



Historical Fantasy Campaigns for Role Playing Simulations

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Why Historical Fantasy?

This article starts with an aesthetic opposition to modern fantasy.

Ursula K. Le Guin, in that marvellous collection of essays "The Language of the Night", argues against the functionalist realist mode of thinking that is so common in the mainstream world. Faced with the accusation that fantasy fiction is at best a useless waste of time and at worst dangerous escapism, Le Guin emphasizes the utopian and creative in fantasy. The radical psychoanalyst and social theorist Herbert Marcuse does something very similar in a chapter of "Eros and Civilization" - reducing quite unfairly for what is an extremely dense and scholarly text - Marcuse argues that only from mythic utopias as counter-factual ideals is there any motivation of changing our current society. Of course, as Marcuse directly understood, a damaged unconscious mind can have a very distasteful individual fantasy - such as that proposed the Nazi writer Ernst Junger glorified the mixing of machine and human flesh as witnessed in war. Ironically Junger, who authored "The Storm of Steel", was dismissed from the Nazi army after criticising atrocities committed by the SS. Obviously one has to be careful what one wishes for.

But it hardly the atrocities of the Nazis that lead to a dislike of modern fantasy. That is a question of morals, rather than aesthetics. Rather, what is unpleasing about modern fantasy is the lack of artistic credibility. According the established principles in literature, any aesthetic expression can be analyzed according to setting, narrative, characterization, theme and style. Modern fantasy, to be blunt, is an absolute disaster when analyzed according to these criteria; a quasi-medieval Tolkien-feudal-Conan soup, full of one-dimensional characters, the beautiful good, the ugly evil, with a tale of get-the-girl-and-kill-the-baddies. Even the most highly honoured Professor Tolkien, whose tales have been substantially improved by the recent film trilogy, was prone to these simple errors, although The Lord of the Rings in tempered by a setting which includes European paganism and a thinly veiled metaphor for the right of Catholic Europe to crusade against an evil Muslims.

Lest anyone think otherwise, attention is drawn to the term "modern fantasy". This is all important. In days gone by when there was a different mode of consciousness throughout the human spirit, the fantastic served a different purpose - indeed, it provided the basis of Government through the authority of institutionalized religion. But the traditional mode of consciousness has long since gone with the disenchantment and rationalization of the world (Weber), and the conversion of the sacred to the profane (Durkheim). Modern authors which genuinely attempt to capture the spirit of those times in a hermeneutic fashion - as the some do (e.g., Tolkien, Howard, T.H. White, Zimmerman-Bradley), whilst "looking backwards" are not making profoundly anachronistic errors. The problem lies with those authors who, in an attempt to create their "own" fantasy world, end up creating something that is a pale and trivial reflection of contemporary styles and mores. Indeed, a good argument can be made - and often has - that due to the forward looking orientation of the modern mode of consciousness, the only possible "fantasy" in modernity is actually science fiction, or the extremely difficult genre of science fantasy (for example, one may mention Roger Zelazny's "Lord of Light" and "Creatures of Light and Darkness" as an exceptional attempt to engage in science

fantasy).

Turning attention to fantasy roleplaying simulations, the claims made above are reflected and are in many ways stronger as such games tend to truncate aesthetic considerations leaving such concerns to individual actors and directors. Shadowrun is a much maligned example: In a near-future cyberpunk-like setting magic returns to the earth in accordance to the zero countdown of the Mayan calendar. This is fair enough in terms of speculative fiction. What is intolerable is the fact that suddenly Elves start appearing - in North America. Isn't there enough mythic beings from the indigenous cultures to draw upon? Or were the authors completely ignorant of the lands in which they inhabit, preferring instead to draw upon the myths of legends of their own colonial past? Similar accusations can be levelled against Gygax's 'Greyhawk', a tepid high-middle ages world, heavily influenced by Tolkien and Vance, where the veritable melange of monstrosities may occur without rhyme or reason. If you want a more Oriental version of the same, go to "Legend of the Five Rings"; there one can find more nonsense with just a modicum of feudal Japanese words to feign difference.

Of course there are exceptions to all this. Although suffering from the accusation of being pure escapism, Greg Stafford's world of Glorantha as encapsulated in the RuneQuest roleplaying game did at least create a world that clearly paid attention to the way that people in traditional society thought, thus providing greater structural narrative consistency - no mean feat in a flat world with dragons the size of mountain ranges and intelligent malignant giant ducks. In its third edition, RuneQuest produced some excellent supplements based on a historical fantasy theme - one for Nordic adventures and one for Japan. It was of course, part of a tradition - Stafford had previously co-authored Pendragon, a remarkable game for encapsulating psychological disposition into the game mechanics itself which was also successfully attempted in the modern nihilist setting of Call of Cthulhu. Indeed, one of the best summaries of Australian indigenous myths and legends can be found in a supplement for the latter, Terror Australis. Another successful implementation was carried out in Ars Magica by Atlas Games. Iron Crown Enterprises produced supplements for Mythic Greece, Ancient Egypt and Robin Hood. Prior to these publications there was of course the high-aiming first generation roleplaying games Man, Myth and Magic by Yanquinto, and FGUs Bushido and Land of the Rising Sun.

The advantages for choosing a historical fantasy rather than a modern fantasy role playing campaign should be self-evident. For starters, there is a wealth of pre-existing material to draw from - there is no need to develop regal lines, language, social classes, economies, mythologies, pantheons, bestiaries and treasures, maps or even weather patterns. There is no fear that the campaign designer will create something that is an anachronism. In addition, all players whilst engaging in a historical fantasy campaign will be learning in accordance to the degree of immersion that they have with the setting, and not just factual information. They'll also be learning how people of different lands, cultures and times actually thought. The sneering claim of "realists" that roleplaying games and "fantasy" is mere escapism is shattered under the weighty facticity that the "gamers" are engaging in freeform historical research.

Establishing and Running a Historical Fantasy Campaign

In many ways the same rules apply for running a historical fiction roleplaying campaign as does. The director of the campaign has to make the standard sort of decisions e.g., is this going to an episodic or serial campaign? how powerful will the characters be at the start of the campaign? By the same token, as mentioned previously, a great deal of the detail in establishing the setting for a campaign has already been taken out. But this is not just advantageous for the campaign director - it also helps the players. With a pre-existing culture and history a detailed character background can be established with relative ease. How easy it is (using an example from the campaign below) to generate Drzislav, the Croatian and lay follower of Krivda, goddess of bitterness and hatred, currently located in the Greek city of Ragusa on the Dalmatian coast - the entire background for this character was generated in less than thirty seconds and with obvious developmental leads. All this information is readily available from existing websites, and best still, often in pictorial form further providing players a sense of immersion to the location of their character.

What is important for the campaign director is that to avoid anachronisms. These are just indicative of aesthetic

impoverishment in a mainstream fantasy setting but they are thoroughly devastating in a historical setting. The suspension of disbelief required to put up with a Japanese ronin samurai-ninja multi-class named James who speaks "common" and rides a Pegasus through a setting reminiscent of Scottish moors is just too much. Whilst an extreme example, campaign directors are strongly advised to keep players on a fairly short leash during the initial stages of a campaign until the players can really get a feel for the setting and narrative. One simple way to do this is to keep the campaign horizon reasonably close and in a non-consequential setting which the director has some pre-existing familiarity and interest with. There are good historical reasons for this of course - during the middle ages, travel was slow and dangerous. Most people didn't travel twenty kilometers from the place where they were brought up. For example, in the Annwyvvn campaign below, the first three game sessions were based in an isolated village near the border of contemporary Brittany and Normandy in France. We used a modified version of Gary Gygax's "The Village of Hommlett" as the starting scenario.

As the director (and players) knowledge of the setting expands, so too can the scope of the campaign. Initially one must be quite stereotypical in the use of plot elements and devices in accordance to the setting. Over time however, as the campaign expands and the narrative unfolds (even in a somewhat free-flowing manner), some atypical combinations can start taking place, as long as they are historically grounded. In the Sarajevo campaign for example, a distinctly Hellenic/Latin adventure and setting occurred as the campaign expanded from the Slavic Balkan region to neighbouring Turkic Bulgaria which was historically ingrained - indeed, it actually became quite a feature of the entire campaign. Although Hellenic and Latin influence in the region was fairly slim at the time to say the least, there had been some influence in the past and therefore the inclusion was justifiable - it was not as if an Aztec Temple was placed in the middle of Serbia. Campaigns can even develop into multi-generational affairs with a lineage of explorer types that end up travelling far from their original homes.

One difficulty that will arise is working out how to deal with religions and deities. The general rule of thumb that is easiest to implement and gives an impression of "realism" is regionalisation and interventionism. By regionalism what is meant is that pagan deities are culturally specific - the further away the priest is from the deities cultural seat of power, the less influence they will have (and the less spells they can provide). Also, many cultures also have numerous small gods. Seeming that there is only a finite quantity of belief to be divided up, it stands to reason that these deities are likewise less powerful (hence the advantage of monotheistic religions). However, the smaller the number of worshippers the greater the prospect of divine intervention, even to non-worshippers (as the players in the Annwyvvn campaign found out one day with a timely but cryptic intervention by Mielikki, the Finnish goddess of the woodlands - and yes, they were in Finland). Likewise the campaign must also regionalise other metaphysical planes of existence. Particular care of course has to be carried out with the use of existing world religions in a roleplaying simulation - some people take belief a little too seriously, and if a person is being historically accurate in (for example) using two Judeo-Hebrew gods (Yahweh from the South, El from the North) player trouble may arise. Put simply, it seems doubtful whether roleplaying historical fantasy is well-suited for people who don't have a secular orientation.

One important contribution that a campaign director can make is to introduce a culturally and religiously appropriate theme into a campaign and reinforce that theme through recurring motif and in a particular style. For the former, it is worthwhile that the campaign director familiarise themselves with some of the more scholarly works that study the particular mythos and some of the key stories. For example, the reverence and bawdy orientation of the trickster in the American Indian mythos, or the path to salvation through a denial and rejection of physical reality evident in Hinduism. This can be a difficult task initially, but as the director and players continue within the setting it almost seems inevitable that such a theme will arise. Indeed, it is quite possible that the director will notice a hitherto unrecognized recurring theme in the cultural history that particularly seems appropriate for their own elaboration. In the two sample campaigns the theme is evident from the title given to the campaigns - the "quest" for Annwyvvn and the "tragedy" of Sarajevo. Note that these titles were only given after substantial development in the campaigns themselves.

Finally, there is the matter of players changing history as she is writ. Obviously, the mere existence of the free-willed spirits embodied in players is going to make some changes to what actually occurred in history, but normally the importance is far from significant enough to give the sense that timelines have suffered undue abuse. Using setting

which have historical doubts about them in the first instance is a good idea - not only is there further free reign for the players, but there is also a sense of living on the borderlands between the ordered civilized world and the world of the unknown. Another strategy is to orientate the players involvement in the campaign towards the fantastic rather than the recorded historical fact. The important thing is create a situation where the players can dramatically upset real history, but avoid a sense that these circumstances are contrived.

Two Examples: The Quest for Annwyvvn and The Tragedy of Sarajevo

Both these campaigns have their origins with the Mimesis gaming group which met between 1995 and 2002 in Melbourne. One of the mainstays of the group was playing a revised version of Empires of the Middle Ages, a historical boardgame by SPI, as that game developed the Annwyvvn historical fantasy campaign developed and eventually attracted some fifteen participants over two separate, but related, campaigns (one medium-high level, one medium-low level). Following the conclusion of the Annwyvvn campaign, the Sarajevo campaign was initiated approximately a year later, but actually remains incomplete. Whilst the former campaign was run using Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (1st edition rules) and the later with the latest incarnation of the Dungeons & Dragons rules, they should be adaptable to any game system.

The setting for the Annwyvvn campaign was the late ninth century in northern Europe, covering the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Norse lands, but some incursions into the Langue Oil region (northern France) and Old High German. There was also the possibility of reaching the magical Elven lands of Annwyvvn (in Welsh, aka Tir Na Og, Alfheim). The initial and driving narrative was to discover to re-discover the pathways to the Elven lands which had been closed for some time. This prospect has been heightened by the recent re-emergence of the Celtic Christians heresy (aka the Culdee) who, unlike the dominant Roman Church, do not persecute Elves on the grounds that they are 'demons'. Starting characters could come from any of the cultures noted above and subscribe to either the Celtic Church or to a regional pagan faith - one character was a renegade Roman Catholic paladin. Most characters were Humans, Elves and Half-Elves, although there was the occasional Hobbit.

During the campaign the British Isles suffered several major incursions from Viking raiders, eventually smashing the Kingdom of Northumbria and invading East Anglia. The players however, ended up travelling from Brittany through Cornwall, Wales and into Scotland and avoided most of the conflict. By making connections with the Nordic kingdom of Orkney (and meeting Nordic Elves on a similar same quest), they travelled across the North sea and into the Jarldom's of Norway and Sweden and eventually in Finland. In these wilds, and encountering some Norse and Finnish dieties, the players discover that the solution of their problems actually lies partially in Bavaria and partially in Cornwall - and thus the campaign split into two with the respective journeys. Eventually the two groups were reunited with a final confrontation at the contemporary location of Mont St. Michel, which involved travelling to hell and back (literally).

The Balkans campaign was set at roughly the same time, although there is no particularly good reason for this. The region at the time was even far more wild than that which the Anwyvvn campaign had been through. There were fledgling Serbian and Croatian kingdoms, Byzantine holdings along the Dalmatian coast, with Magyar, Bulgar, Venetian and Hungarian incurions. The region is wild and a battleground - to quote one contemporay text on Dalmatia: "A bewildering array of conquerors and occupiers over the next 800 years or so [7th to 15th century]. Dalmatia became a battleground, pitting Byzantine, Avar, Greek, Serbian, Croatian, Magyar, Mongol, Norman, Sicilian, Venetian, and Neapolitan forces against one another. About 30 different annexations occur in this period..." Not surpsingly under these circumstances, the players begin as mercenaries, explorers, refugees (including, exotically, an escaped Muslim slave girl), missionaries. In a moment of amusement, one player managed to generate a character that had no common language with any others - in a act of director intervention, an allowance was made for one character to change one of their languages to help out our otherwise very confused Bulgarian.

Unlike the Annwyvvn campaign, the Sarajevo campaign was surprisingly more settled. After (just) saving a small town from orcish invaders, the players eventually take over the township as many of the local elders met their end. As a

multicultural and multireligious group, they rename the town Sarajevo an attempt to build a liberal community is a wild country of sectarian interests. From this the dominant theme of tragedy develops as the players find their successful township threatened by powers far greater than they'll ever be, such as the Orthodox and Roman faiths, the new kingdoms of Serbia and Croatia, the powerful Byzantine and Venetian nations and raiders from Magyar, Hungary and Bulgaria - not to mention traditional south Slavic mythic beings such as Vampires, werewolves and a variety of often malignant nature spirits. The resource rich Sarajevo community engages a bloody campaign for survival, which includes some exotic quests - one of which unearths a key motif for the entire region; an artifact known as The Scythe of Thanatos.

If all of this sounds complex, keep in mind that the campaign director(s) started off with an interest and only some foreknowledge of these regions and their history. Further complexity and detail developed as the campaign directors and players took additional interest in the regions that they were involved in. This research, both textual and visual, provided all players some historical and mythical knowledge of people and lands which they previously didn't have. It allowed them to develop a deeper and greater understanding of their own place and history in the contemporary world in a manner that modern fantasy is quite incapable of doing and, it should be said, a great deal of social studies texts which often provide coverage rather than depth; in comparison, these campaigns allowed the players to immerse themselves in ninth century northern Europe and the Balkans respectively for a number of years. Finally, the campaigns also assisted the players in developing their research skills. As any student of history, particularly of the times mentioned, there is significant difference in authority. Some texts are better than others - something that has the criteria of a scholarly study is far different to the elaborations found in the New Age section of a bookshop. Roleplaying simulations have always had the opportunity to be a learning experience that is also provides a great deal of enjoyment. In way of conclusion, another proposition: Roleplaying simulations coupled with historical fantasy is the best medium to experience past times.

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