

KOBOLD

GUIDE TO COMBAT



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Kobold Guide to Combat

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First Edition

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Kobold Guide to Combat

Introduction

Entering the fray

Janna Silverstein

Storytelling is conflict. Whether that conflict is between a cursed knight and a half-elf prince at swordpoint, a father and son disagreeing about the direction of the family business, a troupe of adventurers facing down a Cyclops at a bridge, or the armies of two great nations clashing over ultimate power, stories move as a result of conflict. It creates drama, tension; it pushes a story, an adventure to a turning point. It's certainly what gets roleplaying games moving. Interests at cross-purposes, kingdoms in peril, the possession of treasure hidden, found, stolen and retrieved—it's all conflict. In RPGs, and often in fiction, the most explicit expression of conflict is combat.

With this book, we wanted to examine combat from as many different perspectives as we could, to talk about everything we could manageably cover in a relatively brief way: the place of conflict in games and stories, what makes for a great fight, the roles that different characters may play, and some of the types of combat you might encounter in your journey as a gamer, a game designer, a writer or reader.

I knew we'd hit on a key topic when I came across an in-depth discussion of the place of combat in games on Facebook earlier this year. I read the whole exchange—more than 50 posts—as players and designers discussed how to interpret the number of pages a game manual spent explaining combat rules. Is a game mainly about the combat or is combat merely one element of a larger gaming experience that's also rich with social interaction, negotiation, trickster maneuvers, and more? Clearly people feel strongly about how combat shapes a game, how it flavors an adventure. This book is here to contribute to that conversation. And make no mistake: I don't think we've covered all the answers. We could do a whole volume on different kinds of weapons, for example. Combat is a huge subject. But I think we've gotten a pretty good start.

I've been delighted by the folks who were ready to step onto the battlefield when I extended the invitation. The table of contents shows the variety of people ready to discuss it: from gaming luminaries like Ed Greenwood, Wolfgang Baur, and Chris Pramas to bestselling novelists John A. Pitts and Ken Scholes, and the Nebula Award-winning fantasy author—and former combat nurse—

Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. We've even got self-defense expert and author Rory Miller, along with so many others. You'll find essays here that focus on the nuts and bolts of gaming. Steve Winter's chapter on military systems at war is chock full of history. And we've got essays that approach the subject from more of a storytelling point of view. You'll find that every essay is only one facet of the larger conversation, each brings a unique perspective, and will be useful to your gaming, fighting, storytelling experience.

I invite you to enter the fray and get involved in the discussion.

The Big Picture

Why we fight

Combat as Communication

Jeff Grubb

I know a number of writers who write excellent but ultimately unnecessary combat scenes. They are fluid and smooth and bring you into the flow of combat, and are filled with broad sweeps, backhand blocks, and devilish dispatches. You catch the feel of the clash of blades and the rippling breeze that follows a longsword's swipe or a crossbow bolt's near miss. They are, in effect, poetic. But in the larger sense of the work, these combat scenes are also unneeded. You can skip to the bottom of the combat sequence and pick up the narrative again and know that nothing of note had happened within the flashing of blades and the exchange of gunfire. It is the combat equivalent of the musical numbers in the middle of a 1930s film, where you can comfortably get up to get popcorn without missing too much of the plot: entertaining but empty as far as the story is concerned.

Compare this with the climactic combat in *The Empire Strike Back*, where Darth Vader disarms Luke (literally), then drops the bomb of his true parentage on him. Or in the original *Star Wars*, where Obi-wan confronts his former student, and ultimately sacrifices himself to provide purpose to his new pupil. Or in *The Princess Bride*, where Westley and Inigo converse in the midst of their swordfight on the Cliffs of Insanity.

Inigo Montoya: *You seem a decent fellow . . . I hate to kill you.*

Westley: *You seem a decent fellow . . . I hate to die.*

In the first two examples, the world of the adventure changes as a result of the combat. The plot hinges on that moment. The stakes are great and long lasting. In the third example, the stakes are lower, but we already see Inigo and Westley bonding, forming a friendship as they prepare to duel to the supposed death. Inigo shows his regret, while Westley is honest and amusing. Character is revealed, bonds are forged, and we get an idea of who these people with the swords really are.

This is the challenge of combat, whether in stories or roleplaying games (RPGs) or massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). Unless there is something going on with the characters themselves, combat is little more than raw activity, filling space on the page, at the table, or the screen. And combat is made more engaging when it is thought of as a means of communication as opposed to mere action.

COMBAT AS A DIALOGUE

Combat is dramatized physical conflict between two or more characters. The simplest example is in the traditional fantasy roleplaying game, where the players descend into some underground crypt to battle, in search of gold, fame and/or experience (their purpose depends on the game system, but much of this discussion will revolve around that largest of gaming gorillas, *Dungeons & Dragons*). Much

of what occurs then is raw action, of fighting stuff and savoring the rich rewards of success. It is the base activity of the typical dungeon-crawling adventure and, for most of us, it is a perfectly pleasant way of spending an evening with friends.

But it doesn't have the same emotional underpinning as the more cinematic examples set above. There may be a particular call or comment or quip that bears merit but, in general, the bad guys are disposable and the base communication of that fight is relatively simple.

Yes, combat is a form of communication, where the participants are making clear their goals and their desires and what they are willing to do to attain those goals. Conversation works like that: I want to inform, or convince, or impress, or cajole you. There is a trade of knowledge, of recognition, or of status. These are interesting exchanges. Dialogue in which we are making small talk over drinks is literally that—small talk of no consequence.

Similarly, while fighting occurs for a purpose, more often fighting is merely an activity. The base conversation of most fantasy RPGs (and their descendants, the MMOs) falls into the small talk category, in that the bounds of the conversation are already in place and repeated, with variation, throughout the adventure/dungeon/work. Here's what it boils down to:

Player: *You there! You are evil! You must die for the good of all, and I shall take your stuff!*

Monster: *Argh! I am evil and hate you because I am evil! It is you who will do the dying!*

The basic conversation is hard-wired into the game through mechanics like alignment, which separates good from evil, law from chaos, and provides an easy justification for violence. The monster is on the other team (notably waving the “*Yay, Evil!*” banner) and as such the player is reassured as to his actions. The monster is also, well, monstrous, an idealized sense of Other, a slouching beast of unspeakable habits and unforgivable manners.

Again, it is a reassurance that combat is the easy action. Indeed, many creatures in RPGs will attack on sight, which saves the player the moral choice of attacking first. In MMOs, the creatures have color-coded name tags for easy identification: red for immediately hostile, yellow for hostile only if attacked, and green for non-hostile. That last also includes hostile forces that you just can't attack yet, like a villain who has a monologue before suddenly switching to red. Sadly, most players confronted with such a bad guy don't listen to the monologue, but merely wait for him to finish so they can hit first.

The simplicity of this form of communication works very well within the fantasy environment, and may be one reason why fantasy genre games do so well. A bipolar world of right and wrong tends to justify that use of force, whereas environments where such ethical lines are blurred prove more problematic. Another genre that does well is superheroes, which also tend to established clear-cut mores of right and wrong. It is a conversation, and a method of communication, but a simple one.

But combat can be more interesting if there are higher stakes, or different rewards, available to the player.

THE SURRENDER SCENARIO

Here's an easy one for most players: surrender. You're fighting your way into the treasure hordes of some cultist organization. Waves of screaming cultists, the name of their unholy deity on their lips, come crashing down on you. You battle fiercely. And then, suddenly, the last survivor throws down

his weapon and surrenders. Now what?

The traditional tendency, particularly toward monstrous opponents, is to slay the creature and move on. But if the cultist is suddenly human (or one of the “good” races), the moral justification gets frayed. The creature is no longer a direct threat. The creature is no longer attacking. He is relatively harmless. What now?

I have seen (and been part of) groups that have crashed on this particular shore. The script, as it were, is suddenly changed. Some players will stick with the old script, killing the now-prisoner. Others will seek to find a way around this new challenge to their playing style. It is as if, in making small talk, you suddenly find yourself deeply engaged in a philosophical conflict with the person you are talking to.

Oddly, surrender is not a thing for most RPGs (given the bipolar nature of conflict demonstrated above), and there are few raw mechanics to handle it. The original D&D did have a mechanism that belonged to dragons alone, which allowed them to be subdued (with the result that dragons were often more desirable enemies because you could get away with defeating them while inflicting less damage). Such a dragon could be sold out of the game or ransom itself with its treasure. The only literary analog I know of for this was in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, by Tolkien, where the dragon is brought back to town carrying its own treasure. But that example is a rarity.

To handle surrender, you have to decide what the rules are in your campaign. The easy one is that once a creature is defeated, it is defeated, and will not rise again to fight the victors. Intelligent creatures of a lawful bent can give their word to leave and never return. Those of a more evil or chaotic nature (noting how easily the nature of alignment helps determine reactions) would be more motivated by fear of the victors coming back and doing worse to them if they ever run into them again.

The point, though, in either case, is that the opponent is removed from the board as a viable threat. Experience points for defeating the bad guy are awarded. The prisoner may be brought along with the group or told to flee, never to be seen again. That part of the conversation is over—the players have achieved dominance and occupy a superior position in the communication. A new form of communication begins.

It should be noted that this only works if the GM makes clear it works. Should the first kobold who surrenders to a party immediately turn on them in the next combat, biting ankles when the players are fighting other creatures, then the players will never trust kobolds (or anything else that surrenders) again. So if you take this route, feel free to help the players understand that mercy is perfectly acceptable—that experience is rewarded if the monster is dead or only roughed up and driven away.

The game master (GM) should use this as a seasoning, not as a regular feature. A set of guards, recruited from the hinterlands to protect a caravan, may be more concerned about their own lives than the items they are charged with protecting. However, trained city guards who must defend the walls against potential foes are more alert, more dedicated, and less likely to surrender to the first broadsword-waving barbarian that assails them.

A MORE VALUABLE TREASURE

An enemy’s surrender is an opportunity for the GM. The defeated cultist will turn out his pockets, of course, and swear off claim on any plunder the players find further on. But the greater treasure that the

surrendered creature can provide is knowledge. What lies ahead? How strong are forces? Are there any traps?

GMs usually loathe providing such details of future encounters, but with a little planning this can be an opening for further development, to give fights a little more meaning. Often the surrendered kobold is too stupid to provide detailed plans, but giving general ideas (number of forces, spellcasters, general layout, where the prisoners are being held) is well within most rank-and-file grunts' understanding. They aren't going to be able to tell you the shift changes for the guards, or the secret passwords. They may neglect to tell you everything (like the pit traps the cult activates in the main hall in case of attack), but less specific information foreshadows what the players will encounter. And in doing so, the combat becomes narrative.

MMOs, by the way, can force this change with their ability to set the "agro" of the creatures. A creature that surrenders suddenly shifts from being a red hostile to a green non-combatant, and therefore cannot be suddenly run through by an impulsive player until it delivers whatever information the designer chooses to share. Tabletop RPGs offer a lot more options, but the price is that the players may suddenly and violently pass on those options.

The conflict, however, is still present: hero and cultist are still foes, but the nature of that conflict changes from brute force to negotiation. Such talks should be relatively brief—you don't want to get bogged down in interrogation with every opponent, but it is a strong exchange. Your bad guy wants to live, and will be willing to provide a certain amount of information (up to a point) to be able to maintain that status.

And as a result, suddenly the combat has a purpose: the players' knowledge base of the area is increased. Future threats are foreshadowed. Something actually happens beyond a compartmentalized single conflict, and the conflict becomes part of a larger narrative. Knowledge becomes part of the treasure, and may influence future decisions as well as any magical ring or powerful weapon.

UPPING THE THREAT

One of the best things that our newly-surrendered friend can provide is information about his superiors. Most powerful creatures, including leaders, last just one encounter, unless specific measures are taken to maintain their lives (teleports, illusions, delaying devices—again, MMOs get around this merely by changing the creatures' tag to "You can't hit this" and the creatures escape, which can prove unsatisfying). A captured opponent, however, can provide some groundwork on the nature of an upcoming opponent, which may in turn prepare (or daunt) the players.

"Why yes," hisses the defeated cultist. "Our master, great Orthox, is awesomely powerful, a wizard versed in setting fire to unbelievers. But more dangerous are his pets—a pair of terrible hounds with fire in their mouths and hate in their bellies."

And at this point the players at the table should look at each other, concerned about the hellhounds that probably lay between them and the treasure.

This method builds narrative momentum, creating a physical goal at the heart of the cultist's temple, and raises the stakes. Now the enemy has a name and a face and the player has a good idea of what he can do. And the nature of the cult itself as more than an abstract bunch of enemies is strengthened.

ONE MORE THING

A last piece DMs can use in their scenarios are the famous last words. They can be as dramatic as a sudden revelation about true parentage, or a warning of things to come, or a cry to some previously unknown god, or a potential death curse. (If using the latter, feel free to call for saving throws, whether the curse is truly effective or mere profanity.) This is a wonderful opportunity to sow the seeds of the future adventures, of shadows operating behind the obvious bad guys, and to foretell future conflicts.

Treating combat as a method to communicate to the players is therefore a spice that can improve the meal of a standard adventure. Combat, and, more importantly, informed combat, forms connective tissue within an adventure. It should not be overused—just as there is small talk that signifies little, there are small combats that exist merely to test resolve and resources and to keep the lower classes out. Such fights can be used to keep the major battles from slamming into each other, and create a sense pacing within the larger adventure.

Combat as conversation can also create moral grey areas for the players where their own resolve is tested. The cultist may have rolled on his comrades in order to save his own hide, but he remains the cultist of an unspeakable god. Should he be allowed to flee? Was a deal made when he agreed to help? Of such questions character development is made.

Finally, the use of conversational combat adds depth to both the world and the players. It fills in the gaps and connects the individual combats with a larger world, strengthening its bonds. A spared (or escaped) foe may show up later (but not too soon) in a new situation, creating rivalries and relationships. Some may go straight, while others may find themselves in similar situations. All of this makes of deeper stories and more interesting games.

Tactics for tyrants

By Krovasch the Charnel King, as translated by Chris Pramas

***Note from the translator:** There is no polite way to say it: this treatise is full of bastardry. The author clearly hates adventurers and they must have caused him some trouble in the course of his reign. Game masters may find some of his recommendations useful as ways to challenge their players. The point, though, is not to simply kill the player characters. Any GM can do that. Rather, consider these ideas to liven up combats, to give the villains some agency, and to make encounters the PCs can't roll over with brute force alone. Their use is also guaranteed to make the players hate the villain(s) responsible!*

In my long centuries as Charnel King, I have seen many “dark lords” rise and fall. Every black-hearted warlord or demonic cult leader thinks he (or she—remember Gilkera of the Hundred Blades!) has what it takes to rule an empire with an iron fist. As history shows all too well, this is not the case and the reason is all too clear, at least from the throne of skulls I’m sitting on. These so-called dark lords were nothing but jumped up thugs. They learned nothing of strategy and tactics, never mind the manipulation of hearts and minds. Their answer was the same to every problem: crush it! All too often, these dark lords were not brought down by mighty armies. No, they fell in the most humiliating way possible. I’m talking, of course, about “adventurers,” the self-proclaimed heroes and self-righteous hypocrites that plague us all. And the sad thing is that it didn’t have to be that way. With just a few tactical tricks, these dark lords could have carved their names in blood for decades to come.

Luckily for you, I am feeling generous. In this short treatise I am going to share some strategies and tactics for dealing with adventurers that any tyrant should appreciate. I start from the premise that you have tried and failed to smash your foes with unsubtle frontal attacks. If that tactic was working for you, you would not be reading this.

DISCIPLINE

Our first topic is discipline. The thing to understand is that adventurers rarely have it. They are emotional. They are impulsive. Many of them are greedy. You can use all these things against them if you instill some discipline in your own minions.

I have seen far too many tyrants demand that their servants stand and die when a battle is going against them. You may have thousands of servants, but it is simply useless to throw them away in this fashion. A much better use for them is a feigned flight. They must seem to break and flee. You want the adventurers to believe that they are winning. You want them to follow the “fleeing” troops, losing cohesion in the process. It’s best if you can split them up, and have the adventurers chasing fragments of your troops hither and yon.

And where do you lead these glory-hungry adventurers? Your deviousness is the only limit! Typically, you want to lead them into an ambush by fresh troops. Imagine their faces when they rush forward only to find three ranks of archers or giants with a pile of ready-to-throw boulders waiting for them. Traps are another fine option. Your troops can be briefed so they know where not to run. The adventurers, without such foreknowledge, are easy prey for pit and net traps, collapsing ceilings, or any other deadly traps you can devise.

TURN THE FLANKS

Some adventurers are smart enough not to fall for such tricks. In this case a simple but effective tactic is to try to turn their flanks, or (better yet) attack them from the rear if possible. Since you almost always have numbers on your side, you should use them to your advantage. Cut off the enemy's route of escape if you can. Choose your flankers carefully, however. You want to instill panic in the adventurers when they are attacked from an unexpected quarter. Don't send goblins if you can send ogres, as I like to say.

The important thing here is to get your flankers in position undetected. How you do that depends on terrain and your magical resources. In a dungeon environment, cunningly placed secret doors can let your minions emerge behind the adventurers with no warning. In open terrain, disguised trenches can serve the same purpose. If you have decent wizards under your command, by all means use them to move troops quickly around the battlefield or to disguise their movement with illusion magic.

Speaking of wizards, your flankers should be on the lookout for adventurer spellcasters. They tend to lurk in the back, so when your surprise attack hits, they will be vulnerable. Your troops should find the enemy wizards and gang up on them. They cannot stand such an attack for long. If your troops take out the spellcasters first, they will have an easier time with the rest.

Another excellent option when turning the flank is death from above. In the heat of battle, few spare the time to look up for new threats. If you have harpies, gargoyles, or similar flying minions, their sudden appearance can turn a battle in your favor. If you have something like a chimera or a dragon, even better! If their first indication of the attack is fire raining down from above, you are on your way to victory.

WEAR THEM DOWN

When the enemy is fresh, well-fed and -rested, and alert, they are at their best. After they have been through a few skirmishes and a major battle, they are likely to find somewhere to hole up. This is a smart approach on their part, I will admit. You must impress upon your lieutenants that they cannot let it happen. After a defeat, your forces may be in disarray. Your lieutenants may be in shock after watching their prized troops get cut up. It doesn't matter. You always have more troops (and lieutenants, for that matter). The important thing here is to keep up the attack. Don't give them a chance to rest. Don't let them get their spells back. Don't let them replenish their ammunition.

Your attacks should be made with as much power as can be mustered on the scene, of course, but in this instance it is acceptable to launch attacks that are likely to fail. Your goal is to wear them down until they become vulnerable to a final rush.

SPIES AND MISINFORMATION

When brooding alone in your dark tower, it is often difficult to understand what these adventurers really want. Sometimes their goals are laughable and easily ignored (“Give flowers to unicorns for peace!”) but other times they have specific goals that you wish you knew about earlier. They might, for example, be seeking the only weapon that can kill you on the mortal plane. That’s information you need to have! But how to get it?

The adventurers will not give up that sort of information willingly to you or your minions, but they might to someone they think is an ally. Over time most adventuring groups increase in size, as the members gain followers or hire henchmen. This is how you get spies in their camp. Adventurers will say just about anything in front of their henchmen and won’t think twice about it. A spy in the right place can get you key information before it’s too late.

If you cannot get an agent into their camp in this way, you can try the phony deserter trick. You send a few soldiers their way who claim they are fed up with your evil and are deserting your cause. Humans work best for this, as they are more believable deserters than orcs and such. The adventurers are likely to be cautious around the deserters and won’t give up much information in front of them. You can give false information to them through the deserters, however. Maybe they know a secret tunnel that leads right into your fortress. Or they witnessed the start of a magical ritual that’s going to summon a demon army unless it’s stopped. Whatever the story, you hope to spur the adventurers into wrong action. You want them to walk right into your trap. They will do it, too, if the deserters are convincing enough.

EXPLOIT VULNERABILITIES

Adventurers often consider themselves invulnerable, and it is true that they sometimes have the favor of the gods or access to powerful magic items and spells. Rather than another direct assault, try coming at them through their support network. They rest between their adventures, don’t they? They must restock on supplies, spell components, and ammunition, correct? Use your spies to find out where that happens. Is there a town or city they favor? A keep on the borderlands, perhaps? (Oh, how they love their keeps on the borderlands!) Once you have identified their base of operations, simply wait until they leave on their next adventure or lead them off on one yourself. While they are gone, wipe that town or keep off the map. Find their local friends and kill them. Poison the wells. Leave nothing behind for them. Then, if they establish a new base, do it again.

The advantages to this strategy are many. First, you are avoiding fighting your toughest opponents and thus preserving your troops. You are sticking the adventurers in their soft underbelly. Second, you are using your numbers to best effect. Third, you are instilling fear in them. Now they have to wonder if their friends are going to die the next time they go off to plunder a dungeon. This puts them in a defensive frame of mind and gives you the initiative. If they decide to stay home and defend their homes, great. Let them waste their time protecting some worthless town while you enact your grandiose plans!

You may sometimes find it to your advantage to take prisoners. They may be able to provide useful information on the habits of the adventurers. You may also find out if there is any tension within the group that you can exploit. Prisoners also make great bait. You can get the adventurers exactly where you want them with a few well-placed prisoners.

YOUR GREATEST TEMPTATION

There will come a point when you have simply had it with these verminous adventurers. They will have ruined more of your plans than you can count, and slain some of your favorite lieutenants. In that hour you will decide that enough is enough. You will say you've had it with incompetent minions. You will swear that there is only one way to end this threat: do it yourself.

This will be your greatest temptation. I am here to tell you to resist it and the reason is simple. You are giving them exactly what they want—a chance to take you down. If they kill you, they win. “But Charnel King,” I hear you say, “I am mighty enough to make nations tremble!” I hear you. I do. You wouldn't have made it this far if you didn't have serious skills in personal combat. You must remember, however, that you are not a dark warrior, you are a dark *lord*. Your job is to lead. If your latest assault on the adventures fails, you can always plan another one. But not if you are dead.

FIGHT SMARTER

As you can see, there is more to being a dark lord than an army willing to scream your name as they die. If you want your reign to last, if you want to pass on your empire to the heir the Gods of the Underworld have anointed for you, you need to defeat all your enemies. You can't do that without some knowledge of strategy and tactics. You will never reach heights of Krovasch the Charnel King, but if you work hard and apply these lessons, you can your write your own bloody chapter in the pages of history.

Military systems at War

Steve Winter

The notion that warfare is older than mankind has an appealing cynicism, but it's hardly true. Fighting is ageless—many kinds of animals fight and kill their own kind for territory, mates, dominance, and other reasons besides food—but fighting is not warfare. True warfare requires organization. It began when people started settling into towns.

This chapter looks at the organization of some of the most famous and successful armies of the classical and medieval eras. The technology and social structures of most fantasy settings aren't much different from classical and medieval Europe, so it's an easy extrapolation from these historical examples to whatever sprawling fantasy empire, seagoing raiders, or barbaric hordes populate your campaign. Use them as models, and see how they change your play and your outcomes.

SUCCESSING DESPITE YOUR LIMITATIONS

Organization covers many factors in an army's success. It affects:

- How large the army can be before it fragments or gets in its own way
- How long the army can stay in the field before it dwindles away from desertion and attrition
- How precisely the army can be controlled and maneuvered on and off the battlefield
- The army's ability to fight as a coordinated whole (as opposed to the fighting ability of individual warriors or small groups)

Size

With primitive organization, large numbers of warriors couldn't be maintained for long. An army consumes not just food and water but also animals (eaten, or killed or wounded in combat or transit), weapons and armor, medical supplies, transport, and money. When any of them run out, the army starts shrinking rapidly. Efficient organization ensures that essential material is on hand when and where it's needed.

Campaigning Season

In the most primitive types of armies, there's no distinction between soldiers and civilians. Every able-bodied man fights; every able-bodied man also plants, tends, and harvests the crops and livestock that sustain the population until the next harvest. Nature puts the bookends on such an army's campaigning season. Soldiers can't take up arms until after the seed is in the ground, and they must be home again by harvest time.

An army that relies on professional soldiers is free from that limitation. It can take to the field as soon as weather permits, and it can keep marching and fighting until weather forces it back into garrison.

The citizen-type army faces the professional-type army at a huge disadvantage for a host of reasons. For example, the simple fact that the professional army can delay its attack until the amateurs are forced by nature either to drastically thin their ranks or doom themselves and their families to a year of hunger is a powerful weapon.

Command and Control

Lining up an army for battle was a laborious process that could take hours. Battles were fought by mutual consent. If the enemy wasn't interested in fighting at that time and place, they'd just march away while you struggled to get your army arranged to attack. The faster an army could array itself for battle, the better the chances it had to fight on terms of its choosing.

Once an army was deployed, it could be controlled in only the simplest ways. On a field covered with thousands of men and horses, a commander's voice might carry 100 yards, but 50 is more likely. Flags, drums, and bugles were more reliable means of sending orders across the length of an army, but they can communicate only the simplest commands. "Advance," "retreat" (always risky in the face of the enemy), and "send in the reserves now" are about the extent of it.

Cohesion

Throughout the ages, one thing has remained constant about soldiering: it's all about the team, not the individual.

No matter how fierce its individual warriors might be, an army that couldn't maintain tight formation in the face of danger and casualties would be overwhelmed piecemeal by more cohesive enemy troops until the whole army collapsed in defeat. The ability to "divide and conquer" is as powerful tactically as it is strategically. Cracking the enemy formation was almost always a surer road to victory than just inflicting casualties. The enemy could be shattered through shock of impact the way the Greek phalanxes and Norman cavalry did it, or through casualties just as the Roman legions and English archers did it. Either way, casualties alone were not the goal. It wasn't victory until the enemy line crumbled and enemy soldiers threw down their weapons and ran for their lives.

WEAPONS

Ancient armies were defined by their weapons of choice as much as by their tactics. Specific weapons lend themselves to specific tactics and formations to the point where those combinations are almost indivisible.

Spears

The spear is in many ways the iconic weapon of classical and medieval armies. It's also a perfect illustration of the idea that weapons define tactics. Spears are easy to make and relatively easy to use (using them well is a different issue). More than most other weapons, the use of spears is optimized when troops stand shoulder-to-shoulder in close-packed, mutually-supporting ranks. Thus they are ideal for quickly-raised, poorly-trained troops. All the spearman needs to do is stay in position, keep the blade pointed at the enemy, and do what everyone else around him is doing.

A few spear armies rose well above this minimal standard. The Greeks at Marathon, for example, were citizen-soldiers, not professional warriors, but they lifted citizen-soldiering to a high level. Alexander the Great conquered the known world with unbreakable blocks of exceptionally well-

trained, professional spearmen.

The chief disadvantage of spears is that rigid blocks of spears are inflexible. A phalanx of spearmen can advance slowly to its front and little else; turning is difficult even with well-trained spearmen and nearly impossible otherwise. If the phalanx is attacked from the flank or rear, it's likely to crumble. Quick-moving light troops or cavalry are essential to protect the spearmen's flanks. Ranks of spearmen also make lovely targets for archers and slingers, thanks to their high density compared to other troop types.

Though a phalanx advances by necessity at a stately pace, it's a shock-of-impact (usually just "shock") formation. When spearmen contact the enemy's front line, a pushing match ensues, with a strong advantage going to the side with the longest spears. Casualties during this phase of the battle would be light, but that changed as soon as one line was pushed out of shape or casualties opened up gaps in the defense. Then, very suddenly, one defender would be faced by two or three attackers, or would face simultaneous attacks from the front and the side. Once spearmen could no longer defend each other, the formation would crumble rapidly as men turned to the only other defense—running away. Rallying and reforming a broken battle line in the confusion of combat was almost impossible with primitive command and communication systems. A highly disciplined army such as the Spartans or the Macedonians might stand their ground in the face of impending disaster, but few others could.

Axes and Swords

Employed quite differently from spears, axes and swords are less cumbersome. A block of swordsmen or axemen in formation can move and turn more flexibly. Being flexible means that a troop's flanks are less vulnerable because a portion of a unit can turn to face a threat from another direction.

In most cases, swords and axes are not shock weapons. Swordsmen don't push a wedge into the enemy's line or bear the enemy over with weight of impact. Instead, they kill, gradually cutting their way into the enemy until the casualties are overwhelming.

Swords and axes need room to swing, so the soldiers can't stand as tightly together as spearmen do. Low density reduces their vulnerability to missiles but increases their vulnerability to shock. Compared to spearmen, who might stand just three feet from their neighbors, a formation of swordsmen or axemen might have six or even eight feet between files.

An exception to that was the Roman legionary, who used a short sword especially well-suited to stabbing. Roman swordsmen could operate in formations nearly as tight as spearmen did, which gave them a great advantage against the looser formations they often faced.

LIGHT TROOPS

"Light troops" is a vague term covering infantry that relied on mobility rather than armor and formation for protection. Such troops fought in loose mobs to facilitate rapid movement, and used at least a few light missile weapons (javelins, slings) to harass the enemy. Chiefly they scouted, foraged, infiltrated gaps in an enemy position, occupied obstructed terrain that would break up a rigid formation, and protected the flanks of less flexible formations—mainly by delaying an approaching enemy, not by defeating it.

The biggest danger to light troops came from heavier, faster enemy cavalry or chariots. In contrast, light troops were too spread out to be good targets for missiles, and so weren't as vulnerable to those weapons as more compact formations might be.

Skirmishers

Skirmishers differ from light troops in that the skirmishers' chief weapons are slings, javelins, small bows, and other missile weapons. Otherwise, they operate much like light troops, relying on speed rather than armor or formation for protection. Their main function is harassment, and the main danger to them comes from enemy cavalry. It was common to spread skirmishers across the front of an army to rain arrows and sling stones on the approaching enemy. When the enemy drew close, skirmishers retreated through or around friendly units into protective positions on the flanks.

Missiles

Missile troops operate in formation, relying on the density and deadliness of their fire for effectiveness. Their purpose was to weaken enemy formations and throw them into disarray before their own spearmen, swordsmen, or cavalry charged. When missiles were used effectively, this tactic delivered a powerful one-two punch.

A trio of exceptional battles during the Hundred Years War—Agincourt, Crecy, and Poitiers—created the myth of the almost supernatural lethality of the longbow. Missile troops on their own, however, stood little chance against a determined assault from enemy infantry or cavalry. That's not to say that bows in general and the longbow in particular were not excellent weapons, but as usual, the myth exceeds the reality.

Chariots

Chariots were used only in the early stages of organized warfare. They have terrific terror and shock potential against loose infantry or against the flanks of inflexible phalanxes.

Their drawbacks, however, are significant. While individual chariots are relatively nimble, they're cumbersome in formation, making them easy for quick-footed troops to outmaneuver. They can operate only on open, unobstructed, level ground.

The chief reason chariots were initially favored over cavalry is that horses of that time were too small to carry men in battle. When horses were finally bred large enough to be effective mounts, cavalry rose in prominence and chariots became obsolete in war.

Cavalry: Light, Medium, and Heavy

A soldier mounted on a horse has tremendous advantages over a man on foot. First, cavalry can cover a long stretch of ground at a fast pace and the riders will still be reasonably rested and ready to fight when they arrive. Second, horses are faster than humans. Mounted troops get to choose when, where, and even whether there will be a fight between cavalry and infantry. Mounted troops can circle around foot formations to get onto or behind their flanks. If a cavalry officer doesn't like the odds, his riders can easily escape enemy infantry (which is a big reason why the nobility and rich patricians usually went to war on horseback), while infantry can't run away from cavalry that's bent on catching them. Third, sitting atop a horse lets a mounted soldier put all his strength and weight into downward stabs and swings of his weapon. A thrust from a lance or spear is nearly unstoppable with the momentum of a charging horse behind it. Finally, the horse itself is both intimidating and formidable.

Cavalry reached its full potential only when it was enhanced by the simple but ingenious invention of the stirrup. Without stirrups, a mounted soldier is at risk of tumbling from the horse with every sword swing and violent maneuver. With stirrups, a rider is as stable and sure-footed as a man standing on the ground, if not even more so.

Light cavalry was typically equipped with swords or spears but no armor and possibly no stirrups. It was good for scouting, protecting the army's flanks, and chasing down a beaten enemy in flight. It couldn't deal with heavier cavalry or even with infantry that wasn't already near the breaking point.

Medium cavalry is differentiated from light cavalry mainly by the addition of some armor and by more significant training to press an attack. It still could not attack a steady wall of enemy spearmen from the front, but almost anything was fair game if the cavalry could maneuver onto the enemy's side or rear. In other words, medium cavalry was equipped and trained to fight rather than to act as a screening and scouting force. In most regards, this difference in training, not equipment, was sometimes the biggest distinction between light and medium cavalry.

Heavy cavalry was equipped and prepared to charge into the enemy, shatter their formation, and fight blade-to-blade from horseback against nearly any foe. Both horse and rider wore significant armor. All that armor cut down the cavalry's mobility, but also made for a nearly unstoppable force. European knights are the most obvious examples of this type, but the Mongols, the Goths, and even Alexander the Great incorporated heavy cavalry into their armies.

Mounted Bows

The difference between cavalry and mounted bows is their method of fighting. Cavalry closes in with the foe and fights in melee, using the size and strength of its mounts to overpower the enemy. Mounted bows take the opposite approach; they use their mounts' speed and agility to keep out of the enemy's reach while harassing them to death with arrows. Some mounted bowmen also carried swords or stabbing spears; they could ride into foes who were disorganized or panicked by the rain of missiles and cut them down as medium cavalry would. Historically, this tactic was an Asian innovation. European armies didn't pick up on it until well into the Renaissance.

Cataphracts

The famed cataphracts of Byzantium were unique and merit their own classification. They could skirmish like mounted bowmen, charge and fight from horseback like heavy cavalry, and dismount to fight on foot as armored swordsmen. They trained rigorously, devoting all their time and attention to their profession, which was possible only with the backing of a wealthy state such as the Eastern Roman Empire. They were arguably the most effective troops in the world until firearms made their tactics obsolete.

Beasts

Elephants were the ancient world's "wonder weapons." Their purpose was to look awesome and frighten everything into fleeing out of their path, to crush anything that didn't flee, and to generally spread confusion, terror, and panic through the enemy's ranks. Unfortunately, drivers have essentially no control over enraged elephants and the creatures don't care who they stomp on, making them equally dangerous to friend and foe alike. They were used for only a few centuries in war before falling completely out of fashion.

A typical fantasy setting offers many alternatives to elephants. Dinosaurs, dragons, oliphaunts, and anything with the word “dire” in its name are just a few examples. Intelligent creatures such as dragons and treants might have most of the strengths of elephants without their catastrophic unpredictability. Dumb brutes such as t-rexes might be controllable with magic. The presence of these types of units on the battlefield, under control, could be the biggest difference between historical warfare and war in a fantasy setting—even bigger than the use of magic spells, though that depends on how well-suited to war your magic system is.

GREAT ARMIES OF ANTIQUITY

With the pieces gathered, how were they assembled into winning armies?

BARBARIANS

The “barbaric” armies of the Celts, Gauls, and Germans might not qualify as great armies, but they did manage to win their share of victories over more organized foes. They are also staples of fantasy worlds, and that combination makes their fighting methods worth examining.

Strengths: Barbarian armies are armies of the people. Every able-bodied man, and sometimes women too, were expected to answer the call when war loomed. Personal bravery held great cultural importance. Warriors trained individually to become skillful with their weapons in one-on-one matches.

Germanic society was organized around tribes. A tribe of 25,000-40,000 people could field 6,000-10,000 warriors. Each tribe was subdivided into groupings of a hundred or so regional families. Armies were organized along the same lines. The warriors from one family or region fought together in a block, alongside other blocks formed by other families. Being surrounded by all the fathers, sons, brothers, cousins, and other men of their extended families bolstered the warriors and gave these blocks tremendous cohesion. To show cowardice in that company was unthinkable. A secondary benefit of these family units was that in defeat, they tended to stick together and protect one another, unlike part-time armies that tended to disintegrate in defeat. This cohesion reduced casualties and hastened the army’s regrouping.

Weaknesses: The primitive organization of barbaric societies meant large numbers of warriors could not stay together for long. With no logistic support, military campaigns were basically large-scale raids. Their targets were livestock, tools, slaves, gold, and enough food to keep the army going. War had to pay for itself in real time.

Individual blocks of Gallic or Germanic infantry were flexible, but as a gathered mass, they were unwieldy.

Tactics: The typical barbarian deployment for battle consisted of gathering all the warriors on high ground, with the mass of footmen in the center, horsemen (light and medium cavalry) on the wings, and young men spread across the front as skirmishers. The attack consisted of a headlong downhill charge accompanied by tremendous screaming. Stones and javelins might be thrown just before impact with the enemy line.

If the initial impact failed to bowl over the enemy, there was little recourse except to retreat back up the hill, rest a bit, and try again. The army lacked the chain of command and communication to make anything else possible. If the enemy held good defensive ground, the odds for victory were slim.

While barbarian chieftains were perfectly capable of coming up with more complex plans, few of them had enough command over their unorganized, undisciplined armies to get those plans carried out.

The end: Fighting against better organized, better equipped imperial enemies had a strong civilizing effect on barbarian organization and command. The “barbarian” armies that brought down the Western Roman Empire in the sixth century A.D. had as much in common with the Romans they fought as with their first-century ancestors who confronted the Roman legions across the Rhine.

MACEDONIA AND ALEXANDER THE GREAT

There were all-conquering armies before Alexander swept across the known world—the Hittites, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Sea People—but there had been no “great armies.” Much of Egypt’s success, for example, can be attributed to the tremendous fertility of the Nile valley. The Assyrians had the immense advantage of possessing iron while their enemies did not.

Macedonia was a poor, hilly country with no such advantages. Instead, it had superb leadership, stern discipline, and rigorous training. We tend to take those for granted in the modern world, but it was a rare combination in the 4th century B.C.

Strengths: The core of Alexander’s army was a phalanx. Unlike the Greek phalanxes that came before, the Macedonian phalanx was equipped with tremendously long pikes rather than spears, and the formation was as much as sixteen ranks deep instead of the traditional six (in open order) or three (in close order). This formation had awesome shock power and was an absolutely secure foundation around which the rest of the army operated.

The *hypaspists* formed a smaller, more elite, more mobile phalanx that deployed between the main phalanx and Alexander’s cavalry, almost like a hinge.

Macedonian horsemen were the decisive arm. They operated as heavy cavalry, charging and fighting in close combat with spears despite not having stirrups; they were some of the only cavalry ever to manage that feat successfully. Alexander usually led the cavalry in person, which is why they were referred to as the *Companions*.

A mixture of light infantry, skirmishers, mercenary swordsmen, spear-armed Greek allies, and light cavalry rounded out the army. They guarded the flank of the phalanx opposite the hypaspists and Companions, harassed the enemy, formed the reserve, and protected the camp.

Finally, Alexander and his generals deserve special mention. Alexander was the greatest military genius prior to Napoleon, and he selected and trained talented lieutenants. It’s easy to understand how an army whose training and discipline far outstripped its enemies, whose officers were selected for ability and were fanatically loyal to their commander, and whose general had no equal for 2,000 years, could conquer every foe it faced.

Weaknesses: Very few. The phalanx, the hypaspists, and the Companions were the heart and soul of the army and bore the brunt of the fighting. The allies, mercenaries, and other auxiliary units seldom had decisive roles. Ultimately, Alexander himself was the army’s greatest weakness. His genius and charisma held everything together, and the army couldn’t survive his early death.

Tactics: The phalanx formed a secure base around which all other units maneuvered. The Companions typically struck first by charging into a weak point in the enemy’s line. A shock cavalry

charge was so unusual in that age that sometimes this alone was enough to shatter an enemy, but more often, it would be followed by attacks from the hypaspists, then the phalanx.

This approach would not have worked for a lesser army. It worked for Alexander because the training and discipline of the Macedonian army were superior to his foes and because the lesser armies it encountered couldn't stand up to the repeated blows.

The end: Alexander conquered every foe he could find until his sudden death at age 32. With no clear heir, his generals fell to warring between themselves over his conquests. This was a typical end for many charismatic leaders and warlords; they rose to command and conquered their surroundings only to die before they could cement their conquests into a lasting nation. Alexander's case was far more dramatic than most.

ROME

There is no single "Roman legion." The army of Rome evolved greatly through the thousand years of its existence. For our purposes, we'll talk about the legions in their most iconic form, beginning with the reforms of Caius Marius in 107 B.C. through the chaotic third century, when the army went through another significant transformation. This is the army of Julius Caesar and Augustus, the army that conquered Gaul, Germania, Dalmatia, Galitia, and Aegyptus.

In contrast to the complex, spear-heavy, combined-arms system of Alexander, the Roman army was primarily infantry, and those infantry were almost entirely swordsmen. They used a short sword for stabbing and cutting instead of slashing, which meant legionaries could stand closer together than the sword-swinging barbarians they often faced. Closer ranks equals more men in the fighting line and more mutual support.

The swordsmen were supported by skirmishers (*velites*) and by light cavalry on their flanks, but these were always secondary to the infantry. It was the well-trained swordsmen led by experienced officers who won the battles.

Strengths: Once the Roman army became a full-time professional force under Marius, it emphasized drill and experience. The greatest innovation the Romans made was rigorous, professional training of full-time soldiers. All leaders aside from generals were promoted from the ranks, and there were no class distinctions between soldiers. Men stayed together in the same units for decades, giving them some of the same familial cohesion as the barbarian clans they fought.

The legions were also justly famous for their ability to dig fortifications rapidly and to build siege machinery and bridges. Engineers were an essential part of the army. Every man carried a shovel along with his weapons and armor, and the shovels were responsible for almost as many victories as the weapons.

Organizationally, the legion was unsurpassed. Every man knew his unit and every unit knew its position. Equipment was standardized and designed so soldiers could carry their own gear, eliminating most of the baggage train and making the legion fast on its feet.

Weaknesses: Cavalry was this legion's biggest drawback. There was never enough, and being light, it couldn't stand up to heavier enemy cavalry in combat. Rome survived this shortcoming for centuries because most of its enemies were cavalry-poor, too. Against foes that had plentiful cavalry and knew how to use it, such as the Parthians, the Marian legion suffered much grief.

Tactics: Roman tactics were more involved than they appear at first glance. The legions didn't simply line up and stab away at the enemy.

Early in their history, the Romans arrayed their troops in an unusual checkerboard of cohorts in three lines. The checkerboard continued in use for deployment and movement on the battlefield, but for the actual fighting, the cohorts linked together into a continuous line backed by a reserve. One key to their durability in combat is how the legionaries were drilled to fall back through the ranks at regular intervals. This continually placed fresh fighters on the front line and allowed exhausted men several minutes' rest at the rear.

Such manipulation in the midst of combat was possible only with soldiers who were drilled to a high level of readiness and led by skilful low-level commanders. Their professionalism gave the Romans a significant advantage over most foes.

The end: The legions' weakness in cavalry led to its complete collapse when it encountered the Huns, armies which consisted of nothing but armored cavalry and mounted bowmen. The Huns' arrival in eastern Europe signaled the end of the great, massive infantry armies and ushered in the age of cavalry.

BYZANTIUM

As the Roman Empire was handing over the keys to the "barbarians" and turning off the lights in the west, Byzantium was flowering in the east. The Byzantines adopted and adapted the best elements from the Germanic, Hunnic, and Persian armies and melded them into an army that stood against mighty odds for another millennium.

The Byzantine army was composed of three roughly equal parts. The heavy infantry were well armored with chain mail, helmet, greaves, and shield, and were most often armed with axes. Skirmishers wore light armor or none at all and most often used bows, though other missile weapons also appeared, depending on whether the skirmishers were Byzantines, allies, or mercenaries. The third arm was the aforementioned and justly famous cataphracts.

Strengths: The cataphracts were the supreme soldiers of their age. No one could match them for training, equipment, or versatility. The Byzantine army as a whole was the only professional, full-time standing army of its age. It generally had solid leadership, but even when it didn't, the army's thorough training and fighting skill prevented incompetent leaders from orchestrating disasters against all but the most capable enemies. Byzantine generals were adept at judging the weaknesses of their enemies. Because the army was so well trained and the cataphracts so flexible, there was no weakness they could not capitalize on.

Weaknesses: An army like that of Byzantium is complex to manage and expensive to maintain. Keeping it at its best drains gold from the national coffers and talent from the national population that might otherwise be put to more constructive purposes than war. Because Byzantium almost always had enemies, the army couldn't be allowed to go to seed to save money (though the navy often was).

Tactics: Like the Roman legions of an earlier age, the Byzantine army still arrayed itself with infantry in the center and cavalry on the wings, even though its striking power had shifted from infantry to cavalry. A typical battle developed with the infantry holding its ground while trying its best to look weak and outnumbered, to draw the enemy forward. When the enemy advanced, the

cataphracts rode out to envelop the enemy line. First the enemy would be harassed and disordered with bowfire, then the cataphracts could charge, mounted or afoot, to complete the enemy's destruction. These basic tactics, with variations, were used for centuries. Since they worked, and the Empire's enemies never seemed to catch on, they enjoyed a long run of success.

The end: Perhaps not surprisingly, Byzantium was dealt more serious blows by its "friends" than by its enemies. When European kings answered Byzantium's call for help and launched the Fourth Crusade in 1202, the crusaders broke their vow to spare Christian cities when they invaded and sacked Constantinople on their way to Jerusalem. The Empire remained in existence for several centuries longer, but it never recovered its previous glory and power.

VIKINGS

The Vikings were raiders par excellence. They came for plunder, pure and simple.

Man for man, Vikings tended to be taller and stronger than continental Europeans. Their ferocity and brutality in combat was legendary, and that reputation contributed to their success.

Organizationally, the Vikings were not significantly different from the barbarian tribes discussed earlier, but they were organized around the ship rather than the tribe or clan. They attacked with a headlong charge using swords, axes, and spears. They also made good use of bows—possibly an outgrowth of their seafaring culture, where it was sometimes crucial to be able to strike an enemy you couldn't physically reach with swords and axes.

The Viking's success as raiders, however, didn't come from battlefield tactics but from strategy. Their attacks always came as a surprise. Viking longships had much shallower draft than any other European ships. They could sail up rivers farther than any other vessels of their size, and they could land along stretches of coast that other ships couldn't get near for fear of tearing open their hulls on rocks. Since it was impossible to know where the Vikings would strike, it was impossible to position forces for defense, and the raiders would be gone with their loot before help could arrive.

Strengths: Throughout the history of warfare, the essence of winning strategy has been to strike where the enemy is weak and change the situation before the enemy can respond. The Vikings had that part down cold. Combine that with their mastery of seafaring and their ferocious reputations and you get a force that can terrorize 20,000 miles of coastline for a century.

Weaknesses: For obvious reasons, the Vikings couldn't include cavalry in their raids. They often captured horses locally, but they used them for mobility when striking at inland targets more than as battle mounts. The suddenness of Viking raids led their foes to rely on mounted forces more and more, chiefly because only mounted warriors had a hope of reaching a trouble spot before the Vikings put back to sea, but also because horsemen had a tactical advantage over the Norse warbands.

Tactics: As noted above, tactical brilliance was not how the Vikings won their engagements. They sometimes employed ruses such as feigned retreats, but their greatest successes were won before any sword was drawn, when the target was selected and the ships were mustered beyond sight of land.

The end: What we think of as the age of the Vikings started in the late 8th century and raged for about a hundred years. By the end of the 9th century, Europeans were developing effective

countermeasures to the Vikings' strategy. Chiefly, this amounted to the feudal system: a ready force of professional fighters on horseback who could respond quickly to threats, operating from strong central fortifications where people could retreat for safety, with a host of fees and duties imposed on those people for the protection they received.

Cultural forces inside Norse society, however, played at least as large a role. By the late 800s, Norway and Denmark were becoming real kingdoms with centralized power, and kings tend to discourage powerful, aggressive, independent local lords from pursuing their own agendas. After a brief hiatus, the former raiders would reappear as conquerors, but that was a very different type of operation.

NORMANS

The Normans didn't invent the heavy cavalry charge, but they perfected it. In the process, they changed the face of warfare, the political shape of Europe, and the whole Mediterranean basin.

It's astounding that an invention as simple and important as the stirrup took so long to appear. It rates with iron, gunpowder, and mechanization in terms of its revolutionizing effect on warfare. Unlike those three, stirrups weren't waiting for a technological breakthrough to make them possible; all that was needed was the idea, yet humans apparently rode around on horses for millennia before that idea occurred to anyone.

When someone finally did think of it, it changed everything. An armored cavalryman could couch a lance tightly between his arm and his body, brace himself in the stirrups, and ride full-tilt into a wall of enemies with the force of a runaway train, with little fear of being knocked off his horse. The age of infantry-heavy, defensive-minded armies with light cavalry on the wings was over; the age of aggressive, attack-minded armies with hard-charging cavalry in the center had arrived.

The Normans were descended from Vikings who settled in northern France and intermingled with the native Merovingians. They were opportunistic conquerors who, over the span of two centuries, carved out Norman kingdoms in Italy, Sicily, the Holy Land, and England.

A typical Norman army was split into three contingents. The core was the heavy cavalry wearing long mail coats and conical helmets, and carrying distinctive kite shields, lances, and swords. Their lances were not the heavy poles of the Middle Ages; they were long but also light enough to be thrown like spears if circumstances dictated. The cavalry was supported by spearmen with similar arms and armor. The third contingent was a mix of bowmen, slingers, javelin throwers, and other skirmishers with little or no armor.

Strengths: Heavy cavalry is only part of the story where the Normans are concerned. Cavalry was the tool, but the other component in their success was sheer audacity. Everywhere they went, no matter what odds they faced, the Normans seemed to believe that there was no foe they could not best if they simply put their faith in God and their lances in the enemy. Battle after battle, they proved themselves right.

In addition, the Normans were great adopters of the methods and traditions of the cultures they conquered. Norman heavy cavalry always formed the core of their armies, but the infantry and skirmishers were drawn locally from both Christian and Moslem subjects, and they retained their traditional, local systems and weapons rather than something imposed by the conquerors. "True"

Normans were always a minority in their conquered territories (probably even in Normandy) and in their armies, but Norman generals were seldom disappointed by their allies when the going got tough. That fact alone speaks volumes about the Normans' ability in diplomacy and leadership.

The Normans were also enthusiastic castle builders. Like the Romans before them, they understood that a small force could dominate a disproportionately large territory if it had an unassailable base to operate from. Unlike the Romans, who tended to fortify only their frontiers, the Normans built castles everywhere and made them the focus of their system of government.

Weaknesses: On the battlefield, the Normans had few liabilities. Where they conquered and established kingdoms, Norman rulers were almost never overthrown.

Tactics: A typical Norman attack opened with archery at a range of 100 yards or less (a factor of their bows more than a tactical choice). When the fall of arrows caused sufficient casualties and disorder among the enemy (or the arrows ran low), the cavalry charged. The charging cavalry could tear apart a disorganized enemy, or it could stop short and poke at an intact enemy shield wall with its spears or throw the spears in an effort to create a gap that the archers did not. The Normans' own spearmen usually did not advance until after the cavalry had done its work shattering the enemy formation.

The end: If the Normans had a weakness, it was their low numbers. They “disappeared” as a distinct people outside of Normandy because they intermingled, intermarried, and ultimately were absorbed by their subjects.

MONGOLS

The Mongols were the most successful of the many nomadic cultures that arose on the steppes and grasslands of Asia whose wanderings were combined with conquest. Despite being labeled a horde, the Mongol army was not that big (it was often outnumbered on the battlefield), and it was very well organized. It was not a “barbarian horde” at all but an Imperial army. Organization, more than ferocity or unusual weapons or innovative tactics, was the key to the Mongols' success.

The entire army was mounted, and was split about 50/50 between bowmen and cavalry. The cavalry was further split about 50/50 between armored (heavy) and unarmored (medium), but both types were armed with lances plus scimitars or axes and drilled continually for close combat.

Strengths: Mongol warriors were excellent horsemen. With every warrior mounted, the army could move with terrific speed on and off the battlefield. Many individuals brought spare ponies into battle so they could switch mounts when one was injured or exhausted. The army had a logical structure, a clear hierarchy of command, a powerful tradition of revering commanders and following orders, and a thoroughly practiced battlefield drill that was suited for creative modification.

Weaknesses: Mongolian horses could endure great hardship, but they were smaller and slower than European warhorses—at least, they were slower than European horses that weren't weighed down with heavy armor and a heavily armored warrior. The enormous number of horses accompanying the army could strip an area of fodder in a short time. The Mongols had to keep moving to avoid starving. Areas that were barren, arid, forested, experiencing drought, or that had already been stripped by the enemy could weaken the army severely. Combat engineering was not a traditional element of Mongol warrior culture, but captured engineers were incorporated into the armies

whenever possible. A small baggage train was needed to carry the enormous number of arrows the archers shot off.

Tactics: The Mongols' basic tactics were simple. The horse archers would gallop toward the enemy, loosing arrows as they rode, then circle away to rest and regroup while others repeated the maneuver. When the rain of arrows had created sufficient disarray and panic in the enemy ranks, the cavalry charged and completed the enemy's destruction.

The Mongols were inventive where tactics were concerned, however, and this simple pattern lent itself well to creative variations inspired by the situation. Enemies unfamiliar with Mongol tactics sometimes interpreted the horse archers' planned withdrawal to be a panicked retreat and broke ranks to pursue; the cavalry would never hesitate to take advantage of such a mistake. Feigning a retreat or leaving a gap in their own lines to lure a portion of the enemy away from the main formation were favorite Mongol ruses.

The end: The Mongol expansion across Asia created an empire second only to Rome in size. Their invasion of Europe was one of the most devastating catastrophes ever to hit that continent. Why they turned back is one of the mysteries of history. Some historians claim the army retreated to deal with political upheaval caused by the death of the Great Khan; others that the Mongols feared they would be fighting at an ever-greater disadvantage in Europe's hills and forests; and yet others that, having achieved the campaign's goal of safeguarding the Mongol empire against invasion from Europe (by brutally knocking Europe face down into the ashes of its former glory), they had no reason to keep advancing.

Whatever the reason might be, if the Mongols had continued their assault, it's hard to see how they could have been stopped; the Europeans simply lacked the means. Europe might well have fallen to Mongol conquest in the 13th century.

The importance of tension and raising the stakes

Diana Pharaoh Francis

The whole point of creating a story is to keep readers reading; this is true in gaming as well. If you don't keep your players interested in the game, then they quit and the game is over. (Come on, say it with me: *Thank you, Dr. Obvious*. Really. I'm a doctor. Don't ask me to operate on you, though—I'm not *that* kind.) OK, so it is obvious in a lot of ways. One key method of keeping your audience riveted is to up the stakes and tension.

The nature of the stakes—or what a character has at risk—can mean the difference between a snoozefest and an extraordinary adventure. I'm going to talk about establishing the stakes for characters, and then raising them and consequently ratcheting up the tension, which is the concern your audience has for those characters (and is the key to their emotional engagement in the story).

WHAT DO I MEAN BY STAKES?

The stakes in a story or RPG outing should evolve and change and the potential of what is risked should become increasingly valuable. Generally stakes fall into three different categories: emotional, physical, and material.

- **Emotional** refers to emotional pain: loss, grief, horror, fear, betrayal, and so on. I should note here that emotional pain matters as much as the physical, possibly more because it strikes deeper into the soul and often lasts a lifetime, unlike most physical pain, which heals. Keep in mind the two frequently go hand in hand.
- **Physical** refers to bodily harm: rape, torture, scarring, infertility, illness, and countless others.
- **Material** refers to something being lost: a house, a fortune, an heirloom, even a beloved toy.

At this point, you'll notice I'm referring only to a character's stakes. I'll touch on lands, village, towns, cities, worlds, and so on, a little farther on.

Raising the stakes throughout the course of a story lends urgency so that the reader turns pages, or in a game, continues playing. You want your players to be not only engaged in their characters' successes or failures, but also the characters' struggles to get where they are going and accomplish their tasks. Games and stories are always about the journey, not the destination.

Let's look at a couple of examples quickly before we move on. I'm going to use Frodo, the hero of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, a fairly well-known character example.

In the category of emotional pain, Frodo goes through a great deal. It starts fairly mildly. He's going to miss his uncle, Bilbo, who inexplicably disappears. That's the pain of loss, but one that's reasonably tolerable. But then the emotional hazards get worse. Frodo is sent running from home in fear for his life. He's forced into a world that is confusing and frightening. The book has barely started and already the reader is worried about his very survival, and not just because of the threat of the nazgul. As the story goes on, he's faced with increasingly difficult emotional challenges: Gandalf's apparent death, Boromir's betrayal and the need to go on alone, the encounter with Shelob and, let's not forget, the incessantly frustrating company of Gollum. He faces many more emotional struggles as he goes on, most importantly whether or not he's even capable of succeeding. If he fails, will he cause the deaths or enslavement of his friends and much of the world? No pressure there, none at all.

You'll notice that the stakes step up as the story progresses. The potential of what Frodo risks increases. While he's with the fellowship, he's got help. If he falls, someone else might take on the task. He sets off alone with Samwise, but has little faith that Sam can do the job. It quickly becomes a story of one man's strength of body and heart. You'll also notice that he rarely wins. Mostly, he escapes situations battered and bruised and by the skin of his teeth. It is important that characters not succeed easily, but are forced to suffer and struggle, or else the audience/reader/players have no real engagement. You want them to connect with your characters and feel their struggles and pain and loss. So you have to start thinking about character torture—but I don't necessarily mean thumbscrews and the rack.

Physical pain is easy to throw into a story, but you must consider the ramifications. Torture can be a dreadful thing. Once you start thinking through just how horrible it can be, then you have to figure out how far you want to push it. What can your players/audience stand? Is a character capable of overcoming that torture or physical harm in order to proceed? Consider: Jaime Lannister, of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, loses a hand. Will he be able to continue to be a knight? How will that loss damage or change who he is and what he is capable of? If he were to lose a leg, in his world, he'd be useless and would have to act from a chair. He could be a mastermind and cause a great deal of trouble that way, but he would most definitely not be the character he had been, which was entirely wrapped up in his physical prowess as a knight.

Material stakes involve what might be lost or gained in terms of property, resources, or treasure. Will someone lose a house or a village or an entire land? In the case of *Lord of the Rings*, Sauron means to rule Middle-earth. In the case of Westeros, Daenerys Targaryen means to claim the Iron Throne. Who knows what the Wildings want? Maybe just to eat everyone. But there's something worse, isn't there?

That something worse that lurks in the shadows is incredibly interesting to a storyteller—whether it's an RPG quest you're building or a novel you're writing. It allows you to slowly reveal the various levels of threat and ratchet up the danger as more is revealed. As long as it makes sense within the story and you lay the foundations of its existence as you go, it will work. You can't get away with, "Surprise! There's been this devil monster here all along and it's going to now eat everyone!" That's a *deus ex machina*; your readers and players will kill you and then dump you into a vat of acid just to be clear about how angry you've made them.

EXACTLY HOW DO YOU RAISE THE STAKES?

Start with your characters, of course. What are their personal stakes?

- Ask what's the worse thing that she *thinks* could happen to her?
- Brainstorm it out.
- Then ask, what's the worst thing that could actually happen to her? Brainstorm it out. Chances are they aren't necessarily the same things.

What someone thinks is the worst thing that could happen might not account for what actually might be the worst thing. If your character thinks having her husband cheat on her is the worst thing that could happen in her life, what if she's wrong? What if her child is kidnapped? It's not even imaginable. She now discovers that the worst thing is what blindsides a person.

"Nobody," as Monty Python would have it, "ever expects the Spanish Inquisition." You want to both surprise your characters while, at the same time, remaining within the scope of the game and the world you've built. In the case of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, no one expected the Red Wedding, but even though it was a surprise, it wasn't a surprise at all. The world and the characters were already set up for it to be believable. It was shocking, certainly, but afterward, the reader could nod and say, "Of course! It makes perfect sense."

The worst things can be small. The car breaks down today of all days. A man forgets to clean his gun and, in a crucial moment, it won't fire. A woman twists her ankle right before the bridge collapses and she's too late to get across. She turns around to find what new horror? Trolls? Orcs? A hungry vampire? A wizard who plans to enslave her? The context of the moment matters.

Raising the stakes is also not static: you don't do it once and forget it. You continue to cause your characters trouble and make their lives difficult, which increases what might be lost or gained. Be thinking about what else can go wrong at all times. You don't want to put them into a situation where they might die all the time. For one thing, death is boring. It's over with and the character is out of the story or game and what's the fun of that? It can also only happen once (most of the time, though this is fantasy and there are vampires, ghosts, zombies and such, but generally, once is usually all a character gets). If you're George R. R. Martin and you have a cast of thousands, that's not a problem. If you're running a game, it's definitely a problem.

It's better to continually put a character in crisis, and one that depends on their context and what's been happening to that character so far. I'll give an example from one of my books, *Path of Fate*. In the book, Reasil is very happy as a healer for her town. She's well-respected, she has her own house and a great life. Then one day, the Goddess sends her a goshawk. The Goddess pairs people with animals and those pairs become the hands of justice in the world. They become rootless and have to travel and do things they never dreamed of. What does Reasil do when given this great honor? She says no. The worst thing that could happen to her at that time is the same thing that everybody else in her country would consider a great honor. But she loves her life, and giving it up would be terrible for her.

Next, the daughter of an enemy country's ambassador gets kidnapped in her town. Reasil has befriended the girl and she's being shut out of the investigation. War will certainly occur if the girl isn't found. Reasil now has no choice but to bond with the goshawk. Circumstances make her give up her life. She's forced into a terrible choice. But now the goshawk is very angry at her and their bonding is not a pleasant one. She has to hunt for kidnappers without any real preparation or skill, while at the same time battling with her Goddess-given animal, who delights in torturing her. If she

can't make the bond work, she'll fail. If she can't overcome her physical limitations, she'll fail. If she can't find the kidnappers, she'll fail. If she can't rescue the girl, she'll fail. If she fails, war returns and people she cares about die. A lot of them.

That's a key element of raising the stakes. Present your characters with terrible choices. Does the farmer save his wife or his daughter? He can't save both. Does the knight protect the king as he's sworn to do or stop the wizard from poisoning an inn full of people? Just how important is the king anyway? What if the knight hates the king? What if the king is the despicable Joffrey Baratheon?

BROADENING THE STAKES

This brings me to the stakes that involve more than just the character's own personal pain. What about the world and the effects on politics, geography, and the populace? Your story might be playing with the fates of a village, a city, a country or even an entire planet. You might be concerned about an invasion or an epidemic or a natural disaster. How many will be effected and how?

The stakes go up when more than just the character's life or well-being is on the line, and leads us to the notion of scope. Scope is about how big the problem is beyond the main character. Epic fantasy, which tends to be the focus of many RPGs, often has a broad scope and deals with the rise and fall of one or more countries or races. Urban fantasy may deal with world invasion by demons, or it may focus on a kidnapping or a very local phenomenon. In science fiction, it might be about a planet or universe. The magnitude of the effect is scope: how big will the ripples be when the rock drops into the quiet pond?

That gives you opportunity to really take your characters on a wide-ranging journey. They might cross continents or travel across galaxies, or they might be confined to a city. Whatever you choose, be aware of the potential losses and risks for the place, the various people, the political regime, and so on. Think about what could go wrong and make it so.

No matter the risks to the politics, geography, or the populace, your choices should always comes back to the impact on your characters. After all, they are the reason for the story. And of course, from that impact, you can judge what might happen next to raise the stakes.

Raising the stakes means establishing how they affect the characters. It means potentially losing what they didn't expect or sacrificing—making choices. You also raise the stakes when you increase the number of things that could happen or the risks that the characters take. You can increase the pace and tension this way. In other words, you want more than a one or two note sense of stakes. Think of it like a symphony. You have different movements, multiple harmonies and melodies—lots and lots of notes making up the whole. For your story, you want to do the same. You want to put multiple risks on the table that create conflicts and rising tension situations that lead to more risks. Escalate it all by increasing the danger and risk, and definitely make sure that failure is an option.

AN EXERCISE

Pick two characters and quickly list the worst things they each think could happen to them. The goal is to create a list of four or five things that they could imagine being a dreadful calamity. (Be sure to be in the characters' mentality when you do this).

Next, brainstorm two-to-three minutes for each character (first one, then another) about the actual

worst things that might happen to them—that they can't imagine.

Now pick one thing from each of your four lists, and for each one, brainstorm the consequences for that character if it should come to pass. Think about the gains or losses, not only to them, but to other characters and the world at large. What if Boromir had succeeded in taking the ring?

This exercise can be repeated for the characters as each calamity comes to pass. Each time, increase the risk and the danger. As your character gets deeper into trouble, keep making things go wrong.

Gaming the novel

The Differences Between Writing a Game and Writing Game Fiction

Keith R.A. DeCandido

I remember when I first started gaming in high school—playing *Dungeons & Dragons* 1st Edition (yes, I'm old)—one of the things I was thinking was that these adventures would make cool stories. I became more convinced of that when I read about the *Dragonlance* novels by Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman, which were based on actual games that the two of them played.

But as I grew older and started writing myself, and also started reading more gaming novels, I realized that the transition from one to the other isn't quite as smooth as one might hope.

For starters, I read far too many gaming novels where I could hear the dice rolling as I was reading. One thing that both gaming fiction and games have in common is that there's a single force that is controlling the storyline. But while the demiurge in the game is sitting right there at the table with the characters sharing their pizza, the writer who controls the plot of a work of fiction really needs to be a more subtle presence.

Yet at the same time, the writer of fiction's actual control over the plot must be more absolute. The game master is leaving quite a bit to random chance. For starters, there's the x-factor of how the players themselves will choose to act and react within the scenario. In addition, many decisions are made, not by the will of the player or the GM, but by the roll of a set of dice.

Fiction writers don't get to do that, particularly writers of gaming fiction. For starters, whenever you're writing any kind of media tie-in novel—not just a novel based on D&D or *World of Warcraft* or *HALO*, but any novel based on something from another medium like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*—you have to get everything approved by the people who own the property before you take the next step. So when it comes to the plot, that all has to be worked out before you write the first actual word of the novel.

By definition, a roleplaying game runs by the seat of the pants. While there's a general guide as to how things are supposed to go—or, at the very least, what the terrain is that the players will be covering—what actually happens will vary from game to game. Which is the point, of course. The fun of gaming is the uncertainty.

Fiction doesn't have that luxury. What can be a very entertaining side journey in a game is an irrelevant plot digression in a story.

That, ultimately, is the primary difference between game and story: a story has to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It has to make sense and have some kind of arc. While game play can often follow

the unexpected twists and turns and digressions of life, a story can't really afford that sort of thing.

IN COMBAT AS IN LIFE . . .

A famous cliché is that of course truth is stranger than fiction, because fiction has to make sense. Games actually are closer to real life in that regard, as random chance or a minor screw-up or just a really bad or really good day can completely change the course of a game. It's inherently less structured than a work of fiction.

When it comes to combat, there are actually ways in which the game's version of combat can influence the writing, whether it's the dice-based melee form of a *Dungeons & Dragons*-style roleplaying game or the grand chaos of a first-person shooter.

Combat in a game does have rules, it's true, but those rules do have a basis in how actual combat works. One side may have a few more advantages over another, whether it's one having greater strength, the other having lesser agility, the weapons used, the defenses being employed, and so on.

But there's also that random chance element. As an example, when I was in college, we played the old FASA *Doctor Who* RPG, and I was able to score a critical hit with a yo-yo right between the eyes of a big scary monster, which stopped it. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, if you put a weaponless Time Lord against a big scary monster in a combat situation, the big scary monster will win (unless you count a yo-yo as a weapon which, well, you shouldn't). Sometimes, though, fortune favors the foolish, and sometimes you roll a 20.

Real-life combat works much the same way. I'm a second-degree black belt in karate, but I'm also a very mediocre fighter. When I face off against the sixth-degree black belt in fighting class—who has won several international fighting competitions—he's almost always going to be the superior fighter. Indeed, he often dials back how intensely he fights with me, mainly because I'm just not in his league. However, every once in a while, I'm able to get a shot in. One time I was able to get a front snap kick to his solar plexus, and he stumbled backward out of breath for a minute. That was my critical hit with the yo-yo. It was a once-in-a-lifetime shot, and I haven't been able to get in a shot like that since, but it did happen. That can happen in combat sometimes, and most game systems allow for that.

Fiction is a much crueler master, though. Yes, we all love the underdog story of David beating Goliath, but you have to make it believable. Shrugging and saying, "Wow, was I lucky" is a momentary blip in a game scenario, but in fiction, you can't just have a character be lucky without building to it, or showing it properly.

So combat, like the plot of your story, needs a good deal more care and construction and structure than the game does. But that doesn't mean you can't use the combat of the game as a basis, you just have to ride herd on it a bit more, and rely less on random chance.

THE NEEDS OF THE STORY OUTWEIGH

THE NEEDS OF THE GAME

Different games have different story needs as well. I have, over the course of my career, written fiction in the *BattleTech*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Magic: The Gathering*, *World of Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, and *Command and Conquer* gaming worlds, and it was instructive to see how the different needs of the worlds affected the fiction.

I've only written two short stories in the *BattleTech* universe. In that world, there's a huge timeline of history where you can plug your story in. Also because the game itself is primarily concerned with the combat end of things, there's room in the fiction to flesh out other elements of the world.

Far more structured even than *BattleTech* is *World of Warcraft*. In fact, it's instructive to compare *World of Warcraft* with another Blizzard Games property, *StarCraft*. I've worked in both, but the popularity of the former game made for a much more constructed experience than the latter.

With Warcraft, because the game is so popular and so multifaceted and with so many players, the history of the world is spelled out to a very minute degree. When I wrote my 2006 novel *Cycle of Hatred*, I spent several hours on the phone with Chris Metzen, one of the people at Blizzard who directs the game stories.

After immersing myself in the world of Warcraft (ahem), I had a vague notion of what I wanted to accomplish with the novel and which characters I wanted to focus on. Once I talked with Chris, a long and hugely productive conversation, marrying my own story thoughts with his encyclopedic knowledge of the world and his notions about how to proceed, I was able to turn out a book that was—and still is—popular a decade later.

Of course, as with *BattleTech*, the main purpose of the tie-in fiction is to fill gaps in the game story. In my particular case, it was to bridge the gap between *Warcraft 3 & 3X* and *World of Warcraft*. Other authors have filled other gaps, like Richard Knaak providing Azeroth's ancient history or Christie Golden providing Thrall's backstory. Even so, the general story of *World of Warcraft* is one that's always moving forward, because the nature of an MMORPG is that everyone is in the same spot in the story as they play. That also means that a lot of the tie-in fiction is going to be involved with the ever-evolving storyline. *BattleTech*, by contrast, is less generally participatory, as each game is its own little corner of the world.

With *StarCraft*, which is also a Blizzard Games property, the reins were a lot looser. While the lengthy conversation with Chris was extremely helpful in plotting out my *Warcraft* novel, I also hit several roadblocks because the things I wanted to do contradicted the very intricate game story. The story was that intricate because the game was *so incredibly* popular (and still is).

At the time, however, *StarCraft* was significantly less popular than Warcraft. Even now, following the successful launch of *StarCraft II*, the science fiction game trails its fantasy counterpart in popularity.

Because of that, the world is less micromanaged and there's more room for writers to play around. My two *StarCraft* writing assignments were focused on the character of Nova, who was to be the lead in a game called *StarCraft: Ghost*—a game that wound up never being released. Where the game was to be a first-person shooter—one in which Nova was a blank slate character whose memory had been wiped—the novel was to provide the backstory that led Nova to where she is when you play her in the game. While Blizzard provided me with an overview of her backstory, it wasn't enough by itself for an entire novel, so I added another chunk of storyline to what they provided. The result was that the novel *Nova* was about half of what Blizzard gave me and about half what I supplied. Where in *Cycle of Hatred*, all the main characters were part of the game lore, with only one advisor my own creation among the major players, I was able to create a bunch of additional characters to round out the cast and the world.

WORLDS AND APPROACHES TO CHOOSE FROM

On the other end of things, both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: the Gathering* have always been focused more on the general creation of worlds that players can go crazy in. That has also been true of the many works of D&D and *Magic* fiction that have been published over the decades. The worlds are wide enough, unformed enough, and flexible enough that authors of game fiction have many options to explore. Within D&D, you've also got lots of worlds to choose from, since there's not only the mainline D&D world, but also *Eberron*, *Dragonlance*, *Ravenloft*, and so on. Some worlds are more carefully constructed than others, but even within that, the possibilities for storytelling are as endless as the gaming possibilities.

Magic is particularly flexible, because the game play puts the players in the position usually reserved for the game masters or writers. The people and events that would make up the fodder for fiction are on the cards being played. When you move the combat from the table to the page, it's easier to keep the reader from hearing the cards flip because magic is inherent in everything done in the game, even—no, especially—the conflict; it naturally becomes part of the story you choose to tell.

As for D&D, I wrote a story in the Dark Sun setting (2011's *Under the Crimson Sun*). One of the conceits of the world is that a lot of bone weapons are used, as refined metal is hard to come by. This is another case where my martial arts training came in handy, as my main characters were skilled with staff weapons, so I incorporated several real-life bo and jo techniques into the fight scenes in the novel. That made it easy to translate the combat of the game into the narrative on the page.

One of my more challenging writing experiences was when I was hired to write a novel tie-in to EA's *Tiberium Wars*, a first-person shooter, and a follow-up game called simply *Tiberium* (that was always a working title). The latter would be more of an MMORPG, and would take place about a decade or so later in the timeline of the game's history.

EA licensed Del Rey Books to publish the novel based on the game, and Del Rey hired me. I was given the opportunity to spend a day at EA's Los Angeles office learning about all the things they were doing with the game, talking with the various designers of both games, and throwing plot ideas around. They were still in the process of creating both games when I visited the offices, and we hit on the notion of a plot that was simultaneous with the events of the first game, but using younger versions of the main characters from the second game.

The good thing about writing the novel as they were creating the game was that they were both released simultaneously in May 2007. The bad thing about writing the novel as they were creating the game was that they were still creating the game. So the game script I was working from was a draft that was being constantly revised. I had an entire subplot about a reporter that focused on her struggles with the censored press. I based this on a line in the script where a reporter for the worldwide news station W3N discussed having to have her stories approved by the government. So imagine my surprise when I sent in the first draft, and was told that line had been cut and this martial-law future actually still has freedom of the press. Oops.

I couldn't do a straight-up adaptation of the game itself, because the structure of *Tiberium Wars* was such that the game player is the leader of a military platoon—but each player gets to create that character, so we agreed that it was best that I avoid the game itself and do a parallel story.

This was a case where I didn't actually have access to the combat style of the game, but it was

supposed to be military, so I just fell back on regular combat tactics (adjusted for the greater technology of the future setting).

FINDING THE STORY IN THE GAME

The most important challenge when writing gaming fiction is to remember that you're not writing a game. Games are more like choose-your-own-adventure stories: you have options, and where the story goes depends on lots of factors outside the control of the game master—and, for that matter, outside the control of the person who wrote the game.

Indeed, it's not really possible to slavishly re-create the gaming experience in a work of fiction, because the two have different needs. The Venn diagram of the two do overlap considerably—development of character is important both in a game and in fiction, and combat can be an important component in both cases—but games don't actually require a plot. Stuff happens, of course, but there's no particular need for unifying themes or the like that are the backbone of fiction.

A game is a sequence of events connected by character but not necessarily by plot mechanics. A story, though, can be a sequence of events, but those events must form a beginning, a middle, and an end.

When you construct your gaming fiction, it's best to focus on two things. The first is the same rule that applies to novelizations of movies, and for the same reason: try to do something the source material can't do. Prose fiction is particularly good at deep internal point of view, getting inside the heads of the characters. Games tend toward surface characterization, except maybe in an RPG for your own character. In addition, fiction has the structure of story that you won't get in a game. The inherent randomness of game play makes it hard to have recurring themes or a consistent story arc, but that's what makes fiction great.

The other, though, is to embrace one of the hallmarks of roleplaying games, which is character generation. There are some writers out there who will actually use *Dungeons & Dragons*-style character sheets to help with character creation, and there are worse models to use. The thought and care that goes into rolling up a character in an RPG can be very useful for developing folks to populate your fiction—not just stories based on games, but stories generally.

Finally, when you're writing fiction, it's probably not the best idea to decide what your next move is on the basis of a roll of the dice. . . .

Speed of combat

Wolfgang Baur

One of the elements of hand-to-hand combat is just how fast it is. Anyone who has ever been involved in a fistfight, martial arts bout, fencing, or similar real-life combat has experienced it. A bout begins, the opponents square up, feint, maneuver—and then it is often over in one or two passes, with one party wounded or knocked down, and the other in a superior position, with an advantage that an experienced fighter can then press home.

Games rarely model this form of combat, where results are quick and largely one-sided, and each fight is largely between two participants. It's more fun, frankly, to give more attention to each combatant, to have a series of successes and failures rather than one big win, and to whittle down an overwhelming foe (or to recover from a disastrous start). Further, many game combats involve at least a handful of participants, allowing some to retreat while others hold a line, or allowing for special actions, tactics, and all the details and precision of position, flanking, and maneuver.

TIMING COSTS AND ADVANTAGES

Playing out a miniatures or RPG combat can—in the most extreme cases—take hours to recreate a few seconds or minutes of hard-fought struggle. This sounds terrible if you are used to resolving combats quickly in a novel's prose or on the screen of a twitch video game, but it's part of the appeal. Struggles are dramatic and unpredictable, but giving players time to make decisions is a feature that allows for more depth. There's time to consider your strategy. There's time to think two, or three, or six moves ahead. Tabletop games are hardly twitch games, and that means slow combat can be detailed—but also somewhat ponderous when overdone. Slow can turn a game boring. No one wants to wait to take their turn.

The irony of all this is that “faster combat” is one of the things that gamers want in tabletop games—but no one wants to just flip a coin, either. We want fast gameplay, just not full-speed.

What can we learn about the structure of combat in games and the relative value of speed compared to other factors? And can we speed things up without losing all the things we want from slower combat, such as a sense of back-and-forth struggle, time for teamwork, the ability to weigh life-and-death choices for character. Which is to say, as gamers, we want the ability to think about a move carefully. If gamers had to actually make decisions in real time for a tabletop RPG, you'd gain a lot in speed, surely, but you'd also breed resentment and, I suspect, lose immersion, because you'd be reacting almost entirely on instinct and trained reflexes. Nothing wrong with that, but a group of gamers won't function as a team if they have 30 seconds to resolve a fight.

FACTORS THAT SLOW DOWN PLAY

The two largest time sinks in game play are *decisions* and *turns*. I'll explain these in a bit more detail.

Turns

By *turns*, I really mean how many people are going through the decision process at a time. A single-player game has only one person making all decisions—it's *always his turn* (paradise!). A two-player game cuts that in half. A 10-player game requires nine other people to take their turns before you get yours again. Even if someone is always playing, or two players can play at the same time, the cycle time for the game's focus to return to you is going to be much longer in a game with more players in it. This makes the game seem slower to you, because while the game's action moves at the same pace as a single-player game, proportionally less of the game is of interest to you, personally, when you are playing a character-driven game such as an RPG.

Decisions

By *decisions*, I mean *character options*, *group choices*, *questions to the game master*, and *die rolls*. More on each of these in a moment.

Options: The more *options* a player has in a roleplaying game, the more time it takes to choose one of them. This is similar to the consumer research on decision paralysis, which found that a buyer looking at one type of cereal in a store has it easy (do I want cereal or not?) while a buyer in a store with 5 types of cereal has a more difficult cognitive task (do I want cereal? If so, what subcategory of cereal? Rings? Flakes? Clusters? And which brand within that category?).

For most gamers, choices are a kind of freedom and customization. But the game designer must restrict choices (also discussed in some detail in the *Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding*, in the chapter “The Limits of Design: Kitchen Sink Design”, Kobold Press, 2012). The weight of decision among choices leads to the remarkable result that providing more features or options is a plus that gamers delight in unreservedly, right up to the moment they reach that one more option—an option that makes the resulting item or category less worthwhile and harder to choose from.

For example, a wizard with exactly one spell available always knows what spell she will cast—the only decision is whether or not to use it. By contrast, a wizard with 50 spells available may take a bit more time (this also explains why high-level play takes *forever*). Worse still, a summoner or necromancer who chooses to summon or create additional minions now must make decisions for each and every one of his minions, their movement, actions, and so on. Not surprisingly, such a character can easily take 10 times longer to play than a fighter who simply has to choose a target. Conjurers and necromancers may be highly effective in winning fights, but they are also lethally awful at keeping a combat moving.

Group choices: In addition to the decisions about character options, you have *group choices*. You might have a set of combat abilities, healing abilities, magical abilities, items, dialogue options, and more. In any group RPG, you must make a choice about *how* to engage an enemy: stealth, charge, bribery, threats, etc. Most combats are straightforward—until the party debates whether to retreat. At that point, things slow down because you need a group consensus on your combat choice, whether to stick with the fight or to retire from the field. It's not whether you make one decision or another; it's just that the decision itself takes time for the group.

Questions to the GM: Every time a player asks for information, that information takes time to either provide or look up. There's nothing wrong with asking for information about the combat, the foes, or the terrain, but it is a source of delay. Players who insist on asking 10 questions before making a

decision are stalling out the game while performing a sort of research optimization. At my own table, I attempt to force the use of perception or knowledge skills for characters who do this: if you are being observant and gathering data, that may be extremely good for the party, but the mental effort required means your character is not swinging a mace or summoning a fireball.

Resolution mechanics: Finally, there's the matter of rolling dice, flipping cards, or using whatever random or non-random resolution your game calls for. All games have some way of resolving action, but what sets apart a fast game from a slow one is how often players must call on that system of resolution to advance the game. The fastest resolutions are the ones that you avoid entirely, where the GM says, "That works," or you never need to find your lucky dice. But once you start rolling, there's faster and slower ways to go about this.

DICE ARE FAST, DICE ARE SLOW

Finally, there are die rolls. I'd never say that die rolls slow down a game (as a resolution mechanic, they are critical). However, the more rolls you are required to make (especially, the more you are required to make to resolve a single action), the slower combat gets. If you must roll three times to resolve an attack, that's slower than a single die roll. This is why combined rolls are so wonderful (like the use of the Dragon die in the *Dragon Age* RPG)—they combine two functions into one roll, speeding up play.

In addition, die rolls themselves slow down play depending on the underlying math of success rates. If your character succeeds with a combat action 90% of the time, the combat is likely to move faster than a combat where your character succeeds only 10% of the time, and the game will seem subjectively slower because you must roll 10 times for one success. This may be the case even if the number of required successes is higher for a combat action with a higher success rate. Players remember their successes and are energized by them. They are discouraged by frequent failure.

The exact ratio of success rates that provides maximum sense of "something is happening" is actually fairly high, and it is linked to genre (in zombie horror, you want a high success rate vs. zombies, for instance, because you need to hit them all the damn time). I think that games can offer a 75% success rate without falling over into the realm of "too easy" or "boring" combat, where there's no sense of challenge. Depending on your exact mechanics, though, that rate can be better set high or low—playtesting is the ultimate arbiter of this. Ask your playtesters, "Did the combat feel fast or slow or about right?" to help set your success rates.

Another way to think about this is that the length of a turn, multiplied by the number of turns required, gives you the perception of speed. That is, a small number of short turns can feel very fast, while many turns that each take a long time make a combat drag. If you've ever played a war game involving a grinding advance where the counters barely move—say, a two-player game that allows you to take your turns frequently—then because the game state changes so slowly, the whole experience can feel hellishly slow to someone raised on twitch shooters and rapid respawn.

I'm not saying that a slow game is in any way inferior or less well-designed than a fast game. Quite the contrary, a game about a siege or slow attrition *should* be designed to feel slow and somewhat frustrating, the better to feel the relief of finally, finally forcing a breach in the defenses. And likewise, a fast game can be entirely unsatisfying and seem arbitrary: the results are quick, but the players feel little investment or challenge because their options and decisions are so few that the

whole thing feels fairly random and dull. A game with the right pace for its topic and audience is the goal. For roleplaying games, that tends to vary by group, but few groups of roleplayers want to just flip a coin and move on to a retreat scene or a treasure scene—though designing such a game might be a lot of fun.

FACTORS THAT SPEED UP PLAY

Fewer players with fewer options available to choose from will speed up play, as will the lack of a tactical board or map of any kind (if you can't stare at minis, you tend to think of combat more efficiently but less accurately). In addition, resolution systems that don't require players to consult tables and charts will always beat a game that requires tables. This is why opposed rolls feel fast: you compare the results on the table and you are done.

At the same time, many of the items that provide extra simulation also require time: flanking, facing, counting movement, rolling separate damage, rolling damage locations, rolling defense or saving throws—basically, any math or resolution other than attack rolls adds to the sense of precision or realism while taking out a cost in speed. To speed up play, the ideal is to roll the dice once and for the result to be plain without reference to other materials. Roll 3d6, and all 6s are a success. Roll 1d20, and beat a target number. Roll 3d6 and pairs are a success. Results are immediate and easy to see.

The other element that speeds combat is abstraction of damage. If wounds were modeled realistically, they would slow down a combatant, they might remove a shield bonus or prevent the full use of a heavy weapon, and so on. But almost none of the popular RPGs on the market do this, because it's a fiddly waste of time.

The main point at stake in a tabletop RPG is who wins and how quickly that can be resolved. Each individual wound has little effect; only when a hero or villain falls over dead or unconscious is it presumed to affect the battle as a whole. Anyone who has ever been shot or stabbed can tell you that this is total nonsense in physical, visceral terms. When you are wounded, it matters to your entire perception of the world—but not in a game, because games are not about the individual hero as much as they are about a band of heroes. The only thing that brings that story to an end is a total party wipeout.

The fastest, rawest combat is a single set of opposed dice: boom, done, winner! The slowest form of combat game requires players to choose their moves simultaneously and secretly from a long list of possible options and variants, then reveal those moves, summon additional creatures into the battle, roll for their effect, add modifiers and consult a chart to resolve an attack, consult another chart to resolve damage, consult a third chart for critical hits or special damage, and then perhaps roll again for defense, parrying, or saving throws of some kind.

This seems rather obvious when it's spelled out. But the craft and addition of materials to any game system over time eventually bogs down the system as a whole. Add a secondary magic system: that costs time at the table. Add item damage or special forms of movement: more time. Add modifiers based on terrain, morale, or magic: more time. The more you strive for realism, the more you pay in speed. For some groups, that's a completely worthwhile trade-off, especially for groups that enjoy skirmish rules, resource management, and the display of tactical skill. For other groups, getting to run

six fast combats in a night instead of two long ones is the preferred option. Know your players, and know your own tastes.

PLAY LESS, PLAY FASTER

The counterintuitive conclusion of all this is that, in many cases and for many play styles, your group may enjoy combat more if there's slightly less of it. That is, fewer maps, less tactical movement, fewer choices between 12 or 20 options each round for five or six rounds. You can play a fun, fast game, but it requires giving up convoluted subsystems, giving up tactical maps (or saving them only for boss battles and finales), and keeping the party size small, to allow everyone more table time that's focused on them.

Scratching the surface

10 Things Fiction and Film get Wrong about Violence

Rory Miller

You have been brainwashed by the novels you read, the movies you see, and, yes, by the games you play. I'm Rory Miller, I'm something of a thug, and I've been asked to make a top ten list of the things that popular media get wrong about violence. Not sure I can do that. Finding ten things they get wrong is easy, since they get everything wrong. Finding the top ten things will require some judgment.

1) Almost all of society—in all times, places, and situations—is designed to limit violence.

If you are a group of adventurers, you are what my friend, Mark Jones, likes to describe as “murder hoboes.” You have no fixed address, you wander around looking for bad people, and you kill them.

That's cool. That's what gaming and a lot of fiction is all about. But . . . in reality, people don't like it much. You see, the random people (or dragons or ogres or whatnot) are never random. They have friends. They have connections. If they have been in the area for any length of time, they are part of the ecosystem. When you kill them, no matter how righteous you feel or how demonstrably evil the enemy was, you have destabilized the local *way*.

Back in college, when I gamed regularly, I thought Gygax was an idiot for instituting alignments, and in my youthful hubris I was sure that good/evil was more important than law/chaos.

That's not the way the universe, or humans, work. Given a painful, horrible and even evil stability, the human animal will prefer it to a risky, chaotic, and unpredictable “good”.

Good or bad, characters who resort to violence (and what other kinds of fun characters are there?) will offend the people around them, and forces will be set in motion to control or contain their violence.

2) Different societies have different ideas of violence.

One of the greatest weaknesses in worldbuilding, whether in fiction, film, or gaming, is the tendency to assume that the 21st century, industrialized worldview is somehow normal. Most people in the industrialized West have never killed their own food. But not that long ago, killing a chicken for dinner was a child's chore.

The mortality rate has always been 100%, but it tended to come earlier. Women died in childbirth at

horrendous rates and children fell to diseases we don't worry about now. Two hundred years ago, by the time you were an adult, you would have very likely buried close relatives, and you would have prepared the body yourself. Death was an intimate truth.

Death is only a piece. Violence was another. Violence was a tool, at times the only tool, to solve problems. There weren't always courts, and when there were, certain people might have no access or no chance. No police, no investigators, no lawyers. If bandits or an invading tribe wanted your town, either you gave it to them (and hoped they would let you live as slaves) or you fought.

Vengeance and vendetta for much of history was as close as one could get to justice. It was a tool, not an aberration.

Some societies, even today, do not see humans of other tribes as "real" humans, and they can kill them easily—and evidently without any form of post-traumatic stress.

It can sometimes be a hard mental transition from a world where children must wear helmets on their bicycles to one where a third of the sons of the nobility died by violence, in duels.

3) Violence has consequences.

Read the hospital scene in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Talk to a combat medic from the Vietnam era. Look at the nose, teeth and hands of an old bar brawler today.

Even in violent societies, people avoid violence—because it hurts. Because it can end with you dead or crippled, no matter how good you are. The Hollywood absurdity of "The bullet went right through the shoulder, you'll be fine" requires an ignorance of anatomy that is simply breathtaking. There is no good place to get cut. Flesh wounds, whatever they are, bleed, and every drop of blood is a step closer to hypovolemic shock.

Arthritis from broken bones. Memory loss from concussions. Difficulty breathing (and snoring) from multiple broken noses. Limp and popping shoulders because joints never heal quite right. This is the inevitable aftermath of a life of fighting. And that assumes you were good enough or lucky enough to live and not be crippled. When you damage your characters severely, they ought to pay a price; we do in the real world. Healing them back to 100 percent health is a cheat. It may make challenges harder, but it makes success more satisfying.

Violence has other consequences as well. Slaying a foe is also an act of creating widows and orphans. In one moment of action, you will affect many people's lives forever. Do they miss this point in fiction? I think they actively cower from it.

4) There are no heroes.

"Hero," my drill sergeant said, "is a four letter word for someone who gets his friends killed and still manages to look good on the AAR (After Action Report)."

"There are no heroes" means a lot of things.

No one feels like a hero. Because violence has consequences and all marginally intelligent people know that, when someone does something genuinely heroic, you get one of two explanations: "I didn't have a choice; anyone would have done it" or "I was just doing my job." These aren't platitudes. Every time I found myself doing something dangerous and necessary, I was wishing another way would work, or that someone else could take the task.

And the iconic hero who stands alone is pretty much a myth. People are not self-sufficient. The mighty warrior needs a swordsmith and an armorer, a horse trainer, and someone to grow his food. He won't have the lifetimes necessary to master all the skills that allow him to be a warrior.

And a lone warrior is meat for any small group that can work as a team. We'll talk about that later.

No one can be a hero to everyone. It is a label of attention, a version of being a celebrity. If your character gets labeled a hero it will draw attention, jealousy, maybe retribution. If you save the village from the dragon, there will be a night of celebration . . . and then days of dark thoughts from the villagers because they were not "man enough" to save themselves. And the heroes will be the natural focus for that resentment.

5) There are some Villains.

Just as some fiction has made heroism unrealistic to the point of silly, there are editors and writing instructors who will tell you that there are no real villains. Everyone is a good guy to themselves.

And that's sort of true. But don't confuse the rationalization of evil with the absence of evil.

There are two basic kinds of people who need to be put down: Enemies and Bad Guys.

An Enemy just happens to be on the other side, whether that side is an opposing army or tribe disputing hunting grounds, or spy versus spy, or a monster that sees you as food. An Enemy is not a Bad Guy. She may even be a hero to her own people. Might be someone that, in different circumstances, would be your friend.

You'll call the enemy the bad guys, and they'll call you that, too, since that's one of the ways humans make psychic armor for themselves. Much easier to sleep each night killing bad people than just people your bosses had an issue with.

But there are real Bad Guys as well. The hallmark of this type is immense selfishness and self-centeredness. If they are on your side, you despise and mistrust them, and if they were on the other side, they would be despised and mistrusted there.

This level of Bad Guy rarely amasses any real power. They don't work well with others. They are usually too impulsive to hide their nature for very long.

Common fiction and film presents these Bad Guys as unfortunate creatures damaged in childhood. That may be true. But if you get access to their private journals, you will hear something very different: how they enjoy hurting people, the rush of power they get when they make someone beg, how victimizing another human is "the best feeling in the world" or "the only time I feel alive."

6) Fights for different reasons are different.

This should be obvious, but I see it violated in popular media all the time. If you are fighting for the honor of a maiden, there will be a ritual. There will be an audience. There will be an attempt to make things equal. There will be rules. Whether it began as a formal duel or it started with "You lookin' at my girl?" in a tavern, the pattern is predictable and it is about the show.

If you are fighting for the life of the same maiden, there is almost nothing in common. It might start with a shriek heard down a dark alley or you might be hired by a baron to save his daughter captured in a raid or your SWAT team might get paged out.

You will take no chances. You will give no warning. You will do everything in your power to make sure it never turns into a fight at all, and surely not a fair one. This is a raid, an assassination, or a rescue. It is not about honor. It is about getting the girl out alive. Any risk taken to prove your bravery increases the chance of the hostage dying. It is not for show. If your operation is perfect, no one will ever know you were there or how the girl was rescued.

A nobleman playing at being a highwayman is robbing people for excitement, and he will take chances. A band of starving peasants robbing the same coach will be robbing people for food, and they will take no chances. If one gets injured or dies, his children will starve.

7) Duels are unrelated to battles.

I touched on this above, but it goes beyond the purpose and social trappings. The skills are different, and so is the mindset. In the late 1650s, there was a shift in Japanese swordsmanship. The men who had earned their reputations on battlefields were not the premier duelists. The mobility, the armor, and the strategy needed in a mass of bodies were not the same as those in one-on-one combat. The Roman battle line did not use the same skills as the gladiators.

Dueling, generally, had more freedom of movement, favored lighter weapons and armor. You did not have to be worried about being speared in the back if you concentrated too heavily on one person (the reason armor was so important). For that matter, in a duel, you have one person to concentrate on.

Possibly more important, in a duel you are an individual showcasing your skill, physicality, and bravery. An individual in a battle is called “meat.”

Teamwork and communication are power multipliers like no others. Humans are not at the top of the food chain because of our teeth, claws, strength, or size. We have spread over the planet because we communicate and cooperate. It may not be dramatic, but a small group that works well together will defeat a disorganized mass with monotonous regularity, even if the members of the mass are each individually more powerful.

8) The passionate amateur.

This is more of a personal peeve, but it is endemic in fiction. The character hires a professional to avenge her father (*True Grit*) or save his daughter (*Castle*) and insists on coming along. Or the rookie forces his way onto the experienced team and becomes an immediate asset.

Arguably, there are good reasons for this trope in Hollywood. Working with professionals is high-speed and provides a lot of communication shortcuts. It is a good idea to have a naive character. For plot logic, it gives the experienced people an excuse to explain things to the audience by way of explaining to the amateur. But, since the amateur is the one the audience identifies with, you are probably going to wind up making the amateur the hero.

How does it work in the real world? About as well as amateur surgery. People become grizzled veterans by learning things. They pay for those lessons in sweat and blood.

9) Drama is bad.

A staple of fiction is the close-fought battle to the bitter end. Drama makes good fiction. In real life, fair fights are stupid and almost always avoidable. The dramatic toe-to-toe fight is the hallmark of an amateur, someone who is unfit for the violence professions.

All pros, all reasonably intelligent people, know that violence is dangerous. It hurts. It has consequences. And there is never a guaranteed win. So they go into any action with every advantage they can muster—information, numbers, a plan, superior weapons, and surprise at the minimum. Smart, prepared people come in hard and fast and do everything in their power to make sure that the target never has a chance to recover.

If they might be targeted, pros have trained so that their responses are pure reflex that might turn the tables. They'll catch their opponents by surprise and regain the advantage. They will do this as quickly as possible, as ferociously as possible, because to fail is to die.

If there is one thing I want you to take away from reading this essay, it is that fact. Unlike in fiction or gaming, in a force incident you don't have a screenwriter to protect you and you don't get to do things over. To fail is to die, and you only get one failure. That fact drives everything else—the reluctance to fight unless absolutely necessary as well as the cold ferocity once the decision is made.

It also explains the almost complete absence of the bombastic, arrogant, hero archetype in real force professions.

10) Things must be maintained.

One last detail to take away. Things, including people and animals, break. They run out of fuel or food or ammo. And all of the things you need take weight and space.

Steel rusts, and sweat has the right salt content to be really bad for steel armor. We won't talk about blood. A steel sword that has been used in battle for hundreds of years would have lost mass to sharpening to the point of being a different style of blade.

If you've ever bow hunted (I bow hunted from horseback for a season), or shot in any kind of wild environment, you know that you won't find all your arrows, and many of the ones you do find will be broken and unusable. Arrows are not heavy, but they are bulky, and actually quite annoying to run through the woods with in any kind of quiver. It's also really hard to find a way to carry them and mount a horse.

It's not just equipment maintenance you have to think about, either. It's animals and people as well. Your characters and their mounts need sleep, food, and water regularly. Dehydration or sleep deprivation are not things your character can tough out. Both, on top of physical effects, like clumsiness, will make your character stupid. Sometimes adrenaline can get an exhausted fighter back in the fight for a short time, but adrenaline doesn't last for long.

CONCLUSION

That's just a quick list off the top of my head. Is it important? People game and read fiction and watch movies largely because these elements are missing. Everyone wants the good parts: challenge, a touch of adrenaline, the sense of victory, the right to tell a good story. No one wants the ugly parts: the memories of horrible smells, the body that never works the same, or trying to find the words to say to a child or wife at a funeral.

But the ugly parts are where the real growth is. The real world may be darker than any fiction, but it is richer, too.

Environments

Fighting in a real fantasy world

Ed Greenwood

In the “utter fantasy” world of films, combat occurs against a soaring soundtrack that, if it could be heard by the participants, gives clear warnings and alerts to all involved, heralds coming victory, and flags who’s winning—and losing—as the fray unfolds.

And because the camera needs to show the viewer clearly what’s going on, bad visibility is present only as a plot device and is fleeting, soon fading to the background or away entirely.

That’s why my players love to have their characters fight in movie conditions. Unfortunately for them, my campaigns aren’t utter fantasy, because I’m trying for something more realistic.

What? What in tarnation is “real” fantasy?

Well, there’s a pertinent real-world saying, from the Colonial era when the British Empire stretched far across the globe, that I’ll paraphrase here: “The British Army seems to fight most of its battles on a steep hillside, in the pouring rain, at a spot where the edges of two maps meet.”

I like to bring that “the laughing gods damn all one more time” element of sheer bad luck, the “Can you believe it? Gah!” flavor to my roleplaying.

Not everyone does, in part because fantasy roleplaying is an escape from the vicissitudes of real life. There are many campaigns in which—aside from dungeon traps—it is always warm and dry, the ground or floor under the player characters’ feet is stable, and “weather” (snow, rain, hail, blowing dust, sandstorms, and even choking smoke) is something that happens outside the windows.

After all, only crazy people would try to fight in such conditions, right? Crazy people and desperate people and rapacious monsters, all of whom see adverse conditions as affording them cover and helping them against formidable foes—player characters, for instance.

We’re all familiar with the monster or pack of monsters that attacks by night, but many a cunning monster attacks with the blinding sun at its back, or in the heart of a blizzard or blinding rainstorm—particularly when that monster judges its targets too strong to take on toe to toe.

Fiendish DMs know that, of course.

Fiendish DMs see no reason not to involve site conditions in their battles. Bad weather or terrain or extremes of climate can pose interesting challenges for players. Tactics must be adjusted on the fly, and ho-hum “Six kobolds? We kill them and stroll on” encounters can swiftly become formidable indeed. Battles in adverse conditions also impart atmosphere and color (and memorability, making achievement or failure hard-fought and therefore strongly meaningful) to play.

Trying to fight in metal armor with big swords and axes in a blinding rainstorm with lightning

crashing down and arcing or crawling all over the battlefield can be . . . interesting.

So can trying to swim and fight in muddy swamp water in full plate armor, against foes trying to grab or entangle you and drag you under, when the ground under the water isn't solid, level, or known to you—until it's too late.

So yes, I'm a fiendish DM, but not a megalomaniac. I may deal in unfairness, but it's limited unfairness, because I want there to be rules. By which I mean common sense general outcomes players can anticipate.

Published rules systems (and many a referee's house rules) attempt various mechanics to try to reflect adverse fighting conditions, often with limited success. This is largely because the effects are variable and therefore the rules may seem either unfair or inconsistent, or the rules try to be detailed but only achieve being cumbersome, slowing down what is supposed to be swift and dangerous and exciting.

So rather than make one more attempt at Perfect Ruling, it might be more useful to explore suggested effects.

RAIN

In most areas of the real world, rain happens. A lot. We tend to ignore it and edit it out of memory, but even when rain isn't coming out of the sky, the temperature changes that attend sunrise and sunset cause dew or morning mists—and wetness underfoot.

Running or charging in wet conditions is more apt to bring on a slip than planting one's feet and waiting for a foe, and then smiting. When it's slippery under the soles, a reaching swing off-balances and so loses both accuracy and force. A tight, close thrust remains effective, but a wild hacking swing becomes far more of a gamble than in dry, well-lit conditions with good footing and visibility—so the high-damage cleaving blows are apt to miss more often than low-damage, less spectacular close-up work.

THE STEADY DOWNPOUR

Everyone gets wet and eventually cold, earth becomes mud and travel slows, and morale literally dampens. Long-range scrutiny (“seeing trouble ahead”) becomes impossible as visibility gets restricted. So a lurking enemy can get much closer before being seen than in dry conditions, and evidence of their presence may be hidden or pass unnoticed. A kobold lying down under a heap of wet leaves blends into a fallen-leaf-strewn field better than a pile of leaves in the same field in dry conditions—true; I've tried it, substituting small-of-stature humans for kobolds.

Unless there's magical means of warding off rainfall, bowstrings get wet, so accurate archery becomes impossible after a few arrows are loosed; most slings soon lose their accuracy, too. Leather bindings stretch, making some weapons and siege engines wobbly or worse, and making the process of getting out a weapon, or fire-making materials, or any sort of gear (particularly if it must be kept relatively dry) slower and more difficult than in dry conditions.

In tactical terms, footing becomes slippery on all slopes and wherever there are loose stones underfoot, or bare earth or sand (which will or already has become mud or even quicksand).

DRIVING RAIN

The big brother of the steady downpour has all the effects just mentioned, but increased: visibility is sharply cut (foes can't be seen until very near, and motionless enemies standing amid trees can often be overlooked, as can those who just lie down in open fields; player characters can often tramp right past them obliviously), and all missiles lose accuracy thanks to the force of the falling or blowing rain.

FOG OR MIST

Take away the deflection of missiles that driving rain causes, but increase the restriction of visibility still farther. Player characters may only be able to see as far as the pointy end of their own extended swords—but this sharply reduced visibility usually varies continuously, from arm's length to as much as twenty paces away. (The strength of any breeze determines this; I have been in fogs where I couldn't see the end of my own paddle when sitting in a canoe, but even a gentle breeze thinned the fog until I could see forty feet away, then make out large things twice that distant.) Thirty or forty feet is a fair average. “Fog” and “mist” may be synonyms to some, but I use “fog” to mean a light, thick vapor that's almost entirely opaque, and “mist” to mean thinner, wetter clouds that drench anyone in them or moving through them (like a steady downpour).

SMOKE

In still conditions, the smoke rising from even a small fire is visible a long way off—as a vertical column that starts to drift only when it encounters an upper layer of moving air. More often, a breeze closer to the ground will send smoke in a particular direction (though anyone who's tended or stood near a campfire is familiar with the old “wherever you stand around a campfire, the smoke moves to follow you” problem).

In short, smoke creates the same visibility problems as fog or mist, though in a far more limited field (except inside a building, where walls and ceilings trap smoke and cause it to fill all the available space). However, gaps of visibility are fewer and much shorter in duration than with fog or mist.

And then there's the big problem: whereas most creatures can breathe just fine in fog or mist, smoke presents a potentially lethal breathing problem for almost all living beings (in most real-world fires, suffocating on smoke slays long before actual flames reach victims). Moreover, smoke not only obscures sight, it degrades the eyes for some (variable) time after the creature trying to see gets out of the smoke. That length of time depends on the severity of the smoke and its components; some smoke is highly toxic or corrosive. In many a fantasy world, veteran warriors and priests who create smoke effects in temples will possess and know how to use various powders, woods, and scents that can be added to flames to change the hue, smell, and effects of smoke.

FROZEN RAIN

I happen to live in a part of the world that has punishing winters. That “punishing” is *not* hyperbole. Extreme polar climes and sufficiently elevated regions (mountains) should inflict such punishment in any fantasy setting that isn't using magic (or open volcanic rifts everywhere) to cover a multitude of climate-related sins, too.

Yes, freezing rain is deadly—covering everything with a heavy, mobility-hampering ice rime, and

brightening the ground with glare or an icy crust atop already fallen-snow. Not to mention creating visibility-stealing mists in close-to-melting-temperature conditions. So everyone—beasts of burden included—slips a lot and falls fairly often. When your horse or prowl-lizard or riding tiger falls on your leg, your leg loses. The results are broken bones, smashed gear and cargo, and slow travel. And let's not forget the combat-debilitating effects of numbness (swing your weapon, drop your weapon) or the eventually deadly effects of exposure.

Even where the snow is deep enough and the icy crust thin enough that slippage is rare and crashing through is the norm, travel is slow and exhausting. Swift maneuvering, against any foe that can fly or is light enough to run atop the crust without falling through, is difficult. (In game terms, an armor class penalty applies, or the foe gets a “better” to hit modifier.)

Just plain wet or deep snow has the same effects, though usually to a lesser degree, but another danger arises: snow covering unfamiliar terrain conceals gopher holes, entangling fallen trees, and other ankle-breaking, movement-hampering perils—deliberate trenches or pits prepared by a waiting enemy, for instance. If the band of kobolds that lairs nearby gets all its food and treasure from passing peddlers or caravans, they will have prepared snares and pits and traveler-funneling choke points to wait near. Snow is the best (for them) and worst (for you) means of concealing such passive hazards. Not to mention the other sort of lurking hazard: six heavily-armed kobolds waiting under a creature-hide tent or blanket.

Heavy, “wet” falling snow obscures long-range visibility and thereby hampers missile weapon use the same way driving rain does because a heavy, wet snowfall really is driving rain, just made fluffy and white for your viewing pleasure.

Snow can also form avalanches wherever there are cliffs or slopes for it to plummet from or thunder down, but more of such delights later.

WIND AND SANDSTORMS

Wind is most often encountered as a factor that increases the severity or determines the direction of precipitation. However, if the wind is strong enough, it can be the ultimate rending and scouring weapon all by itself.

Wind can fling various solid items (tree boughs, for example) through the air as deadly and unpredictable missiles. It can prevent even the largest and strongest creatures from standing upright or effectively wielding weapons.

And as real-world hurricanes and tornadoes have shown us, sufficiently strong wind can drive straws and pebbles right through the bodies of living beings, batter those bodies into shapelessness, or rend them into spattered fragments suitable for monster stewpots. It can prevent successful climbing up or down ropes by pinning and battering climbers, and can even rob creatures of enough breath to go on living.

FAUNA

Swarming insects, and even the swirling clouds of birds that can arise from rookeries or flocks resting on water, can have the same debilitating effects as smoke. Flocks of massed birds usually do more actual battering or piercing damage, but for a much shorter time, than do insects or smoke—but

if in a confined area such as a room or cave, where they can't get away, damaging effects can persist. Although bats do avoid most obstacles, even in pitch darkness, any spelunker who's walked through a cave full of disturbed bats will tell you that bats quite often smack into any moving intruder (and in a cloud of many bats, many will hit; I learned this the hard way).

FLORA

Myconids—innocuous fungi, not just the ambulatory fantasy sort—release clouds of spores that can have all of the adverse effects of smoke, plus whatever fun things that particular sort of spore can do if inhaled. In fantasy terms, that can range from causing hallucinations or a transformation into a fungi creature, to swift blindness, uncontrollable wheezing or sneezing, or death. Burning the spores sometimes avoids the problem—and sometimes causes a worse one.

BAD FOOTING

Slipping and falling, which can foil your own attacks and leave you vulnerable, is possible at all times and likely when the surface underfoot is wet or uneven. Add to that being unable to see the surface properly—as in a swamp or bog—or a loose, shifting surface (scree), and the danger increases markedly.

And then there are avalanches. Most often, these are caused by prior heavy rain or a buildup of snow combined with steep slopes, but they usually involve slides of mud, stones—and deadly bounding boulders, too! Local monsters will often help slides to happen, or position boulders where they can readily be launched down on the heads of intruders. Against a sufficiently large falling rock, even the mightiest knight ends up looking like a bowl of smashed eggs.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Adverse effects are cumulative. If you're fighting on an icy or snow-slick hillside (slippery, sloped terrain without a level rock to stand on or a tree to brace against), in strong and gusty winds with heavy snow or driving sleet coming down, the penalties will stack.

For example, if we decide the slipperiness penalizes attack rolls by 1 or 2 points (even/odd die roll) and robs damage done by 1 point, and have the wind harm chances-to-hit by 1 or 2 points (another even/odd roll), these detriments are combined. Heavy precipitation restricts visibility and deflects missiles, penalizing attack rolls by an additional 1d4+1 points for deflection, plus a visibility-of-target penalty that's zero if within 40 feet, 1 or 2 (even/odd) from 40 feet to 70 feet, and 1d4+5 (6 to 9 points) from 70 feet to 90 feet, and 1d6+8 (9 to 14 points) thereafter.

An allowed exception would be missile weapons launched at a familiar spot, such as a door, narrow mountain pass, or rock cleft, at which the launcher of the missile has practiced hurling in the past. (In effect, the wielder of the missiles is “firing blind” in hopes of catching a target in that spot.)

Some simulation wargamers will find these mechanics achingly simple, and some acting-foremost roleplayers will find them tedious and apt to slow the flow of play. You should use whatever specific mechanics best suit your group of players.

As previously mentioned, monsters familiar with a locale will use its weather and conditions against foes. (One relevant note: reptiles go into torpor if conditions are too cold, but fantastical monsters that have overt physical characteristics we associate with reptiles, such as scales or serpentine

bodies, may of course not really be reptiles.)

Happy fighting and dying!

Through the looking glass

Colin McComb

“Go then—there are other worlds than these.”

—*The Dark Tower*, Stephen King

In most of our tabletop games, we see desperate battles on stunning mountaintop vistas, hand-to-hand struggles in ancient temples buried in jungles, thrilling encounters on the high seas, and—depending on the system you use—attack ships on fire off the Shoulder of Orion in epic space battles. But what if your team is ready for an adventure into unknown Kadath, H.P. Lovecraft’s fabled dreamlands? What if, for example, they have laid hands on an artifact that translates them into sonic waves? What if you want to replicate the surreal movie *Mirrormask*, or visit some of the places in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*? Maybe you’d like to take on the Red Queen in Wonderland, or perhaps you simply want to simulate the effects of a particularly potent hallucinogen. Whatever the case, if you plan to add the strange and the surreal to your campaign, you’ll need to know how to handle conflict in those alien atmospheres.

In Roger Zelazny’s *Wizard World* (potential spoiler warning for a book that’s over 30 years old), wizards duel each other in a shared hallucination, where the sorcerers exert their willpower against one another to shape their perceived reality and thus gain the upper hand. It’s similar to the way one fights in *Planescape*’s primal chaos, Limbo, where the environment roils and spills through constant changes and only the force of the traveler’s will can maintain any semblance of normalcy.

Now, you might have started the campaign weird—perhaps you’re playing *Numenera*, *Planescape*, *Deadlands*, or *Amber* (among many others; this isn’t an exhaustive list by any means), in which case you’ve got the rules you need for the strangeness in your game—at least some of them. But you might also start normal and go weird (*Call of Cthulhu*, for instance, or *Pathfinder*, or *Dungeons & Dragons*, journeying into the planes).

But you’re set to go, if a journey into the surreal is your plan, then you need to come to the table prepared. Your first job is to define your surreality. It’s a difficult subject to pin down, in part because it encompasses so many things. Its defining characteristic is that it is dreamlike, strange, and its rules do not conform to the normal world.

A SHOVE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

You should know where you plan to take your party. Really, that’s the most important part, because

it's going to determine what they face, how they face it, and what lies beyond that. Are they journeying to a realm of pure mind? Are they entering a place where physics is the plaything of the mad, an asylum where their deepest fears are torn from their dreamscapes? Are they in the City of Clocks, where competing factions of clock-keepers wield the flow of time itself as a weapon? Each of these is wildly different from the others, and each requires a vastly different approach to creating it. You'll need to consider a number of variables. For example: time, space, gravity, atmosphere, causality, imagery, and symbolism, just to name a few. And, once you've constructed your surreal environment, how can you use these in combat?

THE ELEMENTS OF SURREAL

Let's break these down. Each of the following subheads contains questions to ask to help target your ideal surreal experience. These questions aren't exhaustive—each of these categories could fill an essay or twelve on its own—but they should help to point you in a direction that can be helpful in considering the direction for your setting. Then we'll consider how to implement these best in your campaign. I'm using *Dungeons & Dragons* as my base assumption here, but you should feel free to ignore my suggestions and pick something that works better for you. (Chances are good I won't show up to correct you.)

So, with that said, let's get on with building your surreal environment.

Time

Does it flow forward or backward? Does it hop around, or is it an arrow? If the inhabitants can traverse time, what is the causality chain? Can they change the flow of events, or does time snap back into its ordained, historical events? On a more personal level, how far forward and back can they travel? Can they hop a few moments, or do they leap back years?

For the purposes of this chapter—that is, for the purposes of combat—we should assume that time skippers employ it as a weapon, using it for do-overs, optimizing attacks, or otherwise generating effects similar to those of a displacer beast.

What stats are helpful here? Whatever power you use for time-jumping will inform the most applicable stats. Maybe you use Dexterity, because it's a measure of reaction time; maybe you use Intelligence, because you need to anchor your spot in time; maybe you use Constitution because time-traveling makes people want to vomit in your world.

How to simulate this: As mentioned above, displacement is a good one for short hops in time, simulating making the target harder to hit. You might also allow stat checks to determine whether the PC can redo an action or re-roll a missed attack. If you choose to get more involved, you might consider the martial art of temporal fugue, which allows the attacker to move both forward and back in time to fight their foes—and if two of them fight together, they fight recursively.

Space

Playing games with distance and perception of distance can be a huge help in developing a surreal feel. But, in order to make that work, you'll need to answer some questions about that space. Does the adventure take place in normal space, or is space disrupted somehow? Can inhabitants traverse space through folding pieces of it together, like a tesseract, and if so, how do they do it? Is this a skill they can teach the PCs? Alternately, you might choose that space be expanded, so that every meter the PCs

traverse takes five times as long to cross—or, conversely, they cross it five times as fast. You might even choose to make the entire fabric of space fungible to someone who knows how to manipulate it. The tremendous possibilities inherent in variable space can help you create the mental dislocation necessary to craft the truly surreal place.

What stats are helpful here? Dexterity is clearly an important stat in order to react to any sudden changes in spatial coherence. Strength is also helpful for traversing foreshortened or lengthened spaces far more quickly.

How to simulate the effects of changed space: The *blink* spell allows for short-distance hops; a longer distance requires something akin to a *phase door* or *teleport* spell. If used in close combat, space folding can allow for enhanced initiative, bonuses to hit through unexpected angles. You can change movement costs, allowing PCs to travel ten times as far in a turn, or reduce their movement range at a whim. Likewise, decide what happens to ranged weapons: do they drop short of the target, or do they fire farther and faster, thus causing more damage? Does visual perception play a more important role here?

Gravity

No trip to a surreal place is complete without gravity manipulation. But you'll need to figure out exactly how to make that work. Generally, you'll want localized effects, pockets of gravity that vary depending on the environment through which your party travels. Gravity can be Earth-normal, switching to a pocket of low- or no-gravity, in which the objects float and collide with one another. You could alternate this with heavy gravity—probably no more than three times Earth-normal, which would begin to crush your party.

What stats are helpful here? In *low gravity*, you'll want to increase damage from Strength attacks by a step or two, depending on how light the gravity is; you'll also provide a concurrent penalty to Dexterity, because the muscles will be used to normal gravity and will overcompensate. In *high gravity*, you'll lower damage from Strength, but you'll also reduce Dexterity again (because the muscles won't know how to compensate for the high gravity).

How to simulate this: As with Space, missile weapons become tremendously problematic in changing gravity—especially if you have your PCs firing their weapons across pockets of localized, different gravities, in which case you might be better off using *Angry Birds Space* for a to-hit roll. Alternately, you might just use the adjusted Dexterity scores to simulate the effects. You could investigate the *feather fall* spell for longer-term movement effects. If you can get your hands on some *Spelljammer* materials, they can help provide you with some more guidelines.

Atmosphere

Sometimes you'll want to keep your party on their toes and mess with the atmosphere a bit. I don't mean "spooky"—I mean the stuff they breathe. While much of the time they'll have normal (if perhaps slightly stale) air in their lungs, that's no reason for you not to mix it up and give them some mildly caustic air, or perhaps air that renders them euphoric (after all, what's the point of a surreal environment if they can't enjoy it?). If you choose to go this route, you should consider whether the air in question has a different texture, different look, different smell, or if it's indistinguishable from their normal air.

What stats are helpful here? As with any environmental effects involving breath, Constitution is the

primary stat. It determines how affected the PCs will be and how long they can resist the effects of the atmosphere.

How to simulate this: If the air is foul or caustic, the PCs will have to make Fortitude checks, with failure indicating penalties on ability and combat checks. Too many failures can lead to unconsciousness, unless the afflicted PC is carried to a place of fresher air. If you plan to use euphoric atmospheres, you could make the air itself an intoxicant, and treat the effects of failed checks as drunkenness or light poisoning. This can lead to greater DC checks, damage to Intelligence and Wisdom, and penalties to Dexterity checks.

Causality

This may be one of the most difficult pieces of surreal combat to simulate, because tabletop gaming is by its nature a causal activity. Breaking these rules can have far-reaching effects, so tread with caution. Ordinarily, an attack causes damage—in an ordinary causal relationship, this is true. But if you choose a *correlative model* of causality, it might simply seem as if the attack caused the damage . . . but instead, the damage might have triggered because of a secondary action the PC took: the number of steps, the distance of the sword swing, the amount of gold in her purse. That is, the PC takes an action, and then you determine whether it correlated with the appropriate signifier for a successful attack. More difficult foes in a correlative environment would have fewer signifiers, and thus would be more difficult to hit or to damage. Note here that you also don't need to limit correlative relationships to attack rolls—you might also use them as damage indicators or resistance modifiers. At some point, you'll need to give the PCs some pointers about the signifiers you use—hints, clues, monster behaviors, and so forth—in order to help them crack the puzzle. Whether or not these signifiers make any sense is entirely up to you.

I don't recommend combat in a non-causal environment, only because it leaves the realm of the surreal and veers into the truly insane.

What stats are helpful here? Intelligence and Wisdom are the obvious ones here. This is a place where Strength and Dexterity may have little effect, but Intelligence can help suss out the signifiers and Wisdom can help the PCs apply them.

How to simulate this: As noted above, develop signifiers appropriate for the environment, develop the behaviors of the creatures within, and provide clues for the correlative effects of the attacks, damage, and resistance checks. Don't make them explicit—you want the PCs to have to wrap their heads around why their natural 20s aren't doing *anything*.

Imagery and Symbolism

Most surreal environments seem to be awash in strange imagery—indeed, that's part of the definition of the environment—but what does it all mean? It's entertaining to describe the man-sized fish (wearing human-hide armor, of course) riding past on a destrier that wears hats on its hooves, but too much of it to no purpose makes the players tune out. If you're going to the surreal, it should have a purpose behind it, and that means you need to consider what your imagery and symbolism actually mean. You have three basic options: nonsensical, dreamlike, and metaphorical. The nonsensical choice means that you're simply delivering a visual kick to the PCs, without any actual correlative effect.

A better choice is to choose dreamlike imagery, in which the PCs can find a meaning within

themselves that has a specific analogue to the imagery you're presenting. Alternatively, if they're in the mind of a dreamer, the images should provide clues as to the nature of the environment and the challenges the PCs will be facing: the branches of a tree might provide the solution to an actual branching labyrinth, for instance.

Similar to the dreamlike imagery, metaphorical imagery should provide clues—but these are broader metaphors, something that should be apparent to residents of a specific culture. Simile, analogy, and so forth can play a role here as well: blades of grass might blossom into steel blades if plucked, while a PC who deviates from a course to loot nearby gold might find himself undergoing a transformation into an avaricious dragon, or an encroaching storm might herald imminent danger.

What stats are helpful here? Wisdom is the most helpful—interpreting these images requires empathy and insight. Intelligence could also play a role—whether or not the PC is conversant with a particular metaphor might find some mitigation in knowledge of a wider variety of cultural expressions.

How to simulate this: This is strange terrain, and it's going to be difficult to adjudicate players' interactions with metaphor. Instead, let the players' imagination to run wild. Let the PCs summon imagery of their own to combat the things they find here. If they are playing in the terrain of mental pictures and descriptive language, allow them to develop language of their own. The ease of the task should be commensurate with the power of the metaphor they develop themselves.

SLIPPING AWAY

Of course, sometimes the surreal turns silly (Exhibit A: *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*), and that's frequently the death knell for a game: whatever coolness you have planned disappears before you have a chance to deliver. Worse, your players won't trust you with the strange again. Handled right, though, adding these strange dimensions can be awe-inspiring, magical, and truly memorable.

Tossing kegs and smashing chairs

How to Stage a Great Barroom Brawl

Steven Robert

Imagine the party wizard careening across the beer-slicked floor with angry peasants launching mugs at her as she slides by, the fighter wildly waving a broken chair while perched precariously on top of a rickety table about to be smashed by the town brute, or the rogue swinging to their rescue dangling from the chandelier.

These images are iconic, and having a brawl in a pub is a great way to spice up an evening's play. You can even set a finale there, where the number of innocent bystanders makes it tougher for good-aligned PCs to break out the area-effect spells.

A barroom brawl can fill many roles. It can be the pseudo-friendly, machismo-filled challenge where everyone awakes hours after with a headache but no serious wounds. It can be the perfectly choreographed diversion needed to cover up other deeds. It can be a deadly earnest fight for the safety of the town. It can start as an innocent misunderstanding only to turn sour in a single palpable drunken moment, going too far and escalating an aggression that can end only in regret. These fights are different things to different people, and with a little practice, it is easy to start looking at your local drinking hole with tactical eye.

SPICE UP COMBAT

The chaotic whirlwind of a brawl can be a new arena for PCs raised on more straightforward challenges. Unarmed combat is usually extremely inefficient, which at first glance seems to make it uninteresting, but it opens up tactical opportunities that encourage cinematic and unorthodox play precisely because standard strategies are less useful.

Improvised Weapons

Most fantasy cities are civilized enough that drawing blades will have serious repercussions with the law but not so civilized that clubbing an opponent with a chair leg is out of bounds. For some general advice on using improvised weapons most effectively, see "Eight Ways to Up the Action!" (*Kobold Quarterly* #3). Chairs are obvious choices (treat them as clubs), but they are also fragile and may break on a successful hit (with hardness 0 and 5 hp; they suffer the same amount of damage they inflict). Storage containers, such as smaller ceramic amphorae and casks, are somewhat sturdier; they deal damage like clubs but have hardness 5 and 1-5 hp.

Larger amphorae or kegs could also be available, but only the strongest brawlers can even lift them (requiring a DC 15-25 Strength check), but they deal significantly more damage (2d8 hp). Mugs of ale

make memorable thrown weapons, shattering upon impact and inflicting damage comparable to a sling. A bowl of piping hot soup or a pan fresh off the fire is even better and add 1d3 fire damage.

Finally, sprinkle squares with broken glass or ceramic as windows and trays of mugs are smashed during the combat. Treat these as caltrops for those without shoes, and even well-shod characters suffer 1d6 points of damage from a fall (or trip) into such a square and another 1d3 points when exiting or standing up (unless they expend a full-round action).

Bull Rushes

Few players will forget being bull rushed into a wall, window, or fireplace. Each 5 foot square that a character would be pushed beyond what is sufficient to place him next to a wall inflicts 1d6 points of non-lethal damage (plus Strength or other bonuses). Also, allow the attacker to make a free Strength check against the wall's break DC (20 for normal wooden walls) to send the victim crashing through to the other side. With glass windows, the impact is less forceful causing 1d6 less non-lethal damage), but the glass shards deal 1d6 points of lethal damage. Ending in a large fireplace inflicts 2d6 points of fire damage and requires a DC 15 Reflex save to avoid catching fire.

CRANK UP THE CHAOS

One of the most difficult aspects of a traditional brawl for the DM is the sheer number of participants: the more the merrier but, also, the more difficult to adjudicate. The following system accounts for the many nameless combatants in a chaotic brawl.

- 1) First, assign a rough area to the mob and assume that every square is either occupied or threatened by a combatant. Moving through these spaces inflicts 1d3 points of non-lethal damage per 10 feet of movement; a DC 15 Reflex save halves this damage. Alternatively, a character can avoid any damage by tumbling (as if to avoid attacks of opportunity) or by moving their speed as a full-round action.
- 2) At the end of each character's turn, determine the number of adjacent squares occupied by these nameless brawlers. Roll 1d4 for each such square; the character suffers one attack, which is considered to be flanking, for each 1 rolled. If the mob has reason to dislike a particular character (for example, the party rogue whose cheating triggered the fracas), increase the odds of targeting that character by also including each 2 rolled.
- 3) Assign a total hp to the mob (rather than track individual members). To resolve area spells, estimate the number of affected brawlers and apply the results proportionately. As the mob's hit points fall, reduce its size; most mobs will disperse when reduced to half their hit points.

Of course, never use these rules to describe the PC's principal opponents.

Table 1: Improvised Weapons

Item	Damage	Hardness hp		Str DC to lift
Amphorae, Small	1d6	1	5	10
Amphorae, Large	2d8	3	10	20
Bench	1d12	2	8	10
Cask, Small	1d6	2	6	10
Cask, Large; or keg	2d8	5	15	20
Chair	1d6	0	5	—
Mug	1d6	—	shatter on impact	—
Soup, boiling hot	1d6+1d3 fire	—		
Broken glass or mugs	1d3 or 1d6 if falling or tripping	—		

EMPHASIZE THE TERRAIN

PCs may not immediately recognize it, but taverns offer countless opportunities for innovative use of terrain during combat. The classic examples are tables, slippery floors, and chandeliers.

Tables

Tables may be meant for eating and card playing, but they also offer numerous options to enterprising combatants. Standing on one grants higher ground (+1 to attack rolls) but also leaves a character vulnerable to being thrown off (inflicting 1d3 points of non-lethal damage and leaving the character prone unless they succeed on a DC 20 Tumble check) either because of a bull rush or because the table collapses following a well-placed strike.

Typical tables have AC 2, hardness 5, and 10-15 hp (or break DC 18-23). Old or poorly made tables have weak spots to be exploited. A creature next to such a table may notice that it is rickety; as a move action, it can make a Craft (Carpentry), Knowledge (Architecture and Engineering), or Disable Device check (at DC 15) to identify the weak point, or a DC 20 Spot check. That character then ignores hardness, automatically scores a critical hit on any successful strike, and receives a +5 circumstance bonus on break attempts.

Characters can flip tables over—always a dramatic way to start a fight. This requires two free hands and a DC 5-8 Strength check (depending on sturdiness) if the table is empty. Raise the DC by 10 for each medium-sized creature standing on it (or 5/15 per small/large creature).

Slippery Surfaces

Areas covered in spilled ale or greasy food pose special challenges. Treat them as difficult terrain, requiring a DC 10 Balance check to run or charge or after suffering damage, adding 2 to the DC of any other Balance or Tumble check, and rendering creatures without five ranks in Balance flat-footed.

More importantly, such terrain can easily be used for cinematic effect in combat. If a creature is bull rushed along such a surface, the pushed distance is doubled and the character must make a Balance check or fall prone (DC = 10 + the difference in the bull rush checks).

Creating these conditions is not difficult: small kegs or casks cover a single 5 foot square while larger ones substantially more. Slicks can be produced during melee, by characters intentionally smashing stacked kegs, or even by ranged attacks that miss their targets but instead puncture a barrel (imagine the burly fighter's surprise when his own improvised weapon trips him!).

For a high fantasy setting, a waxed bar also provides a slippery surface: the bar's narrowness increases the Balance DCs to 15 for running or charging or for taking damage. A fall to the floor inflicts 1d3 points of non-lethal damage (plus another 1d6 if the character falls in a shower of mugs). Climbing onto a bar also grants the higher ground bonus.

The key to using the bar effectively is luring the PCs onto it to set up a bull rush, either by tempting them with an opponent already atop it or taking cover behind it (and harrying them with thrown casks of beer).

Chandeliers

Prosperous establishments may have a hanging light fixture, which can be tempting during combat. Swashbuckling rogues may leap to the chandelier and swing to someone's rescue.

Reaching a chandelier requires a standard jump and grabbing it a DC 10 Str or Dex check (player's choice). The chandelier doubles the horizontal distance of the jump, and the PC may also drop to a lower floor (decrease the effective distance fallen by 10 ft. with a DC 15 Jump check). A PC who misses the chandelier can make a DC 15 Reflex save to dangle awkwardly before falling (reducing falling damage by 10 ft.).

And few events will energize a combat more than a well-placed arrow dropping the entire chandelier (see Table 2 for chandelier hp, hardness, and AC). Smaller chandeliers may be held up with a single rope or chain secured to one side, making them vulnerable. Large chandeliers have multiple supports; give them a chance to fall equal to the fraction of support missing at the beginning of each round. A large iron chandelier (200 lbs. or more) deals 1d6 points of damage per 10 feet of falling distance to all those below it. A smaller one (100-200 lbs.) deals half that. Characters under the chandelier must make a DC 15 Reflex

save or be pinned; escaping a pin requires a DC 10 Strength check as a standard action (and leaves the PC prone).

USE THE ENTIRE MENU

Taverns serve food and drink, and it pays to remind your players of that, even during combat. Characters drenched in alcohol make take a -2 circumstance penalty on Hide checks, and bull-rushed PCs may sprawl into a table full of greasy food.

Tapping Kegs

Kegs of ale can be shaken and tapped (usually with a hammer and a spigot, but a dagger will do in a pinch) as a full-round action. With a ranged touch attack, a keg can then be pointed toward a character within 10 ft., who must succeed on a DC 10 Concentration check to cast spells and suffers a -2

penalty on attacks and skill checks. Small kegs can spray an opponent for five rounds.

(Heavily carbonated beer—and, thus, pressurized kegs—are a modern invention and are not appropriate for worlds hewing closely to historical realism. Anything is possible in fantasy worlds: if an explanation is required, blame it on the gnomes!)

Table 2: Chandeliers

Swinging On	Check Type	DC		
To grab	Str or Dex	10		
On a failed grab	Reflex save	15 to avoid fall		
Falling	Damage per 10 ft.	Escape Artist DC	Str DC	
Chandelier, Small	1d3	10	10	
Chandelier, Large	1d6	15	15	
Removing Supports	AC	Hardness	hp	Break DC
Rope	11	0	2	23
Chain support	11	10	5	26

A character may untie a secured rope with a DC 15 Use Rope check.

* Chandeliers and their supports are immune to bludgeoning damage, and ranged weapons do half damage to objects.

Brewing Vats

Many taverns brew their own beer in large fermenting vats, in a side room or cellar. Such vats occupy a 5 foot square and are 5-8 feet tall. Small pubs have freestanding vats with makeshift stairs to their tops; larger taverns might have platforms built around a set of them (effectively putting their tops at floor level). The earthenware or wooden vessels are sealed or loosely covered at the top. Brewing vats are sturdy, with Break DC 23 (20 at the tops), AC 2 (-1 size, -5 Dex, -2 inanimate), hardness 5, and 150 hp: 15 hp damage suffices to cut a hole from which beer will flow into the room, coating two 4-ft. squares per round (and eventually even filling the room with a shallow sea of yeasty ale).

Characters can push each other into the vats (or, alternatively, throw grappled characters into them); again, allow a free break check with the bull rush. Characters inside full vats must make a DC 10 Swim check to reach the lip and breathe, plus a DC 10 Climb check to pull themselves out—especially difficult for those in armor.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A chaotic tavern fight offers many tactical options. Consider the battlefield and select one or two special features to use each round; your players will quickly follow your example and no doubt develop ideas of their own. Use these guidelines to encourage them—especially in a non-lethal brawl, most players will be happy to follow your judgment. Then, sit back and watch the mugs fly, the chandeliers crash, and the tables flip.

Arm Yourself!

A note on anatomy

Richard Pett

*“Grip the sword, feel it; it’s a heavy instrument, but true.
Think of it as an extension of your arm, an extension that kills, and cleaves,
just as your opponent’s does.”*

—Guard Captain Serrus Brine’s opening speech to new recruits to the city watch

Our anatomy shapes our tools and our tools can become weapons. It’s an obvious statement, but one that has a bearing upon this short treatise on how different anatomical layouts and quirks of the body may be used in your game. Change the body and you change the weapon. What is fine for a two-armed, two-legged humanoid to use may be impossible for a six-armed, tentacled, carapaced horror to wield, and vice-versa.

Often, the tools of a race or civilization can be as frightening as the wielder. Discover a weapon with six handholds, three blades and a hook at one end and you begin to wonder what the wielder must look like. Imagine a group of Norse heroes happening upon a hammer the size of a longhouse, or explorers in some vast alien jungle discovering the shed body-shell and barbed limb-hooks grown as weapons by horrors beyond mortal understanding. These can be the beginnings of memorable encounters for your players. It is not just the amount of damage a weapon does that makes it remarkable, but who or what might wield it.

THE BASICS

The basic humanoid shape—two arms, two legs, hands with opposable thumbs, a brain and eyes to focus intent—form the basic types of humanoid weaponry. The most basic of weapons—a hard, hand-held object to put force behind, later aided by some sort of piercing or bladed attachment—becomes a thousand different types but is basically an extension of the arm and hand. Wield it with two hands and the force is increased. A tough, thrown object enables attack at a distance. This weapon is eventually modified by some mechanism to increase the weight, velocity, and range it may be thrown or delivered. In time, the creation of puncturing projectile heads perfects the weapon further.

The basic nature of our anatomy drives the weapons we can use until, that is, mechanical means are brought into the mix. At that point, we change the game by creating vast catapults and all manner of efficient machines of destruction. We add to their effect with the ammunition they propel: boiling oil, rocks, pitch, and more. We leave anatomy behind, and the only limiting factors that remain are the skill of the creator and operator. But we are not here to discuss technological progress. We are here to talk flesh and bone.

DIFFERENT BODY, DIFFERENT MIND

Fantasy games are full of cold and cunning opponents, devils and demons, dragons and mythical creatures, all of which have differing forms. These creatures are often intelligent, but it is rare that one sees a dragon that uses a weapon or has a coat of glittering mail. While devils often use weapons, they are generally larger versions of more earthly weaponry. Surely such vile minds can concoct things worse than a halberd, falchion, or flaming sword? Does such a creature's natural weaponry strike such fear into its opponents that the creature does not think to modify or supplement it?

Simple variations could involve enhancing that creature's natural weapons: a tail sheathed in spikes, a helm with a crown of barbs, a belly-plate dripping with poison thorns. Such simple weapons could enhance the creature's ability to inflict damage, but at the cost of accuracy. A helm crowned in spines is fine if it scores a critical hit, but seeing what to hit may not be so simple. Consider the rule of thumb that, more often than not, more damage equals less chance to score a hit, and that clumsy may mean more deadly only when an opponent is unlucky enough to be struck.

Where such a creature is inherently cruel or wicked, its need may not just be to win in battle, but to create a diabolic spectacle, to maim, to terrify. Just as a modern weapon such as a flamethrower is designed to create terror, so a devil wielding a weapon unseen or indescribably cruel may create havoc that is as much psychological as physical. Do such weapons become legends in their own right, attributed their own foul personalities or spirits? Fantasy games offer such options to the GM: the addition of powers to unique weapons, or the ability to wield something that seems impossible by modifying the anatomy of the wielder—an extra arm, head, or tentacle. Do not underestimate the impact of something known; a type of weapon attributed to a terrible tribe, devil, or cult can be the start of its effect. Sublimely evil creatures may devise weapons that are horrific in effect but clumsy, perhaps combining a torture device with a weapon of war. Consider the possibilities: a man-trap that crushes the life from victims through clockwork, a complex device that needs four hands to work that unleashes a spinning whirl of saws or blades, or maybe a vast imprisoning iron maiden that requires incredible strength and eyes in altogether the wrong places to enable its use as a weapon.

What of the more mythological races? The centaur? The lamia? The mantichore? Different creatures develop different kinds of intelligence and perspective. They will apply those resources to create weapons appropriate for their physical attributes and their kinds of combat. Would a centaur or mantichore consider armor embellished with a lance or spikes to enhance its charge attack? The hooves of lamias and centaurs become deadlier with the addition of iron-spiked shoes. A spiked helm enhances a head-butt to deliver a deadlier blow. Do characters hear of a strange race of aggressive unicorns eager to take human prisoners, only to learn that it is not the unicorn, but a brutal tribe of centaurs in single-horned helms behind the attacks? And where such an intelligent creature is vulnerable, surely it would take action to mitigate the weakness, a back bristling with spikes to prevent a foe mounting its most vulnerable spot, for example.

The stranger the shape, the stranger the weapon. A look through any fantasy bestiary provides a bewildering number of repulsive shapes and sizes, from the formless ooze to the mightiest beasts of legend. Edward Topsell's *Historie of Foure-Footed Beasts* and his *Histories of Serpents*, published in the 17th century, describes countless monsters and creatures from folklore, observation, and myth. Assign any of these creatures intellect and an ability to create weapons and you have a rich vein of

possibilities. His Boa—an Italian dragon that feeds upon the milk of cows—is terrible enough alone, but when equipped with a coat of spears, or a bracer of blades taken from fallen heroes who have faced it, it could become a terrible weapon of war. Embellish even the most mundane creature and it can take on new menace.

When you look at monsters, go back to the basics and consider whether weapons might give the encounter an edge. Go back to the basics of how it would wield a weapon and, if it is feasible or perhaps desirable, consider what it might create and use to terrify and destroy.

A FRIEND FOR LIFE

Could armor and weaponry be altered and used as additions to the natural anatomy of your creature? Perhaps grown into or even fashioned using part of the anatomy of the creature—a sharpened horn, a cultivated chitin breastplate? What happens if the weapon becomes part of the creature, or two different creatures entirely? Would a devil balk at armor and weapons covered in all-seeing eyes grown from the souls of the fallen? And would it end there? With an ability to command the dead to rise, could a devil use other parts of those same pitiful creatures as weapons in their own right? The grafting of undead limbs as weapons opens another avenue of thought to use in fantasy adventures.

Magic gives you a wonderful reason for things to happen and to exist that should not be possible, and a potential new avenue to consider when using anatomy as a guide for conceivable weapons.

The option of creatures encouraging their bodies to grow weaponry, or being subject to painful tribal rituals to ensure it, offers you an alternative. In the same way that some tribesmen sharpened their teeth, does a tribe of satyrs have a ritual to grow their horns into strange and wicked shapes that enable them to attack with great ferocity? These variations could become badges of honor and a way to identify a mundane foe from an exceptional one.

The next option—the armor or weapon attached as a permanent accessory to the body—not only modifies the natural attacks of such creatures, but enables you to bring stories and legends to them. A tribe of medusa with snake bodies undertakes a vile ritual at the end of childhood where tribal decorations of bones and iron bands are put on so tight that over time they become part of the unfortunate creature. These iron tails extend—or perhaps more truthfully distend—the creatures, giving them an increased size, reputation and method of attack. Do these spines drip with poison, rotting meat, or the body parts of taken foes and lovers?

This variation upon the more mundane additions discussed at the beginning of this chapter makes a permanent commitment to the object, tribal fetish weapon or unholy object of warfare. In making a marriage to the weapon in question, the creature commits its body to the union, and takes whatever benefits—and painful detriments—that combination entails.

A third option—that of living weapons and armor—may involve a complex, arcane ritual, a magical boon from a benevolent (or malevolent) god, or maybe a curse. These weapons may be golems or homunculi in their own right, or could simply be the souls of wicked people given form. More importantly, what is their relationship with their host? Is it master and slave, friend and ally, or is it darker, host and parasite perhaps? They may be nothing more than a curiously well-fitting suit of armor or an exceptionally light and strong weapon, but they could also be so much more. Do these weapons actually modify the anatomy of the wielder and perhaps become loathsomely useful treasure

even for humanoids? Are they something as simple as living parasites that form mandibles grown from humanoid faces, claws or fangs? Or do they change the form completely, riddling the bodies and twisting the anatomy so that what is used in combat is familiar but all the worse for that familiarity?

Imagine what strange shapes and vile forms you can create by reversing the process of the anatomy being the guide to the weapon, and instead becoming the blank canvas for it.

SOME OPTIONS

When flicking through a bestiary for new foes, perhaps those that form the backdrop of your next campaign or adventure path, consider the options below as starting points for using the anatomy of the foe in a new way, or as variants for troops, spies or leaders. The base creature has:

A tail

Can the tail wield a weapon? If so, how is said weapon gripped, or is it part of the creature's anatomy? If the tail is used to bash, what would happen if it had something attached to it—blades, an axe, spikes? Could a prehensile tail be combined with a hand-held weapon to add more strength?

More than two arms

Can the creature wield more humanoid weapons? If it has the ability to wield only one weapon at a time, could it wield just one weapon and put its entire strength behind it? Would a weapon of siege warfare, such as a ram, be used by the creature due to its peculiar biology? Could a new weapon be devised that allows the creature to wield it with all its hands?

Wings

Do the wings end in hands or other grasping appendages? Consider whether a weapon could be utilized that combines a gripping hand and wing appendage. Could both wings grip a weapon that can be used when flying into attack? Could the wings themselves be fitted with blades or edges and used as extra weaponry?

Four or more legs

Has the creature the ability to stomp or does it charge? Would the addition of weight or slicing metals have benefit upon attacks made with legs and feet? Can the flanking sides of the legs be used to hold attachments such as blades to assist a charge?

No remotely humanoid shape

That which has limbs can hold a weapon. That which does not could still have them stitched, grafted, or embedded into them. Consider what the creature is and who it serves. Would an insane wizard graft weapons onto such creatures if possible? Could a vast, multi-limbed, insectoid horror not be fitted with mantles of swords or festooned in spearheads and lead an army or party into battle?

A snakelike shape

Can the snake-appendage be used to attack? Like the tail, can it be used just to bash or can it grip something? What would happen if such an appendage is used to crush and grip? Would spikes help or hinder? How about hooks to make it harder for a victim to escape, or spikes outside to prevent help?

Bear in mind that such modifications may also be used as an advantage by opponents. Not every modification should be purely beneficial. Do huge weapons lead to weak spots, or have opponents

modified their own weapons to counter these new threats? Considering the argument both ways can help to create realism and perhaps further innovation.

STRANGE WEAPONS FOR UNUSUAL ANATOMIES

With countless combinations of anatomies, the variants that may be encountered are boggling, however, here are a few samples of weapons that have been brought back or reported by explorers, heroes, and temple robbers.

The flense

This weapon is used by creatures who possess both wings and hands. The weapon consists of a strong wire festooned with smaller blades, hooks, and nails, hooked to the wing, and held by an armored glove. Creatures often use the weapon as part of a diving charge, which, when successfully completed, allows the attacker to cast off the hand-held part, leaving the victim held by the hooks, which in turn are held on the wing, grappling the foe and keeping it nearby to enable the wielder to use another attack against her foe.

Tail anvil

This hefty weapon is used by intelligent creatures with prehensile tails, or by trained mounts with the same. Essentially a very heavy, hooked blade that is fixed to the appendage, the weapon can be used to deadly effect, its weight and sharpness inflicting potentially lethal wounds at the expense of very poor accuracy.

Girth blades

Often used by creatures with snake-bodies or those with tails, these weapons are iron and leather girdles with blades attached at right angles to the body. They can be used to pierce or slash opponents as the creature turns, to puncture those nearby, or to use as weapons when the creature swings its tail.

The magic of “the gambler”

Aaron Rosenberg

In the classic Kenny Rogers song “The Gambler,” he explains that “you gotta know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em/know when to walk away, know when to run.” The same could be said for including mages in combat. Do you stand and fight? Do you use your magic? Or do you run away, either to find a better position or just to survive the conflict?

KNOW THYSELF

The key to surviving any combat is always to know your own strengths and weaknesses, and those of the tools at your disposal. Are you a heavily armored tank? Then you should not be the one trying to sneak around behind the enemy, but you absolutely should be the one leading the charge right into their midst. Are you better with a longbow than a sword? Stay back, seek higher ground, and pick off key figures in the enemy ranks. If you wade into battle you’re liable to discover that your bow doesn’t do very well at parrying sword strokes and axe swings, and if you’re dead your phenomenal aim won’t be of much help to anybody.

This advice holds just as true for magic users as for mundane fighters, and possibly more so. If you possess magic you may be capable of stupendous, awe-inspiring feats, but only if you know how to use that magic to best effect and how to avoid being tripped up by its shortcomings. Look at the classic *Dungeons & Dragons* wizard. He can cast *fireball*, *lightning bolt*, and other spells that cause massive damage. Everyone who has ever played a wizard character, however, has quickly learned to hate two simple phrases: “concentration” and “attack of opportunity.” That’s because casting a spell requires a great deal of focus—so much so that, if you’re interrupted while casting, you’ll most likely lose the spell completely. At the same time, because you’re standing still and so completely absorbed in your task, you’re a sitting duck for any foe nearby. If an enemy is within reach of you while you’re casting they get a free attack, which is called an attack of opportunity. Needless to say, having a sword suddenly swing at your neck or jab at your chest will almost certainly shatter your concentration.

Wizards face other problems with combat. One of those is the whole question of armor. Technically, a wizard can wear armor, but doing so means there’s a chance any spell he casts will fail whether he’s attacked or not. The heavier the armor, the higher that chance. Plus a lot of wizard spells have casting times of a full round or sometimes even longer, and every round means another chance for enemies to attack you, injure you, and disrupt your spell. That’s why, in D&D, most wizards know not to be in the middle of combat. They stand off to the side, or better yet up on a nearby hill, and cast from a safe distance. After all, a lot of their more damaging spells—including both *fireball* and *lightning bolt*—are long range, meaning they can be cast from hundreds of feet away. Why stand in the middle of the fighting when you can be more effective and safer somewhere else?

THE TIME FACTOR

Of course, some characters are not just wizards. They have levels in more than one class, and some of those other classes might be more combat-oriented. That certainly gives the character more options, but it doesn't change the limitations on the spells themselves. Look at Gandalf the Grey from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf is a wizard, one of the most powerful in Middle-earth. But in combat he uses his elf-blade, Glamdring, instead. He may cause a burst of light or something like that, in order to disorient and frighten his enemies, but he doesn't stand around casting spells when hordes of goblins or orcs are charging him. There simply isn't time. In the movies Gandalf is a little more powerful, and typically wades into battle with his sword in one hand and his staff in the other—he uses the staff to blind people with light but also to sweep them back by bursts of pure force, then uses the sword to attack anyone who got past those effects. It's an effective technique, but only because the magic doesn't require time or effort. If he had to stand still and concentrate a few seconds before each burst, he wouldn't stand a chance.

For another example, look at the Harry Potter books. Harry and his classmates are taught how to wizard-duel, which involves two wizards facing off and casting spells at one another. These spells are all short, one or two words, and take effect immediately upon casting, but there's still that second or two between when you raise your wand and when you finish uttering the last syllable, and if you're distracted your spell may fizzle out uncast. That's probably why, in actual battles, we don't see people like Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange using spells. They don't have time to waste running around shouting “Expelliarmus!” at each other. Their battles seem to involve more innate magic use, still with their wands but without any incantations. The effects may be less precise but they are faster and thus more effective given the pace of battle.

Some magic is well-suited to such a frenetic scene. In Brandon Sanderson's Mistborn series, the Allomancers gain their powers by ingesting small amounts of metal and then essentially “burning” those metals inside themselves. Each metal releases a different sort of power, and they typically come in pairs, one for an internal or self-oriented version and one for an external or others-oriented variety. Once an Allomancer burns the metal, he or she only needs a small amount of mental effort to maintain it, allowing them to talk, run, or even fight at the same time. Thus the Thugs, who burn pewter, enhance their strength, agility, and resilience, making them superior warriors. Coinshots burn steel, allowing them to push nearby metals—they earned their nickname because a favorite trick is to essentially “fire” coins and other small metal objects at opponents. Mistborn can burn any and all of the Allomantic metals, and can do so in various combinations, so a Mistborn can burn both pewter and steel at once, gaining increased physical prowess and the ability to hurl metal at people. Most Allomancy doesn't work well at a distance—affecting other people or objects can often only be done at close range—so if Allomancers are involved in combat they tend to be right there in the thick of things, using their magic to give themselves an advantage over nonpowered foes.

A LEG UP

Sometimes, having that small advantage is the difference between winning a fight and losing one. In Richard Kadry's Sandman Slim novels, the main character, Stark, is a magician who got sent to Hell, became first a gladiator and then an assassin there, and finally escaped back to Earth. Stark is always getting into fights with everything from vampires to zombies to angry warlocks to demons. Does he

cast spells when that happens? Not a chance. Most of the actual spells he knows require long, drawn-out rituals, and there isn't much time for that if someone's trying to stab you, shoot you, bite you, or otherwise injure you. Instead Stark relies upon a variety of pistols and a magical knife. That's not to say he avoids magic entirely in a fight, however. He just turns to Hellion magic, which he calls "hoodoo" or hexes. These are spells that are extremely quick to cast—typically a single gesture and a single Hellion word or phrase—and take effect right away. Most of them aren't lethal all by themselves but they can hurt like hell and they can throw an opponent off completely, leaving them open for Stark's gun or knife. Because, as someone who had to survive pit fights with demons, Stark knows that in order to beat somebody who's genuinely trying to kill you, you use any and all tools at your disposal. Including fighting dirty.

Harry Dresden, of Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files*, understands this as well. Dresden is an extremely powerful wizard, and particularly good at quick spells that hit hard and fast but without much precision. He also uses a variety of magically enhanced items to give him additional attack capability or to provide defense, like the silver rings that can store physical force and then channel it back out for an attack, or his leather duster that has been enchanted to protect from not only gunfire but also magical energy bolts. Dresden is capable of casting more involved spells, but those usually take inscribed pentagrams and long chants and so on. In the middle of a fight there's only time to use his blasting rod or his shield bracelet and a few quick and dirty spells.

AIN'T WE A PAIR?

Of course, one obvious solution to the classic "wizards are sitting ducks when casting spells" problem is never to fight alone. In Raymond Fiest's *Riftwar Saga*, the Great Ones of Kelewan are capable of immense magical displays, including summoning storms, shielding whole platoons of troops, and raining fire down upon an entire flank of an army. They can do this magic while in motion, such as riding on a horse, and don't need words or even gestures, but they do have to concentrate to control such awesome forces. To give them the time to do this, the Tsurani army assigns soldiers to take up guard positions around the Great Ones, and to defend them to the death. Once surrounded by armed warriors, a wizard can cast spells without having to worry about being attacked. And once his spells take effect he can destroy whole swathes of enemy soldiers, saving his guards from having to fight them instead.

In the same way, a wizard can pair with a fighter, the one casting spells from a distance while the other battles the enemy up close. In D&D there exists a pair of magical items known as Spellguard Rings that are perfect for such a pairing. There is a gold ring and a bronze ring—if the wizard wears the gold ring, whoever wears the bronze ring becomes immune to any spell he casts. That way, the wizard can cast *fireball* into the midst of the combat, knowing his fighter friend won't be injured by the blast. Of course, the wizard could also simply coordinate with the fighter so that the spell would miss him anyway. Regardless of how they arrange it, the pairing of a long-range spellcaster and a melee combat expert is extremely effective because it gives enemies not one but two problems to worry about and gives each half of the pair optimal conditions for their particular method of fighting. That can sometimes be as simple as in David Eddings' *The Belgariad*, where the sorcerers call one another out and battle magically while the armies slam into one another using standard nonmagical weapons. With the sorcerers off to one side they don't have to worry about being interrupted or about

getting hit by a stray arrow or crossbow bolt, and the soldiers and fighters don't have to worry about having a spell suddenly strike them down.

CHOOSE YOUR POISON

It all comes down to the way magic works in the system and the setting in which you're playing and what the character not only can do with magic but is comfortable doing with it. If magic involves long, drawn-out rituals and complex spells, you either shouldn't be down there with the fighters or you should have more conventional weapons you can use until you can find the time and the space to cast spells. If magic is more innate or at least more rapid you can step into the fray rather than having to hold yourself at a distance.

There's also a question of tactics, of course. Even if you can use your magic at close range against a horde of soldiers, you might be better off either hanging back and waiting for the right moment or staying off to the side and using your magic to aid your allies, either by giving them strength and other advantages or by casting spells to hamper and harm their opponents. Don't resign yourself to a certain type of magical combat just because that's the safest or usually the most effective. It's fine to prefer the style that you know works best for you, but keep your other options in mind for those conflicts where your usual methods either won't work or simply won't work as well as some other actions. After all, even an expert archer knows there are times when you simply drop the bow and draw your long knives. The same is true of magic-users and their spells. Sometimes that silly little close-range spell can wind up being exactly what you need to turn the tide of battle and save the day. It's all about knowing what's in your hand, and which cards to pull at any given moment.

Taking aim

The Role of Archery in Gaming

Miranda Horner

Not everyone wants to wade into the thick of combat like your basic warrior character. Perhaps the arcane and divine arts of the caster or healer don't quite apply to your play style either. The appeal of distance brings with it both the promise of avoiding the cuts and thrusts of melee-oriented foes as well as providing you with a certain amount of cover—if you'd rather have your foe not see your first attack at all.

Enter the archer. Armed with a bow, whether it be shortbow, longbow, or crossbow, the archer can work alone in the distance from an ambush position or set up with a group of similarly range-oriented companions and bring down the pain from afar with a volley of arrows or bolts.

But that isn't your only option. Some archers work from horseback (or while upon other more exotic mounts). When combined with the mobility of a fast-moving steed, archers can take out important foes while remaining maneuverable upon the field of combat.

But, fair warning: some games require you to keep track of ammunition and the like, and if you're out of ammo, you might have to fall back on other means to defend yourself in bad situations. And sometimes you're stuck with close-range combat. For those times, having a few back-up options can help you get out of that situation so that you can once again start taking out those despicable enemies of yours from the safety of distance.

So, what's it gonna be for your character concept? And what should you think about in terms of mechanics when playing an archer? Let's dive right in by taking a look at the solo archer.

GOING SOLO: THE HUNTING ARCHER

When your mission requires stealth—whether it's for hunting down the prized stag in the queen's forest or setting up a shot for an assassination—you might be going solo. The gear and skills you need should reflect these situations.

For those whose targets tend to be more wilderness-oriented than urban, knowing how to track animals, how to move silently and swiftly through the terrain—all while remaining aware of the direction you're traveling and the geography of the land you cover—are valuable skills. The last thing you want to do is stumble into someone's bear trap as you're tracking down the bear that brought down half the village the other week. Remaining alert and perceptive to the subtle nuances of your immediate vicinity can also be a requirement. In short, anything that provides your archer with an advantage in natural surroundings can serve to increase the chance that when he or she tracks down the quarry, the quarry will be in the worst position possible to defend itself.

Perhaps, though, you hate the wilderness and want your archer to stick to urban landscapes. Evil people and organizations might be your preferred enemy. When choosing to use your bow in the middle of a city, you're going to be at a disadvantage. Getting a shot lined up could require you to find higher ground with a direct line of sight. That means knowing the area you're in or learning it quickly and discreetly. Additionally, being able to pay off the right people so that you can take your choice spot, make your shot, and quickly get out of town before those who want to bring you to justice? These are all excellent things to know. So, if you're more the urban assassin, skills that lend you stealth, provide you with the ability to gain knowledge from others quickly, and perhaps gain you some time ahead of your main event so that you can scout out your escape plan (always have an escape plan) will be of great use to you. Having contacts in the city or town you're in is also a tremendous boon—sometimes that innkeeper you drop a few extra coins to each time you're in town can share with you the juicy bit of information that allows you to set up a perfect spot for a glorious headshot (or, ahem, much-needed removal of a certain very bad individual from the world).

If you want to be versatile and work within all sorts of environments, you might find building your perfect character challenging. Many games will have some means of keeping a sort of balance in check through the use of skill points or feats or other such mechanized resource management. Pick carefully, and look for those mechanics that allow you the most flexibility. If your character build isn't as optimal as you'd like in a particular environment, it never hurts to work with your game master to see if you can tweak a mechanic to make it work better for you—but be careful not to steal the spotlight from other party members. In fact, if you're taking on a lot of solo missions, with your GM's grace, you two could plan to have these take place outside of your normal gaming session.

WAIT! LET'S NOT SPLIT THE PARTY: THE GROUPING ARCHER

Archers who choose to stay with their adventuring group can take full advantage of the distractions their fellow adventurers provide. Wow, that sounds bad. But think of it this way: any distraction your group can provide, whether it be as an intimidating meat shield or a caster ready with fiery bolts of magical destruction, can allow you to line up the perfect shot and take out a specific foe—such as that lich that's about to send a wave of magical force right at your entire party. And your party will be extremely grateful if you can somehow stop that lich from getting that spell off. So, use the noisier and flashier members of your group to your advantage, and see if you can't provide a sort of distraction of your own when it comes to other ranged attackers by engaging them—with your arrows or bolts.

While you're in combat, seek to use the terrain and environment to your advantage by ducking behind tables, scaling stairs to gain a height advantage, and dipping into shadows like your party's rogue loves to do. Just try not to vanish into the same spot as your sticky-fingered friend just did. Bear in mind that you probably aren't the only person in that combat who can be sneaky; watch for others who might be lurking in those shadows. They might mean you harm.

When you're with a group, consider this: you don't always have to shoot first. Even if your initiative comes up first, if the field of combat isn't to your liking, be patient and make the battlefield advantage yours in some way. High ground is helpful because it can allow you to see so much, and sometimes your foes might not be looking up. Shadows, when extensive, can provide you with places to slip into when you need to reload or take extra time to aim carefully. Some games have ranged weapons that require longer load times, plus mechanics that grant you a benefit if you take longer to line up your

shot.

Although it's not always to your advantage to be the first person to damage your foes, weigh that carefully against the potential for dropping a very important or strategically placed enemy on that first round of combat. If you have someone in your party who is immediately threatened, it might be worth making that first shot so that, for example, Ms. Spikey-Armored Evil Warlord doesn't drop your squishy wizard in that first round.

In other words, think before you choose to try to cut short the NPC's boxed text monologue. How best can you use that very first shot? Does it need to be the first attack of the combat?

With all of the above in mind, having the *choice* to act first is a strong option for your character. Being able to move freely about the area and use cover and shadows to hide within can help you make the most of your shots.

COMMANDING THE FIELD: THE MOUNTED ARCHER

Fantasy roleplaying games allow you to use mounts other than horses but, even so, horses still provide you with a tremendous boon on the field of combat: mobility.

Whether you're on a horse, a spider, or a pegasus, you have an advantage over others you face in combat while mounted. When on mounts that can take advantage of more than placement on the ground, use that advantage fully. Send your spider mount crawling across the ceiling so that you can make some shots from above your opponents in the cavern below. (Just make sure your spider mount has the right gear to ensure that gravity doesn't summarily remove you from the saddle when this happens. Falling damage is not fun.)

Even better: train your mount. That horse can become a fully capable warhorse that deals viciously and effectively with any who would seek to dismount you. A spider could potentially tie up a group of foes with webbing, and you could either focus on others or take the webbed baddies down at a more leisurely pace while they struggle in futility. Your pegasus could buffet a foe with its wings, perhaps knocking that person down from a great height on a keep wall, before gaining altitude again and giving you a command of the field.

SPECIAL GEAR: THE TOOLS OF THE ARCHER

When equipping your archer, you should consider what sorts of tactics you want your archer to use in the game. Hopefully you gained some inspiration above. Now, though, your gear can help you fine tune your character concept. How? Let's take a peek at some potential concepts to explore.

First, if you plan to make a lot of long shots, choose a weapon that gives you the most advantage in this regard. If you don't mind being rather obvious in terms of gear you're wearing, then a longbow would work. If you need or prefer to be discreet, however, some of the smaller and more specialized crossbows might be more your thing, but be mindful of the reload times that some games place on crossbows—and the cost. Some game systems like to make these things pricey.

If you envy your wizard's or cleric's ability to affect people with magic, you have options, too: poisons. Whether magical or mundane, these substances can provide you with a much wider range of options in combat. Sometimes, for example, you need to kidnap someone for further questioning—not

kill him or her. And sometimes you really do want to make sure that you have the best chance for removing a potent threat in that first round. Poison can be very deadly and effective. Just poke around in the game's mechanics to see if there are things that will allow you to apply poisons quickly in the middle of combat or even craft them. You really don't want to accidentally stab yourself with your poison-laden arrow. That's never fun.

Now, let's discuss ammo: if you're using a bow or crossbow, you'll need arrows and bolts. Some games allow for different types of arrows and bolts—magical or mundane. Keep your character's preferred fighting style in mind when picking out ammunition. It might be that you want to add more oomph to your ability to take out a foe in one blow. Or, perhaps, you'd rather pick up some magical ammunition that can entangle foes instead so that your party has fewer foes to deal with in combat. And then there are magic quivers that give you an endless supply of arrows—so utterly useful!

WHEN THE COMBAT CLOSES: THINGS TO THINK ABOUT IN MELEE COMBAT SITUATIONS

Sometimes the combat comes to you. In these cases, having a melee weapon or close-range ability is necessary so that you don't feel left out of the fun while your compatriots are whaling on your enemies. If you've already made the choice to use poison, having a special poisoned dagger for melee combat could give you enough space to set up for another shot—especially if that poison drops your target into a deep sleep.

You can also take advantage of any alchemy or equipment rules your game might have by using smoke bombs or other ways to temporarily distract your foe and slide on out of combat. And, finally, many game systems have improvised weapons rules. Don't be afraid to simply punch your foe with bow in hand, or perhaps try to trip up the baddie that's in your face. If all goes well, you might have the opportunity to sneak in another bow attack at close range. Speaking of which, and this is the most powerful option of all, see what abilities your game might provide you when it comes to close combat with a ranged weapon. Or come up with a house rule that works for your gaming group and keeps you involved in the combat even when the base game might normally see you stymied for options.

Basic Gear and Identification

Because an archer tends to use bows or crossbows, plus carry around a quiver, it can be challenging to operate in an environment without cluing people in to what you can do. Maybe you don't want everyone to know that you can shoot people with arrows or bolts.

If that's the case, then making sure that you have a secret stash of equipment inside the location you plan to use your weapons within is a solid plan. If your skills don't run toward bribery, diplomacy, or even streetwise-oriented methods, then ask your adventuring party "Face" buddy to make arrangements for your gear to be where it needs to be when it comes time to use it. And please excuse the A-Team reference.

AND . . . RELEASING

If you're still stuck for inspiration when it comes to creating an archer character for your fantasy roleplaying game, there's an easy starting point for you: a lot of wonderful fantasy movies have come out in the past decade that feature archers. Some of the things you might have seen Legolas do in the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movies are astounding—maybe you can poke around at your favorite RPG's mechanics to emulate those attacks (or seek out others who have already done the work for you online!). And we've got Katniss in *The Hunger Games* trilogy to look toward for her archery skills. You can start with mechanics then come up with character story as you go.

Whether you start with the type of archer you want your character to be or simply focus on figuring out how to mimic those exciting moves that you want your character to emulate, you should have a lot of fodder to think about now. Go out there and hit them with your best shot. Those bad guys await you, whether they know it or not.

Realism and Archery

If you're interested in introducing some realism to your game, be mindful of how the weather and environment can affect the bow, bowstring, and arrows. You can dive deep down an Internet research rabbit hole learning about how to take care of your gear and come up with an interesting range of things Thou Shalt Do To Properly Take Care of Your Bow and Accessories. Failure to do any of these things, when combined with inclement weather of any sort, has the potential to provide the GM with interesting ways to stymie you. Maybe you don't want that, but maybe you live for such details. We don't judge.

Some quick topics of research:

- Waxing a bowstring
- Unstringing your bow when not in use
- Storing your bow
- Cleaning your bow

So, if you're not actually on guard while the party is resting, and if you're an archer, did you keep that bow strung? And what are the consequences of doing so? And what happens to that basic bow you've had since you started adventuring when you're crawling around the lair of the fire elemental king? Things to think about, most certainly!

Resources

If you're interested in learning how to shoot a bow, you might want to check into archery ranges near you for lessons and organizations that can help. There's nothing like learning to use a bow to start thinking about how you'd use the weapon in a gaming session!

- <http://www.fieldarchery.org/about/info.cfm>
- <https://www.nfaausa.com/>
- <http://www.worldarchery.org/>

If you'd rather stick to online resources, the following sites, as well as Wikipedia, might be of interest to you.

- <http://www.learn-archery.com/index.html>
- <http://www.fieldandstream.com/photos/gallery/kentucky/2006/07/beginners-guide-bowhunting>

Siege engines and war machines in fantasy

Wolfgang Baur

Much of fantasy gaming and storytelling is skewed toward the story of the lone hero or—in games—the plucky band of ragtag heroes who overcome terrible odds and triumph over darkness. This makes for a great story, and yet it doesn't, at first blush, seem to have anything at all to do with the drudgery and modern way of war machines and bombards, the great historical sieges, or the mass artillery at Verdun.

I'd argue, though, that some fantasy settings have done something very clever indeed, by picking and choosing how they present siege engines and war machines. There are many approaches to making war and its engines accessible in a game of heroic individuals, and I'll get to those. First, though, a very, very brief history of war machines.

WAR MACHINES IN FANTASY AND REALITY

We all know something about modern warfare, the industrial slaughter made possible by powerful new weapons and machine-driven tactics. These kinds of conflicts make the news. We learn it in the histories of the American Civil War (railroads!), World War 1 (gas! Machine guns!), and the World War 2 (blitzkrieg! 88s! firebombing civilians!). There are even quite modern twists; drones are our newest mechanized and autonomous weapons.

However, older war machines exist, perhaps much older than people realize, and some of these were just as much a shock as later war machines. Gunpowder weaponry was probably first used in sieges by Ghengis Khan during the invasion of the Caucasus and Persia in the 13th century, and then in Europe at the battle of Mohi when the Mongols destroyed the Hungarian army.

The first such recorded weaponry in a stationary siege was in 1262, when King Alfonso X of Castile besieged a city in Spain whose Spanish-Arab inhabitants fired primitive gunpowder arms against the Spaniards. These were cumbersome weapons, but effective because of their novelty. Certainly no one had planned to besiege a castle whose defenders had such strange weapons, but the records of the time are sketchy. They soon proved their value to attackers as well.

Though gunpowder is an element in many war machines, it's hardly required. Even further back, consider the use of war elephants (by the Carthaginians and Romans and Egyptians). Elephants could roll over a line of shield-and-spear troops, and they were terrifying. I'd argue they make a very good example of why bulettes, remorhaz, dragons, and other large fantasy animals might be employed in a highly-magical context. Sure, you've seen an elephant at the zoo. Have you seen one charging you when you are holding a spear and a shield? It's a tank in living form.

And if you'd ever watched someone fire a replica ballista or launch a boulder hundreds of yards with a trebuchet—well, those count as big, fairly scary stuff. Wherever there's war, people strive to build big, powerful weapons.

WEAPONS AS CHARACTERS

In addition, it's worth pointing out that these ancient war machines are all one-offs and, at best, were cast similarly to church bells. They were not produced by the tens of thousands; the technology didn't exist. Instead, they were made by armories and workshops, and the good ones were as lavishly funded as the Pentagon or the People's Liberation Army is today. Look up the pictures of Ottoman bombards like the Dardanelles Gun and Russian behemoths like the Tsar Cannon of 1586, or the Faule Grete of the Teutonic Knights from 1409. They are handmade and precious, in the same way that each castle is built to make the most of a given site or hilltop.

War machines made this way are far more quirky than the industrial, mass-produced weapons of the 19th century—they have inscriptions like “By the order of the Emperor, DuriDurran, Shah Wali Khan Wazir made the gun named Zamzama or the Taker of Strongholds.” These weapons are largely immobile, and that makes them a form of weapon that can also be seized by the enemy.

Each of these named guns has a history and mystique and a character: its owners, its battles are known just as the wielders of a famous sword or the rider of a famous dragon would be known. Taking one little step further, any war machine truly worth its weight in a fantasy game or tale should have a name, it should have its own devoted and elite crew, and it might even be inhabited by spirits or powered by magic to help move, aim, and empower its effects.

This means that fantasy war machines should not seem mass produced, but rather should be treated more like ancient warships or warhorses: each with unique characteristics. Imagine a gun loaded with necromantic shot, flinging disease into an army's ranks. Imagine a Dragon King's Cannon that screams with the fury of wyverns whenever it is fired, terrifying the enemy. Imagine a gun that is also a clockwork automaton, and walks to the commands of its maker. Each of these is the expression of the culture that made it. If the Greeks built that walker, you can bet they'd paint eyes on its head or prow, just as they did on the galleys they rowed to Troy.

Yes, we're heading into the territory of the battlemech here, and we should look to SF for some inspiration and design choices. For flavors of fantasy that want maximum violence, maximum destruction, and a sense of pure horror you want the machine to be superhuman and intimidating by virtue of all the elements that make a battlemech work: they are enormous, they are stronger than any person, and they have a vast potential for destruction with fire, energy, boulders, some unique attack. That Dread Sultan's Walking Cannon will certainly live up to its title as Taker of Strongholds, blowing village after village and town after town into dust. Surely there's an adventure or tale in there somewhere?

And of course, some such weapons need not be clockwork items or animated constructs; war machines can be living things in fantasy. They are dragons, war elephants, and dwarven tanks powered by coal or enchained fire elementals. One way of making fantasy conform to the standards of action movies and heroic war dramas about the 20th century is to turn all the bombers into dragons and all the destroyers into Korean turtle ships, and so on. You're not really playing to the role of the

individual hero in an older time so much as you are mimicking the modern style of warfare with older tropes. That's not my favorite approach (it feels forced and weird sometimes to have a fantasy air force, artillery, and so on), but it totally works.

SELECTIVE HEROISM: SCHWERPUNKT AND TURNING POINTS

So, once you've chosen the look and feel of your enormous war machines, what do you do with them? One way to make these sorts of large and oft-times stationary war machines worthwhile for adventuring tales is to make them targets of a quest themselves ("Destroy the Sultan's bombard before it destroys the city!") or to use them as special terrain elements, sites as worthy of capture as any ley line nexus, holy shrine, or giant's flying cloud castle.

The difficulty is in balancing the needs of the heroic band with the larger view of an enormous battlefield filled with hundreds or thousands or even hundreds of thousands of soldiers, officers, undead, and summoned monstrosities.

How do you make that work? One option is to use a war machine as a stand-in for the larger battle. The heroes have a war oliphant, or they have captured the Dread Sultan's Walking Cannon and must defend it against the elite troops of the opposition, whether those are dragon-riding wraiths or undead swarms or a squadron called the Sultan's Own Blood Sorcerers. If the PCs can hold the war machine against attack, or move it into a commanding position, the battle is won. If not, their failure is a microcosm of the whole battle, and the PCs must retreat (or at least, they are ordered to retreat—they can always choose to stay and become prisoners).

This aligns neatly with a term that wargamers will surely recognize: the *Schwerpunkt* (focal point) and the principle of concentration (familiar from the days of Napoleon and the US Civil War). In planning an adventure or a battle, the *schwerpunkt* is the point of maximum effort and leverage, the place where the correct application of troops and firepower will bring victory. In a fantasy or SF setting, the *schwerpunkt* is where you send the heroes, the bridge or tower or supply line or jump gate that must be held or must be seized. War machines are made for these sorts of vital points, where a single change in the balance changes everything.

AMMUNITION AND DESTRUCTION

Having a war machine at your disposal can be exciting and empowering for your players—and you want that! They command a rain of destruction, they are impervious to bowshot and hurled boulders, they stand athwart the ramparts and defy the enemy at that critical focal point. That's the point of a big empowering machine, and you should play it to the hilt. Emphasize the power and impact of this machine, and you give players a thrill and a sense of mastery. Chances are, your players will eat that up. Let them relish it... for a while.

However, there are some pretty big downstream consequences of player characters seizing powerful engines of war—especially any machine that is the least bit mobile. In particular, if you have clever players, they'll very quickly find ways to turn any captured war machine to their own ends, and this is where a story of a war oliphant or a Great Sultan's Cannon can turn into a story of adventurers carving out their own kingdom or levying tolls on the main merchant track of your campaign. War machines will empower players to defeat the Big Bad Villain and an opposing force many times their size, but some players will always see the purely mercenary potential for these devices as soon as the

battle is over and victory is won.

This is why you should decide ahead of time whether the main war machine will be destroyed when it secures victory (the cannon ruptures) or when enemies overrun it or destroy some vital component (sorry about your planet buster, Lord Vader), whether it will be claimed by allies (the war oliphaunt is reunited with its mahout and trainer), or whether it will become disabled or useless somehow (its magic depleted, the walking cannon-golem sinks into the swamp).

It doesn't matter which approach you take, but keep in mind that a war machine should be a rental or (at best) a very expensive lease in any typical roleplaying campaign. If you want to make it a core part of the game going forward, you certainly can bring in foes to match it: just realize that you've gone from a game of individual heroics to a game of giant fantasy robots and tanks. It may not be what all your players want: does the bard really want to sing about the triumph of Old Clanky? Does the druid want to oversee the construction of an improved Imperial Behemoth? Maybe not.

BIGGER FIELDS OF BATTLE: TUNNELS THROUGH

The alternative solution to chaining the PCs to a particular hill, cannon, or war oliphaunt is to give them free range on a vast and sweeping field of battle where a war machine is an absolutely vital bit of equipment. Imagine being there for the Rain of Colorless Fire from the Greyhawk campaign setting, or a similarly apocalyptic moment in the Wasted West of the Midgard campaign setting. Picture a whole thunderstorm made of *cloudkill* spells and unleashed in one of the struggles between the Five Nations in Eberron. Think big. Think of a clash so huge that, no matter where the player characters choose to focus their attention, something important is happening.

In an environment like this, they might command a scouting group on dragon wings, be shot down by magical nets hurled from catapults, land nimbly behind enemy lines and seize a siege tower, only to spot an important enemy officer's camp from the tower roof and make their way through a chaotic maelstrom of hand-to-hand combat in the wake of a towering and enraged demon-walker—to that general's tent and to take a crucial prisoner—who they smuggle back to their own lines atop a war oliphaunt.

In that example, siege engines and war machines function as aerial reconnaissance, as semi-fixed strongpoints, as mobile shock troops, and as pure transport. Their role is what you make of them, but machines like this on the battlefield are wonderful tools for a larger story, for magnifying the heroism and possible accomplishments of what might otherwise be just another group of scout cavalry or irregular footmen.

DEATH ZONES: DRAGON FIRE AND POISON GAS

One of the functions of war machines is to make a place completely unlivable. Artillery, gas, and even Greek fire were all created with the goal of slaughter and control of a battlefield. Think of the battle of the Black Water in *Game of Thrones*, think of trench warfare with gas, think of napalm in Vietnam. A war machine might easily include the catapults that hurl dragon fire or *cloudkill* spells, or the dragons that simply set forests aflame.

These are extreme examples by the standards of medieval warfare, but they are familiar enough to gamers that they might make for very interesting challenges. Don't give them the dragon fire or the *cloudkill* spells. Make them figure out a way to survive it.

In these cases, the heroes are not looking to capture or destroy a war machine—they are just looking for a way around it. This might mean using a disused postern gate and a series of tunnels and trenches (how conveniently dungeon-like!), or it might mean using a special magical shield that protects them while others die around them in droves (rather grim, but this is Sparta), or it might be that the war machine they face has a single weakness and can be immobilized from the enemy ranks if only someone were foolhardy enough to send a small band of adventurers into the enemy ranks in disguise. The stakes are high, the consequences of failure are huge, and the goal is pretty clear. This premise (like *The Guns of Navaronne*) makes a great war story for a motivated platoon. Give it some thought the next time you design a villain's well-nigh impregnable fortress. Make it a little more impregnable, in other words.

WAR MACHINES AS STORY TOOLS

All of this is to say that siege engines and war machines are elements of a storyteller's toolkit, useful in some instances, ways to raise the stakes or make a thuggish brawl into a larger conflict, and potentially a way to make a skirmish, battle, or war into something with grand and epic sweep. Use them wisely, and your stories of combat will have a great set of options and perhaps, a few much bigger hammers that readers and gamers will know by their own names, as familiar as Enola Gay and Gypsy Danger. War machines are a lever to turn a tale of single heroes into a tale of an entire army and the crucial moments that brought them victory or defeat.

Inspiring words

A Warlord's Field Guide To Battle Cries

Mario Podeschi

A rallying cry rose above the din of the battle, inspiring the Halfling to fight on long enough for Captain Titus to get to his side: "Try harder!" Titus cried.

"Huh?" thought the halfling. "That's it, try harder?"

Battle cries have long been a staple of fantasy gaming. A good battle cry brings an exciting touch of character into a combat encounter, whether it's the barbarian's savage yell or the elven fighter's solemn oath to slay his foe. With the advent of 4e, inspirational one-liners are even stronger—after all, the warlord class restores hit points and grants saves based on heartening words. Most of us don't have the improvisational skills to invent an inspirational shout every combat round, though, so a list of one-liners, ready for use and stapled to a character sheet, can be invaluable. Bards and marshals from 3.5e use very similar powers, and a cutting line can add personality to bold heroes of any class.

The battle cries below are organized by types. Several are inspired by literary or historical battle cries.

CALL TO ARMS

These aggressive battle cries signal either the beginning of a battle or a major shift in a battle's rhythm. Use them when your warlord PC grants your allies speed and bonuses or to unleash that daily powers that make the difference between victory and defeat.

- Awake the irons!
- At them, my brothers-in-arms!
- Onward, mongrels; do you want to live forever?
- Into the fray, you dog-hearted cowards.
- After me! Forward!
- If we should die, let us die with sword in hand and courage in heart.
- Clear the way!
- No step backwards!
- No retreat, no failure. Only move forward!
- Faster! Faster! Fasterer! [*a goblin stand-by*]

- Ka-kaw! [*Native American warriors once used animal sounds as battle cries, which the European colonists found quite terrifying*]
- They are nothing to us. They are leaves to our wind!
- Let valor not fail!
- When we meet in hell, let us dine together as friends.
- We will win this fight, and with it, our place in history.
- Let us fly to glory on wings of steel.

WE HAPPY FEW

Since many powers target individual characters, you may find it useful to develop personalized encouragements for your allies. Revise these battle cries to match your own party members.

- Stand up, Shorty. Otherwise, I'm going to trip over you on my way to the others.
- Ha! You're already falling behind.
- We can't do this without you.
- You're not going to let me have all the fun, are you?
- Get up. I didn't give you permission to die.
- Get up. Either we all go home, or no one goes home.
- On your feet—I'm not carrying you out.
- On your feet, or it's not them you'll have to worry about.
- Arise, and let your steel sing.
- Kai keryth-karlanis. [*Elven for "Long life to the war-souls"*]
- Labbaik. [*A grim dwarven call for defense that means "we are here"*]
- Be strong, comrade. The day is not lost so long as we stand together!
- These fools have not yet learned to fear your dance of death. Make them fear you!
- Worse the weather, longer the march.
- Don't give up now! This will be the greatest part of your legend!
- Their swords will shatter on your shield.
- Giving up so soon?

WARLORD'S CHALLENGE

Sometimes, the best way to encourage your allies is to demoralize your foes. These battle cries taunt the enemy and blend well with powerful attacks that bring other benefits to your party.

- Do you so fear my blade that you bother us with these peasants?
- I have sworn to be slain by better than you.
- My name is Titus, and this is Death!
- Which limb shall I rend first?
- This is the last time I humble you.
- Stand down, or be put down.

- Might I have the pleasure of your name before I run you through?
- Challenging us? You're about as bright as a dying firefly.
- Two strokes and ten seconds is all you've left in this world.
- Never have you been so doomed as when you provoked my wrath.
- Hell hungers, and my sword shall feed it.
- Let your eyes look their last—soon they will be food for the crows.
- Repent, villain, for this is your final hour.
- Fight your last, look your last, breathe your last.
- We will speak more while you twitch upon my blade.
- I must warn you, knave: only cowards have faced me and lived.
- There's nowhere left to run.

SALUTE

These battle cries, many inspired by real-world history, are used to invoke patriotism, religious zeal, or moral conviction. When your party fights for a shared goal, these saltues can add an epic flourish to an encounter. They also work well for clerics and paladins, and for inspiring allies in larger battles.

- Long live the Queen!
- Land and freedom!
- The Empire forever!
- For honor!
- Forever Zobeck! [*or any city you're defending*]
- And when get to Heaven / to Saint Charon will we tell / four more men reporting, sir / we've served our time in Hell.
- Fight well, for the fallen will receive a chosen place at Khor's side!
- After this day, the Red Goddess will know our names.
- Svarog aid us!
- Mithras guide our sword-arms; Isis guide our souls.
- Remember the dead, fight for the living!

MAKING YOUR OWN

You may need to expand this list depending on how often your characters fight. Though it requires some work, it is incredibly rewarding when you develop a line that is completely your own. Just start with a simple phrase like “kill that guy” and expand it into something epic.

The terms introduced here are taken from the study of rhetoric—the art of using language to inspire, educate, or persuade. Even if you are not familiar with these terms, they describe concepts that we instinctively understand. Using cool-sounding synonyms is the most common tool. Rather than killing that “guy,” have your comrades kill villains, knaves, corpses-in-training, and fly-bitten boarpigs. Similarly, you can slay rather than kill, swear instead of promise, and persevere instead of win.

Metaphor is another sharp blade for rhetoric. By expressing simple ideas abstractly, you can turn dozens of epic phrases. Powerful animals provide great imagery for this, as your party can “catch this prey in their iron talons” or “strike with a lion’s fury.”

Synecdoche is a metaphor that substitutes a part for the whole. For an adventuring party, this means referring to your allies as their blades, hands, hearts, staves, and so on. Rather than saying “we will end you”, a hero might say “our blades will end you.”

You can add more life to a cliché by using *metalepsis*, where you renew an old phrase by referring to it without repeating it. As your allies get used to battle cries like “let fly to glory on wings of steel,” you can reinvent it with similar cries like “our wings of steel will carry us through!”

Chiasmus is one of my favorite ways to turn a phrase. It contrasts points with very similar structures. Politicians love chiasmus, using it in phrases like “ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country” and “what counts is not necessarily the size of the dog in the fight—it’s the size of the fight in the dog.” In your own battle cries, reverse sentences to provide a ringing tone.

Alliteration makes your battle cries more poetic and memorable by repeating similar sounds. The warlord’s cry “their swords will shatter on your stalwart shield” sounds more impressive than “their weapons will break on your hard shield.”

Winston Churchill used *anaphora* to inspire British soldiers when he proclaimed that “we shall fight them on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets.” By repeating a phrase with different endings, this technique can turn a simple phrase into a memorable speech: “Together shall we slay their skeletons, together shall we slay their trolls and their basilisks, together shall we slay their mighty dragons!”

Conversely, *epistrophe* repeats sentence endings with similar effect. It was used in Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, when he called upon a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. With epistrophe, you can insist that your friends live as heroes, speak as heroes, dream as heroes, and, if they must, die as heroes.

The halflings’ foe dealt a vicious smack of his morning star, catching the Halfling under the chin. Fading fast, he knew his enemies would have the advantage soon. A rallying cry rose above the din of battle: “Don’t give up!” yelled the warlord.

“This will be the greatest part of your legend!” The halfling smiled at the thought—and fought on.

The Right Character for the Job

Reconnaissance and scouting

John A. Pitts and Ken Scholes

As Moth slipped through the trees, her feet seemed to barely touch the ground. A dozen yards away, Reginald lay back, watching the young waif disappear amongst the shadows, praying that she would come back to him safe and sound. Of course, she always had. This was her seventh time out, scouting a village in the path of Reginald and his remaining troop. Each time she'd gleaned enough information to allow his men to bypass a hostile settlement without incident or, once, allowed his men a much-needed chance to resupply and rest. He thanked the gods for the day he'd found this young woman, a native to these lands, fighting off two attackers, with a third dead at her feet. She never spoke of her family, but her familiarity with the local dialects and customs had saved his men time and again. Maybe, with continued luck, and her amazing skill, they'd get home alive.

Scouting and reconnaissance have been integral to combat across the history of human warfare. Regardless of the era, military commanders have relied upon the most accurate information, both of the terrain and the enemy forces occupying it, to determine the tactics and strategy necessary to achieve their mission.

Missions come in many variations. Sometimes you are driving deep into enemy territory and are looking to hit a certain objective: blow up a bridge, destroy a supply depot, capture a particular landmark, or generally strike at the enemy's soft underbelly. Think of Sherman's march to the south during the American Civil War, or Rome's Gallic wars against the Germanic tribes.

Moth counted to three before reaching out with one hand, cupping the orc's face and sliding the dagger into the back of its neck. She followed the larger body down, guiding it to a quiet rest before rising and signaling to Reginald in the woods behind her. One sentry down, one to go, she thought. Then the mages can get in close enough to disable the magical wards on the temple doors. With luck, the orc high priestess won't know anything until the halflings are stabbing her in her putrid green ankles.

Sometimes, scouting is just to get the lay of the land so you can move your forces with the least amount of trouble, including finding good places to camp and forage, as well as avoiding hostile forces. Knowing where the swamp starts and the mountains end is vital to your forces' survival. You really don't want to get caught with an abysmal swamp standing between you and safety while a ravening horde of ogres bears down on your exhausted, wounded compatriots. The true beauty of a well-played scout is being able to keep tabs on all the threats you could face, finding a way to avoid

them, and maybe, if you are very good, entangle the enemy in those traps you've discovered. Sure, the mage could just fireball that group of ogres, but how sweet would it be if you ran them straight into the den of manticores you just discovered? A good GM would reward you for cleverness, creativity, and chutzpah (as long as you survive).

EVOLUTION OF AN ANCIENT SKILL

From the first group of hunters who sought to take down a mastodon to modern armored cavalry and even satellites and spy planes, the fine art of scouting, tracking and reconnaissance has been part of the continued success and evolution of thriving tribes, communities and even nations.

One of the best-documented, early examples of the use of scouting and reconnaissance is found in the Roman Empire—which brings us to one of the earliest and most profound technological advances in scouting and recon: the horse. This four-legged wonder could move men at unprecedented speeds, allowing for quick incursions, more rapid communication, and a broader sense of the environment an army would face.

The Romans, faced with brutal defeats at the hands of the Visigoths and Huns, evolved their idea of combat, began to deploy more scouts, and even expanded their use of cavalry as a potent weapon all to itself. Successful battles don't always go to the stronger force, but to the force with the best knowledge or intelligence, and the most diverse strategy taking advantage of said knowledge. Speedy and nimble troops don't hurt either.

Of course, the emergence of cavalries came with disadvantages. Horses could be killed, and horses had to be fed and trained, making them a resource used with care. Early on, of the approximately 6,000 soldiers in a Roman legion, only 120 were cavalry. They were used initially as messengers and scouts. But by the 5th century, as the use of the horse became more prevalent in combat, the Roman cavalry expanded up to roughly one third the size of the infantry.

The Roman army used two types of scouts: the *speculatores* and the *exploratores*. The *exploratores*, who were often natives familiar with the terrain, patrolled ahead of the army sometimes up to a day's ride out. Their job was to identify potential campsites, ambush points, enemy positions and any other notable information found, and to verify information taken from prisoners or deserters. The *speculatores*, fewer in number, operated as spies for the legion, sent in disguise to gather intelligence behind enemy lines. As members of the cavalry, the Roman scouts were armed with bows, carried small shields and wore armor designed for maximum mobility and protection while horseback.

In the sixth century, far removed from Rome, Sun Tzu described useful information scouts could gather to determine the size and make-up of an enemy force on the move, identify problems like hunger, thirst or low morale with enemy ranks, and preempt potential ambushes or traps.

Today's scout looks nothing like his Roman or Chinese predecessors, but the function remains largely the same, and the principles that drive scouting and recon have not changed much. Like the Romans, the U.S. military has employed natives, both as enlisted men and as hired scouts. Native Americans, familiar with the terrain and the peoples occupying it, were hired as far back as the Revolutionary War to provide scouting and reconnaissance services to the U.S. military. From the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the first World War, there was a permanent Native American presence in the U.S. Cavalry as scouts.

Use of NPC scouts could add a lot of flavor to your campaign. Are they truly friendlies, or are they

leading the party into an ambush? Do you have a common enemy? Are they using the party as a tool to exact vengeance on personal enemies? There is no end to the complications this can bring. Think of Gollum in Lord of the Rings. He wasn't exactly a trustworthy character, but he definitely led Frodo and Sam with care—to Shelob's lair. So, it was a trap. It ended up working out in the end.

FUNDAMENTALS

Reconnaissance has to be an ongoing venture, happening before, during and after combat, and recon assets are never kept in reserve; scouts are tools kept in use to assure the flow of good information for the strategists. To accomplish this, scouts must stay hidden and, from that concealment, gain and maintain contact with the enemy. And as information is gathered, it must be communicated accurately and quickly or it becomes useless. Maintaining mobility and avoiding decisive engagement with the enemy is also key, particularly if the scouts are discovered.

Information gathered by scouts falls loosely within three categories: Information about the enemy forces, information about the terrain or geography and information about the civilian population. It's obvious that information about enemy forces—the number and make-up of those forces, its leadership, morale, supply chain, its own recon and scouting capacity—gathered by scouts on the ground with their eyes, ears and noses gathering data can mean victory or defeat. Observations about terrain and geography—things like weather, choke-points, water sources, wildlife—provide commanders with a sense of the environment they are sending infantry into and allow them to consider the potential advantages or disadvantages of their location. Information about the civilian population—its infrastructure, holidays, religious beliefs, customs, economic and health conditions—can be useful in shaping strategy. When you are invited to dine with the local tribe, it's always good to know: are you are a guest, or are you on the menu?

GAME PLAY AND STORYTELLING

APPLICABILITY

Anyone can scout, go ahead of the main group and see what's going on. Hell, sometimes the sheer audacity of that act, when coupled with a non-descript appearance, can confuse the locals and guards into thinking you are innocent and safe. But a warrior clomping down the road in plate mail may not be the exact thing that you're looking for when it comes to the main purpose of a scout.

The basic skill set of any good tracker or scout is uncannily similar to that of a good upper-story man or a successful horse thief. These individuals must move quietly and unseen, while at the same time being able to track multiple threats and obstacles all the while seeking their goal and always keeping a ready escape plan if things go poorly.

Your job is to determine if the land ahead is safe or not. Where is the enemy, and can your people survive the next few miles without getting wiped out? You can be looking for a good campsite, foraging for food, or looking for a way around an abandoned castle full of giant spiders. Or, you may be the front man who goes into a town to pave the way for your folks coming in later: the lead for a traveling troupe who set up the locals to anticipate a show, or prepare them to buy your snake oil by drumming up business. You are the forerunner. She who blazes the path forward keeps her people safe and softens up the suckers so her side comes out ahead.

SKILLS OF A GOOD SCOUT

Facility with language, the more the better

Languages help—as long as they are used in the region you are in, of course. Knowing high Elvish while stuck in the middle of kobold territories may not prove to be very useful. Being able to listen to sentries, guardsmen and even local farmers and such is one way a good scout can gather needed information without exposing themselves to danger. The critical skill here is a high intelligence. Scouts aren't all hiding and sneaking.

Stealth

The best scouts are never seen—moving like the wind and never leaving as much as a broken branch or foot print for others to find. There is a reason most scouts are not hulking brutes or mail-clad warriors. Quiet and hidden are the key ingredients here. Think dexterity, agility and spacial awareness.

Tracking

When you are out looking for the enemy, trying to find a good place to make camp, or generally trying to avoid running into enemy patrols or, you know, the local large, toothy, eating machine, it's important for your scouts to be able tell the difference between black bear markings that are weeks old and the fresh tracks left by a minotaur or squad of goblins. The type of track, its freshness, and its direction of movement are all vital to either following or avoiding the critters in question. Again, intelligence is key here, as well as specialized knowledge. You've gotta be able to rub more than two brain cells together if you are going to tell the difference between a black bear and a grizzly.

Excellent Senses

Sometimes you smell the fires of an encampment or hear the whicker of horses before you actually see the line of pickets. Knowing how sound travels, which way the wind blows, and direction of said input can make the difference in surprising the encampment of lizard men or Mongol warriors, and being surprised by them. Add skill points to various traits such as listening, spot hidden, heightened smell, and intuition.

Knowledge of Flora and Fauna

A good scout knows enough not to allow the folks he's scouting for to set up camp in a big thicket of poison oak, or worse, in the midst of a colony of fire ants or killer bees. Understanding what grows where can lead to fresh water. Being able to tell the difference between edible and non-edible plants will allow your side to forage more efficiently. This is all about smarts and again, specialized knowledge. A GM might offer skill points in various regions, perhaps, or classes of beasties. Knowing the habits of a kobold pack can spell the difference between finding their latrine and their pit trap where they catch dinner.

Stalwartness, Forthrightness, Decisiveness and Commitment

Look, you creep through a clearing and find that the enemy has scouts of their own. You see him; he sees you. You have a breath to make a decision on how to react. Do you hare off in a direction that diverts the enemy away from your camp, hoping to circle back and lead them into a trap? Or do you strike, taking down the enemy scout before he can alert his troops that you are out there, plotting their demise? Hesitation will always kill you, maybe not with an immediate thrust of steel, but letting the

other guy live makes your job harder and puts your team at risk. Besides, you don't need the competition. Seriously, do you want the other scouts finding out you fell out of that tree, allowing the goblin scout to see you? Embarrassing. You're gonna need chutzpah, fortitude, and a "what's the worse that could happen" attitude. Wisdom plays heavily here.

A Talent with Pointy Things (or Maybe Heavy, Blunt Things)

No matter how much you want to be like a ghost, vanishing before anyone even knows you were there, there are going to be times when you need to take out an enemy to preserve your own skin. A knife in the throat is a simple solution; knowing how to kill a person (or an orc, a tiefling, or a centaur) with minimal fuss and muss can really keep your day from going totally downhill. See goblin scout above. Any and all martial skills will be useful here. Pick your favorite killing implement and stack the stats and skill accordingly. Two-handed sword is a bad choice, but a garrote, now, that's a thing of beauty. Also, do not forget the bow. A scout needs to be able to bring down that bounding deer from a distance. Have you ever tried to stab a running deer?

A Glib Tongue, a Quick Wit, and a Sharp Mind

Not all scouting is creeping through the underbrush avoiding brambles and the inevitable pile of bear dung. Some scouts, infiltrators, or advance men spend their time mingling with the locals, taking the pulse of the community and determining if a town is a good place to bring their people to or a good place to avoid. Is it a good place to re-supply, or are these iniquitous bastards in cahoots with the evil overlord? Knowing how to talk your way out of a tricky situation, convincing a bar maid to give up a bit of vital information, or talking your way past a pair of bored guards can make the difference between full bellies and fat purses, or the hangman's noose. Skills in speaking—see above re: facility with language—decent intelligence and charisma help here. Being able to spin a tale or two wouldn't hurt when you finally get cornered. It's bound to happen.

Contacts

Many classic societies and secret organizations had networks of like-minded individuals who one could contact to gather information, get next orders, or even sell information to. Spies and agitators tend to work in intricate networks of compatriots who are willing to stage a riot or burn down a building to help you and yours achieve a goal, or just flat escape with your skins. The more people you know, or the more secret handshakes you have, the greater your chances of being successful in unknown territory. Skill points in secret societies, contacts, special tattoos, markings, handshakes, and catch phrases are all part of this expertise. Know the difference between "the celery stalks at midnight" getting you access to a secret meeting, or a quick stab in the neck.

Fun with Animals

Remember earlier when we talked about horses? Mounts are critical to the range and speed of the scout. The faster the knowledge gets where it needs to be, the better off everyone is. Besides, you may need to make a hasty escape, and pulling a horse from the enemy picket line could just be your ticket home. Skills in animal husbandry, animal psychology and the like help here. Again, a good intelligence will add additional levels to all your skills, but being able to discern a horse that's been plowing fields for fifteen years from a battle trained stallion could mean the difference between staying alive or not.

FIND YOUR STYLE

In character generation or story building, it is always good to understand the tone you are going for, the style of play you want, or the overall story arc you want your character to have. Do you want to be that Brick who can stand toe-to-toe with the Ogre and allow the mage time to get off a few magic missiles, or are you the type to catch that Ogre napping and kill him before his battle cries alert his cousins in the next hollar over? At the end of the day, as you're dividing the loot and drinking ale in a tavern, you can sit back smugly while the warrior and mage brag about their conquests, while you pocket that bauble you found while the Ogre was napping.

THINK ABOUT IT

And hey, if you get out maneuvered and the enemy falls on your party with the wrath of a thousand kobolds, you'll be in the woods, hidden away, waiting for your chance to slip into the wilds and head back to that lovely tavern you found a few days back. I'm sure the bar maid there will remember you fondly, especially if you whisper to her in high Elvish again.

Combat from the shadows

Carlos Ovalle

It might be considered a bit dishonorable to stab an opponent in the back, in the dark. You might take such actions out of necessity, however. Maybe you don't have the combat training to go head-to-head against your opponent. Maybe you don't have powerful magic to fall back on. Maybe you have to rely on careful planning or your own cleverness to defeat your enemies.

Maybe you have to fight from the shadows.

There's a grand tradition of combat from the shadows in tabletop RPGs. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* Thief began this style of combat. "You should *not* fight hand-to-hand unless you have to," warns the Thief entry from the Mentzer box. The entry later reads: "[i]f a thief can sneak up on a victim, completely unnoticed, the thief may Backstab." The Thief stayed out of direct combat and struck from hiding.

The Thief's direct descendent is the D&D or *Pathfinder* Rogue, and the Thief has spawned a number of other scions that tend to share a few characteristics. I find the term Rogue a bit more inclusive—not all Rogues are thieves, but most thieves are Rogues—so I'll use the term Rogue to talk about the general fantasy archetype.

So what makes a Rogue a Rogue?

Rogues are clever. Rogues are good at opening locks and disabling traps. Rogues might be a bit selfish or greedy; acquiring *something* is their primary motivation. Rogues often rely on speed more than strength. Rogues tend to be a bit more physically fragile than their martial counterparts but they are survivors, and when they can surprise you, you're in trouble. Rogues have to be smarter or cleverer than their foes. Rogues are stealthy. Rogues *hide in the shadows*.

So where did these tropes come from?

THE FANTASY ROGUE

The trickster archetype has been around for most of recorded human history. Loki of Norse mythology spread chaos amongst the Æsir and is currently both battling the superheroes of Marvel's cinematic universe and starring in his own comic book as an anti-hero agent of Asgard. Coyote of several Native American traditions now makes disruptive appearances in many works of fantasy and urban fantasy, like Patricia Briggs' Mercy Thompson series, where he provides cryptic clues that generally only make sense after the fact. We also find folk heroes like Robin Hood, Puck, and Reynard the Fox recur in stories up through today. Some commonalities between these tricksters: they outwit their opponents, they are rule breakers, and they often fight—and win—*by cheating*.

The trickster archetype in turn inspired the literary archetype of the rogue. Gary Gygax was directly inspired by Jack Vance and his tales of the Dying Earth. Many of us have heard of Vancian magic, but Vance also inspired the Thief with the anti-hero Cugel the Clever, whose “less-than-ethical exploits” often left him fleeing directly from the results of his actions. (“Cugel the Too-Clever-for-His-Own-Good” may have been a better epithet.) Gygax also referred to Roger Zelazny’s Shadowjack as a source of inspiration for the Thief—a particularly dark anti-hero whose power only worked in the shadows. They are also tricksters—they lie, cheat and do everything they can in their power to defeat their enemies, no matter how questionable their actions.

Other works of classic fantasy provide us still more examples of the rogue. The reluctant burglar Bilbo Baggins of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* certainly shares some of the rogue’s characteristics. He avoids direct fights and relies on his wits to overcome obstacles and enemies. Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser of Fritz Leiber’s tales of Lankmar are quintessential adventuring rogues in the picaresque tradition. They are consummate swordsmen, but just as often use their cunning to overcome their enemies. We even find rogue characteristics in Robert Howard’s Conan, the barbarian thief and king. While Conan’s battle prowess is legendary, his skills as a rogue are also impressive. Gygax even gave Conan levels in the Thief class when he created statistics for him in *Dragon* magazine. These characters were the acknowledged direct inspirations for the earliest rogues of tabletop RPGs.

The rogue tradition continues in a number of recent works. Tabletop RPGs have existed long enough to have potentially informed the rogue archetype these characters represent. Locke Lamora, Jean Tannen, and Sabetha Belacoros of Scott Lynch’s *Gentleman Bastards* series plot, steal, double cross, and cheat their way across their brutal world. Arya Stark from George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* uses her wits and her speed to survive incredible hardships. Her early lessons with the Braavosi fighting style and her later training in poisons, lying, and knives bring her directly to the path of the assassin. Speaking of assassins, Vlad Taltos battles adversity (and occasionally kills people) in the Dragaeran empire in Steven Brust’s epic series—and his one-time mentor Kiera the Thief is the absolute best at what she does, earning her sobriquet many times over.

Tie-in fiction directly based on RPGs provides us a number of memorable thieves, rogues and assassins that in turn inspire rogues in games and fiction today. Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis gave us the incorrigible kender and Hero of the Lance, Tasslehoff Burrfoot, whose constant “borrowing” of goods, insatiable curiosity and general good-heartedness help his companions triumph against the forces of evil. R.A. Salvatore created starkly contrasting characters—the thief with the heart of gold, Regis, and the ruthless assassin Artemis Entreri. From *Pathfinder Tales*, Dave Gross’s rake Radovan fights and charms his way across Golarion.

There’s an entire trope dedicated to the Lovable Rogue at that real-world equivalent of a *maze* spell, website tvtropes.com, describing those “who break the law, for their own personal profit, but [are] nice enough and charming enough to allow the audience to root for them.” They break laws and con, hurt or kill people, but they’re still the heroes (or anti-heroes). They are still the ones we usually want to win. These heroes, their styles and their abilities, are the models for our RPG counterparts. So what do we learn from these characters that we can apply to how they fight in a tabletop RPG?

FIGHTING AS A FANTASY ROGUE

The Gentleman Bastards provide an excellent variety of examples. Jean Tannen is a terrific combatant. He's talented and skilled, using his pair of axes, the Wicked Sisters, to devastate his opponents—and he was taught by his master not to fence “with its many sporting *limitations* and its proscriptions against *dishonorable* engagements,” but to “*kill men with a sword.*” Sabetha Belacoros, in her appearances in *The Republic of Thieves*, excels at everything she does, including swordsmanship. She's a far better fighter than Locke Lamora. Locke has never been a great combatant and he knows it. And his friends know it. His mentor taught him how to win, not by his skill with a blade, but by using his weapons “sneak-style,” “in the back, from the side, from above, in the dark.” And Locke does win fights—sometimes against incredible odds—but he has to rely on his planning, his wits, and not a little bit of luck. When he wins, he almost never comes out unscathed. And sometimes he loses fights spectacularly.

So we see that rogues can vary in their battle prowess. Although some of them are amazing fighters, the stealthy ones tend to be more physically frail than the standard warriors. They rely on charm, cleverness, stealth, speed and, occasionally, tactics that might be considered dishonorable but give them an edge, like the use of poison. They might use longswords, but they're more likely to use smaller weapons: daggers or other items that can be easily hidden. They're tricky in combat. Things go best for them when they can plan in advance. *And they cheat.*

They cheat by misdirection and deceit. They cheat by using stealth and trickery. They cheat by breaking the rules of engagement. Taking advantage of planning, cheating and stealth can be complicated in an RPG, especially in a team game in which characters have different skills and varying motivations.

Rogues have been a staple of fantasy tabletop games since the earliest days of the Thief. In those days, they could use skills that other classes couldn't: pick pockets, open locks, find and remove traps, hide in the shadows and move silently. They had a relatively restrictive set of weapons and armor available to them, but they could come out of the shadows to backstab their opponents. Later editions and game systems refined the class further, calling it the rogue, and added additional roguelike classes: the assassin, the bard, Pathfinder's ninja, Kobold Press's shadowsworn, and others. These roles share elements of the thief's skills, but possess their own foci and skill sets.

As the rules changed, the rogues gained new ways to take advantage of their opponents. The creation of extensive simulationist rules that provided more situational options and utilized tactical maps allowed players new strategies. Instead of only attacking from shadow, these characters could take actions that took advantage of their opponents' distraction. Rules existed to create different types of rogues, with many different avenues available to them in and out of combat. These changes opened up an incredible number of possibilities.

In some ways, though, GMs and players may find such extensive rule sets limiting.

Some people debate how to maximize a character's choices for combat, belittling the choices others make that aren't optimal for such situations. Some people don't consider how to allow for actions that aren't explicitly included in the rules. That mindset can be difficult for characters *whose defining characteristic is to break the rules* and think of clever ways to defeat their opponents. The rogue often suffers in these discussions. But they don't have to.

AFFORDANCES AND POTENTIAL ACTIONS

I'm going to appropriate a word from interaction design: affordance. An affordance is basically a functional characteristic of an object in the environment that allows a particular action to take place. The most common example is that a doorknob affords a twisting motion that can be pulled or pushed in order to open a door; the design of the doorknob makes those actions—twisting, pulling, pushing—possible. Affordances come from design, and a person has to be able to perceive an affordance for that design to be useful. In a tabletop RPG, the rule sets and interactions with a GM provide affordances for player characters.

One of the challenges in playing a stealthy character in a tabletop RPG is that it is, perhaps more than other types of classes, beholden to its environment and environmental interactions. The rules have to provide affordances to the players in order for the players to know what is possible using that rule system. And the players have to be able to perceive that such affordances exist.

Let's return to the *Pathfinder* RPG. The character sheet lists the Stealth skill as an option, and Stealth and its interaction with the Perception skill are described in the Skills chapter. The combat rules describe how Cover and Concealment works. The Vision and Light section describes different degrees of light. These are all affordances that should show the player how the use of stealth in and out of combat is possible and how those actions should work.

But there's more to stealthy combat than the rules. The most important and greatest affordances in a tabletop RPG come from the GM, and that begins before a campaign even begins. The GM needs to inform the player what type of game they're playing from the outset. Is it a kick-in-the-doors-and-loom style of game? Is it going to emphasize roleplaying? The answers to these questions can contribute to how a rogue can be designed so that the players and GM can each enjoy themselves. Those discussions determine what actions and activities will be emphasized and allowed by the GM during the course of play. If a GM never uses vision or light in a game, for example, the combat utility of the stealthy rogue may be greatly diminished, and the player may want to consider a different rogue archetype or help the GM create opportunities for using stealth.

A player's interaction with a GM during play is always key to a successful game. A fighter can charge her enemies. A wizard can cast a harmful spell. Those actions don't require much in the way of description. For the most effective use of a character that relies on stealth, however, the GM must describe the environment and what is occurring in the environment in such a way that the players realize that stealthy or clever interactions with the environment are even possible. Those descriptions are the affordances provided by the story. What's the lightning like? Are there trees? Are there crates? Can a person hide behind those trees or those crates? Are there rafters in the room? Can a person climb up into those rafters? If such information isn't revealed, players need to ask these questions to help the GMs create these circumstances if they don't yet explicitly exist.

The GM also needs to create and allow for the creation of clever opportunities by players. Similarly, players need to be willing to be advocates for their actions. A player needs to be able to ask questions and create advantageous situations for his- or herself. Rogues in fiction often need to be creative during combat. Their tabletop counterparts need to do the same. If Locke Lamora is going to send barrels crashing down on advancing pirates, Locke has to know that the barrels are there and that he can make such an attempt. In fiction, the author creates those opportunities. In a game, Locke

the player would have to work together with the GM to reveal those potential actions.

GMs have to create these affordances and, even more challenging, allow these opportunities to occur. And it is challenging. There aren't necessarily rules for cutting a rope to send a crate of barrels to crash down upon your enemies. A GM has to be able and willing to improvise when the rules for a given situation don't exist, because *rogues break the rules*.

BREAKING THE RULES

The rules for stealthy combat can add a layer of complexity to a game, both at the meta-level of the system rules set and within the framework of the game world itself. The rules for stealth only come up when stealth is being utilized in a game, so it's possible the rules may be unfamiliar to people. A GM and stealthy player need to learn these rules at the game's outset to allow for their use and better learn how to deal with actions that aren't necessarily reflected in the rules set.

And within the game world itself, breaking the rules of engagement can only occur when the rules of engagement are well understood. To do the unexpected, you have to know what the expected is. The GM needs to be able to convey that information to the players in some form. In many games, we can rely on general conventions or stereotypes—deceit is unethical, the use of poison is considered dishonorable, stabbing someone in the back is frowned upon in polite society—but those conventions have to exist in that world, and if there are additional considerations, the GM needs to make sure the players know about them.

In your typical adventuring party, not everyone will be stealthy. Stealth requires effort. Perhaps the mage doesn't have the mental room to focus on such pursuits. The warrior or cleric might be clanking around in loud, bright armor. The rogue may be the only character who can use stealth. Those are the situations where the environment is key. It's the player's responsibility to discover and seek out information from the GM that can be used to give that player the advantages they can use in a fight. In such a group, the stealthy character may need to focus on skills that allow her to move ahead of the party stealthily, but also skills that allow her to survive on her own in such situations. The stealthy character can take advantage of the environment—darkness, cover, the conspicuousness of her companions—to contribute greatly to team combat. That's part of the grand tradition of the fantasy rogue. The classic rogue is clever, and the player rogue needs to be clever as well.

Mechanically, stealth can be *amazing* in a game. Stealth offers an incredible advantage in combat. In the *Pathfinder* RPG, for example, stealth can be used to set up ambushes, to sneak attack, to snipe, and to deal devastating damage and effects while your opponents are still unaware. Breaking down the door and loudly charging in headfirst ("Plan A") doesn't have to be the only tactic that parties use. A group that focuses on stealth can take advantage of feats like Stealth Synergy to surprise *everyone* they encounter. I've seen it in play; it's stunningly effective. Even a smaller commitment to planning and attempts at stealth from the group can lead to combat situations where everyone, stealthy or not, can take advantage of their efforts and the stealthy characters can shine. Most important of all, *it's fun*. Making elaborate plans, hiding from enemies, setting up ambushes and attacking from the shadows can all be enjoyable. Those plans certainly won't always work, but dealing with what happens when things go tragically wrong can be incredibly fun in itself.

BEING SNEAKY

Playing an effective rogue can be challenging. There's potentially a lot of planning and effort that goes into playing a stealthy character. But the rewards are terrific as well. The rogue's dependency on environment is also a strength. It adds complication and complexity, but it also allows for creativity from the players, creates great opportunities for player, group and GM cooperation, and provides a great outlet for roleplaying. Some terrific stories come out of these types of interactions, and planning and plotting your way through adventure can make for an incredibly exciting and fun game.

So, sure: it might be a tad dishonorable to backstab someone from the shadows.

It can be pretty damned entertaining, though.

Healing heroes

Combat Medicine and Magic

Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

In *The Princess Bride*, Count Rugen tells Prince Humperdink to take care of himself instead of attending the torture of the hero because “if you haven’t got your health, you haven’t got anything.” But any self-respecting vampire with the accumulated wisdom of several hundred years of undeadness knows that immortality isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. There are many stops between life and death on the pendulum of mortality and they provide drama and conflict in stories from antiquity to the present, whether or not the illness or cure can be attributed to magic.

HEALING: NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

As a magical motivation for a quest, healing is right up there with gold and love. Many fairy tales begin with the illness of the king or the beloved mother and the need for the offspring (or suitor if the afflicted is a princess) to sally forth and find the magic item that will provide a cure. Then there’s the obstetrical variation, in which A) the queen can’t conceive without the help of the witch or, B) the wife has a craving that can only be satisfied by a veggie belonging to the witch—but since we’re talking combat medicine here, we can skip those.

The item that heals is always more unattainable and expensive than the flip of a card or a roll of the dice may suggest. It might be a flower that only blooms once every thousand years on top of a crystal mountain set in the middle of an uncrossable desert, or a fruit that is entirely poison except for one small, inaccessible portion. And, oh, yeah, both of them are usually guarded by one or more monsters that can be defeated only with the aid of animals or geriatric magical beings repaying favors done for them in the course of the quest. In some cases, the real healer is the helpful animal or person who must be sacrificed by the adventurer, and their head or heart carried back to the patient for the cure to take place.

Healing is clearly not for sissies. As with anything, there is always a cost and it is always higher than the hero realizes when she or he accepts the challenge.

HEALING IN TRADITION, STORY, AND SONG

Traditional healers, midwives and herbalists were often known and persecuted as witches. Learned males wise in astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, art, and medicine were sometimes considered wizards. Leonardo Da Vinci comes to mind with his anatomical studies. Both of these designations are hazardous to the health of the healer and may involve practices that are essential to the pursuit of knowledge (like the dissection of corpses) but unsavory to the average citizen.

The suspicion of these people comes not because the “witch” or “wizard” actually harmed anyone but

because perceived power over life and death is a dangerously potent skill set. If someone is that powerful in an area that doesn't give them political power or wealth, those who wish to take them down, probably people in good health, are free to do so—or, at least, to try. On the contrary, if the healer fails to cure someone, that also can land them in serious trouble. Sometimes even successful healing can present a danger to the healer.

The first known prosthetic limb belonged to King Nuada of the mythical Tuatha de Daanan. Nuada, the greatest warrior of his day, lost his arm in a battle for half of Ireland against the enemy Fir Bolg. According to the laws of his people, a king had to be physically perfect, so the loss of his arm made Nuada ineligible. A physician, Dian Cecht, fashioned a silver arm for him and he wielded it to great effect against his enemies and unseated the usurper king. Later, the physician's son, Miach, was able to replace the silver arm with a real one, making the father so jealous he killed his son.

One of my favorite stories about a “combat healer” is the song, *The Witch of the Westmoreland* written by Archie Fisher and popularized by the late Stan Rogers. In this song, a wounded knight undertakes a long and perilous journey to seek healing from a “witch” whose form, like a pooka's, is half horse and half maiden. She is connected to the land in which she resides; she cannot go to him so he must go to her. After a certain ritual on his part and a reciprocal one on hers, the two of them kiss and lay together. Thus he is not only healed but “none can slay the knight who's lain with the Witch of the Westmoreland.” It's an exciting and intriguing song.

Several years ago I had a short conversation about it with Archie Fisher. He told me that the traditional sound of the song is no accident, since it was based on an obscure folk tale he and his sister (the two of them being from one of the great Scottish musical families) found in their research. Then he said, “Of course, we stopped short of taking the song to its logical conclusion.” I asked what that was. Archie replied that if laying with her could cure anyone and make him immortal, then once the knight had been cured, he'd need to kill the witch so his enemies couldn't make use of her too. I was disappointed in this observation, at first because I wanted everything to go well for this unusual creature and her patient, but on reflection, it isn't really as logical as the songwriter seemed to think.

The laws of magic protected the witch, even from the knight who knew she existed, knew how and where to find her. He needed to know what he would require to summon her (his hawk and hound) and how to use the witch's powers once he'd done so. When you consider that the knight was gravely wounded enough to risk going through all of that and yet was able to do the necessary, you can see where a lack of similar endurance might disqualify the majority of the casualties. He must have been an extraordinary fellow. Also, the witch could not be moved from her place to service whatever battlefield was convenient. She rose from a particular lake in a particular way after being summoned with a particular ritual by someone who had the right credentials, whatever those may have been. Otherwise, she appeared to be just another wetland.

Archie's assumption would have only been valid if all of that was common knowledge and her assistance available to anyone and everyone who could command it. Life and death are never so cheaply bought in magical tales, be they games, songs, or stories. There is always a price, a sacrifice required, and always a ritual involved.

The ritual in magic (and medicine) can serve a couple of purposes. Presumably, an elaborate ritual is required to make the incantation or spell or series of actions work. But it may also serve as a cop-out

to cover the practitioner's rear. If the cure doesn't work, the petitioner must have performed the complex ritual incorrectly. If the witch doesn't like the looks of a petitioner, she could find fault with his summoning and lie low. Of course, in modern medicine, sometimes the ritual is a matter of a chemical reaction. A friend of mine made a miraculous recovery when his caregiver discovered she'd been giving him his medication with his meals instead of 20 minutes prior to the meal, as the directions, on closer examination, required.

RITUAL AND SACRIFICE IN CONTEMPORARY AND COMBAT HEALING

Some rituals matter more than others. In Vietnam, we healed a lot of infections with outdated antibiotics, which was all we had at times. Placebos can relieve some symptoms if the patient is told they will. On the other hand, blood types matter when giving a transfusion. The universal donor type is not O+ for all people and giving the incorrect type will probably result in anaphylactic shock and possibly death.

Aside from the financial sacrifice required to buy treatment for illness or wounds, people endure other kinds of trials as well. Miracle drugs that will cure anything can have side effects worse than what they're curing or cause allergic reactions that can kill. No treatment or procedure is without risks or its own share of atrocity stories. No doctor or nurse is all-powerful and always cures every patient who comes to them. Sometimes considerable discomfort and illness is part of the treatment, as with a lot of chemotherapy treatments. Then there are the invasive procedures just used for diagnosis, some of which involve lying on hard tables for long periods, doing without food, having tubes inserted into you, being stuck with needles.

The cost of curing, or attempting to, doesn't only fall on the patient, but on the healer as well. There's education, for one thing. Healers at most levels spend years training, either through formal education or on the job learning to do the right thing, but working under pressure and with little sleep may lead to mistakes.

Health care is a high stress profession and combat nurses and medics, like other soldiers, suffer from emotional illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Their fear may not be of their own mortality, although in recent wars where there are no front lines, that is certainly as jeopardized as anyone else's, but of fear of failing their patients, or regret at having done so.

No matter how objective a nurse, doctor, or medic tries to be, there are always patients who touch them more than others. Losing them takes with it some of the energy the healer has invested in them. It is a grief experience and it happens over and over again. Even though healers are taught to be objective, they invest their own energy in the sick person, to use their own strength to help them, so when the patient dies or is taken from them, it leaves its own kind of wound.

Healers are a minority in a war. Everybody else's mission is to kill people, whereas the healer is continually swimming upstream against the tide of injury and death, trying to stop the steamroller of war long enough to snatch a life from it.

Contemporary combat medicine of my time featured such magical enabling devices as dressings, antibiotics, transfusions, debriding, skin grafts, IV's and the time it takes to heal in real life. There were so many times when I would have loved to have had one of those gizmos on Star Trek that cures everything from ingrown toenails to punctured lungs.

Since games are about conflict and overcoming great odds, I wonder if some players and games aren't, by simplifying the process, overlooking an opportunity to explore a critical element of combat as well as another dramatic facet in their arsenal of virtual events.

A FEW STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS OF COMBAT MEDICINE

Triage

Triage is a word that gets bandied about pretty casually even at the Department of Veterans Affairs these days. It's used to denote sorting out almost anything from clinics to equipment. In military medicine, during wartime, it has a specific meaning that at first seems illogical. When a "push" (a helicopter full of casualties) arrives at the hospital, the patients are examined and sorted according to the severity of their wounds to determine the priority of their treatment. Patients are sorted into three categories:

1. Those who will live regardless of the treatment they receive (who may require minimal treatment to be returned to duty)
2. Those who will die regardless of the treatment they receive
3. Those who may survive if given immediate care.

The first group to be evaluated and sent elsewhere are those who will live regardless. Once they're identified, the third group is readied for surgery or whatever other treatment or procedures are required. The second group, the most badly injured, are set aside—not heartlessly, but from necessity to save the greatest number of people—to die if they must die or survive to receive treatment when available. They're not totally neglected. Bleeding gets staunches and pain relieved if possible, but they are not the first to be taken to surgery or receive the massive effort that might be given in a big, modern, stateside hospital.

To Kill or Not to Kill

This makes sense in military terms when you realize that killing people isn't the most effective thing to do in battle. Wounding people badly enough to put them out of commission not only neutralizes their effectiveness as opponents, but also ties up a number of other people required to care for the wounded and remove them from harm's way, if possible, decreasing the odds against the enemy.

Long-Term Effects of Injuries

People don't usually get slammed over the head with blunt objects repeatedly without long-term effects. Even if they don't incur immediate brain damage, they might need surgery for depressed skull fractures or observation for subdural hematomas, which are sneaky because they may occur hours, even a day or two, after the injury. Soft tissue crushing injuries can be worse than fractures, harder to heal, more painful and more susceptible to infection. I would think there might be a lot of these sorts of wounds when heavy swords, maces, and other weighty weapons are used.

Consider the weapon that inflicted the wound. Poison tips on arrows aren't the only thing that can keep someone from healing. During the Vietnam War, M-16s were equipped with bullets that "tumbled" when they hit soft flesh, so although the entry wound in a normally non-lethal part of the body might look small, the tumbling action of the bullet broke bone and destroyed organs as it plowed through, with a massive exit wound, if any.

Infection

At Scutari, where Florence Nightingale pioneered nursing, it's said that the legend above the entry to the hospital carried the message from Dante's Inferno, "Abandon Hope, Ye Who Enter Here." Because of the lack of sanitation, communicable diseases and infestations of vermin, more soldiers died of disease than wounds. The hospital was a death trap. Weapons and wounds aside, a human enemy is only one of the obstacles to surviving a battle.

In Vietnam, the air seemed full of germs. Although we had modern sanitation and cleaning supplies, I wore the wrong kind of boots and got an ingrown toenail that escalated in a few hours to a fever of 105, a red streak running up my leg, and delirium. As often as possible, we avoided doing surgery in-country, and instead shipped patients out to the nearest military hospitals in other countries. When we got patients in from the field, if they had dressings already applied, we left them on and reinforced them but did not re-expose the wound to the atmosphere. Civilians carried diseases long defeated in this country and carried parasites that would have killed most of us.

IN CONCLUSION

Illness, wounds, and death are as much part of a battlefield as the armed enemies that march across them, if not more. They're also less discriminating or responsive to negotiation. Rather than having a one-panacea-fits-all cure for your troops, try giving your healers skills as specific as those wielded by mages or magical creatures. Of course, if you can find a unicorn, that would be a big help, too.

Monsters: the pointy end of fun

Rob Heinsoo

My favorite anthropology professor used to tell us that twenty years after college, all we'd remember of her courses would be the anecdotes, the moments when theory and analysis made room for simple, bizarre, or hilarious stories. As someone who learned just enough social anthropology to become a game designer, Professor Kelly's affirmation of the anecdote made an impression.

So welcome to today's special class, "Monsters: The Pointy End of Fun." We'll tiptoe towards analysis and design advice by leading with stories—stories of D&D!

DEATH OF THE KING

We'd come to the climax of a three-year D&D 3e/3.5 campaign called the Nine Chords. I played a bard. Don't laugh. The nine great gods were all bards who appreciated songs of glory and power sung in their particular key of the alignment chart. We were kick-ass heroes who had run afoul of the master plan of the Ogre King, who was looking to remake the world with the nameless orcs, goblins, and ogres elevated, and high ones like us cast down.

So this was the big fight against the Ogre King, ready for us in his carefully prepared ritual stronghold, a long procession of trees arranged like pillars, each tree a vampire death-trap sucking the blood and soul out of a captive human or elf and channeling that mana to the king.

The Ogre King was awesome and the GM explained just how badass he looked as the fight began. And then the d20 system took over and the Ogre King was completely obliterated in a round-and-a-half. Our GM, who'd prepared for every eventuality, but not this one, said, "Oh. OK. You win, I guess. The nameless can't believe what they've just seen. Neither can I. I spent four hours working on these stats. A round-and-a-half? So yeah, they all flee. Huzzah."

We felt like true heroes. We also felt a little sorry for our GM, but the alternative world in which he grokked all the ins-and-outs of d20 combat-monster design and combat dynamics as well as he understood the thrills of dramatic storytelling . . . well, in that world, there would have been fewer of us alive celebrating. It wasn't a failure—story awesomeness won. But our GM still thinks of that Ogre King as the one that got away.

Analysis

Let's use this story to poke at a type of tension that's baked into most die-rolling traditional RPGs: the tension between simulation and drama. RPGs started as D&D and D&D grew out of wargaming. Most wargaming is about simulating a particular contest between a particular set of antagonists. In the early days of gaming, character life was cheap because monsters were not there to provide a satisfying

dramatic experience; like traps, monsters were there to kill your player characters if you rolled poorly or if the monsters rolled high or if you made a stupid mistake like pressing the button that released the monsters. Or maybe just because it was a killer module.

Of course, people realized that there was more going on here. The creation of a story—and an understanding of the story-telling possibilities of RPGs—blossomed into all our many wonderful ways to play. Some RPGs favor simulation, others favor drama. Personally I'm most interested when I can merge the two. As a GM, I'm happiest when there's a bit of a simulationist-threat that the players can overcome by dramatic heroism. But of course, most crunchy games aren't set up with systems that also account for drama, so that's where the game designer hat springs to the brow.

As a game designer, I try not to create false-effort traps for players or GMs. I don't want to design a game that rewards spending four hours working on designing a monster's mechanics. Systems that are that crunchy, with that much of an illusion of balance, are traps for good intentions that aren't backed up by system mastery. Monsters in my most recent design, *13th Age*, start as a level-dependent set of stats that get modified slightly and then have two-to-five attacks and powers added on. The thinking is that a highlight-film approach to how a monster fights in combat fits the timing of the monster's appearance at the table. The monster is not there for the whole game; it's there for its highlight. Ideally the system should help that highlight be memorable in a way that's not like other monster's moments.

The other element of *13th Age* design that fits into this conversation is that it has a mechanic for adding a dramatic curve to each combat. All our monsters start with defenses that are one too high. After every round we add +1 to the attack rolls that the player characters will roll the next round, calling that bonus the escalation die. The result is that the monsters often feel unbeatable at the start of the fight. There are moments of panic and frantic action. But as the PCs hang in there, heroism pays off. The pendulum will swing, and when it's swung, the battle is over quickly, aided by an escalation die that stacks probability in the heroes' favor.

Of course there's another obvious moral of the story of the death of the Ogre King: whenever dice and game mechanics are involved, the GM has to be ready to flex into a story they didn't see coming. Here's another story of a game that required that precise type of flexibility. This one is from Jonathan Tweet's original 3e campaign, a near-climactic moment when the monsters were just as tough as the GM thought they were going to be, but the players were different.

SO A D&D PARTY WALKS INTO THE WRONG WELL OF SOULS . . .

What our 17th level characters didn't understand toward the end of Jonathan's epic Elysombra campaign was that he was telling us not to go to confront the undead at the Well of Souls. Everything about that campaign was Jonathan attempting to play by the book. So when he said, "No, the undead are probably just too tough for you. I mean, a *lot* of things have died lately," he wasn't making GM smack talk. He meant it.

But we went anyway—a teleport thing, porting into the Center of All Undead Badness.

Our first hint that it might be a serious problem was when he started placing four-inch-tall Nightwalker "miniatures" from Wizards of the Coast's huge prepainted set on the battle map. And

didn't stop. He'd gone around at WotC and borrowed as many as he could. Something over seventeen dark blue-black undead giants surrounded us. This was the center of undeath. There wasn't really any way we were supposed to survive this. He thought he'd warned us. As players we also didn't know that the campaign was designed to have us die at some point, because there was an afterlife component coming, so Jonathan was pretty sure that was about to happen tonight, and thought the real challenge was going to be how our souls might escape to the afterlife.

The nightwalkers were just as terrible as Jonathan thought they were, blasting away with spells like Finger of Death. He'd powered them up by making them deal at least twice as much melee damage as normal. This was the nightwalkers' place of power, after all. Seventeen too-huge undead creatures and various sorcerous minions cut into us, and Jonathan's certainty that we were all going to die finally started to penetrate.

But a funny thing had happened that evening. One player whose character was the cleric—a barbaric female named Gliss—spent nearly every session drinking pretty heavily. It was his night out from home and he used the night to cut loose, not to optimize his character. But that night he explained that he had a medical procedure scheduled the next morning. “Don't get used to it, but tonight Gliss is in the house. I'm just saying you shouldn't expect this ever again, but tonight, it's on.” Before the game he spent almost an hour going over his character, discovering spells and abilities he'd never bothered to read or write on his sheet. This all took place while everyone else was working through pre-game rants or catch-up conversations, so no one paid all that much attention to the studious cleric . . .

. . . until midway through the session, when the soberly-played cleric revealed power after power against undead that we, and Jonathan, had never seen coming. Even late in the game, Jonathan thought we were done. But Gliss cast another glorious spell she hadn't been able to access before and one night's sobriety became the stuff of legend.

Analysis

That Elysombra campaign was great. I learned a lot from Jonathan's GMing and I learned a lot about D&D systems by playing for years in a constantly escalating consistent storyline.

Part of what fascinated me about the campaign was watching Jonathan work within the tension of the game he felt responsible for. The reason he wanted to play by the rules of 3e, and then 3.5, was that “somebody had to.” He wanted to know what really happened if you took all the rules seriously. He would never have run the game so rigorously if it had just been for his own entertainment.

So in the years since that campaign, my RPG design attempts have been to forge closer toward that point where we can play maybe-as-written and have a lot of fun doing it.

Monsters are key to the *D&D/Pathfinder/13th Age*-style design because they are such flexible antagonists and so much more fun than traps.

In *13th Age*, monsters are a key part of how the GM gets to have fun. In a nutshell, *13th Age* monsters use their attack rolls to determine not only whether they hit or miss, but also which special ability or extra effect they create that turn. As GM, I don't know precisely what each of my monsters is going to accomplish each turn. Neither do I have to decide. There are decisions to make but, at a certain point, the monster's set of abilities is going to generate interesting consequences, or just as often not.

Early wargames, and many RPG scenarios, used random event tables and random reinforcements to generate this style of unpredictability. *13th Age* tries to build a little bit of random event table into many of the monsters that matter, so that heroes can't be certain how a combat is going to play out and so the GM acquires hooks for interesting story descriptions of combat instead of having to generate new language for the same-old effects.

ENDGAME

I started this essay thinking, "Monsters in combat are entertainment for the GM." It wasn't until writing my second *13th Age* example that I realized I haven't fully been living up to this notion as a *13th Age* designer. The overall effort of making monsters simple but elegantly and interestingly variable helps the GM have fun. But I've been doing a lot of my actual design work thinking only about the way the monster intersects with the PCs. On my next project, I'm going to experiment with how I can make a few of the monster abilities directly entertain the GM, abilities that face away from the players and will only surface into their world later. Yeah, this should work. Combat doesn't have to be a completely closed environment. Supernatural consequences during one battle can be summoned into later play, in fact, and even players appreciate elements of earlier battles surfacing later in the dramatic arc.

So thank you! A couple of old war stories, a bit of fast-moving patter, and I've got something new to try.

And speaking of old war stories, fast-moving patter, and new tricks (ever try being a target?), Professor Baur will be with you in a page or so. See you all in d20 years when we do this again.

On being a target

Bravery, Cowardice, and Retreat in Game Combat

Wolfgang Baur

One of the ways to view roleplaying game combat is as a character who is out to smash, slash, spike, and ensorcel the foes in the game. The other—and far less frequently emphasized perspective—is that your character in the game is a target for violent mayhem. That is, the character is the first target for every burst of dragon breath, and at the business end of hellfire maces and extra-pointy arrows and crushing tree-trunk clubs wielded by cloud giants.

It's a lot more fun to imagine being the heroic fighter smiting goblins than being the same warrior about to get crushed by the cave troll, or deciding when it might be best to run. But I think it's important to spend at least a little time thinking about games and characters in which the hero's role in combat is not always purely heroic.

THE DOWNSIDE OF MELEE

While hand-to-hand combat is many things, the one thing it is not is impersonal combat-at-a-distance. Ranged combat has been disparaged by some warriors as “not quite worthy” since the days of Mongol archers, Flemish crossbowyers, and English longbowmen—all reviled by their foes for fighting from a distance. Standing and fighting has always been seen as brave and virtuous—holding the shield walls with your fellow Vikings, riding down peasants with your fellow knights. Getting your cleaver dirty is one of the foundations of medieval combat and heroic stories since . . . well, at least since *Beowulf*, and probably since *The Odyssey*.

But the very nature of hand-to-hand combat puts the attacker in harm's way, and it makes every participant take some measure of risk. Even if (as in the knights vs peasants example) the odds are heavily tilted by armor, a trained mount, and superior tactics and weaponry, there's always a chance that a high-ranking knight will get pulled off his warhorse and beaten to death by peasant clubs. In more D&D-ish terms, sometimes the kobolds have prepared an ambush, brewed a potion of fire breath, and trained a friendly owlbear, and suddenly your 1st level party of heroes get its asses handed to them. There's risk, even if the risk is much smaller than the risks in a real combat.

This risk and danger makes fantasy combat exciting (and can make real combat terrifying), and in games it usually goes the way you expect. But sometimes, just sometimes, the heroes suffer a reversal.

BRAVERY VS. COWARDICE

In most games, the monsters and non-player characters (NPCs) are subject to various forms of morale

checks, fear spells, intimidation, panicked status conditions and so forth. As a result, they retreat or fall back, lose actions, or suffer various penalties to their attacks. This all seems fairly straightforward: the various monsters and foes don't all fight to the death, and certainly in a game you want the players to come out on top. They should benefit from their superior morale, esprit de corps, and even divine guidance and bravery (just look at the cleric spell list for D&D and *Pathfinder RPG*).

The Targeted Player

The trouble comes when we try to apply this sense of fear, panic, or cowardice to the player characters, or even to the heroes in fiction. Cowardice is shameful, and choking under pressure is not the least bit heroic, even if it is very, very human. Most soldiers in real combat have moments of crippling doubt and fear, and witnessing real death and destruction handed out by the mayhem of modern war—or by the much more personal and equally horrifying nature of ancient, hand-to-hand combat—surely affects the spirit, courage, and morale of any soldier over time. So at some point, it might make sense for a character in a game to feel fear, panic, or at least hesitation. How does this work in a high-fantasy context? Does it work at all, really?

Here are a few things that may help you bring morale and bravery a little more prominence. Note that different solutions work for different groups and play styles; you're the best judge of which techniques will work for your group and play style.

Pure Player Decision

One way to address the problem is just to ignore it: Player agency over their character is complete and absolute, and the character will never panic or show cowardice unless that's something the player wants to have happen for story and character reasons.

That's a simple solution, and my own experience is that it means characters are never the least bit bothered by walking through hell, whether on Earth or elsewhere. It's a dodge that implies, "My character is superhuman and never shows weakness." To some players, that is a positive thing, because a fantasy character should be well beyond the normal range of heroism. And to be fair, even if this is entirely a player choice, the gamemaster has options that are rarely fully utilized: taunts and threats issued in character by monsters against a character in the game. This sort of optional taunting has some pros and cons, so let's take a closer look.

Taunts and Threats

When I say "target a player character," I really mean that the NPCs and powerful monsters need to turn a baleful eye on that character. Ogres must command their goblin foot soldiers to "kill the elf! Kill it! Kill it now, all arrowgoblins—kill the elf!" An undead commander might whisper in a sepulchral voice that creeps across the battlefield: "Destroy the last living son of the Nordhammer clan. Bring his line to an end, my ghouls." You need to lay it on fairly thick to really generate a sense of unfair discrimination against the character's class or race, or you need to clearly pick on some icon of the character's identity, such as their heraldic shield or holy symbol. "Ten rubies to the giant who brings me Cuthbert's holy symbol!" is certainly going to get the cleric's attention.

Beyond shouted commands and volleys of ranged attacks, targeting a character should make the party nervous on other levels. The targeted character is taking a lot of damage, and it might be a wizard

character or a wily rogue with few HP. That character might also be the target of magical attacks (ask for lots of saving throws, some without visible cause) and might also be the target of combative mobs in town (“Kill the half-orc! His father slaughtered our caravan just last week!”).

Basically, this level of targeting is about us-vs.-them racial profiling of fantasy races, and the abuse of some feature of a (fantasy) character. If it’s a one-shot thing, you might not want to warn the player ahead of time. However, if you think it’s going to cause hard feelings for someone’s character to be the target of raging monologues and orders (and it certainly might), you might at least want to warn that player ahead of time. It could be as simple as, for example, “Your character might get a fair bit of nasty attention in the game today. Throw your character sheet at me if it’s over the top.” A certain unfair sense of targeting can bring out better emotional or character reactions from a player, but you don’t want to lose friends over this, so use your best judgment.

Finally, not every threat need be an order barked on the battlefield. Some threats can be carried by diplomats or delivered Robin-Hood-style on the tip of an arrow, saying, “You are next” or “Death to dwarves”, or best of all—a supernatural message might appear in the midst of battle that completely plays into a character’s fears. A devil speaks to the pious cleric of failure. A black cat with a human voice speaks a curse to the gypsy rogue. A ghostly spirit speaks to the superstitious barbarian, telling him that his ancestors are waiting for him.

Combine that level of eerie supernatural threat with the more blatant dangers of a pack of ogres, and your “never retreat, never surrender” crew might at least take a short tactical retreat to figure out why one of them is such a target (and of course, as a wise storyteller, you have an explanation that they can uncover when the time is right).

Dice Decide the Supernatural

The second way to handle this sense that player characters are not fallible or don’t really show breaks in morale is through magical targeting or saving throws for game effects. That is, the player controls the character completely, but part of that control is rolling saving throws against dragon fear or a wizard’s soul-sucking spell of ultimate panic. This seems to be rather more acceptable to most gamers, as their hero faced a supernatural threat and the dice said he or she was paralyzed with fear or dropped a weapon or spent a turn running away. The dice absolve the player of inflicting some kind of weakness directly on her own character.

The third way is to me the most interesting, as it requires that a player and gamemaster agree ahead of time to some form of panic or morale system, that removes player agency or that (even better) imposes some strict new conditions on character behavior. This sort of morale check removes some agency from the player, but it also removes the sense of fault or weakness. The character has cracked in some way, and it’s a roleplaying challenge to make that interesting at the table.

This approach might also make players re-evaluate the utility of some common tropes, such as a *remove fear* spell or the *bolster spirits* cantrip from *Deep Magic* (Kobold Press, 2014), if morale and fear of overwhelming supernatural power is a bigger factor in the game. Mind you, this is a choice that designers should make carefully; players should still retain heroism, and the game should not be structured to make the entire party panic in every other brawl. But it adds a new dimension to a game, and one that we see frequently in films and novels. Fear can be as interesting as bravery, and can lead to some terrific story elements.

The one outstanding example of this that springs to mind is *Call of Cthulhu's* insanity system, which requires a player to act out various forms of madness that the rest of the party is generally not informed about if the character's sanity breaks. *Pendragon* has something somewhat similar, and I believe that using such a system for certain types of heroic fantasy combat could also bring some big rewards at the table.

Now, those are the overall options for handling character fear and morale. Let's talk about retreat mechanics for a minute.

A RETREAT SYSTEM

Using dice to decide the supernatural is fairly standard in D&D and *Pathfinder* and similar games, but the use of dice to determine bravery is not, and for good reason. There's not much point in playing a cowardly front-line warrior in a high-fantasy setting. Yes, being forced to retreat by dice is normal in wargames and skirmish games like *War Machine* or *Saga*, but it runs counter to tradition for most styles of roleplaying game, where each player commands a single, special snowflake.

Maybe it's time to reconsider this, and revisit our hobby's wargaming roots. I think that forced retreats can provide a good gameplay challenge and a more interesting story, if such a system is designed correctly. I'm tinkering with one myself, so here are some thoughts on how I see going about it in a way that improves story elements, but doesn't completely trammel player agency and control for long.

Events Trigger Fear and Retreat

Rather than spells or the flight of a dragon triggering saving throws, the events that require heroes to show fortitude in the face of battle might be slightly more mundane, but they should be clearly spelled out. This means not just wounds, but the loss of companions or the turning tide of battle might require a check of some kind.

For instance, if a character drops to 20% of his or her total health or hit points, a morale check might be required. Likewise, the death of a comrade or the arrival of a powerful supernatural foe might require such a check. Goblins would not trigger a morale check, but a dragon would and so would a demon lord.

Morale Effects are Fleeting

However, while checks would make a character hesitate or falter, they need not require a character to flee in total panic. This system can be graduated to show greater and lesser degrees of heroism: the affected character might no longer be able to charge or use full movement, the character might hesitate and lose a partial action, or the character might even drop an item. However, a single moment of doubt from one failed check does not knock a hero out of the battle!

Recovery Could be Swift and Valorous

Making a check on the player's next turn returns things to normal: they hesitated and were assailed by doubt in the face of Sauron, but then they overcame that fear. And if I were designing this system, I'd sweeten the pot a little for players: those who make a morale check and overcome their fears gain a positive bonus for the rest of the fight. That is, facing that fear gives them a bonus to damage or gives them an extra attack or a critical hit, as the character's fear is transmuted into aggression and a desire

to prove their bravery.

The Spiral of Fear

Being hesitant and fearing some element of the fight could turn into a larger problem. If the demon lord sees the paladin hesitate and uses some magic to weaken his spirits, another morale check might be required, and the effects could grow steadily worse. I see this as a spectrum of morale, from, “Oh no, they are all after me—I don’t want to advance” to “I think we’re losing, time to step back in good order” to full blown panic.

TARGETING BETTER PLAY

I would not recommend using something like this all the time, but I think it’s entirely fair in a roleplaying game to sometimes turn the tables and put the players on the defensive. Villains and monsters can take actions that surprise a group with an ambush or kidnapping. Combats can turn against a party if overwhelming evil reinforcements appear on the horizons. There’s no rule of RPGs that says every combat has to be a fair fight, and there’s every reason for villains to fight dirty, talk trash at those irritating heroes, and attempt to break their spirits with both mundane and arcane means.

So, spend a little time figuring out what makes the player characters in your favorite game bend a little, and give them interesting choices if their morale does buckle. I can promise you that when they come back to fight another day, they will be loaded up and prepared and focused. Sometimes a little sting of defeat is what’s needed to make your players put away the cell phones and bring their best game to the table.

One More Thing...

The illusion of conflict

Spoiler-Alerts and Combo-Moves

Clinton J. Boomer

“Oh—what are we whispering about? Well, see, me and Mike have a combo-move worked out for next round. It’s gonna be awesome. It’s like the fastball special, but it has more back-flips. And some pirouettes. Spin-kicks, really. And it also has a hadouken involved. Anyway, we can’t find the rules for it, so you’ll need to give us a difficulty.”

—Overheard at the gaming table

What I’m about to say here is controversial, so let’s get the big scary part out of the way—the part where I totally blow your *mind*—and move directly on to the part where I present my thesis, give my clever examples and then 100% convince you just as quickly and painlessly as possible.

After that, we’ll move on to all of my delightful insights about how you can make your in-story, tabletop combat more fun for everybody involved.

Ready for the controversy?

Okay, here goes: *combat isn’t important*.

Not really. Not at the end of the day. Not as regards the purest form of cooperative storytelling.

Not in the fundamental context of a great tale, well told, featuring you and the greatest of your friends taking on the roles of legendary heroes, cunning scoundrels, mythic monsters and diabolical villains, overcoming amazing odds and triumphing epically in adventures of the most dragon-slaying and dungeon-crawling sort. *Combat isn’t important*.

No. The only thing that’s important, really, is the grand *illusion* of combat.

SPOILERS AHEAD

Ah! So, *illusion* in this instance is a fine distinction to draw—a remarkably fine distinction, perhaps—but it’s a distinction nonetheless.

What do I mean by it? Well, I mean that it doesn’t *really* matter if everything is on the line, all “coming down to this,” as long as some tiny part of you thinks that it is. A fight—a *conflict*—can be fun to watch or participate in *even if we know how it all turns out*. We can observe the fundamental

truth of this illusion's power in the beauty of achronological storytelling, most especially, including the oeuvres of such grand fiction masters as Quentin Tarantino, Stephen King, and William Goldman. For example: in the movie *Kill Bill*, we know from the very end of chapter one—only a few minutes into the movie—that The Bride confronts Vernita Green and kills her. We also know that Copperhead was the *second* name on The List. From that point forward in the film, as it winds backward and forward in time, leading up to right before that moment, we the viewers know that it is literally impossible that our heroine will die while facing O-Ren Ishii—or Buck, or Hattori Hanzo, or Gogo Yubari, or Johnny Mo and the Crazy 88!—or otherwise fail and fall during her quest to (and through) the epic showdown at the House of Blue Leaves.

Those events are set in stone.

We have spoilers, and yet they don't ruin our enjoyment of the piece.

To take it a step further: we know, from the first moment we begin reading Roland's tale of his youth—and of a girl named Susan Delgado, and of John Farson and Rhea of the Cöos, told along the quiet Kansas turnpike in Stephen King's *Wizard and Glass*—that he'll make it to meet up with Eddie and Jake by the end of the adventure.

He *has* to.

In fact, we know that the shrieking eels don't eat Princess Buttercup; Granddad literally tells us so. We know that nobody "gets" Humperdink, too; the villain is destined to live. We're told from the very outset, the opening lines, that the story has fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, True Love, miracles. . . . The first time we watch *The Princess Bride*, we have to know in our heart of hearts that the mysterious Man in Black will not be brutally killed by Inigo Montoya nor the other way around.

Heck, we literally *know* that there's a miracle coming.

What can you call that, except a spoiler?

And yet we can enjoy these tales again and again. We can sit down and re-watch *Star Wars*—even the prequels!—with joy in our hearts, despite knowing how it all turns out. Good triumphs over evil, a hero resists temptation to the Dark Side, a villain is redeemed by the power of love, freedom wins out over tyranny, and there is a kiss. The *illusion* isn't ruined, at least for those singular moments.

Why, then, do conflict-heavy scenes from these wonderful stories still make us *tense*?

Why are we on the edge of our seat when The Bride appears to be at the mercy of her foes? Why do we get so palpably nervous when Roland very nearly succumbs to the vile power of the crystal orb? Why are we so . . . concerned, then, when Princess Buttercup and Westley are on the precipice of what seems to be such terrible danger? How can we be *afraid* like this?

It's about our love of the scene and the players in it, even if we know, in the back of our minds, that we'll get a happily ever after. It's about diving into the tale, experiencing it with fresh eyes—for the first time or the thousandth—and letting the magic of story wash over us.

So there it is. The *illusion* of life-and-death risk: that's the part that gets the heart racing and the blood flowing when you get down to brass tacks. Once you can fake it, and fake it well, everything else is

gravy and high-fives.

How do we fake it, then?

Glad you asked. Let's get right to that.

THE ILLUSION OF CONFLICT

Let's move away from the term "combat" just for a moment—despite the fact that it's still *really* what we're talking about—and briefly use the more general catch-all term: conflict.

Conflict isn't just a sword-fight. It can be a battle of wits, or a chase, or a weird mystery, or even just a hero holding on for dear life. It can be a brilliant character matching raw will against a sinister and seemingly superior intellect, or a series of riddles in the dark. It could be a brutal political campaign, or a deadly game of cat-and-mouse in a crowded mall, or someone climbing a mountain, holding their breath, overcoming a terrible fear or letting go of deep-seated personal trauma.

It can be a character learning to forgive, or accepting that she doesn't have to be the villain, or buckling down and accepting her responsibility.

It can be a hero finally perfecting the technique she learned long, long ago.

It can also be a sword fight, which is *awesome*.

Conflict is deeply interesting, insofar as humans are adapted to winning fights. Fights involve danger, and danger activates the lizard hindbrain in the back of your skull, sending jolts of white-hot adrenaline to the sleepy part of your brain that used to deal with tigers, forest fires, and alien raiders in the long dark of night. Being scared can be fun as hell: roller coasters, white-water rafting, bungee jumping, haunted houses, driving fast.

Those are all scary, and people pay good money to experience them.

Real conflict involves *risk*, of course: someone loses the big poker tournament or the big basketball finals or the big chess match or the big kickboxing brawl, and that agony of defeat makes the thrill of victory so much sweeter. In some forms of gaming, there's actual *conflict* because there's actual risk: most collectible card games, board games, war games, team-based shooters, and so on.

But when you're at the tabletop, playing a cooperative storytelling game—or reading a wonderful novel—there's no real competition. Not fundamentally: the storyteller is not trying to *beat* the players or the reader. Only if a game involves any measurable amount of temptation toward "cheating to win" is there real risk.

The only way to win in storytelling is to enjoy it, at the end of the day: maybe have a little fun, maybe be emotionally moved, or learn a lesson.

The only way to lose is to *not* have an emotional experience.

So how do you create interesting, believable, *illusory* conflict, which doesn't involve real threat of defeat but is emotionally satisfying nonetheless?

GAMIST, NARRATIVIST, SIMULATIONIST

There's a whole wealth of info out there about Gamist, Narrativist, Simulationist (GNS) Theory, which you are welcome to—encouraged to, in fact!—look up and read up on at your leisure; it's fascinating stuff, and I'm not going to try to synthesize the entire concept down to its essence here and

now. In broad strokes, though: an awesome guy named Ron Edwards posits that there are three different ways that roleplaying games “work,” and that different players get different things out of the events in different ways.

The three break down like so:

- **Gamism:** This perspective espouses competition among participants and focuses on conditions for winning and losing based on strategies of play, with the game acting as an arena for competition.
- **Narrativism:** This perspective focuses on the creation of a story of literary merit (according to the standards of the participants), including player protagonists and a cohesive theme. The premise of the game should embody an ethical/moral conflict, and the game provides the materials for creating the narrative.
- **Simulationism:** This approach encourages enhancing one or more of the five elements of RPGs (Character, System, Setting, Situation, and Color) to heighten “experiential consistency” and maintain logic within the bounds of the game. Exploration of Character is a form of this approach, as is exploration of Setting and Situation.

In theory, each group takes something different from good conflict:

- A **pure gamist** (who would be just as happy playing chess, poker, *Magic: the Gathering*, or a really good tabletop war game) wants fights and intrigue alike to run as smoothly as possible, because conflicts have a set system and measurable values. Damage has hard and fast rules, and should run according to the established metrics; if new rules for fighting are introduced, that changes the design goal of making a character, which complicates things—and complications are fun, or we else would all be playing checkers.
- A **pure narrativist** (who would be just as happy with her nose buried in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *Neuromancer*, or *Fate/Stay Night*) wants the combat to help tell a cohesive and interesting story . . . if it’s brought up at all. Struggle, warfare, duels, and assassination are each ripe for powerful scenes—in different ways!—that explore the boundaries of self and personal identity vs. overarching goal in relation to society at large. Mature troupes of mutually trusting storytellers are free to dive further into what it means to be a warrior or a killer, as well as to make combat—and reaction to conflict—a defining part of each character. As long as the scene is dynamic, even *losing* a fight can be the best part of a tale!
- A **pure simulationist** (who would be just as happy camping in the woods, touring a castle, or playing *Minecraft* while in character) wants every knock-down brawl, cunning plot, and heated argument to feel as real as possible. A good session of describing sword practice or plotting political assassination may not add to the story or have rules, but it’s what makes the game worth playing. Knowing the details of your opponent’s stances is as flavorful and lived-in as knowing that the seventh chime on the city bell-tower—primarily used to announce the approach of hill giants toward the southeastern walls, built 157 years ago by St. Ebbroguile, also called Kayvlock the Just, Fourteenth Heir of House Kayvlock and redeemer of the family line—is slightly out of tune, and that each year during the Fool’s Festival (also called the

Feast of Bright Autumn) a ribald toast is raised to St. Ebbroguile when it rings, and that the toast is always proposed by the winner of that year's pie-eating contest.

If you can hit on all cylinders, satisfying everyone, that's awesome. Failing that, figure out what kind of game you enjoy most and what your players are looking for, and hit that one corner of the triangle as hard as you can.

“Yes, and . . .”

The three most important parts of illusory conflict are, in no particular order:

- **Snappy dialogue (character):** The difference between a famous but ultimately two-dimensional monster and an actual, memorable villain is that a great antagonist always has something to say. Whether it's a grandiose monologue about their goals, a barbed taunt, a boast, a threat, or a casual and eerily-detached explanation of what they're doing, give a PC's opponent some character.
- **Chaos and excitement (stakes):** If the fight is going just a little too easy—or hard!—for your players, add an earthquake or a landslide. Throw in shooting stars or a forest fire, another group of wandering monsters or unexpected reinforcements, a crashing ship, a sudden snowstorm, or *something*. No fight ever takes place in a vacuum. Even in an arena, the crowd throws things. In the dungeon, it only takes one wrong step to activate an unseen trap.
- **The twisting knife (drama):** There are amazing rules for critical hits and failures out there, but you don't have to wait for a natural 20 or a natural 1 to pop up before you do something extreme. The best moments in any story are when a character—whether villain or hero—hits a sore spot, reveals a flavorful vulnerability or takes an unexpected stumble. Using a bit of a player's revealed history to up the stakes is awesome, turning any minor scuffle into a serious character-moment.

The most important lesson of improvisational theater—whether comedy or action—is that you never *negate* the actions of anyone else participating in the scene. If somebody wants to try something, you always let them attempt it—even failing at something cool is more exciting than being limited to vanilla options.

THE COMBO-MOVE

I've heard it said that a badly-designed game can be fun with the right group of friends, but that the best-built game on Earth isn't fun if you don't have the right players.

The trick of great combat is to have fun; once you're having fun, others will join in. With this tool-kit, a little extra spice and flavor can start to be introduced to your conflicts; you may find that you can add dimensions to a fight that players will be talking about for years.

And *that's* worth getting excited about.

About the Authors

Wolfgang Baur is the founder of Kobold Press, its publisher, and its general go-to kobold. He enjoys Gothic architecture, Turkish candies, and Seattle coffee to an alarming degree. Wolfgang is the co-author of the Midgard and Dark**Matter* campaign settings, as well as a co-author of the Tyranny of Dragons adventures for D&D and the first contributor to the *Kobold Guide to Game Design*. He lives in an impenetrable set of warrens near Kirkland, Washington, with his wife and two daughters, and he flies a multitude of kites when the winds are fair and strong.

Clinton J. Boomer, known to his friends as “Booms,” resides in the quaint, leafy, idyllic paradise of Macomb, Illinois. He began writing by dictating stories to his ever-patient mother about fire monsters and ice monsters throwing children into garbage cans. He began gaming with the 1994 release of the Planescape campaign setting, and he was first published professionally in the ENnie-Award-winning Pathfinder Chronicles Campaign Setting from Paizo Publishing after placing in the Final Four of Paizo’s inaugural RPG Superstar Competition.

He currently devotes a full 99.9% of his waking hours to thinking about fantasy adventure in general—or ninjas, more specifically. Boomer is a writer, filmmaker, gamer, and bartender; his short comedic films, the “D&D PHB PSAs,” have over 3,600 subscribers on YouTube and have been viewed more than 1.5 million times. A member of the WereCabbages creative guild, a frequent freelance contributor to Rite Publishing, Legendary Games, Sean K. Reynolds Games, Paizo Publishing, Green Ronin Publishing, Zombie Sky Press, and the Hellcrashers setting, his debut novel *The Hole Behind Midnight* was released in 2011. Boomer is currently the happiest he has ever been in his whole life.

Keith R.A. DeCandido has written tons of novels, short fiction, and comics. Many are based on games: novels based on *Command and Conquer*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and *World of Warcraft*, a novel and a comic book based on *StarCraft*, and short stories based on *BattleTech* and *Magic: The Gathering*. He novelized the first three *Resident Evil* films, and wrote an adventure for the *Firefly: Echoes of War* RPG. Other recent and upcoming work includes *Star Trek: The Klingon Art of War*, *Sleepy Hollow: Children of the Revolution*, *Mermaid Precinct*, *Without a License: The Fantastic Worlds of Keith R.A. DeCandido*, short stories in *Stargate: Far Horizons*, *Out of Tune*, *Bad-Ass Faeries: It’s Elemental*, *With Great Power*, and upcoming *V-Wars* and *X-Files* anthologies, and more. His rewatches of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine* appear on Tor.com. Additionally, Keith is a freelance editor, a black belt in karate, the percussionist for the Boogie Knights, a member of the Liars Club and the International Association of Media Tie-in Writers, and a prolific podcaster. Find out less at his cheerfully retro web site at DeCandido.net, which serves as a gateway to his entire online footprint (blog, Facebook, Twitter, etc.).

Diana Pharaoh Francis has published *The Horngate Witches* series, *The Crosspointe Chronicle* and *The Path* trilogy, as well as a variety of short stories and essays. Her novels have been translated into German and French. *Bitter Night* was nominated for the Romantic Times Reviewers

Choice for Best Urban Fantasy of 2009, *Crimson Wind* best urban fantasy heroine for 2011, and *Path of Fate* was nominated for the Mary Roberts Reinhart Award. Her latest book, *Trace of Magic*, was published in August of 2014, and she is currently working on sequels in the Crosspointe and Horngate worlds. She holds a P.D. in Victorian literature and literary theory, and an MA in fiction writing. She's been teaching for more than 15 years, and now writes full time as well as teaching for the M.F.A. in Creative Writing program at Western Colorado State University. She's a member of SFWA. For more about her writing, visit www.dianapfrancis.com. She can also be found on twitter as @dianapfrancis.

Ed Greenwood is an amiable, Gandalf-bearded Canadian writer, game designer, and librarian best known as the creator of The Forgotten Realms® fantasy world. He sold his first fiction at age six, and has since published over 200 books that have sold millions of copies worldwide in more than two dozen languages. Ed writes fantasy, sf, horror, steampunk, pulp adventure, and comic books, and has won dozens of writing and gaming awards, including multiple Origins Awards and ENNIES. He was elected to the Academy of Adventure Gaming Art & Design Hall of Fame in 2003. Ed has judged the World Fantasy Awards and the Sunburst Awards, hosted radio shows, acted onstage, explored caves, jousted, and been Santa Claus (but not all on the same day). He shares an old Ontario farmhouse with his wife and the head of the household (a small but imperious cat). This ramshackle mansion sags under the weight of more than 80,000 books.

Ed's most recent novel is *The Herald* from Wizards of the Coast (the last book of The Sundering Saga), and his upcoming books include *The Iron Assassin*, a steampunk novel from Tor Books and *Spellstorm* from Wizards of the Coast.

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Jeff Grubb is an award-winning game designer and bestselling author. He has helped create a myriad number of worlds (*Forgotten Realms*, *Dragonlance*, *Spelljammer*, *Al-Qadim*, *Guild Wars*) and then proceeded to tell stories about them. He currently lives in Seattle and builds worlds for computer game companies. Nice work if you can get it.

Rob Heinsoo is a game designer and storyteller who blogs at robheinsoo.blogspot.com. He worked on rpgs at companies including Daedalus, Chaosium, Wizards of the Coast, and now his own company, Fire Opal Media. As you'll have noticed, he has his most recent RPG on-the-brain: *13th Age*, co-authored with Jonathan Tweet. Previously he worked on games and worlds including 4th Edition D&D, Faerun, 3e, Glorantha, Feng Shui, and Al Amarja.

Miranda Horner learned how to shoot a bow while in high school, and although it's an on-again and off-again hobby for her, she loves playing an archer or ranger in tabletop and online games so that she can vicariously experience the meditative qualities of target shooting—just maybe it's not as meditative as it is in real life! (There *might* be some cursing involved with gaming. *Might*.) These days, she's the managing editor at Steve Jackson Games, and she has also been editing D&D, Pathfinder, and other roleplaying games since 1994.

Colin McComb has been a professional writer of one sort or another for over two decades, working for companies including TSR, Paizo, Malhavoc, Kobold Press, and Interplay Productions/Black Isle Studios. His work includes the Origins Award winning *Dragon Mountain*, the *Birthright* campaign setting, extensive work on the legendary Planescape line, and design work on *Fallout 2*

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Rory Miller After 17 years working corrections (including booking, ma, mental health, and tactical team leader) and a year in Iraq as a contractor, Rory Miller is now a full-time author and lecturer living in the Pacific northwest and traveling the world. Rory is the author of two of the most influential books in the self-defense field of the last decade, *Meditations on Violence* and *Facing Violence*, as well as the award-winning *Force Decisions*, and the self-published *Violence: A Writer's Guide*. You can reach him through his website at chirontraining.com or at one of his seminars in the US, Canada or Europe.

Carlos Ovalle is a doctoral candidate, Information Technology Coordinator and occasional lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin. He holds a Masters of Library and Information Science and studies copyright and digital archives. He has contributed to works published by Kobold Press, Misfit Studios, Rogue Genius Games and others. He reads a lot of fantasy and volunteers at the SCARE for a CURE charity, where his wife Holly makes some amazing costumes.

Richard Pett delights in bringing the unexpected and revolting to your gaming table, and was in one guise or another nominated in part of 5 ENnies this year. His favorite quote of late was at this year's Paizocon UK when he heard of a player who was so desperate to kill a perfectly charming NPC Richard had written for his delectation, that he couldn't sleep at night. The game had ended that evening at a point when, to do so would risk the whole party. Richard worries whether it is wrong to find joy in someone's insomnia and if instead he should start writing about puppies and kittens.

John (J.A.) Pitts resides in the Pacific Northwest where he hunts dragons, trolls and other beasts among the coffee shops and tattoo parlors.

Check out his award winning Sarah Beauhall series from Tor books (*Black Blade Blues*, *Honeyed Words*, and *Forged in Fire*), or his short story collection, *Bravado's House of Blues*, from Fairwood Press. Find him at www.japitts.net, on Twitter at [@johnapittswriter](https://twitter.com/johnapittswriter) and on Facebook as [johnapitts](https://www.facebook.com/johnapitts).

Chris Pramas is an award-winning game designer, writer, and publisher. He is best known as the designer of the *Dragon Age RPG* and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay, 2nd Edition*, and as the founder and President of Green Ronin Publishing. He has been a creative director at Wizards of the Coast and Flying Lab Software and a lead writer at Vigil Games. Green Ronin continues to thrive under his leadership, publishing roleplaying games like *Mutants & Masterminds*, *DC Adventures*, and *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying*.

Aaron Rosenberg has been writing and designing games for the past two decades, and has worked for everyone from Wizards of the Coast to White Wolf to Pinnacle to Decipher. He has an Origins Award for *Gamemastering Secrets* and a Gold ENnie for *Lure of the Lich Lord*. Aaron is also a novelist, and is the author of the best-selling DuckBob humorous SF series (consisting of *No Small Bills*, *Too Small for Tall*, and *Three Small Coinkydinks*), the Dread Remora space-opera series, and, with David Niall Wilson, the O.C.L.T. occult thriller series. His tie-in novels include books for *Star Trek*, *Warhammer*, *WarCraft*, and *Eureka*. Aaron has also written children's books, such as the original series *Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles*, the award-winning *Bandslam: The Junior Novel*, and the #1 best-selling *42: The Jackie Robinson Story*. He is the co-creator of the ReDeus

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Elizabeth Ann Scarborough is a graduate of Bethany Hospital School of Nursing, from which her mother also graduated. She joined the army during her senior year in training under the Army Student Nurse Program and following officer's basic training and an advanced medical-surgical course, served a year in Vietnam in an evacuation hospital where she cared for both military and Vietnamese civilian personnel. After leaving the military in 1972, she worked for the Indian Health Service and then various civilian nursing jobs. In 1987 she graduated from the University of Alaska Fairbanks with a BA in history. All through her college years she continued writing fiction and sold seven books before writing *The Healer's War*, a fantasy novel loosely based on her experiences in Vietnam, which won the 1989 Nebula award for best science fiction novel. In total, she has written 24 solo books and also has done 16 collaborations with Anne McCaffrey as well as numerous short stories.

Ken Scholes is the critically acclaimed author of four novels and over forty short stories. His series, *The Psalms of Isaak*, is being published both at home and abroad to award nominations and rave reviews. He cites tabletop RPGs as key in his development as a writer. He has a degree in History from Western Washington University and is a winner of the ALA's RUSA Reading List award for best fantasy novel, France's Prix Imaginales for best foreign novel and the Writers of the Future contest. Ken is a native of the Pacific Northwest and makes his home in Saint Helens, Oregon, where he lives with his wife and twin daughters. You can learn more about Ken by visiting www.kenscholes.com.

Janna Silverstein grew up on Long Island, where her parents encouraged her to watch *Star Trek*, to read *National Geographic*, and to write. A lot. In third grade, she edited her class newspaper, and she's been telling writers what to do ever since. She has taken the occasional hiatus but, apparently, she can't . . . be . . . stopped. She has written and edited for Wizards of the Coast on *Magic: the Gathering* fiction, and for WizKids LLC on *Mage Knight* and *MechWarrior*. For Kobold Press, she edited *The KOBOLD Guide to Game Design, vol 3: Tools & Techniques*, the ENnie Award-winning *Complete KOBOLD Guide to Game Design*, and the two-time ENnie Award winner, *The Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding*. Her own writing has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *10Flash Quarterly*, and in several anthologies. Though she'll always be a New Yorker, she lives in Seattle with two cats, many books, and a respectable—if somewhat smaller—collection of games.

Steve Winter got paid for his first roleplaying-related article in 1980, landed a job at TSR, Inc. in 1981, and has been clinging to the RPG industry ever since. He has worked as an editor, developer, designer, fiction author, creative director for AD&D, website producer, and managing editor of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. More of his RPG-themed thoughts are posted at HowlingTower.com and on Twitter @StvWinter.

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