

Silven Trumpeter

Volume 4 · Issue 4 · Winter 2006

THE NIGHTMARE WAR

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YOU MUST BE READY - THEY ARE CO



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Stylistic Divide

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Editor's Note

Winter 2006



Greetings, *Trumpeter* readers!

Here in the Midwest, the winter means a lot of things. We start to get good snowfalls. (Actually, our first snowfall gave us a whopping 18 inches of snow that shut down our city for a few days!) It means that you have to rub the cats with dryer sheets to prevent static buildup. It's time to drink hot cocoa, read a good book, and stay inside where it's warm.


It's a great time for gaming! There's no temptation of the great outdoors, and going somewhere often involves bundling up, scraping ice off the car and driving through snow-obscured streets. Going out to the movies doesn't seem like so much fun when it's sleeting. So instead, you get together with your friends for a good game (or three or five). What else are you going to do when you're snowed in for two days other than play several 12-hour sessions of your favorite campaign?

So it's a good time for an issue of the *Silven Trumpeter*. What better to do on a cold, snowy day than to kick back with some of your favorite articles? We've got plenty of fiction to bring you through the grey days, with a lot of new writers. We bring you material for your marathon game sessions, plus reviews of some new games (some of them quite a bit different from what we usually cover) that you might want to check out with your group.

So kick back, have some cookies and cocoa, and enjoy this winter. Cheers!

Elizabeth R.A. Liddell
Editor-in-Chief
Silven Trumpeter





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How do you Get Involved?

Get your ideas together and send an article proposal to our Editor-in-Chief, Elizabeth R.A. Liddell (Lyz@SilvenPublishing.com). Be sure to include all the requested parts of your proposal, and check with the proposal deadlines to see the best times for submission. Once your proposal has been accepted, you'll usually have about two weeks to complete and submit the article.

Include in Your Proposal

1. Your name and email address
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6. A short writing sample that you feel adequately demonstrates your style and skill. This can be part of the article you're proposing or a term paper – anything that demonstrates your writing.

Proposal Submission Schedule

Spring 2007 Issue (March release)

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Summer 2007 Issue (June release)

Proposals Due: April 15

Fall 2007 Issue (September release)

Proposals Due: July 15*

*Contact the Editor-in-Chief by this date if you will be in attendance at Gen Con Indy and would like to participate as a Gen Con reporter.

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California Gaming at Gen Con So Cal

By Alisa Frisch

It's been said fun and sun go well together, and I have to agree after my return from my first visit to the Gen Con So Cal gaming convention. This smaller-scaled version of Gen Con Indy took place Nov. 16-19 at the Anaheim Convention Center in the balmy downtown Disneyland-area of California. It was a welcome oasis after leaving the 9 degree weather of my Anchorage, Alaska home!

This year was special, as it was the last year Gen Con So Cal was to be held in Anaheim. In 2007, the convention moves to the Los Angeles Convention Center, expanding its attendance possibilities and adding more electronic and tabletop gaming. The convention may also be renamed "Gen Con E," although no decision has been made as of yet.

It's possible this move will cause controversy, and some gamers I met think it's not the best idea. One reason is that Gen Con So Cal lacks the large attendance numbers of its "big brother," Gen Con Indy, so the move may hurt attendance even more, even if the mileage doesn't increase very much for the California attendees. Fortunately, I am happy to say I found it to be an entertaining event, even if it doesn't match conventions such as Gen Con Indy or Origins. Gen Con So Cal's setup was very pleasant. The weather was perfect, offering palm trees for those who may not have been eager to be under the sun whenever they stepped out of the convention center. For parents with kids, Disneyland was right across the street, and restaurants abounded to suit all tastes at any time.

Gen Con So Cal's internal features were different from my past experiences at conventions such as Origins, as the dealer's room was only a quarter of the size of Origins'. It offered more live entertainment from singers and musicians, and I saw many companies I'm quite familiar with and a handful of new organizations. It featured a small artists' area where I could get close to the artists without being bottlenecked or having my view of the artwork blocked.

Gen Con So Cal proved to be an excellent "mixed bag," including seminars and workshops for writers and artists, and plenty of screening rooms for the endless flows of anime-crazed fans. It even included a manga room.

I took advantage of the workshops to sharpen my skills and attended a painting session called *Beyond the Basics*, hosted by artist Susan Wachowski. Susan has her own Web site (www.paintminion.com) and has been painting for more than 15 years. She has contributed works to companies such as Dark Sword Dragons, Reaper and Thunderbolt Mountain, and has won several awards, including two gold awards at Gen Con in 1998.

In this workshop, I joined other aspiring artists to learn how to layer and feather cloaks on figurines, and ways to create a detailed, shadowing effect. Susan was quick with a paint brush and her wit, and was fun to work with. She demonstrated patience that is a must for this line of work or hobby.

For my second event, I went back to the traditional tabletop gaming world and played *Descent: Journeys into the Dark*.

This game epitomized the basic dungeon crawl, and I played a tough, armored human hero. The other three players served as a minotaur, a wizard and a stealthy warrior. We went through the dungeon using designed mazes of tiles and doors as the Game Master ran through the storyline and controlled the treasures and traps we came across, as well as the antagonists we faced. My partners were local Californians who knew each other and gamed together on a regular basis. They had played *Descent* before and were really helpful to me as the rookie. In the end, I think they were also quite thankful that I was able to hone my character as the "big monster basher" to make quite a number of kills that helped our party escape!

Weekend crowds rolled in on the second day of the convention. Strangely, this was the first gaming convention I attended where other conventions were going on at the same time in the same building. It was definitely odd seeing casually dressed gamers strolling past suit-clad executives, as there were conventions present on aerospace design, weddings and home-building.

On this second day, I joined the noncollectible gaming card crowds. Sidling away from the heavily packed *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card-gaming area, which held all the serious faces of a Las Vegas casino, I settled on a game called *Killer Bunnies and the Quest for the Magic Carrot*. This creation from Playroom Entertainment of North Hollywood has been receiving great reviews, and I knew I had to give it a go.

I joined a Playroom representative and five gamers in a basic game involving two sets of colored decks: blue and yellow. Unlike other card games, *Killer Bunnies* doesn't require you to exhaust your wallet buying cards in hopes of gaining that "super power" card that may guarantee a win. Instead, the game has boosters available via colored card sets (red, green, khaki, etc.) that only change the game's complexity rather than "munchkinning" up a player unfairly.

I was again the rookie and took the quick game in strides. The goal was to keep my bunnies alive while trying to take out the other players' bunnies and gain as many carrots as possible. In the end, only one carrot becomes the "magic carrot," and whoever owns it wins.

After the card game, I finally dove into the role-playing games with a mysteriously themed *World of Darkness* game run by White Wolf staff member Will Hindmarch. It was anyone's guess as to what we would end up playing. Perhaps it would be a vampire, a werewolf, a mage or maybe something even worse.

We all ended up playing mortals.

I ended up playing a woman who was a former thug, but who has finally seen the light. She aided another character who was a priest, while the others played cops and drug dealers. Our unusually mixed bunch teamed up to find people missing from a local town.

Throughout the twisted tale, our characters were troubled by a local drifter who demanded sanctuary in the priest's church. He also seemed to have unusual powers. It turned out he was a creature from White Wolf's latest game, *Promethean*. The promethean is a creature similar to Frankenstein's monster, a soulless corpse brought to life by an alchemical power called the Divine Fire of the gods.

With my lack of knowledge of the *Promethean* game background, I found it hard to pinpoint what it was our party was fighting, or whether the creature was working with – or against – us. Also, the mysteriousness of the promethean and his struggle against others who sought him gave us our fair share of fun and arguments. All in all it went well, although the storyline moved a bit too slowly for my interests.

The weekend rush arrived on Saturday, and I stayed in the RPG mode as I played the game *Iron Kingdoms*. This RPG by the gaming company Privateer Press puts adventurers on quests in a land once called Western Immoren, or the Thousand Cities. A long time ago, the city suffered a vicious takeover by a militant race called the Orgoth, but the citizens finally beat back the invaders after 600 years of harsh rule. The citizens renamed their lands the Iron Kingdoms, which I can best describe as unpredictable, dangerous and a place many pirates of legend would favor.

My first scenario with *Iron Kingdoms* was *Down and Out in Five Fingers*. It pitted me and five other players as fighters in the dark lands to seek out an assassin who earlier tried to murder our party. We confronted bandits, iron giants, machines and even traitors, using our wits and weapons – and the d20 gaming system – to guide us. Dan Weber, a representative for Privateer Press, was a great Game Master and was very friendly, especially when it came to me asking many questions about the rules. We all had fun with this scenario, and everyone was a winner.

Later on, I was lucky enough to be in Dan's shorter scenario called *Introduction to Iron Kingdoms*, and this time my gaming husband joined me. We played students of Corvis University who were trying to help their professor recover an artifact during an island digging expedition. We faced different enemies intent on stopping us and one player's character even died. But we finally recovered the artifact. My husband was as equally impressed at the game's ease of play, so it may be on our wish list.

On the final day of the convention, the crowds started to thin out. I continued exploring the RPG offerings and took part in White Wolf's *Exalted* game scenario, *Into the Maw*. This event made my day because I was fortunate enough to be with players who were learning the game's second edition, and they also were a bundle of laughs. As we set out on our adventure to free a prisoner from the Dragon's Maw castle, we found humor

in every role, from the book-happy scholar to the charming musician. Although our humorous moments slowed progress for the Game Master, he loved the experience nonetheless. Before the vendors, gamers and performers closed up shop for the convention, I managed to slip in one more painting session with Susan Wachowski where I focused on the painstaking details of designing hair. I admit I was frustrated after only a few minutes, but Sue continued to be a remarkably patient teacher and provided handouts to help us practice.

So now, I'm closing up my report, satisfied with Gen Con So Cal as a great mid-sized convention sure to suit your interests. I'm already planning my next gaming outing, which may take me to KublaCon in Burlingame, California, in May 2007.

Until then, have a happy holiday and keep on gaming!

Interested in Finding a Con Near You?

Keep your eyes open for Alisa Frisch's new column "Pack Your Dice Bag," first appearing in the Spring 2007 issue of the *Silven Trumpeter*!

Stylistic Divide: Open or Closed Campaigns?

by James D. Hargrove

In a hobby that appeals to as diverse a spectrum of the world's population as fantasy roleplaying does, there are as many personal stylistic preferences as there are individual hobbyists. As many of us have discovered, the chances of a game group's individual members having exactly the same stylistic preferences and working together in perfect harmony all of the time are quite slim. This can cause problems.

If you've ever visited an Internet forum dedicated to fantasy roleplaying, you've no doubt seen hundred of threads expressing disdain for "problem players" or "killer game masters." Every such thread can be traced back to a specific stylistic divide (e.g., the game master likes extremely tactical combat, while his players are more interested in narrative; some players are fixated solely on killing things and accumulating treasure, while others want to create an epic story).

The dynamic nature and widespread appeal of fantasy roleplaying as a hobby guarantees that such stylistic divides will always exist. The good news is that, by better understanding such divides, much of the potential that they have to "break" a game can be diffused before an issue arises. In this article, I examine one of our hobby's most common stylistic divides and offer some practical advice on turning a possible nuisance into a tool for better gaming.

Understanding the Basic Divide

There are two basic ways to structure an ongoing campaign in fantasy roleplaying games: one of which is best described as "open" and the other best described as

"closed." An open campaign provides a kind of "jumping-off point" for the player characters, but has no predefined story arc, background, or ultimate goal that said characters are expected to achieve. A closed campaign, on the other hand, has some or all of these features.

By design, a closed campaign is structured to empower the game master by providing a visible framework within which to play, thus alleviating the need for improvisation and significantly decreasing the amount of prep work that a game master must undertake prior to running this type of campaign. Most adventure modules epitomize the closed campaign, providing a predefined beginning, middle, and end for the adventure outlined

within their pages - a structure that PCs are assumed to work within during actual play.

An open campaign, by comparison, is structured to empower the players (i.e., those players other than the game master). By design, an open campaign provides only a starting premise (e.g., the PCs are bounty hunters, pirates, etc) or plot hook (e.g., the PCs stumble across an offer for work). In an open campaign, what the player characters do, what goals they pursue, and how their lives unfold is largely up to them - they aren't expected to work within a given framework, but to create such a framework of their own during actual play. Obviously, these two basic campaign structures are directly at odds with one another, each catering to different stylistic preferences. The proponents of closed campaigns often argue that the predefined structure frees them of a burden by providing them with a purpose, rather than forcing them to invent their own. Such folks often dismiss open campaigns as an example of "lazy" game mastering. Proponents of open campaigns, conversely, argue that a predefined story arc robs them of free choice and that an open campaign gives them a chance to interact with the world around them on their own terms. Such folks often use the term "railroading" to describe the essence of closed campaigns.

Problems Inherent to the Divide

By examining arguments, both for and against each type of campaign, the aforementioned diversity present within our hobby becomes apparent - thousands of people prefer open campaigns, while thousands of others prefer closed campaigns. Viewing either side of this stylistic divide as "bad" or "wrong" and the other as "the only right way" is what causes most of the in-game complications that arise where campaign style is concerned.

If, as a game master, you're hell bent on running a closed campaign and your players want to play in an open campaign, everybody is going to be unhappy - you because the players are going to try to deviate from your imposed structure in their pursuit of fun, and your players because you'll be doing everything in your power to steer them in a certain direction against their will. The opposite situation isn't much better as, either way, the play group and the game master are still determined to have fun at each other's expense.

Sadly, this type of situation is frighteningly common. We gamers are a stubborn sort, and once many of us get an idea in our head to do things a certain way, adapting our methods to better suit certain situations doesn't come easily. Indeed, it isn't uncommon for disgruntled game masters to simply dismiss players who have fun differently than they do as "problem players" and, conversely, it isn't uncommon for players to dismiss a game master whose ideas about fun differ from their own as a "bad" GM.

The direct consequence of such rigid absolutism where adherence to campaign structure is concerned is that, realistically, in a hobby community as diverse as ours, the odds of finding a “perfect” game group or that “holy grail of campaigns” are infinitesimally small. Chances are that, if you cling too tightly to one unwavering concept of what constitutes fun, you’ll spend most of your time looking for new games and game groups, forever chasing a thing that doesn’t exist, rather than actually playing games. More than a few hobbyists lose interest in fantasy roleplaying due to their pursuit of this endless quest.

Solutions Through a Lens of Reason

If the incredible volume of forum posts on the issue of structural stylistic divides are any indicator, it seems that most disgruntled gamers set out in search of the “perfect” game system, game master, or game group, rather than strike a compromise with their fellows in the interest of having fun. For reasons previously mentioned, most gamers who embark on this quest chase it until they burn out altogether, only achieving their goal until the next divide arises and sets them back on the road.

I’m certain that most of you are familiar with the biblical tale of baby Moses. His mother placed him in a basket and sent him floating down a river, where he was serendipitously discovered and grew up to be the savior of his people. Wait. . . wait. . . what does this have to do with roleplaying? Quite a bit, actually. The idea that a perfect solution to an individual’s problem will somehow fall into their lap if they search for it is a kind of magical thinking known as “Baby Moses Syndrome.” When taken at face value, this idea sounds obviously farfetched and unrealistic - and it is.

The downside to having an active imagination is that, as gamers, we are very susceptible to this kind of unrealistic thinking (often without realizing it). The idea that a given game system, game master, play group, or campaign will cure all of our complaints about the hobby while simultaneously fulfilling our every wish is remarkably seductive and, as such, it presents a tempting alternative to making some small personal sacrifices for the greater good. The problem, of course, is that the gamers’ “Quest for Perfection” has as its ultimate goal a completely fantastic ideal that doesn’t exist and, therefore, cannot be obtained.

The gamer who spends all of his time searching for the “perfect” game system, game master, play group, or campaign may as well be combing through the reeds of the modern Nile looking for a child savior. Ultimately, both pursuits are fruitless. Now, compare this fruitless quest to the relatively simple undertaking of discussing stylistic differences between all of the players in a given group and, subsequently, attempting to reach a compromise. Which seems more likely to produce results?

The fact is that, despite the appeal of a quest for perfection, simple communication is more likely to produce results (and it will also cost you considerably less money). You may have to make some small personal sacrifices, but that’s simply the cost of cooperating with others - the good news is that, the sooner an individual is willing to make such sacrifices, the sooner actual play can commence!

Bridging the Stylistic Divide

If you’re willing to view the divide of campaign structure through a lens of reason and accept the fact that compromise is a necessary part of any activity that involves multiple people working together in the pursuit of a common goal (in the case of roleplaying games, this goal is having fun), bridging this particular stylistic divide will be an incredibly easy undertaking for you.

First, if you’re a game master, you need to do some informal polling of your players to find out what kind of campaign they prefer (i.e., open or closed, as discussed earlier) and, if you’re a player, you need to assert yourself and let your game master know whether you prefer open or closed campaigns. If a GM doesn’t take the time to find out what his players want, and his players don’t take the time to let what they want be known, the chance that players’ personal tastes will be catered to is just next to non-existent.

After the players and the game master have discussed their personal preferences with one another, everybody needs to take a look at the big picture. It is unlikely that everybody’s personal tastes where campaign structure is concerned will mirror each other exactly; expect differences, possibly extreme differences. The importance of identifying the width and depth of the stylistic divides in the group prior to actual play cannot be understated.

Once you’ve identified everybody’s personal tastes and determined how much they differ from one another where campaign structure is concerned, it’s time to decide how you will address these differences during actual play. If it isn’t already clear by this point in time, an entirely closed or entirely open campaign will rarely (if ever) be an option. The trick isn’t deciding between the two styles in terms of absolutes, but in using both styles and determining which to place more emphasis on during actual play.

Obviously, whether your campaigns should favor a closed structure or an open structure has everything to do with your individual players, thus I can’t give you a cut and dried solution here. As a general rule, if the majority of your players favor open campaigns, then your own campaign should de-emphasize predefined structure and provide lots of opportunities for player input during actual play.

On the other hand, if your players favor closed campaigns, then your own campaign should emphasize a predefined plot and provide plenty of pre-scripted encounters for the PCs to interact with.

Now, before I go any further, note that emphasizing one type of campaign structure does not mean ignoring the other. Even if most of your players prefer one type of campaign, there will inevitably be one or more players who prefer the other type. Do not shortchange these players - they have the same right to fun as your other gamers do. Yes, this means that you’ll have to put some more work into your campaigns, ensuring that everybody (yourself included) has fun, but that’s part and parcel of being a good game master.

So, how does all of this work in actual play? How do you accommodate both styles of campaign structure? Why bother with all of this work when you can simply do what you want, as the game master? These are all good questions, and I hear them frequently. Fortunately, each of these questions has equally good answers.

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

Q: Why bother with acknowledging the players' desires, when *I'm* the GM?

A: The short answer is that if you only worry about satisfying your own personal tastes, you'll find that you will go through players very quickly. Players are after the same thing that you are (i.e., fun). Most people don't consider having somebody else boss them around (forcing them to do things that they have no desire to do) a "fun" experience.

Q: How do I incorporate elements of both open and closed campaigns in my own games?

A: The trick is to examine the individual identifying features of each campaign style (as discussed earlier). Here's a quick summation:

Closed campaigns typically have a predefined story arc, an ultimate 'end game' goal to work toward, a back story, and plenty of pre-scripted encounters. An open campaign typically consists of only a starting point (usually in the form of an event) and lots of predefined characters to interact with, though no actual planned encounters (if the PCs have an encounter with a predefined NPC, it will be because they initiate it).

How to combine these two styles of campaign has everything to do with hand picking individual elements and blending them together, placing an emphasis on those elements culled from the type of campaign that the majority of your players prefer. How well you know your players has a lot to do with how good the choices that you make will be, which is why I earlier placed an emphasis on communicating with your players prior to actual play.

Q: So, how does all of this work in actual play?

A: Well, honestly, a lot of that depends upon you as a game master. If you follow the advice herein with an eye toward recognizing the individual rights of your players to have fun, it should work out quite well for you. There will be times when not everybody is happy, but that's just part of life. If you trample over your players' interests to satisfy your own, it won't matter what style of campaign structure you focus on - your players will secretly (and, perhaps, openly) resent you.

Final Words

The most important thing that I have learned over the years is that this hobby is only as difficult as you make it. Hopefully this article offers you some insight into one of many ways to combat potential campaign implosion before it becomes a reality and, subsequently, makes your life at the game table a little bit easier. Here's to giving up the quest and getting back to the *adventure!*

James D. Hargrove is the author of Formless Collaborative Roleplaying and the free-press Core Elements roleplaying system. He resides at the foot of the Rocky Mountains and is currently running a *True20* Adventure Roleplaying campaign.

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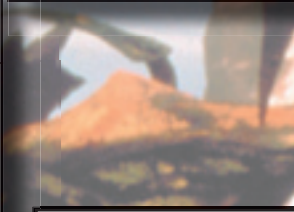
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NPCyclopedia Psionics

by Eyan Bernstein, Matthew J. Hansen and Sean Holland



All in all, this book is an excellent choice for a DM seeking to use psionics in their game. All of the psionic classes and races are used, along with other characters that are at least tangentially psionic in nature, the rules are finely tuned and presented very insightfully, and the new material is superb. NPCyclopedia: Psionics is a book where its presentation is eclipsed only by its usefulness.
Shane O'Connor - RPGnow

NPCyclopedia Psionics

by Eytan Bernstein, Matthew J. Hanson and Sean Holland

So you have purchased the Psionics Handbooks, and one of your players has decided to use a psionic class. You want psionics to be part of your world. The problem is that you use a lot of pre-made modules, and those don't include a lot of psionic characters.

Whatever your needs, if you use psionics and you use NPCs, this book is for you. NPCyclopedia: Psionics features eleven different psionic NPCs. Each contains a detailed background, adventure hooks, combat tactics, and statistics for every level from 1 to 20.

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spell bazaar

by Jeff Harkness

Class Key

Asn = Assassin
Clr = Cleric
Drd = Druid
Rgr = Ranger
Sor = Sorcerer
Wiz = Wizard



Come in, come in. Browse to your heart's content, friend, I shall stand here and await you. What? Oh, you must be wondering after my brother. He has not yet returned from traveling, but he left a note should any of his most valued customers come calling. With your leave, I shall read it for you:

"Welcome back to the Bazaar! I'm doing as I've always promised, friends, traveling our great world in search of the most precious, the most gold-worthy merchandise that will tempt your eyes and tug at your very souls!"

Ah, my brother, always with his dramatics, eh? But let me continue. "I've left my shop in my brother's capable hands in case I miss your return. Let his sure knowledge guide you to the treasures my simple shop holds! So pull out your gold, my friends, and let him ..."

I'll leave off there, friends, as my brother gets quite agitated and keeps repeating himself about your gold. But let my "capable hands" show you some of his stock and we shall talk business. And if you don't feel like buying today, then my wine shop is just there across the street. See it there? Always a happy crowd gathered out front! Perhaps I could interest you in a new sweet wine from the desert oasis Jandisa? Or a fiery brew from the Matik Crag?

But here, we'll talk spirits after business. First is this rather ordinary looking sheet of vellum. Let's see what my brother's notes say, shall we? Hmm, found in a hag's kettle, yes, yes. Stolen when he plucked out her eye. Hah! My brother, always the storyteller! I'd guess he found this old scroll "hidden" in his bed chest! But take a look for yourself and see if it interests you.

Water lash

Conjuration (creation) [Water]

Level: Sor/Wiz 2, Water 2, Drd 2

Components: V/S/M

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: See text

Target: One creature

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: Reflex half; see text

Spell Resistance: Yes

Water lash draws on liquid to create a solid strand of water that can be used as a whip or as a lifeline. The caster decides which version of the spell to cast. A sizable amount of water is required for the spell, and wizards typically cast it over a lake or ocean. A torrential downpour could also provide enough water in the atmosphere for the spell to take effect.

When used as a weapon, *water lash* strikes like a whip, dealing 1d4 points of damage per two caster levels (6d4 maximum). A ranged touch attack is needed to strike a victim with the lash, and the spell has a range of 10 feet plus 4 ft./caster level.

When used as a lifeline, *water lash* creates a strong, durable line composed of water. The lash is cast at a target – to a person swept overboard, for instance – but deals no damage with a successful ranged touch attack. Instead, the lash wraps tightly around the target and caster alike, binding them together for the duration of the spell. The spell has a range of 10 feet plus 10 ft./level when used in this fashion. Breaking the lifeline requires a Str check (DC 25), while attempting to use the *water lash* to pull either the caster or the target against their will requires an opposed Strength check. The caster may end the spell at any time.

Material components: A large amount of water, into which a knotted length of cord is dropped.

You'll take it? You are sure? I'd have thought this scroll worthless. Definitely not worth what my brother "suggests" selling it for. I'll cut that price in half for you, friends! It is the least I can do. More money left for you to celebrate with! And my bar offers the best ales you can dream of, if I may be so bold. But we can talk later of my shop.

Let's see, what's next in my brother's menagerie? Oh, this one. I'm sure I saw him dredging this one from the communal sewers the other week. He spends too much time picking up others' trash, I say. Another note? Ah, if you had known the forgeries my brother created growing up! This one reads "Drawn from runes found on the flame wizard's ceiling." Again, what a kidder!

This scrap of paper claims my brother absconded with the information after jumping from the wizard's tower into the sea. More likely he fell into the oasis and "found" this scrap after hitting his head! But let's take a look, shall we. It's always a wonder to see what my brother's fevered mind creates ...

Ash cloud

Conjuration (creation) [Fire]

Level: Sor/Wiz 4, Fire 4

Components: V/S/M

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: Short (25 ft. + 5 ft./level)

Effect: Circular cloud of ash, 20-ft. radius, 20-ft. high

Duration: 1 round/level

Saving Throw: None

Spell Resistance: No

The swirling vapors of an *ash cloud* are filled with sparking cinders and chunks of ash. In addition to obscuring sight (granting full concealment against attacks made through the cloud), the *ash cloud's* vapors burn and choke creatures caught within its confines. Each round on your turn, starting when you cast the spell, the *ash cloud* deals 1d6 points of fire damage to each creature and object within it.

The *ash cloud* moves away from the caster at 5 feet per round, moving along the surface of the ground. Large quantities of liquids (such as heavy rain) extinguish and disperse the *ash cloud* in one round. High winds or spells that create them (such as *gust of wind*) fan the flames, causing the *ash cloud* to ignite in a flash fire before dispersing. This fire cloud burns for 1 round and does 4d6 points of damage to creatures and objects within.

Material component: A pinch of magnesium dropped into a vial of water.

This one also interests you? My brother shall be most pleased. But let me offer you the same discount on this scrap as before. I don't want you overspending on obviously second-rate wares. In fact, the same bargain shall apply to all that we glance at today! And afterward, we shall retire to my wine cellar and pick out a fine vintage to please your palates. First sip is free! So put some of those coins you are saving in reserve for later, my friends!

What's next on my brother's list, hmm? Let's try this rather dirty bolt of cloth. My brother's booth has the cleanliness of a sty, sometimes. Not like my own establishment, of course. I have

invisible servants that clean every nook every minute! You'll have to visit and see for yourself! Or not, as they are invisible! Invisible? My brother did write somewhere that you are a humorless lot. But again, I'm wandering. Let's read my brother's next note, shall we?

"Dredged from the Well of Fantasies in the shadow of the Dune of Misfortune." The Dune of Misfortune? Now I know my brother's overactive imagination has taken hold. No one dares visit that haunted ground, lest of all to pull free a rotting length of cloth from the "fabled" well. But here, let not my brother's imaginings go to waste. He is always good for a laugh, I say ...

Cloud spores

Conjuration (creation)

Level: Sor/Wiz 4

Components: V/S/M

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: Medium (100 ft. + 10 ft./level)

Effect: Fog spreads in 20-ft. radius, 20-ft. high

Duration: 1 round/level

Saving Throw: Fortitude partial, see text

Spell Resistance: No

Cloud spores produces a fine mist that travels on the wind, but is filled with deadly spores of disease that infect creatures caught within it. Each round on your turn, starting when you cast the spell, any creature caught within the cloud must make a Fortitude check or suffer a virulent airborne form of filth fever. Once a victim succumbs to the disease created within a *cloud spore*, however, he cannot catch it a second time.

Cloud spores moves away from the caster at 10 feet per round, moving along the surface of the ground. Strong winds (such as that produced by the *gust of wind* spell), however, can either disperse the cloud or drive it ahead of them.

Filth fever: inhaled; DC 14; 1d3 hours incubation; damage 1d3 Dex, 1d3 Con.

Material component: A seed pod wrapped in nightshade.

Another one you want for yourselves? Good. But don't overspend yourselves, my friends. Remember all the other delights the bazaar has to offer. "Don't go wasting your coin at the first shop," as my mother would have said. Such a wise woman. She tends the bar some days in my shop, if you'd like to meet her. She'll talk your ear off, though, so be prepared to stay awhile.

But let's get this next item out of the way, so that we may go see her! What? Another note! Has my brother labeled everything within his shop? Why, he probably has a label on his coin till just to make it easier for thieves to find! Where was I? Oh, yes, this new label. "Cut from the bark of a walking tree in the Night Hedge Forest. Barely escaped the evil tree's grasp."

Walking trees? My brother is mad! Oh, how my mother shall weep! But I cannot tell her. You, though, could stop by the bar and give her this grievous news! And share a pint with her to ease her spirits. She doesn't drink that much, my friends, and I

would only charge you half price for what she did consume! But where is this bark? Oh, this thing. I'd thought to put it in the midden heap to clean up around here. Who knew it was "sellable?" Only my brother ...

Crease

Transmutation

Level: Sor/Wiz 0

Components: V/S

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: 10 ft.

Target: One object up to 1 lb.

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: Will negates (object)

Spell Resistance: Yes (object)

Crease causes papers, pages of a book, scrolls and other missives to fold sharply in half. The targeted item continues folding until the caster commands it to stop or it vanishes into nothingness. *Dispel magic* or *mending* cast before the item vanishes can halt the process. Once the spell is countered, another *mending* spell restores the item to its original shape. Wizards' spellbooks and other items use their bearer's Saves to resist this effect, so long as they are on their person at the time of casting.

You also want this one? Surely you spend too freely, friends. But let me not comment on your obviously bottomless coin purses. Let us move on quickly through the rest of my brother's wares so we can both be away from this shop as quickly as possible! I'm feeling a bit under the weather, and a good stiff drink usually picks me right up. You must join me, friends, as I hate to drink alone!

Now, let's see what next my brother has to say. "A gift from a grateful paladin after I pulled him from the fiery collapse of a haunted tower." Oh my brother and his fanciful tales! And why do towers seem to figure so often into his fictions? I think he must be making up for something lacking in his life, I do believe. He should visit me a little more often in the bar. I'm sure he'd find some companionship for those cold nights. Stop by and you'll see what I mean. But let's get this last item out of the way and we can talk about such things on the short walk across the way.

Ring of faith

Abjuration

Level: Clr 5

Components: V/S/DF

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: Touch

Effect: Creates a ring of magical energy imbued with another spell

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: None

Spell Resistance: No

Ring of faith creates a ring of magical energy that anyone can wear. The ring is imbued with the power of the caster's faith, and can be called upon for a simple boon "pre-programmed" into the ring when the spell is cast. Typical uses are to provide simple healings, a protection spell, or some other use. The spell cast into the *ring of faith* must be 3rd-level or lower. The ring counts as a standard ring, and fades if removed from the intended's finger. It fades after a day if not placed on someone's finger.

No, no, put away your coin, friend. You have bought so much today, that I do not feel right charging you anymore for my brother's obvious lies! This one is free, friends. Take it and forget about such shops as this one. Spend your coin in more well-respected establishments! Come across the street with me and we'll discuss such places over a glass. I know a carpet seller who used to work around these parts who sold the most magnificent marvels you ever laid your eyes upon. Claimed some of them could fly, too!

But I must hang the closed sign out now, friends. Would you like to follow me? No? Well, feel free to wander in later. I'm usually open late – unlike my brother who opens when he feels like it – and I'll gladly serve the lot of you. Bring your coin and your thirst and we'll talk *real* business. And remember, the Bazaar never closes!

Jeff Harkness has written or edited more than a dozen D&D adventures or sourcebooks, including Burok Torn: City Under Siege and Creature Collection: Revised for White Wolf, and Glades of Death, Eldritch Sorcery and the upcoming Splinters of Faith for Necromancer Games.

The Dacian Witch - Part I

by James Quigley

From the hill I stood upon, I could see the north banks of the Maeotis Palus and smell the fresh water that came from its shallow sea. A strong breeze chilled me to the bone as I wrapped my cloak around my large frame. My body pleaded with my mind. For a moment I remembered the hot weather I enjoyed in my boyhood years in Thamugas, one of the jewels of Numidia and, until recently, the home of my family.

I thought for a moment on the long journey that had brought me here. When I was but a toddler, my father fled Thamugas with me as the Vandals took the city to incorporate into their growing kingdom. Years later, I joined the Roman army after my father had died, leaving me without a guardian. I was a soldier with dreams of a barred homeland, but who found himself stationed at Sirmium, far to the east. I always maintained a belief that my companions and I would return to liberate those left behind in Numidia. That illusion was shattered when the Vandal king, Geiseric, sacked Rome last year and my commander disbanded his unit, telling his men to look to their families.

Maybe that was fine for the Latins and Germans among us, but for a Numidian? I couldn't go back to Thamugas unless I renounced my Roman and Christian heritage and became a servant under the rulership of the savage Vandal. With Rome sacked and its coffers empty I would not be paid if I joined another unit.

The Western Empire was in chaos, and I had no desire to remain and watch it tear itself apart. Denying my body's natural desire for warmer climes, I pushed north and east, into the strange lands I had heard but legends about. I sold my blade to men who fancied themselves great kings and chiefs, sometimes training their men, often using the sword in a more close and personal manner. I, Marcus Septimus Atellus, had become a mercenary.

Turning from the Maeotis Palus, I continued my journey to the north, into the barbaric lands spoken of by the Thracian people. It was only a matter of hours before I noticed a small village of mud huts. Unconsciously, I touched my pouch of tiny silver pellets, a gift to me for service to a minor Thracian chief. I had more than enough to purchase food and continue onwards.

My boots splashed noisily as I walked among the damp ground of the village. Wary and worn faces stared out at me from inside dark abodes as I marched past. Ignoring the attention, I approached an old woman hunched over a mortar and pestle. "Excuse me, woman," I began. "I am looking to barter for some

food." She looked at me blankly, and I decided to drop Latin for Greek, but she stared at me emotionlessly again before going back to her mortar.

Bristling at the snub, I kicked the mortar away from her hands. It cracked against the side of a nearby hut, spilling its contents into the dirt. That got a reaction from her. She stood her full height, bringing her up to my chest, and kicked at me ferociously while cursing me in a language I did not know, but in a manner that needed no translation. I laughed and unslung my shield, keeping her at bay with it as I yelled and hooted.

"Tell me, soldier. Does Rome come here to persecute the Carpi people once more," an old man asked loudly in passable Latin. He barked something in his Dacian language that I did not know. The crone sniffed loudly, turned to collect her mortar, and left, but not before leaving some spit on my boots.

Amused, I ignored the insult and turned to face the speaker. "Actually, I'm just here to buy some food and then I'll be on my way. I have no desire to stand idle here longer than necessary. My name is Atellus. How are you called?"

"I am called Coson. Come with me," the man motioned with a walking stick to a larger hut in the center of the village. We entered the dwelling, and he had me sit on a floor mat opposite his own place which was cushioned by a single tattered pillow. "We shall be attended to shortly," the old man stated. "For now, I would like to know what brings a soldier of Rome to this place."

"Rome has fallen," I informed the man. "I've become a sell sword."

"I had heard about your city, although I did not believe the rumor. Such a thing is both welcome and frightening."

"Welcome," I asked with a touch of anger. "That is my homeland of which you speak."

"Stay your hand, Roman," Coson said softly. "I speak honestly, but without malice. Until the Romans came, my people possessed a great kingdom of their own. Now, the few of us left are preyed upon by those we used to hold in contempt. Tell me, what do you think will happen to your people now that your empire has fallen?"

I opened my mouth to give a sharp retort, but our discussion was interrupted by the entrance of a beautiful young woman bearing a large jug of herbal tea and two clay mugs. How could such a sight not hold my entire attention? She possessed an innocent, happy face and long, red hair of the type I had only seen among certain rare Germanic tribes.

The rags she wore should have decreased her beauty, but they clung to her body, revealing curves that told me most of what my curious mind wanted to know about her. She noticed my look and blushed, but did not turn away from her own inspection of me in my Roman uniform.

A loud cough interrupted us. Coson said pointedly, "Dura, my daughter, thank you for bringing the tea. Please leave us, since the soldier here and I are having a rather important discussion." He punctuated his comments with a wary look in my direction.

"Yes, father," she said meekly in a sweet voice with the same accented Latin he used on her. I tried not to smirk, since I knew these two spoke out of their native tongues for my own benefit. Instead, I watched Dura walk out, smiling sweetly at me as she closed the tent.

Turning to my host, I poured myself a mug of tea. "You have a beautiful daughter, Coson."

Coson held his own mug and fidgeted with it before answering. "Yes, and if I could trust a man like yourself I would have you bring her anywhere other than this rotting village. Soldier, how many young people did you see in the village today?"

This was a surprising question, but as I thought on it I found the answer more so. "Only your daughter. After that, the youngest person I've seen was in their fortieth year, if I am any judge."

He nodded to me. "Yes, that's about right. Most of our young people have either fled or have been taken by the Lady of the Mire, an evil witch. She sings at night, enticing our young to come out and meet with her. She might not appear for months or even a year, but when she does her voice causes the old to fall tired and the young to be drawn to her unthinkingly, like moths to a flame. Our tribe was once much larger, but when the witch began her attacks families took their children into other lands: Roman, Byzantine, or Persian. Those that stayed only met with heartbreak as their offspring were stolen away while parents lay helpless."

Coson's scrawny frame belied a strength within. I watched as the clay mug in his hands shattered from his tightening grip. He looked at his hand in surprise as blood trickled from his half-closed fist. A fire lit in his eyes and, for a moment, I imagined him in his youth. He met my eyes and saw respect.

"Roman, tomorrow you will take my daughter away from here. I know not and care not where; only that it be somewhere that can be called civilization. She has remained to care for this man who has seen too many winters, but now she is the only youngster left, and the witch woman has been idle for far too long. Agree to this and we will give you as much food and supplies as you can carry.

Succeed and return here with evidence of her safety, and I will give you a small disc of gold, from back when our tribe was part of a kingdom called Dacia." With that, he stood to leave the hut. "It has become late. You may sleep in here. I will have a meal brought to you, and tomorrow you may depart."

The food was a hot vegetable stew, almost tasteless, but it did fill my stomach and created in me a desire to rest. I unfurled my bedroll and slept with my sword in hand, as has become my habit. Strangely, I dreamt of horses and of riding.

Visions of huge plains and armies of riders meeting one another with axe, spear, and bow filled my sleep. I rode among the more vicious side, a rough sort of men who killed the helpless on the field and made cups from their skulls. Entire villages were reduced to slaves and corpses and their greatest steeds ours to possess. During it all, we fought for the affection of our queen, an alabaster beauty who rode among us, her own dark clothes crimson with the life of our prey. *Come*. A voice rang in my ears, beckoning in foreign words that I somehow comprehended. *Come, young one. Dance with me. Feel young with me. Forget your worries with me.*

Dance the dance of the young, she asked of me, and I could almost hear drums in the background, and a rhythm that was both foreign, yet recognizable in the deeper parts of my soul. But I am no longer young, and I certainly no longer dance.

Rest, then. You who have grown old deserve no less than to sleep while the troubles of the world pass on. The voice was less energetic now, more soothing. The rhythm of the drums slowed, sounding almost like a lullaby. A forgotten tenseness in my body began to uncoil. And the voice sung to me, telling me it was safe to give in to peace at last, and to sleep. *Rest.*

But I am not yet old, and I cannot rest. If I could give in and rest, I would never have journeyed this far. I am Atellus the Dark, and I no longer had any desire to listen any to the witch woman's song. A presence in my mind reeled away in surprise. My thoughts cleared, enabling me to roll out of bed and onto my feet, sword in hand.

At first I felt superstitious, that the old man's tale had played upon my mind, but then I heard the voice of a woman singing in the distance. I quickly donned the most important parts of my scale mail suit, checked my sword and dagger, readied my shield, and moved outside the hut.

The village was quiet, except for the restless sleep of the elderly around me, but I could see a tall, light-skinned woman waiting on a hill beneath a bright moon. Another woman stumbled towards her, as if in a daze. I realized it was Dura who walked enthralled under the magic of that haunting song.

Angrily, I moved at an unspoken cadence and watched as the two women met, the tall one touching Dura's face and hair lovingly, then leading her to the other side of the hill. By the time I crested the hill, Dura was gone. The other woman waited patiently for me at the edge of the wooded swamp behind her. Recognizing her from my dream, I switched to a steady walk and approached.

"You come to me, but willingly," she said in Greek with surprised admiration in her voice. I became painfully aware of the well-fitting robes she wore tightly around her body. I tensed, but stood my ground as her hand came up and touched my arm. "And so strong, but so dark." She gazed at every part of me in a fascinated appraisal. "Of what people are you?"

I watched her well-proportioned body move with an arrogance and grace that was its own aphrodisiac. She looked to be slightly

older than me, perhaps in her later thirties, but her body seemed to defy the heavier gravity of age. My own curiosity aroused, I answered, "I am from Numidia, but I am a Roman."

She touched my armor and said the word slowly, as if she had never heard it before. "Ro-man." She moved her body against mine, removed my helmet, and brought her cool cheek against my own, whispering in my ear. "I need a strong warrior to keep me warm at nights, Ro-man. And I have a taste for men such as you."

I had been on the road for too long, and I opened my mouth to say words of passionate agreement. Instead, I heard myself ask, "What about the girl?"

I felt her hesitate for a brief moment, her hands stopping their examination of my arms and chest. "Forget about her," she advised, relaxing once more. She tilted her head back to look at me, her dark eyes and full lips reflecting the moonlight. "Kiss me, and forget. Be mine forever."

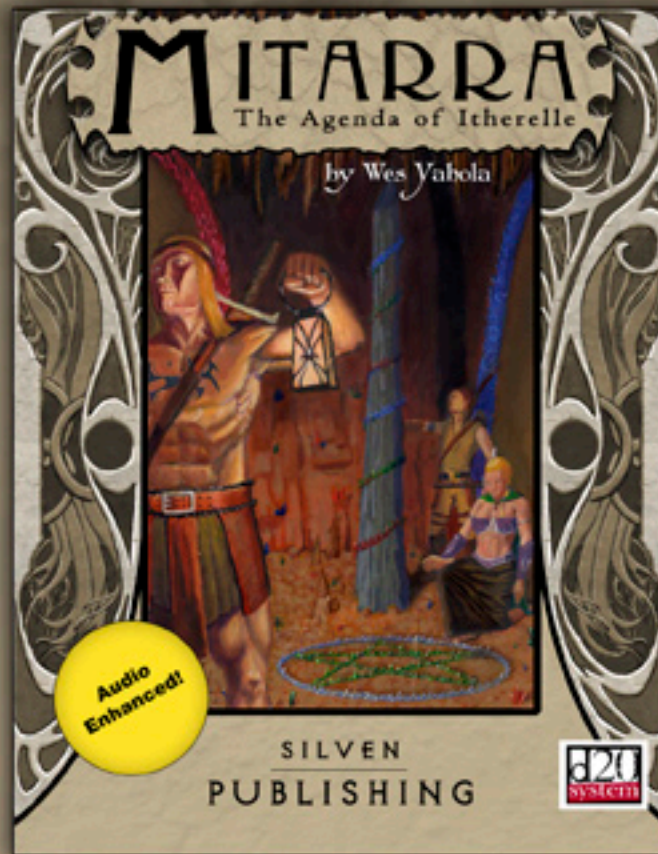
Hungrily, my head bent to meet hers, my hands held her lower back, drawing her close. She did not move, but waited for me, as if willing me to surrender to my need. I could feel her lips a bare fraction away from my own, the energy of that moment fueling a desire in me left unsatisfied for far too long. And yet I stopped, for reasons I know not. Perhaps I sensed danger in the witch's lips, or maybe it was a glimpse of shadows stirring with anticipation in the woods behind her. Or maybe, it was the morality of my mother's religious upbringing trickling once more into my life, a morality I tried to forget. My anger surged, and I gripped the woman's shoulders and pushed her from me. "Where is Dura?"

The witch looked shocked, and fidgeted with the dark hems of her clothing. "You would deny me, Madya, for that wai?" Her eyes grew colder, and somehow the space around her became darker, as she said, "Or perhaps you would prefer death in the forest over an eternity as my lover. Come then, Ro-man. Save the girl before I drink of her blood so that I may be young again. With her drained corpse I will feed the men who once shared my bed, and now guard me in eternity. They grow so very hungry, and they savor the taste of human flesh. Come with me to die. Let me taste your youth and feed your husk to my pets."

The shadows around us grew darker still as she spoke. Switching her words to a Scythian dialect unknown to me, she began to chant. I shot forward, reaching for her arm, but grasped nothing. I stumbled through the darkness, following sounds of tearing and running, but to no avail. The chanting ceased, and my surroundings became visible once more. A piece torn from Dura's rags lay on the forest ground before me. In the moonlight, I spied another piece of fabric tied to a tree branch further into the forest, creating a path for me to follow. Insects didn't chirp, or owls hoot, or rodents scurry; the only sound an echo of Madya's haunting song when the wind blew in my direction.

I unslung my shield, drew my sword, and entered the wood. What else was there left for me?

To be Continued...



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Painting the Sands Red

by William L. Christensen

After ten years spent in the cool, forested lands, Marduk had finally returned home to the desert of Uruk. It was a fair night, and moonlight glistened off the grains of sand. Marduk's heart pounded as he neared the top of the final dune. Below, hidden in the desert sands, was a lush oasis, and by rights it belonged to the Ashur, Marduk's tribe.

The suma, Marduk's giant reptilian mount, began to trot down the dune upon seeing the oasis in the valley below. The desert elves preferred the suma as mounts, and Marduk was no exception. He would take a suma in place of a horse any day.

The ground before Marduk erupted in a spray of sand, and the suma growled and reared up on its hind legs. Before Marduk stood a man clad in a desert cloak and garb, carefully colored and enchanted to match the desert sands. His keen eyes had overlooked the man as he lay in the sand, but as he stood, Marduk saw the arrow nocked and pointed at his chest. "Who are you, and what's your business here?" the man asked.

"I am Marduk, son of Zimri-Lin, son of Sargon, of the Ashur tribe. I've been away ten years to the forested lands, and am arriving home. My business is my own." The suma had stopped rearing, but continued to growl, looking longingly at the oasis.

The man put aside his bow and laughed. "Marduk! You have returned, old friend! Don't you remember me?"

Marduk walked his mount closer, and smiled as he saw the man's features. "Mishmar! Well met! It's been too long! I've brought wonders and many a tale from afar! Come, let us share some water!"

Marduk rode his suma forth into the oasis with Mishmar walking beside him. "What is it that brings you back to the tribe? We all thought that you'd left for good. What with Mara and all..."

"Do not speak of her!" Marduk interrupted. "Speak of anything else of times past, but not of her.... I didn't come to stay. I'm just passing through."

"It looks like we've drawn attention to ourselves. Lucky for you it's the night of the moon festival. On other nights the tribesmen might have greeted you with weapons rather than drink," Mishmar said.

Marduk smiled as his fingers danced upon the hilt of his scimitar. His tribesmen exchanged shocked glances and laughs upon learning of his return. "I won't be staying long," Marduk

told them, but they paid no heed, and forced drink into his hands. The only one who did not seem overjoyed at Marduk's return was the chieftain. He stared at Marduk from a distance, and then turned away without as much as a greeting, retreating to his tent.

Faces Marduk barely recognized greeted him, asked him if they remembered the time that... In most cases he didn't. Life was different then, simpler somehow. He had been a different person, merry like the elves of the forested lands. But all his love and merriment left him long ago. He left it behind with the desert, and thought that it had likely been buried beneath the sands like so many other things of times past. Truth told, it had been buried with Mara.

Marduk played along anyway. He smiled and laughed as he had done long ago, and none was the wiser. He told tales of his adventures in the forested lands, of endless expanses of water called oceans, of strange peoples and customs. He flirted with women he had flirted with in his youth, and with girls who had flowered since he'd left. And all the while he watched Mishmar do the same.

Mishmar had his eye on a young girl who had barely flowered; her name was Ishtara. Marduk remembered her as gangly, uncoordinated and accident-prone. Now she was as beautiful as the oasis, and as graceful as the flowing sands. She noticed Marduk's gaze as she talked to Mishmar, and glanced his way. She lowered her eyes in a coy fashion and smiled before looking back to Mishmar.

Finally after he had told many a tale, after the tribe had said a collective prayer to the moon god Nanna-Sin and many retired to their tents, Marduk went to see the chieftain, Zimri-Lin. His tent was set away from the rest, as if he abhorred the presence of the others. He sat near the water's bank with his back to the clan. "You have yet to greet me, father."

"You still address me as your father, so I see you have not forgotten all of your ties to the Ashur. Yet I don't recognize this man who has returned. He is my son, but he is not. Tell me, stranger, who are you?" Zimri-Lin still sat with his back to Marduk.

Marduk laughed. "I'm your son, of course! Don't talk in such a cryptic manner. We should be merry! It's Nanna-Sin's night, a night for remembrance."

"Where is your merriment? You feign it well, but I've lived longer than those you so easily charm. I'm three hundred years your elder, and know the look in your eyes. You come not out of merriment, but anger. You come to paint the sands red with blood. You've forgotten nothing, and I know what it is that you seek. It consumes you like fire." There was a pause, and the only sound was of two suma rutting nearby, their roars reaching a bestial crescendo.

Marduk drew his scimitar and walked toward Zimri-Lin. He stabbed it in the sand beside the chief, but the older man did not flinch. Marduk sat beside him. "I have forgotten all. I've

grown older and wiser with my time in the forested lands. But you're right. I do have a purpose in returning."

The chieftain glanced at his son and then back at the rutting suma. Marduk continued when his father did not speak. "I've been researching the treasure of the Seven Sages. I go tomorrow to find it, taking whoever wishes to go with me, and then I'll be gone. Perhaps I'll see you again in another ten years." Marduk stood and pulled his scimitar from the sand.

Zimri-Lin called to him as he walked away. "Let Mara's memory rest. You've made her spirit restless for long enough."

"It is not by my hand that she was made a wandering spirit! Blame her murderer, not me!" Marduk walked away without another word.

The sun had already risen, and most of the tribesmen had retired for the day. But a few still lingered, and Marduk joined them, hoping for a distraction. Mishmar and Ishtara were among them. "Your father has missed you. He wants you to lead our people when he passes. He clings to hope that you'll come back one day for good," Ishtara said.

"Then he'll die a sad old man, with unfulfilled dreams. I leave tomorrow and may not be back for some time. Maybe never."

"Were the forested lands really as beautiful as you described in your stories?" Ishtara asked.

"They are more so. Here the endless sands and heat can dull your senses and mind, but the forests never cease to amaze. Of course, there are dangers outside of the desert too, but..."

"But it is worth it," Ishtara said. Marduk nodded, looking at Mishmar. He lay on his back in the sand, staring at the fading moon.

"Mishmar, I've been meaning to ask you something," Marduk said. Mishmar rose onto his elbows and stared at Marduk. "Over the past ten years I've learned a great deal about the treasure of the Seven Sages. There's a legendary hoard under the city of Ninevah, just waiting for us to find it. I have a map. I know exactly how to get there.

I have experience looting tombs. I just need someone to help me. You were my best friend in the tribe, and I know that you wouldn't snub your nose on adventure. I'll split the treasure with you, down the middle."

Mishmar stared at Marduk, amused. Finally he burst out laughing; Marduk and Ishtara jumped. "The treasure of the Seven Sages? The forested lands have addled your brain, my friend! You know as well as I that the treasure of the Seven Sages is a myth! It's only a story to put restless children to sleep. I knew that you were a fool, Marduk, but not that much of a fool!"

"I believed it to be a fable as well, but it's not. Our ancestors had a vast empire, ruling over all of Uruk – and beyond. The Seven Sages ruled the elves as a council at the height of the empire's

glory, and were buried together. I researched it my friend, from afar! I even have a map! But, if you're not interested in gold ..."

Marduk withdrew a fair number of gold coins and other trinkets from his satchel, examining them.

"I get half," Mishmar said.

"Done. We leave at sunset, and do things as I say. You'd best be off to your tent. We have a long ride ahead of us tonight." Mishmar belched and laughed as he stumbled to his tent.

"I could go with you. I could be useful," Ishtara said.

Marduk looked her up and down. "You? You're only a girl."

Ishtara scowled and pursed her lips, and Marduk noticed again how beautiful she was. "I meant to say you are like a flower, beautiful and elegant. It wouldn't do to have you harmed on the journey. It'll be dangerous, and there's no place for a flower in a tomb."

Ishtara smiled. "I may be delicate, but I'm also deadly. I've become a sorceress, you know. Or didn't anyone tell you? I've come to take Mara's place in the tribe since she passed. Since you left."

Marduk flinched, but said nothing. Ishtara moved closer, until he felt her hot breath upon his face and lips. Her eyes were like the blackest waters, mysterious and unfathomable. Their lips met, and he explored the sweetness of her mouth, and then her neck. Ishtara broke away from the kisses, and backed up several paces. She beckoned Marduk forward, and when he did, she led him to her tent.

* * *

Marduk awoke alone that evening in Ishtara's tent. He laughed and played along with the taunts of those who noticed, but secretly he wondered where Ishtara had gone. He felt a brief tinge of disappointment, but then drove it away. "It's time to go, Mishmar. How do you feel?"

"I've never felt better. There's something about Nanna-Sin's festival that always leaves me invigorated. Wouldn't you say there's something in the otherwise dry desert air? I mean, love or something?" Marduk knew where Mishmar was going, but he refused to play along. He would have no such games on his excursion.

"It was the drink, nothing more. She'll change her mind and want you when you return a rich man. Besides, I woke up alone this evening, so she couldn't have been too in love."

Mishmar smiled. "Then let us go."

They saddled the sumas and rode into the desert, bidding a brief farewell to the collective tribe. Chief Zimri-Lin turned his back to them rather than wave with the other tribesmen. Marduk fingered his scimitar and booted the suma hard in the ribs. He wanted to reach his destination by morning. After they crossed

the first dune, they saw a suma in the distance, perched atop the next dune. "Could be bandits trying to lure us into a trap," Mishmar said. He drew his scimitar and booted his suma hard, forcing it to run faster than before.

The two neared the summit of the dune and found not a bandit, but Ishtara. Marduk grew furious. "What are you doing here? Following us?" he asked.

"It seems that you are the ones following me," Ishtara said. "I left long before the two of you, going to the city of Ninevah. You can join me if you like."

Marduk snarled. "It's dangerous for a woman to travel alone in the desert."

"Lucky for me that we share a similar destination. Otherwise it could be a dangerous trek." She smiled, and Marduk could not help but feel some of his anger flee him.

"Then stay close and do as I say. I am the leader of this expedition," Marduk said.

"You were the ones who joined me. Perhaps I should lead."

"You will do as I say or you will return to the oasis!" Marduk yelled. His anger surprised Mishmar and Ishtara. Ishtara nodded, and they rode on in silence.

Soon after, when Mishmar had dismounted his suma to relieve his bladder, Marduk rode up beside Ishtara. "I'm sorry about earlier. But you must trust my judgment, at least for tonight. For the sake of my soul. Do you trust me?" Ishtara looked at Marduk suspiciously. After a long moment, she nodded. "Good. You only need trust me awhile longer. Then you can lead all that you want."

Mishmar mounted the suma again, and the three rode on through the night until it was nearly morning. They had made their way to another oasis by pressing their sumas hard. "Why the rush, Marduk? The sumas will be little good tomorrow night. They're completely worn! You pressed them too hard," Mishmar said. Marduk sat in silence, sharpening his scimitar with a whetstone. He had not said a word since they arrived at the oasis.

"Marduk, isn't this... what are we doing here?" Ishtara asked urgently.

Marduk put away the whetstone and looked the blade over with approval. "You said that you trusted me and would continue to do so until tomorrow. Now whatever happens, you must not interfere."

"Marduk, I don't think that we're on the right track to Ninevah. I think that we turned slightly to the west somewhere along the way. This is the wrong oasis..." Mishmar stopped dead in his tracks. Marduk held his scimitar as if ready for a fight, a look of malice in his eyes.

"Don't you trust me, Mishmar? I was your best friend, and if you can't trust your best friend, who can you trust?" Marduk asked, advancing.

Mishmar backed away, toward the sumas. "Best friends have to stick together," he said, never taking his eyes off of Marduk.

"Yes. And they should tell one another the truth, whatever the cost. And best friends should never stab one another in the back. Right, old friend?"

Mishmar reached the sumas and found his scimitar on the saddle. "Never, friend. Never in the back."

"Do you know where we are, Mishmar? Do you know why I've brought you here? Do you remember what happened at this forsaken place?" Marduk asked.

"This is where Mara was murdered..." Ishtara whispered.

Marduk's keen ears heard her words. "That's right, Ishtara. This is where my wife was murdered ten years ago! This is where my world became a void, where my heart turned to ash!"

"Marduk, the sands have addled your brain. You know that Mara was murdered by cutthroats that snuck into camp. You killed them yourself, remember?" Mishmar said, taking a small knife from his saddlebag into his hand behind his back.

"Oh yes, I killed all of the cutthroats. Every last one of them. I reveled in their slaughter. I disemboweled them as would a diviner, but I was not interested in the future. I tore out their entrails for pleasure. For revenge. You said they raped and murdered Mara! You said it was the cutthroats!" Marduk yelled his words as he advanced on Mishmar. "It took my addled brain ten years to piece it together, but I figured it out. Perhaps deep down I just didn't want to believe that my best friend could do such a thing! Ten years to realize that you were the one watching Mara when the cutthroats arrived. You were the one who was jealous that she chose to marry me, not you! You took advantage of the situation, and then you raped and murdered my wife! You stole my reason for living, my very soul!"

"You stole her from me! You knew that I wanted her, that I wanted to make her my wife! You knew, and you betrayed me! Just as you betrayed me last night! You knew that I wanted Ishtara, and so you had to take her as well! You say that I am the betrayer, but you betrayed my trust long before I ever betrayed yours! And Mara... If the dead could speak, she would tell you that I gave her something that you never could. She would have married me had you not betrayed my trust, and she would have loved me like she never loved you."

Marduk rushed Mishmar, scimitar in hand. He swung out of rage in a wild, downward arc. Mishmar parried the blow and countered. He swung the sword over his head, and down at Marduk's knee. Sparks lit the night as the blades met, and Mishmar took another swing, this time at his enemy's head. Marduk ducked and thrust, catching Mishmar in the side, spilling his blood. Mishmar fell forward, onto Marduk's back.

He stabbed his knife into Marduk's shoulder and pulled the blade free to strike again. Marduk screamed in pain and pushed him away. Mishmar smiled. "You didn't have the mind to kill me then, and you don't have the strength to kill me now. This time I'll do things differently. I'll kill you instead of the woman, and win both ways."

Marduk screamed and rushed forward, driving his scimitar downward at Mishmar's skull. Mishmar blocked the blow with a laugh. "You have learned nothing of battle in your travels!"

Marduk drew his second blade, a khopesh, from his back. Mishmar's smile fled his face for a moment, but then returned as a nervous grin. He held his scimitar and dagger before him, and he and Marduk circled one another, each testing the other. Ishtara drew her own blade, but hesitated. Suddenly, Mishmar rushed Marduk, thrusting his scimitar at his enemy and driving his dagger down at Marduk's face. Marduk countered the scimitar with his own, and swung his khopesh at Mishmar's dagger.

The sword's arc caught Mishmar's wrist, cutting his hand clean off. Mishmar screamed in agony, and as the severed hand fell to the sands, Marduk brought his blade down in a circular strike, cutting into his enemy's stomach. Mishmar stared wide-eyed at the blade, and then at Marduk. Blood poured from his mouth, and Marduk pulled the curved blade upward, watching the pain on his enemy's face. Then he pulled the blade out through the side and watched Mishmar's innards spill, painting the sand red. Mishmar fell in the blood-soaked sands, a look of horror upon his face.

Marduk dropped his swords and fell to his knees. Tears came to his eyes. He felt Ishtara behind him, her hands on his shoulders, and heard her words through her tears. "I'm sorry Marduk.... I had no idea..."

"You can rest now, Mara. I've finally put you to rest..."

* * *

The next night, the two rode on to the city of Ninevah. "I still don't know why you insist on coming with me to the city," Marduk said.

"With Mishmar gone, I'm up for half of that treasure, right? The treasure of the Seven Sages?"

Marduk laughed. "That's a story, Ishtara! Told to restless children to put them to sleep! You don't truly believe that the Seven Sages were real, do you?"

Ishtara sighed. "I suppose not. But I'm still going with you. I grow tired of the nomadic life."

Marduk laughed and for the first time in ten years he felt it. "I'm glad. I would be honored to have you as a companion." The two talked through the night as they leisurely rode their sumas to Ninevah. As they traveled, Marduk ran his fingers over a rolled parchment at his side. It was a map.

Author's Bio

William L. Christensen works as a page layout designer in textbook publishing by day, and as a game designer and fiction writer by night. He particularly enjoys writing fantasy and horror, and harbors a not-so-secret passion for *Dungeons & Dragons*. William has had more than a dozen articles published in *Dragon* magazine, and is the author of many other published pieces of game design and fiction. He spends the majority of his free time with his two favorite people in the world: his wife and newborn daughter, both of whom are perfect.

Once Upon a Time in the Midwest

by J. Travis Grundon

It seems like every small town has a kid that is just a little crazy. You know the kid I'm talking about. Parents tell their children to stay away from him. He always seems to be in trouble and sometimes people are just downright scared of him. I know a thing or two about those types of people. In the town of Millersgrove, Illinois, that kid was my best friend, Jon Harris. My name is Charles Rieser and this is my story.

When I moved to Millersgrove five years ago, I didn't make friends that easily and Jon was the first person to talk to me in school. Jon was one year ahead of me in school, but he only lived a few blocks away from my house. His parents had died in a fire when he was eleven years old, so I felt sorry for him in a way. He didn't have a mom and dad like I did, so I thought it would be nice if he at least had one good friend. Things have not changed much since the 8th grade. Even now, as my senior year of high school comes to an end, Jon is pretty much my only real friend. Jon was the guy who taught me about a lot of interesting things, like pornography, Nazism, and a woman's time of the month. The scary part is, I think if I ever stopped being his friend, he would kill me.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think that Jon has ever really tried to kill me before. He may have a sick sense of humor, but there has only been a time or two where I wasn't sure if he was joking or not. The first time I remember wondering if Jon was crazy was when we went swimming at Crystal Lake with two girls from school when we were fifteen. Jon kept dunking them under the water.

He would hold them there while he tried to untie their swimsuit tops. He did this until he got Stacy Hammond's top off. He thought it would be funny to tease her with it and not give it back. He refused to give the top back to her until she showed him her chest.

Stacy was only a petite fourteen year old girl, but Jon said "Hey look, Chuck, she's stacked like a little boy!" He continued by saying, "She's a carpenter's dream: flat as a board and easy to nail."

I didn't think it was very funny. So when he wasn't watching I snatched the top from his hands and threw it back to Stacy's friend, Mandy.

When Mandy gave the top back to Stacy, Jon turned to me and shoved me under the water. Jon was stronger than me, and a much better swimmer, so he was able to hold me under. He

pulled me up one time just to laugh at me. He told me to call him God or he was going to drown me.

"Yes Jon, you're a god!" I screamed as he pulled me up again.

"No, Chuck not *a* god, the God. Tell me I'm your God and savior and your baptism will be over!" Jon growled back in a sadistic tone.

"Fine Jon, you are my God and my savior or whatever, just let go of me!" I wasn't aware how mad I had made him and I was afraid that he might really drown me.

The girls left as soon as they saw I was safe. Stacy was crying and she said that she was going to tell her parents. Jon told her that if she did she'd be sorry. I didn't know if he was serious or not, but it made me very uncomfortable.

The next day Stacy's dad came to my house and asked me about what had happened at the lake. He assured me that I was not in trouble and that the girls told him I helped them. I didn't know what to tell him. I was sure if I told him the truth, Jon would be very angry. I told him Jon was just playing around and I was sorry for the whole mess. Much to my relief he left, but he told me I would be smart to stop hanging around Jon. Stacy's dad was convinced that if I didn't I was going to get in trouble or end up dead.

I didn't think too much about what he said until after he left and I went upstairs. As I walked into my bedroom Jon jumped out from under my bed, with a huge kitchen knife. I had no idea how he got in my house. He asked me about my conversation with Stacy's dad. He seemed very worried about what I had told him. Jon made me tell him everything I had told Stacy's dad, which I did. He seemed satisfied, but before he left he told me he had some business to take care of, and it would be in my best interest to stay away from Stacy and Mandy.

"Why? I was going to ask Mandy to the fall dance." I replied.

"You don't want to go with her. She's a cow, and I see her pushing maximum density when she gets older." He said it with a laugh.

I was just going to dance with her. I hadn't planned to marry her or anything, but Jon continued to rag on her about being heavysset until he left.

The whole thing seemed weird to me and still does to this day. It was in that two-day span that I began to try to spend less time with Jon. But he always seemed to be around and he came to my house every day after school. Once I began to take note of how crazy Jon was, I wondered if his parents might have been nuts, too. I had always heard that being crazy was passed from the parents to their children, but I will never call Jon crazy again. The last time I made the mistake of calling him crazy was about a year ago when we were walking in the woods behind my house. We had been talking about all the girls we liked from our school when I mentioned Alice Stroud.

“Oh yeah, she’s hot, and she is a freak in the sack.” Jon said with an arrogant smile.

I wondered how he knew that or if he was just making things up. I had never seen them talk and I knew he hated her boyfriend. So I asked, “How would you know? She’s been dating Derek Patterson for, like, 2 years.”

“You know that bonfire when Derek got drunk and passed out in his car?” Jon asked

“Yeah, I remember, the one where you left to get some beer and never came back.” I had always wondered where he went that night, but it was not uncommon for Jon to disappear.

“Yeah, that’s the one. The reason I never came back was because I slipped a pill in Alice’s drink and took her behind the bleachers of the football field.”

I was stunned. I wasn’t for sure if he was telling the truth or if he was just trying to make himself sound cool. If he was telling the truth I was appalled that he would use a date rape drug just to score with a girl that wouldn’t give him the time of day. He had to be making this all up. Had he really drugged her, she might still have remembered it and pressed charges. He had to be lying, but there was only one way to find out.

“So if you drugged her, why didn’t she ever turn you in to the police or tell Derek?”

Jon’s face went from his usual cocky smirk to a cold stare as he said, “Because I told her when she came to that if she ever told anyone, I would kill her.”

His words sent a chill right into my soul. I didn’t know if he was telling the truth, and I had no idea how to react.

“Come on man, you know I’m just messing around. I wouldn’t do that to Alice.” Jon smiled and gave me a friendly punch in the shoulder.

“Jeez man, you really freaked me out. You know you’re crazy, right?” I said as I forced an uneasy smile.

“What did you say?” Jon asked as his smile vanished once more to give way to a furious scowl.

“I just said you freaked me out,” I replied nervously

Jon took a step toward me and pushed his chest out. His hand thrust forward and gripped tightly around my neck. I pulled at his fingers to break his hold, but he slammed the back of my head hard against a tree and screamed, “You called me a psycho?”

“What? Any... No I didn’t. I was kidding when I said you were crazy.” I stammered as I fought to break his grasp.

“You called me crazy, Charles. Nobody calls me crazy. I’m not freaking crazy!” Jon screeched as he slammed his fist into the

tree right next to my face. His face had turned a dark red and his eyes bulged like rotten fish.

“I... I’m sorry Jon. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I’ll never do it again.” I had never seen anyone overreact so much in my life, but one thing was for sure. While I may never say it aloud again, Jon was indeed a psycho.

Jon’s outbursts of rage and sick sense of humor could probably be overlooked if he didn’t have other scary personality traits. I will never understand his interest in Nazi Germany and the Aryan brotherhood. He seemed to almost find all the pain and suffering humorous, much like when he watches horror movies and roots for the killers. If there was a way to classify anything as normal, I would never say that Jon’s actions were “normal” behavior. It seemed to be more of a series of small things, like his collection of bondage pornography and newspaper clippings about serial killers, that made it easy to convince me that he was slightly twisted. While it may have been just an act for attention, that in and of itself could almost be as dangerous.

Tonight is my high school graduation, and I have already been accepted to the University of Illinois to pursue a psychology degree. I have not been able to tell Jon that I am moving out of fear he may do something to try to keep me here. Moving away may be the only chance I have to find new friends and maybe even meet a girl that will talk to me without being scared of Jon.

I found a new respect for my mom when she told me, “We knew that Jon was bad news Charles, but we had to let you find it out on your own. At your age, if we told you to stay away from him, you would have only been that more inclined to want to hang out with him.”

My dad said, “We would worry every time you left the house with him, and if we hadn’t trusted you so much we would never had allowed him in our home.”

As I drove to the high school for the graduation ceremony it occurred to me that my parents were good people. My mother was a great teacher who had taught me well and my father was a good counselor. He may have even been a factor in my choice to follow a career in psychology. A part of me worried that when I left Jon might do something to my parents to get me to come back. Jon would certainly be able to move on with his life with out me being around. Then again, aside from his morbid obsessions, I was the only thing Jon had.

I was almost to the school when a fire truck’s siren bellowed through the air, and the night sky in the neighborhood became a flashing dance of red lights. I pulled over to the side of the street to let it pass as two city police cars followed closely behind. I could smell gasoline and the smell of something burning, but it was hard to see any smoke for the tress that lined the street.

The emergency rescue workers made a left turn onto Morgan Avenue and headed in the direction of the high school. As I turned the corner, the sky was filled with the orange glow of fire combined with the flashing of red and blue lights. He had done it. Jon had set the school on fire because somehow he knew that

I was leaving and he thought that if he could keep me from graduating then he could keep me here.

The police already had the school taped off as I coasted to a stop less than a block away. I knew that if I got too close Jon would see me. He was likely to be waiting for me. I wasn't sure what he was hoping to accomplish by burning the school down. I was still going to get my diploma and leave Millersgrove to become everything Jon could never be. I was going to have a normal life.

The firemen were hard at work fighting the blaze as the police did everything they could to keep the onlookers away from the carnage. Where was I supposed to go now? I didn't see Jon anywhere and I was completely lost. Where was he? This was one of the most important days of my life and he was nowhere to be found. I had to get closer to the school and see if I could find him.

As I got out of the car, I could feel the intense heat of the burning building. I could see that the leaves on the trees at Morgan Avenue were wilting from the heat. The fire was hot enough that the police were forcing people back as far as they had parked. But still no sign of Jon.

I could see so many faces that I had seen in the halls of the high school over the past few years. Many of them watched in horror and awe, while others cried that their special night had been ruined by a psychopath. I had to chuckle a little bit as I forced my way through the herd to the front of the barricade. I had really done it. Because of me none of these people would get to have their graduation ceremony tonight and Jon would be forced to go to jail for burning the school down. I would be able to go on to the University of Illinois and have a normal life. The life I have always wanted...but something was wrong. There was still no sign of Jon.

I asked around to see if someone may have seen him. I walked over to a crowd of girls that had gone to the high school. They saw me coming, and some of them walked away. I wondered what the problem was until I noticed that one of the ones that walked away was Stacy Hammond. I quickly scanned the ones that remained, and sure enough one of them was Mandy. The others seemed to have no faces at all as I pushed my way over to them. One of the faceless girls even spoke to me, but I couldn't hear a word she said. All I could hear was the sound of my own voice as I asked her, "Have you seen Jon?"

Mandy looked afraid of something or someone. Maybe Jon had already gotten to her. Her friends with blank slates for faces seemed to be pulling her away from me, when all I wanted to know was where Jon was.

"It's a simple question, you stupid cow: where the hell is Jon?" I shouted over the roaring flames and the bustle of the ever-growing cluster of onlookers.

She began to cry as she screamed, "He's gone, Charles. He went away to college to get away from you!"

I couldn't understand what she was saying. Not so much the

words, but I couldn't understand what the hell she was talking about. I was going away to college to get away from him. I was going to have a good life. I had to know what she was talking about, but her stupid friends with their stupid faceless heads were taking her away from me and into the sea of Millersgrove rejects. The smell of gasoline nearly knocked me over as I reached out with my right hand to grab for her. I had to know what she knew. I had to know where Jon was.

I reached for her again and again as we fought through the mass of people. Then, finally I was able to reach her. I could feel her. I had a hold of her and I was going to get my answers. I had a hold of her hair and I was pulling her back towards me. She turned to face me as she sank her fingernails into my wrist. Now I had her full and undivided attention. "Where the hell is Jon, and why isn't he here!" I yelled as I pulled her closer to me.

I could feel her fighting and pulling against me, and then like a bolt of lightning her left hand shot from out of nowhere and connected with an incredible pop on my right cheek. It stung as it grew warm from the blood rising. She now had my full and undivided attention as I released my hold on her hair.

"Jon is gone, Charles. He hates you and finally got away from you." Mandy blasted, causing the majority of the crowd to turn their attention to us. "Don't you understand, everyone thinks you are a raving psycho, and how dare you speak to me after everything you've done."

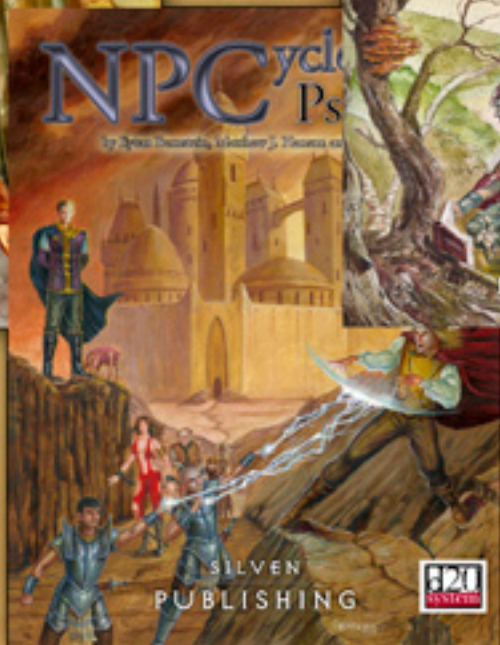
How dare she call me a raving psycho? Nobody calls me a psycho. I wanted to grab her fat little neck and snap it right then and there, but there were too many people around. I never did anything to her, Stacy, Alice, or my parents. Jon is the bad kid, not me. Where was the smell of gas coming from and where the hell was Jon?

It seemed as if the entire crowd was looking straight at me, but none of them had faces. People are supposed to have faces, and not a single one of them did. While they had no features at all like a nose, mouth, or eyes, I could still feel them looking at me. Their non-existent eyes were burning a hole right through me. The smell of gas, heat of the fire and the burning of the eyes made me feel like I was in hell, but if I was in hell Jon would be here because Jon was a bad kid. Where was Jon?

I couldn't imagine what I was going to do now that Jon was gone. First my parents left me and now Jon. Why doesn't anyone love me? Why does everyone leave me? Why do I smell like gas and why are they putting these handcuffs on me?

"I'm not the one you want! Jon is the bad kid. I just want a normal life!"

It seems like every small town has a kid that is just a little crazy. You know the kid I'm talking about. Parents tell their children to stay away from him. He always seems to be in trouble, and sometimes people are just down right scared of him. I know a thing or two about those types of people. In the town of Millersgrove, Illinois, that kid was Charles Rieser. This is my story.



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Through the Lens of History

Using History for Better Gaming

Volume II, Vision Number II: By Jove! Roman Religion and Superstition

by Sean Holland

“The thief who stole this, may you consume his blood and take it away, Lord Neptune.”

– Inscription on a Roman curse

The Roman World of the Republic and Empire was rife with gods, cults, rituals and superstitions. Few events were so unimportant that they did not need the blessing of the gods and the approval of the heavens. Seeking divine approval for actions taken – and yet to be taken – was an important part of Roman civic and personal life.

Equally, the Romans believed magic and spirits were everywhere and that everyday life was rife with tasks to avoid ill fortune and bad luck. This vision looks at how to incorporate these thoughts into play.

Part I – The History

The Romans were pragmatic in their religion, adapting (and stealing) gods, goddesses and religious artifacts from every corner of the lands they visited and conquered. This led to a gradual accumulation of cults, sects and religions in Rome. When things went wrong, the Romans were prone to look for a supernatural explanation. Often, the solution to troubles Rome suffered from required building a new temple ... and the importing of a new god or goddess to live there, thus avoiding further preternatural troubles.

Roman religion can be divided into two broad sorts, public and private.

Public religion was carried out in the many temples and shrines, visible to all. It was public in all senses of the word, performed before the people of the city in an open manner. Indeed, Roman rites were rich with ceremony and often public spectacles with parades and public feasts. The religions considered most important to the functioning – or even the survival – of the state were financed by the Roman treasury and the state sometimes approved the priests. Many Roman government officials even held roles that combined religious duties with their municipal roles. The Romans saw both as vital to the city’s success. Faith was not something to be held in secret; it was expected that people would see your worship and know you were a faithful worshipper and supporter of the city. Religion and civic duty were intertwined.

The surviving dedication of important families and individuals to repairing the temples, shrines and statues shows the public nature of religion in Rome. Supporting a temple was a sign of faith and a show of civic support for having the gods look favorably on the city and its people. Even mystery cults that performed secret rites for only its members proudly proclaimed

their memberships to the temples. Worshippers promised actions such as sacrifices or a new statue or shrine to a god in exchange for success in a particular endeavor. Usually, these promises for such things as safety on a long journey or success in a military campaign were made publicly. These pledges were expected to be kept, for supernatural reasons and because mortals could not trust a person who dared break his word to the gods.

Households practiced private religions, but even that was not private in the sense of being alone. The entire household participated in these small rituals to please the *genii* (household gods) and the family’s ancestors. Romans considered a harmonious household one that worked hand in hand in the material and the spiritual worlds. Small, daily sacrifices of food and wine (libations) were made to appease the *genii* and to make sure the spirits and small gods knew they were valuable members of the family and household community.

Worshippers also turned to the gods for justice and revenge. One way was the use of curse tablets. Ones that have been found were written on sheets of lead and sacrificed at temples and shrines. The curses called for terrible revenge against those who wronged the person making the sacrifice. Often, the person to be punished was named only by their act: “Punish the thief who took my bracelet.”

The Romans placed great store on lucky and unlucky days. They made sure to avoid the unlucky ones. In fact, one of the reasons February has twenty-eight days is that the Romans considered the entire month ill-starred. Romans even maintained lists of days on which no official business could be conducted. The Romans looked for omens in many things. Official augurs read the future in the flights of the birds; other diviners forecast the future through the entrails of sacrifices. No one was too poor to hire the services of a soothsayer to glimpse the future.

In Roman culture, faith was a civic virtue and supporting the right temples was a mark of political and religious acumen. Part of the problem Romans had with the Judians and early Christians was that they would not go along with official religious ceremonies that were as much (if not more so) displays of civil loyalty.

Overall, Romans put great store in superstition and the existence of harmful and helpful supernatural beings. Someone from such a culture would be familiar with the superstitions, even if they didn’t subscribe to the beliefs. The Romans were very pragmatic about their religion, willing to use what worked.

Part II – Breaking it Apart and Putting it Back Together

An interesting use of Roman belief would be to allow characters to “buy” favors from the gods during (or before) adventures. These come in two types. The first are situational favors.

“Lord Vulcan, master of the forge, ward me from the flames of your enemies, and I will give your temple in Ixionia a new statue!”

If so inclined, the god could protect the character with *protection from energy (fire)* as a 15th-level caster. In return, the character must provide a statue at his earliest opportunity. Such a divine gift should come only to those who have proven themselves faithful worshippers in the past. The boon should never occur more than once an adventure.

The value of the gift to the god should be at least as expensive as a scroll of the spell effect (2,250 gold in the above example). But the gods appreciate generosity – when it is directed toward them.

The second type of favor is the quest or task:

“Lady Athena, goddess of war and wisdom, guard me from harm during this war, and upon my return I will build you a new and glorious temple.”

These boons last for the duration of the quest or task. In the example, it could be a +2 deflection bonus to armor class for the duration of the war – as long as the character does not offend the goddess. It is not wise to anger those protecting you.

Such a boon obviously requires a much more valuable gift in the end. It should be twice that of a magic item that provides the same effect. In the example, the effect is the same as a *ring of protection +2*, which costs 8,000 gold. The new temple should thus be worth 16,000 gold (or more). Making such an oath publicly at the beginning of such a task allows the character to get by with spending slightly less (as much as 10 percent) as your success is based on that of the god, making both of you look good when you do well.

If you make a bargain with the gods, though, you had better keep your end of it. The god usually gives the character one warning to make good on his promise, then the curses start

flying and even other gods will not interfere. After all, if you betrayed one of them, how can they trust you now? Earning back the trust of the gods is likely to be a long and arduous task; it is best not to offend them in the first place.

Soothsayers and diviners can serve as a way for Game Masters to convey additional information, especially if characters miss an important warning. If characters resist consulting a diviner, their patron can insist on it before the characters leave on their mission.

Curse tablets are another potential plot device. If a character is guilty of a crime, he could be struck with one or more curses. While each curse could be weak in power (–1 to skill checks, –1 to saves, or so on), the cumulative effect would be to progressively weaken the character until he makes amends, either to those he has wronged or to the gods themselves.

Soothsayers and diviners should always provide cryptic information. If characters are heading to the temple of an evil serpent god and have forgotten to acquire means of neutralizing poisons, the soothsayer might say:

“Sharper than a serpent’s tooth and deadlier than its gaze, beware the cups and daggers of evil.”

This way, players get the satisfaction of figuring out what the warning means – or they ignore it at their peril. Another reason to keep warnings cryptic is to prevent characters from relying upon them. Not all soothsayers can actually see the threads of the future, after all. Some are just very good at telling people what they want to hear.

All of these things can add depth to a campaign that draws upon the Roman pantheistic tradition.

Supplemental d20 Material

New Feat

False Soothsayer [General]

You are praised as one who can see the future and advise those who wish to know their fate. However, you have no talent to see the future, just a convincing line of patter. In truth, you are nothing but a trickster.

Prerequisites: Bluff 5 ranks; Sense Motive 5 Ranks; 1 rank in Knowledge (arcana) or Knowledge (religion).

Benefit: You receive a +2 bonus on Bluff, Diplomacy and Sense Motive checks when dealing with those who think you are a soothsayer. Because of everyone telling you their problems and aspirations, you receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Gather Information and Knowledge (local) checks once you have been working as a soothsayer for a month or more in one community.

Note: If it is ever proven conclusively that you have no divinatory powers, those you have advised are likely to seek restitution or revenge.

The Silven Bestiary

Aerial Beasts

by Kyle Thompson

Death from above! You'll have PCs watching their backs and their heads with this issue's Silven Bestiary. Watch out for the skavra – their four arms can prove to be quite dangerous! The face of siege weaponry is changed in any fantasy setting with the introduction of the wing golem! It's bombs away when they fly over your castle. Watch out for the tree leapers when you're in those warmer climates, they can be quite pesky! All in this issue of the Silven Bestiary!

Skavra

Huge Monstrous Humanoid

Hit Dice: 16d8+128 (200 hp)

Initiative: -1 (Dex)

Speed: 40 feet, fly 50 feet (poor)

Armor Class: 19 (-2 size, -1 Dex, +10 natural, +2 leather armor), touch 7, flat-footed 19

Base Attack/Grapple: +16/+33

Attacks: Claw +23 melee (1d6+9) or battleaxe +24 melee (1d8+9/x3) or light crossbow +13 ranged (1d8 – 19-20/x2)

Full Attack: 4 claws +23 melee (1d6+9) or primary battleaxe +20/+15/+10/+5 melee (1d8+9/x3) and 3 battleaxes +20 melee (1d8+9/x3) or 2 claws +23 melee (1d6+9) and 2 battleaxes +20 (1d8+9/x3) or 2 light crossbows +9 ranged (1d8/19-20)

Space/Reach: 20 ft./10 ft.

Special Attacks: Trample

Special Qualities: Spell resistance 28

Saves: Fort +13, Ref +9, Will +10

Abilities: Str 28, Dex 9, Con 27, Int 8, Wis 10, Cha 10

Skills: Listen ++9, Spot +9

Feats: Cleave, Flyby Attack, Hover, Multiweapon Fighting, Power Attack

Environment: Any warm

Organization: Solitary, pair, patrol (3-10), war band (15-35 with one 3rd level fighter acting as leader)

Challenge Rating: 15

Treasure: Standard

Alignment: Usually chaotic evil

Advancement: 17-25 HD (Huge)

Level Adjustment: –

A large humanoid dives downward from the sky with four battleaxes in hand. It lands on the ground, shaking the earth beneath your feet. The creature is covered in bluish-green scales and has four arms, four eyes and a tail. Four leathery wings sprout from the creature's back. It lets out a mighty roar and moves into attack as you notice several dark shadows approaching you from the sky.

The skavra are mysterious beings that show up from time to time to pillage towns and villages. They are rarely seen, but they usually fight in groups. A solitary skavra is most likely just outside the entrance to a subterranean skavra fortress and

is acting as a sentry. Skavra do set up small tribal communities with a chief and a shaman in the lead roles of such groups. They usually build small villages and towns at the mouths of large caves and have wars with each other frequently. They do periodically unite to fight off those who would oppose them, but once the threat has ended they go back to their endless fighting.

Skavra are certainly capable of taking over cities if they are in a large enough group, but they prefer to destroy all in their paths.

The skavra are violent creatures that take much pride in their combat ability and never find themselves seeking diplomacy.

Skavra tend to live in caves near warm areas because they are cold-blooded. Therefore, while they do live in caves, they rarely journey away from the warmth of the surface and tend to live just inside the cave.

Skavra are capable of speaking common and their own language, skavran.

COMBAT

Skavra favor flyby attacks if space permits. Otherwise, they use all four of their arms with deadly efficiency. If they become surrounded, they trample their opponents if it is possible. Skavra all have a code of honor which holds them to fighting with ferocity and courage, so many will not run from a fight.

Trample: A skavra can trample small or smaller creatures for 1d8+13 points of bludgeoning damage. Trampled opponents can attempt attacks of opportunity, but these take a –4 penalty. If they do not make attacks of opportunity, trampled opponents can attempt Reflex saves (DC 27) to take half damage.

Tree Leaper

Small Magical Beast

Hit Dice: 1d10+4 (12 hp)

Initiative: +4 (Dex)

Speed: 40 feet, fly 30 feet (perfect)

Armor Class: 16 (+1 size, +4 Dex, +1 natural), touch 15, flat-footed 12

Base Attack/Grapple: +1/-5

Attacks: Bite +0 melee (1d4-2 and poison)

Full Attack: Bite +0 melee (1d4-2 and poison)

Space/Reach: 5 ft./5 ft.

Special Attacks: Poison

Special Qualities: Natural camouflage

Saves: Fort +3, Ref +6, Will -2

Abilities: Str 6, Dex 19, Con 12, Int 7, Wis 6, Cha 12

Skills: Hide +18, Listen +2, Move Silently +4, Spot -2

Feats: Toughness

Environment: Rainforests

Organization: Solitary, pair

Challenge Rating: ½

Treasure: None

Alignment: Always neutral

Advancement: 2-4 HD (Small), 5-7 HD (Medium)

Level Adjustment: –

At first you didn't notice it, but on the branch in front of you sits a small lizard. It looks at you curiously and then emits a high pitched hissing noise, baring tiny, razor-sharp fangs. The creature's color shifts as it moves, making it difficult to see. Upon closer inspection, you see that the lizard has tiny, leathery wings.

Poisonous, but not deadly, tree leapers tend to live in temperate rainforests, where they are abundant. Their name comes from the fact that they fly from tree to tree in the rainforest using their tiny wings to propel themselves through the open air.

Tree leapers do not speak, but they do hiss and emit other like noises.

COMBAT

Tree leapers do not attack unless provoked or desperate for food. Otherwise, it usually scavenges for food. Therefore, its poison is meant for defense, not offense. If fighting does occur, the tree leaper will either try to find its way out or it will poison its enemies in hopes of taking some down with it.

Natural Camouflage: Tree leapers' skin automatically changes color to adjust for their surroundings. This allows them to blend in and hide extremely well anywhere, giving them a +10 competence bonus to all Hide checks.

Poison: Bite – injury, Fortitude 12, initial and secondary damage 1d3 Str.

Wing Golem

Medium Construct

Hit Dice: 9d10 +20 (69 hp)

Initiative: +2 (Dex)

Speed: 30 feet, fly 40 feet (perfect)

Armor Class: 17 (+2 Dex, +5 natural)

Base Attack/Grapple: +6/+8

Attack: Slam +8 melee (1d4+2) or alchemist's fire +8 ranged (1d6; see PHB)

Full Attack: 2 Slams +8 melee (1d4+2) or alchemist's fire +8 ranged (1d6; see PHB)

Space/Reach: 5 ft./5 ft.

Special Attacks: Bombing run, vengeance

Special Qualities: Chest compartment, darkvision 60 ft., DR 5/magic

Saves: Fort –, Ref +5, Will +4

Abilities: Str 15, Dex 14, Con –, Int –, Wis 12, Cha 9

Skills: –

Feats: –

Environment: Any land

Organization: Solitary, pair or squadron (3-15)

Challenge Rating: 5

Treasure: Standard

Alignment: Always neutral

Advancement: 10-13 HD (Medium), 14-18 HD (Large), 19-25 HD (Huge)

Level Adjustment: –

Something nearby explodes into a ball of flame. Someone starts yelling and pointing to the sky and you look up. High above you are

several human shaped creatures with strange, flat wings sprouting from their backs. They are dropping small objects and wherever one hits, another burst of flame erupts.

Wing golems were created to fight wars. They fly over besieged cities and opposing forces, dropping their loads of alchemist's fire down upon unsuspecting enemies.

Wing golems are human in shape, with a solid, expressionless face. Their eyes are formed from precious gems, usually sapphires. Their bodies are composed completely of wood and they have short wooden wings that help them better control their flight.

A wing golem has a cavity in its chest. This cavity is almost always used to store alchemist's fire or some other volatile material. Battalions of wing golems have also been used to drop supplies into allied cities while they are under siege.

Wing golems do not speak.

COMBAT

Wing golems always try to avoid melee conflict. If they are on the ground when conflict starts they will immediately fly into the air. If flight is not an option, they will destroy as many of their opponents as possible by throwing the alchemist's fire. Then they will engage in melee or run, according to the instructions given them.

Bombing Run: This can only be done while a wing golem is in flight. Wing golems can drop whatever items they have in their chest cavity while in mid-flight. At any time during a move action, a wing golem may open its chest compartment and drop everything that is stored there. The items will fall straight down (if the golem is stationary) or in a line that follows the remainder of its move action, with each item falling randomly up to twenty feet on either side of the golem. No item will fall in the same 5 foot square if the golem is not stationary while dropping its load. The DM should randomly select where the items hit using a time-efficient method of her choice. If alchemist's fire was dropped, then calculate damage according to its entry in the PHB.

Chest Cavity: Wing golems have a compartment in their wooden chests. They can open and close this compartment at will. The compartment can be used to store varying amounts of equipment and supplies depending on the golems's size. A medium wing golem can store 10 flasks of alchemist's fire (or 10 pounds of other items) in its chest cavity. A large wing golem can store 20 flasks of alchemist's fire (or 20 pounds of other items) in its chest cavity. A huge wing golem can store 40 flasks of alchemist's fire (or 40 pounds of other items) in its chest cavity.

Vengeance: If a wing golem still has alchemist's fire in its chest compartment when it is destroyed, the golem will explode. This explosion deals fire damage and piercing damage due to the splinters of wood that fly out when the golem explodes. The size of the explosion varies depending on how many

Table 1 – Wing Golem Explosion

Number of Flasks of Alchemist's Fire Left in Chest Cavity	Blast Radius (Sphere if Wing Golem Explodes in Midair, Hemisphere if Wing Golem is on the Ground)	Damage Dealt Within Blast Radius	Reflex Save DC
1-5	5 feet	1 fire and 1 piercing	DC 15
6-10	10 feet	1d4 fire and 1 piercing	DC 16
11-15	15 feet	1d6 fire and 1d4 piercing	DC 17
16-20	20 feet	2d6 fire and 1d4 piercing	DC 18
21-25	25 feet	3d6 fire and 1d6 piercing	DC 19
26-30	30 feet	4d6 fire and 1d6 piercing	DC 20
31-35	35 feet	5d6 fire and 1d6 piercing	DC 21
36-40	40 feet	6d6 fire and 1d6 piercing	DC 22

flasks of alchemist's fire were present in the wing golem's chest cavity when it exploded. Anyone caught in the blast radius may attempt a Reflex save (DC Variable; See Table 1) to take half damage. See Table 1 for information on the explosions. Anything flammable that is caught in the blast will catch fire. Follow the rules for catching fire in the PHB.

Construction

A wing golem's body is constructed from wood, usually oak. There must be enough supply available to create the appropriate size golem (200 pounds for medium; 600 pounds for large, 1000 pounds for huge). Also required are two precious gems, usually sapphires, which are used for the golem's eyes.

A medium wing golem costs 40,000 gp to create, which includes 1,000 gp for the body. Assembling the body requires a Craft (carpentry) check (DC 14). The creator must be 14th level and able to cast arcane spells. Completing the ritual drains 1,500 XP from the creator and requires access to the *fly*, *geas/quest*, and *limited wish* spells.

A large wing golem costs 50,000 gp to create, which includes 2,000 gp for the body. Assembling the body requires a Craft (carpentry) check (DC 15). The creator must be 16th level and able to cast arcane spells. Completing the ritual drains 3,000 XP from the creator and requires access to the *fly*, *geas/quest*, and *limited wish* spells.

A huge wing golem costs 70,000 gp to create, which includes 3,000 gp for the body. Assembling the body requires a Craft (carpentry) check (DC 16). The creator must be 18th level and able to cast arcane spells. Completing the ritual drains 6,000 XP from the creator and requires access to the *fly*, *geas/quest*, and *limited wish* spells.

Canals

Waterways to Adventure by John Walsh

John Walsh lives and works in Bangkok, Thailand, with his wife and daughter. He has previously lived in Sudan, Greece, Korea, Australia, and Abu Dhabi, in addition to his native Britain. He is hoping not to have to move any more and instead have more time to write and play games.

Canals are artificial waterways that are used to join different locations to facilitate transportation and also to provide irrigation for agricultural land. Where there are canals, the land becomes more fertile and so more people want to live there. Alas, the more people that want to live near the canal, the more likely it becomes that these people will deposit their rubbish in it and pollute it.

Canals can be large and powerful waterways joining two seas or oceans, like the Panama or the Suez Canals, or they can be small and intricate networks such as those in many Chinese and East Asian cities. In Britain and some other European countries, the canals were built at the same time as the railway system and work together in an integrated transport system, with some canals being crossed by railroad bridges. Like all forms of transport, canals can represent important locations for adventurers in many different game worlds and are places where new people can be encountered, information exchanged, and goods bought and sold.

Barges and Locks

Canals are generally deep and narrow, which is the most efficient form for them to take. This means that boats using the canals also tend to be narrow, to allow others to pass alongside, and long, to enable them to carry enough cargo to make them worthwhile. Many of these boats are pulled along by horses or other pack animals onshore because canals do not follow prevailing winds and are generally too narrow to permit the use of oars. These boats, which do not have any power to move of their own, are called barges. Canal boats which have engines and motors often have them mounted on the end of long tails. In this case, moving the motor at the end of the tail allows the boat pilot to have an effective rudder in case the canal joins a wider natural waterway.

Small boats, called punts, may be moved along by using a (10 foot) long pole which is used to get a grip on the bed of the canal ahead. The punter uses the strength of his arms to haul the punt forward before lifting the pole and placing it again ahead of the punt. This method is used in the romantic settings of Oxford and Venice, where the gondoliers pole their gondolas about the ancient and beautiful cities.

Locks are devices used to counter the effect of moving up or downhill. Canals are best engineered in straight lines and on a level; however, the ground tends not to be so conveniently

arranged. Consequently, there is occasionally a need to move boats in a vertical plane. This is achieved by building a lock, which consists of a rectangular space into which the water can be admitted and also removed. To move upwards, the boat enters the dry lock and water enters from the higher end, causing the boat to float up. The opposite procedure is used to move the boat downwards. A series of locks can even be used to transport boats and their cargo over mountains, if there are enough people to build the whole system.

Unusual Canals

“Normal” canals are built on Earth on a more or less flat gradient. However, not all canals need to be “normal”; after all, people have been looking at the moon and making drawings of the canals there for many years.

The following concepts are presented here in order to give the GM some suggestions on implementing unusual canals within a science fiction or science fantasy themed campaign.

In addition to the canals on the moon, there are also the canals on Mars and the outer planets. These canals were built by an impossibly ancient alien species to help regulate the flow of the molten magma that their power plants created and utilized to heat their installations so far away from the sun. It is those same aliens who built the gigantic miles-long South American Nazca line diagrams. Interpreted properly, these diagrams would reveal the way to a neutral meeting ground where the aliens have left a message of great importance import and, also, some advice on how to organize complex societies without resorting to violence.

It has also been said that there are great stone giants in the sky, flying between the worlds and the stars. These giants are so enormous that many cities of people reside upon them and they dig out routes between their cities to creep through, since walking on the surface is dangerous. Powerful winds can cause a person outside to lose his footing and be blown off into the void and lost forever. These “people canals” are etched across the bodies of the stone giants. Legend has it that these giants can awaken from the pain and react angrily to the nuisances who have been cutting up their flesh.

Canals can channel more than just water; they can also channel time and energy. Some unknown builders have created the time canals, those routes which link the various time streams of the known universe. Most sentient creatures occupy the time stream that moves from the past to the future which travels like an arrow. This is not the only time stream that exists, however, since other creatures live in streams that move backwards, in unpredictable leaps, or not at all so far as anyone can tell. Adventurous magical engineers have managed to dig canals between these streams, which they kept secret because of the dangers inherent in allowing people free access to different ways of moving through time. Each canal is regulated by a powerful and complex lock which ensures that only one time stream is active at any one time. Lockkeepers are powerful, magically-adept creatures created out of the dark material between the stars which only the very smart or the very unlucky have ever come across.

Canal Seeds

These seeds provide inspiration for adventures and may lead into a full campaign or just be a side quest to fill a small amount of time during a session of game play. Introduce these seeds at a suitable moment and allow players to follow them up as they see fit.

Bodies

Body parts are being found in the canal, one per day. First, the left leg of what seems to have been a small boy came bobbing calmly along, then its right sided fellow. Two arms have followed in like order over the next two days. What will arrive tomorrow?

The Mail Must Get Through!

Mail barges pass up and down the canal on a daily basis, transporting vital government mail and private messages as well. Yet there are many bandits and criminals who would seek to steal this mail and they would even go so far as to drag chains across the canal to sink any barges traveling in either direction.

The Engagement Ring

A young man is distraught as his beloved fiancée has lost the diamond engagement ring he bought for her (using the better part of six months' salary to do so) in the canal. It is not entirely clear whether this was the accident the young man claims or the result of an argument between the two which climaxed with the young lady concerned removing the ring and casting it into the depths. In any case, the young man seeks help in retrieving the precious object.

Ley Lines

A strange and rather uncouth man wearing a voluminous black cape is claiming that the canal follows the course of an ancient ley line and that this will surely lead to some terrible disaster unless the canal is filled in, re-dug elsewhere, and rerouted.

The Press Gang

The army is close and rumor has it that they have been instructed to dig a new canal. Everyone knows that soldiers do not appreciate digging and would much prefer to capture some unfortunate wretches and make them do the work instead. Be careful where you go, lest the press gang get you! Worse, the army may decide to besiege the whole town and make large-scale captures.

Employment on Canals

Many people make their living from canals, ranging from those who dredge the bottoms of the canals to bring up rubbish to those who have to build them in the first place. Here are some of the people whose livelihoods depend on canals.

Builder: Canals require large amounts of labor to build. In rare cases, governments or private companies have the very large amounts of money necessary to pay people to do this work. More likely, kings and generals will use slave labor or *corvée* (unpaid state service) labor to build them. Slaves are often worked to death and certainly receive poor treatment, even if their physically demanding lifestyle means that those who survive can become quite strong and determined.

Ferryperson: Although no wider than they need to be, canals nevertheless represent physical barriers to those wishing to cross them. Expensive bridges can be built and used or temporary bridges (pontoons) can be thrown up, but where these are not available, people either swim or take a boat (unless they have magic or technology that enables them to fly or beam themselves across to the other side). At certain points, people will establish a business providing regular ferry transport from one side to the other or else to designated stopping points up or downstream. Since canals are customarily narrow, ferry boats have to be narrow if going up and downstream or short if traveling across. Since canals have mild currents, ferries do not need deep draughts or powerful rudder systems.

Fisher: Canals will either be deliberately seeded with fish to provide an additional source of protein for people living close to their banks or else fish will find their way into the system where it intersects with natural waterways. Of course, stranger creatures than fish can also inhabit canals and not all fish are tame little chaps with nothing better to do than to wait around to be caught and eaten.

Dredger: Dredgers use long poles, baskets, nets and, in the modern age, sturdy ground-raking equipment to clean up canals. This is necessary because many people seem to think it is acceptable to deposit their unwanted rubbish in canals, and this rubbish can extend to corpses and unwanted body parts.

Guard: Where there is traffic, there will be trade and where there is trade, so will there be taxes to be gathered. Armed guards (legally or illegally stationed) are given the duties of regulating the flow of traffic up and down and even across canals to keep track of who was going where and levying tolls of 1-10% on the value of merchandise carried, payable in cash, preferably. Of course, like all cash-based industries, there are many opportunities for bribery and corruption.

In addition to these individuals, there will be the usual assortment of people wanting to travel about the place including merchants and traders, tinkers, troubadours and itinerant performers, messengers, homeless and rootless people, troops being redeployed, wandering priests and monks, journalists, scientists, sightseers, secret agents, and the mentally ill.

Surion: The Dragon Blessed

A *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5 Edition* Race

by Chris McCoy

Surion is high elven for “dragon blessed.” This word came about in the early years of history after the elves built their empires. It was because of the loving bond the dragon rider Salithias Talonborn shared with his silver dragon mount Latheriasalathi that the word “surion” was first brought into existence, as his children’s children manifested abilities that were faintly reminiscent of their draconic forebears.

Handsome and charismatic, the first surions were a perfect balance of elven and draconic blood, with long elegant fingers and angular faces. It wasn’t until the fall of the elven empires that other surions were discovered, the offspring of a half dragon and other non-elven humanoids. These surions were violent, and the elven surions soon dwindled, retreating to their forest sanctuaries where most remain to this day.

Draconic blood is said to be responsible for sorcerers, and that is true to some degree. Some sorcerers actually manifest a faint draconic heritage; these sorcerers actually had a draconic ancestor somewhere in their family tree. These people are called surions, the dragon blessed. Surions are stronger and more charismatic than their peers and strive to master the blood magic that flows through their veins.

Surions are created by a half dragon and some type of humanoid mating. The draconic blood then manifests sporadically throughout the generations. One generation might have several surions, while the next has none. Draconic blood flows in a surion’s veins, and it is through this ancient heritage that true sorcery can be discovered and wielded to its fullest extent.

Personality: Most surions are very outgoing and charismatic, although they carry a touch of their draconic ancestor’s arrogance. Most see themselves as superior to those around them and use their talents to gain wealth and status and to flaunt their superiority. Surions have an almost irresistible urge to hoard treasures, friends and other valuables regardless of whether these “things” wish to be hoarded!

Physical Description: Most surions are taller and stockier than their peers. Almost all surions have some defining trait that hints at their draconic ancestry. One surion might have eyes the color of their draconic forebear, while another might have scales that shimmer in the sun. Most surions express themselves in extravagant ways and dress accordingly. A surion is almost never without jewelry or some other outward show of wealth and power. Surions can have any hair and eye color, although they sometimes tend, knowingly or unknowingly, toward the color of their draconic ancestor.

Surion Specifics

Racial traits: +2 Strength, +2 Charisma, –2 Wisdom

Surions are naturally gifted with a strong personality and sword arm. They are usually quite comely and physically stronger than their peers. Unfortunately, these gifts instill a sense of arrogance in the surion. This usually interferes with his judgment and perception of the world around him.

Size: Medium. As a medium-sized creature, surions receive no special penalties or benefits.

Speed: Surion base speed is 30 feet.

Armor: +1 natural armor bonus.

A surion’s skin is slightly tougher than other humanoids. This can be reflected by scales or simply thicker skin.

Immunity: Energy Resistance 5 toward their draconic ancestor’s elemental immunity.

Surions have a slight resistance toward the type of energy that their dragon forebears used. For example, a surion descended from a black dragon has Acid Resistance 5, while a surion with silver dragon blood in his veins has Cold Resistance 5. A surion’s resistance depends on the type of dragon in his bloodline.

Resistance: +2 vs. sleep and paralysis.

A surion has some resistance to sleep and paralysis, two things to which their draconic forebears are immune.

Skill Bonus: +2 to Search and Appraise checks.

A surion’s eyes are sharper than those of his peers. Surions also have an innate ability to find the true value in gems and other objects of wealth. This treasure-seeking instinct provides them with the abilities to better locate and determine the value of objects.

Cause Fear: Once a day, a surion can *cause fear* as a sorcerer equal to his character level. By calling on his draconic nature and personality, a surion puts forth a shard of their draconic ancestor’s frightful presence.

Darkvision, 60 ft.: Surions see well in the dark.

Languages: Surions automatically gain Common, Draconic and any racial languages. For example, a surion raised among elves receives Elven as a starting language. A gnomish surion receives Gnome in addition to Common and Draconic. Surions can take any bonus languages except secret languages such as Druidic.

Favored Class: Sorcerer.

Level Adjustment: +1

Surions are slightly more powerful than typical PHB races.

Relations: Arrogance defines most surions. For this reason, most surions are seen as haughty sorcerers who think more of themselves than anyone else. Despite this, it is a surion's personality and physical appearance that drive people to him. A surion usually gets along with most people willing to accept him for what he is and for what he is capable of. Being an understanding person helps a surion to acquire friends, regardless of race or creed. Surions seem to have a strange affinity for elves and gnomes, as both these races are heavily into the Art. As creatures of magic, they share an unspoken bond of respect and admiration.

Alignment: Surions can be of any alignment, although they sometimes have an affinity for their draconic forebear's alignment. While this often holds true, exceptions occur. Often, alignment is influenced simply by the surion's upbringing.

Religion: Most surions venerate a deity that suits the interests of them or their family. A small number of surions worship Tiamat and other draconic deities, although this is rarer than most people would suspect.

Language: Surions speak Common and Draconic. Draconic is the language of their ancestors and they have a natural inclination for it.

Names: Surion names reflect their families and upbringing. A surion raised by humans has a human name. A surion raised by dragons has a draconic name. Once again, it is the world in which the surion is raised that has the most effect on his inner sense of identity.

Adventurers: Surions make natural adventurers, as they share wanderlust and a drive to acquire wealth. Their magical powers and wealth grow through adventuring. Surions fit in well with other sorcerers and bards, as both understand the spontaneous nature of the surion's magic. All other classes usually see surions as just another sorcerer or wizard. Dragonslayers cast suspicious looks in a surion's direction, rightfully so.

Author's Bio

Chris McCoy is a veteran gamer who was exposed to the beauty of fantasy at an early age. His gateway to fantasy was C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. He has been writing since age 10. He is a freelance d20 game designer and fantasy author, and has worked for DogSoul Publishing and Goodman Games. He and his wife, Chrissy, spend their time gaming at their home in Englewood, Florida, with their group of five years, the Knights of the Patio. He is a technical sales writer who holds a degree in history. His hobbies include fencing, kendo, sword collecting, history and reading.

Up from the depths

by Jeff Harkness

Shaia bent over the rail, insides churning. Banek stood near her – not *too* near, mind you – but close enough to haul her back onto the *Sea Maven's* deck if she collapsed again. For an islander, the wizard had proven remarkably frail on the waters. The *Maven* was riding steady and sure this day; how miserable would she be if the squalls to the west caught up with them?

“By the gods, what is that smell!” Durkolt scrunched up his nose, turned away from Shaia as she was sick over the railing again. “Can we at least hang her from the stern until she’s emptied her stomach?”

Shaia spun on the warrior – or tried to. Instead, she lurched sideways, her legs wobbling out from under her. Banek caught the wizard before she fell. Her body was tensed, and Banek sensed the anger and embarrassment running through her. The sickness couldn’t quench the fires of her soul, though. “I’ll hang pieces of you from the masts if you touch me, you ...” The insult went unsaid as her eyes went wide and she turned to the rail again.

Durkolt smiled at her back. “I think I like this sickness, after all. It quiets her.” The big warrior strode confidently down the deck, chuckling. Banek was about to remind the big warrior of *his* first time aboard a ship, of the screaming and his worry that they’d need to tie the fighter to his bed, but a flash of movement halted him.

It was the annoying scroll-seller they’d picked up in the last port, homing in on Durkolt. Banek smiled inwardly. They’d been avoiding the man since the trip began, with varying degrees of success. Even with Shaia’s retching, Banek heard the merchant’s latest outrageous sales pitch begin. Durkolt glanced once over his shoulder, his smirk lost to a frown. Banek laughed.

Shaia grabbed his shoulder hard, her fingers digging into his skin and making him gasp. He flinched away, thinking she was going to be sick again. But the emotion on her pale face was far from any illness. It was fear.

“What’s wrong?” He felt it though, a crackle in the air that made the hairs on his neck stand on end. But he didn’t see a cause – yet.

Shaia did though. The wizard pointed at the churning waves along the *Maven's* hull, where prismatic shapes glided beneath the waters. They were roughly Durkolt’s size, but graceful, despite their misshapen forms. Sharp edges and odd spikes protruded from their backs and arms. Banek spied something like a shark’s fin rising from the waters on one of the creature’s backs. *Maybe they were just shadowing the ship?* Not likely.

That thought left his mind as the leader of the underwater pack clamped a barbed hand into the *Maven's* lower hull. Wood splintered, fell into the sea. The creature threw another clawed hand into the air, pulling itself from the brine. Two others followed, scrambling for purchase on the slick hull as they hauled themselves from the waters.

Banek had never before witnessed such a creature. Their bodies were multicolored, reds, oranges and yellows merging over their jagged forms. The first creature looked upward — and despite the fact that Banek could not make out any eyes, even a face — he sensed the hatred, the ill will hidden in the coral. The lead creature raised a barbed hand, its coral fingers tipped with spiral shells for fingernails. A rigid finger pointed skyward, and the other creatures raised their crudely-shaped heads to stare.

Directly at himself and Shaia.

Banek pulled Shaia off the rail just as a volley of coral barbs launched past her head, a colorful display of three-inch spikes that arced over the rail to tear at the sails far above. Spent, they clattered harmlessly to the deck behind. Seeing their prey escape, the creatures quickened their advance. Wood split and cracked as they clawed their way up the hull towards the deck.

“Durkolt! Cover!” Banek shouted, simultaneously tugging Shaia across the deck. She’d have to recover quickly — and on her own. They were about to have their hands full, and he couldn’t afford the time or energy to watch over her. He glanced at where Durkolt had stood, was glad to see the warrior already pulling out his sword and pushing the scroll-seller behind a stack of crates lashed to the deck. They’d worked together for so long now, trusted one another so implicitly, that Durkolt instantly sprang into action at the first word of warning. He’d ask why later, after the threat was vanquished.

A clatter on the deck told Banek that the first creature was aboard. He pulled hard on Shaia, throwing himself and the struggling wizard around a crate. A series of thunks against the wood followed them, and a dozen or so sharpened coral barbs stuck hard in the mast behind them. Banek found himself crouched beside the merchant.

Who still wouldn’t shut up. Or stop selling.

“Friends, friends, I thank you for saving my miserable life! I’m a simple traveler – and businessman! – plying these rough seas in search of miracles. I can show you some of the things I’ve acquired if you are so inclined? A few pieces of gold might persuade me to forget the promises I’ve made on these delicate scrolls and such ...” He stood to better get at a pouch slung low around his waist.

Durkolt grabbed the scroll-seller instantly, pulling him down as another spray of coral barbs ripped through the air. Banek wasn’t sure he’d have done the same with the talkative nuisance. But the rescue hadn’t even fazed the merchant.

“Yes, well, I can show you my wares later. Perhaps you’d like to hear of my travels thus far, eh? Perhaps buy a souvenir I’ve

picked up?” The seller’s eye lighted on a red coral spike jutting from a crate, and he plucked hard until it fell free into his hand. Banek caught a glimpse of papers and scroll cases nestled in pouches as the scroll-seller tucked it away for safe-keeping. “Now, we can do business just as easily here as before. I’ve plenty of trinkets to draw a lady’s eye, I must say. Makes them sparkle like gleaming gold. You do have gold, correct?”

“Shut him up so I can concentrate!” Shaia crouched near the edge of the crates, her hand pressed against her forehead. Beads of sweat sprinkled her brow, and her arm trembled as she focused. Finally, her eyes fluttered open, and Banek wondered if this might be another blast of magical fire Shaia seemed to favor. He hoped she’d remember they were on the Sea Maven, and that land was a long way off.

Magical energies gathered around Shaia’s palm as she raised it around the edge of the crate. She spoke one word ... and then screamed. Her hand swung back, a jagged shard of coral punched through her palm. Shaia screamed again, the magical energies wisping away. Banek pulled the wizard around behind him as another volley of coral shards splintered the crate near her.

Durkolt tapped his shoulder, motioned with his head. “How many?” Banek realized then that the warrior hadn’t seen the coral creatures, didn’t know what they were up against. He’d been too busy pulling the scroll-seller to safety. Banek thought back to the glimpse he’d gotten as they’d scrambled up the hull.

“I counted three. Coral creatures from the sea. About your size.” He didn’t add that there might be more by now, that he’d been too busy dragging Shaia away from the coral barbs raining down around them.

Durkolt nodded, sizing up the odds. “We rush them. I’ve crushed coral in my hands. We’ll do the same to these things.” He nodded with each sentence, and Banek had the feeling the warrior was convincing himself as much as the rest of them. He looked at Banek, lifted his sword before his face and smiled. “If they break like coral, maybe I won’t even need this.”

Banek smiled back at the warrior, mentally preparing himself. Could this be the end? They’d crossed continents chasing the necromancer Krallis, beaten the odds perhaps one too many times.

No. Not yet. Not while they could still fight.

Banek rose from his crouch at the same time Durkolt flung himself around the opposite side of the crate. The coral creatures were already on deck, two moving toward the front of the *Maven*, one advancing on Durkolt’s side of the crate. The sudden attack caught the creatures off guard, the one closest to Durkolt jolting backward as the warrior rose up in front of it.

Durkolt took the creature’s hesitation in stride, swinging his blade in a descending arc. The blade caught the coral monstrosity in the right shoulder, chipping and breaking the coral barbs thrust from its body. Durkolt let gravity pull the

blade through the swing, and the sharpened steel did the trick. The creature’s right arm dropped to the deck, the coral already growing dull.

And then things went wrong.

The coral being didn’t flinch, didn’t fall away screaming as Banek had expected. The thief had been ready to hurl a dagger and finish it off, but the coral creature still stood. The thing’s remaining hand swung upward, then — tipped with talons of coral barbs — and caught Durkolt in the chest. The warrior reeled back, falling behind the crate out of sight. Banek couldn’t tell if he still lived.

And then all three creatures turned toward him, separating him from the crates hiding his friends. Banek felt the rail close behind him, wondered briefly if he might survive a plunge into the sea. No. He’d face these things before he risked certain death in the ocean’s deep. Durkolt had hurt one of the creatures, taken its arm. Maybe he could do the same. He raised his daggers toward the advancing trio. “Come on, then!”

Six coral arms rose against him. *Six? Durkolt hurt one, didn’t he?* Banek glanced to the deck. The arm still lay on the deck where it had fallen after Durkolt’s attack. He raised his eyes, and realized his mistake. One of the creatures had an arm that was smaller, lacked fingers. But even as he watched the coral shifted down from the shoulder, reknitting itself into a new wrist, a new palm.

Despair washed over Banek as he watched the creature’s coral body repair itself. How did you stop such a thing? He’d probably never know. He’d likely end up in the sea after all, thrown overboard when the barbs pierced his body. He’d been worried about Durkolt before, hadn’t even considered that this might be *his* last fight.

The world exploded in a resonating agony that forced Banek to drop his blades and cover his ears.

The blast came from behind the creatures, a tidal wave of sound that lifted them off their feet and flung them forward against the rail. Their coral bodies disintegrated under the noise, splintering and falling to the deck before the sound carried the pieces into the sea. If Banek hadn’t been pushed against the rail already, he’d likely have been lifted and thrown by the force of the still-ringing sound.

Banek turned, saw the merchant with a scroll raised in one hand. Tendrils of smoke wafted about his body, drifting in the sea breeze. He raised his head and his eyes glowed red, fading quick to a dull black. The scroll-seller smiled, his normal focused stare returning to his face. Behind the old man Banek saw Shaia rise up, her hand already bandaged. Durkolt leaned heavily against her, his chest bloody from the coral talons that had raked his flesh.

“Fah. Evil creatures! And they surely weren’t going to buy anything, were they?” The scroll-seller wiped his hands on his robes decisively. “Now, could I perhaps interest you in a trinket or two...?”

Banek, Durkolt and Shaia looked at each other. For the whole trip they'd been turning away the merchant, but none had that urge this time.

"Then let me show you what I kept hidden from our other travelers until I met just the right buyers. You do have gold, correct? Good, then this little item ..."

And their quest continued.

Coral Scion

Medium Aberration (Aquatic)

Hit Dice: 6d8+12 (39 hp)

Initiative: +4 (Dex)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares), Swim 40 ft. (8 squares)

Armor Class: 17 (+4 Dex, +3 natural), touch 14, flat-footed 13

Base Attack/Grapple: +4/+7

Attack: Coral barbs +8 ranged (1d6+4/19-20) or Slam +2 melee (1d8+3)

Full Attack: Coral barbs +8 ranged (1d6+4/19-20) Slam +2 melee (1d8+3)

Space/Reach: 5 ft./5 ft.

Special Attacks: Coral barbs

Special Qualities: Immune to disease, charm and mind-affecting spells; regeneration 2/5 (see text)

Saves: Fort +4, Ref +6, Will +5

Abilities: Str 17, Dex 18, Con 14, Int 11, Wis 10, Cha 16

Skills: Climb +10, Jump +10, Listen +7, Spot +8, Swim +20*

Feats: Cleave, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (coral barbs)

Environment: Underwater

Organization: Solitary or Reef (2-5)

Challenge Rating: 8

Treasure: Normal

Alignment: Always chaotic evil

Advancement: 7-12 (Medium); 13-18 (Large)

Level Adjustment: —

Coral scions are layers of living coral that maintain a humanoid shape. Spikes of sharpened coral rise off their bodies, the shadows beneath these projections giving the illusion of facial

features. The creatures have no eyes, mouths or ears, and their "brains" are a hive mind comprised of millions of tiny coral building creatures that inhabit their bodies. Coral scions move effortlessly through the water, although their open coral body structure would seem to inhibit this. Scions can move freely outside the water, but avoid doing so for long periods (more than an hour), because their coral forms become brittle and begin to break apart, while the miniscule creatures that live within them begin to die.

Combat

Coral scions attack using sharpened coral appendages making up their bodies. They also hurl three-inch coral barbs to "soften up" opponents before attacking.

Coral barbs (Ex): A coral scion propels a volley of four coral barbs from its body as a standard action (make an attack roll for each barb). The attack has a range of 60 feet with no range increment. All targets must be within 10 feet of each other. A coral scion can launch only 40 barbs a day.

Immunities (Sp): Coral scions lack eyes, ears and mouths, and are highly resistant to disease. Their hive minds (created from the many millions of tiny coral-building creatures that inhabit their bodies) make them immune to charm and mind-affecting spells.

Racial bonus: Coral scions get a +10 racial bonus to Swim checks.

Regeneration (Ex): A coral scion slowly heals its wounds as the coral on its body grows, but the process varies depending on its surroundings. When in the open air, a coral scion heals slowly (regeneration 2). In the water, the process accelerates (regeneration 5).

Author's Bio

Jeff Harkness has written or edited more than a dozen D&D adventures or sourcebooks, including *Burok Torn: City Under Siege* and *Creature Collection Revised* for White Wolf, and *Glades of Death*, *Eldritch Sorcery* and the upcoming *Splinters of Faith* for Necromancer Games.

Light on Rules, Big on Flavor

by Michael Fiegel

Introduction

Rules-light RPGs (RLRPGs) are roleplaying games that don't have many rules. This does **not** mean games that simply have lots of rules that are made up on the fly, (like Calvinball, the made-up game in the *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip). In the words of Robert Fisher, a gamer and blogger who's written extensively on "Old School" D&D:

*"Rules light does not mean rules heavy but with only a few rules being written & the judge making up the rest ad hoc... The crucial difference of [rules] light play versus rules heavy, however, is that there are fewer rules! The point is that **there are many situations that simply do not need rules.**"*

– From http://robert.infogami.com/On_rules_light (emphasis mine)

This may seem an obvious point, but it's a crucial distinction. Poke about on Internet forums and you're bound to find groups discussing how one can turn the rules-heavy D&D 3.5e into a more rules-light game by replacing the spell memorization rules with some sort of spell point system. This has naught to do with rules-light gaming; replacing one rule with another (albeit simpler) rule, or making a rule up on the fly, does not an RLRPG make. It is the absence of many rules that defines a true RLRPG, and the addition of many rules that turns an RPG into a rules-heavy RPG (RHRPG).

One Game to Rule Them All

Since most readers will be familiar with *Dungeons & Dragons* (a game with over 20 million players, \$1 billion in revenue and 50% of the RPG market share), a quick overview of its history will serve as a good means of understanding the distinction between rules-heavy and rules-light. The original version of *Dungeons & Dragons* (often referred to as OD&D) was published in 1974 as a boxed set of three 6"x9" booklets. For various reasons, the game split in 1977 into D&D (often called Basic D&D) and Advanced D&D (AD&D).

Basic D&D (referred to just as D&D) was initially published as a series of softbound, boxed sets, beginning with a full-size (8.5"x11") edition in 1977 and a revised "red cover" edition in 1981. The Basic rules remained relatively rules-light, but were supplemented with further box sets (Expert, Companion, Master and Immortal), which added additional spells, monsters and levels. In 1991, the rules were again revised and collated into a single hardcover book, the *D&D Cyclopedia*. Several "introductory" boxed versions continued to be published, but ultimately the Basic game was discontinued in 2000.

Unlike its more rules-light cousin, the much more rules-heavy AD&D was published in hardcover format from the start, with

the first edition of the game establishing the "triad" of core rulebooks (the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*, released between 1977 and 1979), though these were much more slender than their current incarnations. In 1989, a major revision to the rules took place (removing "satanic" references, redefining alignment, introducing THACO, etc.), with the result being AD&D 2nd Edition. In 1995, the rules were slightly revised again (though the edition number was not incremented), and in 2000 the Basic D&D name and the AD&D rules were melded into D&D 3rd Edition, the basis of which was the d20 engine. Three years later, a slightly revised version called D&D 3.5e was released.

In 2000, much of the d20 engine (lacking things like character creation and advancement rules) was released as a System Reference Document (SRD) under the Open Gaming License (OGL) allowing publishers to produce material that used the same game engine as D&D 3e. However, even before that time, game designers had been using the core game engine in other ways. Aside from the dozens of officially licensed D&D computer games, there are countless other games that rely on the same basic mechanics (class, damage, hit points, armor class, etc.), from text-based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) to MMORPGs like *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*.

Speaking of the d20 system in 2002, Wizards of the Coast's then Vice-President of RPGs, Ryan Dancey, said the following:

"The idea is to abstract the "game" inside Dungeons & Dragons and reduce it to a genre-neutral set of concepts and rules. Then, we'll layer on a thick helping of D&D-type fantasy elements, like the standard D&D classes, races, spells, and monsters... Jon Tweet feels that a very strong "rules light" version of D&D could easily be constructed from the existing manuscript; being completely compatible with but just smaller in scope and application than the full blown 3rd Edition D&D rules."

– From <http://www.wizards.com/dnd/article.asp?x=dnd/md/md20020228e> (emphasis mine)

Dancey's assertion is interesting when one considers that D&D had its roots in a comparatively rules-light game. The current incarnation has over a dozen character classes, nine alignments, hundreds of spells, and long lists of skills, feats, weapons and game mechanics. By way of comparison, the original game had only a handful of classes, three alignments, no skills or feats, far fewer spells, and only four basic categories of weapons (broken down by whether they did d4, d6, d8 or d10 damage). Comparing D&D now and then, it's strange to consider that *Tunnels & Trolls* was released in 1975 because D&D was too rules-heavy!

At least two recent offspring have seemingly fulfilled the prophecy of a "rules-light" D&D based on the d20 rules.

Green Ronin Publishing (<http://www.greenronin.com>) has released the *True20* game system (<http://www.true20.com>), a simplification of the d20 system that came out of the romantic *Blue Rose* RPG. Requiring only a single 20-sided die to play, it removes the need to keep track of hit points and experience

points, reduces the number of character classes to three (Warrior, Adept and Expert), and combines spells and feats. Steve Kenson of Green Ronin gave a more specific example of the difference between d20 and True20:

“In d20, high level characters have large numbers of hit points, and fairly large damage values to compensate (although that varies from character to character). In True20, damage capacity (Toughness) and the ability to deal damage remain fairly static, increasing only slightly with level, whereas combat skill does increase. So, apart from different modifiers, high level True20 combat plays essentially the same as low-level, whereas in d20 high-level play involves more dice for damage and keeping track of larger numbers of hit points.”

– From an email exchange

Notably, Kenson added that he did not think of True20 as “rules-light,” but rather as “rules-medium,” being “not as complex as D&D 3.5 or a number of other systems, but also not as light as, say, *Fudge*, *Risus*, or other truly light RPGs.” He also said that True20’s design aesthetic was “less a nostalgic move towards old school D&D (like *Castles & Crusades* was), and more an effort to take a few innovations... and move the system forward, while stripping out much of its tactical baggage and complexity.” Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that a bit of nostalgia has crept in: forthcoming (as of this writing) is a planned *True20 Pocket Player’s Guide*, a 160-page 6”x9” softcover booklet seemingly in the tradition of the original D&D books from 1974.

Even more of a throwback to D&D days gone by is *OSRIC* (<http://www.knights-n-knaves.com/osric/>), or *Old School Reference & Index Compilation*. This open gaming platform is designed to allow publishers to recreate the experience of AD&D 1st Edition from the late 1970s using SRD content from within the d20 OGL. While it hardly qualifies as rules-light compared to something like Basic D&D, it’s definitely a lighter alternative to D&D 3.5e.

Also worthy of note here is *Legendary Adventures*, a rules-light game by Gary Gygax, one of the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*. In a Gamasutra interview, he mentions some of the basic design principles of his new game, many of which mirror the original, simple design aesthetic of Basic D&D:

“The LA game system is rules-light, uses a skill-bundle basis and offers players the opportunity to create virtually any sort of Avatar they desire. There are “Orders” reflecting archetypes, or the player can select Abilities (skill bundles) as desired to get a very unique character. Mechanics are easy and straightforward. In all the game allows play of any sort desired, with emphasis on the role-play involved, not the rules. That makes it fun to GM and to play.”

– From http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20021101/smith_pfv.htm

What It Means to be Light

If “rules-lighter” doesn’t necessarily mean “rules-light,” then how does one tell the difference between a true RL RPG and an RHRPG? Here are a few key differences:

- **Long lists.** Rules-heavy games will devote many pages to listing specific spells you can cast, weapons you can carry, skills you can possess, and character roles you can play, whereas true rules-light games will keep such lists small, or omit them altogether in favor of player-defined roles and abilities.

- **Alignment systems.** The lack of an alignment system (e.g., lawful good, chaotic evil, etc.) in a game does not necessarily mean it’s rules-light, but its presence is a pretty good indication that specific rules mechanics are being applied to the behavior of characters, which is often *verboten* in rules-light games.

- **Numerology.** Rules-heavy games generally stick with the tradition of describing a character’s talents and capabilities primarily through numbers: 5th Level, 18 Strength, 50 Hit Points. Rules-light games have a tendency to use words, phrases or even entire paragraphs to narratively describe characters.

- **Multiple books.** Rules-heavy games often have more rules than will fit into one book, spanning several books totaling in the thousands of pages, and featuring additional supplements (often called Splatbooks) to further define additional rules mechanics. Rules-light games are (generally) self-contained in a single, often sub-100-page book or PDF. “[Green Ronin] didn’t want to ask buyers of the game to go out and buy three big hardback D&D books and learn how to play D&D,” said Steve Kenson of Green Ronin’s True20 system. “Instead, they wanted a complete, all-in-one game system customized to the setting and the genre.”

- **Character Sheets.** Character sheets in rules-heavy games generally take up at least the front and back of a standard 8.5”x11” sheet of paper, and often span multiple pages. Rules-light game characters can often fit on one side of a sheet of paper, and in extreme examples can even be written on 3”x5” index card, or a business card.

- **A Lite Alternative.** Rules-heavy games often have a “lite” version available; *GURPS* has the free *GURPS Lite*, and Green Ronin of course has a lighter version of the d20 engine called *True20*. For obvious reasons, rules-light games don’t need a “lite” version.

- **“Crunch” vs. “fluff.”** Rules-light games might weigh in at over 400 pages, but the bulk of that is generally taken up by setting (fluff) rather than rules (crunch); rules-heavy games often devote more than 50% of their content to “crunch,” mingle the two (long lists of setting-specific skills or feats filled with rules), or apply only a thin veneer of setting to an entire book of rules.

Defined by the aforementioned criteria, examples of RHRPGs would include *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5e*, *Exalted*, *The World of Darkness* books, *GURPS*, *HERO*, and the like. The prime example of a rules-heavy game book is certainly the *D&D 3.5e Player’s Handbook*, which contains only a few generic fantasy trappings atop the core d20 game engine, possesses an alignment system, and consists of many lists of races, classes, skills, feats and spells. Players are encouraged to consult the book not just

during character creation, but during the course of gameplay, in order to look up spells and specific rules mechanics that apply to the game's ubiquitous combat scenarios. Furthermore, gaming groups are encouraged to purchase the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, the *Monster Manual*, and any number of modules and guides to further enhance the experience.

On the flipside, an example of a rules-light game is *Truth & Justice*, a superhero game from Atomic Sock Monkey Press (<http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com>). The game's PDQ (Prose Descriptive Quality) engine uses short phrases and descriptors for characters (e.g., Good [+2] Stage Magician), and eschews specific lists of classes, alignments, powers, skills and equipment, instead encouraging the player and GM to work together to define the character's capabilities. The bulk of the single rulebook is devoted to describing the setting, scenarios, and the philosophy behind superhero comics and games.

Worth noting is that another common feature of many (but not all) RLRPGs is that they tend towards the comedic end of the spectrum, with light subject matter and situations. *Risus* creator S. John Ross explained that this might be due to the fact that "comedy game design carries with it a kind of 'permission' to relax and defy more of the traditions." He continued:

"I don't fancy myself a 'rules light' kind of guy, although I'm definitely a comedy gamer (and comedy RPG designer) and there's often overlap. If you look carefully you'll find that a good many of the conventions of rules light gaming can be traced back to some comedy title or another."

– From an email exchange

Indeed, 1984's *Toon*, 1987's *Teenagers From Outer Space*, and 1991's *Tales From the Floating Vagabond* are all comedy games that are also rules-light by any definition, not to mention proof that RLRPGs are **not** a new phenomenon by any stretch of the imagination. Indeed, one might say that RLRPGs have been around since the industry first began; *Tunnels & Trolls* was published in 1975 by Ken St. Andre to provide a less complex alternative to a comparatively "rules-heavy" RPG – the original *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Friends, They May Think It's a Movement

If you ask Arlo Guthrie, it takes about fifty people a day to make a movement (at least when it comes to singing a bar of *Alice's Restaurant*). And by that definition, the increased prevalence of RLRPGs is certainly a movement. But is it a popular movement, or merely a prevalent one?

Prevalence (perhaps not entirely inappropriately) is generally used to refer to the number of incidences of a disease in the general population. Something that is prevalent is generally widespread, noticeable and capable of being picked up by just about anyone. But prevalence does not imply popularity, which necessarily implies a preference for that which is prevalent. Certainly, RLRPGs have the perception of popularity on the internet, where discussions of "fan favorites" on forums like ENWorld.org, RPG.Net and The Forge (www.Indie-rpgs.com) generally tend to involve independently produced "critical

darlings" such as *Dogs in the Vineyard*, *Truth & Justice*, and *Spirit of the Century*. The net result is that a relatively small number of fans can make it seem as if a game is much more popular than it really is, simply by virtue of prevalence.

There are an assortment of reasons for the increased prevalence of RLRPGs in recent years:

1. **Cost.** Rules-light games tend to be smaller in size, and produced by smaller companies or individuals. This means there's less cost to produce the game, and that's often passed on to the consumer, resulting in lower prices for PDFs. In addition, the increased prevalence of Print-on-Demand services like Lulu.com means that indie publishers and individuals can put out print versions of their games without large up-front costs for printing, distribution, warehousing, etc. The net result is that there are more small, rules-light games than there used to be, and they are available at a lower cost, which entices more people to try them out, which in turn entices the publishers to put out more product.

One offshoot of this trend is that the core game engine for rules-light games is often free. Fred Hicks of Evil Hat Games thinks game companies should definitely be giving away their systems:

"When it comes right down to it, I think most game companies should be offering their systems up for free – it lowers the resistance to people getting started on it, and that means more people playing it. More people means more word-of-mouth advertising, which is priced at a pretty affordable rate. If you want to charge for something, charge it for add-ons – settings, "advanced rules," whatever. But you've got to build on a solid and readily available core."

– From http://www.rpgblog.org/rpg_blog/2005/05/the_fate_interv.html

2. **Ease of Distribution.** RPGNow and DriveThruRPG (which have recently merged) as well as e23, Paypal, Lulu and other websites have made it possible for Indie publishers of rules-light games to get them to market. As little as five or six years ago, just a few distributors and publishers maintained a pretty tight grip on the market. Many game stores were unwilling to try new products, and most distributors weren't willing to handle a game that didn't have at least a few books in the line, guaranteeing a larger source of revenue. More books means more rules. With Internet distribution (and the aforementioned POD services), it's possible to produce one-shot rules-light games that simply would never have been published or distributed a half-decade ago.

3. **Small Learning Curve.** Rules-light games are necessarily easier to learn than rules-heavy games; it's like the difference between learning to play Tic-Tac-Toe and Chess; one you can learn in a few minutes, and the other takes much, much more time, and many years to master. The simple learning curve for rules-light games means that they're more appealing to both the casual gamer and the seasoned vet looking for a new game to play as a one-shot in-between longer sessions of a more rules-heavy game. Furthermore, the adaptability of many of these

systems (such as PDQ, FUDGE/FATE and *Risus*) also means that they can be used again and again to play many different sorts of games, in different genres, without having to learn an entirely new system each time.

4. **Nostalgia.** Older gamers (myself included) grew up with D&D or AD&D 1st Edition, and recall fondly the relative simplicity of the game mechanics. Revamps of the d20 system like True20 and OSRIC (to say nothing of nostalgia-inducing products like Goodman Games' *Dungeon Crawl Classics* modules) are evidence enough that there's a desire for some to find the one thing that newer, bigger versions of game systems can never offer – simplicity.

5. **Role, not Rules.** RLRPGs are often more character-focused and narrative driven, which means that they're more accessible to a greater number of people, including non-gamers. Rules-heavy games are often driven by mechanics, whereas rules-light games are story-driven, attracting people who want to take part in the fantasy without the investment of learning a lot of extra rules.

Heavy, Dude.

None of this is meant to say that rules-heavy games have no value or appeal at all; quite the contrary. Sales of any Indie RPG are almost always counted in the hundreds of copies over the lifespan of a game, and a game that breaks a thousand in a single year is generally an immense success. Compared to the hundreds of thousands of copies of the D&D 3.5e PHB in circulation, it's the sort of success that has to be taken with a rather large grain of salt. There can be no doubt that the "big sellers" in the RPG world are of the rules-heavy sort. Wizards of the Coast and White Wolf probably sell more copies of D&D and the World of Darkness games (respectively) than all other games combined, including the very small subset of those that can be called "rules-light."

Indeed, reviews of rules-light (or "rules-lighter") games often take them to task for the *lack* of rules, as in this 1999 RPG.net review of *Unknown Armies* by James Maliszewski:

"I don't like overly rules-light games. Somehow, I feel cheated, as if I should say, "Hey, I paid my \$25. Where are the rules?" As such, I am not entirely happy with the game system used by Unknown Armies. With only four stats and a very flexible skill system, it's clear that this game is a descendent of Over the Edge..."

– From http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/reviews/rev_1431.html

The appeal of rules-heaviness is particularly important when one takes into account the prevalence of rules-heavy computer RPGs, like the popular *World of Warcraft*, which often only nominally involve role-playing. An entire generation of gamers has never known a time without such games, particularly those influenced by, or based on, *Dungeons & Dragons*. *AD&D: Treasures of Tarmin* was released for the Intellivision system in 1981, over 25 years ago, and just this past year we've seen *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach* and the sequel to the popular *Neverwinter Nights*. Even if most of the game mechanics

are hidden, for many gamers roleplaying is all about hit points and saving throws, which float over your head as you swing a sword, or unlock a chest. A recent (quickly retracted) review of *Neverwinter Nights 2* by Matt Peckham called the "rule-playing game" to task for its rules-heavy mechanics, which are based on the D&D 3.5 ruleset:

"Hello D&D superchrome, bub-bye storytelling and character development (you know, those things you're supposed to "immerse" yourself in). The idea seems to be that we're meant to rah-rah about a superabundance of feats, spells, races, prestige (advanced) classes, and math-equation tickers..."

– From 1Up.com (retracted)

"There is a school of thought that holds that rules complexity (and to a similar extent rules heaviness) is actually a benefit," said Ken Hite in an email exchange. "The mental reward you get for knowing the rules better than other people in your group is one of the things that will keep you playing the same system rather than switching off to a perhaps simpler or lighter one."

Chad Underkoffler of Atomic Sock Monkey Press agreed with Hite's assertion.

"You get a mental charge being able to successfully remember some rule without looking it up in the book, or finding a new devastating combo of rules effects, and debating/arguing about rules can be amusing," said Underkoffler. "However, none of those things, to me, is gaming. That's meta-gaming: you're playing with the rules as rules, rather than the rules as part of the game."

As creator of the rules-light PDQ game engine, Underkoffler was inspired by other rules-light games such as *Unknown Armies* and *Over the Edge*, games he describes as "fast, furious, fun, and flexible." He summed up his design aesthetic:

"What I want is a system simple enough to "run clean" with little knowledge required by first time players, but with neat interpretations and flavorful add-ons that can be used by more familiar players, if necessary. A lot of rules-light games fit that bill, and that makes me happy and proud to have my system counted among them."

– From an email exchange

In Closing

Over the past five years, the music industry has seen customers moving away from pre-packaged CDs and towards digital downloads of single songs, available for less money (or free, depending on where you look) on the Internet. The movie and television industries have also seen advertising dollars and box office revenues fluctuate recently, all while popular sites like Youtube.com allow their audiences to devour smaller chunks of entertainment at their leisure.

Newspapers, magazines and book publishers have seen similar shifts, and are starting to offer content in different formats to meet the differing needs of their audiences. Some authors,

like Cory Doctorow, have even experimented with giving their content away, with some degree of success.

What this means for the roleplaying industry is yet unknown. It seems unlikely that rules-light games are going to knock rules-heavy games off the top of the food chain anytime soon. But the increased prevalence of RLRPGs in recent years does represent a shift in their favor, and it might demonstrate the first signs that the medium is in the midst of a transformation.

Can smaller Indie publishers (including those putting out rules-light games) ever win a popularity contest with the big rules-heavy publishers? Perhaps, perhaps not. What can certainly be said about the Indie releases, and rules-light games in general, is that they are winning the contest of prevalence. It's a game of numbers; larger publishers focusing on more rules-heavy games can only put out so much content in a given year, whereas many smaller publishers working on tighter, smaller games can put out much more content on a much more frequent basis.

Can a horde of kobolds ever hope to defeat even a single dragon? Perhaps not – at least not yet. But they can certainly make an impact.

Some Notable Rules-Light Game Engines

BEER (Brawn Ego Extraneous Reflexes) by 9th Level Games (<http://www.9thlevel.com>)

Games: *Kobolds Ate My Baby*, *Ninja Burger 1st Edition* (as SAKE), *Warhamster*.

BRPS (Basic Role Playing System) by Chaosium (<http://www.basicrps.com/indexen.html>)

Games: *Call of Cthulhu*, *Hawkmoon*, *Elfquest*, *Other Suns*, *Ringworld*, *RuneQuest*, *Stormbringer*, etc.

FATE (*Fantastic Adventures in Tabletop Entertainment*) by Evil Hat Productions (<http://www.faterpg.com>)

Games: *The Dresden Files*, *Spirit of the Century*

FUDGE (*Freeform Universal Do-it-yourself Gaming Engine*) by Grey Ghost Press, Inc. (<http://www.fudgerpg.com>)

Games: *Deryni Realms*, *Terra Incognita*

GURPS Lite (*Generic Universal Role-Playing System*) by Steve Jackson Games (<http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/lite/>)

Games: *Banestorm*, *Infinite Worlds*, *Traveller*

PDQ (*Prose Descriptive Qualities*) by Atomic Sock Monkey Press (<http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com>)

Games: *Dead Inside*, *Ninja Burger*, *Questers of the Middle Realms*, *Truth & Justice*, *Zorcerer of Zo*, etc.

Risus by Cumberland Games & Diversions (<http://www222.pair.com/sjohn/risus.htm>)

Games: *Rough Magic*, *Silverlode 1908*, etc.

Unisystem by Eden Studios, Inc. (<http://www.edenstudios.net/unisystem/>)

Games: *All Flesh Must Be Eaten*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Witchcraft*, etc.

Wushu Open by Daniel Bayn (<http://www.bayn.org/wushu/wushu-open.html>)

Games: *Pulp-Fu*, *Roanoke*, *Wire-Fu*

Author's Bio

Michael Fiegel is the founding member of aethereal FORGE, a loose coalition of artists and writers responsible collectively for the well-known *Ninja Burger*. From 2002 to 2005 he was the Lead Columns Editor for RPG.net, and has written extensively for a variety of roleplaying game companies and websites, including Gamegrene (where he is co-editor) and R. Talsorian Games. He is a regular book reviewer for Slashdot.org, an editor on Wikipedia, and a writer for *Dragon* magazine.

THE CATNET

by Joshua Cole

My name is Caspian Henley, and I'm with the phone company.

Unimpressed? Most are, even in an asteroid belt watering hole full of miners and mine overseers and branch office clock-punchers and once in a while a two-bit sawbones who claims to be a licensed physical analyst until he gets too drunk to lie. In other words, it's pretty low on the totem pole, glamour-wise.

In meatspace.

Plenty of things change in The CATNet – named after the company that owns it, Computerized Astro Telecom, for the living-in-a-cave set – and that's change number one. In the CAT, 'I'm with the phone company' puts you somewhere between a government envoy and a messenger straight from the Almighty. And why not? The CAT may not make the worlds go round, but it keeps them in touch while they do, reaching across thousands of light-years in less than the blink of an eye to connect people in virtual space who couldn't see each other in meatspace in a dozen lifetimes.

I don't pretend to know how The CAT works. I'm not a quantum physicist or even a quantum control technician. Near as I can tell, it's sufficiently advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic. Push a few buttons to control the quantum jumps of electrons in a computer that spans the human-colonized portion of the galaxy. They jump one at a time, but they do it instantaneously, relativity be damned, so there's no slowdown no matter how complex the information or how far it travels.

Or I'm full of crap. Like I said, that's not my part of the business.

Thing is, for all The CAT spans human space and transfers data by means which man, or at least a man with my educational background, was not meant to know, it's still a computer system. Like any computer made by the hand of man, it can be unmade by the same hand. With six hundred billion customers, Computerized Astro Telecom deals with a lot of hands.

Sometimes, you've got to lop a few off.

That's where I come in.

*

My eyes opened on a plain brick wall dimly lit by a line of blue LEDs wholly inadequate to the space and the smoke wafting through it.

There's more than one way to skin The CAT; skins being customer parlance for the filter through which each views the virtual world. Mine was based on hard-boiled detective scenes and probably matched the 1940's Earth it was meant to mime less than perfectly, but then, so did the source material. I've

tried a few different looks in the years I've logged in, but this is a fave.

I reached over to the old fashioned touch-tone on my desk, a relic from the age when the phone company actually dealt with telephones. Of course, it, like everything around me, was nothing more than a visual - and tactile, audible and olfactory, if I cared to indulge those senses on something so mundane - representation of a program; in this case, my link to the company. I held the receiver up to my ear and waited.

Nothing.

As expected. Other Moderators, or Mods, as the cool kids – and most everyone else – say, cover the night shift on my server. Sometimes the unexpected happens. And by 'unexpected,' I mean a Very Bad Thing. Thanking any higher powers that might be listening, I set the phone back on its receiver, kicked back in my plush leather chair, and retrieved a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of my overcoat. When I put one to my mouth, it lit automatically. So it broke theme. Self-lighting cigarettes had their time and place and the 1940's weren't it; sue me for not being a purist. For that matter, sue me for not being entirely sure if they hadn't been invented yet or had already been banned as a fire hazard.

The sporting event tipping off on the boxy brown television propped across from my desk was a definite anachronism: zeroball was the sport of the future centuries after television went the way of the printing press (and hasn't been the sport of the future in anything but marketing hype for centuries since), but no way would I miss the first game of the GZA Finals over a little thing like anachronism. In a world where virtually anything was virtually possible, live sports were refreshingly *real*.

I'd just gotten comfortable for the first flurry of scoring when the telephone rang.

Cursing, I released the TV back to its black and white ambience and yanked the phone to my ear. "Henley here."

The voice on the other end sounded so completely lacking in inflection or emotion, I knew from the word go it had to be one of the watcher programs stationed around The CAT. With my skin, they appeared as 'gray men' - completely bland, unmemorable folks who loitered in generic gray or brown suits, *watching*. And reporting to yours truly. "A corrupted data error has occurred on your server, Moderator."

"Nature and location," I asked, grabbing a larger-than-life-sized pistol from the same overcoat pocket I'd gotten the cigarettes. Neither existed before I called for them, except as stored programs. I unplugged the phone cord with my free hand, impairing its operation not at all.

"Location: Server L238, nightclub 'Saucy Banquet,' second floor. Nature -"

The line went dead.

Uh-oh.

Say what you want about Computerized Astro Telecom, but they built their watchers to last. Had to be a pretty serious error to take one down. I'd bet my gun it was intentional, even if my gun had real existence.

A watcher program could take a lot more punishment than a Mod. Difference was, a Mod could do more than sit there and take. At least, I hoped that was the difference.

I strode into the street. My skin applied here, too. Everything had a warm brownish cast, the cars were round with the first hints of fin, the men wore trench coats and fedoras, the women skirts and blouses; replace those with tuxes and evenings gowns for those who were going glamorous, which an improbably large number were. Of course, every one of them saw the scene differently, unless they were running the same skin as me. Never said mine was a custom job, albeit I have made a few alterations for convenience's sake.

I didn't see much of the street or the people in it, though. Almost as soon as I stepped out of my office, my special privileges as a Mod kicked in. I took a step - and went from zero to infinite. Acceleration and the laws of physics meant exactly squat in The CAT, at least with the software I got when I took this job.

I arrived *in media res*, fancy talk for 'right inside the nightclub.'

The club also obeyed my skin's rules, by and large: cocktail dresses, tuxes, and a band that looked like they played smooth jazz, along with plenty of shiny hardwood and subdued lighting reflected off brass - or real gold - trim.

I immediately noticed plenty wrong with the scene. Not that the alleged jazz band pumped out a driving folkno beat completely incongruous with their appearance - that was just a function of my skin and their user-created content butting heads. No, the problems with the scene were, in order of importance: no one was screaming, the band was still playing, and the only thing out of the ordinary was my arrival - which went unnoticed after the briefest of stirs, since people don't like to get on a Mod's bad side.

I didn't even bother questioning the crowd. Nobody saw something capable of taking out a watcher program and acted like nothing was wrong.

I thought back to the watcher's last words.

Second floor.

I turned to the bartender. "Do you keep some kind of private rooms upstairs?"

He hesitated, but obviously he'd seen my entrance. "Sure, buddy." Then, sweat beading on his bald pate, he added, "There some kinda problem?"

"Something like that," I said. "Where are the stairs?"

He jerked a thumb toward the smoky hall on my left.

I was up the stairs in significantly less than the blink of an eye, gun in hand, surveying a hall of elegant wood paneled doors.

Time to break theme a little more than usual. I may dress like an old school private eye, or like my pop culture upbringing implied they dressed, but I'm a Mod, with all that entails.

I extended my hand.

All the doors should have flown open.

Seven of the eight did. The second one on the right didn't budge.

"Let's see what's behind door number two," I muttered. A data error, obviously caused by a hack. No other way to bar a Mod entrance.

Even the hack didn't hold for long.

My pistol looked like a fairly direct instrument. In terms of user interface, it was: point and shoot. What the program it represented actually *did*, though? Plenty complex. Its 'bullets' adapted on the fly to overwrite hacked code, decrypt illegal protection - or, depending on my mood, stun, hurt or fry the brain of a human target.

One shot at the door handle and the barred room bared its secrets.

I almost wished it hadn't.

Look, I'm not the squeamish type. Anybody who's worked The CAT as long as I have has seen his share of messy hacks and their messier consequences.

Still, I couldn't recall anything quite like this.

The room contained something like four dead people, albeit one of them looked drab enough even in grisly death to mark him as a watcher program. I only guessed four because of the number of objects recognizable as heads; it could have been twice as many from the rest of the parts.

It's only data, right? Nothing to get upset about?

I hate to skimp on company loyalty, but let's put it this way: Computerized Astro Telecom tells people The CAT is safer than walking out your front door. They're one hundred percent right. I can't speak for anyone else, but if I walked out *my* front door without a spacesuit, it'd be a contest between explosive decompression and lack of oxygen to see which killed me first.

There's a lot of 'safer' between that and 'safe.'

You see, somebody had been doing some serious hacking in the

room I'd just entered; the locked door, and the fact a watcher program took notice, told me as much. Safeguards on The CAT's neural interface go out the window when you start messing around with its programming. I'd take ten to one odds the three plus non-AIs in the room were dead to the world in meatspace, their brains convinced to stop functioning when their bodies died in The CAT.

Hell of a way to go, from the looks of it. Their virtual corpses appeared to have been torn apart, not even neatly cut up by a knife or sword, much less shot. Shooting would have fit my skin. I had to assume whatever happened to them, they'd perceived it about the same way I perceived the aftermath - another sign of a hack. User-created content, remember?

Pistol still in hand, I bent down and examined the parts I'd identified as belonging to the watcher. Its deletion interested me the most, since most ordinary hacks couldn't do anything to kill it. The watcher's head had been ripped clean off in one swipe... for a certain definition of 'clean,' anyway.

Hell of a swipe.

I checked the other heads. Same thing. Yet the bodies had still been mauled, as if by some great furious beast. On a lark, I ran a quick scan of the mangled avatars. All three showed signs of significant hacks, but I didn't see a data error on them.

If they were good enough to rewrite their personal codes and resolve the errors, how had they screwed up bad enough to get spotted, much less killed? On the flip side, the watcher program wasn't equipped to resolve errors, so—

Something shifted in my peripheral vision.

I spun, ducking aside by reflex with the same speed I'd arrived at the nightclub. Only my speed saved me, landing me on the far side of the room from my assailant.

Or rather, from where I'd expected my assailant to end up. I didn't bet on its jump carrying it clean through the opposite wall. I caught only the faintest glimpse of it: a cross between lean sinew and deep shadow, quadruped and packing a tail. Mostly, in the split second before it vanished, I saw the tail.

Had some crazy hacked a *cat* into The CAT?

A cat that walks through walls. Didn't I read about something like that once?

Regardless, unless I wanted it walking (and tearing) through *me*, I needed a better place to take it on. I stepped into the hallway and instantly appeared in the middle of it, my back manifestly *not* to a wall. At a thought, the far end of the hall reskinned itself with a big art deco mirror, giving me a good view ahead, behind and to both sides.

So, I'd have been fine if the cat hadn't grabbed me from the ceiling.

Mod reflexes got most of my head away from the great dark paw swiping the air, but it took my hat and a nice trail of blood with it. Mods have special protections; consumer 'weapons,' which can force another customer to respawn at his home even if they can't do any meatspace harm, don't do squat to the likes of yours truly. The cat not only did proverbial squat, it sent a burst of pain through my scalp that could easily break something in my meatspace body.

Not surprising, after what I'd just seen, but call me an optimist.

The glass sure looked half empty, though, as I rolled to the floor and pumped four rounds into the ceiling. It burst open like I'd hit it with a rocket launcher instead of a pistol, but without revealing the cat.

I realized I'd rolled too close to a wall and hopped to my feet, putting another bullet into the wallpaper behind me just as a paw reached out. It froze when my bullet hit it, giving me a chance to admire - okay, wince at - the two-inch claws a hair from my gun hand. The paw flickered as my bullet rewrote it into harmless paralysis.

Then it started moving again.

What. The. Hell.

I'd had enough of dancing around the nightclub's upper floor. Time for some more extreme Mod powers. A mental command to The CAT stripped the skin clean off the virtual building, baring a framework of silver-white background and black lines. My avatar and gun vanished, replaced by a generic silvery humanoid form. Others like it, marked with text and meatspace faces, milled about beneath the transparent floor, looking alarmed for the first time. For a moment, I thought my using such an overt power had spooked them.

Then I got a look at my opponent.

The CAT had completely changed. The cat, on the other hand, looked exactly the same.

It lunged at me, baring fangs I could somehow make out with terrifying clarity despite their being shadows on shadows. Its great paws swept around.

I put six bullets into its gaping maw.

It skidded to a halt at my feet, code-body pulsing and twitching.

"Not such a bad kitty after all," I said, grinning down at it.

It lifted its head to meet my grin.

Streamers of code seemed to flow into its body. Without the skin to deceive my eyes, I could see the data representing the building's structure thinning out, losing detail and resolution and popping up errors, quickly rewritten and resolved.

I knew the cat was doing it.

I'd never seen anything like it.

It scared the hell out of me.

I kept shooting, of course, but the more bullets I punched into the inky surface of the cat, the less it seemed to mind them. It was on its feet in seconds, tail twitching, legs coiled.

It lunged and I dodged at the same time. Freed of physical limits by my Mod powers, I moved at literally the speed of thought.

So, I only *almost* lost an arm as the cat twisted in mid-air and swiped at me. The pain roared through my brain, telling me my arm hung useless and bloody, and no amount of logical cajoling could convince my nervous system otherwise.

Especially when the cat doubled itself over in mid-leap and came back at me.

I did the only thing any sensible Mod could when faced with an invincible faster-than-thought shadow monster looming over a building full of customers.

I ran.

*

So sue me - I'm not about to get killed taking on an unbeatable enemy. I put as much distance between myself and the cat as my server allowed and then some, a trail of unskinned CAT and surprised people in my wake.

A mistake, you might think. No such thing! I had a few tricks up my sleeves yet, starting with giving the cat a clear trail to follow. Couldn't have it chowing on the customers, now could I?

Besides, my retreat wasn't as callous as you might think. I'm not much for thinking deep, but I've been known to think *quick*. The second I put some breathing room between me and the cat, I set the old Henley noggin to work.

I'd never seen anything like the cat before. I had *heard* of something like it, though, and the something I'd heard of wouldn't touch the aforementioned customers when it had a juicy target to pursue. Just rumors, you understand. Nothing officially confirmed.

I needed official confirmation now, not to mention a dispensation to do some hacking of my own without having another Mod come down on me and make times even more interesting - in the Chinese sense, as if there's another.

I also needed to get out of The CAT before biofeedback put my body into shock from what my nerves insisted was loss of blood.

Logging out of The CAT isn't pleasant under the best of circumstance, and these weren't. The world seemed to fade and grow dark before my eyes, giving me the briefest unnerving

impression of *seeing* code - actually the message subliminally informing me I'd logged off. Gravity, temperature, sound, smell, distance - even time vanished, leaving me floating in a null state, pure mind.

Then I woke up, felt light and heat and gravity, and banged my head hard against the smooth metal surface of my CAT Booth. I swore under my breath, but the meatspace pain actually seemed to alert my nervous system to the distinct absence of bloody gashes and broken bones in my arm.

I stumbled from the booth and grabbed a tube of nutrient paste off the shelf beside it, half-chewed and half-drunk the cheese-flavored synthetic, and pitched the tube. Chateau Henley isn't exactly the cleanest place around, even in comparison to my intentionally messy 'office' in The CAT, but since it's a windowless, self-contained apartment strapped to an anthill asteroid colony spun to achieve its spotty artificial gravity, I didn't see the point of fixing it up.

I reached out a hand for my phone, remembered it didn't work that way in meatspace, cursed again, and pushed a stack of newsheets away to reach a touchscreen on the wall. The touch-sensitive sheets flickered to life as they fell, broadcasting the gossip channels; I ignored them and concentrated on the wall.

With my hand pressed against it, the screen forming from the thin layer of nanomachines there interfaced with my nervous system the same way the CAT Booth did. My thoughts guided it through a series of relays to the offices of Xiang Sen, Administrator for the L200 series servers.

The Admin sat behind a broad, elaborate teak desk, dressed in deceptively simple bluish-silver *hanfu* - traditional Chinese robes, albeit I'd bet my gun these were made of reactive nanofiber and could change into armor, suit or spacesuit as convenience dictated - unsmiling beneath a long mustache. I happened to know Sen at least doubled me up on age, but, either from a good physical analyst, Daoist alchemy or some cruel trick the universe played on yours truly, he could have passed for younger. He said, "Good morning, Moderator," in tones indicating it was anything but.

"Morning, Admin," I said, bowing to the screen. "I just logged out of The CAT to -"

"To give your report on the incident on Server L238," Sen asked.

"You heard about that, huh?"

He nodded, very slightly.

"Then you probably guessed what I'm going to ask next, right?"

"No, Moderator, I have not," Sen said. "It is impossible that you would pose a question which might be construed as damaging to the company's reputation over an unsecured broadcast."

Up till Sen said otherwise, it had been entirely possible. Loose lips sink customer satisfaction; mine tightened.

"Your circumspection does you credit," Sen said.

"Um... Thanks, Admin."

"It pleases me to commend my subordinates when they give cause to do so." He left the other side of the coin blissfully unsaid. "It would please me even more if you did not draw customers' attention to your engagements with security risks."

"I needed to see the thing, Admin," I said.

"Did *they* need to see you run away from it?"

"It seemed more photogenic than my getting eviscerated."

Sen didn't respond; his face remained perfectly impassive. Silence can speak volumes, especially in body language.

"I have a plan," I said. It sounded weak to my ears. Sen still didn't so much as blink. "I, uh, needed to clear up a few details. I thought you might know -"

Sen inclined his head as if to contemplate the long nails on the hand he casually raised. He lowered the hand again, more abruptly, fingers splayed.

Translation - I would find all the information he had on the cat, or at least all he intended to release, when I logged back into The CAT. Anyone watching the conversation, even a typical Mod, wouldn't realize he'd said a word. I spent almost my whole first year as a Mod as Xiang Sen's partner, immediately before his promotion. He taught me everything I don't make up as I go along.

Of course, I didn't expect to find much in the way of information. Sen surely *knew*. Just as surely, he wouldn't share what he knew. For a company so dedicated to broadcasting information they invented a way to do it faster than light, Computerized Astro Telecom had an amazing gift for keeping its own skeletons firmly locked in its closets.

Still, the fact Sen wouldn't say told me everything I needed to know.

"I also need a dispensation," I said.

Sen's frown deepened.

"I, uh, have to do a little..."

Deepened.

"Hacking," I said quietly. "I mean, not a little. Maybe a lot."

Sen apparently followed my train of thought. "Absolutely not," he said.

He drummed the fingers of his left hand on the desk, too. He made one complete pass from thumb to pinkie. His hand went still.

I had an hour.

I bowed again, thanked Sen, and let the screen fade into bare wall.

It took me a minute to pull myself together. Sen doesn't exactly terrify me when he talks, all polite and calm as the oceans I'd never seen. It's after he's done talking; I think back to what I saw him do in The CAT.

If I screwed up, he lost double the face: once as my teacher, once as my Admin. Losing face means a lot in Computerized Astro Telecom.

I almost logged right back into The CAT. Then I thought better of it and grabbed a handful of beer globes, held together by the same nanofilm as the screen on the wall, and popped them in my mouth.

Thus fortified, I returned to the virtual world.

*

I stood in the middle of a carefully picked warehouse-construct, pistol at the ready. Beams of dirty light streamed down from dirtier windows. Old-fashioned 2D monitors glowed static at the rest of the room. I'd left the skin on the warehouse; no need to cheese Xiang off any more by showing a passing customer an un-skinned CAT.

I'd probably cheesed him off plenty by what I planned to do.

Especially if it didn't work.

Of course, at least one possible value of 'didn't work' would leave me well past caring.

I pushed defeatism to the back of my mind. If I got distracted and screwed up the first phase of the operation, I wouldn't get the chance to take on the cat, much less suffer my boss' wrath.

Okay, so maybe defeatism didn't go *all* the way to the back of my mind. It just changed tactics.

I holstered my gun - it vanished into my overcoat - and took a deep breath.

Showtime.

I'd hacked The CAT before, a little. Most Mods - and this is a dirty little secret of the company's, so don't spread it around - get their start when they do some petty hacking and get caught before they escalate to the hard stuff and have to be put down.

I didn't much like hacking before.

I liked it a lot less when I had a clearer understanding of the consequences. Some of those made the cat look like a walk in the park.

I loosed my thoughts on The CAT. Hacking got easier when you started with Mod powers; I skipped the first dozen barricades keeping customers from messing with code man was not meant to know and dove straight into the deep end. Deeper than I'd ever gone before I went pro, believe me!

I could sort of see, sort of feel the pulse of code flowing around me.

Practically shaking, I stopped some of the flow and started rewriting.

Why did it creep me out? I changed the virtual world and broke the rules every time I used a Mod power.

Mod powers are a little like miracles, though. You make your appeal to a higher power that is, mostly, on your side, and it grants you the power to go beyond the mundane.

Hacking is like magic - black magic. Maybe you're tapping the same cosmic forces, but you're doing it without help, without direction, and without a safety net, all with the eyes of an angry corporate machine-god burning down on you.

I felt like those eyes were on me now, accusing, wrathful. For *me* to hack was even worse, they seemed to say. I was the digital equivalent of, if not a fallen angel, at least one with some singed wings, and I didn't like the feeling one bit.

Abruptly, I forced my consciousness back to my avatar, hacks forgotten.

I dimly registered that the beams of light were bending in impossible ways and the warehouse had taken on a disturbingly soggy quality, like the fabric of reality had been stretched out and hadn't shrunk back quite right.

Also, the cat was watching me.

"So it was *your* eyes," I said, glaring at it. Here I'd gone and gotten all mystical, and it had to bring things back down to Earth - or to CAT, as the case may be. Downright took the wind out of my sails.

It looked at me with its flat black eyes. Wondering why I wasn't afraid, maybe.

I looked back. "I'm wondering the same thing about you. How come you aren't afraid of me?"

It slunk forward, muscles that weren't muscles rippling black in virtual light. Its claws came out and clicked on the floor. I guessed it wanted to unnerve me. Click. Click. Click.

Bang.

It hadn't expected me to just shoot, I guess, because I put one right between its eyes. "I read your programming," I told it. "It's a fancy pattern, but it's still a pattern."

It hardly slowed from the bullet. Its regenerative subroutines had obviously assimilated the data from my initial attack; my gun, capable of disassembling most hacked code in seconds and most hackers in less if I wanted it to kill, was just another piece of consumable data to the cat.

Click. Click. Click.

It was about ten feet away now, close enough to jump. Close enough to kill? I'd find out sooner than I wanted to.

It raised its hackles.

I chuckled.

"You were somebody's idea of one hell of a joke," I said. "The whole company's named after you."

It growled, seemingly surprised again. The claws came out again.

"Schroedinger's Cat, in the flesh," I continued. "Metaphorically speaking, anyway. The original theoretical quantum being. Existing or not existing - who can tell until they open the box and look at you?"

Fear gave the cat one of its many edges over its prey, fear as old as primitive man huddling in his cave with a crude spear and wondering if the shape in the night was a cloud passing over the moon or a saber-toothed tiger. I declined to offer it that edge, albeit I was bluffing. The bluff seemed to be working: it looked confused. Maybe scared?

I could almost feel sorry for it. Always had a soft spot for dumb animals.

It just *had* to come screaming at me at that exact second, didn't it?

Sympathy goes out the door when something tries to rip my throat out with four-inch teeth.

I dodged at the speed of thought, strafed left, pumped a few rounds into the cat's sleek body. It crashed to the floor and spun without missing a beat. If the bullets did a thing now, you could have fooled me. When it skidded to a halt, it flipped over and readjusted its limbs so it crouched face forward again.

"You want to know something interesting?" I asked, nonchalantly as I could manage.

It didn't. It wanted to kill me.

It jumped, I dodged.

"I set a subroutine to check up on you once I got an inkling

of what you are, kitty. A little factoid that never clicked in the rumors about you.”

I dodged again, fired again, decided to stop wasting my time with the shots.

I could do this all day. Trouble was, I wasn't the only one, and I *would* eventually get tired.

Hence, psychological warfare. “I get the idea behind you and yours. Why pay a Mod's salary when you can code something that works day and night, never gets tired, never gets fired, never gets wired on something it shouldn't? I mean, you're maybe a little overzealous, but so what? Adjust the sliders in that AI of yours and you've got an obedient drone, right? No offense.”

If it cared that I puzzled out what it was, it gave no sign. Maybe it took offense; it sure lunged something fierce, but I had the measure of it this time.

I couldn't hurt it, though.

“The infamous black project - the avenging AI angels of the CAT god, detecting and descending on the slightest violation of the sacred code! It makes for good sensationalism, fodder for the paranoid whackos. It fits the company's modus operandi; I mean, hey, not to sound disloyal, but headquarters can get a little full of itself sometimes, and us Mods probably don't help matters.”

The cat growled its assent.

“My point is, kitty-cat, why am I still on this beat, while you were firewalled like so much prior version garbage?”

It lunged again. I actually did seem to be getting through to it. Its black eyes never left me for a second. It did its best to keep its claws in the same coveted position, but I had a better time avoiding them.

“Hate to tell you, puss-in-boots. You didn't just go ballistic on your field test. You *underperformed*. Us good old flesh and blood humans caught hackers faster, cleaner and with less fuss than you ever could. The test server you prowled was such a mess they had to set up double shifts of Mods for fifty years to clean it up!”

I'd checked all this when the cat's appearance first clicked with my memories of loonies ranting about the automated Moderators the company had unleashed and might once more. Xiang confirmed it with his silence.

What I didn't *know*, I bluffed.

“Face facts, feline,” I said, waving a pistol at it, “you're obsolete—”

And then it got its jaws around my neck, gnashing like it was going out of style.

It took all of ten seconds to consume my poor, pitiful avatar.

“I'll give you one thing,” I said. “You're quick.”

The cat looked around, searching the shadows. Then they settled on the screens ringing the room.

My face had replaced the static on them, all of them. I had to resist the urge to look at my lovely mug instead of the cat; somehow, I managed.

Aside from dying in meatspace or respawning, there's a third thing that can, theoretically, happen when you die in The CAT. If corporate gives a special dispensation, you can do a multiple respawn. Then you just have to be fast enough to jump avatars before the first one gets wasted. It's a jarring experience the first dozen times.

Let's just say I've gotten a lot of dispensations.

Watching my avatar get devoured by an artificial intelligence still wasn't any fun, though.

“It's futile, isn't it?” I asked the cat.

The cat, curled on the ground over my avatar and gun, finished lapping them up with its broad shadow tongue. It looked up at the screen imperiously.

“That's the gimmick. You can absorb the data around you to heal any wound somebody does hack in. No way to kill you, because you can cannibalize the entire world. Even if that 'body' gets blown completely to bits, all you need is one strand of data to reform, and this whole world is data. They couldn't delete you, so when your field test failed, they sealed you up, right?”

The cat didn't answer. It wasn't supposed to pass a sentence, just to carry one out. For the moment, it just stared at one of the screens, haughty, in control, victorious.

Hate to rain on your parade, kitty-cat.

Just kidding.

Actually, it was gonna feel *real* good.

“Did I mention that my old mentor did double shifts for most of his career? Helped him get that sparkling rep. I mean, that server we were on? Hell, the whole L200 series? They're just a mess.”

The cat's eyes narrowed.

“It's almost like somebody fell down on the job there, huh, kitty?”

The cat ripped a monitor off its sparking base, smashed it, and tried to snap it up.

“Of course, the L100 series is clean as a whistle. Has been from the outset, what with being patrolled by 100% human Mods from the dawn of CAT time.”

Another monitor went down sparking. The cat seemed a little frustrated, but I was willing to bet it wasn't with my words.

“You, uh, wouldn't happen to have any trouble absorbing the data from those monitors, would you, kitty?”

It glared over its shoulder at me.

“I mean, my avatar and my gear were put together back on the L200s, same as you. It would sure be a nasty jar if the local landscape generated an incompatible version error when you tried to gobble it up. Assuming, of course, you needed to regenerate your body.”

Apparently, it did understand human speech, because it gave me a look just like a big house cat. Albeit, a big AI house cat with virtual teeth like knives and a disposition to match.

For the second time, I almost felt sorry for it.

It eased my heart considerably when it lunged for a whole bank of monitors, firmly intending to rip every last manifestation of yours truly out of existence.

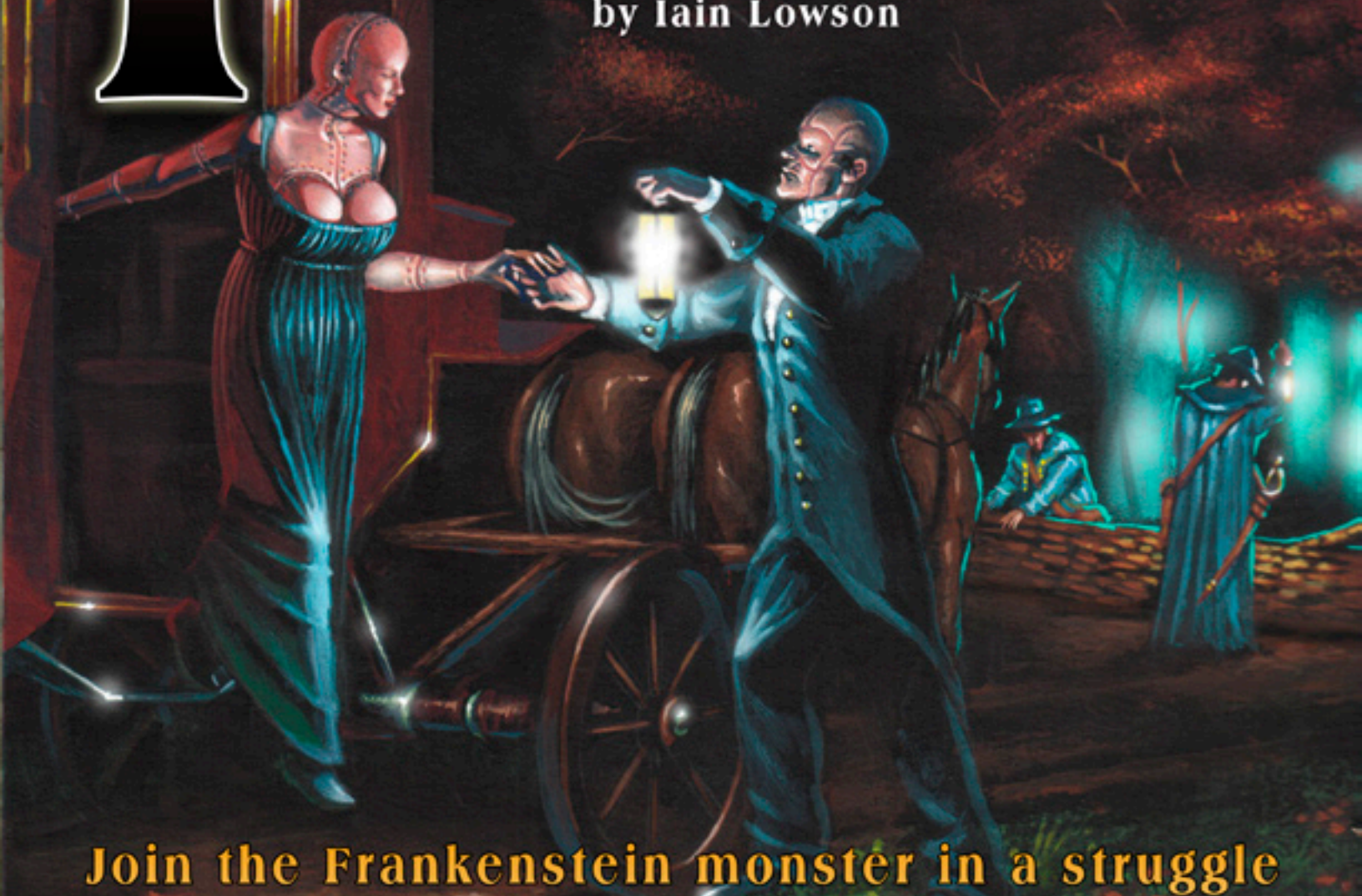
“Bad kitty,” I said, and logged out before the deletion order removed the warehouse and all within it.

Micro Settings

PrometheA

unchained

by Iain Lawson



Join the Frankenstein monster in a struggle
to reclaim the glory of his homeland!



SILVEN
PUBLISHING



Warhammer – The Game of Fantasy Battles

Author: Alessio Cavatore

Publisher: Games Workshop Limited, 2006

URL: <http://www.games-workshop.com>

Reviewed by: Alisa Frisch

Review Date: October 29, 2006

Reviewer Bias: I know that this is normally not categorized as an RPG, but I learned a lot about the complexity of combat through the Games Workshop games, and Warhammer Fantasy still continues to be a popular alternative for those gamers who want to jump into a fantasy world and engage in battles quickly. Also, it is excellent for those gamers who still enjoy the miniature painting hobby, which Games Workshop always seems to find a way for you to engage in with most of its selections.

The 272-page hardcover edition of *Warhammer – The Game of Fantasy Battles* (or *Warhammer Fantasy*, for short) was released on September 9, 2006, after its predecessor kept players going for the past six years. The current seventh edition sports heavy details, background history of the game setting, and a mass of sketches and photos, both black and white and full color, to entertain even the most inexperienced miniature war gamer. It retails for approximately \$50.00.

From the Back Cover

It is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and sorcery, of battle and death until the world's ending. These are The End Times.

Warhammer, the game of Fantasy Battles, allows you to command a force of mighty warriors. With armies of Citadel miniatures, wage war over a tabletop battlefield, using tactics and ingenuity to achieve victory.

This book includes all of the information you need to get started as the general of a fantasy army:

INTRODUCTION

An overview of the *Warhammer* war game, including instructions on how to set up your battlefield and get your armies ready for war.

THE RULES

How to manoeuvre your army on the tabletop, unleash hails of arrows at the foe, and smash aside your enemies in brutal close combat.

THE ADVANCED RULES

These cover rare and potent troops such as war machines, chariots, monsters, mighty heroes and powerful wizards.

THE WARHAMMER WORLD

A guide to the history, races and armies of *Warhammer* – plus full-colour photographs of the forces you can collect.

HOBBY SECTION

Advice on how to choose and collect your army of Citadel miniatures, painting and modeling guidance, and suggestions for ways to stage different types of battles.

REFERENCE

Complete index and quick reference pages for use during play.

Presentation

The book is primarily colored in a light red, and a closer look at the red design shows it to be similar to a crack-ridden leather-bound texture. On the cover, the title *Warhammer* is displayed in a large yellow font that is shaded to make it seem like gleaming gold, with the letters outlined in red. Directly opposite of the title's position at the top of the cover are the words *The Game of Fantasy Battles* in much smaller red cursive lettering.

The large image dominating the cover depicts a pale white work of art on a cloth texture. On one side, a castle and lines of cannons stretching across a mountaintop are shown, and opposite that is a multi-headed dragon spitting flame while in flight. At the bottom is a human warrior riding a griffin steed, wielding a banner with the creature's likeness on it. Confronting the warrior is a huge winged demon armed with an axe and whip. Dominating the center is a strongly detailed golden sledgehammer, with a wooden shield directly in front of it, its red and white covering torn in various places. Finally, the piece is layered with a human skull crowned in a wreath of leaves. The back cover shows a photograph of two miniature armies locked in battle on a detailed gaming board, so as to give the potential reader an idea of what the *Warhammer* game will look like when in action.

Content

Warhammer Fantasy is packed with extensive detail on every area that you could have questions or concerns about, or just plainly be curious about. The text is divided into four large sections: the Basic Rules, the Advanced Rules, the *Warhammer* World, and the *Warhammer* hobby.

Almost every page contains black and white or color drawings of the characters and creatures that make up the 16 different armies available for you to use in your *Warhammer Fantasy* game. There are also maps, diagrams of the miniatures to show their movement and rules in certain battle situations, and also many photographs showing the Games Workshop players and techniques in action. These photographs show everything from picking out your first army in a gaming shop, to painting a figure step-by-step, to competitions that highlight the many Games Workshop events that occur internationally.

Before the first section starts, there is a brief introduction section called "The World of *Warhammer*." This section gives the bare bones for a total newbie to the system. It advises beginners on how to smartly purchase an army, what supplies are needed for painting figures and creating a fantasy battleground, and the supplies needed to work out battle conflicts, such as dice, a measuring tape, and a template for blast and ranged weapons.

The first section of the book discusses Basic Rules. It is essentially all you need when learning to play the game at the beginner's level. This section discusses the setup and progress of a typical game, what your army is made up of and what they can do, how a turn works, and the three basic steps: how your miniatures move, how they shoot, and the rules for close

combat. The subsections are kept as short as possible and utilize many charts and diagrams to help you understand the game's progress in a technical manner.

The second section is the Advanced Rules, which goes deeper into the essential confrontations you'll have to deal with when fighting with your miniatures in a basic game. Here, information is discussed on weapons, monsters, and special characters and commanders. You will learn how to handle your army's war machines (if any), deal with "psychological" situations, such as deciding when a unit is affected by Fear, Terror, or other mental hazards, and also learn an area that reigns true in most fantasy-themed games: magic.

After the rules are given in graphic and extensive detail, section three enters into the area that many gamers would call "fluff." This is the *Warhammer* World section, and it is primarily for those players interested in learning about the background of each of the *Warhammer* armies, from the elusive Wood Elves to the disfigured and deadly Chaos warriors. It discusses in storytelling form how they each came to exist and what goals they have, if any. Some gamers, like me, enjoy this type of information, as it's sometimes nice to be able to look at your fully assembled and painted figure and think about who he is and what he is capable of accomplishing in a war. Also, simply knowing a bit of the background can often make a nice painting job all the more worthwhile.

The last section leaves the rules behind and discusses the *Warhammer* hobby. This section purely dives into Games Workshop, discussing the models and supplies available to you, tips on basing, painting, and accessorizing your armies, game scenarios, and how to become more involved in the hobby in general.

Finally, after you may have struggled to read through all the extensive details of the book, it concludes with an appendix showing the most essential charts you'll need to have on hand when you are ready to battle. These include stats for each figure in the armies, steps of a turn, rules for moving, shooting, and close combat, and spellcasting. Plus, there are paper templates for the special weapons you may utilize, although something more permanent is better to use if you're going to be gaming for the long haul.

Conclusion

In my short experiences with both *Warhammer Fantasy* and its science-fiction counterpart *Warhammer 40,000*, I've found that both games are extremely popular for fans of miniature, non-collectible war games. The latest edition of *Warhammer Fantasy* is not much different from its predecessor, changing mostly army composition rules and magic rules. For those players who don't want to invest in the rulebook alone, there is a box set game available that has a scaled-down version of the rulebook plus two complete armies to play with (Goblins and Dwarves). It is called *The Battle for Skull Pass* and is a great way to get started quickly on a game without contemplating which of the 16 armies you will use.

I would like to forewarn those, however, who have not yet played *Warhammer Fantasy*. Like many Games Workshop games, it is very detailed and requires a lot of time and finances to invest in and build the miniature armies required if you want to play a long, scaled out battle (which is usually required at Games Workshop-sponsored events and tournaments). Also, Games Workshop is known for frequently updating its rulebooks, so be prepared to invest in new rules every few years if you really enjoy the game.

Archetype: Core Book

Body 8 (Game Mechanics): This area is vast and the best way to know it all is to play, play, and play.

Mind 11 (Organization): Very well organized and all sections, from the rules to the fantasy backgrounds, are given remarkable attention.

Spirit 10 (Look and Feel): The photos and artwork concepts have changed very little, but are still impressive, showing off the detail that some players are devoted to when preparing for a game.

Attack 9 (Value of Content): Costing \$50 for 272 pages, Games Workshop core rulebooks are frequently expensive, but they do not have many books out that are essential. Stick to the core rulebooks and army rulebooks when playing the game for all the info you will need.

Defense 9 (Originality of Content): Only a few changes were made from the previous edition, and with six editions already in print, veteran gamers will not see many differences.

Health 9 (Physical Quality): The hardcover will endure years of wear and tear, though eventual spine weakening is sure to happen (at least it does for me when I mark pages by leaving a pencil in them during the middle of a game).

Magic 10 (Options and Adaptability): The newest edition is always the one that is recognized in Games Workshop-sponsored events, but for regular at-home games, previous editions can still work as long as the players agree to use them.

Heavy Gear Blitz

Development Team: Phillipe F. Leclerc, John Buckmaster, and the Dream Pod 9 Team

Publisher: Dream Pod 9

Reviewed by: Kyle Thompson

Review Date: November 20, 2006

Reviewer Bias: This title was given to me for review purposes and eventual play use.

Heavy Gear Blitz is the newest set of rules for the *Heavy Gear* sci-fi tactical wargame. Being a diehard mecha fan (the game reminds me of *Gundam Wing* combined with *Mechwarrior*) I was really looking forward to reviewing a wargame where the focus lies on giant robot warfare. For those who don't know, *Heavy Gear* is a tabletop wargame that involves tactical combat between giant robots, armor units (tanks), and infantry units.

While you can buy *Heavy Gear Blitz* in PDF format, the soft-cover print version has 80 pages plus a page of counters to use in game and has a price tag of \$21.95.

From the Publisher

Welcome to the 62nd century and the world of Terra Nova. Colonized by humans, left to fend for itself, and divided between two rival superpowers, recent events have brought this once-united planet once more to the brink of war. The harsh battlefields of Terra Nova are home to a new type of fighting machine: the 15 foot tall war walkers called Heavy Gears. Filling a role between tanks and infantry, it has radically altered the face of warfare. The battle for Terra Nova has begun. Will you fight for honor, for pride, or for a land to call your own?

Heavy Gear Blitz contains almost everything you need to start playing, including:

- A introduction to the world of Terra Nova.
- Revised, streamlined miniature wargaming rules. Faster to learn, faster to play.
- Basic Field Guides for the three major armies of Terra Nova, to guide you in building your forces.
- A random scenario generator that covers a variety of terrain types, deployments, and victory conditions.
- 28 datacards, covering all the standard vehicles used in the Field Guides.
- An assortment of counters for tracking battle status of your army.

A few six-sided dice, miniatures, pens, and paper are required to play the game. *Heavy Gear Blitz* uses the same 1/144 scale miniatures as previous *Heavy Gear* games.

Presentation

I was very impressed with the artistic presentation of *Heavy Gear Blitz*. The cover is great and a lot of fun to look at.

Despite the interior of the book being black and white, the artwork is no less impressive than the cover. It gives a serious, but also occasionally light-hearted feel to the book that makes it fun to read and just as fun to flip through and look at the pictures. The book also contains some photographs of the miniatures used to play *Heavy Gear*, and those are just as impressive as the hand-drawn art. I would like to commend the artists, photographers, and sculptors whose work appears in *Heavy Gear Blitz* on a job well done.

I do have one gripe about the presentation of the book, and it lies in the format. The chapter numbers on the contents page do not match the chapter numbers given on the footers on each page. For example, the contents say that Chapter 1 is titled "The World," but if you turn the page, the footer reads "Chapter 1: Introduction. Turn the page again and you find the footer at the bottom right of the page reading "Chapter 2: The World." This wouldn't be so bad if it was misprinted on one page, but the mistake is consistent throughout the book. And on page 71, the end of Chapter 9, but the footer reads "Chapter 1: Introduction." This error in formatting definitely takes away from the overall presentation of the book.

The Content

Basically, everything that you need to play *Heavy Gear Blitz* is included in this book, excluding the dice and the miniatures

(and if you are just getting on to the *Heavy Gear* scene, I suggest going to Dream Pod 9's website and buying one of the starter kits which comes with the rulebook and a set of miniatures to get you started).

The book contains a brief introduction and thanks from one of the authors and then delves into the background and history of the *Heavy Gear* world. After this, the basic rules of the game are presented, which are then followed by the fully discussed, down-and-dirty rules. This is followed by an equipment catalogue that describes all of the game statistics for the weapons and other options in *Heavy Gear*. Following this is a brief discussion of more advanced rules, such as troop morale. Then, the book presents field guides, which are basically details on the general formation of squads within each of the three *Heavy Gear* armies. The book closes with a random scenario generator, a brief discussion about tournaments and leagues, data cards for the common units in *Heavy Gear Blitz*, and reference sheets.

The World

This was a great portion of the *Heavy Gear Blitz* rulebook to read. The history is detailed for so small a section, but is fun to read and filled with politics and the foundations of Terra Nova that shaped what it is for the setting of the game.

The chapter discusses the three armies present on Terra Nova as well as the role of each of the main "Weapons of War." This section of the book serves as a brief primer for the game itself – giving the players an idea of what's been going on in the world prior to the campaigns they will play out.

The Basic Game

The rules are solid and easy to pick up, but you have to read the entire rulebook to understand them all. You may not understand all of the terminology as you read through the rules, and if you don't, don't freak out – it all gets explained later. This portion of the rulebook felt a little disorganized at first, but once you've read all the way through the basic rules of the game, it all sinks in and the rules are suddenly very easy to understand.

The rules allow for a lot of unique strategies. My personal favorite was the idea of off-site artillery strikes and air strikes. This can really help you when your guys are in a jam, but the rules are written so as not to unbalance the game.

The back of the book states that the rules are "Revised... Faster to learn, faster to play." Even without having seen the older editions of the *Heavy Gear* rules, this seems to be an accurate statement. Most wargames have more complex rules than other tabletop games due to their focus on tactical combat, which is important. *Heavy Gear Blitz* is no exception; however, it is one of the simpler systems I have seen, and the rules are pretty easy to learn.

The Equipment Catalog

This section contains tables that explain the capabilities of each armament used by *Heavy Gear* units. There is a wide array of weaponry here, allowing for some pretty in-depth customizability of your units, some more than others. The chapter also describes the special abilities and rules surrounding

these weapons, as well as auxiliary systems that appear in some units and sine armor perks and flaws. I felt that this chapter was pretty helpful and that it allowed for a lot of customization of your own army. It also allows for an easy reference if you aren't sure what some of the acronyms following at the end of the weapon entries on a unit's datacard mean.

The Advanced Rules

This section is brief, but it discusses a lot of neat optional rules that can be used in a game of *Heavy Gear Blitz*. Morale is a given, and the rules surrounding it aren't hard to understand. Other rules offer a more realistic rendition of mecha combat (as realistic as something fictional can be) - rules like pilot ejection, optional grenade rules, and others. All of these were simple to understand but aren't necessary in order to play the game.

The Field Guides

These were pretty basic. They present you with what you need to know in order to build an army for *Heavy Gear*. Each of the three factions on Terra Nova – the Northern Guard, the Southern MILICIA and the Peace River Defense Force – have their own field guide, since they each have their own unique units. Each faction also has its own special rules that spice up the system and the sense of uniqueness between the forces.

The Random Scenario Generator

The random scenario generator is a feature that I feel some wargames lack. It is a great way to inspire a game on a spur of the moment and a great tool to have handy in the *Heavy Gear* book. The generator allows for the determination of terrain, weather, mission objectives, game length, tactical stance (neutral, aggressive, or defensive), and deployment. The generator allows for 373,248 different scenarios if I have done my math right. That makes this generator pretty useful, and you'll almost always have something new in each scenario.

Conclusion

Overall, *Heavy Gear Blitz* is a refreshing look at tactical wargaming. The learning curve is not as steep as some games that are more complex, and that tends to make the game more fast-paced and a lot more fun, since it's harder to get bogged down by all the rules. While the book itself could use a little reorganization and format editing, it's a fun game, and I look forward to painting some new miniatures now.

As far as wargaming goes, *Heavy Gear Blitz* has about average pricing, and since most of the units are big and most of the miniatures specific to *Heavy Gear Blitz* and not the older versions of the game, they can be a little pricey; however, if you like wargaming, especially in the sci-fi genre, then *Heavy Gear Blitz* is for you.

Archetype: Miniatures Wargame

Body 10 (Game Mechanics): Learning the game is pretty quick, but it is bogged down at points by some poor organization in the book. Overall, the system is pretty well balanced.

Mind 8 (Organization): While a lot of the content is separated into logical sections, some of the sections could use reordering to make the rules more coherent the first time through the rulebook.

Spirit 12 (Look and Feel): The art is awesome. I really enjoyed just flipping through the book when I first got it.

Attack 10 (Value of Content): The book is 80 pages and comes with a sheet of counters for \$21.95. The rules are great, but the formatting problems and organization does shave a few points off the overall value of the book. Also, having the sheet of counters scored would have helped.

Defense 10 (Originality of Content): The game is slightly reminiscent of *Gundam Wing* and *Mechwarrior*, but the history is great and the three armies are unique as far as I can tell.

Health 9 (Physical Quality): The cover is soft, but sturdy. It does show minor signs of wear, and I am sure they will become more apparent as time goes on, but its definitely cheaper than a hardcover (and a lot more portable).

Magic 11 (Options and Adaptability): There are a lot of options here. I was very pleased with the changes that can be made to just one unit and how varied one army of the same faction can be from another. Overall, I liked how unique you can make your army.

Floor Games

Author: H.G. Wells

Publisher: Skirmisher Publishing

Reviewed by: Kyle Thompson

Review Date: November 21, 2006

Reviewer Bias: This title was given to me for review purposes and eventual play use.

Skirmisher Publishing's *Floor Games* is a reprinting of the original H.G. Wells edition, originally published in 1911. The book's companion volume, *Little Wars*, is what drives many to call H.G. Wells the father of modern wargaming. In truth, this book serves to show the readers where many of the games he created came from – they were games that H.G. Wells created with his two boys, George and Frank.

Floor Games contains two games that H.G. Wells played with his boys, as well as some recommended toys (keep in mind, this was written in the early 1900s) and some activities that he and his boys used to do for fun. The book could be valuable to parents who game in order to introduce some of their young ones to gaming, or to those who are just curious about the history of wargaming.

From the Publisher

Often referred to as a companion volume to H.G. Wells' wargaming classic *Little Wars*, *Floor Games* is "the Father of Miniature Wargaming's" first volume devoted to recreational gaming. Highlights include a lighthearted, often humorous discussion on the theory and methodology behind a wide variety of "floor" and tabletop games and tips on the use and creation of improvised models, terrain, and other gaming props.

Skirmisher's edition of *Floor Games* includes a foreword by renowned game designer James F. Dunnigan – founder of game company SPI and magazine *Strategy and Tactics*, and creator of such well-known classic wargames as *Juuland*, *Panzerblitz*, and *Victory at Sea* – that discusses Wells' influence on the

development of the modern wargame. An introduction by game designer and publisher Michael J. Varhola discusses the first edition of this book, the special challenges related to republishing it, and its significance to modern wargames and role-playing games alike.

Presentation

Floor Games' presentation is great. The cover is simple yet displays a good idea of the contents, but it is the inside of the book where the magic happens. The book is printed in black and white, but there is not a single page (except those with the chapter numbers and titles) that does not have a photograph or picture on it. The photographs do a great job of portraying Wells' games with his two boys, and the drawings on each page are fun and creative, displaying toy soldiers and civilians in model trains or being stepped on by giant human feet. The drawings are from the original edition of the book and are by J.R. Sinclair. In fact, the introduction by Michael J. Varhola states that Skirmisher Publishing's edition of the book is as close to the original as possible – including its layout, with only a few exceptions.

The Content

H.G. Wells' book is presented much as it was when it was originally printed. The book contains four chapters. One discusses the toys that H.G. Wells recommended back in the early 1900s. H.G. Wells continues in the next two chapters to discuss two games that he and his sons played. The final chapter covers other things that Wells and his boys did with their toys to have fun and also talks very briefly about wargames.

“The Toys to Have”

While most of the toys presented in this chapter are no longer available, substitutes are easy to find. Even if you do not intend to set up the games described later in the book, the chapter is a fun read (as is the whole book). Wells recommends four major toys in this chapter as well as several minor ones. If you have kids, you may already have some of these toys or substitutes for them, as toys are much easier to come by today.

The Games

H.G. Wells describes two games that he played with his sons: “The Game of the Wonderful Islands” and “Of the Building of Cities.” Neither has a whole lot of rules in the sense of present-day wargames – there is no dice rolling or regulated miniatures. There aren't even really turns in the games. This makes the games easy to play with a younger group; however, those who are ill-at-ease drawing with chalk on their wood floors or who lack smooth pavement with which to play outside may have a harder time replicating the games as H.G. Wells originally created them. Still, the games are much like the ones many of us played at a young age. Remember setting up plastic army men in mock battles? H.G. Wells and his sons used tin figurines for the same thing, so certain aspects (or perhaps the whole game) are familiar in contemporary games.

Overall, the games sound like a lot of fun. They are entertaining to read and allow the reader insight as to how miniature wargaming evolved thanks to Wells' efforts.

Other Ideas in the Book

The book also describes other things that Wells and his sons did for fun. Some of these ideas they incorporated into the games mentioned earlier in the book, while others were independent of these games. One idea that Wells presents is what he calls “Marble Towers.” These were towers that he and his boys would construct that had steps and turns all around them, leading to the bottom. They would then roll marbles down these towers, much like the plastic tubes that kids use today to put together and roll marbles down.

The chapter also very briefly discusses wargames. Wells alludes to the fact that he may write a book on wargaming at a later date, which would of course be *Floor Games'* companion, *Little Wars*.

Overall, the chapter was fun to read and presents some neat activities for parents to use to amuse their kids.

Conclusion

In short, I found *Floor Games* to be a very amusing and occasionally funny book that is a prime example of some of the roots of modern wargaming. Wells' style is light-hearted and fun in this particular book. If you are not really interested in the history of wargaming, then you may still find the book a good read because of Wells' style of writing. Also, parents may find the book full of good ideas for you to spend time with your kids, especially if you are introducing them to gaming at an early age. The games and ideas in *Floor Games* are creative and fun, and the great benefit is that they can be played without spending much money.

Archetype: Multiple Games Book

Body NA (Game Mechanics): There are no real “game mechanics” in this book. The games presented are loose and freeform and so do not require a lot of rules.

Mind 12 (Organization): The book has a clear, logical progression and is easy to just pick up and read. Organization isn't overly important to the book because it is not really intended to be frequently referenced like a modern day core rulebook.

Spirit 11 (Look and Feel): The art in the book is fun and some of the pictures will make you laugh. The photographs are good as well.

Attack 9 (Value of Content): There are 71 pages in the book, which can be bought for a suggested retail price of \$11.95. The book is a great read, regardless of how much of it you may use, and, therefore, I recommend it.

Defense 12 (Originality of Content): The content is very original, especially since the games were created before wargaming itself became a real hobby.

Health 9 (Physical Quality): The book is soft cover, so it will show some wear and tear. My copy has a small fold in it already, but other than that, it seems to be holding together like any other paperback.

Magic 12 (Options and Adaptability): In this case, the only limit is your imagination. It is up to you if you actually play the games, but the games are general enough to allow for infinite customizability since there are no real rules unless you create some.

Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition

Development Team: Robert “Mac” McLaughlin and the Skirmisher Game Development Group

Publisher: Skirmisher Publishing

Reviewed by: Kyle Thompson

Review Date: October 23, 2006

Reviewer Bias: This title was given to me for review purposes and eventual play use.

Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition is the newest set of rules for the LARP based on the Cthulhu mythos. The book details everything from skill use to acting in character and stagecraft. *Cthulhu Live* weighs in at 205 pages, not including the cheat sheets and character sheet at the end. It costs \$19.95.

A few notes before the actual review. Please bear with me, as I have very little experience with LARPing, though I did take an in-depth look at the system and some research on the topic before this review. Also, I do not recommend the game for a younger crowd because of its darker tones, and the rulebook does contain some disturbing images.

From the Publisher

Horror and insanity are the rewards for those brave and foolish souls who dare meddle in the dark worlds of *Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition*. This tome is the latest and greatest rendition of the acclaimed live action roleplaying game based on the horror mythology of H. P. Lovecraft and other authors. This book offers much more than a unique and richly detailed playable rules system. It incorporates twelve years of best practices and refinements from hundreds of the top live action roleplayers worldwide.

Some of the features in this self-contained game include:

- All new rules for skills, combat, Sanity, Magic, and Psychic powers.
- Tips on recreating your own tales of the Cthulhu Mythos.
- Guidelines on role-playing Outsiders, agents of the otherworldly beings hell-bent on destroying the world!
- Extensive information on stagecraft, special effects, building your own monsters, and organizing events.
- ... and much more!

Presentation

Overall, the presentation of the book is wonderful. The cover is excellent, depicting a hideous array of tentacles and teeth. It gives the image that the rulebook is a hardcover tome.

Inside *Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition*, a vast majority of images are from various LARP groups who have run *Cthulhu Live* games. The book also contains drawings, most of which are very good and detailed. Those that aren't do not cause the presentation of the book to suffer, because the lower quality sketches are all meant to demonstrate some aspect of stagecraft, such as monster costume design. The pages are all made to look as if they are torn at the edges, and some have small, dark spots on them that look like bloodstains.

The Content

The *Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition* rulebook provides everything necessary for play and more. Character generation is discussed first. This is followed by rules that teach players how to play the game and detail combat, skill checks, and other related topics. Roleplaying in general is also discussed here. This section is followed up with information on how the game should be run, which includes a discussion on safety and expanded rules, such as skill test difficulty and sanity tests. Also discussed here are tips for running a game, including campaigns, and character generation. Then comes a discussion on magic, its implications, stagecraft, and the rules surrounding it. The next chapter discusses creating the monsters that appear in a *Cthulhu Live* game and how to stage them. The next section discusses outsiders, or characters driven mad and to darkness, as well as psychic abilities. The final chapter of the rulebook is an in-depth discussion on stagecraft, safety, and choosing a location for your game.

Character Creation

Character creation for *Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition* allows more of a focus on roleplaying than actual statistics. Statistics are straightforward and allow for easy usage of the diceless tradition that goes hand-in-hand with LARPs.

All *Cthulhu Live* characters have four main statistics – education, dexterity, constitution and power. From these, four secondary statistics are calculated – magic points, wound points, luck points (which are sacrificed when a character is in a jam in hope of increasing his success), and sanity.

Each character may also possess advantages and disadvantages, which are basically your run-of-the-mill knacks and flaws.

The last part of character creation involves choosing skills for your character based on two individual point pools calculated from your main statistics – combat skills and academic & trade skills.

Overall, character creation is simple and quick if you have a concept. The rules even include templates for characters of certain professions, such as your general police officer, which can make the actual rules part of character creation a breeze. Actually fleshing out the character is up to its creator.

Playing the Game and Running the Game

These chapters cover all the rules aspects of *Cthulhu Live* that are important to players (Playing the Game) and keepers (Running the Game). Things such as roles of all the participants in a game of *Cthulhu Live*, skill tests, sanity, combat (the majority of this chapter) and damage are covered in this chapter. The Playing the Game chapter also has a section titled *Being a Better Roleplayer*, which is a great help to those who are new to the LARP scene and gives several useful tips to anyone who does any form of roleplaying.

As far as skill tests go, the system is very easy: The keeper (game master) assigns a difficulty to the skill test being attempted and then looks at the character's skill in the activity and modifies it with a main stat appropriate to the situation. If the character's

modified skill value is equal to or greater than the value the keeper set, he has succeeded. Unskilled attempts and team efforts are supported by the system and are very simple.

Combat takes up a large portion of the book in order to clearly encompass a variety of situations, such as sudden death, poison, melee and ranged combat, and special combat maneuvers. Despite its length, there is nothing overly difficult about the combat system, which allows for a quick and deadly (in the game world, of course) resolution of fights in combat.

The Running the Game chapter also has several tips and tools for the keeper to be aware of before and during the game. Things such as safety for all participants are discussed in this chapter in addition to the system rules.

Magic

This is probably the most complex portion of the *Cthulhu Live* rules. The rules are not hard to understand, but they are very inclusive since most magic in the Cthulhu sense can be very difficult to stage in the real world. The section also gives an explanation of how the magic in the *Cthulhu Live* system is not the same as in the fantasy sense. You'll find no mages slinging fireballs willy-nilly here.

A lot of this chapter contains filler about modern cults. This filler material can get fairly dark, though it is all written appropriately from an educational standpoint; however, this is where some mature ideas are discussed and part of the reason why I do not recommend *Cthulhu Live* to a younger audience.

Creatures of the Mythos

This chapter is part stagecraft advice, part bestiary. The chapter contains 28 fully statted monsters that can be used in a *Cthulhu Live* game, and most will fit in any horror game. This should please any keeper creating game scripts, and most *Cthulhu Live* game sessions use very few monsters because they do cost money to stage, some more than others.

The other half of this chapter is dedicated to telling those involved in the planning of the *Cthulhu Live* game how to cost-effectively create the monsters they will need. There are several fun and cheap ways to create monsters presented here. Plus, if you want good ideas for a Halloween costume, you'll find plenty here. I can't promise that everyone will know exactly what you're supposed to be, but most of the costume ideas can be used to create simple but scary costumes.

Outsiders & Psychic Abilities

This chapter presents additional game options, one of which is outsiders, characters (usually NPCs) who have been consumed by the darkness of the Cthulhu Mythos. This option basically adds to and changes some of the rules for normal characters – for example, sanity becomes façade, the ability to cover up one's insanity.

Psychic Abilities are also presented as an option to outfit both PCs and NPCs if the keeper sees so fit. This chapter really filled a gap for me. Without twisted ex-humans and psychic powers, I feel that the horror genre would not be complete, and the

Cthulhu Live rules do a great job incorporating these options into the rule system.

Stagecraft

This chapter presents numerous ways to easily create or find a lot of the props that can be used in a game of *Cthulhu Live*. Many of the ideas here can be done easily at home. This chapter may also be useful to the general roleplayer who enjoys using props in his tabletop games. Being more familiar with tabletop games myself, I found some of this chapter helpful for my future hunts for props. There are lots of good ideas here.

Also discussed here is how the staff of a *Cthulhu Live* game should go about finding a location for the game. The chapter talks about general safety and security, which are vital to not only the success of a LARP, but also ensuring that no one gets hurt or arrested.

Conclusion

Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition was something new for me. I have heard ofLARPs, even considered finding a group to try one with, but I have never gotten around to it. Despite my usual preference to table-top roleplaying, *Cthulhu Live* was something I looked forward to reviewing, and it did not disappoint. The system is solid and simple. The book's ideas for stagecraft and its advice for roleplaying are great.

Despite the game's great playability and easy learning curve, I mentioned before that I do not recommend the game to a younger audience. It is evident to me that mature themes pop up in the game, and, being a LARP, it also requires players who are mature enough not to cause dangerous situations in game. However, for mature gamers – LARP veterans and newcomers like myself – who enjoy Lovecraftian storytelling or the horror genre itself, I strongly suggest you pick up *Cthulhu Live 3rd Edition*.

Archetype: LARP Rulebook

Body 12 (Game Mechanics): The system is easy to learn and very well-balanced.

Mind 10 (Organization): Most of the content is easy to find and is presented in a clear, logical manner.

Spirit 10 (Look and Feel): The cover looks awesome and a lot of the photography inside is great.

Attack 10 (Value of Content): The book's 208 pages of great rules, great ideas for stagecraft, and great tips for roleplaying and insuring the safety of the LARP group, all for \$19.95, makes this a worthy investment for fans ofLARPs or those new to the scene.

Defense 9 (Originality of Content): Obviously, since the game is based on H.P. Lovecraft's and other Cthulhu mythos authors' works, some of the material is not original.

Health 8 (Physical Quality): It's a soft cover, so it will be vulnerable to some wear and tear as time goes on – more so than a hardcover (though I believe the book is available in hardcover, but it may cost you more).

Magic 10 (Options and Adaptability): The game's rules are adaptable to almost any horror game, making them useful in most situations. They may even be useful in an action genre, but it may require creating some new material.

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