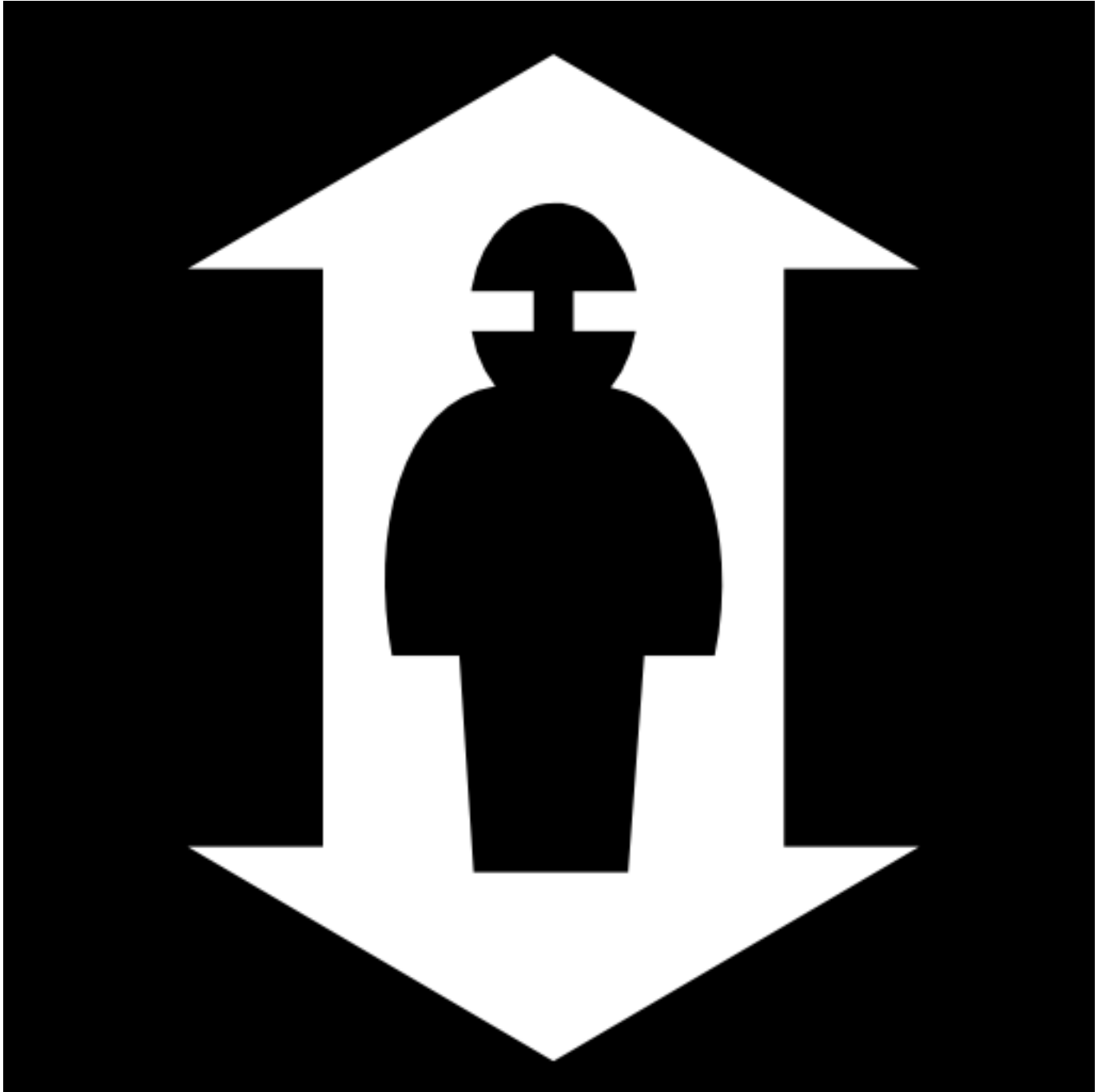


# The Worlds Above and Below



By Michael Sands.

Images by Lorc, from <http://game-icons.net>.

Thanks to my regular gaming crew who playtested this during the contest week: Scott Kelly, Jason Pollock, and Stefan Tyler.

I have taken inspiration from:

- Luke Crane & David Petersen's *Mouse Guard Roleplaying Game*.
- Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry*, Gene Wolfe's *The Wizard-Knight* and *There Are Doors*, C S Lewis's *Narnia* stories, Stephen Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* stories, Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*, Grant Morrison & Sean Murphy's *Joe the Barbarian*, Jake Richmond's *Modest Medusa*.
- Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World* and descendants, especially Sage LaTorra & Adam Koebel's *Dungeon World*, Jonathan Walton's *Planar Codex: Dark Heart of the Dreamer*, and Johnstone Metzger's *Adventures on Dungeon Planet*.
- Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World*.

# Introduction

In The Worlds Above and Below you find yourself drawn into two fantastic lands. The weird peoples of Above and Below are in danger and it's up to you to save them.

You need two to five people to play, some paper, pens or pencils, and a few six-sided dice in two colours.

One person must be your **guide**, who already knows about the worlds of Above and Below. The guide needs to read the rules and will make up many of the details of those worlds as you play. The others will be **heroes**: fictional versions of themselves drawn into Above and Below to fight against the Enemy.

# The Guide

The guide knows Above and Below and introduces them to the heroes. You'll invent many of the details of the worlds, and introduce adventures for the heroes. You'll also play the people and enemies they meet. As the guide, you won't be a hero: your role is to help the others.

If you're going to be the guide (and if you're reading this then you probably are!), choose which of these is true:

- You are actually a person from Above or Below who has been living in the real world.
- You have explored Above and Below in extensive dreamed journeys.

Tell the others what you chose.

# The Heroes

You play a fictional version of yourself.

Every hero discovers a special ability when you first arrive in Above or Below. Take turns to choose an ability from this list, then cross it out (only one person can have each ability):

- Transform into a sunbird.
- Natural with a sword.
- Cure illness with a touch.
- Undetectable when still in shadows.
- Transform into a darkmole.
- Run any distance without tiring.
- Read runes.
- Track anything.
- Affinity with nightfolk.
- Know whenever you are being lied to.
- Talk to spirits.
- See the invisible.
- Take apart and rebuild any mechanism.
- Affinity with wisps.
- True visions in dreams.

# The Worlds

Here are some starting details about the other worlds. You'll add more as you play.

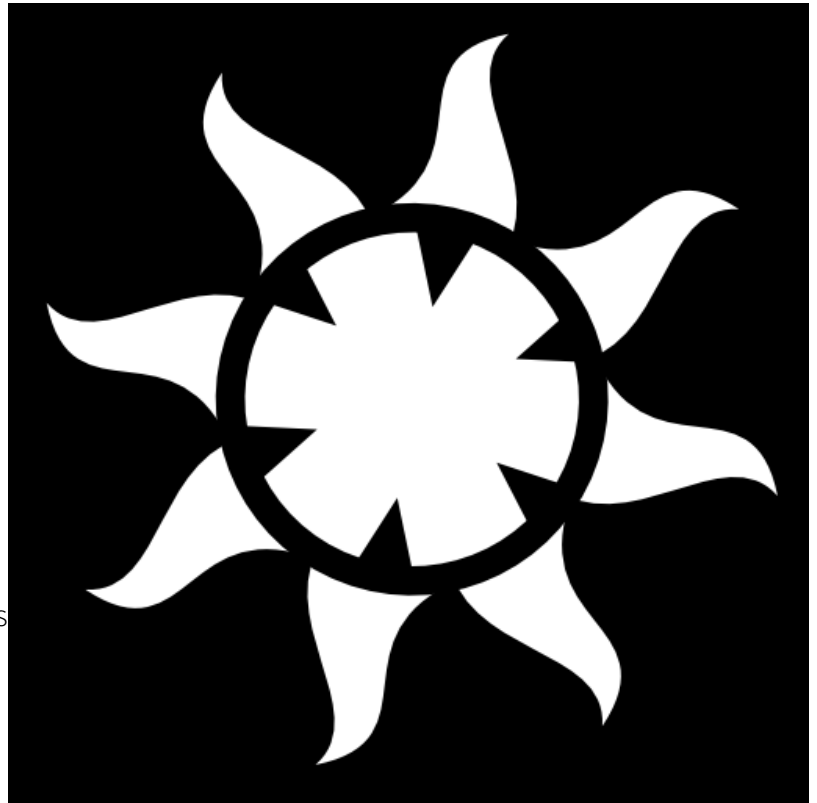
## Above

Above is fields and forests, sunny and airy. Everything here is a little insubstantial – the ground here is like clouds, the lakes and seas are like sky. In woods and mountains, scary things lurk.

Peoples from Above are used to open air, movement, and light. There are winged flyers, pixies, lizards, lemurs, trees, and stranger things. Many creatures fly or climb.

Towns and villages are usually in sunny clearings or prairies, often beside streams or coastlines. Farms grow mainly grow fruits and cereals.

Outside the settled areas, Above is wild and overgrown.



## Some Peoples from Above

The **Forest People** are related to the trees, somehow. They look human, except they tend to be coloured green and brown. They're secretive, and even if you are invited into one of their small villages in the forest you probably won't see more than the feast of fruits and nuts and a woven-branch sleeping place they offer to visitors.

**Swifts** named themselves after the birds. They have wings, too, with hands at the first joint. They love to fly and race. They're smaller than humans, and built thin and light. They like to live in high places, often hard to climb up to.

**Wisps** are hardly-there people who appear as a fragmentary shape in constantly shifting vapours. They know many secrets, as they hide easily. Their voices are strong despite their fragile appearance, and their words and songs may lull you to sleep, or kindle an idea in your mind.

## Below

Below is dark tunnels and caverns, filled with secrets and buried things. You will find enormous caverns, some containing lakes and seas. Light comes from glowing crystals and stones, and luminescent plants, fungus, or animals. Here and there are places of peace and tranquility.

Peoples of Below are subterranean in nature, and used to dealing with darkness and cramped spaces. There are dwarves, goblins, apes, moles, worms, mushrooms, and stranger things. Many creatures crawl or clamber.

Towns and villages below may be in a larger cavern, or often in a collection of connected caves and tunnels. Farms here grow fungi and animals, and strange plants that need no sunlight.

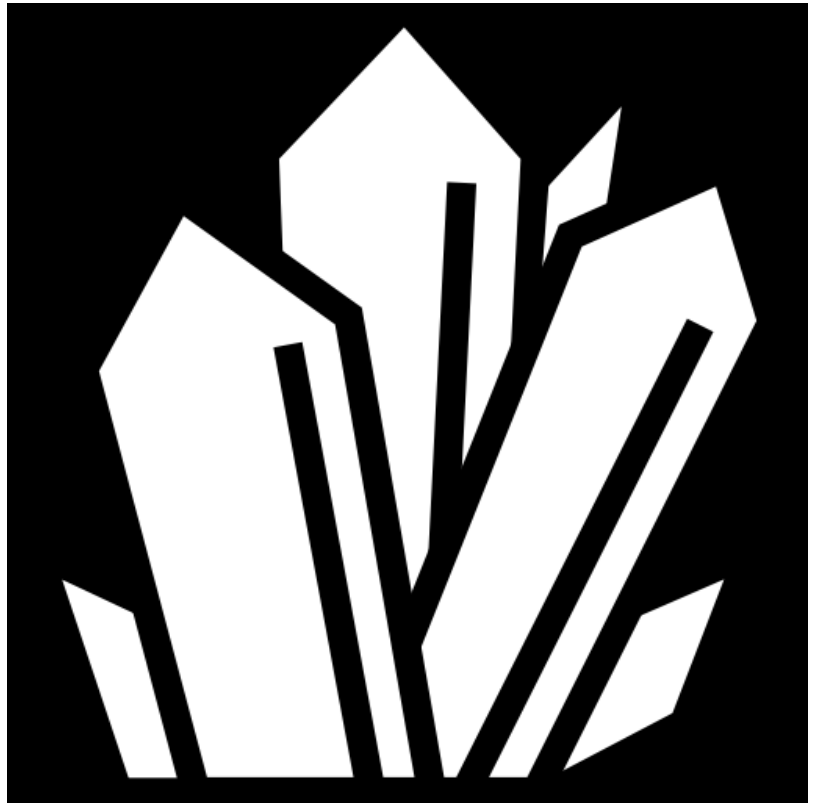
Outside settled areas, tunnels are dark and cramped, with dead ends and dangerous pits.

## Some Peoples from Below

The **nightfolk** have huge ears, and can see in the dark (with sonar, like bats). They can see, but their large eyes are sensitive - they often wear smoked glasses. They're cunning hunters in the darkness, silent and black-dressed, almost impossible to see or hear.

**Badgers** are big and smart, but aside from that just normal badgers. They're expert diggers and live in extended-family setts, where they sing their family epics. They're fearsome warriors and often found in military tunnel-clearing units.

**Drales'** skin is moist and shiny (like an amphibian). They have brightly coloured, individual patterns. They live in wet caves, with a nearby stream or lake. They hunt underwater and live simple lives. They are proverbially hospitable – just greeting a Drale often leads to an invitation to dinner and stories at their home.





## **Back to the "Real" World**

It is easy to travel between Above and Below, and from either back to the real world. You need to find a path, portal, sanctuary, or magic spell to move between them (and travel between Above and Below is easier than to the real world).

Going back can be used to bookend the heroes' adventures - when they're done, we see them back home and everyone goes back to their normal lives until next time.

It's also possible to have adventures in the real world! The other people of Above and Below, including the Great Enemy and its minions, can travel here too.

When you are adventuring to defend Above and Below in the real world, you get to use your magical gear, abilities, and possibly even your allies (if they are present). Your homes count as sanctuaries.

# Playing the Game

The game is mainly played as free-form improvisation, a conversation about what happens next in the story. Everyone describes what they do in reaction to the situation at hand. The guide also introduces details about the worlds, the current adventure, and the places and people you visit along the way.

You can always ask for suggestions if you're not sure what to do! The guide in particular has to manage a lot of characters and information, so it's fine to ask the others to help think of things!

## The Very Beginning

Once everyone has noted down their chosen special ability, the guide will narrate your first introduction to Above and Below.

Guide, the following instructions are just for you.

For the first adventure there are two just below, or you can make your own (see the [Adventures](#) section).

Begins by explaining how you travelled to Above or Below. Probably you were all going somewhere in particular, and along the way you walked through a portal. The transition could be subtle (so you don't notice until you are through) or obvious (with a flash of light, you find yourselves somewhere else).

You should explain about how abilities and allies work, as those are the two resources they have to affect uncertainty roll results at the start. Artefacts and sanctuaries can wait until they finish an adventure.

Then explain what they see around them. You'll be somewhere that's in danger - the first adventure has already started - but there will be time to explore a bit. Let them look around, investigate the world, and maybe meet some people or animals.

Here are two example adventures, intended to be usable as your first outing. There's one from Above and one for Below. Pick your favourite and play.

# The First Adventure: Above

The heroes enter Above at a small village. Across the fields they can see woods, and rolling hills in the other direction. The world has an insubstantial quality, as if the light shines through everything, no matter how solid. Give them time to look around and ask questions, but soon a small person runs to them from the village asking for help.

This small person is Jeb, one of the elfin people who inhabit this village. She's skinny and very pale, almost translucent, golden. She's wearing a shift and knee-length trousers, festooned with belts carrying all sorts of odds and ends.

"Help us! Pirates have told us we have a day to decide which twelve children we should give them as slaves! They're too tough for us to fight, we're just farmers."

When questioned she can tell the heroes:

- The pirates are "raptors".
- They fly - both individually and in ships.
- Where their "mooring" is (a little way from the village, out in the open grass).

Jeb can take them to the village's armoury (such as it is) and equip them with some basic weapons and armour. If the heroes doubt they can make up the time on foot, they can borrow the villages' dragonflies (huge ones, used as mounts and draft animals).

## Raptor Sky Pirates

There are as many raptors as heroes, plus their captain, Boolo.

They look like piratical, blue, shark/human hybrids, but with wings between their sides and arms. They're thin, sinuous, and fast. They rely on fear and surprise more than brute force. Captain Boolo is braver than the rest.

- Wants: Money - a servant of the Enemy is buying slaves, at generous rates.
- Abilities: Fly, Slashing cutlass.
- Allies: The rest of the crew.
- Artefact: The Reaver, their skyship.

# The First Adventure: Below

The heroes find themselves in a fungal forest in a cavern that stretches as far as the eye can see. Moss on the ground gently illuminates this region. A nearby stream leads to a lake, filled with gently wafting white strands and darting fish.

Beside the stream lies an injured soldier, his ostrich-like mount grazing on some green puffballs. A tall, pure-white man, he wears plate armour beautifully embossed with red, gold, and blue designs. But his lance is broken, and he's bleeding from many wounds. He gestures you closer.

"You are not, I see, servants of the enemy? Please take this letter to Marshal Hodith in the fortress Rockfang. The stone imp armies are moving, and the Marshal must be told as soon as possible."

At this, Varuk begins coughing and cannot continue for some time. His breathing is laboured and he seems to be weakening rapidly. If the heroes all decide to help him instead of delivering the message, he will insist with all the force he can muster. He's prepared to die here if necessary.

Smart heroes can split up, leaving one or two to help him while the others take the letter.

Guide, you know the path to Rockfang (although you might need to ask Varuk for a few clarifications). The way passes through the ruins of a lost city, now perpetually washed by a waterfall from above. Although eroded, here and there are buildings and passages that are still whole. Who knows what lies within?

Stone imp spies know that a scout escaped, and they have alerted agents to watch for messengers. The imps are cautious, and they will first try to trick the heroes into betraying their mission. They will bluff and bluster to get their way, and draw back if rebuffed. Make the imps crazy and fun with their tricks - the heroes probably won't be fooled, but try to get some laughs out of them. If tricks don't work, the imps will try a stealthy attack when the heroes' guard is down (either in the city, or while they rest).

## Stone Imps

There are as many stone imps as heroes, led by Captain Scrag.

Stone imps are anywhere from 20cm to 150cm tall, they're wiry, with jewellike eyes and skin like stone. They wear armour of basalt scales and wield obsidian blades, although as these are acting as spies they conceal their war gear under big, billowy cloaks.

- **Wants:** They're following orders: under no circumstances let the message get through. They'll be in big trouble with the goblin-queen if they fail.
- **Abilities:** Resist cuts and stabs. Outrageous lies. Faster than you expect.
- **Allies:** The rest of the imps.

# Uncertainty

When you don't know what should happen next, roll dice to decide

Start by rolling two dice of different colours. One colour is for success, the other for complication.

If the success die comes up less than the complication die, you do what you wanted and something complicates the situation.

If the success die comes up high, then you do what you wanted, and get something extra.

## Improving Your Result

Your ability, gear, and allies can improve your roll.

- If an ability helps, you succeed if the dice are tied.
- If an ally helps, you may re-roll the complication die.
- If an artefact helps, you may roll an extra success die.

## The Guide

If you're the guide, avoid making rolls for yourself.

You will sometimes need to make rolls for people and adversaries the heroes meet (you'll have to judge if they have abilities, allies, or artefacts that apply).

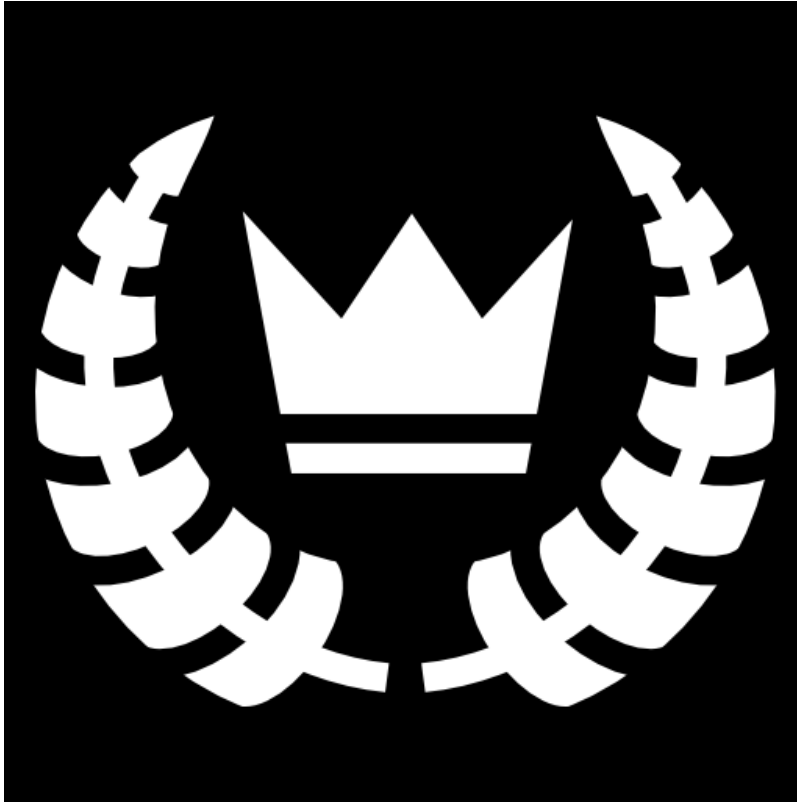
## Complications

Complications take two forms: **conditions** or **twists**.

Conditions are effects that apply to you until they are removed. E.g. "Hurt," "Burnt," "Hungry," "Embarrassed." Take a condition that makes sense given the situation that caused it.

Twists are unexpected complications to the situation, determined by the guide. E.g. "Now the goblins have trapped you in the cave," "You take the wrong path and soon find yourselves in a hive of clockwork hornets."

# Rewards

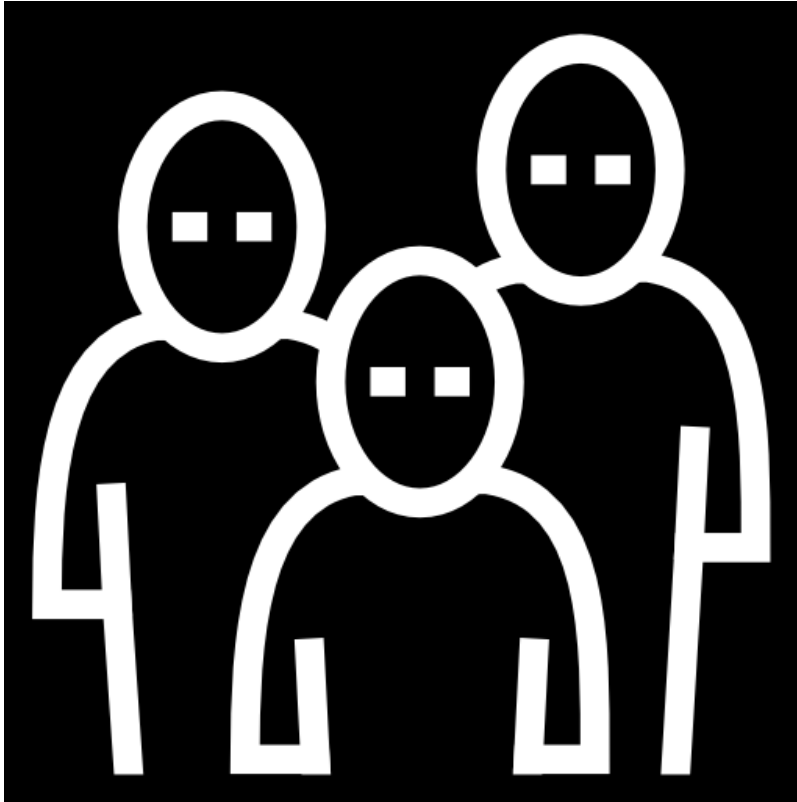


Gain one token for each adventure completed, and one token at the end of each session.

Tokens may be spent to:

- Befriend a person, animal, or monster (so they become your ally).
- Gain an artefact (a treasure found, or reward given).
- Gain access to a sanctuary (you will be welcome there in future).
- Gain a new ability.
- Get a step closer to the Great Enemy (this means the next adventure will give you a chance to significantly interfere with the Enemy's plans).

## Allies



In your travels you will meet potential allies. If you spend a token, you may befriend them so they will be available to help you in future. Allies still have their own lives, but when you ask they'll come (as long as you don't abuse their trust).

Allies help when you roll. If your ally helps you, you may re-roll the complication die. The other players count as your allies, too! If you are making a roll and they help you out, you may re-roll the complication die.

## Artefacts



In the course of your adventures you will come across strange artefacts with arcane powers.

When you get an artefact, the guide will tell you what it allows you to do. When you use the artefact's power, you may roll an extra success die.



## Sanctuaries



Sanctuaries are places that the heroes are safe and can relax. The people there are friendly and there are facilities for rest and recreation.

If the heroes return to a sanctuary, they may remove one complication each for every full day and night they spend there.

Sanctuaries also provide way to travel back to the real world, if you wish to. The form this path takes will be individual to the place.

## Abilities



New special abilities are generated the same way as the first one.

Abilities can help you when you roll. If you use an ability, you succeed when the dice are tied.

# Adventures

Each time you sit down to play, the guide needs an adventure. Making up adventures isn't much work – all you need is the basic idea. You can make up the rest as you play.

Sometimes the heroes won't get to the end of the adventure before time runs out. That's just fine! At a suitable point, stop and finish up. You can carry on from there next time.

When you are guiding them through an adventure, focus on exploring and interacting with the people the heroes meet instead of fighting and conflict. Try to make everyone and everything they meet both weird, but also a little familiar.

If the heroes finish the adventure, let them return to a sanctuary to recover. The next adventure can start there.

Here's what you need for an adventure:

- Someone who needs help.
- Somewhere strange the heroes must go to.
- Something weird that happens along the way.
- What adversaries they will meet along the way.

How to generate each of these is detailed in the following sections.

# Someone Needs Help

Somebody needs help! The people of Above and Below recognise the heroes are out of the ordinary, and will come to them with problems.

These problems are always be caused by the Great Enemy, directly or indirectly.

If you need ideas, roll on these tables:

## What Sort of Person Is Asking?

1. Local leader (village elder, family matriarch, spokesperson for the affected, etc)
2. Spiritual expert (town priest, shaman, medium, etc)
3. Official (bailiff, beedle, sheriff, manorial lord, etc)
4. Envoy from another country/region
5. Messenger from the affected people (maybe mysterious or spooky)
6. It's happening here, right now!

## What Sort of Problem Is It?

1. Marauding monsters or servants of the Enemy.
2. A sneaky saboteur or spy is here somewhere.
3. Agents are recruiting people to work for the Enemy.
4. The Enemy's agents are planning something terrible.
5. A magical curse, spell, or plague is affecting us.
6. A concerted attack by an Enemy army.

## How Can You Fix It?

1. Get all the locals helping.
2. There's someone who can deal with it, but they are far away and possibly reluctant.
3. There's a special artefact that will stop it.
4. You must get to the Enemy commander.
5. You need to take something (or someone) to a certain place at a certain time.
6. Defeat, trick, or bamboozle the Enemy's minions.

# Somewhere Strange

Whatever the problem and potential solution, you'll need to go somewhere weird. It might be close or far, but it won't be conveniently right where you are.

You can generate ideas for the place with the following tables:

## Is It Above Or Below?

1 or 2. Below

3 or 4. Above

5. You have to find it.

6. Somewhere else - the real world, or a whole new realm.

## What Sort Of Place Is It?

1. Dangerous terrain (volcano, fire swamp, walking hills)

2. Wilderness (deep forest, far out to sea, endless moors)

3. Uninhabited (woods, old ruins, past the frontier, a trading road)

4. Rural (farms, villages, orchards, crossroads, a knight's keep)

5. Town (artists' workshop, trade exchange, the magistrate's court, back-alley tavern)

6. City (consul's palace, the rookeries, a barge on the river, the arsenal)

## What Makes It Strange?

1. Inverted expectations: make it the opposite of your first idea

2. Weird physics: something doesn't work like you expect here

3. Unusual customs: think of a custom, and then how people here exceed it, break it, or subvert it

4. Alien environment: for instance: underwater, only accessible by air, time runs faster for the people here.

5. Weird environment: herds of axebeaks, caves of glittering gems, a forest of roots reaching up, orange grasslands, constant rain of sunlight-drops

6. Exceeded expectations: make it the epitome of your first idea

# Something Weird

Every journey should include at least one weird encounter along the way.

You can generate ideas for the encounter with the following tables:

## What Sort Of Encounter

1. Natural feature.
2. Animal or monster.
3. Someone suspicious or hostile.
4. A settlement.
5. Something to explore.
6. Someone friendly.

## What Makes It Weird?

1. Opposite of a real-world thing
2. Doesn't work like you'd expect.
3. Bizarre colouration/appearance.
4. Magical spells and effects.
5. Misleading appearance.
6. Juxtaposition of two different elements.

# Adversaries

Although the heroes will face many enemies, only the Great Enemy is wholly evil.

All the other guards, monsters, assassins, soldiers, and workers are normal people. Generate them the same way as other people: weird but with familiar qualities. They serve the Great Enemy because they fear repercussions, have been promised a reward, or are selfish and opportunistic.

Guide, let the heroes find ways to turn these minions away from the Great Enemy. Take opportunities to show they are normal, although maybe doing bad things (often for good or at least understandable reasons).

When planning an adventure, prepare these details for adversaries:

- Name.
- Description.
- What they want right at the moment.
- Any abilities they have.
- Any allies they have.
- Any artefacts they have (this is rare, for special adversaries).

# Common Adversaries

## Goblins

Goblin have names like Ramosh, Klatterby, Tusk, Sozer, Pikka, Frang, Chuzz, Ironfist, or Gargan.

Goblins are short humanoids. They may be any colour, but green and blue are common. They come from Below and are excellent miners.

Common Wants: Rest and pleasure, Wealth and treasure.

Common Abilities: See in the dark, Dig fast.

Common Allies: Goblins are sociable, so there are usually more goblins around.

Artefacts: Sometimes a goblin finds a treasure in a forgotten cave - it could be anything.

## Shadow Eaters

Shadow eaters have names like Sharass, Zhorosh, Hush, or Thasam.

Shadow eaters are small, scuttling people from Above. About the size of a cat, gently glowing and able to jump and glide, and a hard, spiky shell. As their name suggests, they live off shadows - if one starts eating your shadow, it becomes smaller and lighter, and you'll become steadily more listless in brightly lit places.

Common Wants: Eat some shadows, Worship the sun.

Common Abilities: Shadow-eating, Long glide, Sneak.

Common Allies: Other sun-worshippers.

Artefacts: Very rare, but they treasure anything that can create more shadows.

## Trolls

Troll have names like Bob, Sally, Tom, Fred, Sam, or Zoe.

Trolls are big, tough people from the mountains of Above (although there are cave trolls from Below as well, similar in many ways). They're rude and gluttonous, and sometimes eat people.

Common Wants: Food.

Common Abilities: Immensely strong.

Common Allies: Although often loners, sometimes trolls team up with other trolls or anyone else roughly as tough as they are.

Artefacts: A troll might have stolen an artefact from someone.



# The Great Enemy



The Great Enemy hates everything to do with normal, joyful lives. It's the only truly evil thing in the worlds, and it wishes to dominate everything.

It has many powers, mainly of illusion, deception, and persuasion, and prefers to work via minions and spells.

Beyond that, the nature of the Enemy is left to you.