

RPG REVIEW

Issue #48, September 2020

ISSN 2206-4907 (Online)



SUPERNATURAL BEINGS AND PLACES

***RELICS DESIGNER'S NOTES ... REVIEWS: IN
NOMIME, LITTLE FEARS, LEXOCCULTUM ...
WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT REVIEWS ... GHOSTS
IN D&D5E ... OUT OF THE ABYSS PLAYER
INTERVIEWS ... SUCCUBUS-INCUBUS IN ARS
MAGICA ... CYBERDARKSPACE .. LOST GODS ...
"AMULET" MOVIE REVIEW... THE WIGHT KING
POEM ... AND MUCH MORE!***

Table of Contents

ADMINISTRIVIA.....	2
EDITORIAL AND COOPERATIVE NEWS.....	2
OUT OF THE ABYSS: PLAYER'S PERSPECTIVES.....	5
CYBERDARKSPACE: SEASON 1.....	10
RELICS DESIGNER'S NOTES.....	15
SUCCUBUS AND INCUBUS FOR ARS MAGICA.....	18
SUPERNATURAL RPG REVIEWS.....	21
PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS: NIGHT SHIFT AND MODERN SUPERNATURAL GAMES.....	33
WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT REVIEWS.....	36
ARALUNE: DEMONIC OFFSPRING OF WITCHES.....	47
GHOST CHARACTERS IN D&D 5e.....	49
BOOK REVIEW: LOST GODS, A NOVEL.....	55
MOVIE REVIEW: AMULET.....	58
THE WIGHT KING.....	61

ADMINISTRIVIA

RPG Review is a quarterly online magazine which is available in print version every so often (e.g., Issues 40 and 44 for RuneQuest Glorantha Con Down Under). All material remains copyright to the authors except for the reprinting as noted in the first sentence. Contact the author for the relevant license that they wish to apply. Various trademarks and images have been used in this magazine of review and criticism. Use of trademarks etc are for fair use and review purposes and are not a challenge to trademarks or copyrights. This includes Dungeons & Dragons by Hasbro, WoTC, TSR etc, Cyberspace and Darkspace by Iron Crown Enterprises, Little Fears by Key20, Relics by TinStar Games, LexOccultum by RiotMinds, Lost Gods by HarperCollins. Amulet movie distributed by Magnolia Pictures. Cover art by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, 'The old woman retrieves her arm' from the series 'New forms of thirty-six ghosts', 1889 (detail) Yürei (Japanese ghost) from the Hyakkai Zukan, ca. 1737". Wight" image Farinata degli Uberti addresses Dante. A Gustave Doré woodcut illustration from *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno: Canto 10*. Bael, Medium woodblock, from J.A.S. Collin de Plancy. Dictionnaire Infernal. Paris: E. Plon, 1863. Page 71. Central Australian landscape from CSIRO ScienceImage 1217 Aerial view of Central Australian landscape.jpg The Zone, image from Tarkovsky's film, Stalker (1979) and Michael Higgins', Roadside Picnic (2010)

EDITORIAL AND COOPERATIVE NEWS

Editorial and Cooperative News

Welcome to the 48th issue of RPG Review, with a central topic of "Supernatural Places and Beings", which of course is very much the staple of fantastic literature, but also, on occasion, in science fiction as well where there is "physics, but not as we know it". Regardless of the genre, throughout these speculative fictions there is usually a sense, place, and beings where otherworldliness exists. Of course, there are limits to what the human imagination can engage in as well on a supernatural level. Consider some of the beings of the Cthulhu mythos; Azathoth, the Blind Idiot God that exists in a black hole in the centre of the galaxy, with the monotonous sounds of piped flutes and "encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers". How can a being exist in the middle of a black hole? Where does the sound come from in the vacuum of space?

OK, these are more distal questions and even the depths of such space is so far removed from one's immediate experience that such questions do not overly challenge one's experiences, even if they do generate cognitive challenges. How about something more visceral? Excuse me for slipping into a roleplaying anecdote, but many years ago I was running a game in "Perilous Lands", the setting for *Powers & Perils*. One of the player characters was trapped in "Oblivion". How was I to describe such a place? I did it primarily by sensory deprivation.

Imagine, if you will, that everything ceases to exist.

If you close your eyes, you can still see sense minuscule quantities of light. But this is was like being in the most pitch darkness. Usually, when one experiences other senses become more acute. But imagine that they are gone as well. There is no sense of smell or taste, not even the moist dank air that usually accompanies such darkness. There are no sounds, no background sounds, not even the sounds of one's breath or heartbeat. You try to call out but there is nothing, not even the driest croak of one's throat. Then is when you realise that there is no sense of touch. Worse still, no body awareness. Not even a sense of heat, or even its absence. Where are your hands, your feet? There is no sense of balance, but no giddiness either. There is no gravity. There is nobody, no body, present. Space itself has disappeared, and you exist in a void.

With no sensory input the mind starts to create some. Random images, deeply embedded in subconscious memories, the most fervent and suppressed beliefs, one's greatest aspirations, one's greatest fears rushing over one, waves of apophenia crashing over one and straining the tenuous grasp of sanity which that tiny portion of the reasoning mind hangs on to the remains of sanity. If one could weep in elation or cry in terror they would. If one could feel exhausted they would. Instead, as the final realisation, there is no time either. An eternal present without a sense of past and future, utterly remorseless and utterly uncontrollable.

Is not the absolute negation of the natural universe the ultimate level of the supernatural? Perhaps this is the extreme. Then I suppose the next step is to rebuild the universe from these principles. Start adding in components to our normal, natural world. But add in some special extras, beings and places which operate beyond, or in an alternative manner, to these rules. Beings and places where the sense of space and time are somehow different are very strong versions of the supernatural; they are "ordering principles" of our natural universe, and where they break down, almost anything can follow.

Once upon a time we would refer to the word "supernatural" in the same way that we often refer to "metaphysics" today; the philosophical grounding and speculation of what is above and beyond our expectations of natural reality. It is more than just magic, although it clearly includes it, but rather also raises fundamental questions about a reality. It is for good reason that the supernatural is associated with various gods, demons, devils, and otherworldly locations.

It is with this perspective that we find the writings for RPG Review issue 48. We start with content directly from gaming groups that are part of the Cooperative, Karl Brown's interview with players in his ongoing "Out of the Abyss", Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition game. This is followed by Andrew Daborn providing plot summaries in scripted form from his CyberDarkSpace campaign, an exciting mash-up of Cyberspace, Dark Space, and Stalkers, all set in central Australia. Following this, Steve Darlington, author of Relics, provides his explanations as designer's notes for a new supernatural-themed RPG.

After that, a piece by myself deriving from medieval theology on how Succubus and Incubus operate; for Ars Magica, because that takes such things seriously. Then a reviews that touch upon the subject matter; from yours truly of very different elaborations; In Nomine, a game of angels and demons, Little Fears, the game of childhood terrors, and LexOccultum, a recent game set (mainly) in an occult-inspired version of 18th century France. But real RPG reviewing awards for this issue go to Timothy S. Brannan, who apart from giving thorough designer's notes for Night Shift, also engages in an exceptional collection of reviews on supplements related to witches and witchcraft for D&D 5e, and a sample character race. Also following on with that game system, Karl Brown provides us some detailed material on ghosts characters.

3 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 48 September 2020

As a new contributor (and the last article submitted), Honigfrosch provides a book review of Lost Gods, by BROM. Supernatural, to be sure, but also catching our attention with the subtitle: "Hell Is A Bad RPG Manual". How can one go past that? The ever-dependable Andrew Moshos has unearthed a topic-appropriate film review with Amulet, and to finish off the issue, and an entirely new contribution, Adam Karlovsky provides a poem entitled "The Wight King".

Now mention must also be made of the next issue of RPG Review (especially considering how late this one is): "Cyberpunk 2020 Conference: Year of the Stainless Steel Rat". The Cooperative is hosting an online convention on Sunday, December 27, 10:00 to 18:00 AEDST ONLINE for panels. 19:00 to 22:30 for gaming sessions. There will be various talks and panels during the day, including author Francesco Verso, author and anthologist Sarena Ulibarri, and game designer Tod Foley (Cyberspace, Watch The World Die, Day Trippers). The timetable for the day follows. What we need you, gentle reader, to do is register at the following URL, and spread the word:

http://mail.rpgreview.net/mailman/listinfo/cyberpunk2020_rpgreview.net

Time	Event	Details
10:00	Introduction	Guest Introductions, What Is/Was Cyberpunk?
11:00	Hackers	"IT Security issues", techniques, protection
12:00	Culture	Literature, Film, Music, Fashion
13:00	Technology	Solarpunk, Biopunk and more
14:00	Politics	Anarchism, Libertarianism, Cypherpunks
15:00	Gaming	Traditional tabletop RPGs, Computer RPGs, etc
17:00	Auction	All sorts of cyberpunk related material
18:00	Break	Get some food, chummer
19:00	Gaming Sessions	Cyberpunk 2020; Shadowrun, Eclipse Phase, Cyberspace
22:30	Conference End	Well, that was a day

Until then, enjoy RPG Review Issue 48!

Lev Lafayette lev@rpgreview.net

4 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 48 September 2020

OUT OF THE ABYSS: PLAYER'S PERSPECTIVES

By Karl David Brown, C.S., Liz, Phil Price, and Bill Fahey

The bulk of this article is an interview with my players that is effectively a review of Out of the Abyss from the player's perspective. This article also provides an overview of the first half of Out of the Abyss, discusses the strategy used to sustain a long campaign.

CAUTION SPOILERS

If you are playing this adventure, or would like to some day, you should stop reading now.

The Adventure

At session 35 my group has just passed the half-way point of *Out of the Abyss*, one of the large hardcover adventure books from WOTC. *Out of the Abyss* is an adventure that mostly takes place in the extensive caves beneath the Forgotten Realms setting known as the Underdark. The adventure has supernatural horror themes. **I tried to run the adventure 'as written' as much as possible with only minor changes to account for my PC's actions. I pre-rolled the random encounters before sessions and did my best to explain what was rolled.** There are plenty of reviews of this book out there if you want more background. Briefly, in the first half of the adventure the players begin as prisoners in a small drow outpost. The drow are evil underground elves. They escape and travel the Underdark as a sandbox visiting settlements in any order. At first, they must just survive and are pursued by their captors. Later they become local heroes of the gnome city of Blingdenstone. During their travels they eventually confront their captors and discover that demons and even Demon Lords have inexplicably appeared in the Underdark. Eventually, they find a route to the surface to get home and warn the surface world about the demons.

To begin Part 2 the players should be 8th level. If they are not the referee is instructed to raise their level to 8 or to add some adventures on the surface. My players flat out refused to visit one of the locations, Gracklstugh, so they are not 8th. It seemed logical to create a few adventures to complete quests the player themselves invented during the first half, account for travel out of the wilds, and link the two parts together. These interim sessions are not out of the book. We are currently part-way through this interval in Longsaddle, which is not in the adventure as written.

The Set-up.

Except one, players were strangers recruited from the Facebook group of a local game store. Recruitment was continuous, in that new players were always welcome to respond to the session event invites. However, there was a maximum of six seats per session and preference went to players who had been to the most previous sessions. As expected, this produced a core of long-term players and allowed for new recruits when an existing player was no longer able to attend. We even had players return after long absences. All new players were given a 'session zero' induction to set expectations and orient them.

All players had two characters but only one was ever active during a session. Since this was a multi-year playtest of races produced with my "Tinker's Toolkit Race Design" (available on the DM's Guild) each player had a character from one of my races and one that was from a WOTC core book. At every session half of the characters had to be WOTC canon and the other half races of my design. Some characters were Underdark natives.

Since Out of the Abyss has a horror survival theme and we play without the referee fudging the dice, PC deaths were expected. Therefore, experience points are assigned to the player not the character. New characters have the player's experience points and level. About halfway through the first half, after consultation, we ruled that regardless of experience points no character could be a lower level than two levels below the highest active character. The combination of rules for seat allocation and experience points was designed to incentivise players to attend as many sessions as they could.

Player interviews

The responding players and the sessions they played were:

Liz. 1, 2, 28, 29, 30, 32-35.

C.S. 1-12, 15, 16, 18-22, 24-35

Phil Price. 2-28, 30-35

Bill Fahey. 29-33, 35

Instructions

I'd like to ask you all a few questions about the adventure so far. This will be published as a kind of review of Out of the Abyss to help folks thinking about running or playing it if it is for them. I'll publish your name and which sessions you went to. Let me know if you want your name withheld.

In sessions 1-3 the PCs began as prisoners. If you were there, how did it go? If you weren't how do you feel about starting off like that?

Liz. I thought it was an entertaining way to bring the different characters together and an efficient way to get them to work together against a common enemy. From what I remember it went, er, pretty well... That is, with a certain amount of chaos but most of us got out in the end.

C.S. I think we (the players) were disorganised so it took us way too long to escape. We probably could have and should have done it in one session with one escape attempt. My first PC, a deep gnome rogue, got caught stealing while doing his slave work assignment in the kitchen and ended up being fed to the spiders. He probably should have surrendered rather than try to fight the guards with his stolen chicken bone or whatever it was. My second PC, his conveniently almost-identical twin brother survived all the way until we left Blingdenstone, where he retired from adventuring as a local hero.

Phil Price. I missed the 1st session but the party was still in the cell. I thought it was a useful way of building tension and orientating the players to working with the NPCs. And getting to know the other players as well. This game is about survival and that is clear from the beginning.

Bill Fahey. It would have been a really interesting way to start things off. Not the normal at all.

During much of the campaign you were accompanied by numerous NPCs. What were the pro's and cons of all these extras?

Liz. Pros: Another source of player motivation.

Cons: Remembering them all and remembering to take them into account when planning some nonsense manoeuvre.

C.S. The NPCs were probably intended by the OOTA authors to be a way in to the various Underdark cities but didn't really serve that purpose for our group since our party had several PCs with non-canon races that mostly came from the Underdark.

IMO the NPCs were OK at first but became a significant drain on xp gained (until we banned them from participating in fights) and a very very very long extended escort mission. Which has kind of finished now that we've delivered Elspeth to Longsaddle, but we somehow managed to get ourselves another escort mission delivering the deep gnomes to the Dwarven city even before that finished.

I don't think there were any actual pros to keeping them around. They weren't even much use for gathering food as we travelled or keeping watch when camping. And we had to keep them protected and fed along the way.

The delusional quaggoth Derendil was an exception. He could fight. Shame he got turned into a statue by the medusa later in Blingdenstone.

Phil Price. The NPCs gave some initial increased survivability to the party.

Turning down the wrong tunnel didn't mean instant death. And they gave some Underdark info for the surface dwellers. At some point, our group of players worked out that the player characters could handle business without the NPCs and loss of XPs. And that was Ok. We did have some fun with one murderous NPC - a bit of chaos.

Bill Fahey. For the above ground section they have been helpful to manage the beasts of burden carrying all of the loot!

DM's note. Some canon characters like the deep gnomes were also Underdark natives. OotA also has Underdark background options players can take yet the story tends to assume the PCs are surface dwellers trying to get home. Not all random travel encounters have to be fights. My players chose to help escaped human slaves, including Elspeth, to the surface and a group of deep gnome traders who had gotten into trouble. Returning these random encounters to their homes actually became a major mission in our group although it does not appear in the book.

There is a lot of travelling in Out of the Abyss. What do you think about sessions where you were travelling between the cities of the Underdark?

Liz. My character is very curious about the world and does not mind the travelling. And there are many exciting encounters along the way.

Out of the Abyss is written to have survival and supernatural horror themes. Do you think these themes come through during play?

Liz. I think so.

C.S. Not really. Maybe a little in Neverlight Grove. Those mushroom zombies were creepy.

Phil Price. The horror themes were present. In our game, a number of players were playing Underdark races. At different stages, I was playing a roctopus cleric and then a grimlock ranger. Just like home for these guys.

Bill Fahey. From what I've seen on the above ground section making our way towards Gaultgrym I can see the underlying tones. The release of the demons and the impending feeling of escalation is slowly brewing.

DM's note. A rocktopus is a cave dwelling air-breathing octopus. Grimlocks and roctopi PC races were designed with the *Tinker's Toolkit Race Design* and will appear in a future publication.

Speaking of horror, were you at Sloopbludop city of the kuo toa? If so what is your strongest memory of that fish-folk city? If you were not there what was the scariest encounter you've had?

Liz. I was not at the city, but the encounter with the green dragon was epic. My character was terrified and could only watch helplessly, which was fine since there was pretty much nothing they could do anyway.

C.S. I remember being captured by one group of fishmen and forced to participate in disrupting the opposing group's ritual - by pretending to be sacrifice victims with our weapons etc hidden - that ended up summoning Leemogoogoo (aka Demogorgon). and then running in terror to escape the destruction of the city when the demon arrived.

Phil Price. That was my scariest encounter. Just run away! And running away wasn't fun. My roctopus cleric was the slowest member of the party.

DM's Note. I roleplayed the fish-folk with a funny gurgling voice, a mouth full of spit, and drift in pronounciations. Demogorgon is a Demon Lord.

When the drow slaver's caught up with you again it soon became obvious that the party was out-gunned. However, the players refused to run, like the writers expected. If you were there how did that work out for you? If you weren't there how likely would you be to run from overwhelming odds? Why?

Liz. Sorry, I wasn't there for that session. I think I'm likely to run from even fairly decent odds, I'm a flumph cleric!

C.S. I think we all assumed we were dead anyway, so we may as well go down fighting. Also, we didn't think we'd be able to manage a fourth escape attempt. It was an extremely difficult and tense fight right up until the last round where either survival or complete failure depended on whether our quaggoth Derendil or the drow priestess were killed. Our quaggoth won, captured the priestess, and forced her to raise dead on us.

IMO, it was the best fight of the entire campaign so far. I would have been happy with it even if it ended up in a TPK (but much happier that it didn't 😊)

Phil Price. After escaping the Demogorgon and wandering the Underdark, our party was feeling frustrated. We weren't in a mood to run away. Being blasted from distance by a wand of gloop was tricky but a darkness spell forced some hand-to-hand combat. In the end, after some party member deaths, our quoggoth companion was hanging on to and battering a levitating mage. I agree. This was edge of the seat stuff.

DM's note: The flumph PC race is given in short form in *The Tinker's Toolkit Race Design*. A quoggoth is an underground ape-folk. Since everyone had two characters, the other assumed to be scouting other tunnels etc, a total party kill in one session would not end the campaign. Additionally, perhaps there is a hidden price to Lolth bringing you back to life...

Were you at Neverlight Grove? If so, do you want to talk about it or will that trigger a flash-back? If you were not there how do you feel about surreal-horror adventures?

Liz. Again, I missed that session. Surreal-horror is cool but I expect that it would be more work for the DM to create the requisite atmosphere.

C.S. I think we were largely treating it as a big fight that we could maybe win if we just fought long enough, that we could somehow save Neverlight Grove for the uninfected myconids by disrupting the demon queen's "wedding" ceremony.

It took us way too long to realise that the endless waves of infected fungus zombies really were endless, that we had no chance against the fungus demon queen (Zuggtmoy?) and that our only hope was to gather the uninfected myconids and escape with them to find a new home for them.

Phil Price. This was a fun place. Definite horror themes. Always a risk of infection and who wants to be turned into a mindless zombie? My character was a masked grimlock ranger armed with a couple of xbows. *Spike growth* and *missile fire* could mow down many zombies from a distance. But they kept coming. We escaped with refugee myconids just in time. No flashbacks yet.

DM's Note. *Spike growth* is a spell.

The party spent a lot of time in Blingdenstone eventually becoming heroes of that town. If you were there, do you feel a connection to that place and what was your favourite scene there? If you were not there what was your favourite location so far?

Liz. I was not there, but I did enjoy the Harpells.

C.S. My PC, Dibble Seamfinder, was a deep gnome rogue from Blingdenstone, so he was a native. I missed some of the sessions there (IIRC both of the fights with the pudding king, maybe more) but did enough there to become a hero of the city.

Dunno if i can pick a favourite session there, there was lots of good adventuring around. Some of this I played with my main PC Dibble, some I played with my alternate non-canonical race PC (a sprite druid called Fox Moonbottom, who became my main PC after I retired Dibble when the party left the underdark).

Fave scene Was probably getting the stone blessing after solving some of Blingdenstone's major problems.

Because Dibble was a local, I got stuck with most of the interaction with Blingdenstone notables, even though charisma checks were decidedly not his strength....certainly no great successes but fortunately, he did not fail them too badly.

Phil Price. Our party spent a number of sessions at and around Blingdonstone. There were player and party member changes and we lost some NPCs My roctopus (A nature cleric from the depths. Known as Clamps to the party) died in an epic battle where The Pudding King was killed. His last thoughts were "Oh no! Slimes can climb walls !" Surrounded by a room full of slimes, there was no way out unless you are a flying pixie. I enjoyed the whole Blingdonstone part of this campaign. The Neverlight Grove adventure was a Blingdonstone quest.

DM's Note. Elspeth the rescued random encounter human in our campaign owned a farm in Longsaddle so my players decided to take her home. Longsaddle is home to the Harpell clan of wizards beloved by the Forgotten Realms fan-base. I built encounters in the town and used a modified version of *Into Ivy Mansion* by M.T. Black available on the DM's Guild.

Is there anything else you want to talk about from this adventure?

Liz. I can't believe my flumph character has survived this long!

C.S. I don't really have anything else specific to say about OOTA, just a general comment that while I have greatly enjoyed the game (and still do), I much prefer an open world or west marches type campaign, and am not a huge fan of WOTC's epic "save the world from the monster of the year again" campaigns. But I know that's a lot more work for the DM.

I also prefer low to medium level games (say, 1st up to 10th) and suspect that higher level play will be less fun with overpowered PCs vs overpowered monsters...but the high levels are kind of essential in a campaign like OOTA where the intention is for the PCs to rise from 1st to 20th level.

DM's Note. *Out of the Abyss* takes the characters from 1st level to 15th but I will keep the game going to 20th.

CYBERDARKSPACE: SEASON 1

By Andrew Daborn, Simon Stainsby, Rodney Brown, Michael Cole, Gene Korolew, and Lev Lafayette



Pilot Episode – Coming soon on CyberDarkSpace!

* Establishing close in shot of chrome skyscraper lobby bustling with suits and tradies. Subtext reads: Capital Accumulates Tower, Alice Springs - Mparntwe, 04/06/90

* Interior of cool, white office. HOPE Barcelona, a tall, suited woman gestures to Wallace WALLAROO Namatjira, a frail suited man, to leave.

HOPE - Go get your team. You've got four weeks before the execs arrive. By then I want a full report on the Zone!

* Camera pans out of the office dramatically, taking in the huge, but unfinished skyscraper. It's one of many in the centre of a sprawling Alice Springs. At the view pulls up where the mountains should be is what looks like a long static coloured rain storm. Subtext reads: West MacDonnell Ranges - Tjoritija, The Zone.

* Exterior shot of 'Dingo's Discount Army Surplus Emporium'. Out walk Steven BUDDHA Walker and David JONES, two tall techies carrying a large tent, several metal detectors and more night vision goggles on their heads than necessary to load up a battered land cruiser outside.

* Shot of a sleek hovercar with Joanne BOMBER Lancaster, a broad shouldered jillaroo in the back seat. She is pulling up topographic maps of the West MacDonnell Ranges on a laptop, a large hunting rifle by her side.

* External shot, the bush at night. Everyone is standing in mid-ground staring intently towards camera. There is a haze in the air. Vance CANCER Derling, a disturbingly gaunt and pale figure, walks towards the camera. Before he gets there he is thrown upwards by an unseen force, landing several meters away with a scream.

Episode 1, previously -

* External shot, the bush at night. A number of dead dingoes lie around the stalkers as their guns smoke.

WALLAROO - Stick a couple of them in the back of the truck for HOPE.

* External shot, the bush at night. BUDDHA, sneaking stops suddenly looking at some huts in the distance.

BUDDHA – Zombies!

* Wipe to campfire with HELEN BAKK, HOLLY POLITE, AUNTIE MATTER and a slab of beer. Fabulously cyberized, chromed and bedazzled they welcome the others.

HELEN BAKK – Stalkers actually...Well, and artists. We've got a gig at the Golden Showers on Friday at ten! But nothing pays the bills like a night in the Zone!

* External shot, the bush at night. Wooden shelter near the campfire is overgrown in an odd mossy substance.

BOMBER pokes it with a stick and it rapidly grows down the stick after her. She screams.

* Slash cut to CANCER running screaming through bush.

* Slash cut to BUDDHA screaming and struggling to get his moss covered shirt off.

Episode 2, previously -

* Exterior shot, early morning in the suburban sprawl. TANISHA, a hooded teen perched on a fence, looks indignantly at BUDDHA, currently naked apart from a tarpaulin and bright red.

TANISHA - What the bloody hell happened to you?

BUDDHA - Er... do you know anyone who can help?

* Exterior shot of small weatherboard medical clinic. Outside stands a tall, jaundice man in a dusty lab-coat and a toothy grin waving at the camera.

TANISHA (voiceover) - DR KEEL, my uncle works for him. He's a specialist in what comes out of the Zone.

* Interior of surgery. In background are many glass jars with a variety of insectoid and deep sea creatures suspended in liquid. In the foreground is a restrained BUDDHA. Still grinning Dr KEEL takes a beetle from a jar and approaches BUDDHA.

TANISHA (voiceover) - Bloody weird though.

* Exterior, split screen. BOMBER and her corporate contact, JACKSON.

JACKSON - Got a job for you, take a parcel from Yosef downtown to me. Don't worry about the rioters.

* External shot, the bush at night. From a distance the stalkers gaze on a toilet shack with a ray of light emanating from the outside wall to the ground. JONES traces a rapidly clicking Geiger counter on it.

JONES It's hot!

WALLAROO - Unlimited power!

Episode 3, previously -

* External shot, the bush. The next night. From a distance the stalkers gaze on a dunny with a ray of light emanating from the outside wall to the ground. This time they have radiation tags and heavily modified Esky.

* Interior of brightly lit dunny. BUDDHA reaches for a fist of amber off a slant of light arcing into the wall. Blood trickles from a nostril.

BUDDHA - A little closer...

* Interior shot of HOPE's office in disarray. Table on side, floor and walls daubed in blood and an aircon vent torn out of the wall. HOPE stands in the centre shouting into a commlink.

HOPE What do you mean the specimen got out? It was dead!

* Exterior shot, campsite. JONES and CANCER very carefully gather up some 'wiry moss' from a wooden table.

* Exterior shot, the bush, night. A deep red glow lies eastward. The ground of this hellscape is cracked with fiery fissures and there is a dull roar of flame. Twisted tree trunks like discarded wire litter the floor.

WALLAROO - Let's go there!

* Close up of BOMBER, surrounded by heat haze. The jet engine roar is louder now. BOMBER very carefully reaches

for something out of camera view and suddenly a burst of flame obscures her.

* Shot in interior of lead and dirt lined Esky. Two glowing lumps of matter and a tightly sealed glass jar lie inside. A moss begins to creep from under the lid.

Episode 4, previously -

* Close up of WALLAROO's Casio digital watch 'WED - 07 06:52:26'. Camera zooms out to interior of BOMBER's cab, then out to external shot of the stalkers driving down Nanatajira highway back to the sprawling Alice Springs with dawn breaking behind it, a trail of smoke rising from CapAcc Tower.

* Establishing shot of abandoned hotel followed by interior shot of wine cellar/ makeshift CapAcc base of operations. Suits everywhere. HOPE has set up a desk a midst the chaos.

HOPE - Xenophile hippies blew a hole in our tower... Thanks for the artifacts and your report, here's you payout.

* HazMat suits walk BUDDHA to the 'quarantine' coal cellar as the others give up samples of blood.

HOPE - ...and get me back BUDDHA's blood from DR KEEL!

* CANCER hitting the early morning streets croissant and short black in hand, asking for info on the bombing. Informants shake heads.*

* Establishing shot - Dr Keel's Clinic. Seemingly unoccupied with JONES dressed as a sparkie casing the joint.

* Large front window shatters as BOMBER reverses into it in BUDDHA's ute. CANCER leaps into the flatbed grasping a bundle of sample tubes. Wheels sequel as the ute heads off with a heavily jaundice man in a dusty lab coat firing at the departing CANCER, an unusually dark shadow in the clinic behind him.

KEEL - Stop thief! Come back!

* Establishing shot of hotel, different from the previous one but no better presented. Sign outside says 'Todd River Basin Hotel.' Screen subtitle reads 'Sammy's Bar'*

* Interior of dilapidated and grimly bar. Sammy is cleaning glasses in the background and the stalkers are crowded around a wrinkled Anglo woman in cargo pants, vest and digger hat.

DALBY - You want a guide? That's \$2000 each, \$1000 up front. Or \$500 and keep my glass full for a consult..."

Episode 5, previously -

* Interior of a dive bar. WALLAROO is hunched over an older scarred man,

GARRISON - It's called Black Pudding see! Those kids from that weird church asked me to train them up on blowing stuff up!

* Evening. Exterior shot of a dilapidated Coles store, Pink neon reads 'CHURCH OF UNIVERSAL REASON' CANCER and JONES approach.

* Interior of Church of Universal Reason. DR KEEL and two menacing leather-clad figures lean over CANCER.

KEEL - Join us! We have the answers to all societies' ills! The Zone will set you free!

CANCER - No, the answer lies at the heart of the Zone!

* Interior, JONES' studio lit by the laptop. Store layout diagrams for the old Coles building appear on the screen. Text doc also open shows long list of company names with 'SHELL' written next to each. Underneath is written 'Wesfarmers?'

* Interior, BOMBER reads a book on the Burke and Wills expedition, frowns...

* Interior of coal shed, empty. Open door reveals confused guard looking at rapidly departing BUDDHA.

BUDDHA - Got to go, date night! Back later!

* Split-screen of HOPE and WALLAROO.

WALLAROO - Yeah, I've got his coordinates.

* Interior of a CapAcc secure cell. BUDDHA looks nervous.

* Night. Exterior shot of CapAcc Tower. Explosion rocks building followed by gunfire.

* Dark interior of office building fitted with basic medical equipment. CANCER wakes, moving oddly with a swollen belly he makes for the door...

Episode 6, previously -

* Underground in undisclosed location on the edge of the Alice Springs sprawl.

HOPE - I want proof as to who is behind this cult and the bombings!

* Hope pulls a dusty tarp aside revealing a battered military-grade jetpack

HOPE - Here's your distraction.

* Exterior shot

WALLAROO - Don't worry, I've got a plan.

* Shopping and gearing up montage!

* Exterior of Church of Universal Reason. Camera pans over rooftop and we see a jetpack wearing figure clinging to a skylight. WALLAROO is just inside the building with a large group of leather-clad cultists around him

WALLAROO - Tell me more of the liturgical symbology of your vestments...

* Camera tracks back and we see JONES walk straight past the distracted congregation and activates the fire control panel.

* CANCER sneaks past JONES, barely visible, as the roar of the sprinkler system and the peel of the fire alarm force everyone else out of the building.

* Interior of a guarded basement, DR KEEL cackles as he unveils an alien in an aquarium before BUDDHA and other cowering 'experiments'. Water pools around everyone's ankles as the sprinklers erupt.

KEEL - Speak! What does it say?

ALIEN - Freedom!

* Interior of Church of Universal Reason warehouse. JONES barricades a door with a pile of trolleys frustrating the cultists.

* Underground in a guarded basement. Glass shatters and the alien escapes as CANCER enters the room. Guns flash. KEEL falls and the others run out, BUDDHA pausing to hip-throw a guard.

* Exterior of Church of Universal Reason warehouse. WALLAROO and the H&SO are waving clipboards at cultists.

WALLAROO - Don't re-enter the building yet! Wait for a fire officer!

* Underground in a flooded tunnel. The ALIEN disappears down a drain in the floor as the others run up the stairs.

* Interior of Church of Universal Reason warehouse. Cultists break past barricade to confront the team, until BOMBER, wearing a jetpack, smashes through the skylight spraying glass and exhaust gasses everywhere.

* Panicked expression on BOMBER's face.

* Exterior shot of Church of Universal Reason warehouse. Explosion. Smoke billows out of door and skylight. Slightly singed JONES, BOMBER, CANCER and BUDDHA sprint away.

WALLAROO - I told you.

FIN

Next season on Cyber Dark Space!

* Interior of cool, white office. HOPE and WALLAROO face off across a desk.

HOPE - You're a loose cannon Namatjira!

* Exterior skyscraper. CANCER is defenestrated from an impossible height in a shower of glass.

* Close shot of BUDDHA holding two fingers to his temple. He looks to camera as SFX mind-whammy rays radiate from his head.

* Exterior battlefield. JONES and BOMBER fire unnecessarily large belt fed machine guns while chewing on cigars. Explosions in background.

Credits roll.



RELICS DESIGNER'S NOTES

By Steve Dee

As a younger person I could never quite understand the rapid pace of output from the artists I would read about. It would seem at one moment they would be promoting their new movie and then barely a few months later they would be rumoured to be in pre-production for the next. What of course I was missing was the long cycle of post-production. This is a round-about way of saying that the last word of Relics was written almost two years ago, and that was the third rewrite. I am now mired in a game that will come out next year. I wonder if I even remember what Relics is about, let alone how what I was thinking when I made it?

I must try, nevertheless. You want to know where I got my ideas. Which ideas came easy and quickly, which came later. Which were hard to find and which were discarded on the path to the mountain. It is of course, even if I could remember, no simple calculus. No straight line of cause and effect, of destination and arrival.

I can tell you Relics began when I was about six years old and I saw an angel in a school nativity play, and they had a sword and the amazing authority that a nine year old has when you are six. I can tell you that Relics began when I read the Grant Morrison run on *Hellblazer* and felt like his take on Gabriel was just mean-spirited, with no other moral but to taint the idea that people can be morally good, simply because Morrison has beef with god-botherers. I can tell you that Relics began when I was several splat-books deep in research for a freelance job for White Wolf and thought to myself “this would be a million times easier if I had my own setting so I could make things up instead of looking them up in extremely dense books.” I’ve never been good at research.

Those origin stories are all equally true, but the first time the original ideas for Relics as a setting were born was when I had the privilege of living in and travelling across Europe in 2002 and 2003. Studying art history by being among it gives you a wonderful sense of how ancient some of the surviving ideas are, and how each new religion draws on the ones before, with symbolism folding back and back on each other. It was there that I fell in love with the tetramorph – the lion, the bull, the eagle, the man – and how those four symbolic angels had been repurposed as the figures of the writers of the New Testament’s Gospel. But it wasn’t until I was working on *Vampire: The Requiem* supplements in 2010 that I began writing down the basic concepts. The earliest file in my hard drive dates from 2012. Overall, the elements were mostly all in place by that point: fallen angels trapped on earth, and God sealing the gates of Heaven forever when She departed. Disconnected from their purpose, lacking in some part of themselves, they have to create their own meaning in a world that is alien to them.

The problem I have with setting design however is what I call the verbs. Nouns are easy, nouns are a bunch of people and organisations and rules and rule-breakers standing around in a room trying not to kill each other until they can be sure they’ll survive. That’s relatively easy setting design, at least for me. And plenty of games take that kind of approach: they are games that are descriptive of a world, leaving the players and storytellers to figure out what stories to tell. I however am a more practical man who likes his games to be not just a world but a clear kind of story, with structure and intent. One key thing that makes D&D so successful is that it’s always pretty clear what you’re trying to do: go into holes in the ground, kill things in the hole, take their stuff, buy healing potions, repeat. *Call of Cthulhu* has always had a key structure as well: find dead relative, go to library, see tentacles, die. It took me a few years to find the verbs for Relics.

The answer was, surprisingly, in the television show *Leverage*, which is why the book is dedicated to the show’s creator John Rogers. I’ve always adored the heist genre, and it was instantly, obviously, the correct fit. If angels had been on earth forever, then they might find all their great and powerful tools had already been caught and catalogued, hidden in museums or warehouses and waiting to be stolen. Books like *Foucault’s Pendulum* and films like *Hudson Hawk* and *Indiana Jones* are all on the same principle: that museums hold the secrets.

It seems obvious; it always does in retrospect. In fact, the game was called Relics long before historical relics even appeared. (The original title was Reliquary but it was too hard to say; we also added “A Game of Angels” when we had to keep explaining it at conventions.) The idea of the name came from the theme of the game: of being forgotten, discarded, left to be just a memory, just history.

The link to *Leverage* was cemented when I worked on the *Cortex Hackers Guide* in 2014. I was called in to work on the Cortex Action rules which had appeared in the Leverage RPG. One of my jobs was to provide a setting where Cortex action suited; I submitted a stripped-down human-focussed version of Relics. At that point, I thought it was all I’d use the idea for. It tends to be how freelancing goes: you have a million ideas in your head already and you throw them out the best fit for the gig in question.

But afterwards I did begin writing rules for a Cortex game using the setting. It was going to be a Cortex setting for the longest time, using that systems idea of taking a die from several different categories to assemble your die pool for each test. This was about time that the tetramorph became the four key stats I wanted to use. At one point you were even rolling your Lion or your Eagle. I also had five stats built around angelic powers, such as Fire, Wings, Sword, Choir and Miracle.

One idea that I really liked in early versions was that angels had an inherent disability that marked them as fallen. In the final game this is just a cosmetic aspect of your character but in the Cortex rules I was originally going to cut out one entire statistic for each player. Some angels had no wings and could not fly. Some could no longer conjure fire. Some could no longer perform miracles. The idea was this would drive these loner types to depend on each other, and carry a sense of being broken, of not working properly. These angels were disconnected from heaven, and I wanted that to really hit players hard. To have a spot on your character sheet with an X through it, telling you that you could never do that thing. My own disability was part of that idea, trying to bring forth that sense of being cut off from something everyone else finds natural. That idea never made it, but you can see an echo of it in how only the Aryeh have the flaming sword, and so on.

The game went onto the back burner for a while when Shadow of the Demon Lord by Rob Schwalb came out. I really enjoy that game and its system, and wrote for it a lot. I think it does so much of what makes traditional RPGs so great in a much simpler, cleaner, more efficient way. It also came with four stats and four core classes, which are as much about play style and party composition than they are simulation, carrying that echo of party roles that was in 4E D&D. In my head, Relics reared back up again: I could link each class to each facet of the tetramorph. Plus the setting (and Rob Schwalb’s ethos) was dripping with religious ideas and influence. While I was working on supplements for that game, I pitched Relics to Rob as a game using his system. He was quite keen on the idea and in particular, with working with me. I think that Rob said that was why any of this happened. Rob believed in it, and that was enough.

Of course, the final game doesn’t use the Demon Lord system or anything like it. Something happened on the way to heaven, to quote Phil Collins. I wrote the first few chapters, and all of character generation, and much of the back story. I laid out the book and the contents, wrote some fiction. I even launched the game at a con with donated art, so I was here and ready to go. Now it was time to write the rules for each class. And it was an impasse. It became instantly clear I had neither aptitude nor desire to write any kind of crunchy rules text, nor to balance them or anything else. Something was missing.

For much of my life, I’ve run into this problem over and over again, feeling like I have only half the required skills or gifts. I’m great at making settings. I’m so good at it I wrote one a month for four years as a magazine column. But I can’t do rules. Can’t do fiction either, much (or so I thought). And there’s no money or even audience in worlds without games or fiction.

With a part missing, I appealed to my friends. Surely, I thought, somebody wants to be a co-designer? But nobody really did and to be honest, I am not someone really given to cooperation. Relics was perhaps doomed to fail because I was missing a vital piece, some element shut off to me forever more, because I just wasn’t good enough.

Of course, there was a happy ending when like a thunderbolt I realised the system in *Alas Vegas* was perfect for what I want to do. Again, the match seems obvious with hindsight. And so easy to bring together. Everything looks simple, easy and obvious after it's done. But it was a long shot that took forever to find and seemed, so often, to be impossible and out of reach.

I also discovered that although nobody really wanted to join up with me to co-design, as soon as I started leading, people were eager to follow. Because once you can see the path, it seems a lot easier. Some of us though, aren't born to just follow. Some of us, when the doors to the next world seem to close, have to reimagine a world anew, because there isn't one that suits us to be found. Sometimes where we feel like we do not belong, it is because we are becoming something new. When we feel like we've lost connection, we find our own meaning.

Where do I get my ideas, people ask. I say: Relics is an autobiography.



SUCCUBUS AND INCUBUS FOR ARS MAGICA

By Lev Lafayette

It was Thomas Aquinas classified miracles into the three categories of being "above nature", "beyond nature", and "against nature", and in doing so both drew a distinction between the natural and supernatural, but also established the foundations of the metaphysical relationship between miracles that come from God and those from the Devil. Elaborating on the difference is the foundation of the relation between the Succubi, the Incubi and their human victims. Whilst the in-game statistical information is designed for Ars Magica (specifically the 5th edition) it is easily adapted to any other RPG which uses European Christian theology of some sort as a metaphysical principle for the game setting.

Why is this important? Because what we are dealing with in discussing Succubi and Incubi is an expression of the fundamental differences in supernatural powers that come from the angelic compared to the demonic. Certainly, there is plentiful historical references that places the demons in European speculative fiction. Here is a reference from Augustine:

"There is, too, a very general rumor, which many have verified by their own experience, or which trustworthy persons who have heard the experience of others corroborate, that sylvans and fauns, who are commonly called 'incubi,' had often made wicked assaults upon women, and satisfied their lust upon them; and that certain devils, called Duses by the Gauls, are constantly attempting and effecting this impurity is so generally affirmed, that it were impudent to deny it."

-- Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XV, Chapter 23

Augustine, in *The City of God*, is arguing against Roman pagans who saw their current misfortunes as a result of Christianity being made a state religion. Drawing upon the practises of certain mythological beings and assigning them to demonic titles is part of that marketing. But at this point we do not see why, apart from 'satisfying their lust' that incubi would engage in such a practise. For that we have to turn to Aquinias.

*"Still if some are occasionally begotten from demons, it is not from the seed of such demons, nor from their assumed bodies, but from the seed of men taken for the purpose; as when the demon assumes first the form of a woman, and afterwards of a man; just as they take the seed of other things for other generating purposes, as Augustine says (*De Trin. iii*), so that the person born is not the child of a demon, but of a man."*

-- Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, Part I, Question 51, Article 3

This is quite important. At first, the Succubus, a demon in a female form, to posseses their victim and engage in sexual intercourse with them. Actually, the writings of the time from the victims often state that they simply couldn't move (you know, sleep paralysis), but when coupled (ahh, the puns) with dreams of intercourse, it can be suggested that the demons are not taking "no" for an answer. Indeed, in most cases they probably don't even have the honour and respect to ask the question.

However, this is only half of the story. The Succubus does this in order to collect "the seed" (to use the religious vernacular) from their human victim. Then, safely stored, the same demon transforms into an male-form Incubus to impregnate another human victim and thus provide for a pregnancy mediated by the demons. Why on earth would demons engage in such a convulated practise? The answer for this is found in *The Malleus Maleficarum*:

"But it may be argued that devils take their part in this generation not as the essential cause, but as a secondary and artificial cause, since they busy themselves by interfering with the process of normal copulation and conception, by obtaining human semen, and themselves transferring it...."

Therefore bodies which are assumed in this way cannot either beget or bear.

18 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 48 September 2020

Yet it may be said that these devils assume a body not in order that they may bestow life upon it, but that they may by the means of this body preserve human semen, and pass the semen on to another body....

Secondly, it is true that to procreate a man is the act of a living body. But when it is said that devils cannot give life, because that flows formally from the soul, it is true; but materially life springs from the semen, and an Incubus devil can, with God's permission, accomplish this by coition. And the semen does not so much spring from him, as it is another man's semen received by him for this purpose (see S. Thomas, I. 51, art. 3). For the devil is Succubus to a man, and becomes Incubus to a woman. In just the same way they absorb the seeds of other things for the generating of various things, as S. Augustine says, de Trinitate 3."

-- The Malleus Maleficarum, Part I, Question III

According to the theological principles, it is only through the Creator that life my form. Devils just don't have the capacity to engage in mundane, let alone supernatural, miracles of creation. They can only destroy, not create. Whilst there is a plentiful supply of humans who turn towards evil, they are still empowered with the power of the creation of human life. The Succubi-Incubi can only steal and transmit.

Now, I know that some of you might be thinking this is a fine excuse on why the child of the young Élise the Milkmaid looks a lot like the strapping-fit Jean-Luc the Stablehand, when she is married to someone else. But medieval stories being what they are, under some strong questioning it will be revealed that Jean-Luc will agree that he was seduced by a Succubi, and indeed a red-faced Élise will give the other half of the story with her nocturnal experiences with the Incubi. "The Devil made us do it!"

It is worth pointing out that the Succubi and Incubi can be quite selective in their victims. They do want the human seed to be very strong and undergo the experience of percolating through a demon body for a while. It is the young, healthy, and fertile that is desired. Oh, and for what it's worth, sex with demons is awesome.

"...the children thus begotten by Incubi are tall, very hardy and bold, very proud and wicked. Thus writes Maluenda; as for the cause, he gives it from Vallesius, Archphysician in Reggio: "What Incubi introduce into the womb, is not any ordinary human semen in normal quantity, but abundant, very thick, very warm, rich in spirits and free from serosity. This, moreover, is an easy thing for them, since they merely have to choose ardent, robust men, whose semen is naturally very copious, and with whom the Succubus has connection, and then women of a like constitution, with whom the incubus copulates, taking care that both shall enjoy a more than normal orgasm, for the more abundant is the semen the greater the venereal excitement." Those are the words of Vallesius, confirmed by Maluenda who shows, from the testimony of various Authors, mostly classical, that such associations gave birth to: Romulus and Remus, according to Livy and Plutarch... Plato the Philosopher, according to Diogenes Laertius and Saint Hieronymus; Alexander the Great, according to Plutarch and Quintus-Curtius... the emperor Cæsar Augustus, according to Suetonius... as also Merlin or Melchin the Englishman, born from an Incubus and a nun, the daughter of Charlemagne..."

-- Father Ludovicus Maria Sinistrari de Ameno, Demoniality, or Incubi and Succubi

Sample in-game information for Ars Magica, 5th edition. Characters will have additional abilities to those listed. Many will make use of Intellego Imaginem, and Muto Mentum spells to further enhance their abilities to seduce.

Succubus/Incubus

Infernal Might Corpus (20)

Characteristics: Int +1, Per +2, Pre +3, Com +3, Str +1, Sta +2, Dex +1, Qik +1, Siz 0, Age n/a, Confidence 1(3)

Virtues and Flaws: Lustful +3, Calculating +2, Charming +1

Reputations: None

Combat: None, unless armed.

Soak: 0, unless wearing armour.

Fatigue Levels: OK, 0, -1, -3, -5, Unconscious

Wound Penalties: -1 (1-5), -3 (6-10), -5 (11-15), Incapacitated 16-20

Abilities: Athletics 8 (especially of the "paired" variety), Awareness 4, Charm 10, Craft ("lovecraft") 8, Guile 8, Intrigue 5, Medicine 4 (especially ovulation cycles).

Powers:

Change Sex: 0 points, Init +0, Corpus.

Transform Seed: Something like a charged item (p96 core rules), something like a potion, the Demonic ability of Transform Seed requires the Succubus to hold human seed four phases of the moon, and then transform into an incubus for an additional four phases as the seed develops its new powers; specifically, the child so born as with demon blood (p84 Realms of Power The Infernal) and with wicked personality traits.

Unholy Methods (Major)

Debauchery (p84 Realms of Power The Infernal)



SUPERNATURAL RPG REVIEWS

By Lev Lafayette

Role Aids Realms of Fantasy To Hell and Back (Nigel Findley, Mayfair Games, 1993)

Introduction and Physical Product

As part of the Role Aids series of supplements, "Realms of Fantasy: To Hell and Back" supplement is designed for use with Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, and provides four fantastic locations for exploration; the lost continent of Atlantis, the enchanted island of Avalon, the land of Faerie, the eight pits of Dante's Inferno, and Selene, a vampire city, along with the various denizens of such locales. It's supernatural beings and locations all in one set.

The physical product consists of a fairly sturdy box housing two large saddle-stapled books with paper covers (hardly sufficient for their size), 38 pages of hole-punched loose-leaf "Monster Folio" sheets, and five A3 heavier grade paper maps of the realms in parchment style. The maps themselves are a missed opportunity; whilst the design and material is excellent, they're far too simplistic in their display lacking the requisite detail to be particularly interesting; the map of Avalon is certainly the worst in this regard. The two books consist of a 64 page adventure and guide to hell, whereas the second book covers Atlantis, Avalon, Faerie, and Selene. The text is largely presented in thin serif font with a two-column justified format, which is not easy on the eyes. The artwork is a combination of contributed and public domain clip-art, mainly of a very good quality and often placed with context.

The writing style is formal and quite structured. Contemporary sensibilities will baulk at the excuse of using the male gender as neutral as it "takes up less space". Each book consists of subsections of how one gets to the particular locale, the history of the locale, the geography, inhabitants, special rules and considerations, and how to return from the location, along with various adventure suggestions. There is a sparse table of contents for each book, but no index. There are a number of spelling mistakes, but these do not cause any problems to the author's intent.

Book One: Hell

The description of hell is largely taken lightly from Dante's Inferno with elaborations. Some of these include a suggestion that it is conical-shaped, subject to temporal and spatial locations, has a stinking atmosphere (save vs poison or have a -2 penalty). As a design feature there is only one way out of hell, and that's via the bottom circle via Satan, a rather tall order for any one who ends up there. As an example of the spatial distortion, hell is surrounded by a wall which appears to be relatively low, but the distance to the top is effectively infinite. Hell's population depends on the sins of the souls that inhabit the different circles, starting from a vestibule for opportunists, the first circle of virtuous pagans, then the carnal, followed by gluttons, hoarders and wasters, the wrathful and sullen, heretics, the violent, the fraudulent and malicious, and finally, Cocytus, home of the Greater Evil.

These are described in a page or two each, often with additional material for specific characters or geographical features. For example, statistics are given for Minos, Judge of the Damned, in the Second Circle of Hell (a 15th level wizard/20th level fighter). The seventh circle of hell has the Woods of Suicide and Phlegathon, the Lake of Boiling Blood. Descriptive aspects of each location is also provided game system components, for example movement rate reductions for the swamp of the third circle, or the effects of heat on the fourth. On that note, the effects of the environment, the lay of the land, the heat or cold, all make for some pretty evocative reading. This said, the final plane, where Satan is trapped in ice and ignores all except the souls of the dead, is pretty uninteresting (even if it does follow Dante's description), a seriously missed opportunity.

About half the book is dedicated in its own section to the City of Dis, and its five regions: the bastion, the forge, the

morgue, the crucible, and the labyrinth. It is perhaps a little strange to dedicate so much to one of the special geographical regions of hell in contrast to any of the others. Be it as it may, the city itself is quite well described and, of course, is full of demons. Difficult enough to enter, and requiring great subterfuge once you're there, Dis is a tough location for mortal adventurers. The city includes political intrigues, religious orders, the production of demons, along with several adventure seeds (the demon who fell in love with a mortal woman is a personal favourite).

Book Two: Other Realms

The second book provides material for Atlantis, Avalon, Faerie, and Selene with about fifteen pages dedicated to each, each with the aforementioned regional structure headings applied. The chapter on Atlantis is adapted from Plato, Benoit, and Conan Doyle, whereas Avalon is from Malory, Tennyson, and Bradley. Faerie is largely derived from George Macdonald, whereas Selene is from Paul Ferval.

Atlantis, after the mythical cataclysm, is described as a sub oceanic domed city, with light, heating, and even agriculture is provided by "technomagical" means. The historic Atlantis is described as being rich in a probably magical metal known as oricalum, which of course is different to the alloy of the historical Hellenic period. Ruled by necromancers, the Atlantean have a high concentration of magical use and exceptional lifespans, and numerous slaves, being largely of Greek origin with somewhat extended lifespans. Several magical items from Atlantean origin are provided as well as adventure seeds.

Avalon is a relatively small island in the midst of a lake surrounded by magical mist with misdirects those who are not supposed to enter. The island itself is inhabited by faerie, elves, and humans, all worshippers of the Mother Goddess. The human and elven settlement on the southern side of the island is also home to the high priestess. There is approximately 200 priestesses only the island, fairly impressive given that it is described as being six to eight miles and mostly sylvan woodland. There are some interesting cultural mores, such as the mating rite of the hunt, a new priestess of Avalon character class, new spells, the half-faerie race, several magical items and several adventures seeds.

Faeryland is a place that exists in parallel to unspoiled sylvan areas and is inhabited by a variety of diminutive humanoids (brownies, dryads, leprechaun, nixes, nymphs, pixies etc), the faery, and the subterranean goblins. The goblins and the faery are in a low-level conflict. The land of faery is large, with multiple moons, but without a normal geography. The goblin realms consist of numerous tribes who have their own ongoing open conflicts. A few locations and characters are described in some detail which includes system integration (e.g., drinking water from the Lake of Stars). Again, there is a few interesting adventure seeds to go along with the location.

Finally, there is Selene, City of Vampires. Hidden in a mountain range, existing in its own micro-climate, Selene has some five thousand vampires and twice that number of other, lesser undead. Curiously designed across four major thoroughfares (a cross!), Selene has a central palace and then spreads out from there. One location of particular interest is "the warehouse", which is effectively a prison to hold a food supply for the vampires. The city itself has been ruled for hundreds of years by a Necromancer-King, and outside the city is a large population of several kobolds tribes who are probably the most interesting characters; fatalistic and community-minded, they do their cunning best to survive against the powers of a superior enemy. The chapter concludes with a few example adventures.

Concluding Remarks

There are stylistic issues with the materials and presentation of To Hell and Back. There is perhaps too much content that is expressed as "nobody knows" (e.g., the nature of the cataclysm that submerged Atlantis), rather than providing useful answers. Avalon and Faery are presented in a manner that is surprisingly dull. But these criticisms must be balanced against a product that remains pretty true to its source material. The integration of the game system with the settings is certain more than workable. Whilst the offerings of numerous adventure seeds will require plenty of work by a GM to flesh out game sessions, they will also provide moments of inspiration. For these reasons, To Hell and Back is a very worthwhile product.

Style: 1 + .4 (layout) + .5 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .4 (readability) + .4 (product) = 3.3

Substance: 1 + .6 (content) + .4 (text) + .6 (fun) + .6 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 3.8

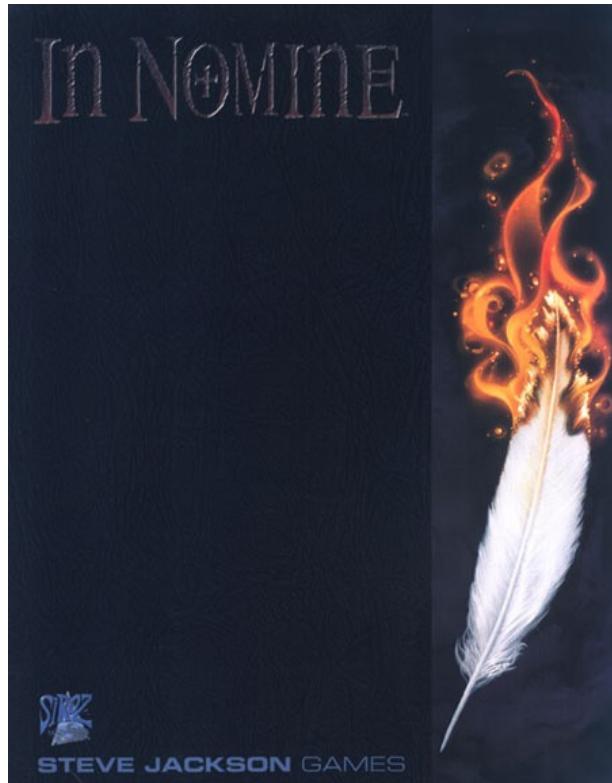
In Nomine (Derek Pearcy, Steve Jackson Games, 1997)

Introduction and Physical Product

Somewhat based on the original game *In Nomine Satanis/Magna Veritas* by the French author Croc (now into its 5th edition), In Nomine is a game where the players take up the role of celestial beings i.e, angels and demons, or at least those associated with them, in The War. With a contemporary setting, they are engaged in an attempt to gain control of humanity. But whilst the PCs have the role of angels and demons, the Celestials, they in turn have their own taskmasters and patrons, that is Archangels and Demon Princes. Deriving, in quite an irreverent manner, from the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and (to a lesser extent) Islam, *In Nomine* posits multiple levels of conflict between the Celestials, between the Celestials and their superiors, and between the Celestials and the humans. In other words, the Celestials are caught the middle of multiple conflicts where they are the nexus. It gives quite a narrative push and at quite a scale.

In Nomine won the 1997 Origins Award for Best Graphic Design of a Roleplaying Game, and this does seem well-deserved. The book comes in a similar format to the GURPS 3rd edition line by Steve Jackson Games, but with some significant differences. The paper is semi-gloss and heavy, and you can feel the weight in the 208p text. The binding is pleasingly strong. The text is three-column justified with a serif font, and is pretty dense. The cover art is quite simple, a burning white feather (although apparently there other versions), but the interior art by Dan 'Smif' Smith is in his well-known cartoon-like style, but now with full-colour. Not only is the art highly competent, it shows an excellent imagination, illustrating both the deadly serious and dangerous along with the comic-relief. I would say it is probably his best work, alas even better than what is in *Papers & Paychecks* (which is awesome, of course). Much of it is contextually appropriate as well. Each page has a clear page numbers and chapter references, a two-page table of contents, and a two-page index. Often the index is more of an impediment, which does say something uncomplimentary about the organisation of the content.

The writing style is formal, largely clear, and has that really weird habit in Steve Jackson Games' publications where italics seem almost random (e.g., p70 "Each ethereal artifact, or *talisman*...". There are three books with a musical style; "The Symphony", "The Instruments", and "The Composition". The first includes chapters on the game system and resources, apart from two rather lengthy introduction vignettes, which are actually very good. The second is a resource collection of factions and individuals, the choirs of angels, the archangels, heaven, the bands of demons, the demon princes, and hell. The third chapter, woefully short, covers "supporting cast", various campaign advice, and a collection of source material. This looks like a reasonable distribution, until one discovers that some of the parts of character generation (which start late enough) also require to delve into the resource collection.



Chargen and Game System

Character creation involves a player selecting their character type, either a powerful Celestial, a Soldier or Undead (supernatural humans), a mundane Human, or a Remnant (the earthly body of a former Celestial). Celestials must choose a Choir (angels) or Band (demons) and their Superior, an Archangel or Demon Prince, or maybe an Outcast or Renegade. Characters have three different forces, Celestial, Ethereal, and Corporeal which can range from 0 to 6, with celestial having 9 points to distribute, compared to 6 for the supernatural humans, or 5 for mundane humans. The Forces determine the levels of characteristics; Corporeal for Strength and Agility, Ethereal for Intelligence and Precision, Celestial for Will and Perception.

The Forces also determine a number of character points to spend on artifacts, roles, servants, skills, Songs (spells), and vessels. These are described with some brevity, usually a short paragraph for each skill, for example, which look quite GURPS-like and can be found in the "resources" chapter, which is after all the game mechanic components (again, the book's organisation could be "a little better"). A Discord disadvantage provides extra points. Overall character generation is really streamlined evident by the half-page character sheets. A typical character will end up with a vessel, a few skills, a couple of songs, and maybe an artifact.

The core mechanic for *In Nomine* is the d666, which in other words is 3d6, but with 2d6 determining whether or not a character succeeds at an action in a roll-under a target number equal to characteristic plus skill plus modifiers (largely a subjective hand-wave), and 1d6 to determine the degree of success ("digit die"), regardless of how well one actually makes their skill roll by. A roll of 111 or a 666 equates to criticals, resulting in a rather impressive Interventions and, because the Symphony is a narrative, the more important the situation, the more dramatic the effect of an Intervention. Attributes range from 1-10 for humans (4 average) whilst the Celestials able to have attributes up to 12. If the target number is 12 or better the person automatically succeeds (with an exception of the Interventions). If a character doesn't have a skill, there are defaults and negatives from the attribute, and sometimes that can make a target number quite difficult indeed.

Celestials can alter the reality - the Symphony - through their magical Songs, which are powered by Essence, which leave behind an echo of their action. The bigger the echo, the more likely it is to attract attention. Discretion is strongly advised, especially if one kills a human, the most complex creation in the Symphony, their supernatural death is "like a thunderclap". This said, starting characters usually have a very low chance of casting, or rather singing, such Songs, with Essence expenditure being lost regardless.

Like most game systems the skill system gets more specific detail in tactical conflicts, which is basically a skill roll. Dodge reduces damage by the effect die, which means that's it's pretty ineffectual against high-damage attacks (imagine the giant's club), which frankly is ridiculous. Armour provides both a modifier against an attacker's chance to hit and protection against damage. Damage is based on the digit die, weapon type, and some modifiers for particularly high (but not low) strength. The amount of damage that characters, from celestials to mundane humans, can take is quite over-the-top to point of saying that the combat system is "almost broken" on this level alone. In addition to this corporeal combat system, but the same sort of principles are applied for ethereal and celestial combat as well; instead of body hits one has "mind hits" and "soul hits".

Setting

The setting content, found largely in the "Instruments" book and to a lesser extent the "Composition" book, provides for the Choirs of Angels and the Archangels, the Bands of Demons and the Princes, a short description of Heaven and Hell, a little bit of descriptive content on NPC categories (soldiers, mummies, animals), a fairly good collection of NPCs, and some notes on campaign style. There are eight Choirs of angels (seven main ones and a special, lesser and more human choir), and thirteen Archangels, seven bands of Demons, and thirteen Princes. You may appreciate the balance in opposites, which is often expressed quite directly; demons are "fallen angels", after all. In many cases names, and to

some degree the style, are taken from religious texts. A personal favourite has always been the Ofanim, a beautifully alien type of angel. In other cases the names and style have been selected for the setting, for example.

The angelic and demonic factions each come with their own resonance and dissonance. The former representing a factional advantage, the latter a disadvantage. They are stylistically appropriate. The Seraphim, for example, have the automatic ability to detect lies, no matter who the speaker is. However, they suffer a great deal if they attempt to lie themselves. They have their opposite in the Demon band, the Balseraphs, masters of deception, who are fallen Seraphim. The factions also have their own internecine issues; the Mecurians, for example, find this dissonance of the Seraphim strange and sometimes amusing. Alignment with an archangel or prince provides servitor benefits with factional differences, and each Archangel and Prince has their own attitude towards the different factions and a particular pathos towards other Archangels and Prices as appropriate. It is a bit cookie-cutter, and had a similar feel to say, *Ars Magica* houses or the White Wolf lines, but conflict is always a fine driving force and there is enough in quantity for a careful GM to avoid a "oh, one of them again".

The last segment of the book deals with non-Celestial characters, such as human Soldiers, ethereal spirits, familiars, relievers, imps, zombies, mummies, and vampires and a modest selection of appropriate animal descriptions and statistics. Of note, as a fairly neat part of system design, particularly small animals (e.g., a domestic cat) has a negative protection value, that is, they are hit they take more damage. In addition there is eight sample NPCs, with about a half-page description provided for each; they're actually interesting characters which will help for adventure seeds. This chapter also includes a campaign advice, which suggests styles being either "realistic", "dark", "humorous", or "mythic", and whilst the advice is sound, it must be mentioned that the game system doesn't really support a "realistic" style of play or, to an extent, a "mythic" style. A "Dark humorous" synthesis seems to be most appropriate from the presentation, text, and system. Not only does the section include advice for character advancement, but it also includes the tricky question of mixed parties of Demons and Angels; now there's fun to be had.

Conclusion

It feels like *Good Omens* with Sandman's Lucifer with a fair dash of *Hellblazer* included in for good measure and the humour of *Etrigan the Demon* (remembering those heady days of DC comics in the 90s). It challenges abstract metaphysical notions of "good" versus "evil" with a more concrete manifestations with a more nuanced version of "lawful selfless collectivism" versus "chaotic selfish individualism". It is, in so many ways, satirical, irreverent, and comic, which creates a environment where the artwork and content really do hand-in-hand. It is, without a doubt, a contemporary, popular culture treatment of the conflict between heaven and hell, rather than a historically-immersed version. The game and setting is fine in itself, and whilst the system does have some extremely significant flaws, some patches can be applied that do not fundamentally break what is offered. Overall, it's the setting and narrative dynamics that drive the game and make it fun to play and the relatively simple mechanics suit that style of play.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .9 (art) + 1.0 (coolness) + .6 (readability) + .8 (product) = 5.0

Substance: 1 + .5 (content) + .4 (text) + .7 (fun) + .3 (workmanship) + .3 (system) = 3.2

Little Fears (Jason L. Blair, Key20, 2001)

Introduction and Physical Product

Little Fears was a controversial game at the time as it touched upon some pretty unpleasant subject matter, that is, children as protagonists and targeted victims of monsters both real and imaginary, albeit with a supernatural feel with an emphasis on the latter even where there are crossovers with the former. This was not expressed in a comic fashion such as one finds in Monsters and Other Childish Things, but rather with the thematic consideration of genuine horror; where often fear is what arises out of the imagination and implied rather than clearly described. The central premise is a world where childhood monsters, where the monsters really are in the closet, under the bed, etc., and adults can't do

anything about it because they've lost their Innocence and can't see or otherwise interact with them. It's up the children to save themselves.

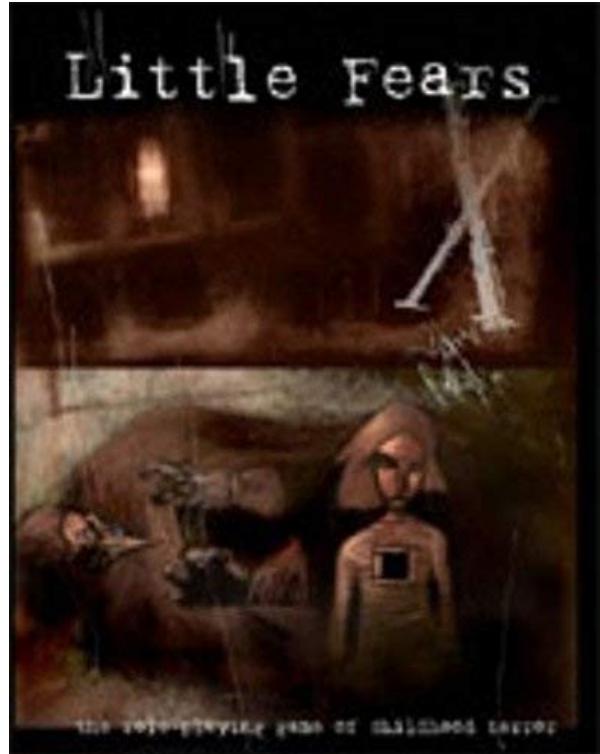
The softcover book is an unusual size at 24cm by 19cm, and is 132 pages in length. The artwork is a combination of washed greyscale and line drawings of multiple styles and whilst very evocative and executed competently, is rarely contextual. The text is presented as largely two-column, ragged right, with a serif font with a clear layout. There's a single-page table of contents and a two-page index. Pages are clearly numbered and each page has the chapter title, of which there are five; "Two Be Young Again", "The Virtues of Childhood", "Keeping the Kids in Line", "Behind the Door", and "Spooky Stories". The writing style is highly evocative and informal (sometimes too much so), but manages to largely avoid verbosity, helped by a simple game system. The introductory text, a sort of "chapter zero" really gives a feel for the setting, is one of the most powerful introductions to a game, combining both innocence and bleakness.

Chargen

Character generation asks players to remember their world from the perspective of a child and to partake in that role, perhaps one of the few times when "acting like a child", "being childish", and "child-like" are all advantageous, and from which there are numerous films that provide this sort of insight. The character generation system is invoked with a series of "about me" questions; "What's Your Name?", "What Do Your Friends Call You?", "How Old Are You?" (player-characters are from 6 to 12, the age of concrete operations for you developmental psychologists) etc. There are social and motivational questions as well, such "Who is your best friend?", "Which adult can you always talk to?", "What is your biggest fear?" etc.

In addition to this core information each player-character has stats, virtues, and qualities. The stats consist of Smarts, Muscles, Hands, Feet, and Spirit. The Virtues are Soul, Innocence, and Fear. Qualities are, unsurprisingly, qualitative, consisting of virtues and flaws. Chargen is a point-buy system; everyone gets 6 Playground Points to buy stats and qualities. Every stat starts off with 2, and an extra point costs 1 Playground Point, and a step down provides an extra Playground Point. For the Virtues, Soul begins at 10 and Fear at 0. Innocence varies according to age (from 8 to 2), the older a character is, the more they know about the world, and therefore the less innocent they are. It costs two points to increase Innocence by 1, but there's only a one-for-one return if lowered.

Good qualities cost a point, negative qualities give an extra point. The rules say that the maximum number of positive qualities should be limited to 10, but that seems to generate characters who are too complex and weird. About 5 seems to be an easier value to work with. Positive qualities are "Things I like about me" (e.g., "I'm athletic", "I have an excellent memory", "I have an older friend" etc), whereas negative qualities are "Things I don't like about me" (e.g., "I have a bad name", "I'm a bully", "I'm chubby" etc). The descriptions are short (a sentence or two), with an occasional direct game-system effect (e.g., a character requiring corrective lenses suffers a -2 penalty to sight-bases Quizzes when they are not available). The opportunity to extend this (e.g., multiple levels of poor vision for additional points) was not undertaken, but would be an easy fix.



Basic System

The game system is extremely simple. There are two types of action, a quiz and a test. A quiz is when the character is trying to do something (e.g., catch a ball). To succeed, roll 1d6 and get under the relevant child's stat. A test is something the character is trying to do, but is opposed by someone else (e.g., arm wrestle). Roll 1d6 and get over the opponent's stat. Of course, the opponent has to do this as well, which may mean a draw or stand-off. If anyone has one or more relevant Qualities they can roll extra dice for each quality. If positive, choose the best die, if negative choose the worst. If there are multiple positive and negative qualities then subtract one from the other to work out how many extra dice to roll.

Despite its simplicity, there are a number of things I don't like about the system. The first is the inconsistency between roll-high and roll-low depending on circumstances. A simple roll-high system (e.g., roll 1d6+Stat, get 6 or higher) could have achieved the same thing. The other is that there is that everything has the same difficulty value. Again, this could be modified by having different target numbers for a roll-high system, or even treating easy actions or difficulty actions as positive or negative qualities.

There is a combat system as well. Usually "to hit" is a test, although sometimes it could be a quiz (e.g., with surprise). The damage caused is based on Muscle and what is being used, up to and including firearms (ahh, kids with guns). The damage is applied to check boxes on the character sheet, with each row equal to the character's Muscle score, which ranges from "I Feel Fine" to the evocative "I Feel Nothing". For what it's worth weapon damage is pretty brutal; an average-small child will be killed with a single shot from a small handgun, and easily rendered unconscious if not killed by a single blow from a baseball bat. In addition to the descriptive value, damage reduces stats. Natural healing is healed at 1-2 boxes per day or more with medical intervention.

Virtue Rules

A very thematic part of the game are the Virtues; Fear, Soul, and Innocence. When a character is confronted by the supernatural, they must make a Spirit Quiz. If they fail, the character's action is determined by a random roll on the "Don't Be Such A Chicken" chart, which is curiously all in the first chapter of the book, rather than the virtue-base second. Be this as it may, if the roll a '6' on the Chicken chart, they gain a point of Fear. If they get possessed from a Closetland monster the character also gains a point of Fear for each day of possession. Fear basically invokes a madness in the child; at Fear 4 they become "unsteady", eventually developing into a damaging paranoia at 6 (invoked a negative die to all quizzes and tests) with increasingly bad effects until they are consumed by Fear at 10.

In a similar manner, a character who loses the Soul is effectively losing their life essence. This should only happen through magical attacks. The effects, known as "darkening" really kick in when their Soul score reaches 6; at this stage they begin to behave erratically, are sluggish and despondent. There is a physical transformation as well, the skin whitening and becoming clammy. As the character's Soul drops further, they will eventually fall into a feverish coma, their soul seeking a master to obey in Closetland. At this stage, only their friends can save them by defeating whatever evil has captured them.

Finally, there is Innocence. This is the key theme of the game. Monsters are attracted to characters with a high Innocence. They feed off the innocence, stripping it from the characters. Exposure to abuse or trauma costs 1 point of Innocence per month. For every 3 points of Fear acquired, one point of Innocence is lost. For every birthday 1 point of Innocence is lost. Everytime a positive belief fails, Innocence drops 1 point. Innocence can never be regained. A type of Innocence comes with Belief, treated like a stat at half a character's Innocence for the purpose of Quiz tests (drop fractions). Whether it is a Belief that their teddy bear will protect them, or a nightly recital of prayers, then on a successful Spirit quiz, it does. Each time the Belief fails however, the child's confidence in their magic drops and when ten failures have occurred, a point of Innocence is lost.

GMs Advice, Setting, and Scenarios

The GMs advice chapter, "Keeping the Kids in Line", is somewhat unbalanced in its content. Some aspects that can be gleaned including making use of horror stories (except with kids as the focus), making use of faery tales (where they often are), being attentive to the player's boundaries, apply techniques for mood (e.g., music and light ambience) and immersion (e.g., ignore out-of-game comments) and, rather obviously, make extensive use of the questionnaire. The suggestions to make use of horror stories and faery tales is made without much elaboration of the tropes or narrative, where making use of the questionnaire, whilst wordy, contained only a few elements that were beyond the obvious. Also included in this chapter are various adult NPCs according to role, including their stats which are on the same scale as that of children, with but a bonus die for quizzes and tests for adulthood. There is also a short description of The Divine Host, the guardian angel for children who, apart from providing advice (a rather opportune, if unstated, plot device for GMs) do not directly intervene.

A setting chapter, "Behind the Door", describes the entities and, to a lesser extent, the local of Closetland, the realm of evil monsters that are motivated by a hatred of the innocence of children. The realm is ruled by a being known as the Demogogue, and its interventions against our world is carried out by the Seven Kings, each named after a cardinal sin; thus there is The Bogeyman (King of Greed), Titania (King of Pride), Baba Yaga (King of Gluttony), The Defiler (King of Lust) etc. Closetland itself is a realm that has many gateways to our world (via the closet is most popular, just like Narnia) existing in parallel, a land of fog, shadow, and sorrow, inhabited by the numerous souls of lost and deceased children. In addition to the Kings there are also numerous other denizens, with a good dozen or so described. None of these monsters are provided statistical information (although more 'mundane' monsters are, e.g., zombies, werewolves, vampires), as defeating them is more a case of the child character succeeded in a series of Quiz tests, effectively against their own sense of inadequacy and fear. But really, there's a lot of hand-wavium being applied here and with the conceit of a narrative solution, but without being implemented within game system itself.

The final chapter, "Spooky Stories", is a number of scenarios and adventure seeds for actual play. The first scenario provides the most elaboration, but even that follows a general model of "hook, bait, resolution", which are explicit titles for three others. Despite their narrative simplicity, these are well-thought out scenarios and whilst the GM will need to do a fair bit of work to extend them out to complete sessions they contain opportunities to apply many conventions of the genre, as well as being well-integrated to the provided setting elements. The chapter concludes with "A Note from the Teacher" are rather enjoyable read of the game designer's motivations and the development of the game.

Concluding Remarks

The medieval story 'Jack and the Beanstalk' tells us a lesson that Little Fears evokes. Of course, there are no such thing as giants who eat children. But from a child's perspective sometimes there are beings who are like giants who do exist; we call them adults, and the lesson for all children from the story is that they can be defeated. Despite numerous complaints about "Little Fears" they does not detract from the validity of the game; it is an utterly superb subject-choice and well executed in its central thematic concerns, it provides players plentiful opportunity for exploratory, challenging, immersive, and enjoyable roleplaying, and it does have a workable game-system for which elaborations and fixes are relatively easy. For these reasons, Little Fears is a recommended game.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .7 (art) + 1.0 (coolness) + .8 (readability) + .7 (product) = 4.9

Substance: 1 + .5 (content) + .5 (text) + .9 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .4 (system) = 3.7

LexOccultum (Theodore Bergqvist and Magnus Malmberg, RiotMinds, 2018)

Introduction and Physical Product

LexOccultum is a Swedish game set primarily in France in the 18th century, mixed with occultism, mysteries, and secret societies, recently funded through a Kickstarter project. The physical product is quite an impressive, heavy,

well-bound hardback of two volumes, and quality gloss paper. The artwork is quite good; evocative in style with good technique for the main feature pieces, with numerous line-drawings in a consistent style, often in the form of three-quarter finished sketches. Often the artwork is contextual, giving a good visual representation of the characters and setting. Text is expressed in three-column, justified, with a serif-font. All of this is fine, but the faux-parchmant colouring with black text can sometimes be less than friendly on the eyes, especially when it switches to brown for some headings and creative text; yes brown text on a light-brown background.

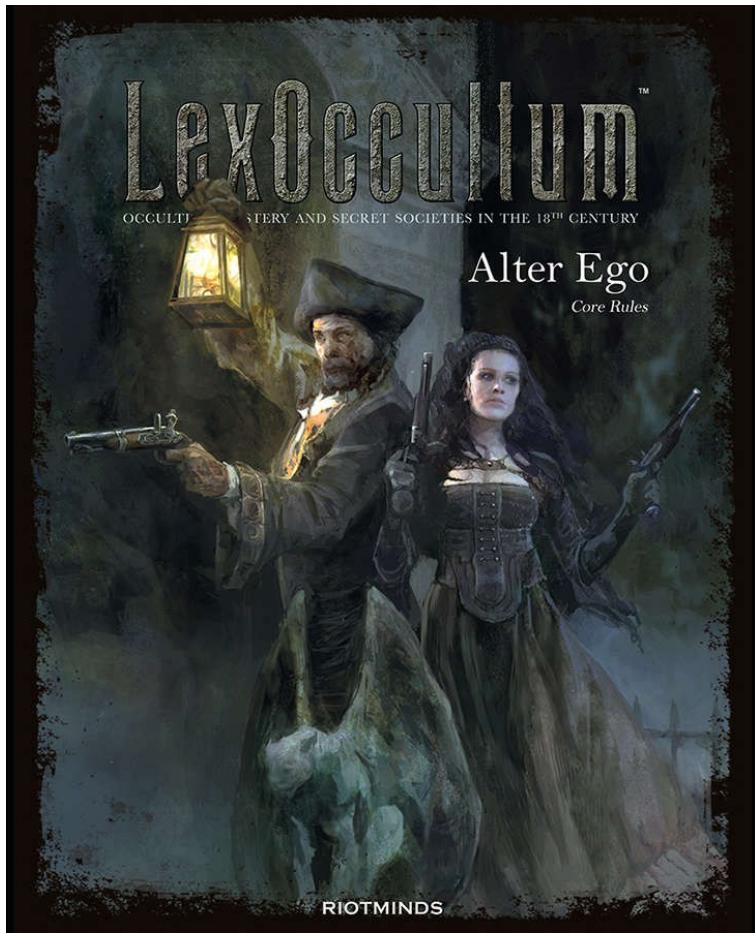
The two rulebooks for the game are Alter Ego and Lex Libris; the first for character generation, and is about 120 pages long the second for gamemasters, and is around 248 pages. There are three main chapters in the first book, "The Character", "The Character's Skills", "Equipment" and six for the second, "Introduction", "Combat", "Health and Fear", "Impressions", "Life in the Wild", "Adventure Points", "The World", "Sub Rosa", and "The Secret Arts". The text is mostly formal, and often quite verbose. The contextually-appropriate quotes from major historical figures are a nice touch. There is a single page table of contents and two-page indexes in the first book and a two-page table of contents and three page index in the second.

Character Creation

Character generation in LexOccultum is a point-based method, with quite a lot of detail. The main components of creating a character are Traits, Class, Archetype, Skills, Power Sphere, Background and Equipment and is built on Creation points, which can be Beginner, Practiced, or Experienced levels. Traits refer to attributes; specifically

Charisma, Constitution, Dexterity, Health, Intelligence, Perception, and Psyche. Whilst a page is dedicated to each trait what it comes down to is that a modifier (+4 to -4) is applied to appropriate situations, secondary attributed (e.g., damage bonus, height/weight, age, movement, mental and physical health points, Fate points - a "turn back time" luck attribute) and disciplines and their specialisations. There are seven Social Classes from High Nobility to Drifter, which provides an appropriate level of assets, and importantly the assumed level of legal liability. Lex Occultum's encumbrance system is based on negative modifiers to physical skill values per kilogram that a character's Carrying Capacity is exceeded (10 plus Constitution bonus).

Archetypes refer to equivalent of character professions, and have an associated core skill: the Professions skill for the Artisan archetype, Communication for the Businessman, Theology for the Clergy, Fighting for the Combatant , Entertainment for the Entertainer, Stealth for the Malefactor, Esotericism for the Occultist, Culture the Official, Science for the Scientist, and Well-travelled for the Traveller. The character gains an additional 50 Creation points to spend on these skill



values, disciplines and specialisations of the core skills. Most of the Archetypes has multiple pages of descriptive setting content (examples, positive and negative aspects), and a full-page colour illustration. Power Spheres range from 1 to 5, gradually accumulated over adventures, and refer to the social status of a character in particular and multiple spheres of activity, providing influence and a bonus where appropriate. The Spheres include Administrative, Entertainment, Holy, Lawless, Military, Occult, Scientific, and Trading. A strong (but not necessary) relationship with particular archetypes should be evident. Starting equipment and wealth is very much dependent on archetype multiplied by social class, with a random modifier.

With archetypes providing core skills, disciplines and specialisations expressed as levels, providing multiple degrees of precision (e.g., Fighting, Ranged Weapons, Pistols), and cost in character points. Core skills have an cost equal to their new value, and are capped. Disciplines and specialisations follow after that, with their cost based on the skill level of the parent skill, but are acquired at a flat-rate, albeit with double value for specialisations. If that sounds a little confusing at first glance, it's because it is simple, albeit with two orders of referencing. There are eleven core skills, and close to some one hundred disciplines, and numerous specialisations. For all this quantity the skill details are somewhat lacking, with only a relatively small number going beyond the "this skill is used for \$x" (e.g., a results chart is associated with "Incite Courage"). Many of the skills are related to the thematic elements of the game, and it is probably unique for having "De Sub Rosa Religione" as a specialist skill.

Equipment is based around the ducat as a generic currency, with a table of annual income provided for almost thirty professions. Equipment price varies by artisan quality. Variety of equipment covers animals (including trained varieties) and accessories, armour (leather and metal in broad terms), clothing, adventuring kits (camping kit, healing kit, weapon kit, writing kit, etc), weapons, tools, services and research equipment. It's all quite extensive. Clothing is notable for the elaborate description, piecemeal components, and most importantly a Vogue Value based on the quality of clothing and how contemporary the fashion is, the result providing a modifier to various impression tests. All weapons do a 1d10 damage, although damage is open-ended and this can vary if the weapon is heavy or two-handed. This apparent flatness of damage is somewhat of an illusion, there is extensive variation, especially in firearms, misfire values, "object modifiers" (to hit or initiative), breakage, and range (which includes a damage reduction), weight etc depending on item and quality.

System

The game system is essentially pick a skill (adding core, discipline, and specialisation values), modify, and roll equal-or-under on a d20 mechanic, with a '1' always succeeding and a '20' always failing. A degree of success is determined by a further d10 roll (higher better) with open-ended possibilities based on the skill level. Why it isn't a simpler degree from the target value is anyone's guess; complexity and mechanical inconsistency for its own sake. Luck rolls, situationally determined by the gamemaster, are also determined with a d10 with high being beneficial. The combat system is resolved over Action Rounds of "a few moments", broken up into Turns, that is an initiative sequence. Initiative is determined on d10, open-ended, modified by traits, weapons etc, and carried out in order. Actions are carried out by the GM counting down, and players are expected to declare when their character acts on the countdown (or change, delay, and recalculate their action). Characters also have a number of Combat Points, based on their skill levels, which allows for specific maneuvers.

Character health is measured on physical and mental dimensions, a default of 32 modified by Traits. There are five levels of damage of ever-reducing value; Healthy or Sane, Damaged or Delusional, Seriously Damaged or Lunatic, Mortally Wounded or Insane, or Dying and Beyond Recovery. The first level is extended or reduced by Traits. The rate of natural healing varies from four points a day to 1 point per four days depending on trait, activating naturally if the character is wounded at level one, or after the application of basic medical care. Unlike many other games, the application of a basic healing skill does not actually heal as such, but initiates the natural healing process. To actually heal damage, and advanced healing skill is required. Characters who have been significantly wounded and do not receive care may find that they suffer inflammation or infection of physical wounds (requiring amputation) or mental strain or collapse for mental wounds (requiring sanatorium treatment), with each damage level coming with its own

random chart. Damage can also be inflicted from fire, falling, poisons etc.

There are a number of short chapters that round out the 'system' information. Making an impression is an important ability in the world of LexOccultum, and sources of Impression include social status, traits (Charisma), power spheres, various skills, and the character's vogue value. Modifiers can be quite substantial, but the range does give character's opportunities to make an impression, where they otherwise might not. Another is life in the wilderness, which deals with various environmental modifiers, issues of food and water, movement distances according to terrain, and hunting with its own table for the quantity of rations and type of game achieved with a success. The final short system chapter deals with the acquisition and expenditure of Adventure Points, study, and training.

Setting

The setting description starts off being explicitly about cults, the occult, and conspiracies; "this is the twilight of the gods", the rise of the enlightenment. Of course, the mid-eighteenth century western Europe comes with additional, prosaic, complications. The Julian and Gregorian calendars are in conflict, confounding astrologers. A potted history of the world of the Biblical timeline, using Augustine's "Six Ages of the World" and Ussher's calculations of time since creation (October 23, 4004 BC); this religious view of history is contrasted with the new and minority naturalistic view. Following this a more Eurocentric timeline first from the period of pre-Christian Europe, then the Christian era with subsections concluding with the enlightenment. As far as a grand sweep is concerned, it's not a bad effort and as an evocative touch, it describes the future Apocalypse.

A short 'society' chapter makes the point that a major change in recent times is that the power of nobility and church has weakened and position can now be purchased, rather than being hereditary, and it is followed by 'Faith and Confession', 'Science and Enlightenment', 'Witchcraft and Superstition', 'Trade', 'War', 'Crime and Punishment', and 'Vanity and Decadence'. A special section is reserved for "the Shadow World", the realm of the mystical and supernatural which is associated with monuments like the pyramids and Stonehenge. There is description of paths to the Shadow World, along with matters of blood rituals, animal and human sacrifices, various forms of divination, etc. These are all short, around two pages a piece, and almost entirely descriptive, providing some key cultural differences to 21stC player norms. More game-system integration would have been useful.

In a similar manner there are a number of geography chapters, with the massive faux pas of the British Isles receiving the chapter title "England", along with France, the Holy Roman Empire, Italy, Russia, before moving into the cities of Amsterdam, Berlin, Boston, Copenhagen, Gothenburg, London, and so forth. Again, the content is almost entirely descriptive. There is more content on the cities, usually two pages of text, whereas the countries receive half a page, at best. Cities also get "typical areas" which starts, appropriately, with the slums, but will also include "fields and the factories", where most people live. Each of these receive examples such as Le Marais or Languedoc, respectively. Building types, e.g., opera houses, theatres, coffee shops etc also receive a descriptive treatment.

Combining the game-setting and the historical setting, is the descriptive pieces on the "sub rosa" elements, that is the occult and supernatural groupings, but also more secular and academic organisations. This includes quite a range of groups that can be slotted into the game, ranging from The Gnosticians, the Pium Sodalitium (the Pope's Holy Warriors), The Inquisition, the Hellfire Club, the Hashashins, The Illuminati, the Oddfellows, The Order of Freemasons, The Dutch Rum and Sugar Trade Company, De Naturali Scientia, The Rosicrucian Order, The Royal Society, & etc. With historical descriptions, game elaborations, descriptions of organisation and influence, major locales, and associated characters these make up a very significant portion of the book. It must be pointed out that even within the domain of esoterica some of the elements have been adapted to the game setting. For example, Damcar is described as an extra-dimensional secret place, a dream world of pure thought, for the Rosicrucians; however Rosicrucian documentation associates the city of Dhamar in Yemen with Damcar, a city of scholars and alchemists. Despite this wealth of descriptive information which can certainly inspire scenario development, again there is little in the way of game-system integration.

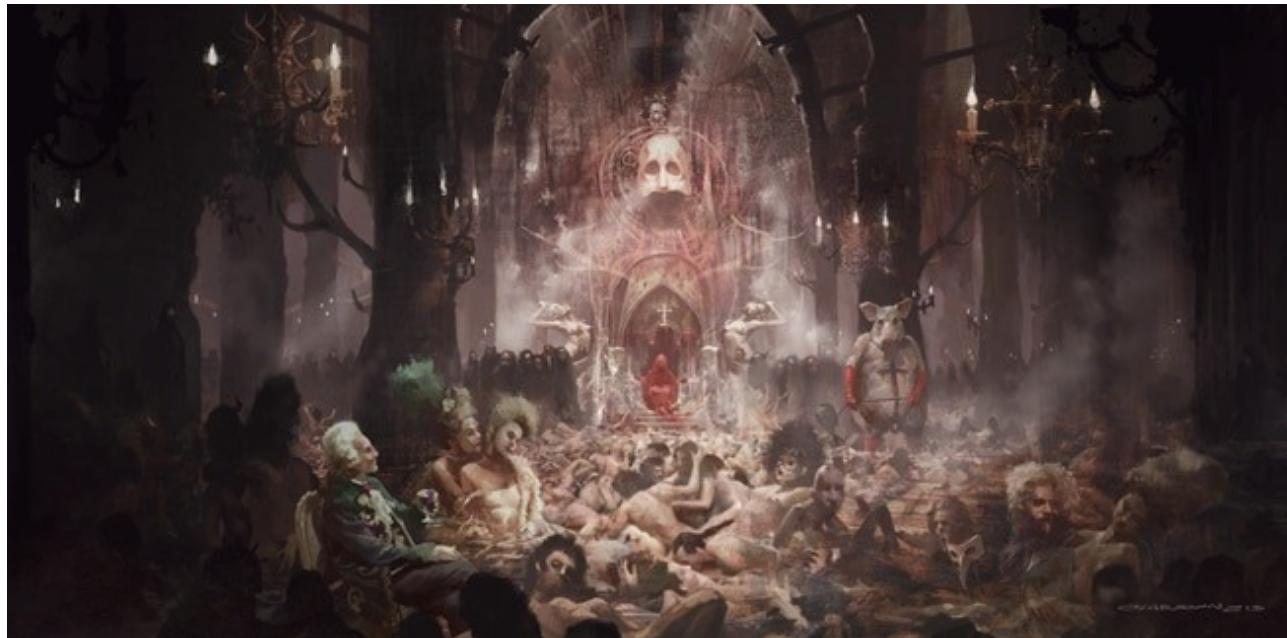
A chapter of "Beasts and Antagonists" fortunately does provide such information, balanced with descriptive text. Included are various lycanthropes, phantoms, spectres and wraiths, and vampires. It's a fairly sparse selection of the mythic creatures of Europe, but it is phrased in the plural as there is a deliberate level of ambiguity in the text. Each encounter with such a being is somewhat unique in terms of origins and abilities. The chapter itself is well-positioned as an introduction to the section on "The Secret Arts", namely "the dark arts", "the divine art", and "the scientific arts". The former consists of skills in the Right-Hand Path, the Left-Hand Path, and Divination. The second is expressed in the singular (albeit with specialisation by religion), whereas the latter is for pharmacology and alchemy. Each of these have several described abilities (read: "spells"), skill level difficulty modifiers, and descriptive effects.

Concluding Remarks

This is a lengthy review and in part at least due to the size of the two volumes involved. We are, of course, describing over 360 pages of text, all of which is presented in sturdy and very well-presented books. The choice of setting is excellent and there is an enormous amount of descriptive text. However the game does have some rather significant flaws, mainly relating to overly-verbose text, an often clunky game system, and a lack of incorporation of the descriptive setting material and the game system, meaning that a Lex GM really has quite a lot of work to do for session preparation. The lack of a sample scenario is quite disappointing as well, given the size of what is provided. Despite my personal interests in favour of eighteenth century western and central Europe for various reasons, this would not be my first game of choice to engage in a world, either for the game system or, to a lesser extent, setting content. But I certainly would and do use it as a source of ideas. It's just that it's taken a lot of pages to say something that could have been done in a quarter of the size.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .8 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .9 (product) = 4.7

Substance: 1 + .6 (content) + .4 (text) + .5 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .4 (system) = 3.4



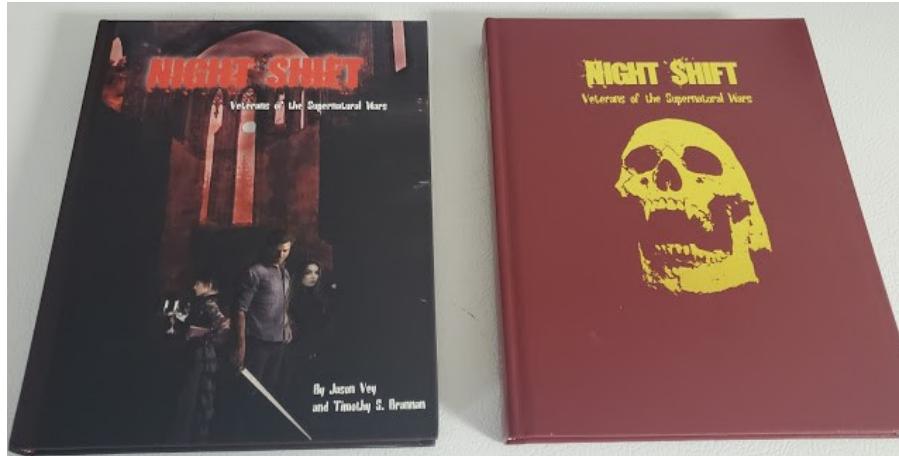
PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS: NIGHT SHIFT AND MODERN SUPERNATURAL GAMES

By Timothy S. Brannan

I am a firm believer that a rising tide lifts all ships, and that other Game Designers are not my competition, but my colleagues. I buy their games, they buy mine. We all benefit and we all enjoy.

Naturally, I also feel that a good gaming experience can be had by looking to see what others are doing and seeing what I can bring into my games when I am running them.

When we were working on NIGHT SHIFT we had a fairly strict "no looking at other games" policy. We really wanted our game to have its own unique feel and direction. But that was last year, and now NIGHT SHIFT is out and I am pulling out all my other games to see what each one has that can help NIGHT SHIFT and what Night Shift has that can help them.



Old School Roots

Jason and I have worked on a lot of games. Both together and separately for dozens of publishers. But the one thing we both enjoy are old-school games. This doesn't mean we don't like new ones, quite the opposite in fact. But it is the old-school design aesthetic that keeps us coming back and saying "what else can we do with this?" NIGHT SHIFT covers both halves of our RPG hearts.

The mechanics in NIGHT SHIFT (what we call O.G.R.E.S. or Oldschool Generic Roleplaying Engine System) are firmly rooted in the Old School mechanics of the world's first popular RPG system. What does this mean? Well if you have been playing RPGs for any length of time since 1974 then chances are good you can pick up the rules for NIGHT SHIFT very, very quickly.

Also, it means that out of the box, NIGHT SHIFT is roughly compatible with thousands of RPG titles.

Appendix A of the NIGHT SHIFT book covers conversions between NS and the Oldest RPG, it also covers conversions between the O.G.R.E.S. of NIGHT SHIFT and the O.R.C.S of other Elf Lair Games products; namely

Spellcraft & Swordplay and Eldritch Witchery.

It also covers 0e, B/X and BECMI style conversions. Converting then between NIGHT SHIFT and anything based on Swords & Wizardry or Labyrinth Lord for example is easy.

There are guidelines on how to convert classes, but since the classes have the same DNA as the ones in many of these clone games I am going to take the extra step and say, just play them as is.

So yeah, run a Sage in Labyrinth Lord. Put a Chosen One in Swords & Wizardry. In fact, I'd love to hear how this works for you. This also gives you a good way to add a new supernatural species to your game. What to play an Angel cleric? With NIGHT SHIFTS rules on supernaturals, you can. IT also makes a nice way to create something my Basic Games have needed, a Vampire Witch. In NIGHT SHIFT this is easy.

Need more monsters? Grab any monster manual and you can be set to go. Monstrosities and Tome of Horrors Complete are only two examples but they give hundreds of monsters. More than you will ever need.

NIGHT SHIFT is not the only Modern Supernatural RPG out there based on old school roots. So many in fact that my next one and others would have to constitute another full post to them justice. But I will mention a couple.

Dark Places & Demogorgons

DP&D is such a delight. It really is. I am very fond of this game and I still enjoy playing it. On the surface it looks like DP&D and NIGHT SHIFT could be used to tell the same sorts of stories, and that is true to a degree, but that really underplays what makes both games special.

NIGHT SHIFT covers adults (for the most part, I'll talk Generation HEX specifically) in a very dangerous supernatural modern world.

Dark Places & Demogorgons covers kids in a very dangerous supernatural world of the 1980s.

Both games are built on the same chassis and have similar cores. One day I want to run a game where the Adults (NS) flashback to when they were Kids (DP&D). Sort of like Stephen King's "It."

Or one could start out as a kid in DP&D progress a bit and then become an adult to continue on in Night Shift.

There is not a good One to One class correspondence between the games and nor would I want there to be. A Jock (DP&D) might end up as a Veteran (NS) or even as a Chosen One (NS). In truth, I would give any DP&D kid character some "free" levels in Survivor but allow them to keep some of the perks of their original DP&D class. So Goths still see ghosts, Karate Kids still kick ass, and so on.

Frankly, I think it would be a blast with the right group. Maybe I should write a two-part adventure that covers both. A little like "It" but something very different. Something "Strange" happened in the 1980s and now a group of characters have gotten back together in their old home town to stop it once again.

I singled out Generation HEX since that one already covers kids. I can see a game though were kids from AMPA (Academy of Magic and Paranormal Arts) have to work with the "normies" of DP&D to solve some great mystery. Likely one that is affecting adults only.

I have also used monsters from the DP&D Cryptid Manual for NIGHT SHIFT many times.

Modern Supernatural

It is no great secret that I LOVE games like WitchCraft and Chill. I have talked many times about my love of both games. Chill was my first Horror RPG and WitchCraft might be my favorite game of all time. Jason and I met while working as freelancers for Eden Studios, the company that made WitchCraft. We worked together on Buffy, Angel, and Army of Darkness. I helped him with his All Flesh Must Be Eaten books and he helped me on Ghosts of Albion. A lot of what is in NIGHT SHIFT came out of our conversations of things we wanted to do in those games.

I guess then it is not a shock or surprise that I see NIGHT SHIFT and the spiritual successor, at least on my shelves and table, to games like Buffy and WitchCraft.

Buffy and WitchCraft defined horror monster hunting for the 90s and into the 2000s. NIGHT SHIFT takes this to 2020 and beyond. With NIGHT SHIFT I want to be able to play anything those other games offered me. Sure the playstyle will be different. WitchCraft is more about the machinations of the Supernatural World. The Gifted (WC) for example are all covered by the Witch Class in NIGHT SHIFT. In WitchCraft though there is a HUGE difference between the Wicce and the Rosicrucians. In NIGHT SHIFT those differences would have to be played out by the players in role-playing. NIGHT SHIFT also is more Normies and Weirdos vs. Dangerous Supernatural types. More like Buffy or Ghosts of Albion in that sense.

All Souls Night

There is an adventure that I have been dying to finish, "All Souls Night." It is part of a trilogy across time and distance that includes Ghosts of Albion's "Blight", Buffy's "The Dark Druid" and what I have been thinking of as D&D's All Souls Night. Translating them all into NIGHT SHIFT makes this so much easier to run.

Supernatural and Chill

Not the new version of "Netflix and Chill" but adapting the best monster hunter games.

Chill has such a long history I could not do it justice here. I love the game but one place it has always felt a little lacking for me is the ability to play a spell-caster. The Supernatural RPG is the same way. In truth, Supernatural RPG is the cinematic version of Chill. I mean sure. If I wanted to play a spellcaster, or a witch, I still have Buffy, WitchCraft, Ghosts of Albion, and about 100 other games to do that. Both Chill and Supernatural are solid "let's go hunt some monsters" games. So is NIGHT SHIFT.

Adapting the style of either game is easy. Having these games also gives your NIGHT SHIFT game a slightly edgier feel.

I have already shown that Supernatural characters like The Wayward Sisters and Charlie Bradbury can have new life in NIGHT SHIFT.

Some games, like say Call of Cthulhu, fit their niche so perfectly that I would not want to run a "Mythos" game with NIGHT SHIFT, but I certainly could borrow ideas from CoC for my NIGHT SHIFT games.

In many ways doing a Plays Well With Others and NIGHT SHIFT is a cheat. One of my own design principles for the game was to make it as flexible as I could so it could cover a wide variety of game and play styles. I am happy in my belief that we succeeded in that.

Also at: <https://theotherside.timsbrannan.com/2020/10/plays-well-with-others-night-shift-and.html>

WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT REVIEWS

By Timothy S. Brannan

Witch Week Review: Charm

by Jeff Mechlinski, illustrations by Yimi Jian "Meammy"



Ok, this is not a witch RPG per se, but that is not going to stop me.

Charm is a "universal" RPG designed to be quick and usable across any genre or playstyle. It advertises itself as being portable enough to keep your character sheet in your pocket and use a dice roller app to play.

For this review, I am considering both the softcover physical book and the PDF. The book is 158 pages, 8" x 8" format. The covers are color, the interior art is black & white.

A quick note about the art. I like it, it does have a comic-book, almost anime style to it, but it also fits the game well.

The first 40 pages cover the basic rules and the remaining 100 or so cover the seven different sample "worlds" you can play in.

The rules are pretty simple, roll a d20 (sometimes with a d6) to get over a particular Target Number set by the GM. Greater levels of success or failure result in added effects. Rolls can be modified. You add the d6 when your character is particularly good at something.

Characters regardless of the Power Level of the game are assumed to be good at what they do. So out of the gate this game is going to have a more "Cinematic" feel to it. A thief will almost always be able to break into a place or steal something for example. Rolling occurs only when there is a chance of failure, combat (or other opposed rolls) or the GM needs it.

The Challenge Threshold, or target numbers, are pretty easy to use and memorize, so players and GMS will catch on very quickly. The levels are all multiples of 3, so abstraction of the rules is easy.

Characters are built using some basic abilities in a way that reminds me of Fate, but a little crunchier. To me this is a GOOD thing. I find Fate a little too fluffy for my needs. This includes the use of a similar term, Aspects. At first level you have three aspects rated at 4, 3 and 2 points. As you level up you can add points to these or gain new aspects. A list of sample aspects is given with guidelines on what else can work.

And that is it. Not difficult to learn and certainly very easy to play the first time. Get together with some friends,

decide on a world and then make characters with various aspects. You are ready to go.

While not as crunchy as say GURPS it is crunchier than Fate or FUDGE. I'd put it just south of True 20 and Unisystem in that regard.

The seven sample scenarios are:

- * Action 5 News: You are the city's most elite local news team! It isn't easy staying on top. You'll need to pull together all your guile and charisma to keep the number 1 spot.
- * Temporal Raiders: Travel time, seeking the ultimate heist. Ally with powerful historical figures, change history, be your own grandfather. What could go wrong?
- * Dustbound: Take on the role of a god-touched gunslinger in a bleak world of dust and decay. Fight Oni, rival gunslingers, and vengeful townsfolk.
- * Mystery Incorporated: Jeepers, guys. Play as a gang of kids, or possibly a lovable pet, who solve mysteries using their astonishing meddling abilities.
- * Pact of Night: Small town woes meet big monster drama. Play a Vampire or Werewolf as you balance your life with the humans during the day and beasts at night.
- * Onitech: You exist in a high-tech world ruled by demon masters. Civility has superseded morality, leading to a perverted and deadly state of affairs.
- * Asylum Reflections: In Victorian London, people are being replaced with mirrored doubles. Uncover the duplicitous mystery in this dark world.

Actually, these all sound like a lot of fun. I have to admit it was the Action 5 News that really grabbed me at first. In this one, you are not likely to get into deadly combat, but your social "hit points" could take some damage. No they don't call them "hit points" but that is my translation to my readers. I will admit, years ago I tinkered with a True 20 idea of newspaper reporters, tabloid writers and news bloggers as a game. When Fate came around I tried it in that too. Never really got it to jell the way I wanted. Action 5 News though does this now for me. A few EASY tweaks, and to be fair all tweaks in this game are easy, and I can run it like I was planning some 20 years ago.

Mystery Incorporated practically jumps off the page and begs me to run something with it.

If I had a complaint at all it is that book makes me jump all over the place to get the information I need. For example there are lot of "see page XX" (no actual xx though, they do have page numbers.)

So reading about Power Level on page 11 I need to jump to page 25 to get information on aspects. There are a few of these. Now to be fair you quickly figure out where things are and how to get to them fast. But maybe a character creation flowchart might be nice for first time players.

Still, there is a lot to like about this game.

Also at: <https://theotherside.timsbrannan.com/2020/10/witch-week-review-charm.html>

5e Witch Project: Complete Witch

from Mage Hand Press

This book is 41 pages (cover, table of contents, credits, OGL, for 37 pages of content).

This PDF sells for \$5.99, but currently is \$4.99 for the Halloween sales. Given that the art is more expensive for an OGL book than a DMsGuild book I am not sure if my 10 cents per page rule of thumb is appropriate anymore. In any case, this one is very close to that.

If my expectations were for better art, design and production then Mage Hand has met those expectations and surpassed them. The layout is extremely clean and readable. The art is fantastic and liberally used. The cover in particular is very dynamic. This is a product that grabs your attention.

The witch class itself is a full 20 level caster with spells to the 9th level. The witch has a number of cantrips known and a maximum number of spells known. This witch also gets something called "Hexes" at the first level and these progress. The witch has 1d8 HD. She is a charisma based spell caster and can cast ritual spells. Ok so far every box has been checked.

Each witch also has a curse. Now this is a nice touch and I really like it. I am not going to detail the curses here, you should really buy it to see, but I am very, very fond of the Burned, Hideous and Hallow. But the coolest is Visions. As a DM I'd use that one to my advantage.

As the witch progresses she gains other powers. Most notably the Hexes. These are roughly equal to the Hexes of the Pathfinder Witch or even of the Occult Powers of my witches. There are a good number of them, including Grand Hexes.

The Archetypes of this Witch are the Witch's Crafts. I would call these Traditions and others call them Covens. But regardless of the names, they work really well. Each craft gains a list of additional spells and choices of Hexes unique to that craft. There are 14 different Crafts. I would have gone for 13 myself, but hey I am not going to complain here. Special shout out for the Tea Magic Witches.

If that was all that this publication gave us, then frankly I would call myself happy and been good. But that is only half the book.

Up next we get a Chapter (yes a proper chapter) on Familiars. There are many new ones introduced here too. There are 17 here including the very inspired Pet Rock (I am not joking! I love it!)

Chapter 3 covers spells. This is the witches' spell list AND new spells. There are 18 new spells here. For a D&D 5 book that is a lot. But again, that is not everything we also get some new Dark Rituals. There are 11 of these and they remind me a lot, in form and function, of the Ritual Spells I also give my witches. They are very well done.

We get a new god/monster/elder thing.



We end with an Appendix on Epic Boons! (This is a first!)

At 41 pages, this one packs a huge punch.

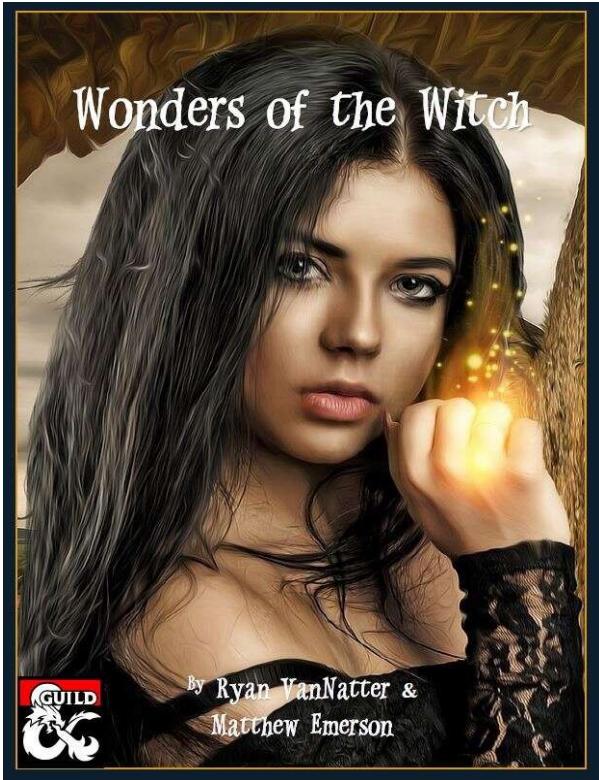
I can't find a single issue with this product save for a couple of nit-picky layout issues. It is really, really good.

I had very high expectations and this product met and surpassed them all.

Also at: <https://theotherside.timsbrannan.com/2020/10/5e-witch-project-complete-witch.html>

DMSGuild Witch Project: Wonders of the Witch

by Ryan Van Natter & Matthew Emerson



This PDF is 50 pages (front and back covers, legal, 47 pages of content) and runs for \$9.99.

It is light on art (save for a great cover) but high on design. It is a very attractive book to look at and super easy to read.

I have not talked about PDF bookmarks so far because there has never been a need; all the other pdfs have been small enough to not really need them. This PDF is larger and uses them. So another plus in their favor.

We open with a fiction section with Baba Yaga instructing a young Igwilv (sic) on the nature of magic and witchcraft. Seriously are you guys just flirting with me now? As someone that has spent a lot of time with both characters in my games, this one feels right. Canon accepted. Hell that cover could double as the young Iggwilv/Tasha really.

We start out with witch-related background details. There is the Dedicate, the Disciple, the Healer, the Hidden One, the Malefactor, and the Temptress (or Tempter). Each with associated Traits, Ideals, Bonds, and Flaws. Eight pages of this and I want to figure out a witch for each one.

Next is the Witch class proper. It is a full 20 levels with powers at many levels. The archetypes/subtypes/subclasses for this are known as Covens and they are Hag, Grey, Elemental, and White. Spellcasting ability is Charisma. This witch has spell slots like all casters, and a max number of spells known. Witches are Ritual casters and use arcane spell foci. So yeah, everything I want to see in a witch really.

Witches gain a power at 2nd level (Beguile) and then a "Witch Craft" at levels 3, 10 and 17. These function a bit like Hexes (Pathfinder) or Occult Powers (mine). There is a list to choose from and these are independent of coven.

The covens are nicely detailed. They are all written in a manner that immediately makes you realize that the authors could add any number of extra covens as their imagination sees fit. This is yet another positive aspect of this class. The covens also feel different enough and cover a wide variety of witchy archetypes.

Spell lists follow with the expected spells. There are also NEW SPELLS. This is the real gem of this book. There are 27 new spells here. They are truly new spells. There are some that will feel familiar, but many that are new.

For clerics there is a new "Black Magic" Domain.

We also get some new named covens. There is the Daughters of Twilight, dedicated to Shar (and a new spell). The Vistani get the Stravaneska Tasque, and a new spell. The Secret Shards dedicated to Selûne (and a new spell). The Sun Sisters, dedicated to the Goddess of the Sun. The Blood of the Green, witches of the forests. The Red Witches of Thay, a Lawful Good sect of witches in Thay! So six more new spells.

There are some Tools fo the Trade which covers many new magic items.

50 plot hooks for witch adventures.

A bit on the Mother Goddess in the Realms, or bringing the Witch Goddess to the Toril.

Finally a bestiary of witch related creatures. These are the: Brownie, Gallows Hag, Rune Hag, Weeping Hag, Gilt Hag, Severed Hag, Daughter of Darkness (!) Witch, and Witch High Priestess. They are organized by CR.

This really is a quality product. One of the best of the DMsGuild Witches to be honest.

Also at: <https://theotherside.timsbrannan.com/2020/10/dmsguild-witch-project-wonders-of-witch.html>

The Great American Witch

by Christopher Grey

For this review, I am considering the hardcover, letter-sized book, and the PDF. On DriveThruRPG you get two different layouts of the core book (1 and 2 page spreads), and several ancillary files for the covens and the crafts. I was a Kickstart backer and got my products via that. Both the hardcover and the pdfs are available at DriveThruRPG.

The Great American Witch is 162 pages, all full color, with full color covers. The art is by Minerva Fox and Tithi Luadthong. There are also some photos that I recognize from various stock art services, some I have even used myself. This is not a criticism of the book; the art, all the art, is used effectively and sets the tone and mood of the book well.

The rule system is a Based on the Apocalypse World Engine variant. Over the last couple of years I have had mixed, to mostly negative feelings about the Apocalypse World Engine. Nothing to do with the system itself, but mainly due to how many designers have been using it. I am happy to report that the version being used in TGAW is a stripped-down version that works better for me.

It is also published by Gallant Knight Games, who has a solid reputation. So out of the gate and barely cracking open the book it has a lot of things going for it.

The Great American Witch is a cooperative, story-telling game of witches fighting against perceived injustices in the world. I say "perceived" because of what injustices the witches fight against is going to largely depend on the witches (and the players) themselves. The framework of the game is built on Grey's earlier work, The Great American Novel. TGAW is expanded from the earlier game.

Like many modern games, TGAW has a Session 0, for everyone to come together and talk about what the game should be about, what the social interaction rules are, and what the characters are. The older I get the more of a fan of Session 0 I become. As a Game Master, I want to make sure everyone is invested in the game, I want to be sure everyone is going to have a good time. So yes. Session 0 all the way. The first few pages detail what should be part of your Session 0. It's actually pretty good material that can be adapted to other games.

The game also wears its politics on its sleeve. Frankly, I rather like this. It helps that I also happen to agree with the author and game here. But besides that, there is something else here. This game takes the idea, or even the realities and the mythologies of the witch persecutions and "Burning Times" and revisions them into the modern age. It is not a bridge too far to see how the forces of the Patriarchy and anti-women legislation, politics, and religion of the 16th to 17th centuries can be recreated in the 21st century. After all, isn't "The Handmaid's Tale" one of the most popular and awarded television programs right now? There is obviously something to this.

The main narrative of the game comes from the players themselves. The Guide (GM) plays a lesser role here than in other games; often as one running the various injustices, NPCs, or other factions the players/characters/witches will run up against. The system actually makes it easy for all players to have a character and rotate the guide duties as needed.

True to its roots games are broken down into "Stories" and "Chapters" and who has the narrative control will depend on the type of chapter. A "Story" is a game start to finish. Be that a one-shot or several different chapters over a long period of time. A "Montage" chapter is controlled by the players. A "Menace" chapter is controlled by the Guide. A "Mundane" chapter is usually controlled by the player and the details of that chapter are for that character alone. "Meeting" chapters involve the characters all together and are controlled by them. "Mission" chapters are the main plot focus that move the story forward. "Milestones" are what they sound like. This is where the witch would "level up."

The game uses three d6s for the rare dice resolution. Most times players use a 2d6 and try to roll a 7 or better. "Weal" and "Woe" conditions can augment this roll. The author makes it clear that you should roll only when the outcome is in doubt. There are a lot of factors that can modify the rolls and the conflicts faced. It is assumed that most conflicts will NOT be dealt with with a simple roll of 7 or better. The author has made it clear in the book and elsewhere that more times than average a conflict is not just going to go away like defeating a monster in D&D. Conflicts are akin to running uphill, that can be accomplished, but they will take work and they will not be the only ones.

Once gameplay is covered we move into creating the player character witches. The book gives the player questions that should be answered or at least considered when creating a witch character. Character creation is a group effort, so the first thing you create is your group's Coven. This also helps in determining the type of game this will be as different covens have different agendas. There are nine different types of Covens; the Divine, Hearth, Inverted, Oracle, the Storm, Sleepers, the Town, the Veil, and Whispers. Each coven has different specialties and aspects. Also, each Coven has a worksheet to develop its own unique features, so one Coven of the Storm is not exactly the same as another Coven of the Storm from another city or even part of the city. These are not the Traditions of Mage, the Covenants of the WitchCraftRPG, or even the Traditions of my witch books. These are all very local and should be unique to themselves. Once the coven is chosen then other details can be added. This includes things like how much resources does the coven have? Where does it get its money from? Legal status and so on.

If Covens cover the group of witches, then each witch within the coven has their own Craft. These are built of archetypes of the Great Goddess. They are Aje, the Hag (Calilleach), Hekate, Lilith, Mary (or Isis), Spider Grandmother, and Tara. These are the Seven Crafts and they are the "sanctioned" and most widespread crafts, but there are others. Each Craft, as you can imagine, gives certain bonuses and penalties to various aspects of the witch and her

magic. Aje for example is not a good one if you want a high value in Mercy, but great if you want a high number in Severity and mixed on Wisdom. All crafts are also subdivided into Maiden, Mother, and Crone aspects of the witch's life.

Character creation is rather robust and by the end, you have a really good idea who your witch is and what they want.

The Game Master's, or Guide's, section covers how to run the game. Among other details, there is a section on threats. While there are a lot of potential threats the ones covered in the book are things like demons, vampires, other witches, the fey, the Illuminati, ghosts and other dead spirits, old gods and good old-fashioned mundane humans.

The end of the book covers the worksheets for the various Covens and Crafts. You use the appropriate Craft Sheets for a character.

The PDF version of the book makes printing these out very easy. It would be good for every player to have the same Coven sheet, or a photocopy of the completed one, and then a Craft sheet for their witch.

While the game could be played with as little two players, a larger group is better, especially if means a variety of crafts can be represented. Here the crafts can strengthen the coven, but also provide some inter-party conflict. Not in-fighting exactly, but differences on how to complete a Mission or deal with a threat. After all, no one wants to watch a movie where the Avengers all agree on a course of action from the start and the plans go as though up and there are no complications. That's not drama, that is a normal day at work. These witches get together to change the world or their corner of it, but sometimes, oftentimes, the plans go sideways. This game supports that type of play.

The Great American Witch works or fails based on the efforts of the players. While the role of the GM/Guide may be reduced, the role and responsibilities of the players are increased. It is also helpful to have players that are invested into their characters and have a bit of background knowledge on what they want their witch to be like. To this end the questions at the start of the book are helpful.

That right group is the key. With it this is a fantastic game and one that would provide an endless amount of stories to tell. I am very pleased I back this one.

Plays Well With Others, War of the Witch Queens and my Traveller Envy

I just can't leave well enough alone. I have to take a perfectly good game and then figure out things to do with it above and beyond and outside of its intended purposes. SO from here on out any "shortcomings", I find are NOT of this game, but rather my obsessive desire to pound a square peg into a round hole.

Part 1: Plays Well With Others

The Great American Witch provides a fantastic framework to be not just a Session 0 to many of the games I already play, but also a means of providing more characterization to my characters of those games.

Whether my "base" game is WitchCraftRPG or Witch: Fated Souls, The Great American Witch could provide me with far more detail. In particular, the character creation questions from The Great American Witch and Witch: Fated Souls could be combined for a more robust description of the character.

Taking the example from WitchCraft, my character could be a Gifted Wicce. Even in the WitchCraft rules there is a TON of variety implicit and implied in the Wicce. Adding on a "layer" of TGAW gives my Wicce a lot more variety and helps focus their purpose. While reading TGAW I thought about my last big WitchCraft game "Vacation in Vancouver." Members of the supernatural community were going missing, the Cast had to go find out why. The game

was heavy on adult themes (there was an underground sex trafficking ring that catered to the supernatural community) and required a LOT of participation and cooperation to by the player to make it work. It was intense. At one point my witch character was slapped in an S&M parlor and I swear I felt it! But this is also the same sort of game that could be played with TGAW. Granted, today I WAY tone down the adult elements, but that was the game everyone then agreed to play. The same rules in TGAW that allow for "safe play" also allow for this. The only difference is that those rules are spelled out ahead of time in TGAW.

Jumping back and forth between the systems, with the same characters and players, and a lot of agreement on what constitutes advancement across the systems would be a great experience.

I could see a situation where I could even add in some ideas from Basic Witches from Drowning Moon Studios.

Part 2: Traveller Envy

This plays well into my Traveller Envy, though this time these are all RPGs. Expanding on the ideas above I could take a character, let's say for argument sake my iconic witch Larina, and see how she manifests in each game. Each game giving me something different and a part of the whole.

Larina "Nix" Nichols

CJ Carrella's WitchCraft RPG: Gifted Wicce

Mage: The Ascension: Verbena

Mage: The Awakening: Path Acanthus, Order Mysterium

Witch: Fated Souls: Heks

NIGHT SHIFT: Witch

The Great American Witch: The Craft of Lilith OR The Craft of Isis.*

There is no "one to one" correspondence, nor would I wish there to be. In fact, some aspects of one Path/Order/Tradition/Fate/Craft will contradict another. "The Craft of Lilith" in GAW is a good analog to WitchCraft's "Twilight Order" and the "Lich" in Witchcraft: Fated Souls. But for my view of my character, this is how to best describe her.

* Here I am already trying to break the system by coming up with a "Craft of Astarte" which would be the intersection of Lilith and Isis. Don't try this one at home kids, I am what you call a professional.

Part 3: War of the Witch Queens

Every 13 years the witch queens gather at the Tredecim to discuss what will be done over the next thirteen years for all witches. Here they elect a new Witch High Queen.

One of the building blocks of my War of the Witch Queens is to take in as much detail as I can from all the games I can. This is going to be a magnum opus, a multiverse spanning campaign.

What then can the Great American Witch do for me here? That is easy. Using the coven creation rules I am planning to create the "coven" of the five main witch queen NPCs. While the coven creation rules are player-focused, these will be hidden from the players since the witches are all NPCs. They are based on existing characters, so I do have some external insight into what is going on with each one, but the choices will be mine alone really.

Looking at these witches and the covens in TGAW they fit the Coven of the Hearth the best.



Coven of the Hearth, also known as the Witches' Tea Circle (tea is very important to witches).

Five members, representing the most powerful witches in each of the worlds the Witch Queens operate in.

Oath: To work within witchcraft to provide widespread (multiverse!) protection for witches

Holy Day: Autumnal Equinox. Day of Atonement: Sumer Solstice. Which was their day of formal formation as well.

Hearth: A secured build in an Urban setting.

Sanctuary: Lots of great stuff here, and all of it fits well.

Connections & Resources: Organization charged with finding those in need.

Going to the Coven Worksheet:

Resources: Wealthy coven (they are Queens)

Makes money? A shop. Let's say that the "Home, Heart & Hearth" stores from my own Pumpkin Spice Witch book are the means to keep this operation funded.

Distribution: Distributed based on need.

Status: Mainstream. They ARE the mainstream.

Importance? Witches need to come together.

Mundanes? Mundanes are important, but not for the reasons listed. Mundanes are the greatest threat.

Influence: Extraordinary.

Members: Five or six local, but millions in the

multiverse.

Authority: Through legacy and reputation

Wow. That worked great, to be honest.

Here's hoping for something really big to come from this.

<https://theotherside.timsbrannan.com/2020/10/witch-week-review-great-american-witch.html>

5e Witch Project: Hidden Oddities, A Witch's Primer

By Eva M. Brown

Hidden Oddities is a monster of a book. At 154 pages for a single class it has my attention. Also at 154 pages, no point in figuring out how much is content vs. title, ogl and the like. It is a beast of a book.

This book rivals any other published book for the D&D 5 game or any other game. The layout is great, with crisp easy to read text. The artwork is fantastic. And the authors know their OGL. I should really just say "Author". While it looks like Eva M. Brown surrounded herself with a great team to work on this, it is obvious from the reading that this is a single voice and author vision.

Up first is a Foreword and it becomes obvious that this book is just more than a witch class. There is a bit of world-building going on as well. This can only be a good thing in my mind. There are Seven Chapters in this book.

Chapter 1 covers the Introduction, what this book is about and the list of Kickstarter backers.

Chapter 2 is the Witch Class. There are little quotes and “magical text” all throughout the book that really gives it a nice feel. Break the code of the magical text for more information!

And in a bit of “magic text” of my own, “yes Eva, I do think we will be great friends!”

We start off in a place I think it great. Background. There are also d6 tables of “I Became A Witch Because...”, a d6 table of “We Whisper to Each Other By...”, “Our Relationship Is...” and “My Curios Are...” This is great stuff and perfect not just for EVERY D&D5/DMsGuild Witch I have reviewed but nearly every witch I can think of (and that is a lot is I can be so bold).

An aside. Curios are a great idea. I love them. I wish I had come up with them first.

The witch is a full 20 levels spellcaster. She can’t use armor and has 1d6 HD.

Instead of getting spell slots the witch gets curios, which are tiny mundane object that can store spells. The witch records her spells in her spell book but uses that knowledge to charge her curios. The witch gains two spells per level (four at level 1) of any spell level she can cast, half her own level rounded up. This means the witch can know up to 42 spells. She can only cast the number of spells as she has curios.

The witch also gains an otherworldly companion. These are roughly the same as Familiars, but can be more than just animals. The witch’s other worldly companion teaches the witch, Witch Script. It is invisible to all non-witches save for when detect magic is cast on it.

The Witch Archetypes are known as Sacred Secrets. There are also some powers known as Arcane Wonders.

Between these, the different types of otherworldly companions and the various types of Curios, there should be an unlimited variety of witches one can create with this book.

Chapter 3 covers the Sacred Secrets. Each one has their own background, Arcane Wonders and other powers. Again, these are treated like subclasses, Traditions, or Covens in other books. There are 14 of these and are all quite details have a lot of great potential.

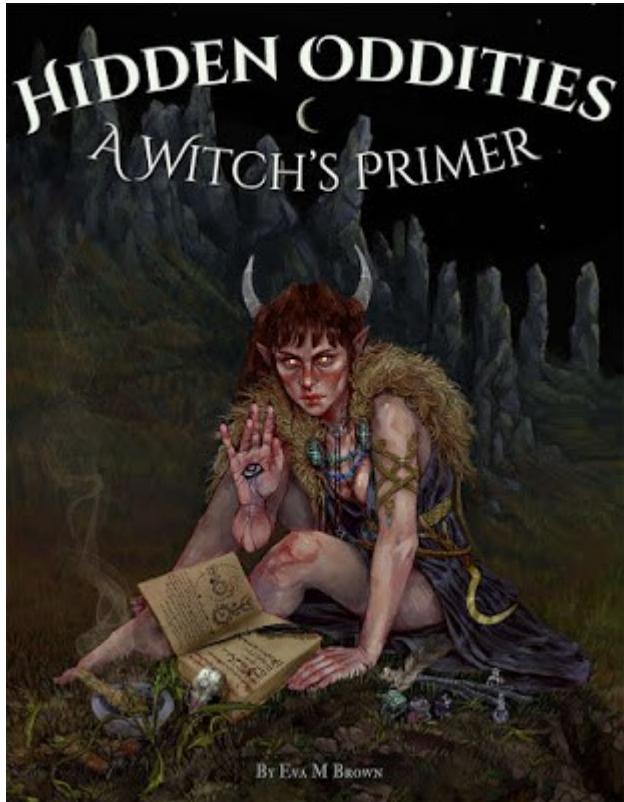
Chapter 4 (mis-labeled Chapter 3 in text) are Additional Options. This is a great chapter and one often forgotten about by other authors of Witch classes (including myself on occasion) and that is other archetypes for other classes. There is a new Druid Circle, a Fighter Archetype, A Paladin Oath, a Ranger Archetype, and a Wizard Tradition. There are also new backgrounds, complete with personality traits, ideals, bonds, and flaws, for any class.

This chapter also has a number of new feats and some new equipment.

Chapter 5 gives us Spells. Here there are 111 new spells. Overtly for witches they can be used by other classes as well. Some of these spells share the same or similar names with spells I have written, enough to make me do a double take. But it is obvious from reading them that these are not used OGC, merely the result of both Eva Brown and myself reading a lot of the same source materials. Which in a way is really cool.

Chapter 6 Lore is our world-building chapter. Here we get some organizations the could belong too, or are against the

witches. Even if you only use them as ideas or seeds there is a lot here to add to any game. Membership, leaders (some detailed), goals and headquarters are all detailed. Nine such organizations are detailed here.



The Appendices cover how to choose a companion, what equipment you might need and the roles of the witch.

Additionally, there is art information and a Witch's Script translation guide. OGL and a four-page Character sheet.

While this might not be my favorite 5e Witch class, it is my favorite 5e Witch book. There is just so much here that is great and really grabs my imagination.

I mentioned before that the art is great, but it really needs to be re-said. This is a great book.

You can also get the Character Sheet for PWYW. It works nicely with other witch classes as well.

Also at:
<https://theotherside.timsbrannan.com/2020/10/5e-witch-project-hidden-oddities-witches.html>

ARALUNE: DEMONIC OFFSPRING OF WITCHES

By Timothy T. Brannan

The final product was not what I was going for originally, but I like what I came up with. Doing research on the demonic offspring of witches. I played around with Aludemons, Alrunes, even Agrat Bat Mahlat.

My research will come up with something closer to what I was looking for, but until then here is a nice low-level monster for you to use.

(Art by Karen Nadine)

Alraune

Medium Humanoid (Demonic)

Frequency: Very Rare

Number Appearing: 1 (1)

Alignment: Chaotic [Chaotic Evil]

Movement: 120' (40') [12"]

Armor Class: 9 [10]

Hit Dice: 3d8+3* (64 hp)

Attacks: NA

Damage: NA, or by spell

Special: Charm x3, Witch spells (3rd level), damaged by holy weapons

Size: Medium

Save: Witch 3

Morale: 8

Treasure Hoard Class: None

XP: 75



The Alraune is born of the unnatural union of a witch and a specially procured and enchanted mandrake root.

The witch must find the place where a murderer was hung to death. It is believed that the "final power" of the hanged man would fall to the ground below him. The witch must come by night and there dig up the mandrake root that has grown from this final power. If she can do this by the new moon then all the better.

The witch then takes the mandrake and applying certain alchemical elements and demonic rituals, he will make a lover for herself in the shape of the dead man. The man/mandrake will then impregnate her his demonic seed. The mandrake creature is mindless and serves only one purpose. By the light of the morning sun, he will wither and die.

What is born then after the normal amount of time is the Alraune. The child, who is always a girl, will grow quickly (three days) into young adulthood. The witch will then set her new demonic daughter loose to wreck chaos.

The Alraune is always beautiful and smells of sweet flowers. She has a natural charm ability that she can use 3 times per day as if she were a witch of the 3rd level. The creature has no soul, nor any sense of morality. She will seduce faithful husbands to destroy their marriages, disrupt any village she is left in, inspire envy and jealousy in all that see her. She will avoid anyone she perceives as stronger or more powerful than herself. If the tide of the village goes against her she will attempt to escape. Most often they end up sharing the fates of their mothers; on the stake and pyre.

The Alraune does not attack with physical attacks or weapons. She will instead rely on her natural charm ability. If pressed she can use witch spells as a 3rd level witch of the Mara or Demonic traditions. Alraunes take double damage from holy or blessed items. Holy water does 1d4 hp of damage to them and burns like acid on their skin.

Alraunes, by custom, are often named after flowers.

Special: Once in a great while a witch will birth two alraunes at once, twin girls. When this occurs one will be exceptionally evil and the other, while not good exactly, is not dedicated to evil. The witch will not know which is which until they become older. It is believed that if the evil twin is killed the "good" twin will be free and even gain a soul.

Also at: <https://theotherside.timsbrannan.com/2020/10/monstrous-monday-alraune.html>

GHOST CHARACTERS IN D&D 5e

By Karl David Brown

The ghost is a race available for play at 7th level or higher. You can start playing a ghost as a new character. If a PC of any race dies, they can return as a ghost. Before launching into the usual content for a new race let's take a moment to consider the implications of allowing a ghost PC in your game.

Should a dungeon master allow ghost player characters?

The ghost race was developed using the race design system in DM's Guild publication "Tinker's Toolkit Race Design" from the RPG Review Cooperative (<https://www.dmsguild.com/product/232813/The-Tinkers-Toolkit-Race-Design>). This system of race design is the product of mathematical analysis of races published by WOTC and more than three years of intensive play testing. Therefore, I expect the race to function and be balanced for play. However, the ghost race itself has not been play-tested. The ghost race also produces very specialised characters that may not be suitable for all campaigns and players.

The other consideration is that the ghost's ability to go almost anywhere will circumvent many challenges. In many ways this is like a flying race, like the aarakocra, in that the PC can circumvent many obstacles but then finds themselves alone. PHB race characters can also gain access to similar capabilities through spells, especially by 7th level when a ghost may join them. Personally, I'm happy to include flyers and ghosts and make almost no adjustments to my adventures to accommodate them. I believe player characters are supposed to use their abilities to overcome obstacles and create unexpected situations so as a dungeon master I just roll with it as I would for any other character ability.

Should you play a ghost?

If your dungeon master allows ghosts, you should consider if you really want to play one. A ghost sacrifices 6 levels of diverse class features in exchange for additional racial traits focused on defence and scouting. Even a ghost's Withering Touch is a mediocre offensive trait at 7th level. The ghost's hyper-specialisation compared to a standard character might be a role you don't enjoy playing. Given the ghost's poor offensive capabilities, players may feel impotent if the adventures are focused on combat. On the flip side, a ghost can survive almost any encounter. Some players will enjoy this safety as a way to develop a character over the long term. Others will find the lack of risk removes some enjoyment from play.

Dispelling some assumptions

A careful reading of the rules as they are written for ghosts in the Monster Manual reveals that they are not completely intangible; evidence for this includes that they have a low strength score, are only resistant to physical weapons not immune, are slowed down when they move through other creatures and objects, and the ethereality trait specifically calls out that the ghost can still be seen "while it is in the Border Ethereal, and visa versa, yet it can't affect or be affected by anything on the other plane." Therefore, while on the Material Plane they are semi-tangible to creatures of that plane.

A standard D&D assumption is that when someone picks up an object spells and magic that affects the character also affects that object. For example, objects picked up by an invisible wizard also become invisible. When a ghost picks up an item, the item temporarily becomes semi-material until it is dropped. Therefore, no special rules for 'phantom objects' are needed.

Ghost

Ailda lay in a pool of her red blood. With dimming vision, she cast about and saw all her companions lay dead or unmoving. Dragon stepped on the body of Hrang, the massive creature crushed the huge northman's bones like kindling. A serpentine neck swung a head, jaws agape, towards her... And there was Hrang again, translucent and glowing with an inner fire of white rage. "Noooo!" he roared. A muscled arm flung out to ward off the bite, but the fist slowed the head then went right through. Where Hrang touched, scaled flesh withered. Next, the barbarian's enchanted

sword slashed across and the dragon's neck. A severed head fell to the ground beside Ailda.

Ghosts are spirits of the dead brought back to the land of the living by tasks unfinished and force of will. Translucent and only semi-real, these spirits are impossible to keep from their goals passing through walls and foes with equal ease.

Semi-tangible

Ghosts were members of another race, usually human, and appear much as they did in life; healthy and whole but somewhat misty and translucent. However, the body of the ghost is not a perfect copy of their living body; it is a manifestation of how they see themselves. A beautiful youth who believes they are ugly will reappear as an ugly ghost. An old man who reveres his golden years as a strong young man might return young and vigorous. Also, for this reason many ghosts manifest favourite clothes, wedding rings, and other tiny personal items that are actually inseparable parts of their body. When a ghost feels an intense emotion, they may glow faintly. This link between self-image and appearance can cause changes over time. A ghost might slowly become gaunt from despair or become more handsome as they gain confidence from their new powers.

Loss and obsession

Only those with a powerful sense of self and an emotional anchor that prevents them passing on to the outer planes return as ghosts. This anchor might be the need to protect a loved one, a consuming desire for vengeance, or the desire to finish their life's work. The mental trauma of death and the soul's journey back changes a person. Many memories are stripped away, and the returning mind obsesses over the manner of their death or their reason for not moving on. In extreme cases the amnesia is near total producing a lost soul that feels the emotion of a relentless yearning or burning vengeance but does not know for what or whom; forever acting on that emotion but never finding satisfaction.

Homes, graves, and massacres

Ghosts typically first manifest at sites of emotional importance. This might be the site of their murder, the bedroom of their child, the workshop containing their unfinished masterpiece, or their own grave. A cemetery might be home to several ghosts. The only places where many ghosts dwell are sites of horrible massacres. Other ghosts have no home in death but follow a living person, perhaps their lover, child, or murderer, who is their anchor to life.

Lost souls and tasks undone

Many ghosts have lost so much of themselves that they are barely aware shadows of themselves mechanically reliving daily activities or the moment of their death over and over. However, a rare few ghosts retain enough of what they once were to act on the goal that death has twisted into an obsession. Whether driven by the need to protect a living adventurer, a greed for gold that will not die, revenge, or some other task undone, these ghosts make for companions whose persistence, resistance to material dangers, and ability as spies will enhance any band of adventurers.

Ghost Names

Most ghosts keep the name they had in life. For others the trauma of the return has erased even the memory of their name. Others come to call them by their appearance or habits. A ghost might be called The Drowned Knight, The Spirit of Gronlar Castle, the Burning Seamstress, and other such descriptive names.



Ghost Traits

Level Adjustment. Being a ghost is worth as much as a race and six class levels. A ghost must have at least one class level. A ghost joins a party at 7th level but only has one class level.

Ability Score Adjustments. A ghost is only semi-real and therefore your strength score is reduced by -2. However, only the iron willed with a strong sense of self can resist the pull of the grave. Your wisdom score is increased by 1 and your charisma score is increased by 3.

Racial hit dice. A ghost has 6d8 racial hit dice in addition to hit dice from their class

Racial hit points. A ghost has 6d8 (or 30) plus 6 multiplied by your constitution modifier hit points in addition to their usual hit points for their class.

Age. Usually the age of the character at death unless their self-image harkens back to the glory days of youth. The mental trauma of the return from the dead often strips them of the memory of their exact age and date of birth.

Size. Medium. By default, a ghost is an ex-human 5 to 6 feet tall. Ghosts have no weight but you can use this space on your character sheet to record a build.

Speed. Your base land speed is 0 feet. However, you can magically fly at a base speed of 40 feet and hover perfectly. Therefore, you rarely need a land speed.

Languages. You can speak, read, and write the Common language and one other of your choice.

Damage Immunities. You are immune to Cold, Necrotic, and Poison damage.

Damage Resistances. You have resistance against acid, fire, lightning, thunder damage as well as bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from non-magical weapons.

Condition Immunities. You simply ignore the following conditions: exhaustion, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, prone, and restrained.

Ethereal Sight. The ghost can see 60 feet into the Ethereal Plane when it is on the Material Plane, and vice versa.

Withering Touch. Your touch can deliver a melee weapon attack using your charisma modifier and proficiency bonus to hit. The attack has a reach of 5 feet. If you hit, you deal 2d6 plus your charisma modifier necrotic damage. The dice for damage increase at 8th level to 3d6 and at 13th level to 4d6.

Incorporeal Movement. You can move through other creatures and objects as if they were difficult terrain. You take 1d10 force damage if you end your turn inside an object.

Etherealness. 13th level you can enter the Ethereal Plane from the Material Plane, or vice versa. You are visible on the Material Plane while on the Border Ethereal, and visa versa, yet you can't affect or be affected by anything on the other plane.

Bonds and Flaws. Rather than the usual bonds and flaws from your background one of your bonds should be an obsession that anchors your soul to the material plane. You may also choose flaws as usual or choose amnesia (partial or total) or an insanity caused by your death and journey back from death. Some examples are given below.

D6 Bonds (anchors)

1. I was knifed in a dark alley by a one-armed man. I will find my killer and have my revenge.
2. I died of a fever leaving behind an orphaned child. I will ensure she never goes hungry.
3. I am in love with a fellow adventurer. Even in death I protect them.
4. The mob came with pitchforks and threw me from the roof. I will have revenge on them all!
5. My arcane research was so close to uncovering a powerful secret. I aspired to godlike power, now I can't even remember what I searched for. I will uncover those lost secrets.

- The treasure that took a lifetime to hoard, has been divided and scattered. I will gather every item back from my unworthy heirs.

D6 Flaws (insanities)

- The living are fleeting nothings, I am eternal. I ignore their suffering and pleas for help.
- I obsess over a vice of the living a can no longer enjoy. I tempt others so I can live vicariously through them.
- The frustrations of my existence boil over into uncontrollable rages at the slightest insult.
- A great treasure was stolen from me. Now I steal gold and valuables whenever I can to rebuild the hoard I lost.
- Because of the nature of my death I am terrified of spiders. I am likely to flee at the sight of even a house-spider.
- I was drowned. I can't even look at pools more than a few feet across and ankle deep let alone approach them. Wells, rivers, lakes, and seas are terrifying.

Existing PCs returning as ghosts

You can create a ghost as a new character or use the rules for ghosts to bring back a beloved PC. If doing the latter, the ghost race traits are added to those the character already has except where noted below:

- Don't use the ghost ability score adjustments above. Instead apply the following: A ghost is only semi-real and therefore your strength score is reduced by two. The harrowing return from the grave has affected your memory, your intelligence score is reduced by two.
- Size is the same as it was in life.
- Use pre-existing unarmed reach for withering touch.
- You lose any land speed you have. Any pre-existing flying speed you have increases to at least 40 or stays at the same speed if already over 40. Any pre-existing flight speed gains the 'ability to hover'.
- Keep existing languages. Do not add the languages for the ghost race.
- You gain a new bond or alter an existing one to represent the emotional anchor that ties you to the land of the living. You may decide to gain amnesia or an insanity as a flaw as well.

Next, we must account for the extra 6 level equivalents of power the ghost just gained (the extra race worth of traits is accounted for by the change to ability score adjustments). There are three imperfect solutions:

- The character stays dead and does not return as a ghost until the other characters gain 6 more levels. In the meantime, the player plays another character. Patience is required for this option.
- The dead character returns immediately as a ghost and is now 6 levels higher than the other characters. The ghost's xp total remains unchanged and therefore does not gain any more levels until the others catch up. In the meantime, everyone just accepts the power imbalance. This might work well for groups that place story ahead of tactical play and if the ghost's player can resist hogging the limelight.
- The harrowing process of returning from the dead strips away much of the character's memories and mind. They return a changed shadow of their former selves. The character must be at least 7th level at the time of death for this option. Remove 6 class levels including the class features, hit die, ability score increases, feats, etc. Removing class levels is a detailed process that is rather fiddly to do and therefore suited to only patient players with an eye for detail.

Ghost Racial Feat. Twisted Soul

Requires: Ghost race, at least 9th level, and one or more flaws that are insanities.

Under the strain of death and obsession your identity begins to erode. You become a hollow parody of your living loving self, a change that shows on your gaunt haunted features all the time. However, when agitated your unhinged the mental state shifts your appearance further into the horrifying visage of a day's old corpse marked by the manner of their death and the insanities within. For example, the horrifying visage of a murderer might have hands dripping with their victim's blood and a broken neck from when they were hanged; someone torn apart by hogs might manifest a bloody body shredded body with tusks and a snout.

You also begin to regard the living as things you are justified in using to achieve your unfinished business.

You gain the following benefits:

- You gain Darkvision 60 feet, unless you already possess Darkvision with a superior range.
- You become immune to the conditions Charmed and Frightened.
- Horrifying Visage. When you use this trait as an action you take on the appearance of a corpse marred by the manner of your death and physically warped by your insanities each non-undead creature within 60 feet of you that can see you must succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened for 1 minute. If the save fails by 5 or more, the target also ages $1d4 \times 10$ years. A frightened target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the frightened condition on itself on a success. If a target's saving throw is successful or the effect ends for it, the target is immune to your Horrifying Visage for the next 24 hours. The aging effect can be reversed with a greater restoration spell, but only within 24 hours of it occurring.
- Possession (Recharge 6). One humanoid that you can see within 5 feet of you must succeed on a Charisma saving throw or be possessed by the ghost; you then disappear, and the target is incapacitated and loses control of its body. You now control the body but doesn't deprive the target of awareness. You can't be targeted by any attack, spell, or other effect, except ones that turn undead, and you retain your alignment, Intelligence, Wisdom, Charisma, and immunity to being charmed and frightened. You otherwise use the possessed target's statistics, but don't gain access to the target's knowledge, class features, or proficiencies. The possession lasts until the body drops to 0 hit points, you end it as a bonus action, or you are turned or forced out by an effect like the dispel evil and good spell. When the possession ends, you reappear in an unoccupied space within 5 feet of the body. The target is immune to your Possession for 24 hours after succeeding on the saving throw or after the possession ends.
- The DC for your horrifying visage and possession traits is 8 plus your proficiency bonus and your charisma modifier.

The Drowned Sailor

A 7th level ghost character for Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition. This is a character created as a ghost rather than a character who has come back as one. He is equipped as a higher-level character (DMG38).

The Drowned Sailor first appeared at the docks a few weeks ago. A misty apparition dripping wet, barefoot and dressed as a common sailor. He knew he was yearning for something, no someone, but who and where he does not know. Weeks later nothing on the docks has fulfilled that burning need or even triggered any memories. Perhaps the answers are out over the sea? Perhaps if he joins a group of travellers, he may learn something useful?

Levels. Ghost 6 and Rogue 1. Total 7 Background Sailor. Race Ghost. Alignment NG. Proficiency bonus +3.

STR 10 (+0), DEX 14 (+2), CON 12 (+1), INT 9 (-1), WIS 13 (+1), CHA 17 (+3)

Experience points 23000. Age. I don't remember but I look about 30. Height. 5'10" Weight. Effectively nil. Average build. Eyes. Brown. Skin Tanned, 'HOLD' tattooed on the right knuckles and 'FAST' on the left.

Saves. Strength +0, Dexterity +5, Constitution +1, Intelligence +2, Wisdom +1, Charisma +3

Skills. Acrobatics +8*, Animal Handling +1, Arcana -1, Athletics +6*, Deception +3, History -1, Insight +1,

Intimidation +6, Investigation -1, Medicine +1, Nature -1, Perception +4, Performance +3, Persuasion +6, Religion -1, Slight of Hand 2, Stealth +5, Survival +1. (* = expertise 2x proficiency bonus).

Passive Wisdom (Perception) 14. Languages: Common, Primordial, thieves' cant. Proficiencies: Armour: light. Weapons: simple, hand crossbows, longsword, shortsword. Thieves Tools, navigator's tools, water vehicles.

Armour Class 13. Initiative +2. Speed 0, fly 40 (hover). Hit Points 42. Hit Dice 7d8.

Attacks.

Withering Touch +6 to hit, reach 5, 2d6+3 necrotic damage.

Short sword +5 to hit, reach 5, 1d6+2 slashing damage.

Dagger +5 to hit, reach 5, 1d4+4 piercing damage

Belaying pin (club) +3 to hit, reach 5, 1d4+0 bludgeoning

Offensive abilities. Sneak Attack +1d6 damage when it applies (PHB96). He has two short swords and two daggers and can use the normal two weapon fighting rules (PHB195).

Damage Immunities. Cold, necrotic, poison. Damage Resistances. Acid, fire, lightning, thunder, and non-magical piercing, slashing and bludgeoning.

Condition Immunities. Exhausted, grappled, paralysed, petrified, poisoned, prone, and restrained

Equipment. Backpack (see below) leather armour, common clothes, pouch (5sp, 4gp, and a glass eye), a scrimshaw swallow amulet (sailors believe this is lucky).

Backpack contents. bedroll, mess kit, tinderbox, 10 torches, 10 days rations, waterskin, 50' of hempen rope, a pouch containing four pearls worth 100gp each and one flawed pearl worth 90gp, two potions of healing OO, vial of antitoxin O, navigator's tools, thieves tools, 50' silk rope.

Personality Traits. I work hard so I can play hard, but I enjoy a friendly wager too much for my fun to last long.

Ideal. I'm committed to my crewmates not to any lofty ideal.

Bond. I desperately yearn for someone, but I can't remember who. I must find them to feel whole.

Flaw. When confronted with a sad scene I collapse catatonic with grief. I'm not sure why.

Other Traits and Features

Ethereal Sight. Can see 60ft into Ethereal Plane from Material Plane and visa versa

Incorporeal movement. Can through creatures and objects as if they are difficult terrain. Takes 1d10 damage if he ends his turn inside an object.

Feature: Ship's passage. Can get free passage aboard ships see PHB139 for details.

BOOK REVIEW: LOST GODS, A NOVEL

by Honigfrosch

LOST GODS by Gerald BROM (2016): A Review In Two Parts

Act One: Hell Is A Bad RPG Manual

Sometimes you want to like a book, but it doesn't let you.

When I had acquired a used copy of *Lost Gods*, I had been very excited. I called it a "crown jewel" due to the gorgeous illustrations. I also said, "I know his writing isn't that good", but then hopefully added "I'm a sucker for interesting interpretations of Hell".

I kind of knew it would be shit? But I was hoping it would at least not be boring. It's boring. It was off to a rocky start, but I kept assuming it would get better. It only got mediocre with glimpses of not-boring. Overall it was still boring, and I finally gave up on it when I was just a few dozens of pages from the end.

The plot summary: Our main protagonist, who has a name but never amounts to more than Some Dude, gets killed and ends up in Purgatory, tries to get back so he can save his pregnant girlfriend. Adventures are kind of had, I guess.

The central premise of the story is definitely interesting, don't get me wrong. Most deities have been driven off the surface of the Earth and forced to make Purgatory their new home, which doesn't sit well with the demons that were already there, and the gods' powers are waning due to a steady decline of worshippers. The human souls are used and abused (as food, entertainment, for slave labour) and there's rebellion brewing, because some humans are sick of being subjected to the sometimes cruel whims of the gods, apparently not realising that said gods are the only thing standing between them and the demons, who are unlikely to be more merciful. But unfortunately it's not really about the gods and their scheming, it's about Some Dude and his girlfriend, and it pretty much dooms the book.

See, Purgatory as such is mostly a depressing, violent slog where everything blurs together. The humans are either victims or assholes, sometimes both. The demons don't have much of a presence. Meaning that the deities are the only chance for the story to shine with something fascinating and even beautiful, if often horrifying — and if "beautiful but horrifying" isn't fitting for most gods, what is? My favourite was Yevabog, the first goddess we meet, spider-like and melancholy. She had a number of "husbands" that she kept inside cocoons on the ceiling of her house, and was devastated when they got burned to ashes, wailing how much she loved them. That's creepy and sad. But scenes like this were few and far between, nowhere enough to make the rest bearable.

It's not that there's nothing happening. A lot of things are happening! There's a magical knife that dude got from a fallen angel caught on the surface, if I remember correctly the dude's father is also below as part of the rebellion, there's arena fights where dude ends up being the new champion, gods get sort of almost killed (I mean they're gods, they get better), everyone's an asshole, meanwhile his girlfriend unsuccessfully tries to escape her imprisonment a few times and

eventually gives birth. But does anyone care? Not me, and I'm not going to lie to you by making this sound deeper or more exciting than it is. Plus, the pacing is glacial.

People were going on about how "dark" this is. I don't know about that. It's joyless, though. There's a lot of gore and violence and suffering, but nobody really gives a shit. Neither in-universe, because souls are at the very bottom of the social ladder, nor outside of it because it gets repetitive and the characters are too bland to make me care about them. And the writing generally does not help. Everyone talks mostly the same, except which/how many curse words they use. There's a lot of descriptions of actions, but we rarely get into the characters' heads, and even then their thoughts are also mostly action-related (I have to find X, I'm assessing my situation to do Y, I'm part of the rebellion and our goal is Z). Attempts at giving characters more depth through the means of angst-filled backstory fall completely flat.

It's all very cursory: the writing is functional, but doesn't have much of a flavour. You never get the feeling that the characters have a life outside of the story, that they have their own thing going on when you're not looking. Trish, the girlfriend, is a prime example of this: I was almost done with the book and still knew nothing more about her than when I started it. She's beautiful, she's pregnant. Her parents didn't approve of her relationship. What are her goals, apart from escaping and having a family? What is she like? What does dude love about her, aside from her beauty and kindness and motherhood? The way she's described in the book, I'm certain that if you asked dude about his reasons for loving her he'd probably say stuff like, she's the best thing that ever happened to me, she gave me a reason to become a better person (for our child!), and that's not really anything. It's a Shutterstock image of a relationship. It's only slightly above a Hallmark card.

And this functional writing is why I compared the book to an RPG manual. There's a lot of description on what you see, first this happens, then that happens. A lot of worldbuilding nuggets that don't really coalesce or feel lived-in. I'm not saying that BROM didn't think about his fictional world, he clearly did and he gets props for mixing various mythologies (such as Egyptian ba and ka to categorise a soul's state of being). But it doesn't make you feel anything. As opposed to, say, White Wolf who occasionally managed to write flavour text or character designs that did, indeed, make me feel sad or intrigued or wanting to know more about some NPC. After almost finishing Lost Gods, I am only mildly wondering whether its basic setting (deteriorating gods sandwiched between human rebellion and demon army) would be worth using for an RPG campaign.

Overall, a massive disappointment. Give it a pass.

Part Two: Terroir and Awe

I first griped about the novel in my Dreamwidth journal, and that review got copied and slightly tweaked into what you just read. But something kept nagging at me. I wasn't finished. I couldn't say why exactly, but I felt I had only touched the surface, like describing ripples in the water without mentioning the large fish right beneath the surface, causing those ripples.

I kept thinking of a scene from the 1984 Stephen King/Peter Straub novel *The Talisman* in which a werewolf stumbles upon a sacred place after his transformation. Two places, in fact. To quote:

"One was a clearing in the woods into which he had chased a rabbit, the other the scruffy back yard of a farmhouse where a whimpering dog lay chained to a stake. The instant he set a paw down in these places, his hackles rose and an

electric tingling traversed the entire distance of his spine. These were sacred places, and in a sacred place a Wolf could not kill. That was all. Like all hallowed sites, they had been set apart a long time ago, so long ago that the word ancient could have been used to describe them — ancient is probably as close as we can come to representing the vast well of time Wolf sensed about him in the farmer's back yard and the little clearing, a dense envelope of years packed together in a small, highly charged location. Wolf simply backed off the sacred ground and took himself elsewhere. Like the wingmen Jack had seen, Wolf lived in a mystery and so was comfortable with all such things."

There's a lot I could say about *The Talisman*, both good and bad, and especially about its prominent theme of Places, of terroir. But this is not the time. That quote is relevant because today it finally made me realise what I was missing: That, no matter how paradoxical it may sound, Hell should be a sacred place. It will be twisted, certainly, torn or perverted, but there ought to be something grand perceptible underneath, something terrifyingly awe-some at its core.

The depiction in the 1988 horror movie *Hellbound - Hellraiser 2* is a fitting example. Its Hell is a large labyrinth, its overseer Leviathan a massive geometrical shape floating above it, emitting beams of black light. It is Lovecraftian in scale as well as strangeness, with a cold, orderly beauty to it... and likely to leave a lasting impression just as much, if not more, as the blood and gore might. (Clive Barker has always been good at dragging you into the guts and viscera of existence and reveling in it, but he deserves more credit for his equal talent to convey transformation and otherness.)

And of course, I have to mention the *Hellscape* of Wayne Barlowe. To develop, paint and write down his own interpretation of Hell has been an ongoing project for decades and his novels *God's Demon* and *The Heart of Hell* get brought up in reviews of *Lost Gods* because of some obvious parallels. Barlowe, too, is a painter turned author, and the general consensus seems to be that, just like BROM, he is better at painting than at writing, that his characters lack depth, and that overall reading his works is more like experiencing a sightseeing tour than an actual story. I couldn't really disagree on that. Still, Barlowe's vision feels grander and better crafted to me, his world more lived in. As sluggish as the pace may be at times, he does give the setting enough time to develop an atmosphere, to revel in lush descriptions and to spend time in characters' heads as they grapple not just with the most pressing plan of action, but with deeper questions of redemption, loss of identity, and emancipation. And more importantly, although some human souls are among the main characters, they are not the focus of the books. Additionally, they are only tethered to periods such as ancient Rome instead of the modern day, and we don't ever spend time outside Hell with details of how the main character really misses his car and what type of car that is. Barlowe may have similar weaknesses as BROM, but his writing style is more fittingly lyrical and archaic, and he infuses his characters with gravitas. The central promise is not a human ending up in Hell and trying to get back to his pregnant girlfriend, but one of the Fallen attempting to ascend back into Heaven (which, considering Lucifer's famous line in *Paradise Lost*, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven", feels almost delightfully subversive).

Barlowe understood that despite the violent or depressing imagery, Hell also has a kind of arrogant grandiosity, of dark splendour calling for reverence. I never felt that with *Lost Gods*, and a hint of splendour only when the novel remembered to put said Gods into the foreground. Or in other words: One novel lets me spend time with a character named Sargatanas, the other with a character named Chet.

What really saddens me is that most of the paintings BROM included in the book do have that otherworldly quality. The depicted gods are grotesque, beautiful, and terrifying. What a shame that barely any of it translates into writing.

MOVIE REVIEW: AMULET

By Andrew Moshos

dir: Romola Garai, 2020



Another week, another horror flick set in a decaying house with some demented woman upstairs slowly dying and trying to take everyone else down with her.

Amulet could not be more different from the other film I'm referring to, being the Australian flick Relic which came out a week or two ago. Amulet is far darker, but also far less harrowing somehow than the other flick. Both were directed by women, not to lump films into categories just because of the gender of the directors involved, but I can say that at least in this instance, they are directors trying to do more than just jump scares and surprise kills.

And while Relic might have been about intergenerational legacies and the steady process of deletion that dementia brings in the aged, the narrowing of a labyrinth people find themselves trapped in looking after the elderly, Amulet is some strange amalgam of guilt, revenge, physical manifestations of evil, and some monstrous feminine energy seeking retribution. I think? I could have it all completely wrong, because the thing I was thinking the most towards the end was "what the fuck is going on, like, seriously?"

Tomaz (Alec Secareanu) is clearly a very troubled chap. We see scenes of him clean shaven, meaning the past, and bearded, meaning the present. In the past, he was a soldier, in a forest, a suspiciously symmetrical forest. Something bad must have happened during The War, but we won't find out until way later in the film. Also, we never find out which war, which, I guess, doesn't matter. All wars are bad, and bad things tend to happen in them. But the bad thing that Tomaz does has nothing to do with the war.

In the bearded present, Tomaz seems to be leading a fairly hardscrabble existence in London, living in a squat with fellow refugees, but one detail of his existence seems to be unique to him: each night as he lays himself down to sleep, he tapes his hands together for some reason, and has to cut himself free in the mornings.

A fire in the squat sees him and the rest ejected into the streets, and now into an even more precarious existence. A kindly nun (Imelda Staunton, the only recognisable face in this film with like 4 people in it) takes him in briefly, and suggests that there is a place nearby where he could board and do jobs fixing the place up.

And it could really do with some work. There's rot throughout the place, in the ceilings and walls, everything creaks, and there's a girl called Magda (Carla Juri) who patiently looks after her decrepit mother, who's in a lot of pain, and often lashes out.

Magda seems like a refugee not only from a country other than England, but from an earlier time period as well. She takes the abuses from her mother with either good humour or resignation. Tomaz's every instinct is to flee, but he also

can't figure out what the hell exactly is going on.

It's about half an hour in where one thing happens, which seems to imply that nothing is as it seems: the nun throws away a small roll of cash. It might seem innocuous, but it is not.

As he gets more wound up in the house and in feeling protective of Magda, who seems like a bit of an odd sort herself, Tomaz is really captured after eating a meal, like, a casserole. He eats it like a man who's not eaten in a long time, not eaten a casserole in a long time, and not eaten a casserole so good it stuns you ever before. I thought maybe there was heroin in the food or something; turns out he was just mega-hungry.

Hungry and tormented by the past. Every time he gets a bit closer to Magda, or Magda trusts him more, he freaks out and pushes her or runs away, because of something, something. It's teased out to an incredible degree, it builds to something truly horrible. But along the way Tomaz wonders whether forgiveness is possible, whether he can forgive himself, and move in a different direction in his life, along a better path.

Meanwhile the aged creature on the top floor keeps harming Magda, and Tomaz keeps being freaked out by the house's sound design, because I think he can hear the same odd, unsettling soundtrack that we're hearing. Plus he finds some hairless albino bat-like monstrosity in the toilet, before he conveniently forgets about it later on, no matter how freaked out he got.

To say matters become worse for almost all involved would be an understatement along the lines of "going into a lockdown for a second time is more depressing than going into lockdown for the first time." The nature of what Magda's "mother" is completely changes towards the end of the film, in ways that don't even register as a twist. Grand, monstrous things occur later in the film, and it's not that they were telegraphed – it's that we weren't to know what kind of film we were watching. We thought maybe this troubled chap was struggling to find a way to redeem himself, that, whatever was happening with Magda and her mother, that maybe there was a way to protect Magda that somehow would make up for what he did During The War.

But that isn't the story being told here. At all. It's profoundly different.

In a chat with the nun, Tomaz wonders aloud about how, before the nun's god came on to the scene, the gods they previously had around weren't as forgiving. They didn't let you forgive yourself, in fact, they weren't much in the business of forgiving anything. Early in the film Tomaz, back in the day, finds a carved totem, or, amulet, if you will, of some earthen, feminine goddess, perhaps. Intended to protect from evil? Perhaps they are more about punishing the wicked, about inflicting evil upon those who deserve it.

Because, as well, until very late in the film, we don't actually know yet what Tomaz did, we still wonder whether he deserves to be forgiven, whether he is at heart a good man. The only book he reads is a philosophical text, to complete some dissertation he was working on prior to the war. It is implied that, in his struggles to forgive himself, perhaps he searches philosophy and metaphysics as a way to justify his own actions, or intellectualise reasons as to why he's not so much to blame for what happened. And then we find out. For sure. That none of that is applicable.

The film from then on makes the case that, actually, no, Tomaz, maybe you were right the first time, and people don't get to decide their own comfort levels with the evil they've committed. Maybe certain people are all about the punishment, rather than the redemption, and, honestly, I was so bewildered and bemused by the end, when it actually comes around, and is far nastier and deranged than I could have imagined, I was left pretty cold.

This is a horror film, but it's not scary at all, maybe a bit gross, and it has perhaps a feminist agenda that I would ordinarily applaud, considering how appalling the horror genre usually is towards women in general and female characters specifically.

I just – it's that – without spoiling anything, anyone who sees the bit with the giant shell and whatever the fuck it was inside, who tells me that *that* made a lick of sense, or the coda, where someone somehow gives a character acknowledgement that the grave wrong done to them has been avenged, without, you know, actually telling them in any way, maybe you'd be less baffled than I was. It makes you think the fix was in from the start, but then you have to wonder the hows and whys of it all, and it feels pretty fruitless.

I didn't actively dislike the film until the end; it's mostly well made. It looks seedy, like it should. There is perhaps something of a language barrier. The actor playing Tomaz is Romanian, the actor playing Magda is Swedish, a character who spends some time with Tomaz in the past sections I recognise from the films of Yiorgos Lanthimos, which means she's Greek (being Angeliki Papoulia), so there's a bit of the Europudding thing going on (films which get funding from different countries in the EU sometimes overload their casts with people from different countries still speaking in English despite there being no story reason for it, lazily referred to as "Europudding", at least by me). While the direction is unsettling and disconcerting, and while the story is completely uncompromising, I can still say that, even as I did not enjoy the experience, I am pretty sure the director Romola Garai made exactly the film she wanted to make, because honestly...

Sure, horror flicks are by their nature unpleasant, but sometimes, when I can't see the purpose behind it, or the approach they're reaching for, stories like this can be a bit absurd at the end, undermining whatever might have been done previous that worked.

Amulet will not protect you from anything, let alone the forces of confusion, and it won't protect you from a bad night at the movies, either.

5 times the real monster turns out to be YOU! out of 10

--

"It has dwelled within you. Now it's time to let it out." – strong words to an expectant mother-to-be - Amulet

Originally from: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/amulet>

THE WIGHT KING

By Adam Karlovsky

The wight king lies
and inside his coffin
he waits
white heat
ruminations
as his spirit marches
along the hill and into the night.

He hears the dryads gossiping
around him voices bounce
like inside a chamber,
to and from the others...
and inside his head.

His spirit sits on the edge
of the bustling pine
the edge of the river
rushing right by him
as he watches...
his thoughts

keep coming back to the lady with the sword

that he was once offered

His queen

by his side as he ruled a kindome far and broad

But rivers last much longer
than the dying soul

water travelling yonder
as his fingers fit into the stream
water rushes through his ethereal fingers stronger



than the ectoplasm that makes up his dream

She'll travel to the sea, no matter whether he
sits by the river

or upon

with ?

in his hill

He watches tadpoles come to life

attentive to the ones that die
letting ones that grow to frogs
pass by

The wight king tries to quench his thirst
by sipping on the running water

only he had harder fought
perhaps had seen much clearer?
the stream would not by fingers slip
her trauma less
and less for naught.

Sometimes lakes freeze to ice.

The queen sits vexing
hexing tattoos up her arms
hoping magic will be nice
but knowing thrice
the language that she writes
before she sees her spells.

And with hardened surfaces above
while the winter winds cut and fit,
she holds her breath -



longer than a dolphin ever dreams of -
hoping that the price is fair and game.
A quicken swim amongst the fish
before the toll knells.

Yet summer sings,
an echo round the corner,
ushering the coroner aside.
She swims up stream again
along the season salmon
knowing of their fate
yet knowing she'll not die.

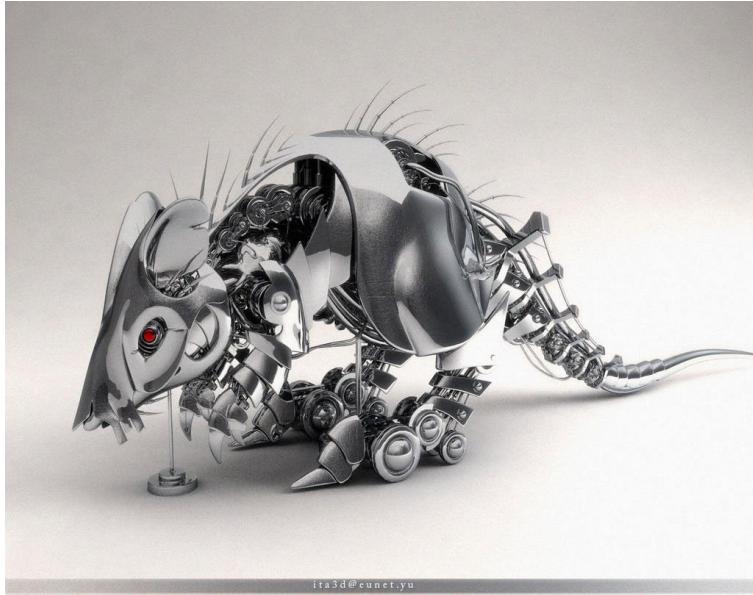
And, there, the wight king waits
watching water ripple in moonlight
singing hymns that guide his soul
along the rays of sun and birdsong
despite his lichly body
waiting in the hill,
gravely marching to the bells.

A rottion hand is raised within the grave
frozen upward by the cold,
and mirroring the corpse
the soul that drifts the songrays
hold it's arm up too,
to catch the lady of the lake
as her hexes into blessings good
and firm
and true.



Next Issue of RPG REVIEW

*Issue #49, December 2020
Cyberpunk 2020: The Year of the
Stainless Steel Rat!*



*Cyberpunk Red ... Cyberpunk 2020 ... Cyberspace ...
Shadowrun ... Eclipse Phase ... Emails & Direct
Deposits .. From Cyberpunk to Solarpunk .. and
more!*