

The background is a textured painting. It features a central vortex of blue and white, surrounded by concentric circles of blue. The outer edges are decorated with numerous golden fish, some of which are stylized and appear to be swimming in a circular pattern. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of blue and green, with bright golden-yellow accents.

The Sea is the World

Clark B. Timmins

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Cover image by Jonna Hind; internal iconography by Lorc; fish images from Wikimedia.

Core Mechanic

Opposed or difficult action attempts are made by rolling a dice pool (d6) and summing the results. The two summed results are compared and the bigger result succeeds; the smaller result fails. Ties resolve in favor of the defender or the character (against the attacker or the game master). The game master rolls the dice pool for difficult action attempts, using perhaps 1 dice for trivial efforts and something like 9 dice for heroic efforts.

The magic system uses Rory's Story Cubes – at least nine Story Cubes (from any set in any combination) are needed.

Setting

The sea is the world; there is no land; there is no bottom; if you go deep enough you come out on the other side (actually, you get eaten... but theoretically you'd come out on the other side). There's stuff floating on the sea – ice and floats – but mostly there's just sea and above it there's air. Without anything to interrupt it, the Coriolis Effect drives severe weather patterns that are as predictable as the sunrise – winds and currents are strong, the surface generally is tumultuous, and there's a tremendous amount of rain. The poles are covered in massive, thick, permanent ice. The ice in turn is surrounded by pack ice. Bergs drift around.

There is no rock. There is no earth. There is no metal. There is no fresh water. There's seaweed, bones, pearls, shells, and ice. Sometimes somebody makes something like a tool, but it's not very common. The world is divided into temperature bands by latitude – tropics, sub-tropics, temperate, polar. Because almost everything in the world is ectothermic



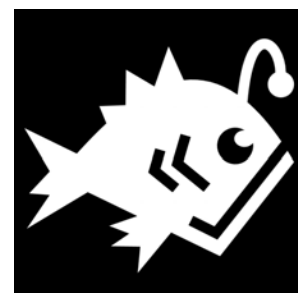
(e.g., roughly the same temperature as the environment), there's not much travel between the latitudes. And there is no meaningful division by longitudes. Vertically, the sea is divided into the upper photic zone and the lower dark. Stuff that lives in the photic zone avoids the lower dark. Stuff that lives in the lower dark may come up at night to see what might fit in their mouths (in the real world, Jacques Cousteau called this nightly vertical migration the "pulse of the deep").

The sea is filled with plankton and algae in a big soupy mess. There's a lot of floating seaweeds, often accumulated in big semi-permanent floating islands. There are three basic types of animal critters around – fish, fowl, and crustaceans. Fish of every type are found – a very few breathe air, most breathe water. Crabs, shrimp, snails, octopi, and anemones are around. Seabirds are around. Swimming birds are around – concentrated on the ice. Magic is pervasive and everything is pretty smart – self-aware, intelligent, sentient, whatever you want to call it (birds are possibly an exception – they don't spend enough time in the water to make any sense). That doesn't mean everything is nice, though, or even that everything likes to communicate. The whole sea is driven by a single Golden Rule that everything agrees upon – it's called the Rule of the Mouth. If it fits in your mouth, it's food. If you fit in its mouth, you're food. Don't feel too bad about eating things that are smart. Don't feel too bad about being a cannibal. It's the Rule of the Mouth. It's just the way things work.



Characters

Player characters are all fish. They have Attributes: Bite, Swim, and Magic. They have Traits which give them a variety of abilities. And they all have a body that can sustain some wounds. Characters start with ten Dice to distribute among their three Attributes (however they want). Characters all have the Trait Language (*Solresol*). Characters can also pick five more Traits (if a character wants to be "really good" at something, they can pick the same Trait multiple times and "stack" the associated bonus, unless the Trait says you can't). If the player doesn't see a Trait they want, they can invent it. When using Bite or Swim, the character rolls the dice pool of the Attribute and takes the sum as their result.



Bite: The general purpose action of putting something in your mouth

and biting it. Sharks have a lot of bite. Clownfish don't have so much bite. If a critter has a bite of zero then it doesn't have a mouth that can bite (thus, it's likely a filter feeder).

Swim: The general purpose action of moving through the water. Tuna have a lot of swim. Clownfish don't have so much swim. If a critter has a swim of zero then it doesn't move on its own volition.

Magic: Magic is complicated and gets its own section, later.

Combat: All of combat devolves to trying to put something in your mouth and bite it. The attacker rolls their Bite. The defender has a couple options – usually, the strategy is going to be not getting bitten, so usually they'll use their Swim. Some defenders, however, might prefer to just bite back. The biggest Bite result (obviously) wins. If the Bite exceeds the Swim then the defender gets bit and takes damage.

Advanced Optional Rule: When comparing dice pool results, if one result is twice as big (or bigger) than the opposed result, then the success can be twice as good as normal. For example, Sharky McSharkface tries to bite Floundy McFlounderface. Sharky rolls a whopping 30; Floundy rolls a miserable 6. Floundy takes *two* wound levels.

Damage: Every critter has seven damage levels. To keep things simple, there are no debilitating effects of damage until you run out of damage levels and then, as they say, you're lunch. Every critter heals up one damage level every day when the sun comes up.

Traits

Some Traits are "hard" Traits that yield specific bonuses. Other Traits are "soft" Traits that require roleplaying (their usefulness should be on a par with "hard" Traits but will require more consideration). There are other traits that are sort of in between, yielding a specific bonus but requiring game master adjudication. If a Trait seems too powerful, eliminate it from the game (or replace it with something similar).

Armor: The critter is armored. Whenever something tries to bite it, the critter gets an extra dice in defense.

Beautiful: The critter is really beautiful. This is a "soft" roleplaying Trait.

Bioluminescent: The critter can make its own light. Other critters in the deep dark find this light hypnotically compelling.



Breath Air: The critter can breathe air. So it can go up top if it wants. But it also doesn't go below the upper photic level.

Camo: The critter is adept at not being seen. However, Camo doesn't help if something has seen it and is trying to bite it. A variant of Camo is "Transparent".

Cleaner: The critter knows how to pick off parasites, barnacles, etc., from other critters. Other critters probably won't try to Bite a Cleaner. As long as it's spending a lot of its time cleaning (e.g., this is a good benefit with a tedious drawback).

Cool: The critter has a striking visual appearance. This is a "soft" roleplaying Trait.

Crunch: The critter has a really nasty mouth that inflicts an extra damage level on a successful bite. Sharks have Crunch.

Disgusting: The critter is somehow disgusting (tastes bad, stinks, super slimy, pukes or poops on demand, whatever), so most things don't want to put it into their mouths.

Endothermic: The critter is adept at maintaining its internal body temperature. It can move freely between latitude bands.

Fade: The critter has a sort of sixth sense of knowing when it's about to get a Bite. The critter can "Fade into the background" and maybe avoid getting bit.

Ink: The critter can spew out a thick cloud of disgusting black ink that helps it get away.

Language: Some critters have secret languages that aren't universally understood. Name your language and only critters picking that language as a Trait can talk it. Fish don't "speak" to talk – they click, hum, thrum, whistle, shimmy, shake, flash lights, or whatever. But whatever they do, that's how they talk.

Leap: The critter is really adept at leaping out of the water and soaring through the skies (for moments at a time). This lets the critter Bite dumb birds.

Lunge: The critter is great at closing the last few feet. Whenever it attacks something, the target gets one less dice in Swim for defense.



Poison: The critter has a nasty poisonous bite that inflicts an extra damage level on a successful bite.

Shock: The critter can generate a powerful electric current that can surprise or stun other nearby critters. This can yield one wound level to nearby critters.

Skulk: The critter is adept at skulking around in a non-threatening way. Everybody else gets so used to the skulking they tend to ignore the critter completely.

Smart: The critter is really smart. This is a “soft” roleplaying Trait.

Spiny Norman: The critter has spines and other pointy bits that make eating it painful. Whenever the critter receives a wound level from physical contact, it gives the attacker a wound level in return.

Treasure: The critter makes something shiny (think: pearl) that can be used to distract another critter for a brief but critical moment.

Weapon: The critter has some type of extra-nasty weapon that gives it two bonus dice on Bite. The weapon can be almost anything except a sword, which are prohibited by the terms of the competition. So even though there are all kinds of critters there are no swordfish (sawfish are OK). You can only pick this trait once.



Magic

Magic perfuses the world and all living critters. Any critter with at least one dice in Magic can cast spells. Sometimes the spells do useful things. Spells require the use of “[Rory’s Story Cubes](#)”, which are funny and expensive dice that you can buy at almost any big retailer.

You can use any set; these rules assume the basic (orange) set. Whenever a character casts a spell, the player rolls all nine Story Cubes in the set. They can then pick one result for each dice they have in their Magic Attribute. They can then construct a spell with the selected dice (they do *not* have to use all the dice they selected). After they state their spell the game master gets to pick one of the unselected result dice (if any remain) and swap it with one of the selected result dice (the game master does not *have* to do this). Thus mangled, the spell functions.



Let's look at some examples. I'm going to use a single stock advertising image as the nine-dice roll for all the examples.

One Die Example: The player picks any die and describes an effect. The GM replaces the die with any other die and says what happens. One in magic is not much use.

Two Dice Example: The player picks the smiley face and the home and explains that her character is going to teleport safely home. The game master replaces the home with the tree and the character teleports safely somewhere.

Three Dice Example: The player picks the book, the key, and the parachute and explains that his character is going to recall some early learning as the key to a safe escape from a tricky situation. The game master replaces the key with the cane and the character recalls some early learning a little bit incorrectly and escapes from the tricky situation... with complications.

Four Dice Example: The player picks the magnet the hand the key and the smiley face and explains her character is going to draw a distant object to herself safely. The game master replaces the hand with the home and notes the character has sent the distant object to her home.

Nine Dice Example: The player picks all the dice and uses the smiley face and the home and explains that his character is going to teleport safely home. The powerful mage teleports safely home. Which is lucky because with nine dice in Magic the mage can't do anything else.

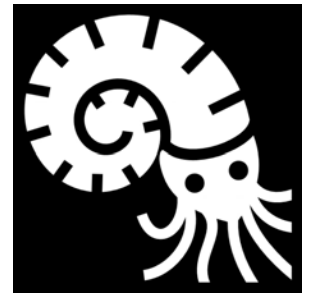
Game Master Magic Guidance

Magic is pervasive but ephemeral. Think of it like a colored dye in water – vibrant right at first, but soon it fades into invisibility. Magic *cannot* be used to create permanent things. Magic *cannot* be used to create “magical items”. It can (very occasionally) be used to harm or heal with “instantaneous” effects. Magic should be common but transient, prevalent but capricious. Players need to understand their magical “spells” probably are going to work, but probably not work just like they'd prefer.

Magic should be useful but capricious. The intent of spell die replacement is not to “wreck” spellcasting but to make it unpredictable. If the



situation “calls for” the spell to work, then let it work. If you’re burned out on tweaking spells then hand off the responsibility in a round-robin fashion to other players. They’ll likely be more helpful than the game master (they know that what goes around comes around), but that’s OK – again, the intent is not to make spellcasting frustrating or useless, but to keep it interesting and capricious.



If a player tries to “do the same thing” over and over again with spells, then they should fail a little bit, then a little more, then a whole lot. Repetitive spell effects do not exist. The “method” they use should not be as important as the effect they’re trying for. If a character always casts spells that e.g. damage an opponent, then they should stop working all the time, leading to being counterproductive. The nature and extent of this will vary with the campaign needs.

Generally, if a spell makes people laugh, makes the game more interesting, furthers the goals of the campaign, and isn’t something obnoxious then it probably should work (more or less) as stated. If it’s a power-grubbing min/max move then it probably should not work as stated. This type of “anything goes” spell casting and results interpretation can become quite fatiguing, especially for the game master. Don’t hesitate to farm out the work. Remember that when Non-Player Characters cast spells, only the game master decides what happens. Be sorta-kinda fair about it.

Rory’s Story Cubes come in a large variety of types. It doesn’t matter which type or product you use. Mix and match. But when a spell is cast, pull nine Story Cubes (at random) and roll ‘em. Those are the only nine you use for that spell. If a player pumps nine dice into Magic so they can control the whole spell, that’s OK. Their character can’t move and can’t bite and probably won’t last very long. If it becomes a problem, then it’s always OK to “cap” Magic at 8 dice. If each player wants to “tweak” a personal pool of nine Story Cubes, that’s fine, too. It keeps them engaged. A player may want to use the “Actions” pack and have their character specialize in “evocation”, or use the “Voyages” pack and have their character specialize in “translocation”. The “Looney Tunes” pack might be appropriate for a lighthearted game; the “Scooby-Doo!” pack might be suitable for a ghost-themed game; etc. The various “Mix” packs add a lot of possibilities. Finally, the “Max” editions are suitable



for younger kids or for visually impaired players (like, ahem, old dudes).

Character Advancement

Whenever the game master decides it's time to advance the power level of the campaign, all players receive one extra dice to distribute wherever they like; optionally, they can "spend" the dice to get a Trait. This probably should happen every other play session or thereabouts.

Atypical Game

There really are no physical belongings ("items") in the game. First, there's usually no way for the characters to hold/manipulate/use them. Second, there's really nothing much from which to make them. The game master can consider things like "magical seaweed" that cures wounds (though rare) or maybe even "magical pearls" that give some benefit (as long as you don't drop them). Most characters won't really have a way to transport these items, however. There's a reason fish don't accumulate belongings.



Introductory Scenario—Fins in the Set (Lighthearted)

The characters have lived for some time underneath a large floating island composed of seaweed (rotting and thriving) and the occasional dead thingy. Little crabs and shrimp crawl all over and through it. Birds sometimes walk around on top of it. And fish live under and around it. It's a thriving ecosystem with a stable Feudal hierarchy of critters. The Big Kahuna is a fair size critter with an hefty Bite and a decent Swim, plus some Armor (think hammerhead shark). In turn some of the smaller Biters have pledged support in exchange for not being eaten, and so forth down the line. Somewhere in that Feudal hierarchy are the characters, closer to the base of the food chain than the apex. But still generally safe and usually fed—useful enough to be considered part of the operating set and not the feeder fish. But just barely.

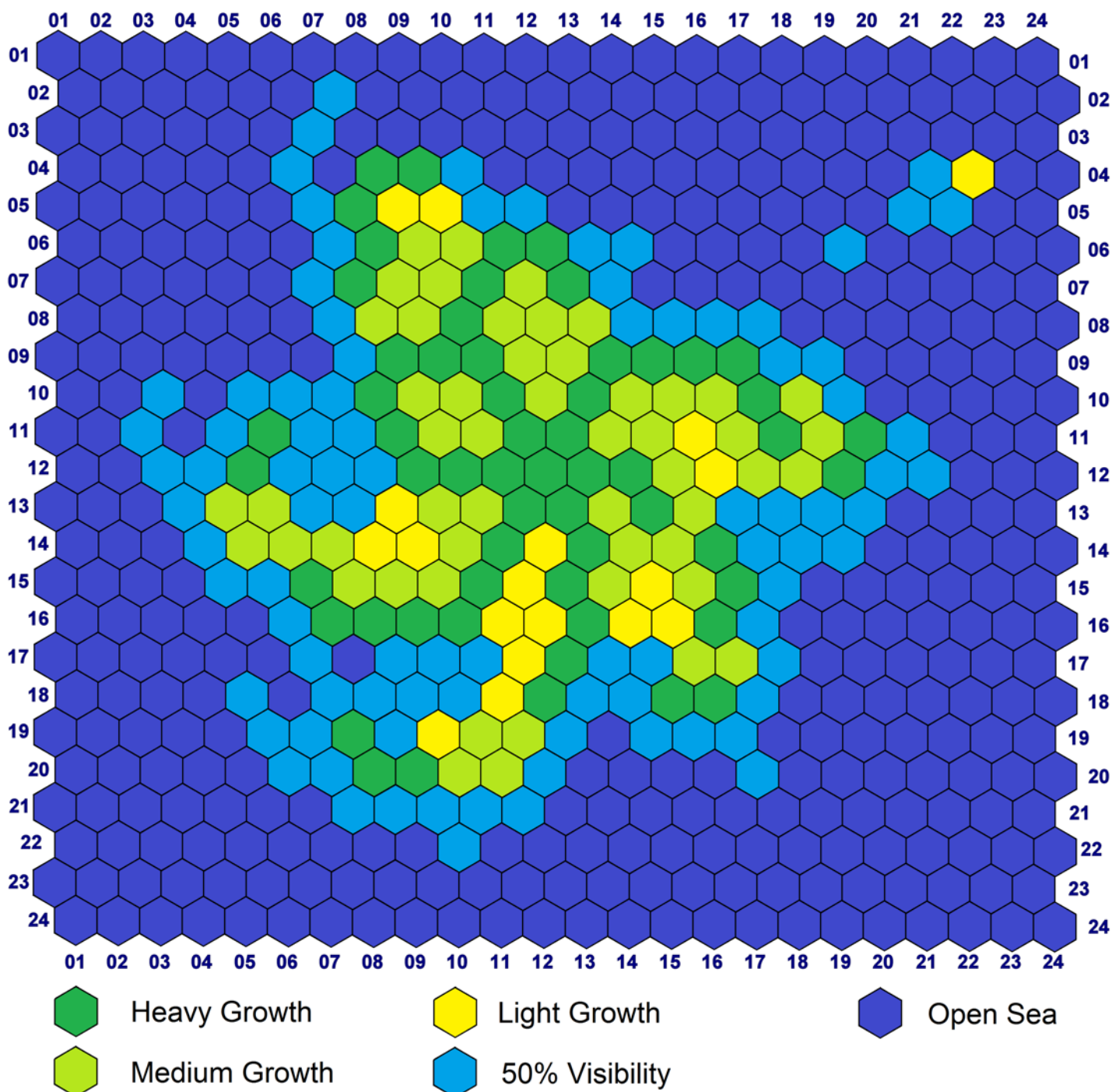
A couple hours ago a humongous pelagic filter feeder passed by and the Big Kahuna went out to have a confab. This caused quite a stir among the community bigwigs, which the characters are aware of without being privy to. Now, they've been summoned to the Big Kahuna and given a choice. They can either a) be served at lunch, or b) head off at a specific bearing to go and "check out what's out there". Wisely, the characters choose to skip lunch and head on out along the specified bearing.



The characters head out for about six hours and then come upon a massive expanse of pelagic sargassum (that's floating seaweed).

In the map, each hex represents one turn of movement. Characters can see through a range of about six "open sea" hexes, with gradually decreasing clarity. Note the map is presented from the characters' perspective—looking up from below.

Blue Hexes—Open Sea with standard visibility—about six hexes with gradually decreasingly clarity.



Light Blue Hexes—"Soupy" with algae and small pieces of seaweed—characters can't see through these hexes from outside, and can only see out into the six adjacent hexes. However, the surface is open to the air.

Yellow Hexes—Light seaweed growth covers the surface. Hex otherwise is like Blue Hexes in effect.

Light Green Hexes—Medium seaweed growth with masses of seaweed descending to about thirty feet of depth. Otherwise like Blue Hexes in effect.

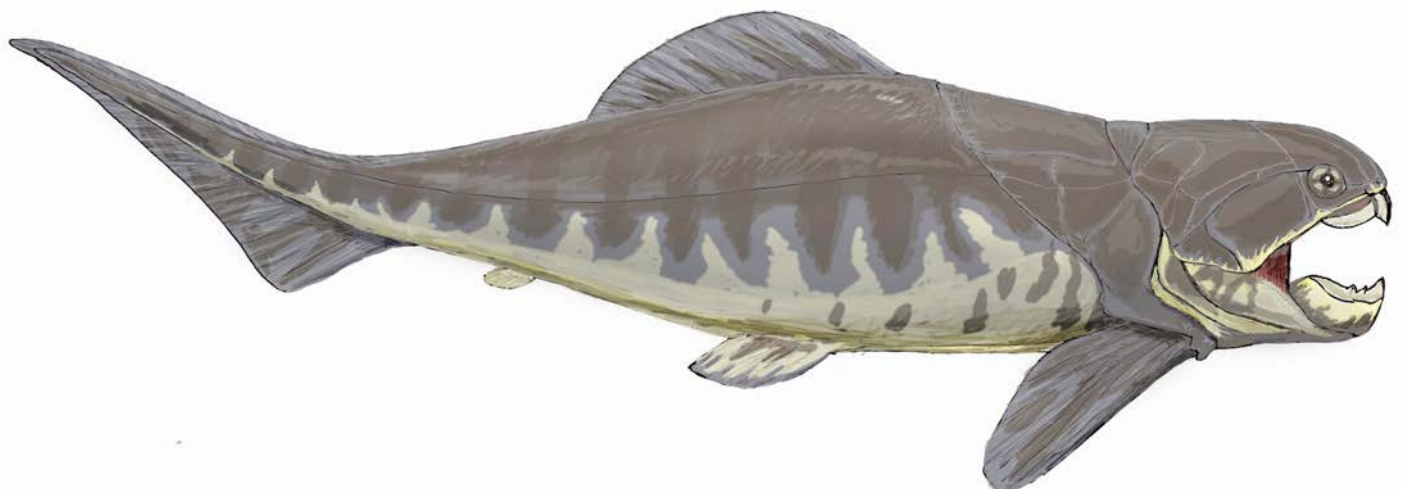
Dark Green Hexes—Heavy seaweed growth with dense masses of seaweed descending to about thirty feet of depth and lighter seaweed descending for another thirty feet of depth.

Encounter Areas:

Top Right separated patch—Clark the Shark, an old curmudgeon lives here. Once upon a time a fearsome predatory with an enormous Bite, the fat old codger now has few teeth, bad eyesight, and almost no motivation to do anything except float around. If the characters annoy him greatly, he might Bite. Otherwise he's up for a chat and will provide whatever information he can as long as it entertains him to do so. He's been around and knows a lot of stuff. But he's grouchy and doesn't volunteer anything. A couple Cleaner fish (notorious gossips) hang out in the region, too.

Perimeter—Border Ruffians; small schools of patrolling Biters, move around the perimeter fairly often. If the characters Swim right in, the Border Ruffians will sense an opportunity and start Biting. If the characters approach carefully and act with deference, they'll probably be quizzed and then allowed to pass unmolested. In theory, these guys work for Dunkleosteus (see below). In practice, they're pretty much autonomous.

Columns 1–12; this region is ruled by a huge Dunkleosteus that likes to be called flattering things. If anybody makes him mad (very easy to do), he's going to eat them. He rules with an boney fin and makes life miserable for everybody. Roundly hated, the only thing that keeps him in power is



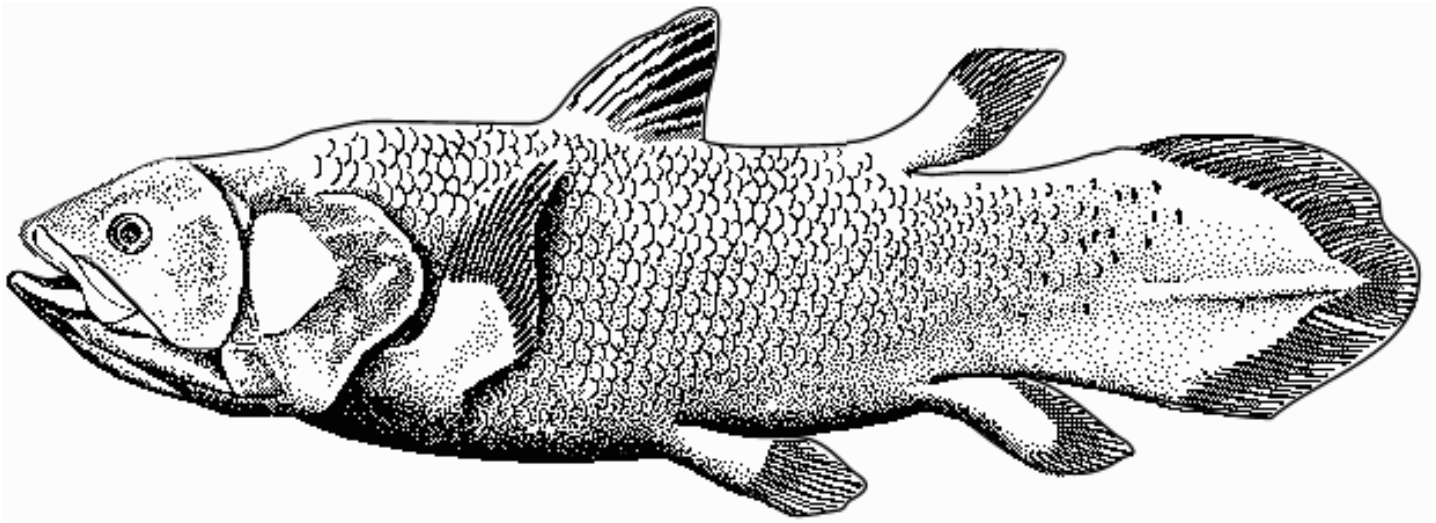
his freakishly powerful Bite and his unbelievably heavy Armor. He has zero Magic and he can't Swim good. He doesn't need to. Beneath him is his Court; a variety of lesser fish that always bear obvious Wounds and take out their frustration by Biting anything smaller than they are, etc., etc. The various fish in this region enthusiastically welcome *any* plan to overthrow/drive off/eat/murder Dunkleosteus. But they will never, ever, take part or assist in any way. They are, quite simply, too terrified. If they had any better option of some other place to go, off they'd go. But for now, here they stay.

Columns 13-21, upper (roughly) half. This region is held by a writhing mass of electric eels. They taste bad, they shock hard, and they are never, ever alone. They're also all reasonably adept at Magic. The biggest one is nearly nine feet long and known as Princess Patti. She accepts endless torments from other electric eels—and eats anything else. Aligned with nobody, that's how the eels like it. From time to time large groups will pass out of their region to hunt. But they're generally fairly restrained, if not respectful. The eels are particularly adept at using their Camo to twine up in the seaweed, giving the whole region a pretty empty appearance. Until it's too late. Also in this region is a quite large spikey puffer fish named Spiny Norman. Norman can barely Swim and isn't too bright; he can't Bite very good, either. But he's heavily armored and heavily—*heavily*—spiked. Norman also has a very high Magic statistic, but he doesn't like to show it off.

Two-hex Heavy Grown (Dark Green) semi-detached region in Columns 19 & 20 / Rows 11 & 12 — A large Snapper named Harry Organs lives here. His one goal in life is to kill and consume all of the denizens that live in the lower, right quadrant of the map. Organs is very smart and very sneaky. He's up for almost any scheme, regardless of how crazy it sounds, if it has a reasonable chance of success and involves eating something. Hopefully several somethings. He's got some Magic, too. Also in this region, almost always Up Top, is Ethel the Frog, a *very* sneaky amphibian critter. Organs knows her (they sort of have a crush on each other). Nobody else has ever seen her. She has no Bite, lousy Swim, good Camo, good Fade, and Great Magic. Organs and Ethel both speak Language (Uasi).



Columns 13-21, lower (roughly) half. This region is held by Doug and Dinsdale Piranha, relatively smallish but hugely vicious thugs. They have an enormous school of nippers swarming around them nearly all the time. They will readily agree to any plan that involves violence but operate on the principle that everything that isn't in their gang should be mutilated sooner or later (preferably sooner). Their gang members can then be mutilated later. Their gang of nippers suffers constant high losses, but their relatively egalitarian gangland/pirate style constantly brings in new recruits hoping that somehow things might be different for them. The Piranha brothers have made several raids against the electric eels and Dunkleosteus, always with disastrous results. But they're always ready to try it again. Dinsdale Piranha has a pathological fear of Harry Organs, having been nearly eaten at least a dozen times in the past.



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