

# GM Mastery

BOOK TWO

## HOLIDAY ESSENTIALS

THE DEFINITIVE SOURCEBOOK  
OF TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR  
GAME MASTERING  
HOLIDAY BASED ADVENTURES



BY: **Johnn Four**





**HOLIDAY ESSENTIALS** is about helping you plan, prepare, and GM better adventures. While you can use the information that follows to craft interesting holidays, my main goal is to help you use holidays as the backbone for campaigns, adventures, and encounters. Holidays can be much more than the minor quirk of your game world. With strategic design, as outlined in the coming pages, you can transform holidays into a vital GMing tool to create immersion, realism, and most importantly, more fun in your game sessions.

## **HOW TO DESIGN COMPELLING HOLIDAYS**

The first chapter gives step-by-step instructions for building a holiday. It helps you pick the right level of detail creation as well, so that you don't waste time over-planning, or don't get caught under-planning.

## **HOLIDAY DESIGN ELEMENTS**

This chapter is your holiday design toolset. It goes into detail about how and what to design for each of the steps outlined in chapter 1. Numerous examples are provided.

## **GM & CAMPAIGN ADVICE**

Chapter 3 provides tips and tools to help you design holidays and use the advice from the first two chapters.



Visit our websites:  
[www.RPGObjects.com](http://www.RPGObjects.com)  
[www.DarwinRPG.com](http://www.DarwinRPG.com)

\$9.95  
RPO2002  
©RPGObjects





# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

BY JOHN SITTICOE  
AND JOHNN FOUR

EDITING: SIMON WARD, BILL COLLINS

LAYOUT: CHRIS DAVIS



COVER: JAMES MATHER

ARTWORK: LARRY ELITORE

# INTRODUCTION: CREATING HOLIDAYS FOR YOUR GAMES

This eBook helps you plan, prepare, and GM better adventures. While you can use the information to craft interesting holidays, my goal is to help you use holidays as the backbone for campaigns, adventures, and encounters. Holidays can be much more than a minor quirk of your game world. With strategic design, you can transform holidays into a vital GMing tool to create immersion, realism, and most importantly, more fun in your game sessions.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Holidays are an under-designed aspect in games, but they hold wonderful storytelling and gaming potential. Often, we cook up default holidays based on real life, books, and movies. Holidays also tend to be afterthoughts—events we tack onto a gameworld or plot after everything else is done. It doesn't have to be this way. You can get more value from your preparation time and efforts by using holidays as the foundation for:

### ADVENTURE DESIGN

A single holiday can spawn numerous hooks and stories that make perfect RPG plots for players to explore. Properly designed, a holiday will have deep ramifications, plot threads, and factions you can use as the backbone for adventure construction. If you need an adventure idea or a side plot for your group, holidays are a great solution.

### ENCOUNTER DESIGN

Holidays should be more than a name and a date on your game world calendar. As you will see, fleshing out your holiday can spawn encounters, encounter seeds, and encounter hooks. Ultimately, this book is about bringing holidays to the game table to make them real and interactive for your players through inspired encounters.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

## HOLIDAY DESIGN

Take a moment between sessions to consider upcoming holidays in your game. If you have any planned, use the ideas within this book to breath new life into them, to make them fun and interesting for players. If you don't have holidays scheduled on your game calendar, then use the information herein to help you design some.

## CHAPTER 1: HOW TO DESIGN COMPELLING HOLIDAYS

The first chapter gives step-by-step instructions for building a holiday. It helps you pick the right level of detail creation, so that you don't waste time over-planning, or don't get caught under-planning.

## CHAPTER 2: HOLIDAY DESIGN ELEMENTS

This chapter is your holiday design toolset. It goes into detail about how and what to design for each of the steps outlined in chapter 1. Numerous examples are provided.

## CHAPTER 3: GM & CAMPAIGN ADVICE

Chapter 3 provides tips and tools to help you design holidays and use the advice from the first two chapters.

# CHAPTER I: HOW TO DESIGN COMPELLING HOLIDAYS



012

ELMORE



## DESIGN FOR ADVENTURE

At first glance, holidays might seem like a good way to flesh out a game world and add interesting trivia to a campaign milieu. However, holidays are a perfect GM tool when used for adventure. They provide plot hooks, encounters, and interesting encounter locations. Associated NPCs, events, and history can feed existing plot arcs, spin off new ones, or tie several together.

A key holiday design step is to adopt the right attitude. Holidays are opportunities for adventure; they don't have to be window dressing. They are campaign and plot design tools with conflicts and rewards, just like dungeons and encounters. What makes holidays special is their unique blend of timeline, events, and location that you can tweak according to your campaign's needs. They present new and interesting situations and environments in which to adventure and tell stories.

- o **Timeline.** Deadlines create drama. You decide when holidays occur, including one-time holidays such as coronations and funerals. Once set and the PCs are notified, the campaign has a deadline that cannot be changed, which adds drama if you can weave in situations that will be difficult to achieve by the holiday date.
- o **Events.** You can design holidays with one important event that the PCs get mixed up in, or with several events PCs can pick and choose from, much like a fork in a dungeon corridor. Additional dramatic tension is created if two or more events happen at the same time.
- o **Locations.** Holiday events require locations. Because holidays can range from simple to complex, sublime to weird, all types of locations fit without breaking immersion or consistency. For example, your low magic campaign does not normally have gates to other worlds or plane travel, yet you have a craving to do something unusual. The solution: you craft the Sun Holiday, during which a portal opens at a special, secret place at high noon providing a gateway to the Plane of Fire. The holiday makes this a temporary effect during an unusual time, and maintains campaign balance and immersion.

## ALTERNATE CAMPAIGN DIMENSION

Holidays have another awesome power: to temporarily interrupt your campaign and plots. During this interruption, you can inject all sorts of adventures without ruining the flow of play or the vectors of your plot arcs. Holidays create a window the PCs can enter and muck about in, sort of like an alternate campaign dimension. When the holiday ends, everything returns to normal, aside from any consequences based on events that occurred during the holiday.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

When the alternate campaign dimension opens, you can insert jousts, bard competitions, bizarre creature migrations, solar eclipses, temporary villains, prophecies, battles, magic oubliettes, unique roleplaying opportunities, and more.

Holidays are forgiving GM tools that let you bend the laws of your world and the campaign for a short time, if desired, and this creates huge opportunities for adventure!

For example, The Race For Manna is celebrated every three years by the villages of Emlet. The year prior, each village holds competitions on the same date to see which team will champion their village in the upcoming race. Teams then have one year to train and practice. In your current campaign, this holiday could be an opportunity for adventure:

- o Ask the PCs to be competitors for competing teams in a village
- o Ask the PCs to help train or coach a team
- o Ask the PCs to be judges who choose which team will represent the village in the race
- o Ask the PCs to represent a poor village in the race at the last moment
- o The race crosses the PCs' path, and they are:
  - o Requested to help
  - o Caught in the middle of a battle between teams
  - o Required to sabotage a team
- o The time of the race coincides with a period of frequent storms and monster appearances. The PCs get tangled up in one or more of these

## HOW TO DESIGN FOR ADVENTURE

Designing with adventure in mind is quick and easy. Adopt an attitude for adventure so you can spot opportunities as you design. While crafting, look for ways to build in the following basic adventuring elements:

- o **Conflict.** Two or more sides compete for a scarce resource such as gold, the attention of the Emperor, the right to participate in the holiday, or control over a special location. For any given holiday element, create two or more factions who compete over it. Note: the level of competition can range from friendly rivalry to deadly combat to devastating betrayal, giving you more options to keep adventures fresh and interesting.
- o **Mystery.** For any given holiday element being designed, try to add an element of mystery, a secret, or an unpredictable outcome. This not



## CHAPTER ONE

only creates drama, but opportunities for discovery quests, investigation encounters, and villainous plots.

For example, funny little Groundhog Day has mystery: will winter end soon, or will there be six more weeks of it? Imagine in your world that, instead of a groundhog it's a dragon, and the result is real. First, you'd want to give the gods a smack upside the head for creating such a fragile triggering mechanism to base climate on. Second, this looks like the perfect opportunity for a villainous plot: the evil Black Lord raises and trains a special group of dragonslayer NPC quintuplets who, on their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, are sent to destroy the dragon a week before the holiday so the whole world is thrust into a nightmare realm of never-ending winter.

- o **Location.** As you design your holiday, ask “where?” as often as you can. Holidays often involve history, ceremonies, and events—which require locations. These locations have unusual and cool circumstances and opportunities for interesting encounters.

For example, the PCs are hunting for a serial killer and are asked to bodyguard the mayor during Arrow's Folly, which is a celebration of the city's founding. The mayor must give a speech on the green outside the mage's guildhall. A platform and chairs has been set-up, along with a buffet, entertainers, and several tents. During the ceremony, the PCs spot the serial killer in the audience. The integrity of the ceremony is at stake, but so are the lives of future victims. If a battle breaks out, instead of fighting in a 10'x10' dungeon room, there's a 10' high platform, a crowd, chairs, tents, tables full of food, and other interesting location elements. Sweet.

- o **NPCs.** A great way to ground your holiday to game table action and relevance is through NPCs. Add notable figures, past and present, who are integral to, involved with, or affected by the holiday. These people can serve as hooks, sources of conflict and mystery, and the basis of encounters and events.

You can craft specific NPCs or NPC roles. For example, a holiday might require a high priest, a sacrificial victim, and a huntsman who selects and returns with the sacrifice. You can craft specific NPCs to fill these roles, if required, or you can move on using just the notion of the roles to fuel other details and designs.

- o **Reward.** Motivating PCs is half the battle between adventure design, session preparation, and railroading. When PCs act out of self-interest,

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

they feel in control, even if you planted the reward. To this end, know what motivates your players and their characters, and sprinkle these elements throughout your holiday.

For example, one of the PCs seeks to build a castle. During the Festival of Trolls, large bounties are paid on trolls killed in the nearby badlands, plus the King personally and publicly thanks those who killed more than two trolls. This is a perfect opportunity for the PC to earn gold toward his future goal, plus meet and hopefully befriend the King who could grant him land in the future.

## DESIGN BASED ON ROLE

You only have so much time. There are many things to prepare before next game session. That's why holidays are such a valuable GMing tool. If you design them for adventure, you'll get a lot of mileage from crafting just one campaign element. However, there are other reasons why you might design holidays. Avoid wasting time from over-designing, or getting yourself in trouble at the game table by under-designing.

Below are the primary purposes for designing a holiday in terms of campaign role. Choose what role best suits your holiday purpose and consider the element design advice given. See chapter 2 for element descriptions and their design.

## INCIDENTAL INTERACTION

Some holidays will exist as mere placeholders, with a slight chance the PCs will bump up against them in a non-meaningful, non-critical way. For example:

- o Holidays that PCs have almost zero chance of interacting with or knowing about.
- o Holidays for places outside the adventuring region.
- o Holiday ideas and seeds you note for now, without spending design time on.

You don't want to spend more than a minute documenting an Incidental Interaction holiday. Your time is better invested elsewhere. However, you should document the bare essentials so you don't forget your cool idea on the outside chance the PCs brush up against it in a trivial manner.

For holidays with anticipated Incidental Interaction, note the following:

- o **Holiday name**
- o **Brief summary:** One or two sentences of what the holiday is about.
- o **Mood:** Whether the holiday has a positive or negative vibe.
- o **Timeline:** Note when the holiday occurs. Note if that date becomes known

to the PCs, if other campaign elements are dependent on that date, or if you have specific thoughts on it.

## BACKGROUND FLAVOR

Sometimes you need to sketch out a holiday to get a good grasp of it and its consequences. In these cases, you want to outline a few things, nail down specific elements, and leave the rest for when you have the time and inclination.

Some example cases for Background Flavor design:

- o You enjoy world design. Crafting holidays is its own hobby.
- o Other game elements are dependent on the holiday. For example, the holiday might be in a PC's backstory, or it might be an important part of the adventuring region's history.
- o You need inspiration for adventure or location design.

For holidays that provide Background Flavor, document the following:

- o **Holiday name**
- o **Brief summary:** Craft a one to three paragraph overview.
- o **Mood:** Pick a specific mood with an understanding of why that mood prevails during the holiday to help provide consistency and fuel future design.
- o **Who the Holiday is For:** Who abides by the holiday and why? Develop an understanding of the holiday's potential impact on other campaign elements.
- o **Significance:** Have a general grasp of the holiday's importance so the holiday can feed other game design and future GM preparation.
- o **Timeline:** If players know when the holiday occurs, or if other campaign elements have a strict dependency on the date, then document this. Otherwise, just have a general idea of when the holiday occurs and how long it lasts.
- o **Working Or Non-Working:** Note whether folks get time off work.
- o **Costume And Dress:** Decide if there is special costuming. If so, make sure it reflects the holiday mood and significance, and whom the holiday is for. Use backstory to inspire this holiday element. Lots of detail is not needed.
- o **Food and Drink:** Decide if there is any special food and drink, and if so, make sure it reflects the holiday mood and significance, and whom the holiday is for. Use backstory to inspire this holiday element. Lots of detail is not needed.
- o **Decoration:** Decide if there are decorations. Have them reflect the holiday mood and significance, and whom the holiday is for. Use backstory to inspire this holiday element. Lots of detail is not needed.
- o **Backstory:** Outline the basic history. Use this to inspire other aspects of your campaign. One to three paragraphs is sufficient, though feel free to



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

write as much as you like if time permits.

- o **Significance:** Have a basic grasp of the holiday's significance and why. Use this to help craft the backstory and who the holiday is for, or vice versa.

## ENCOUNTER FOUNDATION

Holidays are excellent design tools. The best-case scenario is that your holiday design funnels down into several potential encounters so you get good in-game value from your efforts.

On the flip side, you might have a specific encounter in mind and want to use a holiday as its foundation or reason for being. Alternatively, you might be desperate and use a holiday to justify the encounter or some aspect of it.

For example, the PCs have been journeying for weeks in the evil realms of the drow, often running for their lives and coming close to death several times. The next phase of the adventure hinges on the characters infiltrating a drow city, but experience has shown you the PCs don't have the tactical skills or power to get in without a total party kill. However, you are reluctant to decrease challenge ratings of guards and defenses because that would be inconsistent, unrealistic, and break immersion.

The solution? You craft a drow holiday to serve as a huge distraction so the PCs can slip in with much less risk and difficulty. This approach helps the players enjoy the campaign better, and it adds depth to your drow society. It is a plausible reason for easier entry without crippling your design, and gives you several new ideas for interesting encounters while the PCs are skulking around.

For holidays that are the backbone of one or more encounters, document the following:

- o **Holiday name**
- o **Brief summary:** Craft a solid overview, one to three paragraphs, of what you've designed for the holiday to help keep the encounter consistent.
- o **Mood:** Pick a specific mood for the holiday and document the reasons for this.
- o **Hook:** Give the holiday at least one strong hook to increase the likelihood of PCs triggering the encounter and to give the holiday a good presence within the encounter.
- o **Who the Holiday is For:** Have a general idea of the holiday audience as that might influence how you populate the encounter.
- o **Significance:** Have a good grasp of the holiday's significance to help you design and roleplay the encounter.
- o **Timeline:** The holiday will get firmly established in the campaign timeline,

## CHAPTER ONE

so document the date and length of holiday for future consistency.

- o **Working Or Non-Working:** Know whether this is a working or non-working holiday as that might influence how you populate the encounter.
- o **Costume And Dress:** If the PCs will be directly interacting with celebrants, then you'll want to know if special attire is in effect. In addition, if the PCs are participants in holiday events, they might need to know about costume requirements for disguise, roleplaying, and planning.
- o **Food and Drink:** If you think the menu will be a factor in the encounter, then know whether there is any special food and drink associated with the holiday.
- o **Decoration:** If the encounter is within the holiday area, you'll need to know what decorations there are, if any.
- o **Backstory:** If backstory or an element from it is integral to the encounter, flesh out the holiday's history. If backstory won't come into play, then having a general idea of the holiday's background will help you roleplay and GM with confidence. A short summary is all that is required. If the encounter is dependent on a specific backstory element, then feel free to add more details to that in the backstory while leaving other details vague.
- o **Significance:** As with backstory, detailing significance is only necessary if it's integral to the encounter. Otherwise, just craft a general idea of how important the holiday is to society and why.
- o **Encounters:** The notion behind holiday encounter design is to bring the holiday to the game table level via top-down design, and to inspire you to create in-game content. While the Encounter Foundation holiday role requires an encounter, it doesn't have to be one derived from holiday design. Therefore, this is optional.

## ADVENTURE FOUNDATION

Holidays are great for inspiring encounters. They can spawn and support whole adventures as well. One possible approach is to have a need for an adventure and then decide to use a holiday as the foundation. For example, the PCs are finished clearing a dungeon and you cast your gaze forward in time to ponder what the next adventure will be. As you've just finished a grueling location-based adventure, you think it will be refreshing to have a colorful blend of small locations and urban-based events. Aha! A weeklong holiday with a bit of intrigue would fit these requirements quite well.

Another possible approach is to have a holiday in mind with enough depth to support several sessions of gaming. Starting with a holiday concept, use the top-down method to hammer out a plot line, events and encounters, using the process of holiday design to fuel crafting of conflicts, factions, locations, and rewards.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

For holidays that are the foundation of an adventure, fully design these elements:

- **Holiday name**
- **Brief summary:** Once finished holiday design, write a summary of what you've created for future reference, as a test to ensure your holiday makes sense and is complete for your purposes. Three or so paragraphs should do it.
- **Mood:** Determine if your holiday has a positive or negative mood, and then pick a specific mood that aptly describes how PCs will perceive the holiday overall. Use this to help you roleplay and craft events and encounters.
- **Hook:** Give your holiday one or more strong hooks to draw the PCs into your adventure and game world.
- **Who the Holiday is For:** Determine who celebrates the holiday and why to help you craft a relevant cast of NPCs for general, conflict, and encounter design.
- **Significance:** Establish what significance the holiday plays in the campaign and the world region to help mold your plot arc and encounters.
- **Timeline:** Clearly understand when the holiday takes place in your game calendar and how long it lasts to ensure complete consistency and to give you an idea of the overall adventure timeline parameters.
- **Working Or Non-Working:** Figure how much leisure time celebrants and adherents will have to inform your environment and encounter design.
- **Events:** Events are the grist of adventure design. Good event design spawns many encounter design opportunities in such a way that they are integral to the holiday and your plot without feeling like they've been grafted on.
- **Costume And Dress:** Design special dress related to the holiday to flesh out encounter scenes and inspire other aspects of holiday design.
- **Food and Drink:** Figuring out what, if any, special foods and drinks are required can spawn event and encounter ideas, flesh out your holiday, and deepen immersion.
- **Decoration:** Decorations can spawn event and encounter ideas, flesh out your holiday, and deepen immersion.
- **Travel:** Travel requirements are a potent method for plot and encounter development.
- **Backstory:** Use backstory to drive the design of other holiday elements, as your starting point for fleshing out your holiday or plot, or as a way to cure writer's block you might have with other holiday elements.
- **Encounters:** Bring the adventure to the players and unfold your plot line through encounters inspired or derived from all the stuff you've built for your holiday. While several encounters might be unrelated to the holiday, the key points of the story should involve holiday-related events, conflicts, and encounters.



# CHAPTER ONE

| <b>Holiday Role Matrix</b> | Incidental Interaction | Background Flavor | Encounter Foundation | Adventure Foundation |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Holiday name(s)            | a                      | a                 | a                    | a                    |
| Brief summary              | o                      | a                 | a                    | a                    |
| Mood                       | o                      | a                 | a                    | a                    |
| Hook                       |                        |                   | a                    | a                    |
| Who Is The Holiday For?    |                        | o                 | o                    | a                    |
| Significance               |                        | o                 | a                    | a                    |
| Timeline                   | o                      | o                 | a                    | a                    |
| Working Or Non-Working     |                        | o                 | a                    | a                    |
| Events                     |                        |                   |                      | a                    |
| Costume And Dress          |                        | o                 | o                    | a                    |
| Food and Drink             |                        | o                 | o                    | a                    |
| Decoration                 |                        | o                 | o                    | a                    |
| Travel                     |                        |                   |                      | a                    |
| Backstory                  |                        | o                 | o                    | a                    |
| Significance               |                        | o                 | o                    | a                    |
| Encounters                 |                        |                   |                      | a                    |

| <b>Legend</b> |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|
| (empty)       | Design optional |
| o             | General idea    |
| a             | Full design     |

# CHAPTER 2: HOLIDAY DESIGN ELEMENTS



## CHAPTER TWO

### WHO IS THE HOLIDAY FOR?

Before you dive into the details, such as time and events, consider the audience who celebrates the holiday. Rare is the holiday that exists in a vacuum and is not created or modified by those who celebrate it.

For example, the week before the first day of winter, humanoid contingents from all the tribes in the region trek to the base of a hill that is considered holy ground. At dawn of the first day of winter, all the shamans enter a dark cave in the hill and commune with their gods until dawn of the next day. They then emerge with divine instructions for all the tribes for the upcoming year. A huge celebration begins with feasting, drinking, contests, and fighting. During the communing, contingents fight and compete for honor and prestige for their tribes that affects future relations and tribe hierarchies. On day three, everyone returns home, and the shamans relay the gods' will to their chiefs. Whether the shamans really do commune or they just have a board meeting is up to you.

Consider this poorer example version. "The first day of winter is a holiday for orcs, goblins, hobgoblins, and the like. They party and the shamans commune with their gods."

It lacks audience integration. Switch out the monster types for elves, gnomes, and halflings, and the holiday is the same—a sure sign it needs improvement and greater audience consideration.

Notice how the second example is uninspiring and weak on plot hooks. It feels generic. It could be dumped into any game world or society in a flavorless way. It doesn't add anything to the cultures that honor the holiday, and it doesn't bring the game world to life. Factoring in the audience helps you make your holidays more like the first example than the second.

If you already have a holiday concept, think how its celebrants, followers, and adherers make the concept their own and fit it to suit their culture:

With the nature of the holiday refined, consider how the culture is modified in turn by the event. Iterate between culture modifying the holiday and vice versa, as many times as you like until you feel the holiday is an integral part of society.

### SUB-CULTURES

If you have the time and inclination, try to involve sub-culture audiences. These folks are in one of two situations:



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

- o Inclusive. They adhere to and participate in the parent culture's holiday(s).
- o Exclusive. They have their own, special holiday(s) that the parent culture does not celebrate.

Exclusive holidays become a standard holiday design exercise, except that the holiday has a smaller audience. Inclusive holidays, however, are interesting. Sub-cultures are different from their parent culture in significant and often observable ways. You have an opportunity here to craft customized, interesting holidays with different versions for each participating sub-culture. This adds believability to your world, supplies even more plot hooks and encounter possibilities, and deepens your campaign.

For example, in real life we have Christmas. Consider though, how Christmas is celebrated differently by people around the world—and not just between countries, but within countries as well.

For our humanoid winter solstice holiday, we might decide each type of monster has its own, unique rituals. The goblins are the weakest and most cowardly, so perhaps they traditionally camp at the outer fringes. They sneak around, preying on weak members of the other races, such as the inebriated, wounded, young, or old. Their intra-contingent contests reward prestige and power to those who steal the best stuff from the more powerful races.

On the other hand, the orcs are rough, tough, chaotic bullies. They always camp at the center, kicking out any non-orc tribes already camped there, and seeking to party the hardest amongst all the races: having the biggest bonfires, largest kegs, and bloodiest, most massive brawls. While their shamans are communing, orc contingents earn prestige by beating on each other and capturing as many goblin slaves as they can get their meaty hands on.

Forming a ring around the orcs, the hobgoblin contingents are solemn during the communing day and carefully party on day two. They erect temporary fortifications, and hold numerous treaty negotiations or territory, trade, and slaves. These meetings require much travel between hobgoblin camps. Of course, they pick the shortest routes: straight through the orcs. This causes a lot of posturing and fighting, to the delight of the goblins.

Try to consider how each sub-culture might make the event their own while still working within the main themes of the parent culture.

## MOOD

Most holidays carry with them a certain mood that affects participants and non-participants alike. Establish the mood early on. A defined mood anchors your holiday, giving you a touchstone to help you GM the holiday better. It also influences other parts of the design, such as events, name, costume, and so on.

For example, you might have a recently settled frontier region where a dragon used to lair until heroes vanquished it forty years ago. You decide to craft a holiday with a joyous mood. Knowing the holiday should be fun and celebratory, you create the Day of Flames, which celebrates the death of the great red wyrm, allowing eager farmers to finally settle the fertile lands those many years ago. Knowing the mood is joy, you design other aspects of the holiday with this in mind, such as flame-walking contests, torch dancing, and a giant fire-pit feast for events; red clothing, hangings, and banners for decorations; and a noon parade to the site where the dragon finally fell as the travel requirement.

Establishing a central, binding theme is another key benefit of figuring out mood. Complex holidays can have many different parts, each with its own mood. At the game table though, players work hard to grasp your narrative and picture what's going on. A unified mood is easy to convey and gives players a strong hook to figure things out with. It helps them understand how they should act, react, and roleplay.

### List of Holiday Mood Suggestions

First, decide if your holiday has a positive or negative mood. Then, consult the applicable list below for inspiration, or roll a d20 for a random idea.

### Negative Emotions (d20):

1. Sad
2. Somber
3. Regretful
4. Apologetic
5. Repentant
6. Pessimistic
7. Reckless
8. Hostile
9. Hateful
10. Mean
11. Scornful
12. Anxious
13. Belligerent
14. Violent
15. Vindictive
16. Gloating
17. Bitter
18. Fearful
19. Serious
20. Tense

### Positive Emotions (d20):

1. Adventurous
2. Happy
3. Grateful
4. Jubilant
5. Victorious
6. Mischievous
7. Euphoric
8. Generous
9. Merry
10. Rapturous
11. Triumphant
12. Blithe
13. Surprised
14. Mirthful
15. Effervescent
16. Energized
17. Optimistic
18. Gleeful
19. Romantic
20. Reflective

## HOOK

Give your holiday a strong hook. This distinguishes it, help players grasp what the holiday is about and get them involved, and help you better design and GM the holiday. A good hook is a rallying call around which you gather all the other design elements. At the game table, this is a cohesive, unified campaign element that's not vague or confusing, and that will be memorable and interactive.

Like mood, choose your hook as early in the process as possible. This will save you time and inspire other holiday elements. If you get caught short on planning time and need to GM on-the-fly, your hook provides a strong anchor for your imagination, ideas, and GMing consistency at the game table.

Example holiday hooks:

### Religious

- o The beginning of the world
- o The impending end of the world
- o The birth or death of a key aspect, such as a god or saint

### Military

- o The end of a war
- o Victory or loss at a famous battle
- o The birthday of a notable military leader, such as a current general

### Discovery

- o Founding of the nation or community
- o The discovery of magic
- o Encountering a new race

### Commerce and Trade

- o Opening a trade route
- o Fairs and markets
- o Trade skill convention

### Farming

- o Fertility / Planting
- o Harvest / Plenty

### Political

- o Elections
- o Council appointments
- o Coronation anniversary

### Celestial

- o Solar or lunar eclipse
- o Solstice or equinox
- o The recurring passing of a comet or asteroid

## CHAPTER TWO

- o Special configuration or conjunction of planets, moons, suns
- o The passing of seasons or change in climate

Monster – pick a specific monster or monster type

- o A great victory against the creatures
- o A mockery and taunting of an ongoing threat
- o The passage of knowledge about the creatures to arm future generations

Magic

- o The celebration of magic
- o The anniversary of an important magic college or school
- o A reminder that magic is evil or too powerful for mortals to tamper with

## ESTABLISH SIGNIFICANCE

How important is the holiday to society?

Consider the following categories of significance and potential parameters:

Major

- o Everyone in society is affected.
- o Lasts a long time, such as a season, month, or week.
- o Considerable sacrifice is required, such as 10% of the year's earnings.
- o There is much wind-up and preparation.
- o Example: Christmas. Requires taking time off work, travel, shopping, worshipping, and two to three months of merchant campaigning. It also affects most of the population in one way or another.

Minor

- o 50% or less of the population is affected.
- o Short duration, such as a day or two.
- o Little sacrifice is involved, such as purchasing a small gift or saying special prayers.
- o Involves minor preparation.
- o Example: Thanksgiving. Often involves travel, taking time off work, significant food preparation, and while most of society is affected, it only lasts one day.

Trivial

- o A small fraction of society is affected.
- o Short duration, such as hours or a single day.
- o Little or no sacrifice is involved.
  - o Involves little to no preparation.
  - o Example: April Fool's Day. It only lasts a few hours, and most people don't participate.



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

Establish the level of significance to limit your design and to help with quality control. For example, if you design a week-long festival with lots of preparation and sacrifice involved, but in-game society treats this as a minor holiday (i.e. the PCs learn about it on the first day of the festival, and most encounters remain unaffected) you have a disconnect that might break sense of disbelief.

Here's a system for evaluating the importance of your holiday. Rate the following items from 1 to 10, with 1 being trivial and 10 being major.

- o Percentage of society affected (either from direct involvement or through indirect consequences, such as being subjected to weeks of advertising)
- o Resources consumed by individuals (such as food, money, time)
- o Resources consumed by whole society (such as parks, water supply, transit)
- o Level of sacrifice made by individuals (such as earnings, time, forgiveness)
- o Level of sacrifice made by society (such as loss of productivity, cost of clean-up)
- o Length of holiday (hours, day, days, weeks, months)
- o Work stopped (none, hours, day, days)
- o Personal relevance (is it a big deal to people?)

Assign each of these factors a rating from 1 to 10. Then total them:

- 8-25 = Trivial Holiday
- 26-50 = Minor Holiday
- 51-80 = Major Holiday

Once you know how significant a holiday is, you'll want to explore the rationale behind that decision. Your answers to the questions below will help inspire new holiday details and keep things consistent throughout the whole design process.

- o How and why was the holiday created? (Related to Backstory.)
- o Why does the holiday continue to exist? What purpose(s) does it serve?
- o What benefits do the powers/gods receive from it, if any?
- o What benefits do the celebrants receive from it, if any?

## ESTABLISH TIMELINE

Every holiday has one thing in common: it happens at a certain time for a certain length of time. Knowing when a holiday occurs and for how long it lasts helps you plan game sessions, plots, and campaigns.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FREQUENCY

Does the holiday repeat? If so, what is the rate of occurrence?

- o Major holidays should occur infrequently. Imagine if a production or factory-based society took a week off every month to celebrate something or other. Competing societies wouldn't take long to out-produce their rival and grow in power faster. Chances are the society would crumble in on itself or fall to stronger powers.
- o Minor holidays can occur more often as long as the overall annual disruption is not significant. For example, a long weekend every month for an efficient society is tolerable.
- o Trivial holidays can occur frequently. In North America, there are several holidays every week, if you add up all sub-culture holidays, such as GM's Day.

While picking frequency, ensure that fatiguing holidays are far apart, unless you're designing for an evil society or a campaign opportunity. Holidays requiring great sacrifice should be rare. For example, a dragon-worshipping holiday might involve lotteries for citizen sacrifice, causing much angst and fear. Such a holiday would be taxing and should not be frequent.

### WHEN

At what point on the calendar does the holiday occur?

- o Climate and weather. Holidays involving outdoor events might require fair weather.
- o Celestial bodies. Most forces in your game world, if not all, cannot affect celestial bodies, so holidays involving those will have their timing dictated. For example, comets, eclipses, moon cycles, auroras.
- o Terrain. Landscape is closely tied to climate and weather, but there might be additional timing considerations imposed.
- o Season. Climate, weather, flora, and fauna are seasonal factors.
- o Light. The amount of daylight or darkness might be important.
- o Wealth. Some cultures and sub-cultures might have predictable wealth cycles. For holidays dependent on wealth for donations, gift exchange, or financing, timing is everything. Example: farmers tend to have more wealth in the form of crops or revenues during harvest season.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

Some occasions might fall outside of the regular calendar—a frequent fantasy element. For example, your calendar might consist of 10 thirty-day months with a special holiday day placed between each month, for a total of 310 days per calendar year.

The one-off is another interesting holiday. Unique celebrations or events can add to campaign flavor and provide good adventure design opportunities. For example: the birth of a royal child, the opening of an important building, the launching of a new vessel, and the arrival of an important person or entity.

## DURATION

How long does the holiday last? Most will have a short length, but some might be rolled out in stages or phases, or last hours or weeks. For a different approach, consider the extremes, which can give your game an epic or bizarre flavor. Examples:

- o Minutes. Timed with the sun's position on a certain day each year, the Rising Dragon celebration lasts three and a half minutes.
- o Years. Every 1000 years the world experiences an amazing growth cycle and its population celebrates for nearly a decade with rolling holidays where each portion of the populace takes turns rejoicing.
- o Nanoseconds. For the holy day on Concatenation held on the Creator's day of birth each year, all the AIs reboot, which takes approximately 100 nanoseconds.

Tip: mark your game calendar. (See Chapter 3 for Game Calendar tips.) Once you've figured out the frequency, duration, and timing, be sure to note it on your game calendar. It's troublesome and unfortunate to do a lot of design and planning only to forget the holiday when the day approaches.

Plan how you will carry holidays forward each period. You need to ensure recurring holidays trigger on schedule. Some ideas:

- o Spreadsheet template. Create a campaign calendar with just holidays and other important recurring events on it. Each New Year, copy and paste the template.
- o List. Create a list of holidays sorted by date. As time passes, check the list frequently.
- o Photocopiable calendar. On a sheet of paper draw out an annual view of your calendar, key in notable dates, and photocopy as each New Year occurs.

## CHAPTER TWO

It gets tricky if you have holidays trigger every few years or more. These might not need tracking though, depending on anticipated campaign length. If they do, consider making a list of noteworthy items for future years and check it as each New Year occurs.

### WORKING OR NON-WORKING

Do people get one or more days off of work during the holiday? This decision affects the importance rating of the holiday, society productivity, society consumption levels, morale of the populace, and more. It's an important factor.

Holidays rarely provide time off work, especially in subsistence or self-employed societies. If they do, it's for a short period only, such as an afternoon.

You can design any amount of time off work, of course, but it's something you should consciously decide for every holiday you design.

You might mix it up during long holidays. For example, a holiday might last a week, but only the last day is officially a non-work day. Christmas is a real life example, where one or two days are official days off work, but the holiday itself tends to last a week or more for many folks.

An interesting point to consider is who benefits and who pays for non-working holidays. Use this as a point of conflict for background events, adventure seeds, or encounters. For example, the Temple of Rath would like to see the Week of Rath be entirely a non-working holiday so that worshippers can flock to temples, provide more donations, and form stronger bonds with their god. The government and guilds, however, only want one day off so that work, services, and revenues flow unimpeded.

Another example might be a holiday that all observe but for which only a sub-culture receives the benefit of time off work. This might be the seed for class-based conflicts, societal unrest, and political adventures.

### DESIGN EVENTS

Holiday events are one of the most important design considerations. They're where the action takes place and they're how you'll make the holiday tangible for the PCs.

You can use most of the design elements of holidays to craft activities—they mirror well. However, the core things you should consider are:



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

## NAME

Give each activity a name to help your group, and to make the activity interesting. For example, the Feast of the Raven followed by the Dance of a Hundred Murders will be more interesting to the PCs than “dinner and dancing.”

## PARTICIPANTS

Decide who participates in the event and the possible roles for NPCs and PCs to take or interact with. For example

- o Organizers. People who labor to make the event happen.
- o Chief organizer. Someone should be made boss to settle disputes, take responsibility, and ensure things go well.
- o Attendees. People who make up the audience or rank and file for the event.
- o Ceremonial leader. Some events are lead by an individual or group, perhaps to guide a ceremony, act as Master of Ceremonies, cut the tape, perform the sacrifice, and so on.

## LOCATION

Location is important. All encounters hinge on a location. If you want to make an event something for the PCs to interact with, then pick a good location. If it's to be a combat encounter, choose something more complex and interesting than a giant hall. If it's a roleplaying encounter, choose a place where quiet conversations can take place or that enables PCs to use their spying and stealth skills.

Location can also have symbolic implications. For example, if the ceremony is about ancestors, pick a graveyard or mausoleum. Special touches like this can make events come to life for players.

## ACTIVITIES

What happens at the event? For example:

- o Speeches
- o Dancing
- o Dining
- o Rituals
- o Sports, games
- o Voting
- o Toasts
- o Performances
- o Magic

## CHAPTER TWO

Decide if an event is active or passive, from the PCs' perspective. Can they participate? If so, does it require roleplaying, skill or ability use, or combat? Asking the players to whip up a short speech is a great puzzle exercise, especially if they need the speech to have specific consequences, such as build reputation, trick the villain to act, or raise morale. The PC delivering the speech will (finally?) get to wield their social skills, should you opt for skill checks.

### QUIRKS

Make the event memorable and different from other events. Do this by giving the event quirks. For example, dress up a speech with the audience needing to perform special poses or actions throughout, requiring balance checks.

Some quirk category ideas:

- o Clothing, headwear, accessories
- o Props
- o Contests
- o Special or weird food or drink
- o Ritual sayings
- o Choreography
- o Music
- o Parades, processions
- o Performances
- o Factions and rivals

Some specific quirk ideas:

- o The Parade of Dragons. Celebrants carry a long, paper dragon as they travel through the streets. Perhaps factions with different colored dragons clash, often violently.
- o Giant drums. A dozen drummers who punctuate speeches and situations accompany the event.
- o Special bow. Each time the high priest gives the signal, the audience must perform an awkward special bow. Audience members can always identify imposters and posers by noting who falls down or stumbles.

### ENCOUNTERS

Finally, unless this is a pure world design activity, the whole point of crafting events is to involve the PCs. Before you move to the next step and while the event is fresh in your mind, brainstorm a list of encounter ideas. There's no need to flesh these out, but you can return to this list of seed ideas any time and pick one or more to develop.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

For example: the Parade of the Dragon

- o PCs walk in parade
- o PCs get ambushed in parade
- o PCs must travel through parade
- o Foe hides in parade
- o Parade participants clash with rivals—PCs caught in middle
- o PCs hired to guard parade participants
- o Accident causes parade to stall—PCs must fix

## COSTUME AND DRESS

Does the holiday involve special costumes or dress? This can be an event quirk or core thematic element. As a core element, costumes can serve several purposes:

- o **Promotion and awareness.** In large societies, regions with significant amount of foreigners, and for holidays observed by sub-cultures, costume and dress serve as visual reminders and cues that the holiday is occurring or about to occur. For example, Santa Claus suits.
- o **State of mind.** Clothing can help people enter the proper state of mind. For example, holy days might involve complicated garments that take time to don—time unconsciously spent thinking about upcoming events and significances.
- o **Signals, directions, instructions.** Costumes can help audience members and participants figure out who has what role, who to follow, where to go, and so on.
- o **Tradition.** Tradition oriented holidays use ceremonial dress as a way to ensure things look and feel the same each time.
- o **Membership.** Some holidays require, reward, or segregate membership. Clothing is one of the easiest ways to make identification possible. For example, each year graduating initiates don special capes and sashes, letting people know of their special status so others can congratulate them, give them gifts, and gather around them.
- o **Protection.** If the holiday has a functional purpose, clothing can become a form of protection. Participants in a great hunt might need to wear red to avoid getting shot. A ceremony that exorcises bad spirits from the village requires everyone to wear garlic necklaces and silver bracelets.

## CHAPTER TWO

- o **Theme.** Clothing might be a critical ingredient of the holiday, such as Halloween or a masquerade ball.

Make a few notes about clothing requirements to help flesh out your holiday and make it special. PCs will also enjoy the unusual circumstances or any inherent challenges involved with crafting, locating, donning, or wearing costumes. There might also be requirements or opportunities to make costumes magical.

**Description:** Costumes give GMs new things to describe and a break from conveying the sights, smells, and sounds of dungeon critters. They also give players new things to imagine and envision, so they're a tremendous creative opportunity.

**Equipment restrictions:** If there's a dress code in play, characters might be restricted from wearing armor, weapons, magic devices, or even standard adventuring tools and gear. This creates interesting situations and problem solving opportunities for PCs, NPCs, and encounter design.

**Roleplaying:** Costumes create ironic, fun opportunities for characters to be someone or something else for a brief period in the game. The players roleplay their characters roleplaying! Costumes might impose restrictions of movement or action, or require certain mannerisms, rituals, or customs, giving everyone more chances to roleplay.

**Player customization:** If there are design decisions or costume choices, certain players will enjoy thinking about and planning their character's costume and accessories. Tactical folks might enjoy figuring out how to arm their PCs and ready them for adventure while abiding by costume restrictions.

**Clues:** Costumes offer opportunities for adventure and encounter clues.

- o They mask and disguise people, in whole or in part, which makes them perfect devices for:
  - o Impersonation. You don't need the full costume ball experience for impersonations. For example, a foe might don a simple monk's frock dyed red for holiday use and blend into a parade of monks to escape or sneak into a guarded area.
  - o Identity protection. If someone doesn't want to be recognized or spotted, costumes are the ideal tool. For example, during the religious week of Amon Amuk, all men and women must wear veils. This backdrop allows a lot of subterfuge during the game.
- o They're distinct, thereby providing extra puzzle information for PCs, making gameplay fun. For example, part of a costume is discovered during



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

an encounter. If the PCs investigate, perhaps using information gathering skills, they learn what event the costume was for, which in turn gives them one or more potential locations and a list of potential participants. “That’s a ceremonial baton, sir. All the judges wear them at important political events. In fact, I believe there was the grand opening of the new city jail last night....”

**Disguise skill:** Costumes provide a useful application for PCs eager to flex their ranks in Disguise. It’s good to allow players strategic use of skills they’ve invested in.

## COSTUME CATEGORIES

From pre-conceptions, personal experiences, and things read and watched, you might have a specific view of costumes. Consider the costume categories below to get new ideas for when, where, and how to add them to holiday gameplay.

**Official:** Are costumes a mandatory ingredient? Perhaps they’re required for certain functions and events, or maybe they must be worn during the entire period. Official costumes might have laws associated with them, and rules and regulations more involved and strict than mere social custom. For example, during King’s Day, all mounted guards must wear the ancient uniforms of the state’s original, conquering army. Though the costumes are hot, heavy, and cumbersome, the guards bear their mandated uniform with stoic pride.

**Fun:** Some costume customs just add fun and special feelings to a holiday. Tradition or unwritten rules help guide people as to what to make and wear. For example, during the Parade of Lost Saints, people in the town of Blackwater craft beautiful, ornate costumes that caricature the 32 Blessed Saints who perished in the Demon Wars. They parade through Blackwater’s streets and alleys dressed in these humorous costumes to honor the past sacrifice.

**Political:** Politics is about power. Costumes in your adventure setting’s society might be a traditional or useful tool for politicians, and others in authority, to exert their power and influence. For example, Grinding Day marks a well-earned rest at the end of the season’s second harvest in the city of Newburg. It’s also the final day each year that city counsel members have to campaign before ballots are cast on the morrow. As per tradition, candidates wear costumes to help celebrants and feasters identify them and chat with them. In recent years, candidates have modified their costumes to be more intimidating or inspiring.

## CHAPTER TWO

**Religious:** Costumes play a large role in religions, as they are a good device for conveying meaning, symbolism, authority, and roles. For example, each year the Week of Holy Days consists of numerous plays throughout the kingdom that depict the events leading up to the most recent time the God of Knowledge traveled through the planes to walk the land once more. The costumes from the plays are always the same and instantly recognizable, giving actors a temporary bit of fame and prestige.

List of 10 holiday costume examples:

1. Special uniforms for the police
2. Ceremonial robes for priests
3. Monster-themed masked ball
4. Papier-mâché
5. Kids dress up as little goblins
6. Nobles dress like peasants for a day
7. Single women wear veils and brown frocks
8. Warriors wear ceremonial armor and medals earned
9. Cult members wear a green cloak with a blazing yellow eye
10. Halflings wear white gloves, black masks, and toy rapiers

## FOOD & DRINK

Food and drink is the core of many holidays, with big family dinners, feasts, and drinking celebrations. People need nourishment and hydration, regardless of whether it's a special time or not. Food and drink is factored in out of necessity and for logistical reasons (feeding a dozen people, or a thousand, requires planning). Even holidays with a theme of sacrifice will likely address the matter of food and drink, or lack thereof.

## REQUIREMENTS

A good first step is to calculate the requirements and scope of your holiday's food and drink. You want to look for extremes and unusual circumstances during this exercise, as these become excellent fodder for plots, encounters, and in-game elements. For example, if a holiday involves dining on a special bird, such as an axe beak, then you might wonder where all of the axe beaks for barbecuing come from. Might that make a fun side-quest for the PCs, with them helping to find or capture the animals, or searching for stolen stocks, or delving into a mysterious, holiday-threatening disease? As always, the goals of holiday design are to seed your games with interesting events and encounters and to increase player immersion.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

## NUMBER OF MEALS

How many meals occur while the holiday takes place? Multiply the number of days the holiday runs by the number of meals celebrants typically consume each day. For example, four meals daily over the course of a twelve-day celebration total 48 meals to consider.

Of this number, how many are affected by the holiday? Greater numbers and ratios indicate higher costs and lend holidays greater import. Imagine a celebration that involved 12 days of feasting versus a holiday that only required a special toast at lunch—the food and drink imparts much weight to the feasting holiday (pun intended). If 48 meals occur during the holiday period, but only three are special in some way, that changes up the mood and feel quite a bit, possibly hinting that the holiday has a specific energy cycle, such as a build-up to a climactic end day or a significant beginning.

## NUMBER OF COURSES

How many courses per holiday meal are involved, and are there more or fewer courses than during regular meals? For example, in a society where one course is the norm, an added desert course might become the highlight of the celebration. This factor is a bit tricky, as different social classes often consume different numbers of courses. The richest might normally consume five course meals, while the poorest wait impatiently for their daily grain handout. Feel free to calculate an average change in course numbers, or break things down by social class, culture, or other celebrant factor, if your adventures, encounters, NPCs, and GMing would benefit from it.

## SPECIAL DISHES AND DRINKS

Does the holiday involve unusual or unique dishes or drinks? Do these require special ingredients? How often do the dishes or drinks get consumed, such as at every meal or course, or perhaps at just one meal?

## TIMING

When do the holiday meals and beverages get consumed? Are there special times or do they replace normal consumption? Here is an opportunity to make holidays memorable. For example, on a certain day each year, citizens might forego breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and instead participate in solemn midnight ceremonies consisting of special teas, heavy breads, and aged cheeses. Offsetting meal times can also add flavor to holidays, with late breakfasts following luxurious sleep-ins, or early dinners signaling short workdays.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EFFECTS OF SCOPE

Multiply the number of special dishes or drinks consumed by the number of affected courses, meals, and celebrants, and you have a good idea of the requirements and scope.

Use the following elements to enhance your campaign:

- o **Supply.** If large supplies of one or more ingredients are needed, that then establishes an economy you can layer into your world for background color or adventure opportunities. The rarity, source, and special qualities of the ingredient can add entertaining twists as well.
- o **Theme.** Your rough calculations might reveal food and drink have significant holiday theme impact from quantity, timing, or type.
- o **Events.** Large scope might mean more communal events to increase efficiency of supply, preparation, and distribution, while small scope might increase the intimate nature of holiday meals and events. Use scope to fuel event design.
- o **Frequency.** You want to impact the characters with your holidays. Large scope might mean increased frequency, which in turn means more encounters. For example, for a day, everywhere the PCs go, people are eating spicy sausages and drinking strong ale. This makes the holiday noticed and real for the players, and lends an interesting, consistent backdrop for several encounters.

### WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

The specific food and drink consumed during your holiday might be unimportant to your campaign's gameplay, however, they do present a few unique opportunities you might consider taking advantage of.

- o **Seasonal crops.** What, if anything, is bountiful during the time of the holiday? Seasonal supplies let you inject a bit of setting information, and they represent a game balance factor. You can limit rare ingredients, special effects and advantages to just the holiday period.
- o **Friends and the innocent become foes.** Celebrants suffering negative effects from holiday meals and libations make excellent encounter challenges. For example, drunken folk often undergo a change of emotions and personality. Aggressive, though innocent, drunk villagers could impede an investigation, block a chase, pick a fight, or become an intolerable nuisance, testing the player characters' ethical and roleplaying limits.
- o **Reveal your game world and increase immersion through naming.** Name dishes and drinks after various campaign elements to expose the PCs to NPCs, places, and history. Help the party learn more about your game

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

world through ethnic dishes, foreign food, and exotic drinks.

- o **Clues and hooks.** It's hard coming up with fresh ways to disseminate adventure information and clues, so use holiday meals to provide trivia, hints, hooks, and clues. For example, the key to a dungeon puzzle might have been codified long ago in a recipe that's now used as a special holiday dish. Perhaps foes might have stains on their lips from a holiday drink known to be served only at a few establishments with the resources to get the drink in each year. Names of dishes and beverages provide good mechanisms for clues and such as well.
- o **Bufs, boons, and drawbacks.** One of the best adventure feasts ever can be found in the old D&D Expert module, *Castle Amber*, written by Tim Moldvay. PCs are offered several dishes and drinks. Each player must declare what they are eating before the effects (and saving throws) are declared. Some items had positive effects and some negative. Most effects were temporary. This was always a fun and exciting event when I GM'd this adventure, and you can use the same device in yours.
- o **Plots.** Food and drink are special game elements because they are everywhere, common, and personal. They get consumed (and reach blood, organs, and so on), can occur in private or group settings, and can appear in a huge variety of shapes and forms. This is a perfect set-up for an evil plot or adventure-worthy event. For example, if a villain required town residents to perform a special dance and recite special words to make them susceptible to mind control, that would be a difficult endeavor. However, slipping some poison in the holiday ale supply or parade candy makes his job, and yours, that much easier and more plausible.

## POTENTIAL FOOD AND DRINK FACTORS

Following is a list of ideas and considerations to help you flesh out holidays and encounters:

- o **Political.** Food can serve political agendas. It can feed the masses, keeping them content and behaved. It can generate goodwill during election times. It can be used as a distraction while special activities or operations take place when everyone is feasting, drunk, or groggy from too much turkey.
- o **Thematic.** Aspects of dishes and drinks can resonate with aspects of your campaign and holiday. Historical dishes can help introduce backstories. Food flavors (sour, salty, tasteless) can echo the flavor of an encounter or adventure. Ingredients and dishes can symbolize current conflicts and struggles.
- o **Religion.** Food and drink can play important roles in religious ceremonies, have spiritual effects, or mirror religious tenets. For example, a meal might be symbolic of a significant, ancient meal; the color of a drink might represent the color of a god or religious element.



## CHAPTER TWO

- **Ceremonial.** Sustenance might not be the primary intent for certain holiday meals, and they often have ceremonial purposes. For example, special crackers with magic runes on them are consumed during an important ceremony.
- **Restrictions and allowances.** Some holidays require people *not* to consume certain things. This creates potential encounter situations, such as the PCs getting caught drinking something they shouldn't, or the group being hired to enforce certain restrictions. In high fantasy games, you can use restrictions to create adventure challenges, such as making consumption of potions or healing herbs illegal during the holiday period. This is a great option, though be sure it doesn't feel contrived.
- **Fasting.** Some holidays require *no* food or drink consumption. You can use this to make a holiday unusual or interesting, to present a challenge to hungry PCs, or to establish special campaign conditions. For example, the PCs might be hired to protect a group of religious leaders during a week-long holiday, and near the end it becomes difficult as the leaders grow weak and muddy-headed while the villain's minions are well-fed, strong, and sharp.
- **Monsters.** Factor local flora, fauna, and threats into your holiday meals. Critters make great exotic ingredients, the reason for a dish, or immersive obstacles. For example, a local monster might be the only source of a holiday drink ingredient (slice of lime fungi, anyone?), or it might be the reason a dish exists (ancestors crafted ceremonial orc pies as motivation to help control rampant orc populations). Kraken stew might be a popular and expected holiday serving, but who's going to get this year's main ingredient?
- **Cooks.** Who prepares holiday food and drinks? Who knows how? If a recipe is common, every household can supply themselves, but if the knowledge is special, then people will need to congregate where the cooks can supply the dishes to eat, or to those merchants who can get the food or drink for resale. Perhaps there's a special delivery service or process?
- **Storage.** Exotic ingredients might need to be harvested or gathered, and then stored. This creates security or logistical issues, which in turn, creates encounter and adventure opportunities. For example, the (gross) holiday drink, Flaming Stirge, might involve letting stirges feed on cows, then bleeding the flying creatures into a boiling mixture, which is ignited and served fresh. However, there's a problem with gathering and storing the stirges until holiday time....
- **Presentation.** How a meal is served and how it looks at the time of serving are important factors. You can use garnishes, server costumes, plates and glasses, and other presentation elements to make holiday meals and beverages interesting, adventure-oriented, or encounter-oriented. For

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

example, perhaps in the bar where the PCs are celebrating, the Flaming Stirge drinks cause a fire. Perhaps royal family servants must lay out gold cutlery and plates, creating an irresistible opportunity for thieves, or maybe candy gets thrown out during a parade causing complications when children are caught underfoot as a conflict erupts.

## DECORATION

Decorations are costumes for things. They serve important holiday purposes, whether the occasion is festive or somber. They can serve important campaign functions as well. Crafting decorations for holidays can be difficult though, and you'd probably prefer to spend your time building dungeons or NPCs, so here is a short list of things to consider.

## WHY DECORATE?

Celebrants might have several reasons to decorate when a holiday comes around:

- o **Tradition:** People decorate because they're supposed to, because it's always been done, or maybe because they have storerooms full of decorations and expense receipts from years gone by that they must justify and get value from. Tradition is a powerful and complex social force. Once a tradition gets started, people tend not to question it and it becomes a habit or expectation.
- o **Awareness:** Decorations serve as signposts, letting people know about a holiday or event. Locals might not need reminders, and people might anticipate beloved holidays for months, but foreigners, traders, and visitors might be unaware. The daily grind can distract folks. Decorations help them look up once in a while and remind them about the special time.
- o **Communication:** Decorations can communicate specific holiday and event details, such as timing, location, and nature of a celebration. They can also remind people about restrictions and rules, such as fasting times or areas that must be kept quiet.
- o **Territory.** Different groups might have different, conflicting agendas for a holiday as well, or they might have friendly, yet territorial claims during celebrations. For example, rival political or religious groups might use quantity or quality of decorations to make their messaging dominate. Merchants looking to make more money might decorate their areas of business as a sign of support or alliance, and to make their place more noticeable. Families might use decorations to let members know where their clan is celebrating at a park or stadium.
- o **Reinforce the meaning.** Most holidays have meanings and messages, whether historical (this day, thousands fought and died for our freedom),

## CHAPTER TWO

thematic (celebrating kindness and acceptance of others), as warning (the gods watch over us and judge—beware!), and for a variety of other reasons. Decorations symbolize meanings and help to remind and reinforce them.

- o **Retell the tales.** Holidays are not only spawned by story-worthy events, they create them as well. Crazy, unusual, humorous, and serious events occur during holidays. These stories will be passed on each successive time. Decorations help retell tragedies, highlights, and noteworthy events.
- o **Fun.** For many, decorating is fun, whether it's dragging dusty ornaments from closets or crafting new ones. Decorating is a communal and bonding part of holidays.

Gamemasters have different reasons to think about and plan decorations.

Following is a list of potential purposes—try to accomplish several at once to get the most from your planning time:

- o **Hook and clues.** Decorations tell stories, sometimes literally and sometimes symbolically. They are perfect vehicles to deliver adventure clues and hooks. Also, you can take current adventure clues and hooks and merge them with decorations to help integrate holidays into gameplay. For example, in one encounter the PCs are scheduled to find hidden papers containing a list of names. You switch things so that the papers get reused as origami-like decorations the PCs can find, unfold, and decipher.
- o **Puzzles.** In addition to symbolism and interpretation, decorations give you two types of puzzle opportunities: hiding things and obscuring things.
- o **Conflict.** Decorations can cause conflicts. They might trigger violence between rivals and enemies, or stir unrest amongst celebrants. One party might take offense over another's gaudy decorations. A group might create lethal decorations to strike with or plan "accidents" around. Provocative decorations might offend and create rifts.
- o **Storytelling.** Including decorations in your scenes and descriptions help immersion. While decorations can be the source of tales themselves, their presence also helps you tell more believable stories.
- o **World development.** An oft-quoted rule of thumb is to show, don't tell. The use of decorations to reveal world history and details is one way to accomplish this. A fast technique is to look at background events from adventures you've got planned, world information you have at hand, and your notes and scribbles. You then pull names, places, and events from them, upon which to base decorations. You don't need to cancel other planned ideas to impart this information, as decorations can supplement these to help ensure PCs get the message. If you make decorations interesting, or point them out during play, the characters will interact with them while you seamlessly deliver your information.
- o **Encounter development.** Decorations can be deployed by tactical GMs to

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

serve as hazards, methods for foes to achieve surprise, vision impairments, and points of drama where things might feel unusual. Large decorations could even be neat and bizarre encounter settings. Decorations of any size might serve as impromptu weapons, traps, and rewards.

## WHAT TO DECORATE?

Here is an idea list of things and places you might consider decorating when fleshing out your holiday design:

- o Public places
  - o Buildings
    - Doors
    - Windows
    - Facades
    - Roof
    - Entrance walkway or driveway
    - Front lawn or area
  - o Parks and fields
  - o Water towers
  - o Grain and food silos
  - o Streets
    - Street lamps
    - Hitching posts
    - Sidewalks, ramps, walking platforms
    - Trees
- o Private places
  - o Businesses
  - o Homes
    - Rooms
    - Hearth
    - Doorways
    - Ceilings
    - Floors
    - Walls
    - Furniture
    - Patio, deck
    - Shed, garage, exterior storage
    - Dog house
    - Outhouse
  - o Meeting halls
  - o Guild halls

## CHAPTER TWO

- o Eating places
  - o Tables
  - o Chairs, benches, and seats
  - o Utensils
  - o Dishes
  - o Napkins
  - o Cups and goblets

### DECORATIONS

- o Signage
  - o Murals
  - o Posters
  - o Wall hangings
  - o Rugs
  - o Tapestries
  - o Flags
  - o Holy symbols
  - o Welcome mats
  - o Window signs
- o Lighting
  - o Window shades
  - o Painted window glass
  - o Stained glass
  - o Special lights or lamps
  - o Candles
  - o Decorative torches
  - o Special covers or shades for lights, lamps, lanterns
  - o Magic illusions
  - o Magical permanent light cast on decorative objects
- o Gifts and portable decorations
  - o Hard food, such as gingerbread dungeons
  - o Small paper, clay, or wooden toys
  - o Books
  - o Weather vanes and wind-powered toys and items
  - o Wreaths
  - o Statues
  - o Small furniture items
  - o Glass snow globes



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

- o Interactive
  - o Corn maze
  - o Giant papier-mâché dungeons
  - o Fireworks
  - o Sparklers
  - o Wood toys and puzzles
  - o Noise makers
- o Plants and garden
  - o Hanging baskets
  - o Special plants, such as Easter lilies
  - o Flowers, leaves, and vines
  - o Monstrous flora
  - o Special garden crops and designs
  - o Scarecrows
  - o Bird feeder
  - o Bird house
  - o Fountain
  - o Pool
- o Food related
  - o Table sets
  - o Napkins
  - o Special cutlery
  - o Special dishes
  - o Special plates, bowls, cups, serving dishes

## WHEN TO DECORATE?

When do the decorations come out? This is based on factors including holiday importance, holiday length, and the nature of the holiday. The biggest question to answer is whether decorations appear on or before the holiday. Pre-holiday decorations create a build-up effect that you can use to add foreshadowing, drama, and tension. For example, if the PCs are to stop an assassination that will occur on a holiday, drama will increase as more decorations come out during the days leading up to the event, serving as a subtle reminder of the timeline.

Decorations that appear only during the time of the holiday possibly become a significant part of the celebration or any related rituals. For example, if a massive quantity of decorations is expected, then the whole community might have to pitch in to get the job done. In turn, this has become part of the holiday tradition, possibly spinning off numerous other rituals, such as the picking of work crews or decoration pairings, and the decision of who gets to mount the most prestigious decoration. Another example might be an event that occurs every decade when a dangerous creature hatches and rampages for a day.

## CHAPTER TWO

Decorative herbal items help protect life and property, but the exact hatching day is never known until certain signs appear at the last minute.

### WHAT HAPPENS AFTER?

What happens to decorations after the holiday? Do decorations become garbage? Do they linger and become a nuisance? Perhaps there are ritual or traditional storage procedures, especially for dangerous or valuable decorations. Consider the following factors:

- o **Quantity of decorations.** Large amounts will require more resources to deal with.
- o **Value.** Decorations might require secure storage, or they might be sold, dismantled, or put to another use.
- o **Importance.** Decorations with emotional attachments or special significance will get special treatment. They might be stored, or they might have their own disposal rituals, such as a ceremonial burial or burning.
- o **Danger.** Some decorations might pose a lingering danger, such as broken glass or pottery underfoot. They might become poisonous or diseased.

### TRAVEL

Does the holiday require travel? The most obvious type is a pilgrimage, where people journey to a sacred place or shrine. There are other travel aspects to consider:

- o **Leadership.** Does the holiday involve the leaders of the community in any way? If so, do they need to be in certain places at certain times? For example, in a city the lord might be required to make his way to the church to receive certain rites. Perhaps the leaders of all the states and provinces travel to the capitol. Maybe the guild leaders must make a slow circuit through the Nobles District.

It's important to note any kind of travel requirements for leadership. Security risks and logistical concerns can create fun gaming opportunities.

- o **Followers.** Can adherents celebrate the holiday wherever they please, or do they need to congregate somewhere? Do they all need to congregate in one place, or can they assemble in one of several places? Large numbers of traveling followers can create traffic issues, have political consequences (such as when followers of different nations parade across borders), and offer possible villainous opportunities (such as sabotage, ambush, and attacking while everyone is away).

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

- o **Destination.** If travel is involved, where are folk traveling to and why? Holidays often involve shrines, special buildings, faraway places, unique locations, fairs, theatres, and destinations that are perfect settings for encounters—whether the holiday is happening now or not.
- o **Routes.** What paths do people take to the required destination? Is there one route or many? Is the route special, sacred, difficult, or unusual? Are there laws, restrictions, or traditions associated with the routes? And, hopefully, are there conflicts involved with the paths? Conflicts mean interesting encounter, plot, and gaming opportunities!

Though travel is not a primary design element for holidays, it's a wonderful tool for adding immersive details to your campaigns, logical reasons for encounters and events to happen, and interesting story possibilities.

For example, decades ago a terrible event happened. The night sky suddenly lit up. A bright object roared from the heavens to crash into the earth, causing a terrible earthquake, tidal waves, and forest fires. Though the region has long since recovered from the disaster, the date is commemorated each year with solemn ceremonies at the site of impact.

However, the holiday is fraught with conflict as the land is divided into two groups, each of which has their own interpretation of events. The first group believes the object was a piece of the War God's body, bestowed on them to forge into masterwork weapons and armor, and to deliver a message that the folk should vanquish their neighbors and rule the land. The second group believes that it was a piece of a star that crashed into the world. A prophecy says the star fragment contains something that should forever remain buried.

Both groups travel the roads to reach the site for the revered hour at night. Bandits, mercenaries, con artists, and merchants crowd the route to take advantage of passersby. Folks often arm themselves, as strength in numbers is no longer a guarantee of safety. Once at the site, both groups face off against each other. Minor fighting often erupts.

The King also journeys to the site. This year there is a sinister plot to waylay his entourage with an elite force of wizards, warriors, and archers. The King believes in The Prophecy and has made enemies of those who believe in the War God's message. A sect of War God followers plans to do something about it this year.

## CHAPTER TWO

Meanwhile, as people from villages, towns, and nearby cities throng to the holy site, a rogue leader and his men have an ambitious looting plan in the works to take advantage of the reduced guard levels and everyone's distraction at the holy time.

With such a plot-rich environment, a GM has many options for adventure. Do the PCs get hired as bodyguards by a noble who plans to journey to the site? Do they get co-incidentally caught up in events when the King is attacked near them along the road? Do they stumble upon the rogue leader during his looting spree? Perhaps you just place them at the site, in the thick of things, to get involved with the fighting and jostling?

### BACKSTORY

Give your holiday a backstory. This anchors it to your world and campaign so it doesn't feel like something grafted on just to make an encounter or adventure work—a sure immersion killer. A backstory is also a valuable exercise to help put all your details together and into perspective. If you've fleshed out events, mood, costumes, decorations, and so on, writing a holiday history should reveal incongruent elements and add more meaning to elements by connecting them to each other with a common history.

Here are a few best practices to consider when crafting the legends of your holiday:

- o **Keep it short.** You have other GMing preparation to do and other holidays to craft. There's no requirement to write a long history, and a short one will serve your purposes, so keep it short.
- o **Keep it simple and direct.** You might be tempted to create a complex legend with lots of NPCs and events. Avoid this, if possible, as it takes longer to write, becomes tougher to remember, and makes it harder to convey to the PCs. You and your group will remember a short, snappy history much better. Chances are whatever message, clues, or adventure hooks you might have planted within will be picked out and not lost in a sea of detail.
- o **Make it action oriented; add conflict.** History is boring, just like any story, if there is no point, no struggle, and no stakes. If you can weave in a conflict it will make the backstory more interesting to write and game.
- o **Make an adventure out of it.** Unless you want your holiday to be pure window dressing, get additional value by adding in future plot hooks and adventure opportunities. Though the PCs might be in a situation you don't want derailed, having the seeds of adventure ready in game world elements

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

pays off in the long run. You'll have more adventure options when they're needed and they'll feel like they're part of the campaign fabric.

- o **Add phases.** Most histories undergo warping and change over time. As they are retold, facts change. In addition, societies are never stagnant. They'll change holidays over time to serve their own customs, interpretations, and motives. If there's time, try to add two phases after the initial events that are the basis of the holiday. Each phase should morph the holiday a bit.

Phasing not only creates realistic holidays, but also gives you more layers to sew adventure opportunities into. When documenting each phase, use the above best practices: keep it short, direct, and action and adventure oriented.

Be sure to change one key noun of the holiday in each phase and document why. This makes the process faster and easier for you, and builds believable sets of changes.

For example, during the Week of Kites, folk take to the fields to fly magnificent kites they've been working on since last year. There are best kite competitions, stunt competitions, and on the last day, a grand show performed by the famous Kite Society. The holiday celebrates a great battle that was won through clever use of kite messaging by an ingenious inventor whose workshop has never been discovered.

Only scholars at the university know the inventor was inspired by an ancient clan of gnomes who built huge wind machines to fly to untold heights to reach their hated cloud giant enemies. No one today knows the true story of a time when the cloud giants and the gnomes were staunch allies in a war against goblinkind. When the war ended the cloud giants betrayed the gnomes and tried to enslave them. The gnomes barely escaped from the giants' cloud homes using wind warmachines to descend safely to the earth and hide. This escape became a holiday for the gnomes, which inspired a certain clan two centuries later during a war with the giants....

## COOL NAITIE

During all stages of design, keep your mind open for good naming possibilities. You want to make your holiday an interesting aspect of your campaign, even if it's only to serve as a background event this time around. An easy and proven way to make a game element interesting is to give it a compelling name.



## CHAPTER TWO

A cool name often has one or more of the following elements:

- o **Mystery.** The name mentions people, places, or things that aren't known to the players yet, but sound interesting.
- o **Conflict.** The name conjures up a struggle, battle, or dispute.
- o **Unique.** I'm guilty of having too many Farmer Feastdays and High Harvestimes in my campaigns. Perhaps you are, as well. Boring names are a set-up for a boring campaign element. Give your holiday an interesting name not heard before in fantasy or gaming literature.

Example names:

- o The Tournament of the Viper Sword. A wondrous fair that springs up only once a decade where knights vie for land titles, lords send champions into the ring to settle disputes. Numerous commoner competitions establish bragging rights for the next ten years.
- o St. Ruby's Day of Woe. We could just go with St. Ruby's Day, but adding in the last part makes it more interesting to players, and more inspirational to design and GM.
- o The King's Last Parade. It's custom for the King on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday to hand the kingdom to his heir, assuming calamity has not caused a transfer before then. This gives the old King a few years of peace as reward for serving his country, and is a fair way to ensure the heir is ready and that the kingdom receives young kings.

## ENCOUNTERS

Crafting holiday inspired encounters relevant to your campaign gives you the most value for design and preparation time invested:

- o **Encounters showcase your holiday design.** You add cool world flavor with an interesting holiday that is more than just a name and a date that passes the PCs by. Encounters let the PCs interact with the holiday, hopefully in a memorable and meaningful way.
- o **Encounters can tie things together.** During holidays, anything can happen. Crowds, secret rituals, monsters, celestial events, parties, and so on. In this crazy—but plausible—temporary environment, you can grab one or more loose ends and tie them together with a holiday related adventure.

For example, a player in your western medieval campaign might be begging for a katana, but you don't have an active oriental culture in your world. You want the villain to make another appearance somehow soon, to build up the hate. Plus, the PCs are stumped and haven't figured out yet the obvious clue that would lead them to the next dungeon location.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

You decide the upcoming holiday involves a sacred group known only to a few as the Midnight Martyrs. These people were strangers from another land who saved the region centuries ago by trading their souls in exchange for peace. One member tried backing out at the last moment, nearly ruining the exchange. His companions murdered him for the greater good and the ceremony continued successfully. However, the ghost of the murdered warrior rises at midnight on the anniversary date at the site of the ancient ceremony, and becomes corporeal to beg for release. You design the ghost to be a warrior, decked out in strange armor (oriental), wielding a katana. You also design the site of the ceremony to be the same place you want the PCs to go next to further your main adventure.

The saving of the region by the Midnight Martyrs is the original reason for the holiday, though that meaning has been (until now) kept secret. For the adventure, you have a high priest summon the PCs to ask for help. The campaign villain has discovered the existence of the ghost and wants to slay it for his armor and weapon. The PCs must be at the site at midnight and defeat the ghost themselves, possibly while battling the villain's minions!

In this long-winded example, you've modified an existing holiday design, fleshing it out a bit more in the process, which adds new depth to the holiday next time it occurs. You've also tied a few things together in a plausible way.

- o **You need encounters anyway.** The building block of game sessions are encounters, so you need to build them or be ready to craft them while GMing. Letting your holiday inspire and spawn encounters gives you a 2 for 1 deal.
- o **Making it real.** An encounter is a key point between theory and results when it comes to design. If you're ever unsure whether a design is solid, try spawning encounters out of it. This will give you a true test to see if your ideas are game-able and fun.

For example, your holiday might involve eating and drinking contests. In theory, the concept sounds like a lot of fun. However, when you go to make an eating contest encounter, you realize it could be pretty boring. Your initial design has contestants making a series of Fortitude savings throws. Whoever makes the most in a row wins. But that isn't much fun as it's not interactive—roll, roll, roll....

## CHAPTER TWO

After some thought, you revise your design and the holiday tradition becomes a gross-out contest. This still involves eating and Fortitude saves, but beforehand, contestants must dream up gross concoctions from a list of available ingredients (which you assign save modifiers to based on how gross you think it is). Now, at least, players can have fun dreaming up gross dishes and can affect their opponents' outcomes.

Looking back at your notes, you see ways to incorporate this new development into the holiday's other design elements to help flesh out the backstory, tweak the name, add a new hook, modify the significance, and so on.

### NOTE ENCOUNTER IDEAS AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY

As you craft various elements of your holiday, be mindful of any encounter ideas that spring up. Note these down! The best-case scenario after crafting a holiday is to have 10 or more encounter seeds for immediate development, or future reference and inspiration.

When it comes time to include a holiday in a game session, weeks or months after initial creation, it saves time and eases preparation to have encounter hooks and full encounters already fleshed out. Chances are, the greatest inspiration strikes during the design process. All sorts of ideas might come to you. Capture these and keep them with your holiday design notes.

### ENCOUNTER STAT BLOCK

To help organize your encounter ideas and plans, consider using the following format in your notes:

1. **Name.** Give the encounter a name that describes its nature so you can scan it in the future and instantly get a grasp as to what it's about and what to expect (i.e. roleplay vs. combat, location type, nature of the challenge).
2. **Seed description or encounter summary.** In one paragraph or less, outline the encounter idea or encounter plan. This will help you rapidly assess the encounter in the future for applicability, plot, and requirements, if any.
  - a. **Participants.** Who's involved?
  - b. **Conflict.** Why is this an encounter instead of a brief GM narrative? What do the PCs get to interact with? What is the challenge?
  - c. **Motive.** Who's doing what and why?
  - d. **Hook.** What could draw the PCs in and get them involved? Try to note several hooks to cover several angles and prevent railroading.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

## TYPES OF ENCOUNTERS

There are a few different types of encounters based on the level of holiday interaction and holiday importance for the situation. Knowing what type can serve as a guide to help you craft better encounters.

- o **Showcase.** The encounter exists specifically to highlight a certain aspect of your holiday. There's nothing wrong with wanting to show off your designs. Holidays set a wonderful stage on which to game. This type also imparts details about your holiday in the oft advised, "show, don't tell" fashion.

For example, you could narrate how the village holds a short but colorful parade through the paths from Village Hall to the lake. It wouldn't take long to narrate, and it would be interesting to learn about. Alternatively, you could have the village elders ask the PCs to lead the parade as reward for taking care of those pesky bandits two days ago. If the PCs agree, they must dress in colorful outfits—arms and armor is permissible. After the players decide how to decorate their PCs and start the parade rolling, you stage a retribution ambush by a few bandits who escaped the PC slaughter. In this Showcase Encounter, the players strongly picture the scene because of the thought they had to put into their PCs' decorations and from leading the parade—a better result than simply describing a parade.

- o **Event.** If you have holiday events crafted, they could become encounters either by purposeful design or from emergent gameplay. An Event Encounter is linked to a scheduled holiday event, such as a fire breaking out due to sabotage of the holy brazier. It could also be the event itself, such as a three-legged race or support rally with speeches.
- o **Consequences.** Holidays involve events, politics, and people. Many things happen during a holiday. Some will have interesting consequences that could spill into an encounter involving the PCs.

For example, in the cold, pre-dawn hours, clan elders join their shaman atop Red Ogre Hill and sacrifice a pregnant cow. The health of the rescued calf in the coming weeks will inform the shaman of the gods' will. During the ceremony, the PCs traveling through the area stumble upon a stream of blood crossing their trail. No doubt they'll draw weapons and investigate. They soon track the stream to the source and learn about the gruesome ceremony. If the clan is to be allies or neutral to the party, you've just shown a vivid, primitive aspect of their culture. If they're enemies, you've set up

## CHAPTER TWO

a great combat scene. You could further complicate matters with a tough wild animal being drawn to the area by the blood scent, or by some foul agent looking to capitalize on the anticipated mystical forces temporarily available from the ceremony—perhaps unbeknownst to the clan.

Use the following categories of consequences to help inspire or organize your holiday encounter thoughts:

- o **Conflict.** A direct competition, struggle, or challenge.
  - o **Complication.** A puzzle that needs solving emerges as something goes awry, or two elements brought together don't mix well.
  - o **Opportunity.** Potential reward exists if the PCs take a certain action, react quickly, or make the correct choice.
  - o **Hindrance.** An aspect of the holiday element creates penalties, negative modifiers, restrictions, or an undesired situation.
- o **Incidental.** The encounter does not depend on the holiday for any reason, and the holiday makes an appearance in the encounter. For example, you plan for a drunk, stumbling out of a tavern who runs into the skulking PCs and potentially alerts their foes. It just so happens that it's the day of a holiday, so you decide the troublemaker is a drunken celebrant. It could just as easily be any drunk coming out of any nearby tavern; the holiday aspect is purely incidental.

### ENCOUNTER TIPS

Here are a few general tips to help you craft an entertaining holiday encounter:

- o **Make it interactive.** Avoid encounters that are based solely on dice rolls. Contests and skill events succumb to this trap often. Look for creative ways to allow for player tactics and choices. You might also look for optional rules from various D&D, d20, and OGL books if you don't mind expanding your rule base a bit for this special situation. For example, there are books out there and at least one Dragon Magazine issue with rules for conducting chases.
- o **Use an interesting location—think 3D.** The classic dungeon encounter error uses the 10'x10' empty room. Similarly, the typical holiday encounter error places the PCs in a flat, empty area, such as an open field, an empty alley, or a wide street. Holidays can involve a number of different, unusual, and special decorations, locations, and furnishings. Holidays let you break the rules as far as believable situations occur due to the potential, inherent unusualness and temporary timeline of the event.



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

For example, it's tricky placing the PCs' backs against a cliff to add delicious drama to a tough battle. Unless the PCs go there by themselves, most other solutions feel contrived. However, it would be simple to declare that PC-attended holiday offering to the sea god takes place at a special location on a cliff edge. On that spot fifty years ago, the high priest of the god dove into the water, never to be seen again, in an effort to commune with his deity to save the region from evil sahuagin.

- o **Add NPCs.** NPCs are an awesome exposition tool to help reveal information about your holiday. They help heed the traditional writer's advice to "show, not tell." Add NPCs to encounters and have them:
  - o Preparing for the upcoming holiday
  - o Traveling for the holiday
  - o Wearing the costumes you've picked for the holiday
  - o Eating the special food and drink you've selected
  - o Engaging in the events, ceremonies, and traditions you've designed

Pick any holiday design element and have NPCs somehow displaying, demonstrating, or roleplaying it.

- o **Add conflict.** Be sure your encounter involves a challenge of some sort, or yawns might travel 'round the table. It could be combat, but doesn't have to be. A great method is to pick the two best and worst skills for each character and then think of how you might combine one of each into an interesting holiday-based challenge.

For example, Glimnor the bard has a high Perform skill, average Jump, and poor Balance. You decide to create a ritual where celebrants' hands and feet are shackled together. They must boldly recite the holy passages as they make their way to the high priest who will ceremoniously cut away the bonds to symbolize the religion's founder escaping slavery.

## SUMMARIZE YOUR HOLIDAY FOR FUTURE REFERENCE

After a bit of design, and before you plan to put your holiday aside for new preparation tasks, craft a short summary. This has several benefits:

- o **Future recall.** If your holiday isn't immediately used, you can return to the summary to freshen up on what it's all about and what you've designed.
- o **Avoid bad planning.** As noted in the Summary Tips below, you'll want to note any preparation issues so you won't get caught off-guard.

## CHAPTER TWO

- o **Diagnostic.** Summarizing your design often reveals the validity of the central ideas and concepts. Sometimes, your summary will reveal your holiday as goofy, incomplete, or off-mark from your original vision. These are signs you might want to tweak a few things.

### SUMMARY TIPS

- o Keep your summary short, from one to three paragraphs. You don't want this design element to take much time or to be a chore. Often, a single sentence will do the job!
- o How much advance notice does the game world need to prepare for the holiday? Note this. It's disappointing when you forget the game world would have been affected in some way during the time leading up to the holiday. The PCs might have noticed preparations, there might have been encounter opportunities, clues might have been introduced, and so on.
- o How much advance notice do **you** need to prepare for the holiday? You do not want to underestimate what you think will be required to prep for gaming the holiday in whatever role you've decided it has.
- o Does the holiday have any specific dependencies? Date is usually one. Region? Events? Is there a game or world element required for the holiday to happen? For example, a holiday to celebrate the birth of an heir requires a pregnant Queen, which would be good to be reminded about.
- o Does the holiday have any important triggers? Do one or more conditions need to be met for the holiday to happen? Will a certain event cause the holiday? You wouldn't want to forget, after announcing a new heir has been born, to trigger your planned holiday.
- o Is there anything important that still needs to be designed before it's ready to play? You don't want to ambush yourself by discovering at the game table a blank section titled Events....
- o Note the intended campaign role you've designed for. You don't want to get caught off-guard thinking you have an Adventure Foundation holiday prepped when it's been designed at the Incidental Interaction level.
- o Feel free to use point form.

# CHAPTER 3: GŪ AND CAMPAIGN ADVICE



109 *ELMORE*

## CHAPTER THREE

### CRAFT A GAME WORLD CALENDAR

Having holidays means you have a campaign timeline. It's a horrible moment when you realize you've forgotten about a holiday and the time has passed. Players might wonder why there was no holiday this year but not say anything, or you might remember at the last moment and be totally unprepared.

Complex holidays should be noted well in advance as campaign time passes so you can craft desired events, have NPCs roleplay and validate the holiday's existence, and build whatever hooks, clues, and paths you need.

You also want to avoid inconsistent timelines where reoccurring holidays happen at the wrong time because you forgot when the holiday happened previously, or you forgot to track things.

The best tool to ensure holidays run on schedule with advance notice is to craft a game world calendar tool. You will probably have a calendar created as part of the setting product or your world design, and now you just need to craft something in physical or digital form that lets you schedule holidays and events for years to come.

Two systems that are fast and simple to create are index cards and spreadsheets, assuming your game world has a different calendar structure than Earth:

#### INDEX CARDS

This is my preferred method to track game time. Index cards are physical, portable, cheap, and easy to use. Go to the Dollar Store and look for cheap index cards and a container, or go to a stationery store where the prices will be just a little higher.

#### EACH CARD = ONE DAY

Each index card represents one day in your game world's year. You need enough cards to fill out one year for your game world. Label the date (day and month only, not year) in a top corner so you can find specific cards/days fast. Make notes on specific dates as needed, including holidays, plot events, and session logs.

#### CRAFT MONTH SEPARATORS

Find a method to separate day cards into month groups to make searching and filing faster. One way is to use tabbed cards. Another is to add Post-It Tabs or

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

Post-It Notes as tabs. You can also use a marker and color the top edge of day cards in alternating months.

## AIM FOR REUSE

To avoid making a new set of cards for each campaign run in the same world, aim for re-use. I do this by attaching Post-Its to the face of the cards as needed and then tear off the Post-Its when a new campaign starts. You can also flip the cards and use the back to get two uses, or divide the cards into quadrants front and back for eight uses.

In addition, as you make notes on cards, mark the year. This helps date journal entries when the calendar cycles through each New Year—day and month are labeled at the top, and year labeled per entry.

When you reach the last day of the year in the calendar, return to the first card. You can see last year's notes this way. Holidays will re-occur naturally as you cycle through the cards again. For holidays that aren't synched to a particular date, you'll need to go through the year in advance and note new dates for holidays (marking the year so you can keep your history straight).

Feel free to put holidays on new cards of different color and insert them before their scheduled day. The color is a visual way to note upcoming holidays. The separate card lets you document holiday specific information without filling up a regular day card.

## SPREADSHEET

Spreadsheet software, such as Microsoft Excel or OpenOffice, is another great way to make a calendar. Each cell represents a day. Resize and merge cells as desired. Use comments to make notes or type into the cells directly. Separate months or years with new worksheets. Alternatively, you can put a whole year or several in a single worksheet.

## TIDDLYWIKI

A third option might be using a web browser and a wiki, such as Tiddly-Wiki. TiddlyWiki is free and doesn't require a server. You can use it offline and you only need to worry about a single HTML file when transferring between computers.

In your wiki, create a new link or entry for each day for one year. Label the month and day, but not the year. As with the Index Card system, as each year passes you return to the beginning of the calendar and append new notes, labeled

## CHAPTER THREE

by year. You'll see previous year's notes this way for easy reference, and you'll see holidays as they come up. Recurring holidays synched to specific dates only need scheduling once, and then they'll cycle through naturally as years pass. Holidays with unique dates need to be manually entered each year—do this in advance so you're prepared as campaign time passes during sessions.

### CRAFT SUITTIARY T⊕OLS

If you create a calendar tool, then you should also craft handy summaries and place them at the front of the index card container, in the front tab of your spreadsheet, or as the first page of your wiki.

1. **Calendar structure.** A summary of the calendar structure (number of days in a week, number of weeks in a year, plus any other notable cycles) and names of days, months, and years if they have names.
2. **Cycles of celestial bodies.** If there are one or more moons, you might want to note their cycles or phases. If they're not synched or predictable, you'll need to create a code and note the phases on individual dates. This summary card then becomes your key for figuring out your code if you forget.
3. **List of holidays.** It will help a lot to have a list of holidays and their dates in one place. If holiday dates change each year, craft an updated summary card a year in advance as time passes.

### TIP: PLACE ADVANCE N⊕TICE

Regardless of the calendaring method employed, schedule advance notices of upcoming holidays. Complex holidays and holidays that require GM planning need longer advance warning, and possibly, more than one advance notice.

For example, Baker's Day of Delicacies occurs every year one week after the last crop is in. Bakers, cooks, and chefs spend a whole week crafting tasty treats and try to outdo each other with new recipes. On Baker's Day, the whole community comes out to sample and vote on all the tasty treats, breads, and dishes. This is a minor holiday, but you like to roleplay it, so you put a note one month before Baker's Day to remind yourself that cooks everywhere are starting to shop and search for ingredients. You place a reminder one week beforehand to tell the PCs how busy chefs and bakers are this week, and how darn good the streets smell. You also like to throw in special dishes the PCs can consume that bestow various random magical effects (for good or ill) and this requires a bit of design. So, you put another reminder two months in advance to have enough time to craft a table of random effects between sessions.



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

## WATCH THE PACE

Note how fast time tends to pass in your campaigns. If it's slow, perhaps because the players like to game out every day of their PC's lives, then you can shorten up GM reminders. If the pace tends to be fast, or if weeks sometimes pass in the blink of an eye, you'll want to extend your reminders to the fringes so you have at least one between-session period to plan for upcoming holidays.

## HOLIDAY "STAT" BLOCK

Here is a checklist of holiday design elements. Holiday design is free form and iterative, so feel free to design the following in any order, keeping in mind the Holiday Role as outlined in chapter 1 so you don't over- or under-design.

1. Holiday name(s)
2. Brief summary
3. Mood
4. Hook
5. Who the Holiday is For
6. Significance
7. Timeline
8. Working or Non-Working
9. Events
10. Costume and Dress
11. Food and Drink
12. Decoration
13. Travel
14. Backstory
15. Encounters

## STAT BLOCK HINTS

Use these hints when filling out the stat block.

1. Holiday Role
  - a. Incidental Interaction, Background Flavor, Encounter Foundation, or Adventure Foundation
2. Holiday name
  - a. Also add alternate names the holiday might have for various cultures and sub-cultures.
  - b. Add any historical names it might have had in the past.
3. Brief summary

## CHAPTER THREE

- a. From one sentence to three paragraphs.
  - b. Describe what the holiday is about and note any key points, dependencies, and requirements so you won't be caught off-guard in the future.
4. Mood
    - a. Does the holiday have a positive or negative mood? If the Holiday Role requires it, note the specific mood.
  5. Hook
    - a. Note what makes the holiday unique and interesting to the players and their PCs.
  6. Who the Holiday is For
    - a. Who celebrates the holiday?
    - b. Note which groups, sub-groups, cultures, and sub-cultures honor the holiday.
  7. Significance
    - a. How important is the holiday to society and why?
    - b. Major, Minor, or Trivial?
    - c. Why does the holiday exist? Why does it continue to exist? What purpose does it serve?
  8. Timeline
    - a. When does the holiday occur?
    - b. Frequency?
    - c. How long does the holiday last?
    - d. Can you still easily change this date, do the players already know it, or are there established dependencies on the holiday date in other parts of your campaign/adventure design?
  9. Working Or Non-Working
    - a. Do some people get away from their labors? Is it everyone in the region, or just certain folk? Does this cause any tension?
  10. Design Events
    - a. What events are associated or scheduled for the holiday?
    - b. Stat out each event by noting:
      - i. Name
      - ii. Participants
      - iii. Location

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

- iv. Activities
- v. Quirks

## 11. Costume and Dress

- a. Do people wear anything special?
- b. If so, who, when, and what?

## 12. Food and Drink

- a. Are special dishes prepared? Are there feasts or food-based events?
- b. Are there any special drinks associated with the holiday, its events, and its rituals?

## 13. Decoration

- a. Does anything get decorated, such as rooms, homes, or streets?
- b. If so, what are the decorations?

## 14. Travel

- a. Does the holiday involve or require travel?
- b. Who must do the traveling?
- c. Where do they go?

## 15. Backstory

- a. How did the holiday come into being?
- b. Are there any noteworthy past instances of the holiday?
- c. What effect has the holiday had on the game world?

## 16. Encounters

- a. What encounters and encounter ideas are possible because of the holiday?

# CHAPTER 4: HOLIDAY EXAMPLE



144

ELMORE

## VIGIL OF FORSAKEN SOULS

### HOLIDAY ROLE

Adventure Foundation

### BRIEF SUMMARY

The Vigil of Forsaken Souls is a horrific event, timed with lunar eclipses. It causes the dead who have not been given proper burial to rise for one night and attack the nearest living souls.

This event has three stages: The Sweeping, a week-long period during which folk frantically look for bodies and report them to priests for proper burial before they can rise; The Vigil, which is the night the dead rise and attack; and Remembrance, which takes place the day after The Vigil when people bury the victims and then celebrate life.

Before The Sweeping can begin, priests and scholars must notice the signs of the imminent eclipse and officially declare the Vigil of Forsaken Souls is upon the land again. Then word is sent, red-themed costumes donned by priests and leaders to further spread awareness, and red-themed decorations taken out for similar purposes.

Everyone in the region is equally at jeopardy, and often work stops during The Sweeping. Work also stops during The Vigil and Remembrance. The rich can usually afford defenses and protection, and the poor must fend for themselves or gather in shelters for mutual defense during The Vigil.

### MOOD

This holiday has a negative, fearful mood, overall. However, the three stages of the holiday each have different moods:

**Sweeping:** Anxious. The time leading up to The Rising is one of worry and speculation about the amount and nature of danger.

**Vigil:** Fearful. As the dead rise and attack, it's war. Combatants fight for their lives, while others hide and pray.

**Remembrance:** Joyous. Survivors rejoice, and though mournful of their losses, they choose to grieve through celebration.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## HOOK

During the holiday, the dead rise from their graves to gather and attack, providing lots of adventure and action opportunities. This holiday can occur any time the GM wishes, with no regular or set calendar date, making it a flexible and useful GMing plot or side-plot option.

## WHO IS THE HOLIDAY FOR?

All in the shadow of the eclipse are affected. Sane folk heed the signs and prepare for the Vigil of Forsaken Souls. The event hits those in the countryside the hardest, where defenses are poor, and effects of war, banditry, and hard life create many Risen. However, in times of murder, plague, and lawlessness, those in urban centers also face great danger.

Numerous evil groups and individuals take advantage of this event to add undead to their forces, or to capture the Risen for various purposes. In addition, at least one known cult reveres the event and regards it as an important religious holiday.

## SIGNIFICANCE

This is a major event. Once the signs present themselves and the priests declare the Vigil of Forsaken Souls is imminent, most societies begin The Sweeping, making it their top priority. They also start preparing for The Vigil. All levels of society are affected by this horrific time, though the rich can afford to hire protection, while the poor can only beg for safety or hide well.

## TIMELINE

The Vigil is triggered during lunar eclipses whose occurrence and frequency is up to your game calendar. However, it should be triggered at least every decade so that it is a well-known and feared event. Making it too rare could leave society ignorant and unprepared, though this could be your intention.

The Sweeping begins once the signs of the lunar eclipse are spotted, reported, and approved by priests whose function is to monitor for them. They might use telescopes, prophecies combined with natural phenomena (such as fleeing animals, discolored sunsets), or visual identification (the naked eye can see the imminent eclipse). It's recommended only about one week's notice is available to give The Sweeping period dramatic intensity as folk scour for the forgotten dead.



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

The Vigil lasts only one night, during or following the eclipse.

Remembrance lasts the day after The Vigil.

## WORKING OR NON-WORKING

This is up to you and the available resources of the afflicted society. People are needed to search everywhere for dead who have not been buried. Sewers, poor districts, gaols, and harbors in cities are investigated. Fields, roads, and the countryside are searched in rural areas. You might craft a guild of professionals to perform these tasks, or leave it up to the citizenry to organize themselves, in which case they'll need time away from work during The Sweeping.

Civilians are usually recruited during The Vigil to help defenses. Everyone honors Remembrance, and that it usually a non-working day.

## EVENTS

The Vigil of Forsaken Souls consists of three general events: The Seeking, The Vigil, and Remembrance.

The Seeking begins when signs of an imminent eclipse, as foretold, are first noticed, studied, and declared official by priests and scholars. Messengers with warnings are dispatched to carry news throughout the afflicted region, and people begin searching for the bodies of the fallen that have not been given proper burial.

The Vigil is one long, fearful night of watching for and defending against any undead left undiscovered after The Seeking. In most parts of the region there are no attacks. However, there are always a few, and grim and frightening stories of those spread afterward as warnings to folk during the next eclipse not to let their guard down.

Though some might think sources of undiscovered dead in a civilized society would be few, consider these possibilities:

- Slain criminals. Bad guys fight bad guys and dispose of the evidence all the time in RPG worlds.
- Foul play. Neighbors, lovers, and the greedy commit foul play on a regular basis. With something to hide from the law, they'll likely not point out the locations to Seekers. Perhaps the state declares a temporary amnesty on certain crimes to motivate those with knowledge to step forward with the information.

## CHAPTER FOUR

- **Battlefields.** Most military forces will tend to the dead, especially in a world where the Vigil of Forsaken Souls is a real threat, but not all circumstances allow this, creating walking armies during The Vigil.
- **Monsters and humanoids.** You might decide that only those with souls are affected during the Vigil, which might rule out monsters. However, this leaves numerous humanoid societies, and their burial practices are not going to be as thorough or consistent. Ogre and troll zombies are the stuff of legends, yet stories abound of the horrendous damage and loss they have caused in the past.
- **Villains.** The Vigil of Forsaken Souls is an opportunity for the heartless. They might hide away bodies between eclipses just so they can raise an army for their evil purposes. Perhaps a few insane, malicious villains purposefully dump bodies near communities just as The Vigil begins to ensure woe and sorrow. Undead villains might find this event particularly useful for their evil purposes.

It's recommended that many different kinds of undead rise to attack during The Vigil, not just skeletons and zombies. This increases the threat (walls will not stop ghosts and shadows, for instance) and adds a variety of challenges for gameplay purposes. It's also recommended that whatever force caused the dead to rise leaves at dawn, turning all surviving undead to back to lifeless corpses.

Remembrance consists of subdued emergence from secured areas, shops, and homes to assess damage, mourn the fallen, and grieve for those friends and relatives who were forced into unlife during The Vigil. By midday though, as tradition dictates, Remembrance becomes a celebration of life and survival, and each community and family celebrates in its own way, usually with feasts, parties, and dancing. Priests will ensure that the dead and undead are given proper burial, and they might hold special ceremonies of thanks and worship, but they too then allow joy and merriment into their hearts.

### COSTUME AND DRESS

Seekers searching in dangerous areas are given red tabards to signal they search for the dead before they rise during The Vigil. Most folk honor this as they have no desire to face a horde of undead. Priests, kings, and community leaders during the Seeking don special clothes with red-based themes to serve as visual warnings to all who see them that the time of the Vigil of Forsaken Souls is upon them.

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

During The Vigil, arms and armaments are the special dress of all who can afford them and are able to fight. During Remembrance, general clothes of celebration are worn. The poor will wear their everyday clothes, while others will wear festive garments.

## FOOD AND DRINK

There is no special food and drink for this holiday. Just before The Vigil, many special toasts are made with drinks of choice to honor the dead, to boost morale, and to fortify nerves.

## DECORATION

During The Seeking, all temples and churches are decorated in red to warn people the Vigil of Forsaken Souls is upon them. Some places put red covers on street lamps, and decorate public buildings and streets to further notify and warn citizens to search wherever they can for the forgotten dead. Holy symbols and shrines are dusted off as even the most irreverent pray and hope.

## TRAVEL

Travel on a small scale is a key factor for this holiday. During The Seeking, people volunteer, are conscripted, or are required by law to search their communities and area for bones and remains of unburied dead. This brings people to places they'd not normally visit. In some places, professionals take care of this task, but in most it's up to the common man, guards, and soldiers to conduct the careful searches.

Just before The Vigil, important personages are taken to heavily fortified and consecrated places, such as church basements, special bunkers, and inner sanctums of castles. Common folk often gather at community centers and places of worship for mutual defense, though many fortify their homes or shops and hole up there. During Remembrance, people return to their homes to celebrate with neighbors or attend community celebrations.

There is no travel during The Vigil as it's so risky. Those on critical tasks, such as messengers coordinating military activity, are usually accompanied by a cleric and dressed in red to prevent friendly fire.

## BACKSTORY

There are two interesting backstory possibilities. The first is that the Vigil of Forsaken Souls is a world-based event by design. This holiday occurs because that's the way it is or it's how the gods made it, creating a neat hook for your

## CHAPTER FOUR

setting. It depends on how frequent this event occurs, but you could base an entire campaign on periods of Seeking and Vigils. For example, a monthly eclipse would seem daunting, but professions would emerge to ensure the ongoing safety of communities. Special soldier or guard units, sheriffs, special constables, and other roles would emerge to make The Seeking a constant effort that only gears up for the general population days before The Vigil. The PCs might make up a group who are charged with scouring the region for the dead and bringing them in for proper burial before the next eclipse. They might have to scout humanoid settlements and skirt war zones. If the task is prestigious or guild-based, you could flesh out the campaign with rivals and politics. In addition, who knows what things such a group always searching in the darkest and most dangerous parts of the region could discover?

The second backstory option is a powerful force hidden deep within the afflicted region feeds off the eclipse event to create the Vigil of Forsaken Souls. It could be a magic item, a villain, or some natural but twisted source the PCs learn about and quest after. It could be that scholars know of this source, or that prophecy alludes to it, but none can figure out its location or how to destroy it. That is, until the PCs uncover part of the secret that leads them on a chase throughout the region. They unravel the full truth and finally confront the source in an attempt to stop the event once and for all.

### ENCOUNTERS

Here is a list of encounter ideas and seeds related to each stage of the Vigil of Forsaken Souls:

#### THE SEEKING

- PCs are hired to search a specific location
- PCs stumble upon Seekers in trouble
  - Fallen down a well, cliff, collapsed floor
  - Fighting opportunistic criminals
  - Fighting a monster, such as a giant insect or snake
- A villain sends minions to sabotage Seeking efforts
  - PCs are attacked because they are thought to be Seeking
  - Seekers under attack cry for help
  - PCs stumble onto a powerful guardian protecting a body-dumping ground
- PCs are flagged over by someone who knows where a body is located, but the location is dangerous
- PCs spot someone digging a grave-shaped hole, but they claim it's to bury a dead pet

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

## THE VIGIL

- An obvious encounter is battling undead; try to make the combat environment or type of foe interesting
- PCs are attacked by panicked folk who mistake them for undead
- Poorly constructed defences create an emergency, such as fire or a collapsed structure; PCs rush to help with the danger of undead attacking at any time
- PCs spot cultists roaming the streets, vandalizing and looting while citizens are in hiding
- Fearful citizens in a shelter turn on each other; fights break out and chaos threatens the safety of the whole group

## REMEMBRANCE

- PCs spot thieves picking the pockets of the fallen and looting the dead
- People refuse to leave their windowless shelter, not knowing dawn has arrived, and think the PCs are undead trying to lure them out
- PCs spot someone furtively bringing bodies to a warehouse
- During the celebration, PCs are caught up in a brawl as frayed nerves seek relief
- PCs are asked to find a loved one gone missing during The Vigil

# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

## OPEN GAME LICENSE VERSION 1.0A

The following text is the property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. and is Copyright 2000 Wizards of the Coast, Inc ("Wizards"). All Rights Reserved.

1. Definitions: (a) "Contributors" means the copyright and/or trademark owners who have contributed Open Game Content; (b) "Derivative Material" means copyrighted material including derivative works and translations (including into other computer languages), potation, modification, correction, addition, extension, upgrade, improvement, compilation, abridgment or other form in which an existing work may be recast, transformed or adapted; (c) "Distribute" means to reproduce, license, rent, lease, sell, broadcast, publicly display, transmit or otherwise distribute; (d) "Open Game Content" means the game mechanic and includes the methods, procedures, processes and routines to the extent such content does not embody the Product Identity and is an enhancement over the prior art and any additional content clearly identified as Open Game Content by the Contributor, and means any work covered by this License, including translations and derivative works under copyright law, but specifically excludes Product Identity. (e) "Product Identity" means product and product line names, logos and identifying marks including trade dress; artifacts; creatures characters; stories, storylines, plots, thematic elements, dialogue, incidents, language, artwork, symbols, designs, depictions, likenesses, formats, poses, concepts, themes and graphic, photographic and other visual or audio representations; names and descriptions of characters, spells, enchantments, personalities, teams, personas, likenesses and special abilities; places, locations, environments, creatures, equipment, magical or supernatural abilities or effects, logos, symbols, or graphic designs; and any other trademark or registered trademark clearly identified as Product Identity by the owner of the Product Identity, and which specifically excludes the Open Game Content; (f) "Trademark" means the logos, names, mark, sign, motto, designs that are used by a Contributor to identify itself or its products or the associated products contributed to the Open Game License by the Contributor (g) "Use", "Used" or "Using" means to use, Distribute, copy, edit, format, modify, translate and otherwise create Derivative Material of Open Game Content. (h) "You" or "Your" means the licensee in terms of this agreement.
2. The License: This License applies to any Open Game Content that contains a notice indicating that the Open Game Content may only be Used under and in terms of this License. You must affix such a notice to any Open Game Content that you Use. No terms may be added to or subtracted from this License except as described by the License itself. No other terms or conditions may be applied to any Open Game Content distributed using this License.
3. Offer and Acceptance: By Using the Open Game Content You indicate Your acceptance of the terms of this License.
4. Grant and Consideration: In consideration for agreeing to use this License, the Contributors grant You a perpetual, worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive license with the exact terms of this License to Use, the Open Game Content.
5. Representation of Authority to Contribute: If You are contributing original material as Open Game Content, You represent that Your Contributions are Your original creation and/or You have sufficient rights to grant the rights conveyed by this License.
6. Notice of License Copyright: You must update the COPYRIGHT NOTICE portion of this License to include the exact text of the COPYRIGHT NOTICE of any Open Game Content You are copying, modifying or distributing, and You must add the title, the copyright date, and the copyright holder's name to the COPYRIGHT NOTICE of any original Open Game Content you Distribute.
7. Use of Product Identity: You agree not to Use any Product Identity, including as an indication as to compatibility, except as expressly licensed in another, independent Agreement with the owner of each element of that Product Identity. You agree not to indicate compatibility or co-adaptability with any Trademark or Registered Trademark in conjunction with a work containing Open Game Content except as expressly licensed in another, independent Agreement with the owner of such Trademark or Registered



# ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS: HOLIDAYS

Trademark. The use of any Product Identity in Open Game Content does not constitute a challenge to the ownership of that Product Identity. The owner of any Product Identity used in Open Game Content shall retain all rights, title and interest in and to that Product Identity.

8. Identification: If you distribute Open Game Content You must clearly indicate which portions of the work that you are distributing are Open Game Content.

9. Updating the License: Wizards or its designated Agents may publish updated versions of this License. You may use any authorized version of this License to copy, modify and distribute any Open Game Content originally distributed under any version of this License.

10 Copy of this License: You MUST include a copy of this License with every copy of the Open Game Content You Distribute.

11. Use of Contributor Credits: You may not market or advertise the Open Game Content using the name of any Contributor unless You have written permission from the Contributor to do so.

12 Inability to Comply: If it is impossible for You to comply with any of the terms of this License with respect to some or all of the Open Game Content due to statute, judicial order, or governmental regulation then You may not Use any Open Game Material so affected.

13 Termination: This License will terminate automatically if You fail to comply with all terms herein and fail to cure such breach within 30 days of becoming aware of the breach. All sublicenses shall survive the termination of this License.

14 Reformation: If any provision of this License is held to be unenforceable, such provision shall be reformed only to the extent necessary to make it enforceable.

## 15 COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Open Game License v 1.0 Copyright 2000, Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

System Reference Document Copyright 2000-2003, Wizards of the Coast, Inc.; Authors Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, Skip Williams, Rich baker, Andy Collins, David noonan, Rich Redman, Bruce R. Cordell, based on original material by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

The Character Clip Art & Color Customizing Studio is published by Elmore Productions, Inc. under the d20 System License, version 3.0, copyright 2002, Wizards of the Coast, and the Open Game License Version 1.0a, copyright 2000 Wizards of the Coast.

GM Mastery: Adventure Essentials: Holidays Copyright 2006, RPGObjects; Author John Simcoe, John Four.

## OPEN GAMING CONTENT

Designation of Product Identity: The following terms are designated as product identity as outline in section 1(a) of the Open Gaming License: GM Mastery, Adventure Essentials, NPC Essentials.

Designation of Open Gaming Content: The following sections of The Red Order are designated as open gaming content except for terms defined as product identity above.

The Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 are closed content.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 are open content.