x0.5) LK 22 (x2) CON 8 (x1) DEX 2 (x0.25) CHR 3 (x0.25) SP 15 (x1.5)
Length x0.25 Weight x1/12 Starting Age: 1 year Old at: 2 years

#Raven

MR 4 Dice 1 Adds 2

Natural Weapons: peck 1d Natural Armour 4 feathers

Special Attacks may use a called shot to attack eyes. Special Defences nil

ST 2 (x0.25) IQ 3 (x0.5) LK 26 (x2.5) CON 4 (x0.5) DEX 0 (x0) CHR 5 (x0.5) SP 20 (x2) half this on land
Length x1/4 Weight x1/100 Starting Age: 1 year Old at: 10 years

*Satyr

MR 12 Dice 2 Adds 6

Natural Weapons: normal unarmed attack 1d and a butt for 1d

Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 15 (x1.5) IQ 9 (x1) LK 15 (x1.5) CON 12 (x1) DEX 10 (x1)
CHR 8 (x1) SP 12 (x1)

Height x2/3 Weight x1/3 Starting Age: 3d+8 Old at: 40

Also known as korreds and fawns, satyrs are the natural mates of nymphs. The offspring of such unions are nymphs if female and satyrs if male. All satyrs are male. Satyrs often take lovers from the other good kin any offspring of such unions are full satyrs if male and sterile half breeds if female. Satyrs may be used as player characters in some campaigns. Satyrs lack the necessary discipline for serious magical studies in the crucial years of youth and so may not be wizards. Satyrs may be rogues or warriors.

Skeleton, Animated

MR 9 Dice 3 Adds 10

Natural Weapons: normal unarmed attack for 1d, but usually armed. Natural Armour: hard bone 5

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 15 (x1.5) IQ 1 (x0.1) LK 15 (x1.5) CON 9 (x1) DEX 15 (x1.5)
CHR 0 (x0) SP 10 (x1)

Height x1 Weight x 1/8 Starting Age: na Old at: na



Human skeletons given movement by sorcery who unthinkingly obey the wizard who raised them.

#Stag

MR 46 Dice 5 Adds 23 Natural Weapons: antlers 3d and two kicks 1d each Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 36 (x3.5) IQ 3 (x ½) LK 20 (x2) CON 30 (x3) DEX 0 (x0) CHR 6 (x0.5) a social animal but aggressive toward other males and perceived threats. Impressive to look on. SP 20 (x2)

Length x 1.25 (including neck, 2/3 this at shoulder) Weight x3 Starting Age: 1d6 Old at: 15

A large male deer (such as a red deer, wapiti or shou) during the antlered season. Without antlers a male deer is called a hummel and attacks only with its two kicks. Were stags always have their antlers when in deer form. Female deers generally have no antlers (kicks only) MR26, ST26, CON26, length x2/3 and weight x1 but are otherwise rated as per the males. Some species of were stags can roar like lion, others make a call like a deep horn.

***Therianthrope**

MR 10 Dice 2 Adds 5

Natural Weapons: bite/peck/etc. 2d. In an action a therianthrope can make regular unarmed attacks as a human (1d) or use a weapon instead of a bite. Natural Armour: Nil

Special Attacks: Nil Special Defences: Nil

ST 10* (x1) IQ 10 (x1) LK 10* (x1) CON 10 (x1) DEX 8 (x 8/10) CHR 10 (x1) SP 10 (x1)

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

* Either ST or LK is 18 (x2) pick one based on the physical characteristics of the animal whose head the therianthrope has. Alternatively, both ST and LK could be 15 (x1.5). Therianthropes are as diverse as humans major NPCs should be detailed with attributes reminiscent of the animal whose head they have.

Therianthropes are presented in some detail because they would make an excellent player character kin in most non-European settings. A therianthrope is a human with the head and neck of an animal. Such beings have been depicted the world over since humans painted the earliest rock art, though they seemed to have vanished from Europe in ancient times. In my campaign world therianthropes are rare in most parts of the world, extinct in the 'West' and fairly common in the South (Africa). The animal head and neck is always as large as a human head and neck combined, so an ibis therianthrope has a larger head than an actual ibis i.e. a child sized head and a proportional ibis neck. An elephant therianthrope has a smaller head than an elephant and hardly any neck. The head of a therianthrope provides a compromise between animal and human senses including colour vision and perhaps a single acute sense. The body of the therianthrope while totally human has a build and appearance reminiscent of the animal, an elephant therianthrope will be large and heavy set while a cat therianthrope will be smaller, lithe and graceful. However, the capabilities of their bodies and limbs are always within the human range, non-human abilities are limited to those few provided by the head.

Therianthrope diets contain a mix of human and animal foods. Despite bestial heads flexible tongues and larynxes allow them to speak human languages but with a 'accent'. In personality such creatures are basically human but tend to have personality traits reminiscent of the animal whose head they have. So human are they in personality that they fit in well in human societies accustomed to their odd looks and they are attracted to humans (when a human and therianthrope, or two therianthropes of different heads, or a therianthrope and a were, breed the offspring has an even chance of being either kin).

Therianthropes generally get on well with weres of the same animal, sometimes forming mixed communities. As magical creatures therianthropes are often rogues or wizards and have their fair share of warrior-wizards also. However, their partially animal nature has less aptitude for tools and weapons so few are pure warriors or artisan civilians (though no character type is actually banned). The standard rules to prevent a therianthrope from making a bite and a weapon attack together in one action it is noted here again for clarity.

Each breed of therianthrope also has one minor special ability determined by the head. Typical abilities include:

- Smell/taste saves at one level lower.
- Vision saves at one level lower.
- Hearing saves at one level lower.
- Night vision like a cat, able to see double usual distance in dim light but still blinded by total darkness.
- Poisonous bite, the venom adds 1d damage if the attack hits and gets past armour.
- Elephant's trunk, treat as an arm of DX x½, ST x1/3.
- Echolocation like a bat. You use sound to 'see' even in total darkness (treat as colour blind) but enough of the squeaks or clicks you need to make to 'see' in this way are audible by humans and others to give your own location away, sneaking saves are impossible in quiet areas and two levels harder if there is background noise.
- Sense of direction like a migratory bird. An internal 'compass' so you always know which way is north and never get 'turned around'. This is useful in mazes but does not allow a character to automatically retrace their

steps.

*Troll, Young

MR 36 Dice 4 Adds 18 Natural Weapons: Tough clawed hands 1d each, bite 2d Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 30 (x3) IQ 10 (x1) LK 10 (x1) CON 30 (x3) DEX 10 (x1) CHR -20 (x-2) SP 10 (x1)

Height x2 Weight x4 Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 200

Trolls are tall but long limbed so mass less than other creatures of the same height. Some referees may allow troll PCs. Trolls grow sporadically throughout their lives in response to stress. Larger trolls can have much higher MR's and most of the additional Adds are devoted to STR. Trolls are a highly variable kin and the extra dice from higher MR's can be added to any of the natural weapons, one may have enormous tusks and other massive fists etc. Height of older trolls will be at least inches equal to square root of STR times 25, and mass at least ST squared divided by two.



Troll, Young Slave

MR 26 Dice 3 Adds 13

Natural Weapons: Tough clawed hands 1d each, bite 1d

Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 30 (x3) IQ 5 (-) LK 5 (-) CON 26 (x3) DEX 10 (x1)

CHR 0 (-) SP 10 (x1)

Height x2 Weight x4 Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 200

One legacy of the fallen Dwarven Empire in my campaign is a large number of trolls in slavery. The attributes above describe a troll youth born and bred into slavery and ready for market. A troll slave is meek, servile creature compared to the freedom and savagery of 'wild' trolls. Such a troll slave is a valuable commodity bringing about 710gp at auction (see auxillary characters 3.7 and my house rules on this section).

Troll, Large

MR 72 Dice 8 Adds 36

Natural Weapons: Tough clawed hands 3d each, bite 2d.

Distribution of dice between claws and bite can vary.

Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 62 (x6) IQ 10 (x1) LK 14 (x1.5) CON 72 (x7) DEX 14

(x1.5) CHR -30 (x-3) SP 10 (x1)

Height (16'5") x3 Weight (1922) x11

Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 200

I have prepared a number of trolls at different sizes to challenge any level of party. This size is still fairly common, larger sizes than this will probably be encounters of note with unusual specimens. An 8th level troll character might look something like this.

Troll, Huge

MR 126 Dice 13 Adds 63

Natural Weapons: Tough clawed hands 5d each, bite 3d. Distribution of dice between claws and bite can vary. Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 80 (x8) IQ 10 (x1) LK 15 (x1.5) CON 126 (x12.5) DEX 16 (x1.5) CHR -40 (x-4) SP 10 (x1)

Height (18'7") x3.5 Weight (3200) x19

Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 200

An example of older more experienced troll similar to what a 20th level troll character might look like.

Troll, Gigantic

MR 250 Dice 26 Adds 125

Natural Weapons: Tough clawed hands 8d each, bite 10d. Distribution of dice between claws and bite can vary. Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 130 (x20.5) IQ 10 (x1) LK 15 (x1.5) CON 250 (x25) DEX 16 (x1.5) CHR -70 (x-7) SP 12 (x1)

Height (23'8") x4.25 Weight (8450) x50

Starting Age: 3d+50 Old at: 200

An example of a huge ancient troll. Such enormous specimens are thankfully very rare.

*Urchin

Pixie form

MR 9 Dice 1 Adds 5

Natural Weapons: unarmed 1d Natural Armour 0

Special Attacks nil Special Defences nil

ST 4 (x0.5) IQ 13 (x1.5) LK 17 (x1.5) CON 8 (x1) DEX 17 (x1.5) CHR 12 (x1) SP 12 (x1)

Size x1/3 Weight x3.5% Starting Age: 3d+40 Old at: 180

Hedgehog form

MR 4 Dice 1 Adds 2

Natural Weapons: bite 1d Natural Armour 2 and unarmed attackers receive 1 damage. Protection raised to 4 if roll into a ball.

Special Attacks nil Special Defences
nil

ST 2 (x0.5) IQ 13 (x1.5) LK 17 (x1.5)

CON 8 (x1) DEX 0 (x0) CHR 8 (x1)

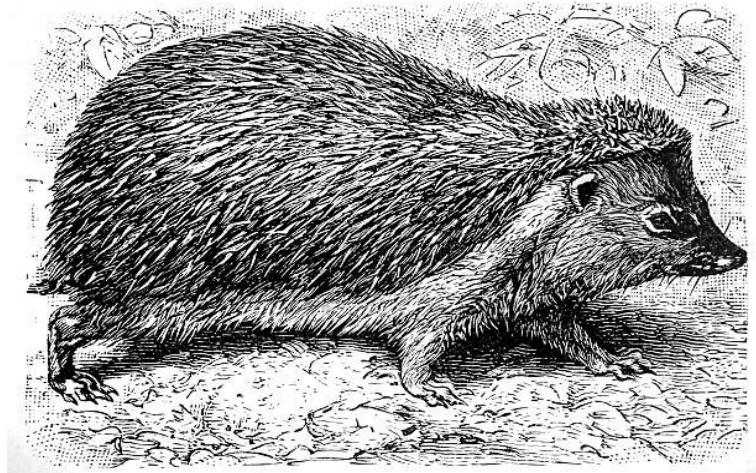
SP 7 (x0.75)

Length x0.1 Weight x 1/150

An urchin is a pixie ‘were-hedgehog’.

They live among normal pixies and openly use their shape shifting ability.

All the notes on pixies apply to urchins.



TRAVELLER 5.1 REVIEW (PART B)

by Karl Brown

A little history

In issue 22 I wrote a partial review of the then new 5th edition of Traveller (aka Traveller 5 or T5) concentrating on character generation. The T5 core rules cover as much ground as an entire game line for other systems; therefore, to properly review T5 will take a series of articles. The idea was to work through the book actually putting the numerous generation systems to the test and in the process create a new setting for the T5 rules. This is the belated second article in the series. Though created for T5, the characters presented here have good back-compatibility to Traveller ‘Classic’ and T4.

T5 was poorly received by many reviewers in 2013 but I suspect most of these had read the book but not tried out the various systems. Some of the criticisms were well deserved but I believed that T5 was a ‘diamond in the rough’. However, I needed a few kludges and tweaks as I worked through character generation. Have these issues been fixed? As of June 2019 a PDF of an updated version, ‘Traveller 5.10’, has been released (T5.10?). If you bought T5 then the PDF of T5.10 is a free upgrade.

Farhome Sector

“...the Galaxy is roughly a thousand times larger: there are literally a thousand equivalents to Charted Space that remain unexplored and untamed. The Traveller system provides two paths forward: travels within Charted Space with its full, rich background and structure, or travels beyond the limits of Charted Space to truly unexplored territory. ... The Traveller rules system provides everything players (and referees) need: rules for nearly every encounter, situation, sophont species, equipment, starship, world, and strange situation.” T5.1 Book 3 page 9.

I set out to test this goal.

The Farhome Sector is far from Traveller’s canonical Charted Space setting, 8.2 kiloparsecs away to be exact (26745 light years). There are numerous intelligent species in the sector including a branch of humanity presumably transplanted there by the mysterious Ancients tens of thousands of years ago. The highest echelons of the Imperium government are aware of this distant branch of humanity but their proximity to the terrifying ‘Denizens’ and inevitable contact makes the existence of the Farhome Sector humans a high-level state secret. PCs could be natives, or an accident with the faster-than-light drive could find travellers from Charted Space among the unfamiliar worlds of Farhome.

What you get

This time around rather than T5’s single phonebook sized hardcover, T5.1 has been split into a slip case set of three volumes mirroring the contents of the original pamphlet sized ‘black books’ of Classic Traveller from 1977 except bigger (280 to 304 pages each). The three books are “Characters and Combat”, “Starships”, and “Worlds and Adventures”. As with T5, these represent a very complete game line’s worth of content. Also like T5, despite the huge page count the number of generation tables, diagrams, etc. keeps the word count within a readable range. Each book is about the size of the D&D 5e Player’s Handbook or one of the core books of the GURPS 4e Basic Set. A more practical size than the giant ‘phonebook’ of 2013. The sturdy slipcase is black decorated with the red Sunburst symbol of the Imperium and a red line. The books are black hardcovers decorated with a thin red line and white font reminiscent of the original 1977 Traveller booklets. The pages are thick quality paper and the interior printing crisp greyscale. The solid construction of the books should survive years of game table abuse. Overall, the set makes a classy looking and satisfying object.

The PDFs have bookmarks. Illustrations that are greyscale in the printed books have muted colours in the PDFs. As a

Kickstarter backer I received the PDFs in a USB in Traveller colours that also contained the core rules for several previous editions of Traveller.

There is a table of contents covering all three books and each book has a list of charts and page numbers. There is now an index at the end of each book, this solves many of the issues I had using the 2013 version. However, the indexes for Book 2 and Book 3 are inaccurate. For both books add 7 to the page numbers given in the indexes. The interior art has a mix of illustrations, colour and greyscale, harvested from previous editions and simple line art along the same lines as T5. The colour plates of starships from 2013 version are missing.

This article

As originally planned, I will test-drive and rate each chapter. To start off I'll look at the chapters reviewed in my 2013 article and see if they have improved the issues I spotted in 2013. Then I'll finish the review of the Characters and Core Concepts sections.

Improvements

Almost all the issues I had with the first few chapters in my 2013 review have been fixed. Only two remain: The Knowledge <Career> and Knowledge <World> the character has are still not mentioned during character generation; they are first mentioned in the skills chapter much later in the book (page 134 book 1). Additionally, every character has a hobby (page 133 Book 1).

The design and presentation is now much clearer. The writing now seems to be less cold than it was and more enjoyable to read though still a little cold overall.

After the rather inspirational introductory sections, the new version still has the rather dull basic information section at the start. However, the material on dice and probability has been moved to an appendix at the end of Book 1. This chapter is now less of a slog to get through.

In my earlier review I suggested a number of kludges and tweaks. Tweaks were not judgements on the game, they were just ways to adjust minor details to taste. Kludges were to patch over where T5 failed to give you needed information. The kludges were few and minor and they all have been fixed.

The abbreviated, and flawed, homeworld generation system has been removed. Homeworlds can be selected from a list given for the Spinward Marches or another list provided by the referee (after they have read and used Book 3). Either way the worlds have full statistics and are not missing law level and tech level as was the case in the deleted system. Though not needed for generation, if you want to know what your homeworld was like you need to skip forward to Books 2 and 3 to interpret the homeworld numbers including what level of technology.

Character generation remains largely random. However, a boxed text reads:

"Create the Character you want to play with friends. Pick and choose abilities that are important and interesting. Use randomness for the rest. (with appreciation to John Wick)".

This approach will suit some groups; in others players will abuse the privilege and create super-characters. My tweak from issue 22 to give players limited ability to alter results and create the character concepts they want to play will still be desirable for some groups. The tweak is:

Write out this list of numbers: 1, 1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 4, 5, 5, 6, 6. Whenever one or more dice are rolled in character generation one or more of these dice can be replaced with a number from this list. Each number on the list is used once then crossed out. This system works best when a player has three or less modest goals such as an explorer with her own scout ship or a strong marine veteran.

After generating Characteristics and homeworld the next step is education. The tables for education have been redesigned and are clearer than they were. For example '(star)ship skills' are clearly listed right there on the page rather than elsewhere in the book. In 2013 I found the presentation of skills confusing; for some skills the first level provides only a limited sub-skill called a 'Knowledge' and this was not flagged or explained at all during character generation. In this new version the Education section explains this and provides lists of knowledges within each of the affected

skills.

As in 2013 every career has its own page of tables but the career specific checklists are still on a separate page. No improvement on this quibble. At the end of their careers characters muster out to determine what they own. It is still entirely possible to create a character who owns nothing so my tweak from Issue 22 may still be used by some groups. However, when characters receive pensions and other benefits has been clarified, the first payment is before play starts so there will be fewer paupers now. It is unclear if income from land grants is a benefit paid at the start of the year, I'd err towards consistency and say yes. The writing describing land grants for exploring scouts is unclear until you flick back and read about land grants on page 40; this page should have been referenced. I'm not sure how to implement the rule. It is clear now which ships are loans and which are owned by the PCs. As written characters begin with few possessions but possibly a lot of money. Some groups may want to allow characters to buy gear before starting play, though I gather this is not how Mr Miller plays:

"Weapons are acquired in the course of adventures. While the simplest course of action would seem to be simply buying specific items, weapon acquisition can occur as characters travel." Book 1 page 235.

Most equipment is not described until Book 3. There are statistics for *hundreds* types of guns and armour later Book 1. Still not included in the character generation checklists, as I would have preferred, but now given its own section and explanatory text Background Information tables provide some details of the character's previous life in their chosen career. The procedures for Background Information, such as Secrets, is now clearly stated. Life Pursuits, hobbies and interests, are still separated from character generation where they really belong. Life pursuits are now linked to the experience systems as I expected.

We are family

We have now re-reviewed the materials I looked at in Issue 22 and are now ready to try new chapters of the book. Next up, we are presented with some intriguing alternate origins for characters including relatives of existing characters, clones, chimeras, and synthetics (manufactured organisms). To test-drive these options I will create a characters related to my character of Issue 22:

Marquis Jaim Joohrah.

98C78D (Strength, Dexterity, Endurance, Intelligence, Education, Social Status)

Skills: Programmer1, Leader2, Liason1, Spacecraft ACS2, Wheeled1, Pilot0, Drive0, Seafarer0, Career Noble4, World Glor1, World Imbar6, World Lanth1.

Gear: Life Insurance 2, C4+1, StarPass.

Each new character will follow different educational and vocational paths so we can test more options available in character generation.

The **Genetics** chapter enables the creation of blood relatives and the game has a simple but clever mechanic to ensure related characters have similar characteristics. First, we are going to create the matriarch of Jaim's highborn family. From Issue 22 we already have Jaim's 'genetics', 3661 for Strength, Dexterity, Endurance, and Intelligence. Randomly determining which genes came from Jaim's mother we discover three of the mother's genes '661'. Rolling a d6 and adding to each of these we get 9A2 for those characteristics. The 'A'? Traveller substitutes letters for numbers over 9, A is 10. From Jaim's Social standing of A before his career we can determine his mother had social standing A+1= B. We use 2d6 for the remaining characteristics. So the mother has 39A247B. The rest of character generation proceeds as per usual. See my article in Issue 22 for a review of character generation. After I finished character generation Lady Zeltha was still only 32 years old, too young to be Jaim's mother. I considered arbitrarily adding one skill per year but in the end I have decided Lady Zeltha has spent a LOT of time in cryogenics chambers.

Traveller character generation provides numerous bits of a character's backstory. I interpreted Zeltha's into the following backstory: Born into minor nobility Zeltha of Glor attended Law School at The Blue Institute. However, despite getting an honours degree, she was a dull student and only really graduated by leaning on her family's status. She is in fact quite dim. Realising she couldn't make it as a lawyer she sought adventure and found it in Glor's

Intelligence Service (GIS). Her first undercover mission was undercover as an army major on a primitive world where she learned to ride beasts and provided misleading information to foreign agents. On a poorly thought out whim she left GIS and was soon recruited by criminal gang. Never caught by the law, her position in society was used to get the con artists access to fellow nobles and she posed as a merchant for a while. These schemes made her very rich. She met Jaim's father during her time moving in noble circles serving on the Ad-hoc Committee on Exotic Super Novae and her gang instituted the Volnint Scandal to cover her theft of funds. She hopes to one day own an estate on the remote paradise world of Volnint and retire there. To fund this retirement she has obtained the coordinates of a fabled graveyard of ancient ships she hopes to ransack. Ironically, she is dedicated to rooting out corruption in the Gastmal Megacorporation; she believes it is one thing to con the rich but quite another to embezzle from ordinary shareholders and exploit workers.

You could use Zeltha as a PC or NPC.

Lady Zeltha of Glor at 32 years (biological age).

79A2AB

Knowledge Grav-1, Advocate-2, Tactics-1, Knowledge Smallcraft-1, Knowledge Spacecraft ACS-1, Knowledge Rider-1, Language (D'hor)-2, Leader-2, Vac suit-1, Actor-1, Trader-1, Knowledge Agent-1, Knowledge Rogue-2, World Knowledge Glor-2, World knowledge Volnint-1, World knowledge Imbar-1, Hobby Swim-0

Gear: Commendation, 2x Starpass, Wafer Jack. 7000 000Cr, 10 ship shares (a free trader, a yacht, and a scout ship), a small rock with strange engraved markings.

Life Pursuits: Life of Leisure Social Standing + Carouse = 12

Space Salvage: Endurance + Vac suit = 12

Investigative Journalist (Zeltha's hobby pursuit) Intelligence + Author = 12

After the chapter on Genetics is a two-page chapter on **Chimeras**. This presents a rather 1970's view of genetic engineering based on blending two species together. This rather retro view of biological technology is in keeping with the rest of Traveller, full of tropes from 60's and 70's science fiction. You need the details of two species but we will not see how to create alien intelligences until the end of Book 3 and to do that we also need an understanding of how worlds are described in game terms, also in book 3. This chapter should have been placed after the section on aliens in Book 3. As is, I simply cannot make use of it now without skipping ahead and learning those two systems.

The next chapter details '**synthetics**'. These are manufactured cybernetic organisms which includes fake animals, organic devices, and 'sophantoids' (androids and other intelligent synthetics modelled after non-human intelligences). Synthetics do not use the usual character generation rules instead they simply wake up in the factory programmed with a simple personality and skills. Here is an example character:

V-series androids are designed as general-purpose household servants patterned after humanity. V-A55 first awoke in the quality control room of the factory that manufactured them complete with personality and skills but no memory before that point. Their particular model of android has no oblivious gender and a rather androgynous design. V-A55 has the turquoise star-burst logo of the Briltrillium Megacorporation on their forehead clearly marking them as a synthetic. Like all V-series androids, V-A55 is incapacitated by a spoken keyword; in this case 'Blunderskrunch'. They try to keep this code secret.

Like all V-series V-A55's personality is based on four compulsions: no-harm, obedience, self-preservation, and work ethic. They are devoted to their owner Lady Zeltha of Glor who paid 2401500 credits for them.

V-A55

Sanity: A (10)

777700

Athlete-1, JOT-5, Steward-4, Chef-2

Built-in equipment: modified communicator (Book 3, page 174).

The text does not state this clearly but since synthetics are playable then they should be able to develop life pursuits.

However, synthetics can be so specialised they might only qualify for one life pursuit and have another as a hobby. A couple of sentences discussing life pursuits for synthetics would have been nice.

To be an adaptable servant

Int+JOT=12

V-A55's hobby: To be able to help Zeltha in salvage operations

End+Vacuit=12

After synthetics, are the rules for **clones**. These may or may not be force grown to achieve maturity quickly and may or may not have a recorded and edited personality implanted.

"There are five general types of clones:

Natural. Clones occurring naturally.

Offspring. Clones produced as children.

Relict. Clones intended to replace dead individuals.

Guest. Clones produced to provide cheap labor.

Med. Clones produced to provide medical parts."

The rules for clones are based on the genetics rules used to create family members. Clones are genetic duplicates but characteristics do vary from the original due to environment.

Soon after character creation Jaim is marooned on a remote uninhabited forest moon. After two years of being missing he is presumed dead and his life insurance activates. The insurance company pays the Briltrillium Megacorporation to force grow a clone of Jaim to equivalent to 18 years of physical age. The insurance company provides Briltrillium with a recording of Jaim's personality from two years ago. The revived Jaim awakens in a hospital in a younger body and inherits all of the missing Jaim's possessions. Another year later a ragged original Jaim is rescued from the jungle by a noble on safari. When the original Jaim is rescued, there are two Jaims whose memories diverge three years ago. Fortunately, this is the kind of thing that has happened before and the law in Farhome is very clear (I had to make something up). The possessions of both are summed and each owns half the value. The Jaims' cash out their Starpass and remaining life insurance and split the money. Similarly they split the annual income from their land grants 50:50. I have added one life pursuit skill per year to simulate the usual post-character generation experience rule.

Marquis Jaim Joohrah Copy

98778D

Skills: Programmer1, Leader2, Liason1, Spacecraft ACS2, Wheeled1, Pilot0, Drive0, Seafarer0, Career Noble4, World Glor1, World Imbar6, World Lanth1, Streetwise -1.

Gear: 625 000 credits plus 630 000 credits from land grants.

Biological age 19. Mental age 33.

Life Pursuits: Flaneur, An idle rich interstellar explorer of streets and cultures

Streetwise. Social Standing. C+S=12

Distance Runner: Athlete. Endurance C+S=12

Travel Writer Knowledge Travel Destinations <Subsector>. Education . C+S=12 (actually 14 for Jaim) Secondary skill: Author.

Marquis Jaim Joohrah Original

98C78D

Skills: Programmer1, Leader2, Liason1, Spacecraft ACS2, Wheeled1, Pilot0, Drive0, Seafarer0, Career Noble4, World Glor1, World Imbar6, World Lanth1, Survival -3.

Gear: 625 000 credits plus 630 000 credits from land grants.

Age: 35

Life pursuits as above but replace Distance Runner with: Survive the Jungle. Endurance. Survival C+S=12.

T5.1 states you can shift the priorities of life pursuits (they are ordered 1st, 2nd, etc.) but does not state that characters can change them to gain new ones. However, as a tweak I would allow in extreme situations.

Land grants of the two Jaims.

2 hexes on homeworld: Imbar 758422 star: K6V2 Ni 30000 credits/year

2 hexes on a PreAg(ricultural) or PreRi(ch) world in his home system 30000 credits/year

4 hexes elsewhere on his homeworld. 60 000 credits/year.

4 hexes on an Ag or Ri world in his home system. 60 000 credits/year

8 more hexes on his homeworld. 120 000 credits/year.

8 hexes on a PreInd(ustrial) world elsewhere in the subsector 120 000 credits/year

These generate an annual income of 420 000 credits or 210 000 per Jaim so at three years that's another 630 000 credits each.

Core Concepts

After Characters is the Core Concepts section including the task resolution system, Skills, Knowledges, Talents, QREBS, Intuitions, Personals, and Senses. It's worth spending some time telling you about each of these. As already noted there are career and world knowledges, and a hobby skill mentioned here that should have been discussed in character generation.

The **task resolution system** is roll a number of d6 (more dice make the task more difficult) and try to roll under Characteristic+Skill+modifiers. Pretty simple. However, the system also describes cooperative, opposed, unskilled, uncertain outcomes, spectacular successes, dangerous tasks, and other situations. Overall, the complexity provided is mid-level and able to cover any situation that might come up in an adventure. The rules are often quite clever. For example for uncertain tasks the Games Master secretly rolls some of the dice and the players the rest; the more uncertain the PCs would be of the outcome the more dice the Games Master rolls.

After this is the descriptions of individual **skills and knowledges**. Unlike many modern games, which employ a small number of unrealistically broad skills, T5 has 64 core skills some modified by numerous knowledges. Given, a typical PC has around 12 skills and knowledges. Creating PCs of diverse backgrounds that cover as many skills as possible is a good strategy. There is a risk here that a PC might have skills, like chef, that are rarely used on adventures. The Game's Master will need to be sure PCs are hired for missions matching their skill sets and players will have to look for creative uses of the skills they possess. However, T5.1 does try to make skills useful on adventures. Firstly, and oddly, skills are not affected by technology level. A PC used to working on steam-powered carriages can apply their Automotive knowledge to fusion powered electric cars. Secondly, skill descriptions provide adventurous tasks using the skills, such as Artist to create forgeries or Admin to get the government to fund your exploration.

There are a few points worth mentioning. The Athlete skill provides a Physical Conditioning task that takes a year, improves Strength, and confusingly operates separately to the experience system. Unusually, the Craftsman and Designer skills augment other trade skills to produce high quality masterpieces or new designs respectively. Most games systems would simply require a high level in a trade to create masterpieces and new designs. I feel the Craftsman and Designer skills are novel games rule but add unnecessary complication.

After skills and knowledges is a section on **Talents**. These are a small collection (14) of non-human powers that are handled like skills, a nice bit of consistency. These include things like Compute, Hibernate, and Sound Mimic. Looking ahead I can see characters gain 1d6 ranks in these (Book 2 page 234) but no opportunity to improve during character generation. Ditto to skills associated with biological castes or alien societies. I suggest this tweak: when a character from a species with one or more Talents or species/caste skills gains *any* skill during character generation they may substitute a talent or species skill. This tweak provides many opportunities to gain talents and species skills supporting the creation of characters who are good at their species 'signature' powers if desired. As well as Talents non-humans can also have super-senses as described in the Senses section.

An optional system called **QREBS** (Quality, Reliability, Ease-of-Use, Burden, Safety) adds detail to items of

equipment enabling the inclusion of wear and tear or critical malfunctions if desired by the referee.

A single page describes the optional **Intuitions** (Insight, Curiosity, and Luck). These are a rather narrativist rules to provide players with information at the meta level; quite out of step with the rest of the very simulationist rules presented but a welcome inclusion for some play groups.

Five pages on '**Personals**' provides a detailed set of rules for interacting with NPCs. These look comprehensive and at the same level of detail as other rules in the game. I think they will work well for groups who prefer structure to hang roleplaying off. However, I'll withhold judgement until trying them at the table. Many groups will ignore these rules and rely mostly on roleplaying.

The last section in Core Concepts deals with the **Senses**. These are the rules for spotting, listening, sniffing the air etc. Each sense has its own variation on the rule that is based on the now familiar increasing numbers of dice for difficulty, range, and size. These account for the different sensory abilities of non-humans with both detail and ease of use. Characters that see in the infrared range, have the nose of a bloodhound, or sense electrical fields like a shark are all possible.

T5.1 advises that many rules should probably used only when important to the situation. Using QREBS for every item will bog down play. Using QREBS for the water vapour collector when crossing a desert adds tension. Worrying about which aliens can see what colours all the time is overkill, when a secret message is in far-ultraviolet that's important.

Summary of most (not all) of Book 1

So after reading through this far and trying out the various generation systems but not taking it to the table and playing an adventure what's my assessment so far?

T5.1 professes to allow play anywhere in the galaxy but in practice many assumptions from the Imperium are present. For example, the default language is the Imperium's Anglic and a list of languages from Charted Space is given. Other examples of material that presupposes a particular kind of society include the existence of the Traveller's Aid Society, Land Grants, Star Passes etc. For me trying to create a new Traveller sub-setting the easiest solution is that around 200 years ago a luxury liner at the edge of the Imperium mis-jumped and found itself stranded in the Farhome sector. Here they introduced Jump technology and soon became culturally and economically dominant over the native sophants and local humans who had no faster-than-light drives. Naturally, many of the institutions are modelled after those the passengers of this lost liner knew in the Imperium.

Overall T5.1 is a great improvement over T5 in both presentation and clarity. The first few chapters do an excellent job of introducing the game and the default universe. The character generation allows for all kinds of careers each with flavourful features. Characters begin with backstories that reflect their prior careers in interstellar society. Variations on humanity are covered in Book 1 including clones and manufactured cybernetic androids. Disappointingly, robots do not appear until Book 2 and aliens (sophants) are not presented until Book 3. Despite this, Book 1 lays the groundwork for non-humans with talents, senses, size rules, and its open-ended difficulties (just add more d6). Remember the T5.1 core rules have the scope of an entire game line and therefore is both very complete and excellent value.

Revised Section Scores out of 5

Sections are those **bold** in the table of contents.

The physical books as an object 5 (4 if you would prefer colour)

The PDF 5 (especially when presented on a sturdy labelled USB full of goodies)

Introductions 5

Basic Information 3

Characters 4

Core Concepts 4

Average of material reviewed so far: 4.33

CRPG REVIEW : DARKEST DUNGEON

by Dorchadas

You would think that Darkest Dungeon would be the perfect game for me. And it is--this isn't a bad review, so don't think I'm tipping my hand early--but while I leaped on the kickstarter the instant I learned about it, I withdrew my pledge when they added in a backer-exclusive class. I'm fine with kickstarter-exclusive cosmetics or silly, non-gameplay-affecting content, but the idea of a mechanical benefit to kickstarter supporters sat badly enough with me that I was willing to forgo playing the game entirely. Then I played other games, and it faded from my consciousness.

Until 2016, when ping816 suddenly bought it as a present for me. And then I learned that the kickstarter had suffered from unclear communication and the backer class was the Musketeer, a cosmetic skin over the top of the Arbalest with all the same mechanics, so I needn't have been so suspicious in the first place. Well, live and learn.

And then I was playing Baldur's Gate II and the Legend of Zelda games, but last November, now that I was finally all the way up to Breath of the Wild, I loaded it up. The screen went black, and then I was greeted with the opening cinematic: *Ruin has come to our family*.

You remember our venerable house, opulent and imperial, gazing proudly from its stoic perch above the moor. I lived all my years in that ancient rumor shadowed manor, fattened by decadence and luxury, and yet I began to tire of... conventional extravagance... Hell. Yes.



The basis of Darkest Dungeon is crushed hopes. You play the Heir, a relative of the Ancestor from the introduction who answers his letter and comes to the squalid hamlet near the manor to assemble a team of women and men to delve

into the various locations nearby, seeking the remnants of the Ancestor's folly and building up their strength to assault the manor itself. The base game has four areas, each with a separate theme and aesthetics. The Ruin, haunted by the walking dead and guarded by the Necromancer and the Prophet. The Warrens, filled with mutated swine and terrible hybrids and guarded by the Swine-Prince and the Flesh. The Weald, crawling with fungal beasts from the black heart of the forest and guarded by the Hag and the Brigand Cannon. And the Cove, the abode of fishmen and squamous beasts of the depths, guarded by the Siren and the Pirate Crew. A successful delve in a particular area levels it up, unlocking harder or longer missions and more powerful boss variants, whereas an unsuccessful delve leads to madness and death.

One thing to remember when playing is that the delvers are meat for the grindstone. They will die, often and horribly, and that's part of the game. There's no way to avoid it, and even when naming every delver after a friend and becoming fond of them, it's important to keep in mind that they are expendable, playing pieces of the chessboard, and some must be sacrificed if all are to succeed. Darkest Dungeon is a roguelike, and it's possible for a breezy delve to go south in an instant as a crit followed by poison or blight kills a delver, or the delvers run into a miniboss like the Collector or the Thing from the Stars or the Shambler. My only wipe was caused by the Shambler, while walking down a dark hallway into what I thought would be a simple random encounter.

There is one bright spot among all this, though. In a game about resource gathering and management, of never having enough and always having to make choices, new delvers are plentiful. They cost nothing to hire and every in-game week, more of them arrive, so even if you have a string of bad luck and every one of your precious delvers dies, there will be more grist for the mill. Darkest Dungeon isn't so merciful as to give you a reason to say all is lost and give up.

The heart of Darkest Dungeon are the delves, where four delvers venture into the wilds to fight their way through beasts, cultists, and more terrible things in the hope of finding fortune and glory, but often finding madness and death. Delve maps are randomized, with a bunch of rooms connected by a series of corridors, and most delves are either "explore 90% of rooms" or "complete 100% of room battles," though there's occasionally another mission goal like destroying profane altars or finding lost holy relics. Mechanically, all of that is just clicking on something, though, and the meat of each delve is the combat.

It's turn-based, each class has unique abilities, none of that is surprising. Darkest Dungeon's unique spin on its combat is the importance of movement and positioning. While each class has unique skills, only four (of seven) can be selected at a time, and certain skills can only be used from certain positions and also only target certain positions. The hellion skill Iron Swan, for example, is hard-hitting with a high crit chance, but the hellion can only use it from the front row and it only targets an enemy in the back row. The grave digger can throw her daggers as long as she's not in the front row and hit anyone who isn't in the front row. What's more, several skills involve movement or shuffling. The abomination skill Slam always moves him one slot forward, and the bounty hunter skill Uppercut both stuns an enemy and knocks them back one slot. Perfectly tuning a party for a specific order can result in chaos when an enemy uses a skill that shoves your main damage dealer to the back row where none of their skills work, or pulls a healer to the front where they can no longer heal.

It's possible to build a party that specifically takes advantage of this. One of my favorite party compositions near the end was vestal, jester, shieldbreaker, and highwayman. The shieldbreaker would start at the front and use Impale, which hit all enemies and inflicted blight, moving her back one. Now that the highwayman was in front, he would use Point Blank Shot, which did enormous damage with a high crit chance and moved him back one. The jester would buff them both with Battle Ballad and the vestal would provide heals and the occasional stun. It was extremely effective most of the time, though not an unstoppable juggernaut--I had serious trouble when I took this comp to fight the Drowned Crew. There's no one party composition to rule them all, and often it's worth running and trying again with a different

group if a battle seems to be going poorly.

There is one way that Darkest Dungeon is favorable to the player, and that's how it deals with death. While it's possible for a massive crit to kill an enemy in a single blow, delvers are protected against that. They can never be reduced below zero hit points in a single blow. Rather, a powerful hit will drop them to zero hit points and put them on Death's Door.

A delver on Death's Door has serious penalties to their damage, speed, and crit rate, and any further damage can kill them. I say "can," because there's a chance to resist each further attack, which leaves the delver on Death's Door and lets them fight on. In one battle, a single delver lived through five attacks on Death's Door before the next attack killed them. Using trinkets, it's even possible to optimize a character for being on Death's Door, and there's class called the flagellant that receives significant buffs for fighting on Death's Door. A single heal removes the Death's Door status and provides the protection of hit points again, so sometimes a battle becomes a frantic dance of trying to keep delvers at some kind of positive hit points level and kill the enemies before disaster strikes.

But because it's Darkest Dungeon, enemy death is a disadvantage. Rather than enemies vanishing when they die, they leave behind corpses that take up rank slots and preserve enemy marching order. That makes skills to move enemies extremely valuable, since scything through the front ranks to reach the back ranks takes longer than simply looking at enemy hit points would indicate, and since enemies in the back ranks tend to be more dangerous than those in the front. I also quickly learned that enemies that die due to bleeding or blight attacks don't leave corpses, and neither do enemies who die to critical hits, so I often built parties around debuffs and damage over time in order to maximize corpse removal. That party I listed above rarely left any corpses behind.

I could have built parties around skills that clear all corpses, or around pulling enemies in the back ranks forward, or simply around attacking the back ranks. There's whole strategies that I didn't use but that would still have worked, and I was able to make my own strategies work even in difficult situations, all of which is the mark of tactical depth. There's no one true way other than the inevitable path to the grave.

Between delves, the delvers return to the Hamlet where they can drink or pray their cares away or be hauled into the sanitarium for treatment of the issues that accumulate over successive delvings into the blasphemous monstrosities of the surrounding lands. The Heir can order them to improve their equipment or skills, recruit more delvers, buy trinkets from a traveling merchant, or visit the graveyard to remember the fallen.

While delvers come and go, usually horribly and at the worst possibly moment, the buildings in the hamlet are permanent. Darkest Dungeon takes the modern roguelike approach of characters being expendable along with an overarching progression system that persists between characters. During delves, in addition to money and trinkets, delvers can find various heirlooms of the Ancestor and bring them back to the hamlet, where they are stockpiled and used to upgrade the buildings. Generally, this is about providing higher-level services or reducing their costs: the upgrade to the stagecoach means more delvers show up each week and there's a chance for higher-level delvers to arrive, the blacksmith upgrades make it possible to buy higher-level weapons and armor and reduce the cost of doing so, and the abbey upgrades let multiple delvers be treated at the same time and makes treatment more effective. The Crimson Court DLC also adds "Districts" with a high cost in gold and heirlooms that provide a permanent bonus, usually a buff to delvers.

All of these heirlooms take up bag space, so while the moment-to-moment gameplay of a delve is about battle tactics

and light levels, there's also the tradeoff of how many bag slots to leave empty and what to throw away to make room for other things. More food, since food is needed for camping on longer delves, can be eaten to heal, and sometimes delvers get hungry and need to eat? More antivenom or medicinal herbs or bandages to cure debuffs? More shovels in case there's a blockage? This or that by brokenboulevard It's a constant struggle, and I was short of money for most of the game because I prioritized heirlooms and never bothered to pick up raw gold unless I was bringing an antiquarian, a support class whose main benefit is increasing the amount of loot the delvers find. That was the choice I made and I had to live with it, which is really the main theme of Darkest Dungeon.

I've gone this far and haven't even mentioned stress yet, which is probably the most famous mechanic in the game. In addition to hit points going down, over the course of a delve, stress goes up. It goes up occasionally as the delvers walk through the corridors of their expeditions, goes up frequently in combat in response to enemy attacks or the shock of a fellow delver suffering a critical hit, and can rarely be reduced by delver skills. Hitting 100 stress triggers an affliction like Fearful or Paranoid, which causes a number of problems. Paranoid delvers move backward to hide and refuse healing or buffs, while Masochistic delvers sometimes use their turn to attack themselves. Rarely, 100 stress causes a virtue like Courageous rather than an affliction, but that's not something that can be relied on. Emoji Panic flailing

While hit points heal on every return to the Hamlet, stress does not. Much of the game is thus about stress management, about having a broad and deep enough pool of delvers that those who are high-stress or afflicted have time to recover in the abbey or the tavern. Going on a delve with high-stress delvers is asking for everything to go wrong, as often afflicted delvers cause stress in their companions, leading to a chain reaction. Critical hits or kills on enemies restore stress, but not much. Generally, the best way to recover stress is skills when camping during a multi-day delve or by going back to the hamlet.

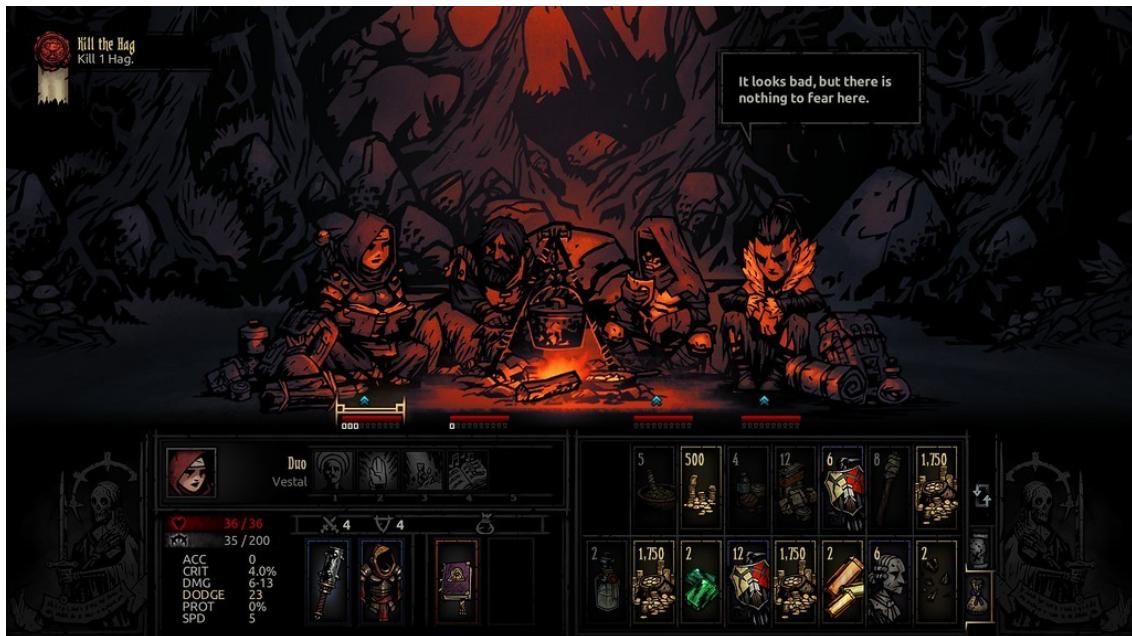
Stress also ties into the dungeon light levels, which is why the game is called Darkest Dungeon. At high light levels the delvers receive large bonuses--they have a better chance of surprising enemies, higher crit and dodge chance, and take less stress. Lower light levels reverse all these bonuses, but also provide progressively more loot. Some skills increase light levels, as do torches, and some skills decrease it. Light is another resource to manage, just like food, stress, bag space, and everything else the delvers have to account for.

This game is amazing. Part of the reason I waited so long to play Darkest Dungeon is because I heard a lot of the difficulty is grind. Grind up new delvers after a bad crit+bleeding combo kills a max level healer, grind up heirlooms to improve buildings, grind up trinkets to equip delvers, grind grind grind. Radiant reduced the cost of building upgrades and increased the allowable level range for delvers to undertake missions without actually reducing the moment-to-moment gameplay difficulty, and frankly, I have a list of games to play as long as my leg and I don't need a bunch of extra hours put into a game that aren't strictly necessary to beat it. My completionism and extreme caution already drove me to spend more hours than strictly necessary. I put 70 hours into Darkest Dungeon, and I probably could have won in 40.

The mood kept me coming back. Some of that is the narration, done by the incomparable Wayne June, which really sells the arrogance of the Ancestor and the despair of the task ahead. The art style is great too, a kind of sketch that's just cartoony enough to be video gamey while still revealing how terrible the situations the delvers find themselves in. It took me almost until the end of the game to realize that the fungal artillery enemy was a fungal bloom puppeting around a corpse, not some weird mushroom monster. And considering all the awful hybrids in the Warren, I'm glad the art is more cartoony.

I'll probably be quoting this game for years. Lines like a brilliant confluence of skill and purpose, or dazed, reeling, about to break, or anything else I've quoted during this review. I've already started saying them, and pretty soon I'll just have black shadows for eyes and move in straight lines everywhere I go.

There's a lot of mods out there, enough to easily last me hundreds of hours of playthroughs even if I ignore all the waifu ones (there's always waifu mods). And if there's any criticism of Darkest Dungeon I have, it's this--there's basically no reason to replay it without modding it or otherwise shaking things up. A single run takes dozens of hours and exposes you to everything the game has to offer. It's not like Civilization, where there's a new starting scenario each time you play. Every game of Darkest Dungeon is basically the same. The delves change their patterns, but they won't have anything new. But with 70 hours worth in a single game, is that really a problem?



In the annals of roguelikes, Darkest Dungeon deserves to stand at the top. It's punishing enough that every action requires care, with acknowledgement of the likely consequences, but there are enough ways to recover that it's not completely soul-crushing. There's even an event that can return a dead delver back to life, and I ended the game with all the delvers I named after my friends alive even though quite a few of them died on the way. The mood fits the content--of course everything is hopeless and full of despair. This is a roguelike! And of course it's a roguelike, with no way to undo your actions. It takes place in a Lovecraftian world of cosmic horror!

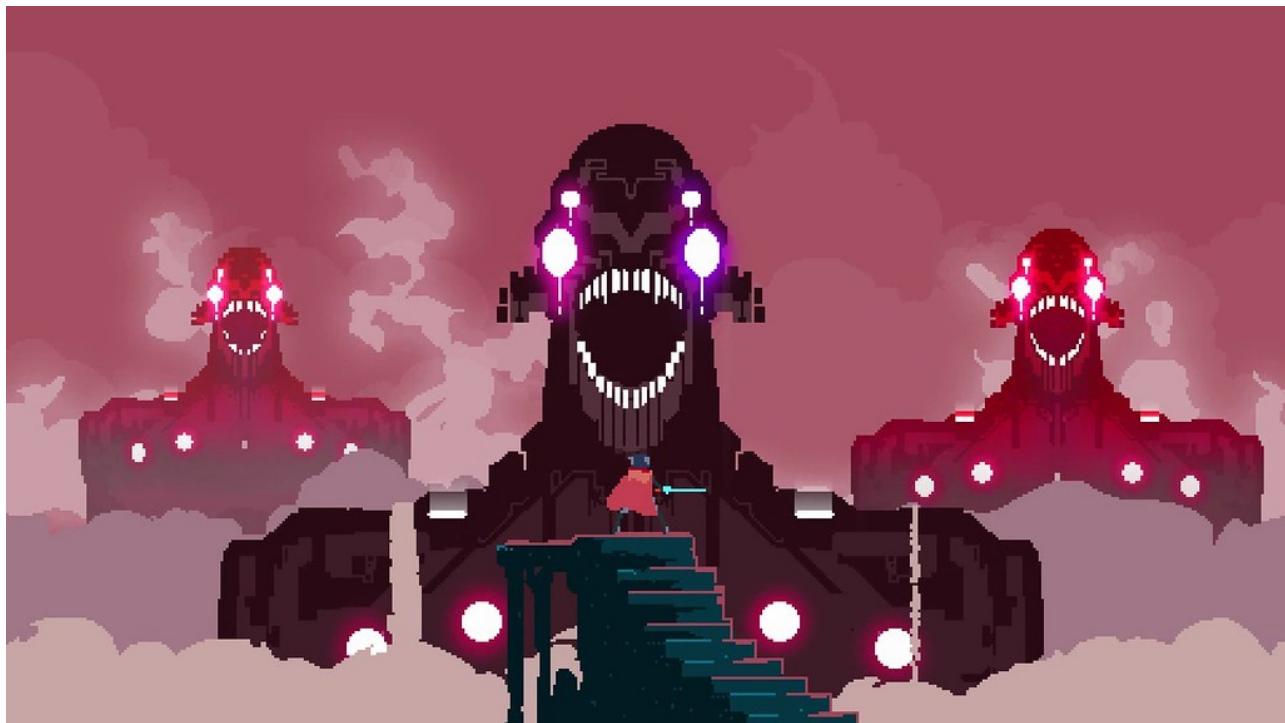
Almost three years after ping816 bought me Darkest Dungeon, I finally beat it. And as usual for when my friends buy me games, I end up wondering why I waited for so long. This game is amazing, well worth all the time I put into it. I sat on it for too long, but now the task is done, and it was worth every long hour. This wasn't like XCom: Long War. It was far better at less than half the time cost. What a wonderful ride.

Also, if you want to hear what I sound like / a bit of RP, I did a Facebook thread where I chronicled my progress through this game, and I recorded the last update from the Heir after I beat the game (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/olkwnkl1v8m2u82/Darkest%20Dungeon.mp3>). I'm pretty proud of how it turned out.

CRPG REVIEW : HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

by Dorchadas

I first became aware of Hyper Light Drifter a couple years ago, after the kickstarter had finished but before there was much more info available about it, when I saw this promotional image that seared itself into my brain.



My first thought was, "That looks amazing." My second though was that the picture reminded me of the god-warriors from Nausicaä and the Valley of the Wind mixed with sharks, and anything with that influence and that kind of amazing pixel art was something I had to own, even just to support the creation of more modern pixel art games with some craft behind them. We don't need to use pixel art in games anymore, but by the same token, we're not bound by the limitations of old pixel art either. It's a stylistic choice, and one I wholeheartedly support. Like voice acting, modern graphical standards are raising the cost of games to a point where innovation is discouraged because a failure costs far too much. Or maybe it's just that I'm not a big fan of most AAA-level games nowadays for a variety of reasons.

I mean, some of my attachment to pixel art is from playing old DOS and NES games, and that's part of why I liked Shovel Knight. But only a part of it, because they have to be good games as well or I'd just watch the pretty pictures on someone's Twitch stream. And like Shovel Knight, this is a good game.

I do have to talk a bit more about the art, though, because it is gorgeous.

In a year where I played games like Castlevania: Symphony of the Night and Secret of Mana, Hyper Light Drifter was still my favorite-looking game, though only just. I mixed in screenshots from other games with my generic pixel art

folder for our television's screensaver, but once I beat this game I immediately went and set the screensaver folder to my Hyper Light Drifter screenshot folder.

Each of the four areas in the game has an obvious visual style, from the vibrant swamp to the east with its pools of cerulean water and green vegetation to the rain-drenched wasteland to the south and the cold, mechanical secret labs hidden beneath. One of the advantages of pixel art is that it allows more suggestion and allows the mind to fill in the gaps with the art as a template. That was helpful with the various animal people that the Magician--the main character, as the Steam trading card that bears their picture calls them--meets, and especially helpful with all the horrible things that happen to them. I would have been much less interested to play a game showing the otter people tortured to death by toad people if it had modern-Tomb-Raider levels of graphical fidelity. I can look at the sprites and summon it up in my head, and that is enough.

dreams(?), the Magician travels until they collapse, then are brought to the City by another Drifter and nursed back to health. They hear of the troubles in the neighboring lands from some refugees in the town, all of which is conveyed by pictures. The only text is the brief tutorial prompts explaining what the buttons do and how to recharge gun ammo. I remember reading an article where the designer commented that he spent a long time trying to convey that through gameplay or pictures as well with the goal of having a completely textless game before finally deciding that a small amount of text at the beginning wouldn't be a problem.

As the Magician continues on their journey, they solve the problems in each of the four quadrants. The mutated toad people who had massacred the otter people of the east. The raven people who destroyed the hawk people's rookery except for a small remnant of eggs saved by one hawk person. The blue-skinned people of the west--similar to the Magician--and their nameless foe, and the crystals that sealed them both in eternal imprisonment. And the alligator people of the southern wastes and what they found beneath the sands of their home. The other Drifter who found them, traveling the same course and warning them of the dangers ahead. In each of the four quadrants, a dead god-warrior of the time before.

And all the while, the Magician keeps coughing up a strange pink substance, and dreaming of a city, a cataclysm, a gateway, and a dog.

There's more to it with some analysis--others have translated the symbols found on the monoliths throughout the game, which are an actual message rather than just gibberish designed to look good. Spoilers found here (https://www.reddit.com/r/hyperlightdrifter/comments/4d2jzo/the_story_of_hyper_light_drifter_explained/).

It's pretty easy to piece together the basics, though. There was a city, performing experiments, and something went wrong. There was an accident that destroyed the city, seared the landscape, and scattered its people to the winds. Their descendants live in the ruins of their ancient civilization with barely any understanding of how the old technology worked. Remnants of the old war, of people who are affected by the pink liquid, which seems to be some leftover of the old experiments, are a constant threat, as well as war machines, ancient defenses, and mutated creatures. Only in the central city is there peace, of a sort, but most of those who try to venture beyond the walls return seriously injured, if they return at all. It's very Gamma World, with the cataclysm and all the mutated animals. And now that I've finished this, I really want to run a game of Gamma World.

The gameplay is primarily sword-and-gun action. If I had to use an analogy, it's like playing Devil May Cry 3 with the Tricker style at all times. The Magician has their sword and a gun, initially only a pistol but with other guns available

during the course of the game, and the ability to quickly dash to avoid attacks, cross gaps, or reach enemies. Finding "gear-bits" throughout the world are the currency used to purchase extra abilities, including a dashing slash, extra ammo for the guns, the ability to hold more health packs (which I only discovered right before the final boss when I no longer needed it), a more powerful slash, and probably the three more important upgrades in the game, the ability to reflect shots with sword swings, immunity to bullets while dashing, and an increase in dashing power beyond the initial three in a row.

This makes gameplay pretty frantic at times, with shots coming from multiple directions while enemies are closing in and multiple sources of danger to keep track of at once. While there are long-range guns available, sniping for any prolonged period is impossible because no gun has more than a handful of shots and the only way to regain ammo is to stab things. Mostly enemies, because while stabbing scenery and breakable objects does restore ammo, it does so at a much lower rate than stabbing enemies does. I noticed this the most when fighting the tougher enemies, when I'd run out of shotgun ammo and have to quickly dash in and get a couple hits in before running away to avoid a counterattack, then dashing in again to fire the shotgun at point-blank range. When it worked, which was most of the time , it felt really good. When it didn't work, it was mostly because I mistimed things.

There were only a few times when it felt like I was killed by circumstances beyond my control, and they were mostly due to being stunlocked. And that can easily be laid at the feet of me mistiming my dashes or moving into the wrong place.

I was really convinced to get the game when I read the review on Rock Paper Shotgun where John Walker hated the game (<https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2016/03/31/hyper-light-drifter-impressions/>). That's why I don't want objective reviews, I want reviewers to lay their cards on the table up front. I can read a game John Walker hates and know that I'll probably like it, and stay away from the games he likes. That's just as valuable to me as a reviewer who has similar tastes to mine.

His hatred is based on going the "wrong" way first, and it's a casualty of the text-free nature of the game. The intended order is East, North, West, South--South is actually locked off until the other three are finished--but there's very little indication of that in the game itself. The only sign is a dog that runs to the east when the Magician approaches the central square of the town, but I expect that would be easy to miss among all the rest of the art. I probably would have missed it myself if I hadn't known it was there, at least the first time.

But I didn't have much trouble. There wasn't any boss fight that I had to try more than a handful of times, and every boss fight has a save point immediately before hand so it's easy to get back and try again without losing health or needing to expend ammo. There was one time that I had to leave the area, go out and get more health packs, and come back, but that's partially due to ignorance on my part. The Magician starts the game with the ability to hold three health packs and I figured that was it, but no. There's a store off to the east that sells more. Oops. If I had done a bit more exploring the way the game expects the player to, I would have found that and probably not had any trouble with that fight.

Finding secrets is a huge part of Hyper Light Drifter's gameplay, and without scouring the map, a playthrough of the game would probably take several hours less than my own playthrough took. Fortunately, nothing outside the direct route is necessary to beating the game, and there's a consistent method of indicating where a secret is. It's visible on that screenshot on that island in the middle bottom, the small dot-within-a-square. The vast majority of the time, a secret is discovered by dashing onto empty space from that symbol--the screen didn't scroll west to reveal that area until I

dashed off the platform--or activating that symbol to reveal hidden platforms.

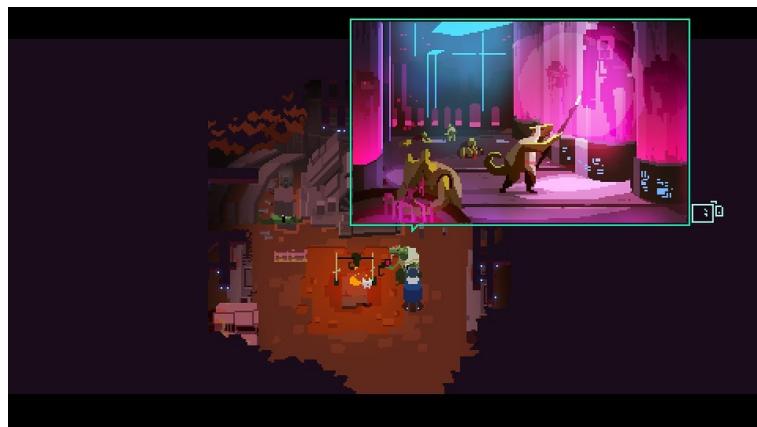
However, finding the secrets is compounded by my major complaint with Hyper Light Drifter--the map is almost totally useless. After maybe an hour, I went and found an annotated map (spoilers, obviously) that has the locations of all the items in the rooms where they are found, but with no specifics about where in the room they are. The in-game map doesn't have that--it has the section (or room, if underground) the Magician is in, the location of four modules that the other Drifter tells the Magician about, the teleporter, and the final boss room. That's it. New modules will appear on the map when you find them--each quadrant has eight, with four necessary to proceed--but the monoliths with the story, the keys that open secret doors, the extra weapons, the gearbits...none of that shows up on the map. Good luck.

I mean, Super Metroid at least put "there is a secret here" indicators on its map and showed when those secrets were uncovered, and still had areas outside the maps Samus found so there were other things to discover. This is a solved problem and I'm baffled that Hyper Light Drifter decided to introduce unnecessary obfuscation. It's the definition of fake difficulty.

If the game gave the player a way to annotate the maps themselves, the way that Axiom Verge did, it wouldn't be nearly as much of a problem, but it doesn't. It just throws up an inadequate map and expects the player to like it.

That is a major complaint, and I don't want to downplay it. A terrible map in a game about finding secrets is a huge flaw. But that was pretty much my only complaint about the game, in the entire time I played it. Dashing around and cutting groups of enemies to ribbons feels great, the art is beautiful--hence the higher-than-normal proportion of screenshots in the post--the music by Disasterpeace is wonderfully atmospheric, and it is in all ways a great game. Probably my favorite game of 2016--though that's not really a contest, because looking back over my records, this is the only game released in 2016 that I played this year other than Stardew Valley, and I haven't finished that yet so I can't properly rate it.

But I can rate Hyper Light Drifter. It's a must-play.



MOVIE REVIEWS: HEREDITARY AND PARASITE

by Andrew Moshos



Hereditary (2018)

(dir Ari Aster)

That. Was. Utterly. Horrifying.

Since I sat through / endured Midsommar, and thought it was a crafty little flick, I thought I'd go back and check out Ari Aster's first flick Hereditary, which I'd heard a lot about but declined to watch, figuring nothing good would come of it. But since I tricked myself into watching something as out there as Midsommar, by telling myself it was a documentary about the Midsummer festival Melbourne's been having since the 1990s to celebrate our LGBTIQ brothers, sisters and non-binary identifying everythings in between, I tricked myself into watching Hereditary by telling myself it was a documentary about DNA and heritable traits, you know, phylogenetic and epigenetic expression to the max!!!

Imagine my surprise when this turned out to be two of the most terrifying hours I've spent watching Toni Collette react to stuff.

I've read a few reviews since watching the flick, and I have to say I saw a movie very different from the one many of the detractors saw. What they saw was a weird flick that doesn't make any sense and is very slow, and doesn't have enough gore or jump scares or something.

What I saw was a horrifying story about a doomed family. The thing about doom is, it is inescapable, and generally to make you commit to watching something to the end, you have to at least be made to care about the people involved. That's not where this is coming from. The Graham family doesn't earn our sympathy or our compassion, but at least every few minutes I was alternating between "Oh my god, poor Charlie" to "ohmygod poor Peter" to "ohmygod poor everyone".

When Hereditary begins, a family prepares to bury an unloved matriarch. During the eulogy, the deceased's daughter Annie (Toni Collette) delivers a eulogy that, on one level, could have more succinctly be put as "Fuck you, mom, burn in hell" but which instead tries to ground us in the disturbed reality of what Annie comes from: a family where severe mental illness has destroyed almost everyone. Severe dissociative disorders, severe psychosis, hell for the people with it, hell for the people around them. We are sure Annie is not sad to see her go, but when she relates how she lost her own sibling and her father, you might think now she and her 'normal' family can grieve, take some time, and eventually grow closer.

But this flick is called *Hereditary*...

Which means the problems of previous generations are carried through to the next, and the next, and the next.

For much of the films' length, we are not sure what is going on. For much of the film's length, most of the characters don't seem to understand what exactly is happening to them. By the film's end, even we aren't going to entirely understand how what happened happened, but we're going to be pretty sure that it happened.

People die, both in films in general, and in this film. One of the deaths that happens here is one of the most horrific things I've ever seen. But death happens, and it doesn't always make sense. We wrestle with the why of things, but we can't dispute that they've happened. Here we doubt everything but can't look away from the results.

With some of us, the trauma of death forces us to confront our own mortality, or that of the people around us, but it can also fracture our sense of self. Much of this movie makes it look like some of the main characters have collectively lost their fucking minds because of death, guilt, resentment or an unholy turmoil of other emotions, but is there insanity involved as well?

And it's unfair, but it adds another layer to something permeated with layers of dread already.

Annie's line of work is constructing complex dioramas, and throughout the film she is constructing tiny replicas of the sets that the characters themselves in the house are living in, and often the camera tricks us by showing scenes we're not sure of, as to whether they're transpiring in the house itself or in the tiny houses constructed inside the house. Annie's reconstruction of a scene where one of her children dies is done in such a way that you're not sure why she's so cool with everything, seconds before she completely loses her shit. Parenthood, for some people, is really fucking hard.

It's hard to play this kind of character and remain sympathetic. Toni Colette is a tremendous actor, and she brings a tormented level of energy to this flick that is honestly hard to watch. When she starts believing certain things are happening, and is begging, flat out begging her husband (Gabriel Byrne) to believe her, it's agony to watch and listen to. Her scenes of grieving, which are all too frequent, are incredibly hard to watch and listen to, but in the way which enhances the film as intended.

We are given plenty of signals that we can't trust what we're seeing, or that what we're seeing might be the delusional fugue-state hallucinations of someone in the throes of psychosis. But none of that changes what's actually happening. We question whether there are other forces at work, other entities at play, and we dismiss it, thinking we know where the script is going.

We don't know where the script is going. It goes somewhere weirder and uglier than I predicted. And even then it doesn't change what's happened; it just makes the horror that happened have more reasons for happening.

Anyone who remembers *The Sixth Sense*, the flick best remembered for its twist ending that triggered an epidemic of

movies with twist endings, whether they made any sense or not, might remember that the mum of the kid who saw dead people was played by none other than Toni Collette. So she's no stranger to playing a part in movies where she's going to risk seeming like a raving lunatic. Or, like she played in the cable series *United States of Tara*, playing someone with a complex amount of disassociated personalities. She is great and disturbing at it, as much here as she is in anything else she does.

Beyond the horror of many of the scenes that we watch, the real work occurs in the scenes where nothing obviously demented, psychotic, catastrophic or horrible is happening: it's when she's telling someone what she really thinks. It's in the eulogy where she describes her dearly departed mother as secretive, controlling, manipulative, corrosive. It's in the argument where she yells at her son, Peter (Alex Wolff) and expresses her unexpressed rage at the fact that they can't speak about what's happened. It's when she relates to a new acquaintance (the great Ann Dowd, best known currently for playing Aunt Lydia in *Handmaid's Tale*, which is a red flag if a red flag ever existed) about why she thinks her kids resent her and don't trust her.

And that story is a doozy. Imagine trying to convince someone that, in the middle of the night some years back, you'd awoken to find yourself doused in a flammable liquid, at the foot of your children's beds, also doused in something, and that the thing that woke you was the match you'd just lit, but that it was totally not your intention, and it's not like you went through with it, and why couldn't the brats get over it, huh?

It's even in the nightmare where she screams at one of her kids about how much she'd never wanted to be a parent.

There's almost too much going on here, but however much or little there is, it's also laden with a trauma-inducing soundtrack and agonising cinematography that really grinds our souls down on our way to the grave.

I was traumatised by this tale of family trauma and madness, and paranoid conspiracy well before the climactic scene, but the final stretch, which is the section most critics I've read had the biggest problem with (perhaps because it seems like it offers an almost 'rational' explanation for what's gone on before, despite being fairly consistent with what we've seen transpire thus far) places a blackened, terror and poison-filled cherry on top of something that was already a dread-abundant monstrosity.

This is horror at its most devastating, because it strikes at the heart of the family; the one place we thought we would be safe. Quite often the danger in horror flicks is meant to be something from the outside threatening to come in: when the danger is the family itself, well, then we know we're absolutely fucked.

Ari Aster is a meticulous filmmaker, which is something replicated as a motif throughout his films, especially in the set and art design. I think of him as a dark version of someone like Wes Anderson, or at least a more evil version. There is very little room to breathe in *Hereditary*, there's nothing played for laughs, there's no light or respite, so there's not going to be a good night's sleep following, if that's what you were hoping for.

Again, like I said with *Midsommar*, I cannot recommend the flick to anyone, because I feel like it would be sadistic to do so. Recommending it to horror heads would be self-defeating, because invariably they scoff and say "eh, it was pretty tame", and recommending it to people who don't watch horror is just criminally negligent. Suffice to say that *Hereditary* kicked me in the head and in the gut repeatedly for two hours, but, hell, in my case it's a bit of an

improvement.

8 times I shudder at the thought that genetics is destiny out of 10

--

“Don’t you EVER raise your voice at me! I am your mother! You understand? All I do is worry and slave and defend you, and all I get back is that fucking face on your face!” – I’m sorry, I just loved that line so much – *Heredity*.

Also at: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/hereditary>

Parasite Movie Review (2019)

dir: Bong Joon-ho

I musn’t be remembering the film properly, because I don’t remember the bit where rich people stole everyone’s eyes. Sounds like something they’d do, though.

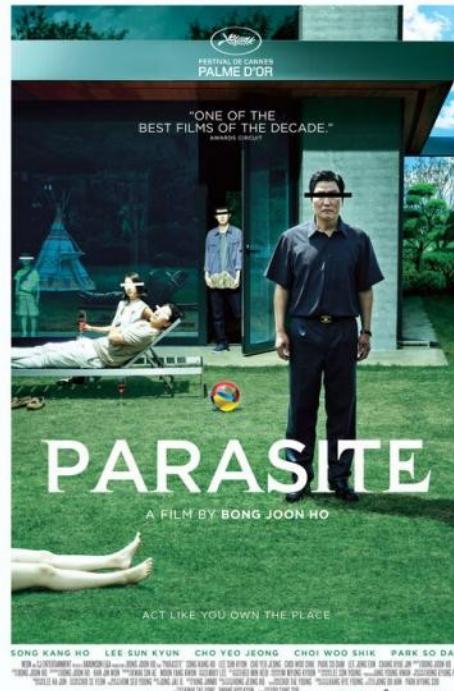
(기생충 *Gisaengchung*)

The thing about parasites is... how many are too many, and what should I do to get rid of them, lickety split?

Nah, but *Parasite*, the latest flick from the deranged and brilliant mind that brought us *Okja*, *Snowpiercer*, *Mother*, *The Host* and *Memories of Murder*, all of which are remarkably solid films, all of which are fairly unique, is probably the most outwardly conventional of all his films.

Not only that, but it won the Palme D’Or this year at Cannes! Can you imagine caring about such a thing? Surely if something wins the Palme D’Or it means it’s a pretty great film, if not the greatest film of all time, or at least that year thus far? I mean, look at all the other great Palme D’Or winners, like *Pulp Fiction*, *Barton Fink*, *The Piano* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*.

I didn’t make up that last one. On the list of winners there are a lot of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh films, and films from many nations, with no obvious bias towards the films of any region. Mostly, they have nothing in common, though one could be tempted to imply that the jury likes flicks where class is addressed, or plays a part thematically, or is indeed called *The Class*, which won the Palme D’Or in 2008.



Parasite, the South Korean director's latest flick, is pretty much about class, but it's also about the struggles of a family of grifters, and their travails. The least charitable application of the title would be to say that what this family does is become a parasite burrowing its way into the body of another, wealthier family. When we meet our grifters, they're living in a basement, fighting to find the right spot in which to use someone else's wi-fi connection in order to connect for some data. Calling the place a hovel would be an insult to squalor.

But they're tough, and resourceful, as are most petty crims who need to survive on their wits. The father, Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho, who is not only in most of the Bong Joon-ho or Park chan-wook movies I've seen, but also in the majority of all South Korean flicks I've ever seen) is a fairly quiet, fairly optimistic chap. He supports all his kids in all their attempts to graffit. He seems like such a likable guy. The mum, Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin) is a former athlete, and gives the least amount of fucks of any in the family (being exactly zero), often threatening to bite the hand that feeds or actively biting it especially when it's not in their interest. Then there's the gentle and retiring son Ki-woo (Choi Woo-shik), and the daughter, Ki-jung (Park So-dam), with some serious Photoshop skills that she puts to work in service of the plan.

It's a friend of Ki-woo's that starts the ball rolling – he is the tutor to a wealthy couple's daughter, and, as he's going overseas, he wants Ki-woo to continue tutoring her, because he wouldn't trust one of his uni peers to do it without slavering over her. But Ki-woo, he thinks, is too lame / trustworthy to abuse her trust.

Once sis fabricates some credentials for Ki-woo, he works his way into the Park family, a tick burrowing under their privileged skin. He hits it off with the mum and the daughter, but, most importantly, starts creating opportunities to trick the Parks into hiring the other members of his family without knowing they're all related. Each new hire is more complex, requiring more subterfuge. It requires ruining other people's employment and lives in order to achieve their goals of making fat bank.

It's in Ki-woo's eyes, dubbed Kevin by the wealthy family, when he first sees the expanse of the home, the yard, the vast internal spaces, the elegant and minimalist interior design. He is awed by it. When he starts teaching the daughter, and she starts to show her feelings towards him, he's just delusional enough to think that she may be his way in to permanently become like his betters.

His sister, renamed Jessica, starts tutoring, or providing 'art therapy' to the youngest child, who seems to be a hyperactive brat that the mother is convinced is some kind of genius, but Jessica's strategy is to play upon the mother's fears, stoking her terror that her golden boy child is somehow damaged beyond repair. The kid is, to use the technical term, a dingbat, but it behoves no-one to have that pointed out. So Jessica suggests 2 hour sessions 4 times a week at a high rate, which the family readily agrees to.

Mrs Park (Cho Yeo-jeong) isn't portrayed as being particularly stupid, but the grifters don't actually have to try that hard at their particular grifts or agendas in order to Jedi mind trick her into doing exactly what they want. She seems somewhat attentive to the needs of her kids, but only so far as feeling assurance that an appropriate service industry person is taking care of the requirement.

She has a kind of trusting benevolence that only comes from almost complete insulation. Mr Park (Lee Sun-kyun) is

neither overly trusting nor insulated, but he too has expectations that can only be provided by the lower classes knowing their place and delivering as required.

The grifters eventually get in as best they can, and even reach a place where they feel almost benevolent towards their hosts, as they hoover up their expensive hooch and eat their snacks. You almost feel like there's a balance achieved, a harmony where the rich bastards no longer fear the poor scum, and the poor start to see life from the other perspective, understanding that just because they have material wealth, it doesn't mean they're entirely insulated from the other elements of life that can go wrong.

That's not where this film is going, you see. The rich bastards may be just regular people with money, but the poor will never even be really human to these people. The host may come to expect that it cannot be rid of its parasites, but that doesn't mean they ever see the parasite as an equal.

It's the smell, you see. It's first detected by the youngest boy, a smell that all of the grifters share, but then Mr Park can't stop smelling it. At first the grifters wonder whether it's the laundry soap they wash their clothes with, or whether it's the fact that they live in a mouldy sub-basement. But later on, when Mr and Mr Park wonder out loud, within earshot of a humiliated Ki-taek, whether it's the smell of boiled rags, or radishes or some other element of the poor world that can't help but pervade their existence.

It's something they can't fake their way out of, or explain away, or cover, or dodge. And it's maddening.

To avoid spoiling the film irredeemably by spoiling it too much further (with something I'd almost argue isn't even really a spoiler, because it's just so fucking out there, but every review I've read talks around it like it's a revelation that everyone's dead or an alien or alien ghosts, none of which is remotely close) the film takes an even more bizarre and, I would argue, goofy turn, to ensure that events hurtle towards a catastrophic end.

Natural disasters have a way of impacting some way more than others, but the aftermath of a particular night of flooding will be felt by multiple families. Because the reality is, hosts can sometimes entertain multiple sets of parasites.

This is described as a comedy, or a dark comedy, but it's not really a laugh out loud experience, at least not for me. Perhaps if I'd watched it with a Korean audience, or at least a Korean-Australian audience, I might have found it a more raucous experience. Unfortunately for me, I saw it in the whitest of white locations, so no cross-cultural understanding was entered into. Class stuff I can get, across cultural lines and national borders. That the poor envy the rich is not a stretch, and that the rich loathe the poor is nothing new in human history. That both sets of people would have their illusions that they need maintain in order to justify their beliefs is also unsurprising. But the directions the film eventually goes transcend those simple understandings, where, eventually, I'm left not even being sure what the film was trying to say. At the risk of generalising further, it almost seems like the film is saying different groups of parasites left desperate will attack each other more than the host in competing for the same drops of blood or leftovers or whatever. Or that once the distance between the haves and the have nots becomes insurmountable, neither group will see the other as human, and death will come swiftly for our enemies.

The film manages to reach a bizarre but touching bittersweet ending which somehow manages to have its cake and eat

it too, by showing how limited the mobility of the impoverished is, or how trapped by the house they remain, even long after actions that cannot be undone have been taken. Prisoners remain prisoners.

That being said, there were at least three moments in the film where the plot required characters to take actions of such staggering dumbness that I felt like I was watching a much dumber film. Like, if a crucial plot development is dependent on three characters eavesdropping on a conversation and then falling into the scene like they're the fucking Marx Brothers from a hundred years ago, you're not really talking about masterpiece theatre no matter what the reviews say.

It's still a really interesting and enjoyable film, though. I don't know if it's one of the year's best. It's not even the best Bong Joon-ho flick I've seen recently (I liked *Okja* far more, mostly because it was so out there). But it's pretty strong all the same.

7 times the song Eat the Rich by Motorhead is never sung or referenced but should have been out of 10

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"If I was rich, I would be nice too. Money is an iron; it smooths out all the wrinkles." – I wouldn't know, I'm too busy trying to increase my collection of Faberge eggs – *Parasite*.

Rating: 7 stars

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