

The Silven

Trumpeter

The Official Magazine of Silven Crossroads

Silven Trumpeter 15 - October 2004 Issue
<http://www.silven.com>

Mini-Feature: Indie RPG Spotlight

We have articles on a host of Indie RPG topics in our mini-featurette this month.

Lights, Camera, Action: Independant RPG Design

Dregg Carpio delves into the necessary elements of RPG design!

Page 45

Gen Con Indy 2004

FEATURE

We bring you complete Gen Con coverage throughout this issue!



Sound off!

Got an urge to send a note to our editor? Would you like to volunteer as a writer? Have comments about an article?

Write to Dana at : adriayna@yahoo.com

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From the Editor

I was hanging out with a non-gamer friend a few weeks back, and the subject of gaming was brought up in the conversation. While I'm not embarrassed about the subject or my status as a gamer (as I know some are), I don't necessarily tout about that "I'm a gamer!" to all of my friends and coworkers. So when the subject of RPG games came up, I was more interested in explaining it rather than looking for a hiding place to shelter me from the fallout.

We discussed me going to Gen Con and other conventions, the *Silven Trumpeter*, my weekly gaming sessions, and some other gaming-related tidbits. All the while, I was thinking that my explanation was getting through to her and that at any minute she'd jump and say, "Woohoo! Give me a d20 and lets get started!"

Instead, she took me by storm with a series of questions fired in rapid succession: "What exactly is role-playing? Why do people game? Why devote hours of your time? Why do you *need* to devote entire evenings or full days to it?" Now what role-playing is seems easy enough—you compare it to acting, getting lost in your favorite book, or even seeing a good movie that immerses you in another place for a while. And "why do people game" seemed simple as well—because they enjoy doing it, because it is a means of relaxation and to some, escape, and because it has an inherent reward system where the harder you try, the more you succeed (unlike what often happens in the "real world"). So far, all good answers, I thought.

But then the last and final question came, "Yes, Dana, I understand you *like* it but my question is *why?*" Why?...Why? Perhaps the question isn't

quite so easy to quantify or answer on any level. And even if I were to give an answer here (or to my friend) I think that many readers would find it unsatisfactory. I ended up telling her that I think the why differs for each individual who is playing it. A cop out, yes, but a reasonable one.

One thing is certain, however. From my recent time at Gen Con and activities on the `net, for whatever the reason, and whatever the "why," many people from all over the world are taking part in our great hobby.

This month's issue features a host of Gen Con related articles and information. We have a Gen Con diary from Etyan Bernstein, several demo reviews, interviews from industry professionals that attended the con, and a very special spotlight on indie gaming. So sit back, relax, and enjoy this new jam-packed issue!

I'd also like to take this chance to welcome our two new editors—Elizabeth Liddell and Paul Tevis—to the *Silven Trumpeter*.

Best Regards,

Dana Driscoll

Dana Driscoll

Editor In Chief
Silven Trumpeter

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by Scott Fitz

Gaming Tips: World Building 102 - Presenting the Environment Part 3

Following the steps presented before, you have created an environment. However, if you can't explain the environment to your players, it is as if you never created anything. Presenting the world to the players is a crucial part of the game, as you are building it in the minds of your players.

The single most powerful comment on this subject I can make, is also one of the simplest: **Be confident in your presentation.** It is all appearances. If you come across as knowledgeable and competent, people will take what you say as true. Never EVER, stammer, go "umm, ahhh, or rrrrr", or look distracted or nervous when presenting parts of your setting (or GMing in general). It lessens the impact of what you have to say. Again, let me repeat, the most important thing to remember when presenting the environment is:

Be confident in your presentation!

Campaign Packet/ Bible/ Encyclopedia

If the environment you are creating is a world, major country, space station, or the primary place where your game's action will occur (so it could be a village even), your primary tool for presenting the environment is a game packet. The Game packet, also called the game bible or game encyclopedia, is a formal write up for the campaign that players (and the GM) can refer to for information on the game and its environment. This packet should range from three pages to a twenty-five pages of environment material depending on the environment and your needs (the more unique the world, the more information is needed). If you have been using the checklist for the

main environment and/or any smaller areas (cities, villages, moons), you already have short answers that can be easily expanded and made more accessible by some punctuation and spacing. This process places your setting into a more concrete and defined format, useful to set things in the mind of the GM and the players. Note: The rest of the game packet will include rules and requirements for characters, any house rules in work, and campaigning guidelines/ideals. Give each player a copy of the packet, and make a few extras for reference and new players.

Keep the Big and little text rules in mind when creating said write up. Players will care less about your carefully crafted history, than the concrete things that effect their character's day to day existence (people's names, food, clothing, sleeping, and social structures) and general life (Birth, Death, Family/ marriage, Work/ leisure, and Religion as it impacts daily life.)

Note: As the GM, your game packet might have material that is different than the player's world pack. That is because your packet contains what is true, while their packet has all their available character knowledge. Your packet may or may not be as neat and as organized as the player's, but it will be crucial to your game.

Character Weave

In good stories, every aspect of the characters and the world are woven together creating the tapestry of the story. Good games are the same. Characters need to be woven into the setting of the campaign. Players and the GM should talk about elements in

About the Author

A gamer since 1976, Scott has worked in and around the game industry for many years. He has spent most of his life in the grail quest of gaming: the perfect game. To that end his has honed his game craft to razor sharpness. Now he gives out game advice on a number of Internet sites.

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the game environment that the character can have a connection to: recent history, NPCs, organizations, other characters, or some random aspect of the world. Adding this connection to the setting ties the character to the setting, it helps define characters better in the minds of the players, gives the players some options in play, and the GM ways to motivate character in adventures.

It is always best to make a character part of the game world.

Character Lines

One process that helps players learn the world is a character line session. The GM determines all the important elements in the world and the organization associated with it. One session when the players are creating their characters, the GM presents each of the important elements of the world. The players must then decide on their character's opinion and reaction to this important element of the world, and the rationale behind it. If the player wants to hate the local religion, they should give a reason why. This series of character lines help build up the character and educates the players in various parts of the world.

Educate your players

The players will need to learn more and more about the world as the campaign advances. Often times they will need to know information before they need it in the game. The GM should foresee what they might need to understand what is going on and give them that information before hand.

Game Packet: Did you skip the above section? Shame on you, go back and read it.
Introductory moments: Before play really

begins, as people are settling in, give them a quick blurb about some aspect of the setting. This would be a slightly expanded version of what is in the game pack. Once you are done and have finished with any questions, ring the bell (or what ever signifies play has begun) and start your game.

Introduce it in the story: If you want more of the “show, don’t tell” approach, trying introducing characters that are involved with the information you want to convey. Want the players to know there are Elves in your world, have them meet one or meet someone who knows them well. Want your players to know of another country, let them meet someone from that country. Historical markers, local festivals, ceremonies, religious observances, can occur in the game and will illuminate small aspects of the world.

Bards: In short, have an NPC in the game tell them what you want them to know. Bard’s telling stories, people they overhear at the bar, the local paper, or a weeping widow, will convey information quite nicely, if the players are in the mood to hear.

Pyramid of Support

This is a tool borrowed from our writer friends. If you want someone to believe something, you have to slowly build up that something. The more powerful something is, the more a GM needs to explain and foreshadow its coming. The thing could be a monster, or an organization, or an army. The players will need to encounter the results of the thing’s existence, maybe brush against a minion or lesser part of the thing, or could run into a survivor. The more evidence and support you make for a claim, the more willing people are to believe it. The more evidence a player sees of something’s power or influence, the more they will believe it. If you want your characters to respect and fear a “powerful force” show them how powerful it is. Otherwise, they will yawn, attempt to fight it, and then bitch about their characters being dead or enslaved.

Related to this, don’t expand your campaign faster than the players can absorb the complete picture of what you are presenting. The story tellers say that players/ audience must hear something three separate times before they really know it. Taking that advice to heart, judge your player’s understanding of what is going on. On average, you will find it takes three sessions to imprint something, then move on to a new level of material.

Maintaining the Environment

If you are running a campaign, environment building never ends. In short **DIP** happens. You will be adding smaller environments as your storylines and campaign continues. You will be expanding the world, major country, starship, or what ever the primary place where your game’s action occurs, as new ideas come to you and old ones are refined. In short, as long as your game is successful, you will be expanding the game environments and the people in them.

The March

When people build game environments, they know all the details (hows, whys, when). This allows them to build up a detailed history. Then the campaign starts and this detailed history tends to stop cold. Unless it revolves around the characters, in most games, nothing else happens. Just a reminder, **Change is the only constant.** The rest of the world is “in play” as well as the characters. History and changes continue. Note: The player character may or may not have an impact on the march of history. If they want to, GM’s should let them.

Smaller environments inside the environment

As the campaign continues, you will need to expand and detail smaller areas of the main campaign environment. The key bits for these places must be consistent with the larger environment they are in. If one country is a post-medieval England, it would not have a city that appears to be Pacific Islander in lifestyle. Once you have the place’s key bits in place, simply go through the process as before, keeping in mind the scale of the place you are creating. Also

make sure there are connections between the larger environment and the one you are making.

Note: Johnny Appleseed/ Clairmont approach:

Plan ahead for future story arcs, even if the plans are only half formed. That way you can insert the elements you need for the story arc into the appropriate environment ahead of time and even foreshadow the story arc.

In the vein of Johnny Appleseed or Chris Clairmont (of X-men fame), litter the campaign as it goes on, with plot points that are unresolved or things which might become dramatic events later. If the players show any interest at all about that part of the environment (or NPCs), you can work on the additional bits and details needed, inserting them into the setting. The players are then amazed at your ability to foreshadow important events, not knowing that you only put out the hook and filled things in as they took said bait. Remember the Pyramid of support.

Maintaining Process

Talk to the troupe: Every now and again, get more “bits” from the players. Once they have gotten into the game, they will have a better idea of what it needs in their opinions. It is best to collect bits towards the end of any story arc.

Collate info: Collect all your notes and add any new details them into your original checklist categories. This expands your initial listing. Do not forget to include all the smaller environments and organizations you have made during the campaign.

Comb and Refine: Take your expanded listing and go through the environment building process. The environment will get deeper and richer, with more verisimilitude.

Expand your game pack to a game encyclopedia: Add more entries to your world pack. Eventually, your pack will give a complete explanation of the world.

No GM is an island

Some people would say that this is just too much work for one person to do. Who says one person has to do it. If your troupe has players with some expertise, have them write certain sections of the setting environment. Not only does someone who knows something about it write up the section, you don't have to AND you will not be surprised by the player's knowledge at the gaming table.

If a person wants a character from "far away" or some area you have not detailed out, have them write up that location. The GM will of course have to approve the submission, but someone else will have done all that work. This will also allow the player to really know their home.

Conclusion

Game environments are not built with a ruler and some tape, they are built with imagination and an understanding of what is needed to make the game environment. That is the purpose of this article, to give you what you need to build a solid game environment. While there is more that I could cover (this article could be 60 pages long), this sums up the key elements you need to consider when making an environment.

Remember, your job as an environment designer is to create a sense of verisimilitude and to meet your troupe's needs for the game. As long as you, the environment builder, focus on the Big Type needs and understand your time to create is actually limited, you can stay focused on doing just as much as you need to do. That way a world can be properly fleshed out without taking too much time and effort, no matter how much creativity you need to invest in the world.

Every idea you have for the world does not have to be "unique", "original", "never before seen". In fact, it is probably better if it is merely a fresh take on an accepted idea. This creates a more accessible

setting for your players. As a designer, do not be afraid to lift an idea from history or other sources. As the Wiseman Bob once said, "Good Gamemasters borrow, Great Gamemasters steal shamelessly." Take it. Use it. Make it your own. As long as you are not reselling it, everything should be fine. Remember the plot of Romeo and Juliet had been floating around for centuries, but Shakespeare took it and made it his own. He did an okay job, don't you think? So will you.

Every part of the environment should be appropriately thought out, be consistent and connected, fit the other Cs, and be presented well so your players believe in the environment. This creates the magic of verisimilitude, the illusion of completeness. Remembering that the environment is there for you to tell stories (and play out action) with your friends, will make your work be that much more useful.

So now that you have the understanding, apply some imagination and time and create a game environment of your own.

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by Smokestack Jones

The Lumpers

BY GLEN HALLSTROM

O-DINKUS, A LITTLE HELP HERE...
...I WET 'EM.

STEADY LAD...JUS' GIMME A WEE SECOND...

WHUMP!

CLICK!

POKE POKE POKE POKE

RAHHHHHHH!

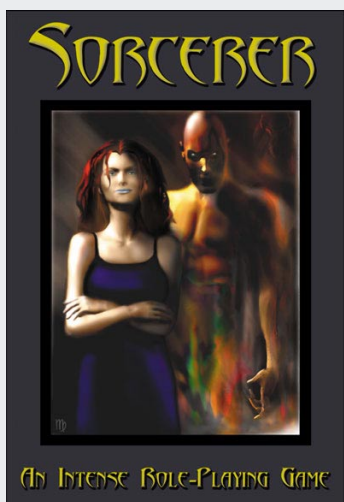
NOT BAD, HOW'D YOU...?
EYEBALLED IT, LAD...

HALLSTROM

by Joseph Villari and Dana Driscoll

Indie Game Spotlight: Demo Reviews

At GenCon 2004 we had time to sit down and demo some outstanding and unique indie games. Each game listed below has been independently written, published, and distributed by the authors and, unlike some more mainstream products, have a refreshing and varied nature that the mainstream RPG industry is so currently lacking. These games pull no punches—the designers have a specified theme and goal in mind when creating the game and are passionate about their work. We highly encourage you to pick up a copy of an indie game that interests you or, at the least, stop in for a demo when you see a publisher at a con.



Sorcerer

Adept Press

Written By: Ron Edwards

Price: \$20

<http://www.adept-press.com/>

Sorcerer is an award-winning game in which the basic premise is that your characters have gained access to significant powers through the taming and control of a demon. The game, which is ultimately about the quest for power, has several unique qualities that make it outstanding.

The game is traditional in the sense that a GM runs the action and dictates what happens in the game—however, this is where most “tradition” ends. The game is a constant struggle between the character gaining the upper hand and the demon exerting its will. To have any form of power/magic in the game, you must be bonded to a demon. The demon soils your character considerably and can alienate him from “normal” society. The demon has two forms—the form of some small object (an earring, a ring) that is worn by the character and a larger, fully manifested form.

What we found most appealing about the game was the distinctive take on the magic system as a whole—in this game, magic is grimy and dirty—to be powerful, you must compromise and “feed your demon.” Not only can you control your own demon—you also have the ability to exert control over other’s demons and influence others through your granted powers. Its ultimately a game about power and greed, and one not worth missing!



Fastlane

Twisted Confessions Games

Written by: Alexander Cherry

Price: \$12

<http://www.twistedconfessions.com>

Written by Alexander Cherry of Twisted Confessions, *Fastlane* is a unique and challenging game has the theme of “life in the *Fastlane*.” The game is able to handle multiple genre gaming but is not too generic; *Fastlane* generally suits any type of fast-paced, high-rolling, high-living, high-risk kind of game. Everything from the mechanics presented in game (who you owe favors to and who owes favors to you, facets such as people, assets, nerve, guile, sobriety, life rating, styles) to diceless conflict resolution fits the theme perfectly.

This highly creative game uses a roulette wheel to resolve situations and conflict where dice would normally be used. And while you may be a bit uncertain as to how a game like this could work or be fun, the roulette wheel and the concept of risk taking vs. playing it safe adds a new element to RPGs. The game includes a chart and simple d6 method of simulating a roulette wheel if you do not own one. In *Fastlane*, the players and GM create the setting together. If the player is successful in his winnings, he gets to dictate the results of the situation. On a loss or a tie, the GM narrates what happens.

Poker chips represent difficult situations or encounters that need to be overcome. Players have to bet and earn winnings that amount or more than the stack of chips of their opponent has (the size of the stack to beat determined by the DM). For example, if a player wanted to gain information from an unwilling or hesitant informant, she gains betting chips based on his stats and circumstantial modifiers. Next, she places the chips on the roulette board, deciding at that time to go for a high-risk, high-payout approach or a more "safe" method that won't result in the same extreme success. Seeing this method in play during the demo really shows how cool and unique the concept of *Fastlane* is!

You can expect a full review of *Fastlane* and interview with the author in the Other RPGs section soon!



Universalis: The Game of Unlimited Stories

Ramshead Publishing

By Mike Holms and Ralph Mazza

Price: \$15

<http://universalis.actionroll.com/>

Universalis is one of the most unique games that we have seen in a long time. The game is a token-based game with no GM. It reminds one of an endless "choose your own adventure" type game where the players sit down and build a story.

Play begins by each of the players throwing in a chip and "buying in" to the story. The play progresses as each player adds a specific "element" to the story that he would like to include—everything from the setting of the story to specific characters and events. If players do not agree at any point, they can challenge each other by paying more chips to have their outcome be the one that happens. This gives players in-game power to monitor other players and their actions within the story. With a limited number of chips, however, strategy needs to be employed to ensure you still have enough chips to do things you want to do later in the game or scene.

You begin a game of *Universalis* by creating the guidelines for the story in a round-robin fashion with each player taking a turn adding in a new element. This includes anything from the type of story, setting, story elements, or specific rules for the story. During the demo we determined we wanted a tragic, sci-fi story with a backdrop of a crumbling galactic empire that included a betrayal, the loose mafia ship federation, and an android. Once the players are satisfied about the backdrop for the story, the main game play begins.

The game progresses in scenes, which each player getting a chance to add to the scene on his or her turn. Players each make a secret "bid" for the scene with a number of chips—she who has the highest number of chips gets to frame the scene. Each element that is added to the scene (character, character's traits, character's belongings, etc.) costs one chip. Characters can be controlled by a single

Other Indie Games

While we ran out of time at Gen Con to demo everything, we were able to catch up with a few more designers and chat about their games. Here are some more indie games you can check out:

Primetime Adventures

Dog-Eared Designs

By Matt Wilson

<http://www.dog-eared-designs.com>

Primetime Adventures is a game themed on primetime TV focused on characters in an ongoing series. It has round-robin scene creation, a traditional setup with a GM/Players, and a series of scenes that focus on both plot and character. Characters are fluid and ever-changing in *Primetime Adventures* creating a more meaningful experience. This great game is new to the indie world, making its debut appearance at Gen Con Indy 2004.

Nine Worlds

Chimera Creative

By Matt Snyder

Price: \$20

<http://www.chimera.info/>

Nine Worlds is a game heavily based on Greek mythology with a magical flare. It is a cosmic drama where characters can travel through the cosmos on etherships. The central theme of the game is about authority—are you going to submit to the god's will and follow their instructions or are you going to attempt to subvert it? The game uses a playing card system called the "trick taking" system where characters can collect cards and use them for various purposes in the game. We had a chance to take a look at a copy of *Nine Worlds* and it is visually appealing as well.

player in the story (if you pay enough chips) but generally multiple players can take control of each of the characters in the story by purchasing control with a chip.

A confrontation happens when a player has an idea she wants to happen in the story and one of the other players objects to it, or when confrontations of will or physical might arise. A d10 dice pool determined by the traits of characters you currently control and facets of the scene that are for or against your interest is rolled. The highest number of successes allow that player to determine what happens in the scene. These characteristics of the game, as well as others, allow for every player involved to be both a GM and player.

Overall, we were both highly impressed with *Universalis*. This is truly an amazing game that is simple to learn and play, yet carefully constructed as to allow for the creation of elaborate tales and epic campaigns. Coupled with the benefit of being able to incorporate any genre the players can think of as well as deep, multi-faceted characters makes for an excellent game every time you sit down to play it. If you are looking for an entirely new way to role-play, *Universalis* is for you.

You can expect a full review of *Universalis* to be posted in the Other RPGs section at Silven Crossroads soon!

Kill Puppies for Satan

Lumpley Games
By Vincent Baker

Price: \$15

<http://www.septemberquestion.org/lumpley/lumpley.html>

Some people can handle this game, some simply can't. This game focuses on playing evil, pathetic, puppy-killing Satanists and is certainly not for the weak of stomach, those with an affinity for small furry animals, or those with strong religious convictions.

The mechanics of the game are very simple. Your four main stats are "cold," "fucked up," "mean," and "relentless." You kill puppies, cats, and other assorted small furry animals and gain "evil." How much evil you gain is dependent on how you kill the creature and what you kill. For example, if you kill a Seeing Eye dog with your bare hands, you gain +3 evil. If you only kill a kitten with your car, you gain +1 evil. Evil can be spent to create a host of beneficial features in game—for example, allowing you to throw your voice, reroll a die, heal yourself, compel somebody to do something, or call Satan on the phone.

The demo of *Kill Puppies for Satan* consisted of three evil characters raiding a puppy show at a local church. The party entered, killed a bunch of puppies, created havoc in the church, and then laughed maniacally. It was actually quite fun, although most of us left the table feeling more than a little disturbed.

According to Vincent Baker, the designer of the game, the game was originally created as his "fuck you to gaming." He saw the game as a joke and wrote it to poke fun at the RPG industry as a whole. However, the game took on new meaning when he actually began to play it with friends—in the game everyone is a loser, but the question arises as to if the friendship of other losers is enough? Players slowly gain compassion for their loser characters and by the end of the game, they are attached to them and don't want them to lose. And so, both the writer and the game are back

Other Indie Games cont.

Dust Devils

Chimera Creative

By: Matt Snyder

Print Price: \$12

PDF Price: \$6.95

<http://www.chimera.info/>

Dust Devils is a gritty western game that uses a playing card system with themed poker mechanics to resolve conflict. The main theme of the game is reckoning with your devil—the devils of your past transgressions and choices gone wrong. The "high-card" mechanic allows the player with the highest card in the poker round to narrate the scene. Voted best indie game of 2002 and Jonathan Tweet's 2002 "Pick of the Con" at Gen Con 2002, *Dust Devils* is a sure thing for anyone looking for unique western-style gaming.

in the RPG industry with this twisted look at being a psycho.

You can look for a full review of *Kill Puppies for Satan* in the Other RPGs section at Silven Crossroads soon!

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by Eytan Bernstein

Gen Con Journal

Gen Con is an experience unlike anything else in gaming. It is a four-day convention devoted to all forms of gaming—role-playing games, war games, card games (collectible and otherwise), and the various paraphernalia that accompany these pursuits. The Con has an overwhelming variety of activities: seminars, workshops, games, exhibits, and dealers. There are even opportunities to catch up on the latest anime or kung fu flick. For those interested in the business end of the gaming world, you can meet many designers, developers and novelists to meet. Attendees have the option of getting books signed or even participating in interactive seminars with top names in the field. Something is always occurring, and it is up to each gamer to keep up her vigilance and attend those events that truly interest her.

The most important thing to consider is how much you want to do and how much time you have. Gamers come to Gen Con to pursue longstanding interests, but this does not prevent them from learning new things and experiencing new games. One has to go with a mind open to new experiences—however difficult this can be—in order to reap the rewards of such a rich opportunity. In the end, the convention feels much more fulfilling if an effort is made to experience as much variety as possible.

Loads of free loot to can be garnered if you know where to go. The only problem is time and a place to store it all. Most gamers happily tackle this problem, coming home with free magazines, books, art, pins, minis, dice, anime and even more unusual treasures.

The following is a journal of my experiences throughout the convention. I hope this will provide a good introduction for those considering the possibility of attending Gen Con in the future.

Day 0: Wednesday August 19th: We arrive in Indianapolis

Part of the Silven delegation arrived in Indianapolis after a long trip spanning six states and approximately thirteen hours of driving. The drive was long, but pleasant, with agrarian scenes right out of a country landscape.

We got to the hotel in mid to late afternoon and settle in. The Radisson is nice though incredibly overpriced. We decide basic hotel arrangements and then get ready for the evening's activities.

Wednesday evening, Dana Driscoll (Editor-in-Chief, *Silven Trumpeter*) and Lance Kepner (D&D/d20 section head) ran a game they prepared for the Silven delegation. It was an interesting experience in which two game masters ran simultaneous good and evil parties at different tables. The actions and choices of the two parties affected each other and made for an out-of-the-ordinary experience. Good won out this time, but evil had fun in the process. Kudos to Lance and Dana.

Day 1: Thursday August 19th: We Scope out Gen Con

A number of seminars—all in the early morning—throughout the convention took place in a location

About the Authour

Eytan Bernstein is a High School social studies teacher on Long Island. He enjoys RPGs, writing fantasy fiction, movies, and making up unique words. He has previously been published as a poet and is also an accomplished pianist/songwriter. He hopes to someday make it as a game designer/fantasy writer.

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known as the Omni Gate. While I am certain that these events were interesting as they are being attended by prominent novelists such as **Jean Rabe** and **Richard Lee Byers**, for the life of me, I could not locate these events. It almost feels like a cosmic joke played by the gaming gods on unsuspecting Gen Con neophytes.

Some of us still have not figured out how the seminars work. For any seminar or workshop with a cost, you have to pick up tickets in advance (often on very long lines). Unfortunately we realized this far too late to attend any of the paid workshops in the Embassy Suites. It is at this point that I decided to only attend free seminars. The paid workshops look interesting, but they are all long and costly, frequently \$6.00-7.50 a piece. With tons of these to try, few attendees can afford to go to too many. I decided to stick to the free ones—often just as interesting and easier on my wallet.

We spent some time in the dealer hall, a mammoth venue with the largest variety of gaming experiences—shopping, demo or otherwise—that I have ever witnessed. Dominating the hall is the WotC center that includes a sales area as well as numerous demonstration tables. We spent this day buying various products, several of which have yet to appear on the market. There were also a number of celebrities present including the ever-leathery **Marc Singer** (best known as the *Beastmaster*), the steely-eyed **David Carradine** - currently best known as Bill in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, **Herbert Jefferson jr.**, **Richard Hatch** from *Battlestar Galactica*, **Virginia Hey** from *Farscape* and **Ken Foree** from George Romero's *Dawn of the Living Dead*. Also present were **Walter Koenig**

who played Chekov in *Star Trek* the original series; **Linda Blair**—still a head turner—from the *Exorcist* and numerous made for T.V. movies; **Gil Gerard**—still looking quite dapper, Erin Gray from *Buck Rogers*, and Tanya Roberts from *Charlie's Angels*, *Beastmaster* and *That 70's Show*.

Also among the many guests of honor were big names and insiders in the gaming industry. Among the novelists there was **RA Salvatore** of *Drizzt*, *Cadderly*, *Echoes of the Fourth Magic* and *Demon Wars* fame. Also present was **Ed Greenwood**, uber-creator of the *Forgotten Realms* and author of over 13 novels set in that world (as well as others). **Elaine Cunningham**, known for her work on Elves in *Forgotten Realms* and lyrical writing, signed many autographs. Also present at seminars and some signings were **Jean Rabe** (*Dragon* and *Forgotten Realms* novelist), **Richard Lee Byers** (novelist with new series "The Rage" for *Forgotten Realms*), **Matt Forbeck** (fresh author in WotC's new children's line), **Mike Stackpole** (long time fantasy novelist in many different worlds), **Stephen Kenson** (Green Ronin designer and author of novels, especially *Shadowrun*), and *Dragonlance* gurus **Tracy & Laura Hickman** and **Margaret Weis**.

Many other "top names" present were involved in game design. Some of the above novelists also make forays into game design, but the following are some of the big insiders present: **Peter Archer** (of WotC), **Bill Slaviscek** (WotC higher-up), **Skip Williams** (one of the biggest designers today), **Keith Baker** (newcomer creator of *Eberron*), **Jonathan Tweet** (d20 designer), **David Williams** (card designer), **Michelle Nephew** (of Atlas Games), **Christian Moore** (former designer now in consulting and film producing), **Mike McVey** (Games Workshop minis guru), **Rick Loomis** (GAMA Ambassador), **Kim Mohan** (one of WotC's head editors), **Robin Laws** (designer best known for *Feng Shui*), **Steve Long** (Decipher), **Kenneth Hite** (designer), **Sandra Garrity** (industry sculptor extraordinaire), **Mike Gray** (from TSR and Avalon Hill), **Monte Cook** (big name designer best known for *Arcana Unearthed* and *D&D 3.0*), **Chris Fitzpatrick** (miniatures guru), **James Earnest** (President of Cheapass Games), **Ron Edwards** (from Adept Press), **Andy Collins** (WotC

designer/editor), **Andy Chambers** (best known for his work in Games Workshop), **Phil Brucato** (best known for his contributions to *White Wolf*), **Jolly Blackburn** (hilarious man behind *Knights of the Dinner Table*), **Dave Arneson** (one of the original founders of *D&D*) and **Justin Achilli** (behind *White Wolf Development*).

Day 2: Friday: So Many Seminars, So Little Time!

WotC gave a seminar on its latest developments and plans for the future. Bill Slaviscek among other Wizards designers answered questions asked by the audience. Interesting information includes the following:

1. *The Complete Arcane* book will include three classes like the previous two entries in the series (*Complete Divine* and *Complete Warrior*). Two will be reprints – the Warmage and the Wujen – but one will be new. The Warlock will make use of a brand new mechanic for spellcasting that has no limit to the number of spells per day they can cast. Apparently they have very restricted spellcasting abilities, but no limit like that of wizards, clerics, or sorcerers.
2. There are no plans to give sorcerers significant new options. The *Complete Arcane* will have some new options, but WotC still feels that sorcerers are sufficient in their design.
3. We should expect several more in the terrain/climate-based series that starts with *Frostburn*. The panel mentioned *Sandstorm* as a desert-based supplement.
4. An entire book devoted to death, necromancy and undead will be released entitled *Librus Mortem*.
5. We should expect four campaign setting specific

books (per setting) each year (other than *Eberron* which is slightly frontloaded) and eight general supplements.

6. WotC's biggest challenges right now are maintaining balance – especially with the myriad of feats and prestige classes – and not reiterating/reprinting material.

Next I attended a really good seminar with **Mike Stackpole**, **Matt Forbeck** and **Tracy Hickman** entitled "How to become a Fantasy/SF Novelist." RA Salvatore was supposed to be there, but was unfortunately tied up elsewhere.

Good advice from the panel includes:

- 1) There is no one path to success in this industry. Everyone who gets there has a different story.
- 2) The most important thing is to keep writing. The first novel written by any writer is rarely good. The important thing is to keep writing and then revise later.
- 3) Viewpoint is one of the most important things with which starting writers struggle.
- 4) Short chapters are the key to making books read quickly.
- 5) Never write a novel in a shared world to start. Write in your own worlds and if lucky enough,



wotc 30th anniversary party

you may get an opportunity in another franchise.

I also attended an unremarkable session in which some of the WotC staff worked with the audience to create the framework for a 3.5 adventure, later to be compiled.

The *Dungeons and Dragons* 30th anniversary celebrity panel was a lot of fun. It was attended by a number of prominent people in the gaming/fantasy world as well as some in the entertainment industry. Included among the industry insiders were **Jonathan Tweet**, **Kim Mohan**, **Keith Baker** and **Bill Slavicsek**. Also included were the popular fantasy novelist **RA Salvatore**, a *Futurama* writer (who I admit, I've never heard of) and a Hollywood producer. I didn't get to ask too many questions, but **RA Salvatore** did comment that he'd love to see **Edward Norton** play Artemis Entreri in any *Drizzt* film adaptation. There was much talk of a possible *Drizzt/Dark Elf* Movie or series that seems like it might be a strong possibility. They all commented on fond *D&D* experiences and how gaming has influenced their lives/work. **RA Salvatore** shared the story of a 2E Halfling Psion, a deadly fall, and a wand of wonder.

I caught the end of a world building seminar given by **Ed Greenwood**, **Kenneth Hite**, **Matt Forbeck** and **Justin Achili**. It was interesting to hear the thought process behind the creation of such worlds as the *Forgotten Realms* and the *World of Darkness*. The creators emphasized the importance of timelines, open-endedness and variety.

After I stopped by the dealer's room to browse for a while, I went to the giant anime room for a huge raffle drawing. The audience picks up free tickets at the side of the room and then waits as a huge number of prize bags (anime collections, art, posters, stickers, decorative weapons, RPG & anime books and other things) drawn by number (or by trivia during a short trivia session). I didn't win anything this time, but it was fun.

Day 3: Saturday: More Free Stuff! More Seminars!

I started off the day by going to the WotC demo series. Participants were given a card with an image of the iconic *D&D* character Regdar (popularized in the *Player's Handbook* and *Scourge of Worlds*) and a series of demos listed as various objects on his body. Each demo was stamped on the card. At the end, participants went to a booth in wizards where they rolled a giant bouncy d20 (I've got to get one of these!) You added the number of demos played to your roll and have to get three 15s in order to win a prize. Thus, if you have all ten demos, you only have to roll three 5s. Both me and a friend succeeded and got our prizes – for me a copy of the new *Eberron* campaign setting, for him a Giants of Legend Minatures Box (which contained the very rare huge gold dragon piece worth \$40.) It didn't hurt that there were starter decks, boosters, pins and other free stuff along the way.

I next attended to two hour Q& A with **RA Salvatore**. A huge series of questions were posed to the popular fantasy author. He described his process for the creation of character names, his childhood experiences, and his regret that today's children are overexposed. He also talked about what we can expect from future books. He assured fans that *Drizzt* will continue – simultaneously silencing detractors with the suggestion that he writes books for fans and only cares what they – not his critics – think.

Ed Greenwood and **Mary Elizabeth Allen** had a fun and engaging session in which they lead the attendees in the creation of a fantasy story set in the *Forgotten Realms*. The story elements ranged from silly to extremely bawdy. **Ed Greenwood** is certainly an uninhibited fellow. The story will be compiled and later debuted on the wizards website. It should include a gnome brothel, a woman whose hair never ceases to grow, a jeweled chastity belt, a holy codpiece, an illithid tea party and much more.

I finally made my way over to the anime raffle. I had a headache building all day so the noise was somewhat difficult,

but amazingly enough, I won a prize in the first few drawings. My prize was a gift bag with a weird Cthulu statue, a manga book, a coca-cola hot wheels type car (with the polar bear theme) and some stickers. I decided to leave at this point even though they were debuting Hero (which I'll just have to watch another time) because of my headache.

Day 4: Sunday: We leave.

Gen Con was a lot of fun: free stuff, seminars, anime, and demos, but eventually you have to go home. We left around noon and had a short game session for our ongoing game. It was somewhat abbreviated by the drive stops, but it was fun nonetheless. I did manage to steal a whole bunch of bath gels, shampoos and soaps from the hotel so I am happy about that.

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by Matthew J. Hanson

The Adventures of Starlanko the Magnificent:

Starlanko the Magnificent vs Guble the Gregarious

Many years before Starlanko the Magnificent defeated Blander the Terrible, before Starlanko was voted handsomest wizard on the northern continent, even before he was known as “the Magnificent,” Starlanko attended a school dance.

“Hey, Starlanko. Party’s inside,” said Sharshim, a compatriot of Starlanko at the Mage Academy of Dalphithius. To say Starlanko was attending the party was perhaps a bit misleading. He was not attending it, as much as he was standing in one corner of the massive balcony outside the party, occasionally casting glances to the other corner of the balcony.

“Oh.” Sharshim noticed who was at the other end of the balcony. “So you going to talk to her?”

“I don’t know,” said Starlanko. “She came here with Guble.”

“Yeah, and you came here with Mari Kebbil, but I don’t see either of them. I just see the two of you, both standing alone.”

“I’m not actually alone right now.”

Sharshim smiled. “I guess I’ll be shoving off then. Sweep her off her feet.” Sharshim saluted Starlanko, and returned to the party inside.

Starlanko surveyed the balcony. Then, in a decidedly nonchalant fashion, he sauntered to the other side.

“Hi, Candessa.”

“Hi.”

“I just saw you at the other end of the Balcony, and I thought I’d come over and say hi.”

“Yeah.”

“So some party huh?”

“It’s okay I guess.”

“Still, it’s nice to get some fresh air,” Starlanko said.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, Dung Beetle!” came a voice from the nearest doorway. “Enjoying the party? I saw Mari Kebbil in there and she looked kind of lonely.” Guble, another student at the academy waltzed onto the scene. He wrapped one arm around Candessa. In the other hand he held two goblets. “I got us some punch, hon.” Guble winked on the word punch.

Candessa laughed. “You sure know the way to woman’s heart.”

“So, Dung Beetle,” Guble said to Starlanko. “Shouldn’t you be getting back inside?”

“Yeah, I guess I should.” Starlanko shuffled into the party with the sounds of Candessa’s laughter at his back.

Several years later, after Starlanko started being called, “the Magnificent,” before he defeated

About the Author

Matthew J. Hanson is an aspiring writer, as well as a long time gamer. He normally lives in Minnesota, but is currently finishing his senior year of college in Beloit Wisconsin. Recently, his 10-minute play *Who is Ruth* was selected as the winner for the American College Theatre Region III winner, for their 10-minute play competition, and it will be advancing to the national competition in April. If you would like to learn more about Matthew J. Hanson, please feel free to visit his website at www.matthewjhanson.com.

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Blander the Terrible, and both after and before he was voted handsomest wizard on the northern continent (for he would receive that honor several times), Starlanko the Magnificent sat in the office of Major Veeps Mikjar.

“Of course I can’t say anything official yet,” said Major Mikjar.

“Yes, I—” Starlanko began.

“We already said we would make the official announcement four days from now you see.” Major Mikjar’s speech was muffled buy the half chewed sausage in his mouth. To the sausage Mikjar added a slab of butter supported by a substance that might have been bread.

“Naturally, nobody knows more than I—”

“And if we were to make some sort of statement before the preset date it might upset some people, and nobody wants that.”

Starlanko could tell that Major Mikjar was determined to tell Starlanko things the wizard already knew, so he chose to remain silent rather than get interrupted again.

“If we could just buy everybody’s spells we’d buy yours in a snap of course, but the higher ups decided it would be more cost efficient if we found one vender to supply all our new spells. I guess that’s

what happens when you let bureaucrats run the military.”

Starlanko continued to smile and nod.

Major Mikjar swigged from a mug containing a potent unidentifiable alcohol. “As I was saying. We can’t say anything official, but I’ve got a pretty good feeling about the Camiranian Military awarding you the contract.” Major Mikjar laughed, “Unless some other wizard shows up at the last moment and steals it out from under you.”

The door to Major Veebs Mikjar’s office burst open. “Veebers!” said the intruder, “Long time, no see.”

Major Mikjar rose from his desk, and gave the newcomer a hardy handshake. “Hey, stranger! I haven’t seen you since Albi was born,” the major said.

“How is the little tiger?”

“She’s good, starting to talk. She still loves that blanket you gave her.”

“Speaking of gifts, I brought a little something for you,” the intruder said. He produced a bottle of whisky from beneath his red wizard robes.

Major Mikjar accepted. “You sure know the way to an old man’s heart.”

The intruder seemed to notice Starlanko for the first time, “Is that you, Dung Beetle?”

“I go by Starlanko the Magnificent now.”

“A nice trade title. I go with Guble the Gregarious.”

“You two know each other?” Major Mikjar asked.

“We went to school together.”

“Not that I mind, Gubly,” said Major Mikjar,

“but what brings you to these parts?”

“I’m here on business, actually. I heard you might be looking for a contract to provide you with some new spells.”

“Sure we are! You want to hear about it?”

“Sometime sure, but I don’t want to interrupt anything.”

“No, that’s fine,” Major Mikjar said. “We were pretty much finished here.”

The first voice Starlanko the Magnificent heard upon returning to the Blind Bat tavern was that of his sword Funbane. “But it was the forth King of Androthia, Pergrim the First who solidified the ruling family’s image as being connected to the divine.” Starlanko never actually fought with the sword, and only carried it around out of pity. Starlanko had tried to throw Funbane away once, only to discover that the sword returned to its master every midnight. The only thing that Funbane seemed to be good at was spouting useless information about history or royalty, or the history of royalty. Starlanko usually tried to get Funbane to keep its information to itself, but Redreck the Fierce, who was babysitting Funbane for the afternoon, let the sword indulge itself.

Redreck slid Funbane across the table, and finished his tankard of mead. Redreck was a strong fighter, who rarely spoke. He and Starlanko had worked together for several years.

Next to Redreck sat Candessa Voliar. Candessa and Starlanko had both attended the same wizarding academy at Dalphithius, but they never got to know each other then as much as Starlanko would have wanted. The two classmates reunited a couple months ago at a mind-numbing Midsummer’s Day party. After Starlanko rescued Candessa from the party, she decided to travel with him for the time being.

“How did it go?” Candessa asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” Starlanko admitted. “It seems like the two bids we knew about shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But...?”

“But it seems that there is a last minute entry.” Starlanko filled her in on the details.

“Guble!”

“Guble the Gregarious it would seem.”

“I haven’t seen him since the Academy. That was an interesting relationship. I wonder what he is up to.”

“Competing against us for a spell contract with the Camiranian military it would seem.”

“I should stop by and catch up with him.”

“That would be lovely.”

“You worried? Do you think he’s got better spells than the Astounding, Spectacular, and Incredible Starlanko the Magnificent?”

“I doubt it, but that’s not what worries me. It’s not what you know, it’s who you know, and Guble is a close personal friend of the man that will be awarding the contract. This does not bode well.”

“If I may, sir,” said Funbane. “I believe that a man of Major Veebs Mikjar’s rank and lineage shall conduct himself in a fair and impartial manner. Anything less would be unbefitting a man of his station.”

For one who knew a lot about nobility, Starlanko thought Funbane knew very little about nobility.

Candessa said, “I think you should wait to worry until Guble demonstrates his spell.”

"And this next one is a spell I like to call *purple doom*." Guble cast his spell, and it caused an explosion of purple flame.

Starlanko and his companions were on the Camirian testing field, a wide-open space littered with several obstacles. Starlanko had demonstrated his spell at the same location several days earlier. A small bleacher was set up for the onlookers, including the other wizards who were going for the spell contract, members of the Camirian military, and several random spectators. Major Veebs Mikjar was sitting directly behind Starlanko the Magnificent. Starlanko could feel the bleacher sway whenever Major Mikjar shifted to get the best view around Starlanko's pointed hat.

"Wow!" Major Mikjar exclaimed upon seeing *purple doom*. "That was purple."

"Yes," said Starlanko, "but other than that, it was just a *fireball*."

"But it was a *purple fireball*. Do you know how much purple dye costs?"

Starlanko the Magnificent cast *prestidigitation* and turned his hat purple.

"And now," said Guble. "A little incantation called *caustic destroyer*." He let loose another spell and it caused a spherical blast of acid.

"Was that acid?" Major Mikjar asked.

"It was just a *fireball* except with acid instead of fire!"

"Isn't it great!"

Starlanko was tempted to scream at Major Mikjar and beat him with Starlanko's now purple hat. He realized that the instant gratification provided by this course of action would not justify the longtime repercussions.

Starlanko the Magnificent sat in silence for

the rest of Guble's demonstration.

Despite Starlanko's best efforts of reason and bribery, several days later Major Mikjar still seemed to favor awarding the Contract to Guble the Gregarious. The evening before Major Mikjar would make the official announcement, he threw a party at his personal villa.

Starlanko tried to schmooze as best he could, but the knowledge of his impending loss made it hard to put his soul into it.

"Oh, Guble, you still know the way to a woman's heart," came Candessa's voice from across the room.

Starlanko decided to get some fresh air.

It was the beginning of autumn and the air was crisp, but the sky was clear, and Starlanko could see a mural of stars from Major Mikjar's balcony. A gust of wind blew off Starlanko's purple hat, but he did not seem to notice. After about a few minutes of leaning on the banister, staring at the stars, Starlanko noticed a large figure lean against the railing next to him.

"Hey," came the man's bass voice.

"Hello, Redreck," Starlanko replied.

"I thought I was supposed to be the quiet one."

"I know."

The two men sat in silence looking at the stars, making their slow journey across the sky. Finally Redreck looked to Starlanko. The warrior squeezed the wizard's shoulder, and then went back inside.

It was not long before a very different sort of figure was leaning on the balcony next to Starlanko.

"Hey, Starlanko, party's inside," said

Candessa Voliar.

"I know."

"Something bothering you?"

"I'm just trying to figure out some means of getting this contract after all."

"Is it really that important?" Candessa asked.

"It's quite a nice sum of money."

"You act like it's something more than that."

"...I also really don't want to lose to Guble," Starlanko admitted.

"Is this one of those macho schoolboy rivalries?"

"You could say that."

"So?" Candessa pried, "What did he do?"

"He... there was a girl, who I had a crush on at the Academy, and Guble ended up with her instead of me."

"Really?" Candessa smiled at him, "Who was it?"

Starlanko opened his mouth to answer.

"Wait, let me guess," Candessa said. "It was Mari Kebbil wasn't it?"

"...yes. It was Mari Kebbil."

Candessa smiled at Starlanko. "She has no idea what she is missing."

"Thanks."

"You should come inside. The party is nice."

"In a few minutes," Starlanko said.

Candessa returned to the party. No sooner had she closed the door, than there was the clang of a sword hitting the stone balcony floor. It was midnight already.

"Greetings, master, what doth be occurring?"

"We're at a party, Funbane. Outside a party really." Starlanko had left Funbane back at the tavern, but true to form, it could not be separated from its master long.

"And beith this the Cloudview House?"

Starlanko sighed. "I have no idea."

"I doth believe it is. The Cloudview House was constructed by Leppi Mikjar, the third son of Kap Mikjar, and the great-granduncle of Veebs Mikjar. Now unfortunately Leppi Mikjar—"

"Wait a minute," the corners of Starlanko's mouth twitched in anticipation of a smile. "Major Mikjar is a noble isn't he?"

"Yes sir, though a fairly minor one, and as he is not the eldest child—"

"And you know a lot about nobility?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything about Major Mikjar I can use?"

"Well," began Funbane, "Veebs Mikjar was born in the year—"

"No. What I really need is to know something about him that he wouldn't want anybody else to know."

"I beg your pardon sir, but it would not be proper for me to divulge information about Major

Mikjar that he would not want to be public."

"Don't worry," said Starlanko, "I will only use the information for good, never evil."

"Well... there might be one thing sir, but it is of such a nature that I daren't speak it out loud."

"Why don't you whisper it to me then?"

Starlanko held the sword up to his ear.

"A goat!" Starlanko exclaimed.

"Indeed, sir, her name is Sylvia. But I must ask again that you be careful how you use this knowledge, if it were to be let out to the public at large, I fear it would ruin the reputation of such a fine upstanding citizen as Veebs Mikjar."

A smile had taken over Starlanko's face. "Don't worry. I'm pretty sure Mikjar knows what's good for him."

Starlanko at last returned to the party. Major Mikjar was among a crowd of people laughing heartily at a story being told by Guble the Gregarious.

"Excuse me, Major," Starlanko said. "May I have a word with you in private?"

"Hold on a second, Dung Beetle," said Guble. "I'm almost at the best part."

"I think it might be rather urgent, Major," said Starlanko. "I was asked to deliver a message from somebody named Sylvia."

Major Veebs Mikjar went white as the ghost of a sheet. He politely excused himself.

The next morning, the contract for supplying the Camiranian military with new spells was awarded to Starlanko the Magnificent, based on his spell's superior creativity and utility.

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by Edward J. Kopp

Interview: Henry Lopez of Paradigm Concepts

Well known in the Miami gaming community even before starting his own company, Henry Lopez is a guiding force in the gaming community in the southeastern United States. During the d20 boom he started a gaming company with his good friends Eric Wiener, Nelson Rodriguez and Pedro Barrenechea. Paradigm Concepts has managed to succeed in a very competitive market by telling a good story. Their flagship book, the *Codex Arcanis*, is 98% story and 2% crunch. They've developed a strong fan base among the RPGA by continuing to tell that good story. I was able to get Henry to set aside a little of his time during Gen Con and talk with me.

Since most of our readers probably haven't heard of Paradigm or you setting, why don't you tell us a little bit about *Arcanis* and the World of *Shattered Empires*.

Well, *Arcanis* was created for the more mature player. It was created for those who had gone beyond the knocking down the door, killing the monster, and grabbing the treasure. We wanted a world setting that had depth. We wanted a world setting that gives you political intrigue. We wanted a world setting that was role-playing intensive while still challenging your tactical ability and thought process. And we wanted a world with some of the deadliest combat that we could possibly come up with – without being over the top. So we sat down and created *Arcanis*.

We made *Arcanis* different in a couple of very important ways. The first way was the fact that instead of going after the model everyone else was

doing (which is a medieval western European mirror image) we decided to go with our main nation to be a mirror image of ancient Rome. So the Coryani Empire was born. And it's basically, you can play ex-legionnaires, ex-gladiators, and your patrons are senators vying against each other for power plays. We have the Emperor who is going off kilter little by little. We're starting a whole civil war with the generals coming in and what not. So that was critical and makes us different.

The second thing was we made sure the gods don't have an alignment. But churches do. Therefore we don't have a good god vs. an evil god. We have a Pantheon of gods similar to the ancient Greek gods, where they all got along although they had their own points of view and their own agendas. We have a situation where we have a schism of the bigger churches or what not. We have the Mother Church and we have splinters where they are actually heretical or they believe each other is heretical. It leads to a very interesting role-playing situation where you can have a lawful good paladin worshipping the god of Death, but he's worshipping an aspect of that god that is good. Let's say he's playing the domain of Disease. So he can worship the aspect of Taker of Disease, protector against disease, The Healer. Where as you have the same god being worshiped by an evil character who worships the aspect of the Bringer-of-Disease. So you have that conflict and that's what it's all about. Conflict. And we've given twists to all the major archetypes as far as races.

Humans stay human because that's what we are and we want to have a central focal point where

everybody can have a grounding. A place they can stand and know where they are. But we twisted everything else. Our dwarves were first Celestial Giants who were cursed by the gods for transgressing against mankind and were forced to become dwarves. And they're all vying against each other to lift the curse. It was prophesied only one will be redeemed and they want to be that one. Our elves are called Elori, are an elemental subtype, and they were actually a servant race to a reptilian empire that spanned the continent earlier before mankind came. They eventually overthrew it. We've taken twists on everything.

You have three titles released this year at Gen Con. Can you give me a brief synopsis of each one?

Sure. We're very excited about our titles at Gen Con. We released our core book, which is our first hardback book - a 320 page, over 300,000 word hardback. We call it the *Player's Guide to Arcanis*. It's a companion book for our *Codex Arcanis*. The *Codex Arcanis* is our 192 page softback world setting book. The *Players Guide* is primarily crunch. It's new feats, new prestige classes, 14 new core classes our base classes. We've created 16 base classes. We have 14 variations of paladins called Holy Champions. They are a 20 level paladin class, but they're all tailored for each of the different gods. So that's very different. Like I said, new spells, new prestige classes, new feats, lots of new equipment. We have a whole section on religion and how does religion work and what not. So we have that. So that's our premier book.

We also have *Ssethregore: In the Coils of the Serpent Empire*, which is the first of our empire series. And it goes back and actually delves into the first empire from the beginnings, over 7000 years into the history of *Arcanis*, all the way to the present. It delves into the creation of the Elori in detail. It deals with lots of stuff for one of our player races called the Ss'ressen which are good lizardmen that have teamed up with the humans. They fled this evil empire. So, the revenants of this ancient reptilian empire has basically gone to a little corner of the continent called the Kraldjur Morass, which is a huge swamp area. They fester and are ready to eventually teem out and swarm the continent. So this book deals with the past, the present and the potential future of the book.

And lastly we have *City of Secrets: An Adventurer's Guide to Nishanpur*. Now Nishanpur is one of our favorite cities and is apparently a favorite of a lot of our players. It's a city where duplicity runs rampant. A city built on intrigue, blood and fire, as Kimberly Wager-Scott wrote. It's an 80-page book, half of which is source material detailing the city, the different quarters. It has beautiful maps inside the other half is an actual adventure called the *City of Secrets*, which you can play either for home game or for *Living Arcanis*.

Why don't you, since you brought it up, tell us a little bit about Living Arcanis and exactly what's going on with that.

I'd love to. *Living Arcanis* is the largest member-run campaign for the RPGA. For those of you who don't know what the RPGA is, the RPGA is an arm of Wizards of the Coast, sponsored by Wizards of the Coast. It's call the Role Playing Games Association (RPGA), and they are famous for their original game called *Living City*. Another one they have is *Living Greyhawk*. They have *Living Force* for *Star Wars*, but we're the largest member-run campaign which means we're not run by Wizards of the Coast. We are also, I believe, either the second or third, or like neck and neck over-all campaign right behind *Living*

Greyhawk. I think *Living Force* and us are neck and neck. But I'm pretty sure we doing about number two. And basically, *Living Arcanis* is a game with lots of adventures. So far, we've put out 75 adventures over 1.7 million words, plus special events like the Battle Interactive and normal LARping type interactive like we had at Orgins this year.

And these are free adventures. You can go to the RPGA.com web site. If you don't play *Living Campaigns* at conventions you can list yourself home play or home campaign and download the adventures for free. So there's lots of support for *Arcanis* through *Living Arcanis*. *Living Arcanis* is very important for us because it is through the adventures and actions of the players of *Living Arcanis* that the world is molded.

We made a decision very early on, when we decided to create *Arcanis*, that we would not have uber characters. We have iconic characters, but we don't have characters that drive the story. There are other fantasy campaigns that have a basis or set of heroes that basically drives the entire plot along and the heroes, players, are left in almost a backseat position. And that bothers me. I think the players are the heroes. Players should dictate the way it goes.

Now obviously we have a certain plot idea, the meta-plot; it pushes it along. An example of world molding happened at Origins in June of this year. At the convocation of the Divine, things occurred that I didn't plan for and that completely derailed three or four sub-plots that I had. But that's fine because the story is yours. I'm only a facilitator. The story is actually the community's of *Living Arcanis*. So that's what we have.

Put in here a shameless little plug: we do have a Yahoo group for those of you who are Internet savvy. It's free. It's *LA for Living Arcanis, LA_Talk*. It's a vibrant community. We have over a thousand members. I think it was 1017 before we left for Gen Con. It's a no flame list, very friendly. We welcome new players; every body is very friendly. We help everybody out. Questions are answered and whether they are rules questions, meta-plot question,

obviously no spoilers, or setting questions. We're a very friendly community and we definitely want to see it grow.

You kind of touched on my next question. I noticed in the Player's Guide to Arcanis that it starts with the events that ended at last year's Gen Con. Why did you decide to let the Living Campaign influence the meta-plot?

Well, the living campaign is the meta-plot. We work very hard to make sure our print product and our RPGA or living campaign dovetail into each other and are very tightly woven. And I thought the most poignant way to put that point across is to take our premier book, our *Players Guide* and actually showcase an event that occurred at last year's conclusion. I won't spoil it here. Pick up the *Players Guide* and read it [laughs] where something pivotal happened and it actually changed the course of the campaign. I wanted to focus on that to show the players are the focus.

As a matter of fact, in one of our books, *Ssethregore: In the Coils of the Serpent Empire*, we have a character called Ven val'Sosi, a Ss'ressen who went through a trial and went to the final table, the table of Heroes, that we had at the first year's conclusion. And he's actually prominent now. He still plays but he is a prominent figure in the campaign. His actions are cannon. And they materialize within the actual plot.

You brought up something you had mentioned earlier, you did do a twist on humans. You have the Vals. Why don't you explain them?

True, we do have the normal humans. A Val is a subrace, I guess, of a human. What happened was the gods came with their Valinor during the cataclysmic thing called the God War which happened back in the mythic age. The Valinor are like angels, celestials if you will. And they mated these Valinor

with certain families to create the Val line. Which, for example, the val'Holryn, val'Assante, val'Virdan and what not. So there are 13 major families. And a bunch of smaller minor Val families.

In *Arcanis*, Vals have two things that separate them from humans. One is the fact they are the only race, humanoid race or human race, that is psionically active. *Arcanis* does support psionics. And we support the latest psionic rules. And they have something called Bloodline Powers which are tailored to each of the Val families. No two Val families overlap in Bloodline powers, with the exception of the val'Holryn, which are known as the bastards of the Gods. And nobody knows exactly what Valinor spawned them, per se. So their powers actually are a mix and match of everybody else's. Which is a very bizarre thing. But it is part of the meta-plot game.

Well, let me finish up here. What can we look forward to Paradigm putting out in the next few months as far as what is going to be in *Arcanis* in the next year?

We have lots of stuff coming out. We have *Legacy of Damnation* which is our Dark-kin sourcebook. Another piece of history that happened approximately 1000 years prior to the start of the campaign was that a rift between the Infernal plane and the mortal plane, which is what *Arcanis* is on, was ripped open and demons, devils and what not swarmed across the land raping and pillaging and what not. Dark-kin are basically a recessive gene that pops up. You can have 8 generations of humans breeding pure humans and all of a sudden [snaps] a Dark-kin will pop up. And Dark-kin have infernal traits. So that's one of the races. This book basically looks at them in depth, gives you prestige classes, feats, powers, that you can take for your Dark-kin and it details what is on the other side of the God Wall where the demons have been trapped for 1000 years. And it details the

Sealed Lands. As of now, they're the un-sealed lands. So that's Legacy.

We also have *Magic of Arcanis*, which is another core book dealing with our magic users, whether they be wizards, clerics, sorcerers, bards and what not. We have a monster book coming out called *The Monsters of Arcanis: Born of Nightmares*, which is our monster book.

We also have our first mature only book. It's called the *Theocracy of Caneri*. It's the second of our Empire books. We felt that the nation of Caneri, which is a theocracy, is steeped in evil and we shouldn't be shy to show what truly evil is. Now it's not going to have anything gratuitous. It's not going to have sex or violence, but there are adult themes as dictated by the topic. It will be shrink wrapped so that kiddies won't be flipping through it. It will have a huge label stating such so that retailers won't be "Oh my gosh, what am I selling."

And beyond that we have lots of products. We have the Coryani Empire book coming out. We have a book in development called *Invisible Kings. Backrooms and Back Alleys*, which is a secret society, thieves rouges book and that sort of thing. That's in development

After GenCon I contacted Henry and got a little information about how successful their Gen Con was. Living Arcanis premiered two adventures "Lusting Leeward" and "Pebble Upon Still Water" and between the two of them they sat as many as 120 tables. There was a Ss'ressen special mission for 3rd level and up which sat a total of 37 players or five tables. The Battle Interactive "How the Mighty Have Fallen" sat 25 tables with 175 rabid gamers chomping at the bit to save the city of Sicaris. If you've never heard of a Battle Intereactive it's a must do part of Living Arcanis at the major cons.. And they're the most fun 175 people can have at one time. Paradigm was also successful in going home with out a single copy of the Player's Guide to Arcanis out of the 300 they had brought to the show. Most excellent for them!

For more information about Living *Arcanis* and Paradigm concepts, you can visit their website at: <http://www.paradigmconcepts.com/>

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by Khaz Axzen

Cruxuzule Mammibia, Demon of Zauurcrag, Part II: Minions

In the last installment of "Cruxuzule Mammibia, Demon of Zauurcrag", our heroes, Sarel Duthar, renegade frost elf from the frozen north, and Khaz Axzen, dwarven mercenary and former slave, fought and slew a Hellborn gargoyle after it killed a prominent citizen's son in the town of Voth. Instead of being grateful, the paranoid townspeople accused Sarel of summoning the demonspawn, and in their grief and fear, hastily organized a lynch mob. Forced to flee the town, the pair was aided by a Captain in the Baron's guard, Garelgar Janlyn, and his companion Amir Sotho, a mercenary Bowman, tracker, and former priest of Nuune from the Far East.

"All living things have the power to heal themselves," explained Amir as he rubbed his hands together rapidly before placing them on Sarel's injured left side. "You just have to believe it and know how to harness the power."

Sarel felt warmth slowly spreading from the easterner's hands and flowing through his broken ribs, followed by a tingling sensation. The frost elf closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on healing, as instructed by Amir.

"Mumbo jumbo," mumbled Khaz, who was sitting on a large, flat piece of rock in front of the fire, chewing on a piece of black bread he had extracted from the bag Lyle had given to them.

After fleeing from Voth, the quartet traveled into the forested foothills dominating Reban's southwestern frontier. They had moved in relative silence until well after midnight before stopping in a rocky clearing at the top of a hill. Huge redwood trees surrounded the clearing, their mighty boughs providing a roof that obscured the stars.

Massive blocks of granite, rounded by the elements and crumbling with age, littered the clearing, remnants of some ancient civilization. Garelgar sat opposite Khaz on the other side of the fire, smoking a pipe.

"There. Now you need a little bit of rest," said Amir, rising from Sarel's side. He reached into a pouch hanging at his belt, withdrew a small vial, and gave it to the frost elf.

"Salve, for your burns. Dab it lightly." The easterner then turned to Garelgar. "I'll take first watch, Cap," glancing at Khaz before adding, "I'll range pretty far out, so I can hear over the dwarf's chewing."

Before Khaz could reply with more than a growl, Amir ran lightly from the clearing, topknot bobbing up and down as he went.

"Are you feeling any better, Mr. Duthar?" asked Garelgar as Sarel stood up and flexed.

"Surprisingly, yes. Thank you," the frost elf replied, slipping his shirt back over his bandaged torso.

"Good! Now is as good a time as any for some questions and answers." Garelgar slapped his knees before rising, offering his seat atop a relatively smooth stone to the injured elf. Sarel declined and sat on the ground to Khaz's left.

"How'da ya know us? Why was ya lookin' fer us? And what the Hell was that thing back at the tavern? Da those things run wild out here or what?" Khaz asked before pausing briefly to take a breath and draught from the wine skin. "And," he added, wiping his mouth and beard with the back of his hand, "if you's two are officers of the barony, why are ya's runnin' around the woods like a couple a tramps?"

About the Author

Khaz Axzen and wife Donna currently live in the Pocono mountains in north east Pennsylvania with their two children, Devan and Lauryn. When not working or chasing the kids around, Khaz enjoys reading, writing, watching Yankee games and shopping for additions to his fantasy knife collection.

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"Tramps?" Garelgar had his hands up, gesturing for Khaz to slow down. After a brief pause and a deep breath he added, "Tramps. Fair enough, Mr. Axzen. Amir and I, along with three others from my company, were ambushed by those *creatures*, as you put it—"

"Gargoyles." Sarel interceded.

"Gargoyles, thank you, Mr. Duthar—"

"Call me Sarel, please."

"Very well, Sarel, thank you. As I was saying," continued Garelgar. "We were ambushed by those gargoyles. Six of them. They killed our mounts and three men, two of whom were priests of Beordin."

"Witch hunters and fanatics!" spat Khaz, lying back on the rock with his hands behind his head.

"Well-respected, expensive witch hunters," added Sarel, also relaxing a bit. "Their order goes all the way back to the Demon wars and the legendary demon hunter Beordin Thunderhand. A large donation to the temple of Beordin in Brynhalla is usually expected for their help.

"The same," confirmed Garelgar. "They fought bravely and killed four of the gargoyles. Amir and I were tracking the one you encountered at Lyle's and were going to requisition new mounts in Voth, but time didn't permit, as you already know."

Garelgar reached into his tunic and produced paperwork bearing the Baronial seal. He presented them to Sarel. "My travel warrants. This is the only proof of my identity I can provide before we reach the garrison tomorrow, other than the name of the person who recommended you two."

Sarel re-folded the documents and handed them back to Garelgar. "They seem authentic, and if they are to be believed, you are a captain in the

Baron's guard. But documents can be stolen. Who was it that brought us to your attention, captain?"

"A druid passing through the province, by the name of Kimba Truehart -"

Khaz groaned audibly at the mention of the druid's name.

"- from the druidic order of the..." Garelgar left the sentence unfinished, indicating Sarel or Khaz should finish it.

"Cheetah. She is from the druidic order of the cheetah, Captain Janlyn," Sarel finished. Khaz continued to groan as he sat up, rubbing his bald, tattooed head as if it hurt.

An acquaintance of Sarel's, Kimba Truehart had enlisted the frost elf and Khaz to aid her in ridding the Khorian city of Isegoth from the clutches of a demonic cult. It had almost cost them their lives.

Khaz broke the silence. "Le'me guess, ya's got some blood suckin' cult runnin' around, and ya need me an the elf ta help ya's out, eh?" He took another swig from the wine skin. "Ain't nuthin' ever simple?"

"How was she?" asked Sarel over the dwarf's ranting.

"Good, I think. I don't have very much experience with elves. They were returning north, hastily. Apparently Reban isn't the only kingdom having..." He paused, as if searching for the right word. "Troubles is the best word to describe it." Garelgar sat down on the other side of the fire before answering Khaz.

"We have an actual demon, runnin' around, as you put it Mr. Axzen. And it's destroying entire villages, slaughtering their residents like wild fire through dry grass." Garelgar's eyes narrowed as he stared across the fire. "And with every soul it takes, it grows in power, enlarging the portal it came through and summoning more Hell-spawned predators, like those gargoyles. It wasn't summoned by the Black Order. The wards put in place by the elven arch-wizards of Thantwilanoria after the Demon Wars are breaking down, and the citizens of Reban are the prey."

Both Sarel and Khaz saw in Garelgar's eyes and heard in his voice that this man was not just some baronial dignitary. He could be dangerous if need be. Mercenary officer or not, this man cared

about the people he was sworn to protect, and he would protect them just as he protected Sarel and Khaz from the lynch mob in Voth.

Ashamed, Khaz rose to his feet, and bowed low. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean ta...ta..."

"Trivialize," intoned Sarel. "What the elf said!" continued Khaz. "I didn't mean ta drivelize yer situation, an I hope ya took no offense." The dwarf finished with another bow, his beard coming dangerously close to the fire.

"My apologies as well, Captain Janlyn," Sarel added, nodding his head. "We will aid you any way we can."

"No offense taken, and while your aid would be greatly appreciated, I would prefer if you both would give me an answer in the morn, after sleeping on it." Garelgar motioned for Khaz to sit before adding, "I don't want any rash decisions. If you choose to leave, I will provide you both with travel warrants that will enable you to travel anywhere within the borders of Reban, unmolested."

"That's fine Captain," answered Sarel. "But if you don't mind my asking, could you tell us what you know about to this demon, and what you expect of us, so we can make an informed decision?"

Garelgar nodded his agreement. "I don't know much, but before I begin, do you mind if I see your axe? The one you used to slay the

gargoyle?" He directed his question at Khaz, who looked up in surprise. Dwarves didn't part with their weapons willingly.

After a moment's hesitation, Khaz drew the weapon in question from its fur sheath, laying on the ground to his right. It had been a gift from the druid, Kimba Truehart. Although smaller than his two-handed axe, it was still as long as an average human battleaxe. The handle was carved from living oak, like a druidic staff, while the head was made from the claw of a giant ground sloth, embossed in high-quality, tempered steel.

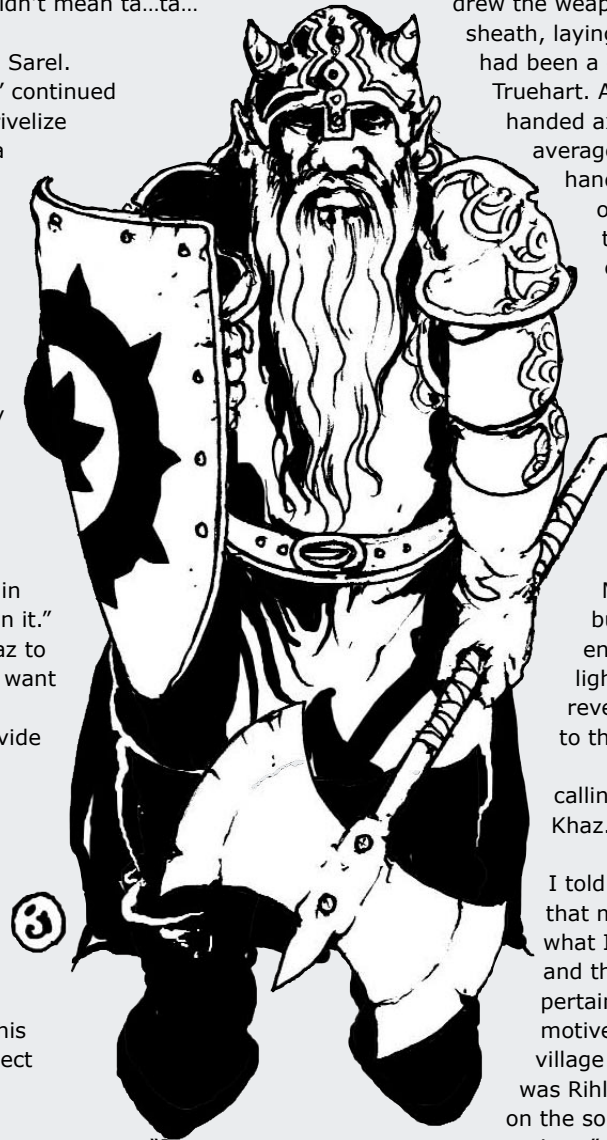
Flipping the weapon over, Khaz leaned around the fire to hand it handle first to Garelgar. Upon touching it, Garelgar felt the magical energies tingling through his arm.

"This is a fine weapon, Mr. Axzen, and I am no mage, but it is obviously imbued with enchantments of the powers of light. Thank you," said Garelgar, reverently handing the axe back to the befuddled dwarf.

"Yer welcome, an stop callin' me Mr. Axzen. Call me Khaz."

"As you wish, Khaz. Now, as I told you before, I don't know all that much. A lot is speculation and what I learned from Kimba Truehart and the priests of Beordin pertaining to the character and motives of this demon. The first village to fall victim to the demon was Rihl, a small farming community on the southern outskirts of the province."

"What do you mean by 'fall victim'? What exactly happened in Rihl?" asked Sarel, leaning



forward to offer Garelgar some jerked beef from the bag of food they received from Lyle at the tavern.

Garelgar accepted the meat, nodding his thanks. "Rihl was completely destroyed; its inhabitants were not only hacked and ripped to pieces, but their remains seemed to have been gnawed and eaten." Garelgar paused, shuddering visibly from the haunting memory. "At first, we thought the dwarves out of Ghan could have been responsible, or a tribe of orcs from the Twisted Forest-"

"I ain't never heard a no dwarves that eat people!" Interrupted Khaz, a hurt look on his face.

"No offense Khaz, but the dwarves out of Ghan are feral Graume dwarves. They emigrated here four or five hundred years ago, settling in the old volcanic tunnels of the Jarastraka Mountain range. They are savages, filing their teeth and wearing the bones of their foes as armor. Bora Grude, the king of Ghan pays them to watch his border. They call themselves the Iron Scorpion clan, cousins of the Bloody Skull clan up north."

"Hmpf." Khaz waved his hand in understanding. Mountain dwarves didn't consider Graume dwarves, real dwarves; they considered their feral cousins primitive and barbaric. Whereas mountain dwarves lived in subterranean cities and disdained magic, the dwarves of Graume Island lived out in the open and embraced sorcery. Several centuries ago, the ruling clans of the island, in an attempt to modernize and join the mainstream nations of the world, had forsaken their older customs of teeth filing, face painting and cannibalizing their enemy's. Some of the clans refused to change and warred with the ruling clans, though they were defeated and exiled.

"As I was saying," continued Garelgar, "We ruled out dwarves and orcs because there were no tracks leading to the village. The only tracks we found were those of the gargoyles leaving. We did find two sets of taloned tracks within the village. One set of footprints was seared into the ground, and the other set looked like a huge bird or a dragon."

"Dragon!" Exclaimed Khaz

"Yes, but upon further inspection and eyewitness account from the second village, Menda, we've determined it to be some demon-spawned

bird." Garelgar exhaled, as if disturbed by what he was about to say. "Even more alarming than the fleeing human tracks leading to mangled corpses were the human tracks accompanied by gargoyle spoor and footprints, leading back to the Twisted Forest and Zauurcrag. It was as if the survivors were being herded."

"What of the survivor from Menda? What did he have to say?" asked Sarel, leaning forward and resting his chin on his right fist.

"She, actually, and her child. Both were half dead and quite mad. All we gleaned from her rants was that before the attack, the residents of Menda heard ghostly drums, carried on the wind from the south. And that the demon was mounted on a skeletal, un-dead bird. There was also a name she kept crying over and over before she passed." Garelgar paused before whispering, "Cruzuzule Mamnibia."

Sarel noticeably frowned at the demon's name. The crackling of the fire and the cricket's night song was suddenly loud in the silence. "You are right to whisper the fiend's name. If the demon is indeed here on earth's material plane, invoking its name could unwittingly summon it in our midst."

"You know this demon?" Garelgar asked the frost elf, leaning forward.

"Know? No, Captain, I don't know this demon, but I have heard of it, yes. Crux is a blood demon. Blood demons, unlike plague and fire demons, are not very intelligent, nor are they cunning. They are filled with malice, like a berserker or a champion of Hell. Blood demons are used by the demon princes and lords as weapons, killing machines."

"Can it be defeated, and if so, at what cost?" Asked Garelgar.

"Yes," answered Sarel. "It can be defeated." After a moment's hesitation, the frost elf continued. "I am more concerned with this portal of which you spoke. It is more likely a tear or rift in the earth's fabric than a portal or conduit. Even if the demon is defeated, the tear needs to be repaired."

Khaz was leaning forward, once again rubbing his face and head as if in pain. "I don't understand all this portal and Hell stuff."

"Does it really make a difference how the

demon got here?" asked Garelgar, agreeing with Khaz.

"Yes, it does," answered Sarel flatly. "If a demon is summoned, the summoner has created a temporary conduit, enabling the demon's spirit to travel between the planes of existence. Even if the fiend escapes, the damage it can cause in its astral form is limited. Like a ghost, it does not entirely exist on our plane. It needs a willing host, like the one we encountered in Isegoth. Even then it is bound by the physical properties and powers of the host. But if the powers of Hell discovered a weak point in the wards put in place after the Demon Wars, like a hole in a dam, water will seep through, weakening the already compromised area. In this case, the dark energies of the nether planes are the water, and they are weakening the dam between Hell and earth."

Sarel let this information sink in for a while before continuing. "I suspect Crux was sent through the rift, and as you said, each soul it takes increases its power. That is partially correct. The more blood the demon takes, the more minions it will be able to conjure. But it is likely channeling most of the power it gathers to whatever lord of Hell is holding the rift open, which in turn is being used to enlarge the rift. Eventually it will be large enough to permit more powerful denizens of the fire plane to enter our world."

"So what you are saying is even if we kill this Crux, its masters will just send another demon in its stead?" Garelgar shook his head in disbelief. "It keeps getting worse!"

"Well, killing the demon's physical form and sending its spirit back to Hell will be a temporary victory. Some of its own energies are being channeled into the rift, but you're right. Eventually another will be sent," answered the frost elf. "The demon must possess an artifact of some sort, a weapon or an amulet that acts as a magical bridge or conduit. This artifact must be identified and either destroyed or sent back through the rift. That will likely create a vacuum that will destroy the tear and seal it, but either the priests of Beordin or the druids can better judge that than me. How do you propose we find this demon, Garelgar?"

Picking up a stick, Garelgar drew a map in the dirt. He glanced at Khaz, who was now snoring. "If

Eight spidery legs supported its bulbous arachnid-like body, and each leg ended in a cruelly curved claw. An oozing stinger at the back of her body twitched in the intense heat from the molten lava rivers on either side of the bridge.

the demon continues on its present course, ranging further north out of Zaurcrag, the next village in line is Allura, around the time of the Gourd Festival and All Hallows Eve." Garelgar drew a line through the circles indicating the villages. "Allura is a town, not as big as Voth, but it still has hundreds of residents. The carnage could be devastating."

Sarel took a deep breath before asking, "What do you intend to do, Captain Janlyn? Have you considered the possibility of evacuating Allura?"

"Allura's town elders have been made aware of the potential danger, and some residents have left, but I fear the demon will just proceed past Allura and attack Voth." Garelgar drew another line in the dirt, indicating Voth's proximity to Allura.

"I intend to take a small force," Garelgar continued, "perhaps twenty men, so as not to be too conspicuous, composed mostly of my company and Amir's scouts. It will be bolstered by the priests of Beordin and yourselves." Garelgar indicated Sarel and the sleeping dwarf. "We will wait for the demon to attack. Unless you can think of anything else?"

"No, Captain, I can't think of anything else. Not without the help of powerful sorcery. I will help in any way I can; I don't have to sleep on it. However," Sarel continued, pointing to Khaz with his thumb, "I can't speak for the dwarf."

"If I hit these Hellborn bastards with my axe, will they bleed?" Khaz spoke groggily, startling both Sarel and Garelgar, who assumed the snoring dwarf was asleep.

"Yes," answered the frost elf.

"Then I'm in! Bring em on," answered Khaz before rolling over on the broad piece of granite, hugging his beloved axe to his chest. Within seconds, he was snoring again.

"Well, you two should rest," said Garelgar as he stood and stretched. "I will go and see if Amir needs relief. At daybreak, we will leave for the garrison, and

then on to Allura." The Captain turned and strode away from the fire, before turning back to the frost elf and Khaz. "Thank you," he said before disappearing within the deep shadows of the massive redwoods.

"You trust this human, Sar?" Asked Khaz without rolling over.

Sarel leaned back against the same stone the dwarf was reclining on before answering. "I see no reason not to Khaz. Not yet."

The frost elf closed his eyes, letting the night sounds and the crackling fire lull him into a state of relaxation, a state that passed for sleep as far as elves were concerned.

Drool Knashmemnon, the high plague demon, moved ponderously down the narrow bridge, chittering to herself in the throat-tearing language of Hell.

Lesser demons hastened from the grotesque creature's path, while some circled above in the thin, oxygen-deprived air, not wishing to incur some hellish disease.

Eight spidery legs supported its bulbous arachnid-like body, and each leg ended in a cruelly curved claw. An oozing stinger at the back of her body twitched in the intense heat from the molten lava rivers on either side of the bridge.

Between the two foremost legs was a misshapen torso, human in shape but covered in open sores and cancerous lumps. The foul smelling, yellow puss oozing from these wounds marked the creature's black hide.

Bloated flies buzzed about its beaked, vulture-like head while beady red eyes focused on a swirling wall of black nothingness rising in front of her. Gripped tightly in her taloned right hand was a spiked, elf-hide whip, its handle fashioned from a human thighbone.

Clearing the cloud of flies from her vision with

a wave of her scorpion-clawed left hand, the demon of decay called softly into the black void before her.

"Cruxuzule Mamnibia." Her voice trailed off to a moist rattle, which turned into a body racking cough. Vile Phlegm and diseased flies shot from her open beak as an image began to form in the swirling blackness.

Looking back at her from the void were two fiery red eyes, set deep within a baboon like head. They were the eyes of Cruxuzule Mamnibia, blood demon and champion of Hell.

Cruxuzule lowered its head respectfully, answering in a rumbling voice, "Yes, my lady?"

"You have done well, my rampaging sweet," said Drool as if speaking to a child. "You have enlarged and strengthened the rift considerably, and Zaranoth is pleased." Once again her grotesque body shook with hacking spasms.

"Thank you, my Queen," Crux responded subserviently.

"Even now, champions and priests gather at your next conquest, the human settlement known as Allura." She spat the last word, as if it tasted bad. "Zaranoth has bid me send you what minions I can, to ensure your conquest. I present to you, my dear berserker, a score of daemokdelance!"

Drool Knashmemnon's great bulk shambled aside, revealing twenty demonic soldiers standing on the bridge behind her.

The great wolf-like demons waited patiently. They stood ten feet tall on their hind legs, their red Hell-metal armor emblazoned with the horned and fanged skull insignia of the ancient demon lords of Zaurcrag. Resting on their backs, between their leathery wings, were black metal cleavers inscribed with evil looking red glyphs.

The Queen of disease motioned for the daemokdelance to file into the violently swirling rift. As the last beast was about to pass through, Drool reached out with her right hand, causing the

daemokdelance to cringe. The course hair of the demon's shoulder fell out, and the flesh beneath instantly began to decay. She handed the cringing demon her whip, and then pushed the creature into the void, which puckered and wavered violently.

Deep beneath the ruins of Zaurcrag, Cruxuzule stood back as the daemokdelance filed out of the rift, using their wings to soften the fall to the hard rock floor of the large cavern. The floor of the ancient torture chamber was now broken and uneven, as large cracks zigzagged their way from wall to wall, and steam poured out of the natural thermal vents. A hellish red glow from the pockets of magma running below the fissures lit the chamber.

Crux heard Drool's voice distantly and weakly as the last bestial soldier came hurtling out of the black nothingness to land unceremoniously on the floor with an audible crunch of bone and clatter of armor. "Use these gifts well, my bloodletting lovely!" she said before the link between earth and Hell was severed.

Vomiting, the last daemokdelance forced itself to all fours and crawled to Cruxuzule's feet, leaving clumps of bloody hair and flesh behind it as the decay and disease from its shoulder spread rapidly. The dying creature presented the blood demon with Drool's whip before falling sideways into one of the thermal fissures.

Behind the blood demon, huddled in a small recess in the stone wall, were several naked, bloody, half-dead human prisoners from Rihl and Menda. All of them were bordering on insanity from their ordeal. They were guarded by Cruxuzule's blood gargoyles, and they had already witnessed some of their number being eaten alive.

Turning from the assembled daemokdelance, Crux motioned for the gargoyles to herd a single human away from the rest. Using its tail, one of the gargoyles slapped at the closest human, a teenage girl, who fell forward onto her knees. She looked up

at the whip-wielding demon before scrambling to her feet and running toward one of the steaming fissures.

Cruxuzule lashed out with supernatural speed, and the whip wrapped around the screaming girl's waist. As she screamed in terror, the flesh of her midsection turned black and began to decay. The blood demon slowly pulled back on the whip, tearing her flesh with the bone spikes, which filled the hot chamber with the scent of fresh blood and rot.

Clamping a huge clawed hand atop the human's head, Crux silenced the annoying screaming with a sickening crunch. Tearing the girl's head from her body, the demon held the ruined skull above its upturned open maw, allowing the blood and pulp to drip down on its red tongue, nectar squeezed from an overripe fruit.

Casting the head aside, Cruxuzule Mamnibia motioned for the wolf-like demons to sate their hunger with the rest of the human captives.

TO BE CONTINUED

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About the Author

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Elizabeth Ellis (KouAidou) draws the webcomic Fantasy Wars and the RPG Wars comic strips for the Silven Trumpeter. She graduated from the University of Maryland with a major in Japanese in 2003 and is currently at large. When not shackled to her art supplies, her hobbies include anime, translating, and of course, role-playing.



by Dana Lynn Driscoll

Product Spotlight: **No Press RPG Anthology**

Edited by: Luke Crane

More info/Purchase: www.nopress.net

Reviewed by: Dana Driscoll

Reviewer Bias: *I received a review copy of this product.*

Introduction

The *No Press RPG Anthology* contains eight original, complete, short-form role-playing games by some of the top indie RPG designers. Contributors to this unique anthology include *Universalis* co-author Mike Holmes, *Fvlminata* co-author Michael S. Miller, and *Fastlane* creator Alexander Cherry. Games included within the anthology include *Snowball*, *Discernment*, *Pretender*, *WTF?*, *The Agency*, *Pagoda*, *Cell Gama*, and *Over the Bar*. To my knowledge, this book is the first of its kind—a totally new look at what RPG games have to offer in the form of short RPGs by a number of different authors. This review will give an overview of each of the contained RPGs in detail and conclude with overall impressions.

If I could describe the *No Press RPG Anthology* in one word, it would be inspiration. Some form of media has inspired all the developers of these games—and this inspiration eventually developed into something they could share with others. And indeed the *NPA* has inspired to me as a gamer; it has inspired me to try new genres and push the limits of what role-playing is about.

Look and Feel

The soft-cover book is 146 pages and has a black and white interior. Unlike most other indie products, it is your more standard RPG book size—8.5" by 11". Not that this matters in any way except for the fact that it will fit neatly on your shelf with your other "standard-size" books. The binding appears to be pretty solid—I toted the book across five states after Gen Con and it arrived without much wear and tear.

The artwork contained within is quite interesting—each of the different RPGs within the book has its own artistic flair. Each RPG has an opening logo introducing the game and unique side border on each page that sets it apart from the rest. These borders not only help brighten up the white space but also help you to discern one game from another when quickly flipping through. Other than the logo and the borders, there is little artwork, however. Unique fonts and headings help keep it interesting.

And with that quick look at the physical properties of the book, let's delve into the goods!

Snowball

By Alexander Cherry

If you have ever seen the movie *Memento*, the premise behind *Snowball* should be familiar. The essence of *Snowball* is an attempt to create backward-storytelling—a concept where you start at the end of a story and work your way back to the beginning. A second "normal" mode allows the game to be played in a more linear fashion. *Snowball* is a

About the Author

Dana has a variety of different interests, some of the most important being reading, writing, learning, and playing D&D. She is currently a graduate student working on her PhD in linguistics at State University of New York: Stony Brook, with her undergraduate work in Literature, Writing, and Women's Studies.

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variant ruleset for *The Pool* by James V. West. Even so, the game is self-contained and playable without having a copy of *The Pool* lying around.

The *Snowball* engine is collaboration-based—both the GM and players have a say in how the game processes. Other mechanics in the game are based on a dice pool system, so have your d6's handy. Gameplay progresses through a set of scenes, much like you may find when reading a play. Several scenes can take place at once—and with the reverse rules, most of these scenes progress in a backwards-linear fashion.

Characters are determined by a loose set of traits—no hard numbers are involved during character creation. Traits are distinctive features of a character—these traits can be improved or lost over time through normal gameplay.

Included in the chapter is an example of play. This is a great way for new players and GMs to see not only how the game is played, but also what the game is capable of doing.

Overall, I'm impressed with the creativity expressed through *Snowball*. The mechanics seem simple, yet

solid. I certainly loved *Memento* and am looking forward to escaping linearity and trying this game out!

Discernment

By Michael S. Miller

Taking a radical departure from *Snowball*, *Discernment* is “a role-playing game of grasping after the truth.” In a sense, *Discernment* is like the ultimate lab experiment; it is a game where a single player is the subject of an experiment by a group of scholars. The scholars (all the rest of the players at the table) are to determine the quality of the soul of the individual in question (soul quality is chosen at the start of the game by the subject and kept in secret from the other players). The scholars each formulate a hypothesis of two soul-qualities they wish to test the subject for (in secret) and take turns creating and executing the a scenario to prove or disprove their hypothesis. Essentially, the game is played with three “layers” of reality—the gamers themselves, the role of subject and scholar, and finally the scenario-level where the subject must interact with the scenario the scholars have created.

Actions and scenes are resolved through a token bidding system. The scholars pool their bids against the subject—if the scholars have more tokens, the lead scholar determines an outcome of a scene. If the subject wins, she instead gets to resolve the conflict.

The game ends if one of two things happen—the subject becomes fully “aware” of the tests and ends the game, or the scholars are able to correctly guess the hypothesis. Additionally, there is a point system kept by the subject. At the end of the game (either way) the subject tallies the total score and announces the “Scholar Emeritus” who gets to decide the final fate of the subject.

One thing I don’t necessarily like about the game is the way that the “lead scholar” is determined at the start of the game. It is determined by who is the most published author in the group, and so if you are always playing with the same group, the most

published author among you will always have the lead scholar advantage. Other than that, however, it is a game that I’m itching to try out.

Pretender

By Kirt Dankmyer

Pretender is a game set in an alternative 1980’s universe in which you are a supernatural being who is “pretending” to be a human. Pretenders do not change or alter the world around them, rather they are on a path of both coolness and self-discovery. The game is rather freeform and focuses on extreme personalities, role-play, and looking as cool as possible.

Characters are created in a free-form discussion at the start of the game via consensus. Topics include—What type of game is this going to be? What is everyone playing? Next, you create more details of the world and the connections between the characters. Each character also has a set of elemental statistics, which, like the other aspects of the game, are decided on rather than predetermined by the rules. In conjunction, characters choose specialties—specific positive abilities that they can do. Once everyone is happy, the game begins.

The game is a dice pool game that has a classic GM position. You assign dice to different categories—successes mean you get to determine that particular element of the roll. For example there are narration, motion, safety, and style dice. The game does not utilize different mechanics for combat, and advancement, if used at all, is determined by consensus.

Pretender is an interesting concept, but I get the feeling that almost too much is attempting to go on within the system. I particularly like the consensus elements of the game, as these encourage players to work together and allow the group collectively to set the power level, type of game, and ideas for plot.

Interview with Luke Crane, Editor of the *No Press RPG Anthology*

Conducted by Dana Driscoll

We got a chance to ask Luke Crane, Editor of the *No Press RPG Anthology* <www.nopress.net> and mastermind behind the *Burning Wheel* <www.burningwheel.org> a few questions about the *No Press RPG Anthology*. This interview was conducted through email on September 14th. We thank Luke for taking time out of his busy schedule to talk with us about this great new book!

Silven: Was the *No Press RPG Anthology* your idea? If so, how did you come up with the idea?

I was reading the game design forums over at indie-rpgs.com about a year ago. There are so many good ideas in that forum. Jon Walton had just posted another version of his *Facedancer* RPG. It was two pages, half-finished, earnest, artful, and damn interesting. Right then and there I got bitten by the bug: let’s publish these things.

So I started a “Let’s Do It!” thread in the publishing forum there and started to hash out the details. The idea wasn’t original. Many attempts had been made before me, and I did meet a fair bit of foot dragging and resistance. But we eventually came to a consensus and managed to agree on a format, the financial aspects, and a rough deadline.

The cool thing is that you can still go back and read all those threads and see how it developed. Some of them are pretty embarrassing.

Silven: Where did the name “No Press” come from?

The No Press name came after Ron and Clinton [from indie-rpgs.com] told us we couldn’t use their forums/icon/IP to brand the game. They have a really strong following so many of us thought it would be best to brand the anthology as “From the Forge” or something like that. But they outright refused (I think they were right to now). So we were stuck without a working title or a brand. The No Press moniker came out of a burst of “fuck it!” energy right there. If we couldn’t use their brand, we’d make our own. And our brand was a phantom brand, born from magnificent half-formed ideas and bad html code and forged into playable and rockin’ games. There certainly was no press in its future. Or so we thought.

WTF?

By Daniel Solis.

WTF is termed a “game of competitive schizo-storytelling” that can be layered upon another RPG or played as a stand-alone system. In this inverse-style role-playing game, there is only one player character—the star—and a bunch of GMs/directors all fighting for control over both the story and the star. Note that each director has her own storyline the star is participating in—creating a very hectic and convoluted game! Each director takes “turns” (usually 5-10 minutes real-time) directing her part of the story.

While I understand the nature of *WTF*, a good example of play (as included in the first three games) would have helped solidify the mechanics and workings of the game. Even so, this is another unique game I’m interested in trying out.

The Agency

By Matt Matchell

The Agency is a 1960’s style game described in the introduction as “*Austin Powers* meets *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.” The basic premise of the game is that characters are secret agents who are attempting to thwart the supernatural menace and save humanity!

The game has a director (GM) and players in the traditional sense and uses a dice pool system. Characters are created through concepts—each player comes up with a character concept that will determine what skills the character has, the purpose of the character, the character’s relationship with the Agency, and more. Each character must also take a bonus and a flaw—both something that makes the character stand out and something that causes the character trouble. A decent list of both bonuses and flaws are included to choose from. Examples of characters are included to clarify and expand character creation guidelines.

The game also gives a wealth of information for the director. This includes information on the setting (stylized 1960’s England) and what is happening in the rest of the world. Not only does this give a director ideas for where to take the game, it also helps flesh out the setting and “feel” the game has to offer. Even more impressive, the game gives hints about types of scenarios you can use in your Agency game and a list of elements that good scenarios have. It includes some scenario ideas to get you started. Prominent villains, supernatural villains, the Agency’s most wanted, and important members of the Agency are also detailed in the game.

Of all of the games presented in this book, *The Agency* is one of the most solid and fleshed-out. It covers everything from damage and wounds to car chases and scenarios!

One of the things I like about this game is the “feel” presented both graphically and through the memos located throughout the game.

Pagoda

By Jeffrey Schechter

Pagoda is a fast-paced martial arts game that focuses both on flashy combat and the reason behind why the characters fight—their motivations, goals, pasts, and futures. It is a game with a very strong eastern flare, fitting for the *wuxia* genre and the game itself.

Characters are determined in three “degrees”—elements, aspects, and paths. Elements are just that—opposing forces of elemental power. Each character has mastery of one element, harmony with two more, and sense the final two. Aspects are similar to traditional character stats—power, grace, cunning, awareness, and presence. Finally, paths are specific training paths (both combative and non-combative). Each character must also choose a flaw and a zodiac sign to be complete.

The game is a modified dice pool system—rolling doubles, triples, or beyond is the path to success.

Silven: How did you gather the submissions for the project?

The submission process was completely open. I posted a thread in the publishing forum on indie-rpgs.com. There wasn’t even really an approval process, the game simply had to be short, complete, playable and playtested. If it met those simple criteria, it went in.

It was risky, but who the hell was I to say if someone’s game was crap or not? Tastes vary widely in our hobby and that’s cool.

So people who had shortform games on the backburner came out and offered their precious gems. Once submitted, the games were all professionally edited. I think it was an enlightening process for many of the authors.

Silven: What is your favorite short RPG in the book?

Well, I personally solicited two games for the anthology, *Pagoda* and ‘My

Hat of d02 Know No Limit’. *D02* didn’t make it because the author was busy with other stuff, and it needed editing (to make it MORE weird and unreadable, not less).

So *Pagoda* was my pick. Jeff Schechter is 15. He had to ask his parents’ permission if he could get published. I think that’s awesome. I’m so jealous!

But as I got more involved in the production of the anthology, I really fell in love with *Discernment* and *Cell Gamma*. They are two cutting edge games.

Silven: Are there any plans in the future for a second volume?

Absolutely. But the damn thing took a lot of freaking work. It was a highly unpleasant experience to be publishing two books at once -- the *NPA* and the *Monster Burner*. So I need to better structure my time and publishing schedule. Next time around I’m squeezing that evil genius Jared Sorensen for a game, and I’m twisting Ron Edwards’ pinkie toe until he gives me a short one.

The more repetition in numbers on the dice, the more successful the action. A second important mechanic in the game is Chi, allowing the character to modify his rolls in order to push himself to greater heights. A final element that makes the game more interesting is spirit magic, utilized by shamans and sorcerers.

For a combat game, the rules could be a bit clearer—but once you read through them once or twice and try them out, they make sense. Overall I find this *wuxia*-based game both highly creative and appealing.

Cell Gama

By Mike Holmes

Cell Gama is a game in which the main characters know nothing—not even the game they are playing! Characters wake up imprisoned—and slowly discover more about the world and themselves as the game progresses. The game is truly built around the characters as, without even knowing it, they create the reality of the game.

The actual write-up of *Cell Gama* presents only the basic mechanics and facts—the who, what, why, when, and how is up to the game master. It is a game essentially without rules—characters are created as the play progresses, dice are used to determine successes, and actions can be resolved. *Cell Gama* does include a list of important NPCs that inhabit the prison, the major areas that the prison contains, specific prison events (regular events, special exercises, experiments).

The GM has a very important role within the game of *Cell Gama*—a role to both facilitate the game but also to lead the characters to victory. Information can be presented to the characters in many ways: memories, breakdowns, cultural and environmental clues.

Cell Gama is a game I'm anxious to try out some night when my group is least expecting it. Its a well-

executed and extremely interesting concept. Perhaps the only downfall I can see to this game is the fact that it may not work as well the second time around if you attempt to play it with the same group again.

Over the Bar

By Ben Lehman

The final game presented in the *No Press RPG Anthology* is a short RPG to play anywhere alcoholic drinks are available. Essentially, each player picks a major and minor ability, hobby, and deficiency for the character. The game progresses through the consumption of alcohol—usually the fastest drinker wins! The final game is a lighthearted way to end this fabulous book!

Closing Thoughts

I wasn't sure what to expect when Luke Crane excitedly handed me this book at Gen Con to review. In fact, I didn't get a chance to even pursue it until after the con was over. I must say, this book has really blown me away! I am amazed at the variety, quality, and sheer amount of RPG goodness that has been packed into the *No Press RPG Anthology*. In fact, I'll go as far to say that this is a book that should belong on any RPG fan's shelves. It will open your eyes up to what RPGs can really become and pushes the envelope of how we define RPGs today.

The forward of the book, written by *Sorcerer* designer Ron Edwards, describes this book as full of "sparks." These games are each sparks in a sense—they will appeal to a diverse bunch of gamers, they were written purely for fun and enjoyment, and they cover many different genres. Some of these games appealed to me more than others—but I'm sure that for every gamer, there are several games that he or she will enjoy. So what are you still reading for? Order the book today and give your group something to get excited about!

But the priority right now is to promote what we have. It's only a month old and it has a long life ahead of it. I may be wrong, but I think it's the first of its kind—an anthology of short-form RPGs by different authors. There are years worth of good play material in there.

To purchase the No Press Anthology or to learn more information about the game, you can visit the NPA site at <http://www.nopress.net>.

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by Eytan Bernstein

The Many Faces of Gaming: **Gay-mers**

This is the inaugural piece in a new column devoted to the many subgroups and communities in the gaming world. Each month, the column will explore a different group in the hopes of increasing diversity and exposing readers to people they never knew existed. The subject of this month's column is gay gamers.

In the last ten years, attitudes towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals have shifted considerably. Positions concerning these lifestyles vary widely from complete acceptance to rejection and condemnation. Some insist that these lifestyles are immoral, corruptive and violate the laws of nature. Others hold that they are natural, have existed since the dawn of humanity and are a part of everyday life. The position of this article will tend toward the latter viewpoint. While this is not an attempt to legitimize GLBT lifestyles, readers will derive little from it if they remain intolerant.

With changing attitudes towards GLBT individuals, a new issue has arisen in the gaming community – gay gamers. This raises any number of questions. Why is the presence of gay gamers significant? What is the current gaming landscape like for GLBT individuals? Should gamers make more of an effort to include GLBT characters in their games? How can gamers – regardless of sexual identity – portray more convincing and more realistic GLBT characters in their games?

The first question that needs to be addressed is “Why is the presence of gay gamers significant?” There are a number of answers to this question, but

one of the biggest is homophobia. A short jaunt to Counter-Strike will prove that homophobia is alive and well. The common use of the word “gay” to denote something that is stupid, uncool, or redundant is rampant. Many, when confronted with their use of this term, suggest that no offense to homosexuals is intended and that the word's negative connotation has nothing to do with its more standard meaning. This unfortunate state of affairs sheds light on the all-pervasive nature of homophobia in society: even rather tolerant people, who consider themselves above expressions of racism and bigotry, are comfortable with expressions of homophobia simply because it is legitimized by those around them.

The negative use of the term gay is the least expression of homophobia in the gaming world. Bald-faced homophobia is expressed on even the most mainstream gaming sites, including our very own Silven Crossroads. While great strides have been made to increase awareness and tolerance, true hatred and fear still exist. This is the real reason that gamers must be aware of this issue. It's easy to sit back and ignore ignorance and prejudice when it doesn't target you, but it takes a great deal more guts to stand up for someone else. Gamers must remain aware of this issue because they are likely to be confronted with it.

The other major reason that this issue matters is that most gamers, at some point in their lives, will game with someone who is GLBT. Unfortunately, this simple fact about a person is likely to have an effect on the game. If everyone in the group was comfortable with the GLBT individual, this effect would be minimal,

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Eytan Bernstein is a High School social studies teacher on Long Island. He enjoys RPGs, writing fantasy fiction, movies, and making up unique words. He has previously been published as a poet and is also an accomplished pianist/songwriter. He hopes to someday make it as a game designer/fantasy writer.

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however, this is frequently not the case. Even if this discomfort is not openly expressed, some member of a gaming group may act differently around a gay member. This is to everyone's detriment, as the game will suffer. Many gay gamers' biggest complaint is that they don't feel comfortable being themselves in a hetero-dominated role-playing environment. This results in awkward, unpleasant games. If a member of a gaming group is not comfortable with another member – for any reason – they should talk about it. Some people will always have a hard time relating to those that are different from them. Unfortunately, the onus is not on gay gamers to ignore this – most people are different from them. Honesty and discussion may be awkward and painful in the beginning, but it will lead to much better gaming down the line. Besides, one never knows who else in the gaming circle might share your concerns.

The second question that needs to be considered is “What is the current gaming landscape like for GLBT individuals?” At the present, white heterosexual males dominate the gaming industry, and GLBT-friendly material is scarce in gaming. This is beginning to change however, but slowly. The gaming world seems to lag behind other forms of entertainment when it comes to change. There have been few gay characters in mainstream novels and movies – though this is increasing – yet they remain extremely rare in fantasy novels and RPG products. Perhaps because of the very nature of pen and paper role-playing – the idea of resisting the use of technology in place of more archaic utensils – lends itself to anachronistic tendencies. This does not appear to be the case, however, with video games. While gay characters and scenarios are rather rare in

video games, they are becoming more common, even in those based on role-playing games. The recent Temple of Elemental Evil game offered a quest in which success allowed one of the male characters to marry a male NPC. In Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, female Jedi may find themselves being hit on by other female Jedi. The Sims have always had a variety of options for same-sex gaming, and such options are becoming more detailed.

There have been a number of characters in video games that were either out or suspected to be gay. Eagle in the Street Fighter games – a handsome, buff bobby in full getup – was revealed to be gay, something long suspected by some players. Some have suggested that the relationship between Guile and Charlie was hardly platonic. There are a variety of other examples, but the important thing about these examples is the source. Many of the gay or gay-friendly characters in video games are coming out of Japan, where gender is a much fuzzier subject. Male characters in many amine or Japanese video games have slightly effeminate qualities. This blurring of gender boundaries leads to a greater occurrence of GLBT characters or experiences – Cloud’s cross-dressing to complete a mission in Final Fantasy VII for example.

While video games have experimented to at least a small degree with the possibility of GLBT characters and experiences, fantasy novels and RPGs have been rather timid. There are a few, such the character Imoen from the Baldur’s Gate novels, who has a romance with a drow matron. The forty or so Shadowrun novels have a much better track record with regards to GLBT characters. Steven Kenson and Mel Odom have significant gay characters in their novels; Kenson’s books actually have a gay main character: Talon. One of the strengths of these novels is that the sexuality of the characters is incidental to their success and professionalism. Outside of these few examples, however, GLBT characters are hard to find.

For the most part, gaming products rarely even acknowledge the existence of GLBT characters. The

one example of a book that does is The Book of Erotic Fantasy, and we all know how Wizards of the Coast reacted to that product. While the book only devotes a small section to gay characters, it takes the right approach. It suggests that the sexual identity of a character can have nothing to do with the daily activities of that character. Romances may exist, but given most players’ tendencies to avoid in-game intimacy, it is generally not an issue. Some intrepid players and open-minded GMs may wish to explore nontraditional relationships, but it’s not a necessity. It would be nice, however, if options for such exploration existed. The Dungeons & Dragons Player’s Handbook doesn’t even mention sexual identity. It is as if this is not a significant aspect of a character – as opposed to attributes, skills, appearance, outlook, or religion. While D&D is marketed to a large range of age groups, there’s no reason to reject The Book of Erotic Fantasy – a book that is clearly targeting a more adult audience.

The lack of GLBT-friendly gaming material should not indicate that the GLBT is absent on the radar. There are numerous online websites and groups devoted to gay gamers or “gay-mers.” Such sites include <http://gamers.experimentations.org/>, www.alloutgames.com (the Gay Gamer/Straight Gamer Alliance), www.gaymer.com and others. These sites typically offer a message board for gay gamers and encourage the promotion of tolerance in gaming as part of their mission. Yahoo!, Orkut, and other sites have significant gaymer groups. Gaymers were also well represented at this year’s GenCon. The Chicago Gay-mers were there – with very cool t-shirts – and participated in the same miniatures demos, card games, and video games as the rest of the attendees.

Online GLBT groups do their best to link up gamers, but there is still a great deal of difficulty in the gaming world with this issue. This brings us to our final question: Should gamers make an effort to include GLBT characters in their games? The answer relies completely on levels of comfort and intensity of roleplaying. For your average hack-and-slash game, the sexual identity of a character is probably irrelevant. For a role-playing intensive game with

romance and conflict, this issue might become more important. It is not surprising that most gamers avoid playing characters of different genders and sexual identities. For many, gaming is a relaxing activity, and playing something totally alien to them is difficult. For others, it is a thrill to play a character that is completely different, and playing a character of the opposite sex or with a different sexual identity as no different than playing a barbarian or sorceress. The inclusion of GLBT characters in games depends on the type of game being played and who is playing. In a tolerant atmosphere, players should not feel hesitant to play a GLBT character. If you do decide to play a GLBT character however, there are a number of things to keep in mind.

Playing GLBT characters requires a subtle balance between following and breaking from stereotypes. It’s true that many gay men seem to talk with a lisp and that there does seem to be a section of lesbian culture that favors a more butch look. This does not mean that everyone in these groups exhibits these behaviors. There are many nuances and ranges of sexual identity. The difficulty is drawing the line between stereotype and necessity. To establish culture, players frequently use overdone accents and speech patterns. The same is true for moral alignment – the good are often very good and the evil are frequently truly diabolical. Players do this to establish a better feel for the character, and it is usually better than making no effort to change vocal patterns or mannerisms. It can be tricky, however, to do this well when it comes to sexual identity. While it is not unreasonable to have a gay male character with effeminate characteristics or a lesbian character with very masculine qualities, not every GLBT character should follow these lines. It is easy to use stereotypes to make characters easier to identify, but if they are used too frequently, the characters become caricatures and cease feeling real. It may be difficult to play a character with subtle characteristics, but at the same time, most players don’t want their characters to seem like role-playing stunts. Many attempts by male players to play female characters come across this way, and this should be avoided.

It is helpful, when playing a GLBT character, to think about aspects of that character's life that pertain to the current situation. This includes the character's views on religion, upbringing, childhood and relationships – especially as these relate to sexual identity. It is also useful to determine when the character knew that he or she was GLBT and how this affected his or her life. Answering these questions can help steer the character away from stereotypes. It may also broaden your horizons when creating characters.

The notion of gay-mers may be new, but at some point, most gamers will play with or encounter in some capacity an openly gay (or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender) player. The attitude of a gaming group can have a great deal of influence over whether or not a person comes out. If the attitude is homophobic, with constant use of derogatory terms and expletives concerning GLBT individuals, coming out is unlikely. If the attitude is tolerant and open-minded, coming out and being open with group is much more likely. Most gay gamers just want to have fun playing their games and characters, but they feel limited by a culture that forces them to suppress a major aspect of their lives. They lack role models in literature, and most have to struggle to find a balance between comfort and honesty.

Role-playing games are a niche market, and while the majority of players and designers seem unwilling to or uninterested in acknowledging other perspectives, a good first step could be significant. If sexual identity was mentioned, even in passing, it would be an improvement over the current sterile, repressed state of affairs. It's hard to understand a company that believes that it has a moral responsibility to keep all sex out of the game but at the same time includes demons, devils, and succubi in its core books. It is odd that one is acceptable and the other is not. Hopefully, the RPG industry will take note of other industries and expand its content – even if only subtly and gradually. If this occurs at the same time that

society's acceptance of GLBT individuals expands, perhaps gamers can move forward – albeit ten years or so behind. If the gaming industry was to make greater efforts to show legitimate GLBT characters, these characters might seem like more of an option to the average gamer. Is this likely to change the way most groups play? Probably not. But if it encourages a broader spectrum of characters, it is a success.

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by Aaron Todd

Travinara Part 2

After breakfast, the twin brothers began their journey south. Their year-long journey into Travinara had officially begun this morning, once they left the Wizen tree and headed towards Dupaal. The deer, Chukra, had been very clear in the direction they were to take, and since they had no other plans, it seemed a logical enough course to follow. They'd never gone so far out of Wellmoore as they would by the end of the day, but this was to be a journey of many new things for them.

Their travel capes draped about their necks like shields at their backs. In a manner befitting their being twins, the capes were cut as two portions of the same bolt of cloth. The tan color came from a dye made from the mud on the shores of Lake Stable. Parto and Droito wore them with pride at all times as symbols of the home that treated them as though the town itself had born them.

For two days they walked, just as the deer had told them, when they came upon a road. No different than any other road they had seen, the path was just a bit wider and the ruts were a bit deeper. No doubt that this was from the carts and carriages that came in and out of the marketplace of Dupaal. The free-rolling hillsides that had marked their travel so far made way for the flat, easily traversable land that surrounded the roadway. The fruit-bearing, traveler-friendly Wandering Willows sporadically marked the sides of the road to let strangers know that all were welcome in Dupaal.

Just a few hours after finding the road, it led them to the outer edge of Dupaal. Two days of walking had left them a bit tired, hot, and ready for some food.

There was nothing to welcome them, no indication that anyone would notice their arrival. The only thing that greeted them was a post-mounted, hand-painted sign that read 'Dupaal'. Their journey had only just begun and already they felt as if they were too far from home to turn back.

At first glance, the town didn't seem like much they had heard of, but as they got closer to the center of town, it became a more active, commercial place. The road that they followed sliced straight through the heart of the bustling market where it seemed like everything they could ever need was for sale.

The marketplace of Dupaal sold goods of every sort imaginable. There were stands with cakes and pies, others with breads, some sold animal hides, pottery, jewelry, clothing, or even small bits of furniture. The twins had been to a couple other markets before, but they were nothing compared to what they were witnessing here.

The stories they had heard about the people in Dupaal did not disappoint the pair of travelers. The people that milled about the marketplace represented a myriad of the continental cultures. Some wore the darker colors of the northern clans, there were those in regal purple, and even some wore the bright colors of the southern lands. There were other halflings here, although none that they had ever seen before. Men and women of varying skin colors and even the normally reclusive elves wandered about the town both selling and purchasing goods.

About the Author

Aaron Todd is a devoted husband and Computer Operations Manager in a Philadelphia suburb. A classically trained literature buff and an award-winning poet, he has turned his attentions over the last year to his long-sought-after career as a novel writer. With his first work nearly finished, Aaron is actively seeking a publisher and agent. In his free time Aaron likes to jog, bike ride, read Star Wars novels, and enjoys a challenge at any level. With Football, Hockey, and Lacrosse as his favorite things to watch, activity is never in short supply.

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It was very near the end of the market day and many of the businesses were shutting down. The boys needed to find a place to eat and to bed down before it got too dark and they couldn't find their way around.

"I think there's a place we could stay the night. And perhaps get some food, too." Parto pointed to an establishment that had a sign over the front door that read 'Dupaal Inn.'

"Not exactly a creative name, but it will probably do," Droito replied. "Let's see what they have."

Once they entered the establishment, the crowd inside was much less diverse than it had been in the marketplace. There were no other halflings or elves and most of the men were of the same light-colored skin. The man behind the bar appeared to be a not-so-jolly fat man who looked like he had just bitten into something so sour that he needed a drink. But the man didn't take a drink, he just kept the expression with indifference.

As they approached the bar to inquire about food and a room, Droito noticed – and pointed out to his brother – a woman leaning against a one of the only lonely spots on a wall on the far side of the room. Long black hair flowed smoothly over her bare shoulders and nearly down to her waist. She reminded Parto of a cat that had just caught a mouse and finished it off, cleanly. It would have seemed almost appropriate for a small tail to be hanging from the edge of her mouth. No one was

speaking to her, but she looked as though she could get the attention of anyone in the room if she chose. She didn't appear to notice the halflings.

"Hey, Parto, she's got a blue scarf." Droito pointed out to his brother. Her body most mostly covered by an aged red peasant blouse and a long skirt that covered more of her than they could see from their vantage point. A light blue scarf wrapped once around her neck, one end trailed down over her ample cleavage, the other end over her back.

"Yes, she does. I wonder why Chukra said to avoid her? She seems quite lovely by the look of her," Parto replied as he observed her.

"She certainly does." The tone of Droito's voice changed as he continued to look at the woman. He was clearly intrigued.

"I wonder why no one is talking to her? A pretty girl in a bar with a bunch of guys drinking. You'd think they'd be all over her." Parto continued to look at her as well.

The woman casually glanced around the room and her eyes caught them looking at her. Feeling like they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't have, they immediately turned, in sync, back to the bar, where the barkeeper appeared to be waiting for them.

"What'che need, little fellows?" the large man asked them.

"We're looking for some dinner and a room," Parto began. "And we're looking for maybe a couple of days work. We're just passing through, but we'd like to earn our keep."

"I can't help wit the work, but I can help wit the rest. Soup, bread, and ale'll cost ye each a copper, the room'll be a grommel for the night. But you git a night free if ye be stayin a week," the barkeeper offered.

"Okay, the dinner sounds fine." Parto took just a moment longer before he remembered Chukra's words.

The deer told them not to stay longer than a week. *Strange that he should offer just one day over a week,* he thought to himself.

"But I think we'll just be a couple of days, so we'll just pay each night at a time, thanks," Parto replied politely.

"Fine wit me. Your dinner'll take a few minutes, ye can have a seat over there, and the waitress'll bring it over to ye." The bartender motioned towards a table by the wall. He then filled two carved wooden mugs from the barrel behind him and set them on the counter.



Parto pulled out the coppers from his purse and put them on the counter as he reached for the ales. His brother was still watching the voluptuous woman, and she was watching him, too.

"Come on brother, it's just about time to eat." Parto bumped his brother's right arm with his own left elbow. "I've had nothing but flat bread for the last two days. I want some real food."

"Oh, right, dinner." Droito woke out of his hypnotic exchange.

The two brothers took their places – Parto on the left side of the table, his brother, the opposite. The table was rather high for them, but it was manageable.

"So, were you listening to the bartender? He tried to get us to stay over a week. Said he'd give us a night free. That's kind of strange, isn't it?" Parto wasn't sure if his brother had paid any attention while they were at the bar.

"He did? Hey, didn't Chukra tell us not to stay longer than a week?" Droito was mildly paying attention, but was clearly distracted.

"Yes. Weren't you paying attention to anything at all just now?" Parto nearly lectured his twin.

Droito looked around the room, ignoring his sibling's statement. Parto could tell what his brother was looking for. Or rather, 'who' he was looking for.

"Brother, what are you doing?" Parto tried to get his attention.

"Where'd she go?" Droito said softly.

"Who cares where she went?" Parto replied, even though he could tell his brother wasn't listening.

The sound of a voice caught them both off-guard. They hadn't even noticed that the woman was now at the edge of their table. Neither could tell where she had come from, but she was standing there holding two plates with bread and a bowl of soup on each. She was the waitress.

"Here's your dinner. You boys need anything else?" Her voice was inexplicably serene. The words came out of her mouth without a hard sound in them.

"Uh, no, thanks, not right now, but we may need a refill on the ales in a bit." Droito answered before his brother could.

"Well, if you boys need anything, I'll be right over there." She pointed back to the wall where she was standing when they came in. "If you need anything, just wave, and I'll be right over." Her voice was comforting; almost maternal, yet sultry. She turned slowly and walked back towards her post.

Both boys watched every step she took as she found her way back to her previous solitary position. Every step she took seemed labored, as though she carried a burdening load. She paused at the bar while the keeper said something to her, then she went back to her seemingly designated spot. She turned to look at them, and they knew that they had been caught watching again, so they turned their attention to their food.

About the point where they were each halfway through their meal, a man pulled a chair up to the end of the

twins' table and settled into a comfortable position as he easily opened the conversation. "Evenin', gents."

"Hello." Droito paused chewing for a moment.

"I saw you two looking at that waitress. She's something, ain't she?" The man spoke forwardly. "She is beautiful, but don't go any nearer to her than you are now, I tell ya."

"Why not?" Droito was very curious now. This was the second person who told them to avoid the woman.

"Why don'tcha know, boys? She's a Siren. Sure, she's lovely to look at. Voice of an angel. But she'll sing ya to your own death, she will. She'll eat your soul, then wipe her mouth clean with your dignity. Trust me boys, you want no part of that."

"But what's she doing here?" Parto inquired. "I thought Sirens were water-born? I thought they tricked sailors, not land folk."

"Well, mostly, yes, but sometimes, even the most sultry of Sirens get a desire for something more and find themselves on land. This one's just stuck now. She stayed around too long on the land and forgot how to swim. Now, she just works here, picking up souls, whatever she can. Keeper don't allow it much, though. Bad for business."

"I guess it would be," Parto agreed.

"So did I hear right that you young men are looking for some work?" the stranger asked.

"Yes, but how did you know that? We only just got here, not half an hour ago." Parto liked the idea that work was coming to them, but he was curious about where the man's information came from. Must have been the bartender, he decided.

"Name's Marco, by the way," the man quickly dodged

the question. "I do have some work, if yer interested. It's not much, but I'll pay a fair wage, and I'll only need ye for a few days."

"What sort of work is it?" Droito finally spoke up. He had continued to eat while the man spoke to them.

"Well, ye see, I'm building a new barn for my farm on the edge of town, and I'm almost done, but I need some help finishing up and getting stuff moved from the old one. I had a hired hand helping me out for awhile, but he moved on. So, you think ye'd be interested? If not, tell me now and I'll leave ye to yer food."

Parto and Droito looked silently at each other for a few moments. When it came to simple matters and they each wanted to know what the other was thinking, they often only needed to look at each other. Their eyes could tell each other as much as words would tell anyone else.

Parto turned back towards Marco, "We'll take it. Now exactly how much does it pay, when do you need us there, and where is it? We're not from around here, so we need to know exactly how to get there." Parto liked to be precise.

"I can pay ya each two grommels per day, but I expect to see ye bright and early in the morning. Around here, after first light comes breakfast, and after breakfast, the work starts, so I want ye both there by the time I'm finishing me breakfast," he trailed the sentence down, allowing the twins to respond.

"Sounds fine, sure, now how do we get there?" Parto finished the thought for both of them.

"Well, the road that comes into town from the North, yer going to follow that until it comes back out of the town again. About a half mile outside of town, ye'll find a road that splits off to the left. Take that about another half mile til ye see a farmhouse on the right side. There's a fenced in portion where ye'll see me stallions and the old barn. New barn is right behind it."

Both young men nodded in acknowledgement.

"Well, gents, then I guess I'll be seeing ye in the morning," Marco stood back up and returned his chair to the table he had taken it from.

"See you in the morning, then." Droito smiled as he acknowledged him. It was their first job outside of Wellmore.

The boys finished their dinner uninterrupted. Droito continued to glance at the waitress, and rather perceptibly. Parto chose to ignore it for the time, although he wondered why his brother seemed so engrossed with the woman.

"That was some good stew, eh, brother?" Parto asked rhetorically.

"Yes, it was. Guess we ought to check out our room," Droito finished the thought for his brother.

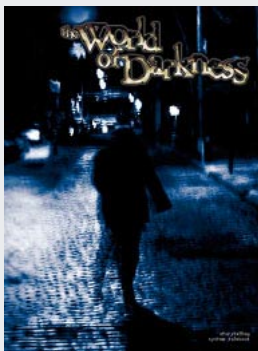
"Yeah. It has been a rather long couple of days. It'll be nice to sleep in a bed again." The two young men got up from their table, paid the bartender for the room and headed up for the night. Droito watched their waitress as they went.

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by Nash J. Devita

Review: White Wolf: World of Darkness – Core Rule Book



Authors: Bill Bridges, Rick Chillot, Ken Cliffe, & Mike Lee

Publisher: [White Wolf Publishing](#)

Reviewed by: Nash J. DeVita

Review Date: September 29th, 2004>

Reviewer Bias: I have been playing in the World of Darkness for about 12 of the 13 years it has existed and have been a rabid fan of the series ever since my first exposure to the Vampire: the Masquerade. Of course, that series is now over. This title was received at Gen Con Indy 2004 for review purposes and eventual play.

This is the first book and primary core / rules book for the new World of Darkness in the (semi) new Storytelling System. *World of Darkness* is 222 page hard cover with interior black & white illustrations from Thom Ang, Sam Araya, Tim Bradstreet, Jeremy Jarvis, Becky Jollensten, Michael Kaluta, David Leri, Mark Nelson, Jean- Sebastien Rossbach, Greg Ruth, Christopher Shy, Durwin Talon, Josh Timbrook, and Jamie Tolugson. It is good to see some of the

returning artists as well as some new names and styles here. The full page art is all from Jason Manley. The cover photographer was Anna Harper with cover design from Katie McCaskill & Matt Milberger.

Presentation

The cover is strikingly simple. Thanks to this fact, it is very attractive. The cover features a blurred photograph of an individual shambling (?) down a lighted city street in the dead of night. The only pieces of text that appear on the cover are the title at the very top and in very small print, "Storytelling System Rulebook" in the lower right hand corner.

All of the interior art work is black and white. Some of the illustrations are full page, some half- page, and others smaller still. The image placement is not always relevant to the context but it is still well placed and very attractive. I really like the variety of styles used within.

Each page also contains a border image on the outer edge. This image varies from chapter to chapter. Each of these images is a collage of individuals. Thankfully, this is subtle enough to not be distracting while reading.

Content

The Rules Basics

For those gamers familiar with the old 'Storyteller System' and the variant used in *Exalted*, these rules will, for a good portion look familiar. Still used are dice pools rolled with d10. These dice pools are still made

Review snapshot

Archetype: Core Rule Book

Body: 10 (*Game Mechanics*): Clean. Better than ever.

Mind: 11 (*Organization*): It does not get much better.

Spirit: 10 (*Look & Feel*): This is a very pretty title.

Attack: 11 (*Value of Content*): A book of the size from most publishers would cost \$35 or \$40, not \$25. This is a very sweet deal.

Defense: 8 (*Originality of Content*): This is, more or less, version 2.0

Health: 10 (*Physical Quality*): The only damage I would expect to ever see are banded corners.

Magic: 10 (*Options & Adaptability*): Almost any type of game is possible with this core book. The expansion it allows is quite nice, too.

Scoring Definitions:

12 = Superior. Best of the best.

11 = Excellent. Just a hair from perfect.

10 = Very Good. Part of a Baker's Dozen.

9 = Good. Most gamers would like this.

8 = Fair. Some gamers would like this.

7 = Average. Most gamers would be indifferent.

6 = Sub-par. Flawed, but not without promise.

5 = Poor. Some gamers would dislike this.

4 = Bad. Most gamers would dislike this.

3 = Very Bad. Among the dirty dozen.

2 = Inferior. Worst of the worst.

up of traits that are rated in **dots** and are generally figured by adding **Attribute & Skill** ratings.

The differences between the old and new Storyteller Systems are obvious and greatly welcome. Now, the storyteller no longer determines the number on the dice that constitute success. Instead, like *Exalted*, all rolls of seven (7) through ten (10) are successes. Ones no longer subtract from successes. Only modifiers subtract from dice rolled. Now, if a character's dice pool would be reduced to zero (0) dice, the player still rolls one die. If a one (1) comes up on that die there is a **dramatic failure**.

The rules are still straight forward. Thankfully, plenty of examples are provided for players who are new to the system.

Characters

Characters are still made up of **attributes** and **skills** (referred to previously as **abilities**) as some of their primary stats.

There have been some nice changes to the **attributes**. There are still nine (9) attributes that are broken into three (3) sub-groups - **mental, physical, and social**. There are two (2) new attributes - **resolve** and **composure**. These replaced **perception** and **appearance**. Thanks to the elimination of appearance, no traits should ever be at zero.

Another nice change to attributes is the inclusion of secondary groupings. Attributes, in addition to being categorized as mental, physical, and social are also categorized as **power, finesse, and resistance**. This general break down helps show the connection between attributes in different physical groups (e.g. Resolve is mental but also a resistance attribute. Composure is social and resistance. Though they are used in two different situations, the use is still that of resistance.).

Skills now offer broader uses than they did in the past. No longer are skills such as **enigmas** necessary since that is encompassed by **investigation**. These new broad use skills really help streamline the system. There are now far fewer 'useless' skills since each one has so many uses.

When compared to their WoD 1.0 namesake, merits have gone through the most significant changes. Some merits are actually the same - **eidetic memory** and **common sense** are still there. Many of the 'new merits' are what were previously **backgrounds** - **resources, fame, and status** are all examples of those items that were backgrounds that are now merits.

Health and Willpower have only minor mechanical changes, so I won't go into detail about them. Others have a set cost in dots. For example, **common sense**

costs four (4) dots while **contacts** can range from one (1) to five (5) dots.

The other side of merits, **flaws**, are actually now optional. They only give a bonus of the storyteller sees fit within a given game session. This is a great help since the old merit / flaw system was so easily broken since flaws were able to be ignored on so many occasions.

Health and **Willpower** are pretty much the same so I won't both going into detail on them. If one has played or plans on playing, this is something that needs to be known quite well, though, so don't skip this section. There are some changes but they are minor.

Morality is roughly the equivalent of **humanity** from the old games. If a sin is committed, there is a possibility this rating will have to be rolled against. A direct correlation exists between **morality** and **derangements**. When one slips in morality, there is a change of gaining a derangement.

The last major 'stat' and change is the removal of **nature** and **demeanor**, replaced by **virtue** and **vice**. These stats are general and universal. These are general and (mostly) universal. Vices are the seven (7) deadly sins. Virtues are their counterparts. As they did before, these have a direct tie to **willpower** and is re-gain as well as a little bit more.

Setting

The setting here is that which most gamers are at least vaguely familiar with. This world is a mirror of our own but only so far. The jobs people hold are the same, the television programming is the same, the stores and streets are the same. One major difference between the game world and the real world is that almost everything is more corrupt. Gangs are more prevalent on the streets; there is more corruption in the government (this is possible?), etc. This biggest difference between the World of Darkness and our own is the existence of the supernatural. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and whatnot all exist. They do not exist in the

open, however. They are not even seen for what they are by most individuals. If they did act in the open there would surely be an inquisition thanks to public fear and loathing of that they fear or that which is different.

The characters in this game are a little different than the general populace, however. They can see the supernatural for what it is. What they do about it is up to the players, though. Do they fight them, help them, or stand idly by?

Conclusion

So, that is much of what *World of Darkness* has to offer. Is it worth it? Sure. Is it necessary? Absolutely not. There have been a number of nice changes however which, in my opinion, make this system far superior to the last one.

This title makes possible that one thing that was missing from the last line - normal people (or at least semi-normal ones). I am glad to see that non-supernatural beings can actually exist in the World of Darkness.

This book is necessary for use of the future products in the WoD, including the already released *Vampire: the Requiem* as well as the upcoming *Mage* and *Werewolf* hardbacks.

Where to buy

Through our partnership with FRP Games, our readers can get this product at a discount here:

http://www.frpgames.com/cart.php?m=product_detail&p=11818&ref=sil

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by Dana Driscoll

Silven Exclusive Interview: Dregg Carpio of

Chapter 13 Press

Dregg Carpio is the lead writer of Pulp Era and co-founder of Chapter 13 Press.

Can you give us an overview about "Pulp Era?"

Pulp Era is a role playing game based on the "Hero Pulps" and movie serials of the 1930's and 1940's. The players take on the personas of the classic pulp stereotypes, saving the world, fighting evil in two-fisted battles, and exploring forgotten worlds. We have designed Pulp Era as a pulp genre handbook more than an actual setting, so in its pages you won't find any "metaplot" or setting to follow, just a very detailed character generation system and a lot of great information on the genre and period. The last twist we have added can be summed up in the games subtitle "Cinematic Adventure in the Yesteryear!" The feeling of the games has also been influenced by a lot of great modern action films out there by directors such as John Woo, The Wachowski brothers, and Ang Lee. Envision it as "Doc Savage" meets "The Matrix", or "The Shadow" meets "The Replacement Killers". We still want the players to feel immersed in the early serials, but also get the idea that the sky is the limit when it comes to the action in play.

What type of gamers and games will this game appeal to?

I once had the pleasure to discuss my game with the great Robin D. Laws, and I think he put it best. "Pulp games are for Niche audiences, and can only appeal to a small percentage of the role playing population." Which is sadly true to some degree. The Pulp genre

although a major influence in all gaming genres (don't get me started on that argument) is one of the less visited. The market is still flooded with 15 different elf handbooks and how to build a better dwarf splats, even though we have new interests thanks to movies like "Spy Captain" and the re release of the Indiana Jones movies on DVD the numbers of actual Pulp gamers is small. With this in mind the proof has to be in the pudding. Gamers are a superstitious lot (to quote Batman... sorta) and it takes a lot of show and tell with a system or genre to get interest. The Gamers that would be most likely to buy and or play a game such as "Pulp Era" are going to fans of such films like "Hellboy", "Sky Captain", or "The Shadow", as well as Pulp magazine and serial enthusiasts. There are only a few quality Pulp RPG's on the market these days, we hope to add one more.

When can we expect a release of Pulp Era? Where can people purchase it?

Pulp Era is looking at a November release with a full push in January starting with "Dreamation" a local convention in New Jersey. With the printing service we are using our book should be obtainable from Amazon.com, the chapter 13 website, and of course at most conventions in NJ and NY.

Many designers have a single word that they use to sum up their game. What word describes your game and why?

That's easy... "Cinematic!" We want our players to think in the terms of Hollywood special effects and

action. The Cinema has always been an escape from reality and even more so in the time period we are trying to emulate. The Players of Pulp Era should be in the mindset of the serials, throwing real world thinking and physics out the windows. We want our game to be an escape to a more innocent time, and a period when imagination took you farther than any train or plane ever could.

What gave you the idea to write Pulp Era?

The one thing about Pulp Era is that it is the child of many parents. I can take the credit for it original concept and creation and for about 35% of the actual writing, but if it was not for the other members of Chapter 13 press (Mike & Kristina Smith, and Jon Richardson) the book would still be sitting in Chaos. The Idea has been around since about 1992 when I ran a one shot Pulp game that turned into a year long Campaign. Its funny how something you only plan as a one-night jaunt, turns into something so committed. At the time I was going to a local Bay Area convention called "Dundracon" and there I met a fellow by the name of Jeff Hatch who had been running a game called "Pulp Adventure" for some years. Seeing what Jeff had done, I pulled together my trusty gaming group and started the game design. The only constant is the games name; it has been "Pulp Era" since day one... the mechanics on the other hand. To answer the question, when I was growing up there was a show in the bay area called Captain Cosmic, it was on at 5:00 on a local station out of Oakland and every week it would show a episode or two of old Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, Green Hornet, and Captain

Marvel serials. Those old shows drove me to find other serials, buy old copies of Weird Tales and to just be obsessive with the genre. Finally I just got tired of running my pulp adventures in other game systems, so I wanted my own and went to it. My vision behind the game has changed a bit in the past 4 years, in that time I have become a big fan of a lot of modern action films and their directing styles, I feel the newer version of this game reflects that change in the way I see the genre.

How long has this project taken you from start to finish? Any problems along the way?

The start of the project was around 1992 or 1993. I tried running the campaign in the old Top Secret/SI system by TSR and then tried it in GURPS, no system fit my style and I had tried many. A friend of mine turned me on to the old TSR Marvel Supers system, after playing that once I fell in love. If I truly think about it Pulp Era was nothing but a chart titled "Thrills and Spills" that was sort of borrowed from the Marvel Idea. Nonetheless a system started to form around the chart and in about a year I was hitting every Bay Area convention with my work. Later I started working with the now Co-Author and Line director Mike Smith and between him, I and our friend Jon we pumped out about 4 versions of the game, each time changed because of my odd tastes in role-playing. This of course led to nothing but production issues. The game stay asleep for some years until at Dundra con 96 I had the pleasure to meet Jared A. Sorenson of Memento Mori Theatrix, Jon, Jared, Mike and myself re did Pulp Era and put it free on the net. I was happy as a clam with the new system and it was getting a cult status, you could say Pulp Era was one of the 1st free RPGs to be put on the Internet. Sadly enough there was friction amongst the ranks and I trashed the projects to save my friendship with both parties. Lets move ahead 4 years now, and I had written a free RPG called basic pulp based on the Basic system

by Dilly Green Bean games. I was pretty proud of the work and wished to do a 2nd revision. During the revision I thought to use the name "Pulp Era" for the new edition and well the rest is being edited as I do this interview. 10 years to answer the 1st question, and to answer the second... I guess due to my haste I had to put the editing team for this on hi gear, although not happy about it we are getting to put a 10 year demon to bed. We are looking at a Release date of December 1st, 2004.

Do you plan on creating any additional supplements or products that will be associated with Pulp Era?

Yes Indeed! Mike Smith and His wife are taking in the jobs of Line Directors and Editors of the Pulp Era line. I can tell you that we already have a settings book in the planning stags and hope to see it released by summer of 2005, also we plan to do a line of PDF supplements for it as well, including new Gimmicks, Martial Arts, Stereotypes, and all kinds of Pulp Era related goodies. The best thing to do is keep your eyes posted to the www.chapter13press.com website for further updates regarding any of out products like Pulp Era and the new "Tales from the Funk!" series that will be following fast behind.

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▶ dsfsdf

by Shane Cubis

Antipodean Adventures: Captain Cook

G'Day all. This month we're looking at one of the finest explorers of the eighteenth century—Captain James Cook. A man who declared that he intended to go "farther than any other man has been before me...as far as I think it possible for a man to go." James Cook located hundreds of new Pacific landfalls, charted the entire length of New Zealand's coastline and a large amount of Australia's eastern coast, and proved that Torres Strait separated Papua New Guinea and Australia. I'll present a bit about his background and information on the journeys he took into the Pacific. The intention, beyond providing some background information to the eventual settling of Australia, is to provide a vehicle for your party to go exploring for *Terra Australis*.

Cook the Man

"I found it necessary to put every one on board to an allowance; for such are the Tempers and disposition of Seamen in general that whatever you give them out of the common way – altho' it be ever so much for their good – it will not go down, and you will hear nothing but murmurings against the Man that first invented it; but the moment they see their superiors set a value upon it, it becomes the finest stuff in the world and the inventor an honest fellow."

- James Cook

Captain James Cook stood 183cm tall and carried about him an air of authority. He possessed piercing eyes and strove to maintain a composed demeanor at all times. He was fair, professional, and consistent in his discipline, inspiring respect and admiration in his crew. It has been said that only an extraordinary man

like Cook could have kept such a motley crew in check for the three-year voyage that the endeavor undertook in 1769. One of Cook's revolutionary innovations was insisting that fruit and vegetables be carried on board at all times. He forced his crew to eat oranges and disgusting pickled cabbage as often as possible, thereby warding off the curse of scurvy. Those who refused were liable to be flogged.

The man who would eventually become his century's greatest navigator was born the son of a Scottish laborer and a Yorkshire farm girl in 1728, in the small village of Marton, England. His father's boss was sufficiently impressed by the young boy's intellect, so much so that he paid for James' schooling. Once his initial education was finished, James was apprenticed to a grocer in Whitby. Here he got a taste for life on the sea and starting at the age of eighteen Cook spent a few years working on a variety of ships as a collier.

In 1755, he joined the Royal Navy and within two years was qualified to master a ship. He picked up a great deal of wisdom and experience during the war between France and England over North America - especially in the fields of cartography and navigation. Somewhere along the way, this extraordinary man found the time, books, and energy to learn the intricacies of astronomy and mathematics.

Cook's first major exploration mission came under the ostensible purpose of viewing the transit of Venus (which, it was believed, would help to measure the distance from Earth to the sun) from the optimum position – the Pacific island of Tahiti. Europe regarded the natives of Tahiti as the living embodiment of

About the Author

Shane Cubis is a young, fit, Australian plagiarist with an affinity for Spider-Man. He has recently succumbed to internet peer pressure and now secretly refers to himself as a 'gamer.' He wrote and starred in an award-winning short film, "Dream Date" (also starring Aussie cricketer Brett Lee), has had an article published in 'Knights of the Dinner Table,' as well as regular articles in such publications as 'Tertangala,' 'The Northern Leader,' and 'Beans Baxter.'

He has an Honors degree in History/Politics, and is currently studying to be a primary (grade) school teacher. On Saturdays he calls bingo - a job his nana got him five years ago. His favorite book is 'Catch 22,' his favorite band is TISM, and his favorite movie is 'Back to the Future.'

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Rousseau's 'Noble Savage' theory. The Tahitians were strong, healthy, and relaxed: food and possessions were shared equally, and beyond the occasional violent ritual required to settle down the deities, they had no major religious guilt issues. The weather was beautiful all year round, meaning an outdoor existence could always be enjoyed, and the Tahitians lived day to day, responding to immediate needs as they arose – eating, sleeping, dancing, and copulating as the mood took them. Of course, during their short stays on the island, European sailors gave Tahitians a delightful gift in the form of sexually transmitted diseases. The British and the French blamed each other for introducing syphilis to Tahiti for years to come.

At the helm of the ship *Endeavour*, Cook set out. The *Endeavour* was a three-masted, flat-bottomed collier that had been redesigned to cope with Pacific conditions. On the three-year voyage Cook was about to undertake, it accommodated 71 officers and crewmen, twelve marines and eleven civilians—one of whom was the notable, wealthy botanist Joseph Banks.

After recording the transit of Venus, Cook was to sail around the area with the purpose of either proving or putting to bed rumors of a great southern continent.

There were still great tensions between France and England, who were racing to pick up colonial possessions, and Cook's orders were delivered to him secretly. He was to make a study of as many native flora, fauna, minerals etc. as possible, as well as charting *Terra Australis Incognita*. Australia (or 'New Holland', as it was then known) had been partially mapped, but a great number of questions remained.

Cook sailed all around New Zealand, carefully charting the two islands (and in doing so, proving that there were *two* islands, rather than one). The native Maoris were not as welcoming as the Tahitians had been, and the Europeans fired upon them, allegedly in self-defense. Once the New Zealand cartography was complete, Cook set out west, to chart the eastern coast of Australia. The *Endeavour* first landed in Sydney, in a beautiful, wide bay named Stingray Bay for the multitudes of marine life present. This was later renamed Botany Bay, when the number of new plants rapidly outstripped the new species of animals. Here the crew of the *Endeavour* first made contact with Australian aborigines, whom they offered beads and nails. Cook noted, however, that "all they seem'd to want was for us to be gone".

Having mapped around 3000 kilometers of the eastern coast, the *Endeavour* hit a snag - the Great Barrier Reef, miles of vibrantly colored coral that is beautiful to the eye but not so good for a ship. Cook was forced to pull ashore for significant repairs. This break in the voyage gave the crew the opportunity to do a spot of inland exploration, which resulted in some more meaningful contact with Aborigines than firing weapons into the air to drive them off. Other points of interest on this voyage include the first sightings and sketches of the iconic Australian marsupial - the kangaroo.

Once the *Endeavour* was seaworthy, the expedition continued north. When he reached the northernmost point of Australia, Cook raised the British flag and claimed possession of the entire eastern coast in the name of the king. He renamed the region 'New South Wales,' and set off home through Torres Strait, proving that Papua New Guinea was a separate landmass to Australia.

"The head, neck, and shoulders, are very small in proportion to the other parts of the body; the tail is nearly as long as the body ... the fore-legs are kept bent close to the breast, and seemed to be of use only for digging: the skin is covered with a short fur, of a dark mouse or grey colour excepting the head and ears, which bear a sight resemblance to those of a hare. This animal is called by the natives Kangaroo."

- James Cook

In 1774, Cook sailed the *Resolution* into the Antarctic seas until they reached an impenetrable ice field. Having traveled further south than any crew had gone before, Cook gave the command to turn the ship around. At this moment a young midshipman, sixteen year old George Vancouver, leaped onto the front of the bow and cried out "*Ne plus ultra!*" (meaning 'none farther'). For the rest of his life he would boast that he had been further south than any other man. With this journey, Cook finally disproved the existence of an idyllic Southern paradise of lush forests and strange inhabitants.

On his third major Pacific voyage, Cook met his death at the hands of Hawaiian Islanders. Believing Cook to be the reincarnation of Lono, god of plenty, he was welcomed with gifts and adulation, hundreds of swimmers swarming around the ship. Cook simply thought the Hawaiians were a generous and hospitable people. In time, the chiefs there began to have doubts about Cook's divine status and began to pointedly ask when he intended to set sail. He did so as soon as possible, but was forced to return a week later when the *Resolution's* foremast was broken in a gale. This time there were no welcoming swimmers or gifts. A number of altercations broke out over the constant thieving of the natives, culminating in the theft of a cutter. Cook went ashore with some armed compatriots with the intention of holding the local chief hostage until the boat was returned. That's when things turned ugly.

A man with a dagger threatened to stab Cook. In response, Cook fired his musket, missing the assailant and killing a bystander. In the chaos that followed, Cook turned to order his men offshore. In this moment he was stabbed in the back of the neck, falling into the coastal water. He was clubbed and stabbed repeatedly, before being torn to pieces and burned.

Adventure and Campaign Ideas

1. Obviously, a Captain Cook-themed campaign would involve the PCs playing the roles of crew members on his ship. Aside from general crewmen, the players could be members of Banks' retinue (botanists, artists, or even general servant/laborers), other wealthy, interested parties traveling aboard the ship for their own reasons or even as natives picked up along the way.

2. The PCs are natives of the Pacific Islands who must deal with the change in life that the coming of the Europeans represents. Will they welcome them like the Tahitians or attempt to drive them off like the Maoris? This campaign would have a lot of interesting elements, and could be used as a vehicle to explore the nuances of colonization, racism and 'The Great Chain of Being.'

2. The Tahitians have appeared to be an innocent and welcoming people, but now they require something from the crew. A dark, angry god must be placated and apparently demands the flesh of a European. A crew member has been kidnapped by the natives, and the party must negotiate his release before the entire situation devolves into bloodshed. Captain Cook demands a peaceful resolution of the PCs.

3. The history books leave out a significant encounter that occurred on the east coast of Australia. When the *Endeavour* sails into Botany Bay, they find that a French crew has recently landed, attempting to claim New Holland for their nation. Cook takes the PCs aside and shows them some further secret orders from England, commanding them to remove the French explorers from Australia at all cost.

Other Genres

Science Fiction: A human vessel, with the apparent mission of viewing black hole activity from the Cubisia system, is also tasked with scouting out potential invasion points and annexing possibilities on Cubisia-6. They will interact with the six-limbed slave miners, as well as their reptilian overlords, all the time masquerading as simple scientists and crew.

Fantasy: The PCs join the dwarven Captain Cookbeard in his quest to 'sail farther than any dwarf has sailed before' in search of a far-off continent of valuable metals. The continent is mentioned in a number of ancient dwarven texts, and may be sunk, inhabited by dangerous foes, or the land of milk and platinum depicted in the ancient works. Even if it does not exist, the journey is still plagued by all the standard perils of the sea.

Horror: The crew of the *Endeavour* get halfway through mapping the eastern coastline of *Terra Australis*, when two of Banks' group are found dead, apparently of shock. The culprit is one of the plants harvested by the botanists, which is sentient and not happy about being taken from its home. It slithers back to its jar after killing men one by one.

Modern: Captain James Cook of the Australian Royal Navy is helming an expedition to the ocean floor, where certain military tests will be run and scientific samples taken. The PCs are asked to join the expedition for a variety of reasons. Once down there, they will face the mysteries of the deep, potential inability to return to the surface, cabin fever and betrayal from some of the crew members - who are spies from a private corporation.

Fond Memories of Gaming from the Silven Community

By the Silven Member Community
Compiled by Dana Driscoll

With the celebration of the 30th Anniversary of *Dungeons & Dragons* at Gen Con 2004, we asked Silven Crossroads members to share some of their fondest gaming memories. We thank each of the contributors and wish them many more years of gaming to come!

Tim Riley
Aka: Marketingman

My fondest memory about gaming is the day I unwittingly ran a game for my future wife at a convention. She was one of four females who played in a twelve-player adventure called the "The Withered Wizard Inn." She was one of about twenty total females at the convention of 500 people (this was back in 1985, the stone age for female gamers.)

All during the weekend we kept bumping into each other at the food court, at dealers tables, etc. So the con organizer introduced us officially. He later became the best man at the wedding and godfather to our two children.

Lance Kepner
Aka: Astros

Maybe this should be an article on who has the most abusive DM?

Maybe it was the time my dwarven paladin ended a plague cloud by sucking it up.

Or maybe the time my monk purposefully let himself get swallowed by a giant purple worm just to kill it from the inside.

Or possible the time my arcane trickster single-handedly evaded a party of nine drow of the equivalent level.

Or it could have been the entire campaign with said trickster.

Or the time my bard was nearly killed with a butter knife... no I hate that one.

Or maybe the look on my PCs faces as they run into a villain with a mirror of oppositions that they willingly looked into.

Or perhaps one of the jillion times Orph Maloney grew unimaginably strong through wild magic.

Sigh, too many to decide. Is that a good thing? And what's this about these memories not happening? You mean they weren't real?

Eytan Bernstein
Aka: Manablast

In one game, characters were traveling through the realm of the dead. They were approaching a garden that housed the deceased parishioners of one of the gods. The gardens were beautiful and surrounded by olive trees. They were rejected from visiting due to lack of moral character. When they left, an invisible stalker attacked them. Lacking a weapon, one of the characters snapped off one of the olive branches and attempted to beat the creature with it—an olive branch, the symbol of peace! Needless to say, they dealt with the battle in other ways, but this stuck with me.

continued on page 48...

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MARIANA, DROW COP

by Melissa Piper



My name is Mariana Varcen, and that's how my first day on the job started. That was quite the reception I received, wasn't it?



Of course, that's the welcome most Drow have come to expect. Most people still aren't used to the fact that we exist. My only hope at this point was that the chief was friendly...



Come in!



by “Dregg” Carpio

Lights, Camera, Action! Sharing your Vision: The Ins and Outs of Indie Publishing, Part I

Welcome to the October installment of “Lights, Camera, Action!” I would like to take another break from my genre rants this month and talk about something that has been taking up a good portion of my time as of late—independent publishing of role-playing games. In this two-part article series, I give a look into what it takes to self-publish your ideas, get a good marketing plan, and finally try and make a few dollars off of your intellectual property.

With over 1,000 titles in print and even more out of circulation, the market for role-playing games industry is dog eat dog. In order to make anything out of a publishing venture, you have to stay ahead of the game (no pun intended). Within each of us resides a game critic who will open a newly bought book, look over the mechanics and say, “Wow, I could have done that so much better.” In fact you can! However, with the market flooded from everyone and his grandmother producing RPG supplements and core rules, you want to make your game stand apart from the others. Why would someone want to play your *Quest for the Golden Flame* RPG when your average gamer already owns a d20 game, *Fuzion*, and/or *GURPS*? Success is determined by the way you market your game and make it appealing. Gamers are known to impulse buy a game because of cool art, a kick butt setting, or a nifty mechanic that they are interested in trying out.

It’s no illusion that the cost of gaming materials has skyrocketed in the past 10 years or so. I remember when I first bought my *AD&D* books back in the late 80’s; the 3 core books cost me 35.00. Try and get a complete game system for that much these days.

Not that I am saying that we should not buy games because of price, or saying that we should create our own material to spite the big boys. What I am saying is you should not have to fork out hard earned coin on a system that does nothing for you, or one you have to modify to the point you have already written more pages for it than contained in the core book itself.

Getting Started

So you are sitting there with a notebook or two filled with great ideas. Your weekly gaming group raves about your system or supplement and you feel confident that you will be the next Gygax. It would take along time to travel the con circuits showing this magical notebook to everyone, so you are going to need to mass-produce.

A question was brought up to me by a good friend about the actual process of putting ideas on paper. This can be a difficult task if you are not used to transposing thought. The key is to not worry about how your notes look, they are for all intent just a rough sketch or outline of what you plan to write. For example, when I started working on the ideas for my project “Nitrous,” all of my notes were written in my sketchbook and about 70% of them were just little doodles of what I was thinking. It was this sort of mental coding that gave me the key to the mood or emotion I was in when I started conceptualizing the game. If drawing is not your cup of tea, try writing down descriptor words in a little pocket notebook (a tool no gamer should be without), or if you are lucky to have a portable recording device, start talking. What you are looking for is a way to give you reminders of what you have come up with, and

About the Author

“Dregg” aka James Carpio is a native of San Francisco, California who now lives in the wilds of Suffolk County, NY. James has written for the likes of Eden Studios, Fuzion Labs, random gaming E-Zines and is currently designing games for his own gaming company Chapter 13 Press (www.chapter13press.com). James can be found at most Northeast conventions and game days with his family doing demonstrations for other gaming companies he supports and running promotional support for I-CON, Gotham Gamers Guild and Wild Gazebo Productions for whom he is affiliated with.

it might make life a bit easier when putting it all together.

Using plain English in your writing is a good thing. Unless you have a genre piece where period slang is going to make or break your project don’t do it. Not everyone speaks your style of slang, and if it means that only 30% of the gamers will understand your references, then you have already failed.

It is a good idea to put all your ideas in the file—every little note and side bar—before you move on to the next step. The worst thing for any game designer to do is to start to dissect his or her work before it has all been written down.

If you are like me with horrid spelling, grammar, and handwriting you are going to need to have a word processor handy. All computers come with some sort of word processor so it’s not too hard to get your hands on a program to do your text editing. More common programs Microsoft Word®, Claris Works, and Word Perfect. All are pretty simple to use and allows for spelling and grammar checks, formatting, borders and headings, art insertion, and some have the ability to port over into PDF which will be a godsend once you are finished with your masterpiece. The important thing to remember is that you have to use a program that is going to fit your needs and budget. I have used anything I could get my hands on to finish the job, and if you are like me and budget conscious you might want to take a gander over at www.download.com and check out some of the great shareware that might save a you a nice chunk of change.

It is also a good practice to use the "Save as feature" in your word processor. Make multiple copies of your files... "Joe's Game Core," "Joe's Game Core (2)," etc. this will assure that if you alter the text of the first and mess up or delete parts and want them back, you have the raw text at your fingertips.

So now you have a good amount of time invested and everything could possibly written down is on paper (in theory). Your dream has been given life, every time you read it tears stream down your face, and now is the time to get ready for layout so you can make the world a better place with your vision, right? WRONG! I don't care if you are an English professor with 100 titles under your belt. "Get yourself an editor!" Our egos are our worst enemies, and as much as well think our work is next to only the great works of literature, we are not going to be the ones spending time, money, and effort trying to figure out what the product is you are trying to put across. Your editor is going to be your second brain, she will proofread, spell and grammar check, and in some cases reconstruct your work in order to create a flow of your ideas. This is a very important point—in most cases we know what we are talking about when we design mechanics and campaign settings/worlds, but does the person who may potentially spend upwards of \$40 on your product have a clue? It is important that you also meet with your editor every step of the way, because if she misinterprets a ruling or does not understand something in the mechanics it can cause a nasty monkey wrench in the machine later on. Remember your editor is there to make you look good and if she is not told how to, she has to guess.

Open Game Licenses

Besides creating your own set of game mechanics there are a lot of "OGL" (open gaming licenses) on the market these days. The OGL theory is that the manufacturer of a gaming company has striped down their core rules system (*Fuzion*, *d20*, *Active Exploits*) and has offered the base mechanics to 3rd party game designers for either free or for a royalty once the game is being sold. For more info on OGL game engines take a look on some of the manufacturers game sites (<http://www.wizards.com>; <http://www.talsorian.com>; <http://www.pigames.com>; <http://www.action-system.com>).

Playtesters and the Art of Criticism

You know your game is good, and your gaming group raves about it whenever you are out at an outing, so now its time to see how the other 99% of the gaming world likes your ideas. This is called playtesting and although you may be saying, "Well if my group understands the mechanics, why can't everyone else?" The fact of the matter is that in most case your group are your friends, and to get an honest opinion you needs to have non involved 3rd party players take a gander at your game.

How is this done? Many resources are available to get a group of eager gamers to try out your game for you. The first is your local gaming store. Try putting up a flyer or three at your store's bulletin board or ask the owner to put the word out. If your local store is like mine you will have gamers just waiting to have their name listed as playtesters and the possibility of some chips and cookies as a reward for an afternoon of testing. You can also go to web sites such as RPG.net or Silven.com and visit the forums and put up ads.

The only thing you really want to concern yourself with is material theft, so you should have everyone sign a "non disclosure" form. This way you have some sort of legal rights if your materials suddenly appear on RPGNow.com in PDF with someone else's name.

With the Forums idea all you would need to do is select one or two groups of people and send them a RTF or PDF of your game (sans art or layout) and give them a playtest deadline. You might want ask them to give you a weekly or biweekly report so you can take notes and do more tweaking of the mechanics

Plan an afternoon for your first test run, as you will want to playtest the very important parts of the game. Most commonly the big three of game mechanics are:

1. **Character generation:** Believe it or not, character generation systems can make or break a game. Using pre-generated characters is ok for playtesting other elements, but for you will want to make sure

Indie Publishing Dos and Don'ts

Do use gaming forums, store bulletin boards, and conventions to spread the word of your game. Free advertising is priceless.

Don't spam people private email address, abuse forum rules or net etiquette to advertise. This can hurt your reputation before the first page hits the ink.

Do look around for affordable talent such as graphic designers, artists, and editors from your local colleges. You can get the best stretch of a dollar here and some honest hard work.

Don't hire professionals you know you cannot pay for. You don't want to start off you publishing venture having a black mark in the community you very much need.

Do take advantage of freeware and shareware programs to further you projects.

Don't invest money you don't have in programs you do not know how to use. People might rave about them, but those same people also know how to use them as well.

Do hire a good editor to go over you work and make sure you have a well-written product.

Don't Depend on spell and grammar checks built into your software to do it all for you.

Do research you material and make sure you are not infringing on copyright (the world does not need another *D&D*, *Deadlands*, etc).

Don't try to file off serial numbers. This includes taking flagship characters and changing names, stealing mechanics and changing the words, or taking well-known cities, vehicles, food products from other settings to use in yours.

people who eventually buy your book are willing to create characters. I have many an RPG in my closet I don't play because I hate making characters. Ask your Playtesters what they did and did not like about the character generation (it is important to take notes during each phase) and tweak character generation for them right then and there. Now that they all have ample characters for the playtest decathlon, its time to try out some skill use and problem solving.

- 2. Skill use:** What you are looking for here is to see how contests between player and NPC work out. You want to make sure the system of resistance is balanced and not going to bog things down. Have the players simulate arm wrestling, tug of wars, and contests of mental prowess. These are the things most players will come across during a nightly session some time in the future.
- 3. Combat:** The final step is the combat; truthfully this is what the players were all waiting for. Since these are disposable characters, throw everything at them. Give them flying robots, berserk Vikings, and angry bears to duel to the death. See how modifiers work, set up cover situations, and don't pull any punches. Combat is where the rules are really going to be scrutinized and mulled over, so you really need to take notes and make changes on the spot, even if you have to redo whole combat scenes to get the flow right.

At the end of it all thank the players, give them a business card or email address and get names for the all-famous "playtesters" section of your credits.

Remember the playtesting is primarily for seeing if the mechanics work. Settings are a great thing and may be the driving reason why someone buys your game, but the setting does not need the stress testing like mechanics does. I will pass on a bit of advice given to me by Luke Crane (creator of the *Burning Wheel*).

Find a simple gaming system like "Risus" or "The Window" (both indie RPGs known for their rules-lite systems) and run a few sessions using your campaign setting. This will allow you to plot out the world setting a lot and give you a feel of what rules might be needed to give your setting the right boost. Don't dwell too long on the playtesting, get what you need from it and move on.

The Concept of Design

Finally your ideas have been all spell checked (remember to give your editor the new updates from playtest), playtested, and reformatted. X amount of time has finally paid off and now you are ready to unleash the best game in the world on the public at large. It is time to take your vision and make it take physical form.

For some of us, creating a visual product is easy as some have some hidden talent as an artist, graphic designer, or web monkey. Let us assume though that you have no such talent—do really think "Joe Gamer" is going to fork out 40.00 for non-formatted text and stick figures?

In today's market of high glossy covers, magnificent artwork, and brilliant layout, you need to have your visual act together to fly with the eagles. This does not come cheap, unless you have friends who will give you a decent rate on artwork and layout this will cost you upwards of \$500 to get it all together. If you know no one with these talents, your best bet is to hire services at the local college. Students these days are hungry and most would be willing to do an excellent job for you for very little. It helps them add a portfolio piece and gives them some pocket money to set off the high costs of education. Most college art departments will have a bulletin board that you can advertise on. Put down what you need on an index card, put it up and within days you will have a nice selection of talent ready to do artwork. You might be the lucky publisher to discover the new Larry Elmoore.

When thinking about design and layout, the first thing you want to consider is the look of your book. Covers and art should be a second thought; you first want

Indie Publishing Dos and Don'ts cont.

Do get a DBA (doing business as) license to protect your company name legally and to have the option to sell your game at conventions and stores in your state. DBAs can be applied for at your counties town hall and prices do vary.

Don't make excuses to not protect yourself. Did you know if you don't get a DBA, some one else could register your company's name and sue you for copyright infringement?

Do look into getting your material copyrighted.

Don't think that because you have "unique" material, that some one else could ever have such brilliance.

Do use royalty free clip art/borders/fonts.

Don't google search and use copyrighted materials. Some people are not forgiving and lawyers are very expensive.

to look over a selection of fonts, style sheets, and borders. The ability to read your book and make it visually appealing is going to be a good selling point. A book that is pleasing to the eye and easy to read is going to make a good impression on those who pick up your work on the bookstore shelf. Try and stay away from fancy watermarks or background art as it make the text difficult read. Choose borders that direct the eyes to the text and that are not distracting. Simple line work is sufficient in some cases or a simple logo in the corner makes for an interesting look. Things like boobs, large font words, exploding cats and the like will just distract the reader and make it hard to get through the chapter.

What also needs to be considered for the text is where your art is going to go. Don't just assume that the art is going to just magically work with the text; it is also bad form to just plopp down a picture dead center and put the text on top and bottom of it. Not only does this look sloppy, but also be assured that snobs like me will find hours of pleasure making fun of the bad layout. I have bought books just to mock and show to

my friends so they can mock as well. Again this is why the graphic designer will become your second best friend next to your editor.

Now it is time to figure out what sort of artwork you want to grace the pages of your personal bible. There are a couple of things you will want to think about before even spending a dime on some sketches or digital art work. First, find an artist who suits your style and vision for the product. The art you choose should reflect the feeling and mood you are trying to set; do not try and cheap out and use clip art or badly done poser art. If you cannot get art that fits the game and theme don't use any period. It is better to just to enthrall your audience with words than distract them with out-of-place pictures or drawings.

Last of all, the cover needs to be thought about. This is the seller; this is the thing that people are going to see when they pass by the bookshelf. What is on your cover will highly affect the way your game is marketed. Again I stress *do not* settle for second-rate art, even more so where the cover is concerned. If you cannot commission a decent art piece or find something in the royalty free category just leave it a solid color with some nice headline to give the games name.

Conclusion

And on that note I will close on this month's installment of "Lights, Camera, Action! Next month I will touch more on the marketing, promotion, and self-publishing your gaming masterwork and the avenues to get it noticed. Until then may all your adventures be cinematic!

Fond Memories of Gaming from the Silven Community cont.

Mike Thompson

AKA: Leaderdesslock

Before I was a gamer I was a comic book reader and collector, and my first exposure to *D&D* was the one-page comic ads you would find in various Marvel comics. I remember that it looked really cool to me that you could actually play the part of one of the heroes you read about, and soon after (saving lunch money and other forms of preteen income) I managed to get the blue box basic set.

Ah, those were heady days, when elf, dwarf and halfling were classes and not just races. I especially remember that the box came with a set of the *coolest* dice you'd ever seen. They had more than six sides! You got a white crayon to color in the numbers too. I still have one of the d12s from those days, although it is more of a d1 at this point.

I started playing with my brothers and a couple of friends, but my brothers quickly tired of it and went back to outdoor sports. My friends and I kept at it, and an 8-10 hour marathon game on Saturdays was common. Encumbrance was a bizarre concept, and we would walk round with 50 spears, 10,000 gold pieces, tons equipment, and think nothing of it. The innocence (and I guess ignorance) of the early days was the best.

One of my personal favorite memories was during the early stages of playing *Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth*, my all-time favorite module. I was DMing a group of four, and they were traveling through some of the twisting tunnels on the first level. They didn't realize that they had looped back on themselves, since nobody was bothering to map. I told them they came upon the boot prints of four humanoids heading in the same direction as them. Intrigued, they decided to follow.

When they came to a fork in the tunnel, they followed the boot prints to the right. Eventually, they came to a tunnel merger where the original four appeared

to have been joined by four more humanoids. They heard nothing ahead, but drew weapons and kept following. This kept going literally five or six more times, and nobody ever noticed that the prints always followed the right-hand path and always were joined by four more sets of prints at the same time interval. One of the guys finally got wise and mapped out their path and realized they had been following themselves for four hours game-time. You have no idea how hard it was to keep a straight face through all of that!

Marc Lipshitz

Aka: GhostKnight

Back in the dawn of time (around 1985), my group was setting up to play a *Call of Cthullu* game. Our setup included supporting props of skulls (plastic) covered and holding candles, black sheets over the walls and windows, a pentagram drawn on the ground around the GM's chair, and red cellophane around the light bulbs to give off the correct illumination. Oh, and of course the gothic chants playing in the background to set the mood. Unbeknownst to us one of the player's mothers had recently seen one of the "*D&D* is satanic and leads to occultism" articles that were hitting the press at the time and decided to see what we actually did. The look on her face when she entered the room was priceless! Of course, it took the player around three months to return to the game; he had a hard time convincing his mother that what she saw was just props and not the prelude to some satanic ritual!

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by Sean Holland

Through the Lens of History: Using History for Better Gaming

Vision 12: "Bear Baiting, Cockfighting and Rattling, Oh My!"

Animal Blood Sports

"Cock-fighting and bear-baiting, may raise the spirit of a company, just as drinking does, but they will never improve the conversation of those who take part in them."

-Dr. Johnson

Entertainment has consisted of different things in different ages. For all of the modern complaints about violent movies and video games, entertainments were often much nastier and bloodier in earlier eras. Blood sports that pitted animals against each other, often to the death, have been around for almost as long as we have recorded history and continue to this day.

Part I - The History

Animals have been used as entertainment in various way throughout the ages, including pitting them in combat against each other. People from all social classes would gather to watch and gamble at these events.

One of the most enduring of these sports is cockfighting, which dates back to ancient India and China. It is believed that cockfighting was introduced to Ancient Greece around the time of Themistocles (c. 523-460 BCE). Themistocles, it is said, while moving with his army against the Persians, observed two roosters fighting desperately, and, stopping his troops, calling their attention to the valor and obstinacy

of the feathered warriors to inspire them. From Greece cockfighting spread to Rome and from Rome throughout the Western and Mediterranean world.

Cockfighting uses the natural belligerence of the rooster when confronted by a rival to induce it to engage in combat. Most roosters used in cockfighting are bred and raised specifically to this end. In some regional variations, the roosters are fitted with metal spurs originally called "tela" but now known as "gaffs", which make the fights quicker and bloodier. In other styles the bird's feet are wrapped to blunt the claws and lengthen the bouts. Fighting done without gaffs or taping is sometimes called "naked heel."

In the Elizabethan and Restoration periods in England, the pits used for cockfighting were circular in shape, with a matted stage about 6 meters (20 ft) in diameter, and surrounded by a barrier to keep the birds from falling off. Upon this barrier the first row of the audience leaned to get the best view. In England, it was a popular sport on Shove Tuesday.

Cockfighting in England declined in popularity after it was declared illegal. Gamblers moved to the race track instead. Today, cockfighting remains popular in Vietnam where it is one of the traditional entertainments during the Tet (Lunar New Year) festival.

Rattling was another popular sport in England. It involved setting a small dog, usually a terrier, loose in a pit with a pack of rats and betting on how many rats the dog could kill in a certain time. Most of the modern terrier breeds were bred for or from dogs to be used in this sport or for rat hunting

About the Author

Sean Holland is a gamer with 26 years of experience. He currently DMs one D&D campaign and plays in two others. He has a BA in History (minor in Philosophy) from the University of Portland, Oregon, and is working on a MA in History at the University of Georgia. He does writing and play-testing for the game industry. If you look at any of AEG's recent One Word series of books for the d20 system you will find his name in there somewhere and he has had other writings published over the years as well.

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Supplemental d20 Material:

New Templates

BATTLE BRED

Battle Bred animals are raised and trained to fight; well fed and well trained they are much more dangerous than normal animals of their type.

CREATING A BATTLE BRED

"Battle Bred" is an acquired template that can be added to any animal or magical beast.

Size and Type: The creature's type remains unchanged. It uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

Armor Class: The battle bred has a minimum of a +1 natural armor bonus.

Special Qualities: *Hardened (Ex):* A battle bred gains a +4 save against fear.

Abilities: A battle bred's Strength and Constitution is increased by +2, and its Wisdom is decreased by -2 (minimum 6).

Skills: A battle bred gains a +2 racial bonus on Intimidation checks.

Feats: A battle bred retains all feats of the base creature and gains Dodge and Weapon Focus (primary

in general. Dogs used in the ratting ring usually had their ears cropped (trimmed down) to prevent rats from latching onto them. A 2.2 kg (5 lb) Toy Manchester Terrier named "Tiny" was reported to have killed 300 rats in 54 minutes and 50 seconds. Ratting in the pit sense has fallen out of favor and the term is now used for setting a trained pack of terriers loose in an area suffering from an infestation of rats and letting them hunt and kill the rodents.

Bear baiting was common entertainment in which the bear was chained to a stake either by one hind leg, or by the neck, and worried by dogs. Bear baiting took place in arenas built in the form of theaters called "bear-gardens" which were visited by all classes of people. Sunday was the favorite day for this sport. The chained bear was set upon by packs of trained dogs that tried to take down the bear. Spectators would bet on whether it would be the dogs or the bear that would survive the vicious fight that ensued.

Of bear baiting Robert Laneham wrote in 1575:

"It was a sport very pleasant to see, to see the bear, with his pink eyes, tearing after his enemies approach; the nimbleness and wait of the dog to take his advantage and the force and experience of the bear again to avoid his assaults: if he were bitten in one place how he would pinch in another to get free; that if he were taken once, then by what shift with biting, with clawing, with roaring, with tossing and tumbling he would work and wind himself from them; and when he was loose to shake his ears twice or thrice with the blood and the slaver hanging about his physiognomy."

Some of the bears survived long enough to become stars in their own right. "Sackerson" was one such animal that was immortalized in Shakespeare's play *the Merry Wives of Windsor*; others had such names as George Stone or Harry Hunks. The large mastiff was the dog of choice to fight against a bear.

Bull baiting pitted dogs against a larger animal. A bull was placed in the center of the ring and the dogs were sometimes released one at a time against the bull. One eyewitness reports, "One of the bulls tossed a dog full into a lady's lap, as she sat in one of the boxes at a considerable height from the arena." Sometime the bull's nose would be filled with pepper to enrage it before the fight. Bull dogs, unsurprisingly, were the usual opponents for the bull.

Sometime other animals would be baited as well. When such was available, an ape would be strapped to a pony's back and chased by hounds. The frantic antics of the ape and pony as they tried to escape the dogs were considered quite humorous and exciting by the spectators.

Both bear- and bull-baiting were prohibited in Britain by Act of Parliament in 1835. This almost led to the end of the bulldog, but they were saved by breeders who loved the breed. The modern bulldog is shorter of leg and smaller than the type used to face bulls.

Dog-fights are another blood sport. A dog-fight pits two dogs against each other, often in extremely close quarters. Dog-fights have existed for centuries but their popularity increased dramatically after the banning of bear- and bull-baiting. The term 'pit bull' comes from the breeds of dog developed to fight other dogs. The dogs are very tenacious and fights usually last an hour or more before one of the dogs gives up or is killed.

Dog fighting was made illegal in England and the United States by the early 20th century but, sadly, it continues to exist in the modern world despite efforts to eliminate it. In the modern American dog fighting circuit pit bulls are one of the favored breeds and dogs raised for dog fighting are said to be "game bred." Dog fighting continues to this day and in an even more vicious form. The sort of 'training' used to create modern fighting dogs, which usually includes both beating and starvation, leads to the creation of brutalized animals who are often extremely vicious both in and out of the fight. However, dog fighting

natural attack) as bonus feats.

Environment: Any, usually raised in an urban or rural area.

Organization: Any.

Challenge Rating: +0, +1 if the base creature has 5 or more HD

Treasure: None.

Alignment: As base creature.

Advancement: As base creature.

Level Adjustment: —

GAME BRED

Game Bred animals are brutalized and mistreated to make them vicious and dangerous.

CREATING A GAME BRED

"Game Bred" is an acquired template that can be added to any animal.

Size and Type: The creature's type remains unchanged. It uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

Special Qualities: *Brutalized (Ex):* A battle bred gains a +3 save against fear or effects that cause pain.

Mean (Ex): Any attempt to make the game bred animal friendly or non-hostile suffers a -2 penalty or the game bred receives a +2 racial bonus to resist, as appropriate.

Abilities: A game bred's Wisdom and Charisma are decreased by -2 (minimum 5).

Skills: A game bred animal gains a +2 racial bonus on Intimidation checks.

Feats: A game bred retains all feats of the base creature and gains Toughness and Die Hard as bonus feats.

remains extremely popular as it is easy to conceal and hard to prosecute.

Part II- Breaking it apart and putting it back together

As horrible as such things may appear to us, the use of animal combats for bloody popular entertainment has a long and successful history. The use of such in a game may add both color and serve as a reminder that the world the characters are in is very different from the modern day world.

As all of the animal blood sports are magnets for gambling and socializing, they can easily be used in adventures. It may be that the characters meet their new patron at a bear-baiting ring or a ratting parlor. Characters could be hired to spy on rivals and their animals, paid to kidnap valuable animals, or to rig fights by use of magic or other dirty tricks. Or the characters might want to get involved themselves and manage their own team of fighting animals, which would make them targets for established groups of animal trainers.

A druid or ranger might be following the trail of hunters who had been capturing wild bears to bring into the city for use in bear baiting. Some characters might seek to free the animals used in these sports. Of course, that could cause more problems as fight-trained animals roamed the streets causing trouble (and might bring the authorities after the people who freed the animals). Or, on the other side of the coin, adventurers might be hired to capture new and exotic creatures for the fights, perhaps someone wants to start an owlbear-baiting ring.

Environment: Any, usually raised in an urban or rural area.

Organization: Any.

Challenge Rating: +0

Treasure: None.

Alignment: As base creature.

Advancement: As base creature.

Level Adjustment: —.

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by Nash J. Devita

Indie Spotlight: The Forge

This month, kicks off a new column that I will be writing every other month, "Indie Spotlight." This column does just what it sounds like it should – present an independent (or indie) RPG publisher or collection of independent RPG publishers and briefly discuss their game(s), theories on gaming and game design, and give an overview of the individuals within the publishing company (or collection thereof).

I cannot think of any better way to start this article series off than with <http://www.indie-rpgs.com>, The Forge. The Forge is a collective of indie RPG publishers who have joined forces to help promote their own and each other's products such as *Sorcerer*, *Universalis*, and *The Burning Wheel*—just to name a few. There are a ton of great titles from these kind folks – yes, they are kind, even despite game names such as *Kill Puppies for Satan!*

So, what is The Forge all about? In their own words, The Forge is there for:

"1. Information: Is it actually possible to publish your own game? Yes, but you'll benefit greatly from the experience of those who've done it, ranging from necessary abstractions like figuring out just what 'success' means for you, to equally-necessary practicalities like how to choose the best bids from printers.

2. Resources: Need some layout? Looking for art? Or just figuring out how to organize your presentation? Mutual effort is a big deal at the Forge – you'll find people who are willing to help at minimal cost or

even just for fun. You'll also find features like artists, website links, and essays on desktop publishing.

3. Feedback: How about that game itself, anyway? Play-testing, comments, mathematics, goals, and far more are available through the community at the Forge. Most of us are very committed to 'fully-baked' games, which is to say, games which really provide the vision and experience that you, the designer, wanted to convey. It's not enough just to look nice – the game has to work. The Forge offers a unique opportunity to bake games more fully than any other venue.

4. Discussion: This is what gets all the attention, because the Forge includes bangarama-thon forum discussions which yield some amazing things. We've got some serious rules for how to act toward one another there, which are distinctly not internet-like, so it takes so getting used to. Besides, some of the discussions are very practical and concrete and some are pretty damn out there, so most people figure out 'where' they like to participate.

5. Theory: At the Forge, 'theory' doesn't mean artsy-fartsy rambling, but rather, *making the best possible sense*. Which also means it's a never-ending task, as older ideas evolve, new ideas appear, and new members join the mix of constant analysis and comparison. Does it work? Who knows? But hey, we try. A lot of the discussions prompt members to write essays, which get archived at the site.

About the Author

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6. Hosting and sales: Need a website? The Forge isn't a major hosting-enterprise, but some space is available at reasonable prices if you want to start out without annoying pop-ups and so forth. More importantly, the site also features the Forge Bookshelf, which offers a small but practical venue for selling downloadable stuff."

Thankfully, an independent publisher does not even need to have started with the Forge to become a member. Keith Taylor of 93 Games Studio joined just before Gen Con Indy 2004 and was there with the Forge crew at the booth.

There are a number of reasons that individuals have come to the Forge with their games and do what they do with the Forge. Ron Edwards of Adept Press, the current Forge moderator, is a gentleman who holds sole rights to his three games. He started very small and quickly realized, thanks to his first Gen Con, that people are most interested in a strong community of play. This is the primary reason that there are so many demos for the various games going all convention long. Ron realized quickly that the CCG people had the right idea – give the players enough to get hooked and wanting more; don't bore them with all of the complexities. This can be done in a 10 to 30 minute demo instead of a multi-hour 'standard' RPG demo. Being as that there is so much to do a Gen Con (or any other con for that matter), learning about a product in a short amount of time and having a lot of fun is key. There was a huge crowd at each of the five Forge demo tables during Gen Con 2004. I hate this saying, but it does hold true here – the proof is in the pudding.

He then got the idea to join with other publishers due to the costs. At cons and elsewhere they work to promote each other's products, to help teach players, in that 10 to 30 minute span, (most of) their game. The Forge has seen this work for three years now at Gen Con – 2002 through 2004.

They are not there only for the sales, however. As Ron told me, in a booth by himself, he probably could have walked away with more sales than he did at the Forge booth. That is not the primary goal, though. The primary goal is to foster mutualism within the Forge. Each member publishes his / her own game but at the same time learns the other member's games well enough to sell them to fans that would most appreciate them. Word of the products has significantly spread thanks to this goal. This can be seen in a serious sales spike after cons.

Of course, the various members are not learning the other games just for sales. They are all having a good time together, as well. That pleasant attitude was clearly visible from day one at the con to the time that I spoke with them, the beginning of day four. When they can, they sit in on demos.

Beyond the cons, the primary goal at the Forge is self-ownership and creator control of their games. Each member is the developer, writer and owner of his or her own games. Ron told me that he had been approached at one time by the folks at Wizards of the Coast back in 2001. They had an offer to take his game under their name but he felt that he would have been losing too much control of this product. In addition, it would be working against his own beliefs so he had to politely decline their fairly generous offer. Ron might have a lot more money today had he taken that offer, but would he be as happy with himself and his product. From what I got in my time with him, the answer is clearly 'no.' Thankfully, he is happy with where he is today thanks to this decision.

Beyond Ron, I spoke with some of the other members of the Forge crew. I had a little more time with Keith Taylor as well as some time with Keith Senkowski and Matt Wilson. Keith Senkowski stumbled across

Forge Booth Participants

Adept Press

<http://www.adept-press.com>

Games: *Sorcerer, Trollbabe, Elfs*

Ramshead Publishing

<http://universalis.actionroll.com>

Games: *Robots and Rapiers, Universalis*

No Press

<http://www.nopress.net>

Games: *No Press Anthology*

Half Meme Press

<http://www.halfmeme.com>

Games: *My Life with Master, Nicotine Girls*

Chimera Creative

<http://www.chimera.info>

Games: *Dust Devils, Nine Worlds*

Lumpley Games

<http://www.septemberquestion.org/lumpley/lumpley.html/>

Games: *Kill Puppies for Satan, Dogs in the Vineyard*

Dog-Eared Designs

<http://www.dog-eared-designs.com>

Games: *Primetime Adventures*

the Forge while working with his product and in an epiphany, as he put it, had to join. Keith Taylor was 'recruited' by an active member of the forums at the Forge. As stated above, he had been publishing on his own previously and felt that he and 93 Games Studio belonged with this cabal. Matt Wilson's work was actually inspired by a few other titles from publishers at the Forge so he felt that it was the perfect place for him and his work. Gen Con 2004 was his first con as a salesman and he was very ecstatic (rightfully) to make his first sale while there!

Vincent Baker of Lumpley Games and George Thompson of Driftwood Publishing were both treated swimmingly at Gen Con 2004. George Thompson

BTRC

<http://www.btrc.net>

Games: *EABA*

Twisted Confessions

<http://www.twistedconfessions.com>

Games: *Fastlane*

Custom Built Games

Games: *SNAP*

Incarnadine Press

<http://incarnadine.indie-rpgs.com>

Games: *With Great Power..., War Stories*

Behemoth 3

<http://www.behemoth3.com>

Games: *Masters & Minions*

Bob Goat Press

<http://www.bobgoat.com>

Games: *Conspiracy of Shadows*

Digital Alchemy

<http://www.digital-alchemy.net>

Games: *Cartoforge, Adventure Writer*

93 Games Studio

<http://www.93gamesstudio.com>

Games: *The Swing*

actually acquired Driftwood just a few weeks before the con since the original proprietor had to leave his own company to pursue his life's dream. George, before acquiring Driftwood, carried a great number of Forge titles in his store. Vincent originally became involved via discussion of RPGs and RPG theories. He was amazed at the 'quality of discourse' there. He was approached by the folks at the Forge to sell the game that he had been distributing for free via the internet, *Kill Puppies for Satan*. The knowledge and wisdom of the Forge has helped him sell out of his on hand stock two years running.

Even as I look at what I have written, I can see that these few examples don't really cover the attitude

Fond Memories of Gaming from the Silven Community cont.

that exudes from the whole crew at the Forge. It is almost a familial relationship, not a business one. They are not there only to sell their own books. Of course, that is a major goal, but that is not the only reason. They are there to have fun and to help the rest of the crew have fun. Ron sacrificed some of his sales to help those of the other publishers at the Forge. He, like the rest of the Forge, is not only looking out for number one but the entire team.

It felt good watching them in action as a team, too. Just before the opening of Gen Con Indie 2004, the final day, Ron invited me to listen in on the 'pre-con prep.' They decided on a game plan with everyone's input, even if it did not involve their own product. We were all good to go and very happy to see the day get going (despite a hangover or two). I did not sense an ounce of competition among this crew. They were all there to help one another and have a good time doing it.

At the Forge booth at Gen Con Indy 2004 were:

You can get to the Forge directly by going to <http://www.indie-rpgs.com>.

Jason Libby

Aka: Darkforce Prime

My favorite was the all-weekend-long *Marvel Super Heroes* games where we started Friday at 5pm and ended Sunday 9am. We had no sleep and spent the time eating Dilly Green Beans and drinking ice tea. I remember it was Ogre (a friend of mine who stunk), my step-brother, and myself. Sometimes, Jason, the co-owner of Dilly Green Bean Games, would also be part of these games. We would get so tired the D10s would sprout legs by the end of the weekend and walk off the table. We managed to destroy earth a couple times, but it's the Marvel Universe so the Beyonder just kept fixing it. Crazy stuff. We got so powerfully mad we were creating worlds, cosmic super Gods, and robot armies. It all came to an end when I used my Solar-energy absorption guy (Class 1000) and destroyed the Dino world (granted my flight wasn't high enough to remove me from the star I landed in). I also dropped my typical statted characters with Class 5000 energy absorption on my friend's robot world. I killed it, no power.

Steven Skains

Firestorm

Once while we were in a small cave, my monk got sprayed with the blood of a dire badger. Just a bit later, my character picked up an enchanted drow longsword. My character started to take damage every morning, and I was like, *It has to be the badger blood! Must...get...water!* But I couldn't find any amount of water that would wash the blood off, so I went throughout the module thinking that this damage was coming from the badger blood. The drow longsword never passed my mind as the culprit (damn curses!)

The Evil Overlord

One of the humorous times that sticks with me was when we played a 2nd Edition game. Since it was kind of spur of the moment, I rolled on the random encounter chart and got animals—skunks.

My initial thought was "that is lame." Then I thought, "Well, I have never used skunks before. Maybe one of the players will get too close and get sprayed." The characters were walking down the road, and I had them make a perception roll. One of them rolled well, and I handed him a note that said that there was a slight movement in one of the bushes very close to the right. I thought they might be wary and maybe someone would check it out. Instead he said, "Ambush! Form a shield wall! Charge!" So six players charged the skunk and they all got sprayed. When they arrived at the town gate the watch would not let them in because of the stench. I thought it was hilarious.

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by Edward J. Kopp

Interviews: Ian Richards of the RPGA

This year at GenCon I had the opportunity to talk with Ian Richards, the head of the RPGA. He graciously took time out of his busy schedule Wednesday evening to sit down and talk with me.

Why don't you start by giving us an idea what a managing director of the RPGA does?

Well, first of all I'm Program Manager of the RPGA which means I develop, with my staff, programs to continue to provide community and content for the community of role-players. These are primarily *D&D* players and *Star Wars* players that get together as friends. I work for Wizards of the Coast so therefore it's all to do with Wizards of the Coast products.

So, you are an employee?

I am an employee of Wizards of the Coast. I'm part of the Organized Play department at Wizards of the Coast so I organize games, card games, and miniatures. I'm also responsible for the *D&D* brand and obviously *D&D* and the role-playing game itself.

We also develop different programs to try and stimulate and continue to support players playing their hobby. This can be in their own home. We have no problem with that, we do support them directly in their own home. And then if they want to venture forth and have some experiences with other players we're there to support them every step of the way. So this means we provide them adventures anywhere in the world with our delivery system. It's as simple as that. They download the adventures, they play

adventures, they report they play adventures, and they have a reward scheme. They will actually get rewards that will help them continue to play. So, it's a bit like playing campaigns at home. I'll be able to explain more about that shortly.

Then there's also a store-based program which supports players that want to play locally. They go into the local stores, the local club. It's sort of a mini extension of being at home and playing. Now instead of six people, you're playing with maybe 30 or 40 people. And that's great. We have no problem. We'll support you and have a special program for that in place as well.

Then obviously we come to conventions like this. This is where you can sit down and interact with several hundred players. We have 150 tables here at Gen Con right here on the floor. Each can take up to seven people, so three times a day we run roughly 700 people.

And we support you anywhere in between. As a GM we also reward you. You tally up your players playing things and we send you rewards based on that as well. Because it gives us good hard data as we develop *Dungeons & Dragons* and move forward as a company. It gives us hard data about what players want to play. Conversely, we support players that just want to play their games. So, for that hard data we try and reward them for that.

So would you say that with all the effort you put into supporting the game and Game Days, is the membership of the RPGA growing? Has it stayed the same? Is it shrinking? What's going on?

The RPGA in the last three years has exponentially grown about 30 % per year each year. That's primarily because of technology. As more people are getting more proficient and more access to the Internet, we move more to a 'net delivered system. Therefore, we're able to get more actual adventures and support into grass roots play. Grass roots play being in their own home.

This is something the RPGA didn't spend a lot of time doing to begin with. It grew up in the convention environment. It started by supporting convention play. We've sort of moved from that level backwards. Well, obviously most players start at home and they move forwards into convention play eventually. We've moved in the other direction. So, it takes us, I suppose, an evolutionary time to get to this point. Those people playing at home are just as important as anyone who comes to a convention like Gen Con.

So I think most of our growth has come from that and supporting the retailers. We're now taking the games to them, the place they play when they're able to play. And it's very easy for them. The point of being able to interact with us has become so much simpler, so much easier for them. That way it becomes more for them. And we have a lot of growth in places like Brazil, Colombia and Greece. I remember going to

Gen Con UK last year, and there was a whole bunch in from Greece out of Athens. They speak Greek all the time they were talking at the table to each other outside of the game. When they actually played the game they all spoke was English because they don't have a local translation of the game, they learned to play *Dungeons & Dragons* in English. So they play in English, it's wonderful to see. As soon as they step up from the table, they instantly go back into Greek. So, ya know, it's a wonderful sort of feeling from that.

Maybe the biggest satisfaction I can get is people have this event and people say hey that was such a great time. We had such a wonderful time. We want to come back next year. And so for us we win if people have a good time.

Excellent. So do you have what's coming out in the future? What is the RPGA looking forward to in the next year?

Lets see. Well, I need to say something about the campaigns. We have different styles of games. We're trying to revitalize our tournament-based programs. We have an open tournament based game here. Team focused. We all know that role-playing can be very subjective. So scoring individuals, how well they role-played in comparison to the other players is a very subjective thing for the individual. So [our tournament] is very much objective driven. So that takes away the subjectivity of an event like that. So we have that for those that want to play a little competitively. And we're going to grow that over the next twelve months to eighteen months.

Another thing the RPGA grew up doing was providing tournament based scenarios. The game is going back to its roots. That's what the RPGA specializes in. We still have the campaign play at multiple levels as well. Which is just like a home campaign. It's multiple campaigns and your playing with thousands of players across the world. So, like *Living Grayhawk*, set in the *Greyhawk* setting every month they have twenty thousand plus people interact. Then you go

to *Living Force*, the *Living* bit denotes an on going campaign, *Living Force* being *Star Wars*. Again you've got multiple thousands of people interacting so it's growing in all those levels. That gives you a campaign of people getting together, just like a home campaign.

What we did is last year was introduce a new style of campaign which is halfway between the two. It's a finite-ending campaign. We take a two-year campaign—we're going to take first level and there will be changes in level. It's a bit like a throwback to the early *D&D* modules like G1, G2 and G3, D1, D2 and D3. It's an epic-level campaign happening. Which progresses you through, rapidly through, these scenarios to a certain level. It has a finite cut off point. This is fantastic for supporting play at the retail stores where people do meet up. You have to recognize that clubs do meet up in retail stores that have provisions. And that's taking the campaign to a different level. That's a short-term campaign in which people can slot in slot out of and allow for people to join at any level. Where as obviously if you became 10th level and your friend decided to join and has to start at 1st then you can't play together. With this new style of campaign they can start at a much higher level, which is equivalent to you, and they can play with you. That's going to advance this year because next year we're going to launch a new *Eberron* campaign.

And will that be Living?

That will be in the new campaign cycling style.

So you will start at 1st level and after a certain amount of time there will be a bump up to 7th or whatever?

Yeah. At this convention we're going to bump to 7th level if you're not there already. There will be a short section of story missing that assumes you've done X, Y and Z in that time and you've achieved that minimum level. If you were to play all the scenarios up to that point you'd be at least two levels above

that. So that gives you an idea of when you play and the investment puts you slightly ahead but not so far you and your friends still can't play. The only one we have going on at present is set in the *Forgotten Realms* which is the *Legacy of the Green Regent* campaign and after that will be *Eberron*. *Legacy* doesn't end till next Gen Con so there's another year to go. And the *Eberron* campaign will start in January or February, depending on when *Winter Fantasy* will actually be. We have a sneak peek happening at Gen Con Southern California. And the first scenario will be played there as well.

Now there's also member run campaign. How do those work?

What we term member enabled campaigns, which means we as staff don't actually have any direct involvement. We have like *Living Arcanis* by Paradigm Concepts. Paradigm Concepts has an agreement with us to support it and we actually provide the space. It's an association, just like the RPGA says the Role Playing Games Association; it's an association with those companies.

We try not to diversify to many places. It's not good for them and it's not good for us. In other words we will only have so many of a particular game system. So we have a lot based in fantasy, we have some based in science fiction like *Star Wars*. And then we have the modern campaigns like *d20 Modern* and we also have *Living Spycraft* as well. So we try to offer a mix, but we try not to offer too many otherwise what we do is subdivide the player base down and everyone has low numbers. And that way we try and keep everyone playing in a healthy campaign, and it becomes viable for those companies to continue being supportive.

All right. You answered a lot of my questions and you've given us a lot of food for thought. I really appreciate it. May I ask a few more questions? What are your GenCon numbers like from last year to this year?

This is the biggest presence we've ever had at GenCon. That's the reason we had to move everything into one hall. Normally we've had break out rooms with just a few tables in each one. We just don't have the space now. Last year we were in break out rooms and one small hall. This year we're in this large hall because we want to increase our table space. We went from 136 tables a slot to 150 tables a slot to give you an idea. Of course we had in some slots last year, a slot being a four hour game period or a five hour time period, because we added some last-last year. We had to get tables from other areas because we just had too many people wanting to play at the time so we burst out of there. And that's the reason we asked for more space. Convention play continues to go up which is great news for us and great news for the convention. Obviously the numbers of people coming doesn't directly affect us. Obviously it affects Gen Con, which is a completely separate company. So it's great support for the convention.

What kind of expectations do you have for Eberron?

Right now there's a lot of people interested in *Eberron*. *Eberron's* a great seller. We have a lot of people lining up to write for us as well. Even though we've got the best story going we have a lot of people who want to write other things for us. It seems like it's going to be a highly popular setting. I'm sure it doesn't appeal to everybody but that's just the way it's going to be because it's not just a setting it's about the style of the campaign.

Are Dragon and Dungeon still going to promote the RPGA with Polyhedron going away?

Polyhedron's gone.

Are you looking for a replacement?

There's a two-pronged answer to that. *Polyhedron* is gone, this is true. We're debating in-house about what we will do with *Polyhedron*. We want to keep it going but it's a case of how we do it. Will just be online? Will there be a print copy? It's something Paizo gave back to us and said we can no longer support this. We have to think about it first. We want to do it but obviously it comes up at a time halfway through the year where we suddenly have a problem with budgets and such. So we're re evaluating where we want to be next year and what we want to do. So that answers where *Polyhedron* is at.

As far as *Dragon* and *Dungeon*, I have a monthly column in *Dragon* magazine; a 750 word column which is one way. The second thing is that with *Dungeon* we now sanction each of their scenarios. So every time *Dungeon* magazine comes out if it has an RPGA code next to it you can report playing it at home. For multiple campaigns. obviously they write generic, a lot of generic material. If it's *Living Greyhawk*, if they publish *Living Greyhawk* material, then it's subject to *Living Greyhawk*. If it's generic then it's just generic. But the point is we don't penalize them for that. All *Dungeon* scenarios have a given amount of points.

So you just tell us you're playing. You tell us you're playing *D&D*, when you're playing *D&D*, who you play *D&D* with, and we'll credit your account with so many points. When you get so many points you get free stuff. And free stuff is never bad. You're playing great games, your having fun anyway, and what the heck; you get free stuff as well. It's free to join and it's free stuff. Now some people don't want free stuff, I don't get it myself but there you are.

And the adventures are free as well?

They used to charge for it--\$10 a time. Now we don't charge at all. You have to be a member of the RPGA. You then get a special PIN number for yourself. You then have to pass a very simple online test that shows you know the game system that you want to play, and then it gives you access to the database so you can run your own events. We don't distinguish between one table, you and your game group at home, to a hundred tables at a show. As far as we're concerned it's the same. You say it's a home game and you can only have three scenarios. Let's face facts; we don't want people playing more than fifteen hours in one day. And I'm sure it can get abusive after that point and will get labeled for it. But if it's a home game tell us you want to play the next day and have another three scenarios. Don't try to download more than three scenarios in one day. And for much larger events if you tell us it's a convention we allow more to be downloaded. So we'll support you in any way possible. It's all free.

We thank Ian Richards for taking the time to talk with us. For more information on the RPGA you can visit: <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=rpga>

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by Christian R. Bonawandt

Shotgun

"They call him Shotgun Scotty. He was contracted to take out one of my other crews. He did his job almost perfectly. I need you to go after him, because you always do your job perfectly. Besides, this is personal. I know I can trust you to do this right."

She accented her words with a sultry look--her head tipped to one side, her dark eyes flashing with hidden meaning. She didn't need to do any of that; her voice was erotic as it was. Resonant, yet feminine.

"What's the stats on him?" Stendhal said.

Jodi picked up a cigarette and lit it. Normally Stendhal hated cigarettes, but he tolerated hers for two reasons. The first was that they weren't straight-up tobacco, rather some kind of derivative that smelled like ashen cherries. The second was that she paid him good money--among other things--and she paid him often.

"He's five-foot-eight, well built on top, quick reflexes but not particularly agile. How much do you know about the Garullian race?"

That was nothing. Stendhal had six inches on the guy, was evenly distributed as far as muscle went, and just agile enough. He wasn't sure of his own racial heritage, but knew enough to say that a Garullian wasn't much in comparison.

Stendhal took note of glance by Smyther Reens, his tech-and-chem guy and all-around right-hand man. Smyther's race--whatever it was, he never said--couldn't make facial expressions, which sometimes

made it hard to read such glances. In this case, though, Stendhal knew.

"The famous Wimbletons from Lavender are Garullians, right?" Stendhal asked. "Is he another of their prodigal offspring?"

Jodi blew a few long puffs like post coital sighs. He hated when she did this shit in front of Smyther. "Shadrick Scottsford Wimbleton, the youngest and shortest of the kids, but also the most insane."

"Dude, anyone who names their kids like Senator and Professor Wimbleton did is insane in my book," Smyther laughed. Not that he was one to talk, but then again, for all Stendhal knew, Smyther Reens could have been a moniker.

"Those aren't the stats I'm talking about, anyway," Stendhal said. "I mean what kind of damage did he do, how many people did he take out versus how many people he brought with him, where the hell the name Shotgun Scotty comes from and just why exactly this is personal?"

She sat upright in her chair, put her feet on the floor and quenched the cigarette. Her face became solid, seeing as how he was resisting her temptations. "It was just him, and he took out Carmichael and two of his top boys."

An electric shock ran threw Stendhal from his back to his chest. There he swallowed it down. "Chris Carmichael? I thought you said that human and his team were sometimes more trouble than they're worth. That's personal?"



"Carmichael is incidental. Don't worry about why it's personal." If she didn't want him to know she wouldn't have told him. This was a game, one Stendhal wasn't interested in playing right now. "They call him Shotgun Scotty because not only is he impulsive but also he has an affinity for pump-action weapons, sawed-off or otherwise. Typically he's seen with two halves at his hip and two full-sized crossed over his back like swords. I also have his address and phone number if you want."

Now she was getting snippy. Stendhal said, "I'll take his address and whatever else you have on him in your file along with the contract."

After the meeting, while Smyther picked up some necessary equipment, Stendhal sat alone, trying to put some thought into this strange situation. Half a million credits was a lot of money to pay for one guy, but if he could take out three experienced mercs on his own than he was something to contend with. With the half payment up front, Smyther bought a TK-1010 Force Field. Stendhal didn't trust armor that only kicked in when he was being shot at, so he picked up some quality form-fitting plate armor that he could wear under clothes. The plan was to go up to Scotty's place somewhat in disguise and ambush him.

Security at the apartment building was lax, but present. Smyther, with his tear-shaped blue head and gangly form wasn't exactly inconspicuous, but his personality blended well with a handful of gagging Elffan, Neoman and Human teenagers. He slipped in behind them and split from them on the third floor. Scotty was on the fourth.

Since Jodi was in good with (read: frequently had sex with) the owner of the Pizza Gallery eatery chain, getting hold of a uniform and box wasn't hard. Stendhal duct-taped two TSU-3200 Special Uzis with 100-shot banana clips to the inside of the pizza box and told the guard through the call box that he was going to room 425--Shadrick Wimbleton's room--so he would be buzzed in.

He and Smyther met in the stairwell. Smyther slipped on the force field straps hidden in the high-school-style backpack with two silenced 9mms loaded with plasma bullets.

Stendhal knocked on the door. Through his cybernetically-enhanced hearing he detected someone shuffling off a heavy, unbalanced item. He imagined a small but stout Garullian rolling off a futon still in his underwear. Perhaps he had a shotgun at his bedside.

Footsteps treaded awkwardly toward the door, then stopped. "I didn't order a fucking pizza," he muttered in a groggy voice after presumably looking through the peephole. Smyther was tucked against the wall by the door, out of the peephole's peripheral range.

A pro would have kept up appearances, stuck with the gimmick until the guy at least undid a latch or three. But Stendhal had no idea what name this guy would have ordered a pizza with (he was born with three, and probably had a good handful of nicknames besides the one Stendhal knew). Even if he did know, Stendhal was a multi-racial guy in his forties with a boxer's build--he was no master of illusions.

A quote from Lamb-dada, a merc turned author who Stendhal admired, popped into his head: "A disguise will only get you so far."

Two hard, martial-arts kicks made the wooden door cleave past the deadbolts.

Instead of finding a sleepy, unsuspecting man in his underwear, standing in front of the broken door Stendhal saw a pissed off, fully-armed man in segmented body armor with a spot of cocaine still hanging on his upper lip.

"Fuck me," Stendhal said.

On cue, Smyther jumped in front of Stendhal so he could get out the Uzis. Smyther fired two shots from each gun before Scotty reacted.

Just like Jodi had said, he had two full-sized, single-barrel shotties crossed over his back and two sawed-off doubles at his hip. He also sported a bandoleer of cylindrical ammo reloads. After letting his plate armor absorb the plasma rounds, Scotty pulled his sawed-offs from his hips, showdown-style. He jerked them sharply to trigger the slide action, then fired. Both slugs stopped a half-inch from Smyther's chest, flicked away like crumbs by the force field. The wallet-sized generator crackled with excitement. It would only take a dozen or so shots like that before it wavered.

Stendhal pushed past Smyther. He simultaneously flicked on the laser targeting and the safety of both SMGs. The heavy banana clips and silencers made the guns unbalanced and hard to aim. Nobody buys 100-round clips if they think they're going to be accurate, though.

The bullets spat past Scotty like killer mosquitoes as he dove behind the couch for cover. Before landing out of sight he fired the last two slugs from his sawed-offs. The double bangs echoed in his cybernetic ears with a sound reminiscent of two hollow metal rods being clanked together. The rounds smashed Stendhal's chest dead-on over his heart. Although the plate armor ate the bullets, he still felt like he had been punched twice in the chest by an ape. He suppressed a cough.

With discretion long lost and security likely on its way, Stendhal and Smyther charged inside like cavalry. Scotty shot up from his cover, both single-barrels in hand. Stendhal dropped on his hip and slid beneath the Garullian's legs like a baseball player, bouncing back up when he reached the other side.

Scotty turned sideways and fired blindly at both mercenaries. Again Smyther's force field crackled. The shot at Stendhal went past his ear. His cyber-hearing screeched like a banshee. The sound wracked his brain so viciously that he found himself holding his ear instinctively, uncontrollably.

As he writhed, he felt Scotty brush his shoulder--he was heading toward the window. Smyther's rounds whistled frighteningly close to his shoulder. Although he couldn't hear it too well, he knew Scotty had jumped out the window. Son of bitch probably had bionic limbs or something.

After the whining in his ears stopped, the first sound he heard was two security guards telling him to freeze. One wielded an open-band radio. Smyther had a stun gun in his shorts pocket, but Stendhal filled them with fifteen rounds a piece. His frustration made him eager to kill something. Even though the silencers hadn't helped discretion, he was glad he brought them. For the next two hours he didn't want to hear anything loud.

The next loud thing he heard came four hours later. As they went at it, he kept Jodi's face mouth by his

right ear, the one that hadn't gone berserk. Her resonant voice was more than enhanced through his cyber-ears--it became enchanting. The things she said to him in bed only made it better. For the entire hour and a half of their "session" Stendhal's body was electric, his senses alive with fire. Even the smell of the food from the Seventh Finger Restaurant beneath them became erotic, sensual and gave him pleasure.

It all began to fade the second the climax ended. That's how it always worked. It only took twenty minutes before he felt tense, angry, and thoughts of how he let Scotty get away, and how the hell Smyther was going to find him squashed his brain. The stench of human-style food made him sick. Too many preservatives--how the hell did humans live on preservatives?

As he got dressed, he said, "You didn't tell me Scotty snorted dust, or that he was the kind of freak who slept with guns on his person."

"It didn't seem like something you couldn't handle," she said between sighing and stretching. "Besides, I didn't like how you were behaving at our meeting."

"What'd you want me to do, jerk off in front of Smyther?" he barked, slipping into an undershirt as white as his bleach-colored skin.

"Would it have made him jealous?" she said.

He stomped over to her and grabbed her thick, stiff hair. Normally a mercenary didn't threaten his contractor without invoking the wrath of half a dozen other employees. His and Jodi's relationship, however, was not typical. She didn't treat him like her others guns-for-hire, like her other employees, like her other business associates.

"Listen, you bitch," he seethed, pulling her hair back like an abusive father toward his little girl. "I'm a professional killer. If you want to bring me up here and screw around with me, I consider that part of the payment. That's all."

"You're so cold sometimes," she said. Her voice

wasn't soft. It never was, but now it was softer than when she was around business partners, other mercs.

"Then don't fuck me." Stendhal let go of her hair, finished getting dressed. "You have plenty of other associates you do that with, anyway."

"None like you," she said. "You're a rare breed."

He threw on a dark green turtleneck. The denim slacks and ribbed-wool sweater enhanced his thick build. He caught her admiring his form with child-like eyes. He hated that high school, bad-boys-are-so-hot routine. His empty stomach clenched, worsened by the scent of the kitchen below. Damned woman just had to live above her own restaurant. "I don't even know what breed I am," he remarked.

"Why?" she asked. "That's so unusual nowadays. So many people are so proud of their heritage."

"My parents didn't give a shit about that. Neither did I. What I am just isn't as important as who I am."

"How philosophical," she said, somewhat in awe at his devil-may-care attitude. That pissed him off, too.

"Aren't you half Garullian?" he asked her, hoping he'd knock her off her cloud.

She wiggled the sixth and seventh fingers on her hands. "Half," she confirmed. All fourteen of her fingers were thinner than most races. They came to nail-less points, and the tips were covered with fine hairs that made her hands resemble spiders at a quick glance. Despite their eeriness, they had their advantages. "My mother was Garullian, my father was--"

"I don't care," he said.

Her face darkened. He darted for the door hoping to leave on that note.

"I'll tell you why getting Shotgun is personal," she said.

He paused long enough to say, "I don't care."

"My sister hired him to take out Carmichael and his boys," she added quickly. "I think she got bad information, thought maybe he was my top guy. We always had this rivalry between us, but I never thought it'd come to this. That's why I paid you so much. It means a lot that you show her I mean business."

Stendhal knew if he stopped long enough to make the comment, he'd get sucked back into conversation and wouldn't be able to leave her on that sour note. "That's it? Family shit?" he said anyway.

"I never would have done something like this to show up Mindy. We swore once, when we got into the underground, that we'd never make business personal. I should have known she'd break her word. It was naive of me to think otherwise."

"You're parents would be so proud," he said.

"Must you be a sarcastic asshole?" she said.

"I have work to do." This time he slipped out before she could say another word.

Smyther met him at the studio apartment exactly on time. The place smelled like volatile chemicals and microwave-able burgers, the latter being remnants of the previous renters. The dirty, hundred-year-old carpet crunched beneath Stendhal's feet as he paced the room. Smyther was slumped on the couch with dozens of tiny screws, tools and gears smattered across his kaki shorts like crumbs. He wore a T-shirt that read "Don't be afraid to make a door where you need one" in a crayon-esque font. It was another quote from Lamb-dada. T-shirts like those sold because the general populace believed Lamb's works were fiction. Some knew better.

It was around 8 p.m. If they were to get this hit done, they had to do it tonight. The more time that passed the more time this guy had to equip himself, hire extra boys and make a move on them.

"What'd you get on this guy?" he asked Smyther.

Smyther said, "If I had muscles to make facial expressions, I'd be grinning from ear to ear. Assuming I had those, too. And a mouth."

Stendhal suppressed a groan.

"There's an opium den he hangs at, the Jitterbugging Energy Nut, on the other side of the city," Smyther continued. "He's a regular, has his own table, his own dealer. The Nut is underneath another bar, the Quaking Oat Bar and Grill. I staked it out during your meeting with Jodi. There's an easy back way in. We can use that one and not have to worry about concealing weapons."

That was the thing about Smyther. He always came through with a ton more information than seemed mortally possible as long as you didn't ask him how he came about it.

"Don't expect to take him by surprise," Stendhal said.

"Why's that?"

"Something Jodi said rubbed me the wrong way," he said. Smyther laughed at the word rubbed, but Stendhal let it go. "She said that her sister was behind Scotty taking out Carmichael."

"Mindy LaRemme, the multi-national fashion magnate and model?" Smyther asked.

"Jodi said that Mindy ordered the hit on Carmichael because she heard he was her best guy."

Smyther made a sound like a kid giving raspberries. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"Me too," Stendhal said. "I'm thinking it's a load of crap, that killing Carmichael was a way to bring you and I out of the woodworks so the hit would look like counter-revenge, and not just a good ol', stick-in-your-eye hit."

"It would explain why he was dressed and ready

for us the first time," Smyther said with a shrug. "I always heard that Mindy was the smarter sister."

"More clever maybe, but not smart," Stendhal said. "If she was smart she wouldn't have invoked my wrath." He turned his attention to the gray duffle bag Smyther had brought with him. "What goodies did you bring?"

"I was going to go for fusion blocks, but decided to just juice up some plasma grenades. Since he doesn't wear full-body armor I went for adding poly-lithium to the mixture, which would increase the blast radius from five feet of flames and twelve of force to like eight or nine feet of both, that way we could just melt his head and not worry about his armor. I've got five of those in these opaque Water-Aid bottles since the poly-lithium made the bombs too big for the original canisters. Between that and your TSUs he doesn't stand a chance."

Through his cyber-hearing, now almost back to normal, Stendhal picked up heavy, unsteady footsteps close to their door. He gave Smyther the hand gesture to be alert. Across the room, by the bed, Stendhal's arsenal sat ready in unfolded suitcases and unzipped duffle bags. Stendhal was near the door, the best cover being the half wall between the kitchen and the common area.

A two-foot-diameter explosion blasted the door and its locks, letting it swing free. Stendhal snatched his 9mm and made for the kitchen. Scotty had two new shotguns in his hands. These were totally unlike the ones he had strapped to his back the first time--12-gauge, eight-round, double-barrel, slide-action, barrel-over-barrel, and obviously loaded with explosive rounds. But that wasn't the best part. Welded to the top barrel of both guns were hy-free blades that traveled the entire length of the gun, overshooting it by about four inches to make a perfect bayonet. The butt of the guns had been removed and replaced with two-handed sword hilts, complete with buttons to activate the hyper-frequency. How the hell he could have wielded those with any sort of accuracy or balance threw Stendhal for a loop.

There wasn't enough room in the apartment to set off one of Smyther's super-grenades. Stendhal heard a click, click, boom, then the sound of Smyther's sandals on the carpet--he was going for the guns.

Using the half-wall as cover, Stendhal fired two shots blindly around the corner at Scotty. Scotty fired two simultaneous shots at the wall. Stendhal heard about half a second of the explosion before his cyber-ears popped. Then he felt the wall burst. He felt as though he had been hit in the back with a giant, flaming baseball bat. Shards of the wood-and-plaster wall scratched his back, neck and shoulders like barbed wire.

Stendhal suddenly found himself leaning against the aluminum oven door. Pain overrode all of his senses, and he was clearly deaf at this point. The absolute silence was as painful to his mind as his broken body. He had no idea where, if at all, he was bleeding. For several seconds, he wondered if he was dead, and if not, looked dead to Scotty. Where the hell was Smyther?

A thick hand grabbed his near shoulder-length green hair. The distinct ethereal touch of a hy-free blade bit his neck. Like a snake, Stendhal thrust his pistol arm out. Without sound, he felt the recoil of the 9mm ripple vividly through his arm. Blood sprayed his body like juice from a spooned grapefruit. Although he couldn't hear it, he felt Scotty's body crash into the remains of the kitchen wall.

He rolled to his feet, channeled the pain. To Stendhal's dismay, Scotty had taken the round in the hip, in a spot just barely exposed by the fragmented armor. He sat in the U-shaped break in the half-wall. The Garullian snarled, revealing his race's signature hacksaw teeth.

They stared each other down for half a second. Then Scotty launched to his feet and fired two shots from each gun. Stendhal could still feel the pop of each round. He dropped and rolled on his shoulder, came up standing near the fridge. He was cornered.

Scotty flipped the guns vertical, grabbed them by the sword hilts. Was he serious? He said something. Stendhal didn't wait for him to finish. He planted the red laser-targeting dot on Scotty's head. The kid charged before the shot went off.

Between the vibrating hy-frees and fact that the swords were welded to shotguns, any sort of accuracy was dependent on Scotty's brute strength. He swung them with the deliberation of a martial artist, but from the way his muscles clenched, he was relying almost entirely on his cocaine-fueled arms to steady them. The blades sliced through the fridge like a cucumber as Stendhal darted around the Garullian. Again he placed the laser dot on Scotty's head. He was sadly dependent on such a device, having lost a good deal of his peripheral vision and ability to focus while in the army.

Scotty continued with the momentum of his first swing and spun full-circle to face Stendhal. Stendhal fired, but ducking the swing made him miss. While crouched he planted another shot in the same hole he had before. Scotty dropped to that knee and his face made an expression of rare agony for a coke addict.

Anxious to get away from the hy-frees, which would have sliced him in two even if clad in armor, Stendhal bolted out of the kitchen, toward the bed.

Smyther already had one of the duffle bags lumped over the remaining shoulder. His left leg and arm lay cleanly severed in an abnormally small puddle of semi-fluorescent red blood by the bathroom door. That answered Stendhal's earlier question. Smyther's wounds had stopped bleeding and an inch or so of each limb had begun to grow back. If Smyther said anything, Stendhal had no way of knowing--in place of most races' mouths, Smyther had only three small holes from which sound emanated.

Stendhal thrust the 9mm in his pants again, slumped Smyther with the bag over his shoulder and headed for the window. The little blue guy curled up like a kid in anticipation of Stendhal's move.

Using the duffle bag as a cushion, he threw Smyther out the first-floor window. On his way back to the couch he slammed the suitcase of smaller guns closed. He dove down, knowing Scotty'd be up and about again. Stendhal grabbed one of the Water-Aid bottles and spun the cap off as though going to chug it. Instead he threw the activated grenade at the Garullian and darted for the window. He had three seconds.

The shaking floor gave away Scotty's otherwise silent charge. Stendhal lifted the couch as he stood. A bullet blasted past his left shoulder. Two seconds. He flipped flimsy item at the attacker. The move gave him just enough cover and time to bolt.

Stendhal's fingers brushed the suitcase handle. He stopped, thinking he could grab hold more firmly. One second. He glanced back at Scotty, who had the super-grenade in hand. Stendhal lunged at the window.

A second pop went off in his head. His cyber-hearing kicked back on with a hiss and shriek. After which, he heard the growl and snap of intense plasma. The contrast of the cool night air and tidal wave of quasi-nuclear inferno made his senses flare. His nose met with the combined scent of burning wood, heated metal and the melted rubber soles of his boots.

He landed with his face in concrete and his gut on Smyther. He felt the moist layer of blood on Smyther's T-shirt seep into the fabric of his sweater. That really pissed him off, since this was now officially the only shirt he had.

"Did you get him, Sten?" Smyther asked with a calm in his voice like he had been watching cartoons all day.

"Yeah, but there's someone else," he said.

"Why bother with cybernetic hearing when you could just buy new eyes," Jodi asked, after their rendezvous

at her place above the Seventh Finger two days later. "By now you should have been able to save up enough to buy quality cyber-eyes that don't look like glass."

Stendhal rolled onto his side. He hated these post-coital conversations. "The ear thing is just an implant, no surgery. Even to get the good kind, which I'm going to do soon, I can stay awake during the installation."

"I could refer you to Dr. Ysz. There's no better cyber-surgeon in all of Arbok."

His discomfort growing with her prodding, he sat up and let the blood flow back to his brain before getting dressed. "I don't want anyone putting a knife to my brain. I hate the idea of being unconscious enough as it is. I just don't trust anyone that much."

"How's Smyther healing?" she said like a counter-argument.

"I don't know," Stendhal said. "Every time something like this happens he disappears in the middle of the night and comes back fine days later. I don't ask questions."

"He's a hard person to kill," she said. "What race is he?"

"I don't know," Stendhal said stiffly.

She chortled in triumph. "There's a lot you don't know about him. That's not good in this line of work."

"If I'm ever double-crossed one of these days I'd rather it was by Smyther than anyone else." He stood, picked up the gray slacks he had bought the day before. "I'd have no excuse for not figuring out some Katala, Elffan, Human or Garullian. But Smyther, there's no figuring him. He has a way about him that you can't read. Where most people are windows, he's a brick wall. Besides that, he's more productive and capable than anyone I've ever met. He's exactly half the reason I'm your best merc."

For some time she was silent. As he finished dressing, she said, "I read the papers today."

"So."

"One headline said, 'Le Femme LaRemme Murdered'."

"So."

"You didn't even try to cover it up. The government's policy is to keep all mercenary actions covert."

"I wore a ski mask and made it look like a mugging, even kept her purse. I used some of the money in her wallet to replace the items I lost in the explosion."

"She wasn't part of the contract," she said, sitting up on her knees. "The contract was for Shotgun Scotty."

After lacing his boots and holstering his 9mm, he turned to her. "Mindy was after me. Killing Carmichael was a rouse to get me to come to her hitman."

"That's not why you killed her," she said. She was still undressed. Her arms rested akimbo, holding her breasts aloft, half hiding them, half emphasizing their presence.

He suppressed an annoyed grumble. "Enlighten me."

"You did it for me," she said.

Stendhal couldn't decide between letting his jaw fall agape and throwing his arms into the air. "I shot your sister in the head."

"You did it for me," she said like he might be missing something.

He got down in her face like a lecturing father. "If someone murdered my sister I'd be pretty pissed off at them, so I don't know what the hell your problem

is."

"I love you, Stendhal Macross," she said.

Stendhal threw his arms in the air. "You're insane." Knowing nothing else would work, he stomped toward the door.

"And you love me," she said.

"I'll get over it," he said, slamming the door behind him.

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by *Melissa Piper*

Modern Gaming: Resurrecting a Dead Campaign

Below are two scenes from a role-playing session: one fantasy, and one modern. Which one captures your interest?

Fantasy: You stand before a towering castle constructed solely of granite block and mortar. Your eyes trail up to the heights of the castle, but your view is cut short when your eyes meet the bright sunlight. After rubbing your eyes in an attempt to fight off the remaining afterimages, you look back to the castle. You spot banners, almost as long as the castle is tall, hanging under the windows. A light breeze blows, causing your hair and cloak to move in a gentle wave. The breeze cools your skin after your long journey, and you are just happy to know that you are about to receive a hero's welcome within the stone walls.

Modern: You stand before a towering skyscraper constructed of steel and glass. Your eyes trail up to the heights of the skyscraper, but your view is cut short when your eyes meet the reflection of the sunlight on the glass. After rubbing your eyes in an attempt to fight off the remaining afterimages, you look back to the skyscraper. You spot advertising billboards, consuming half your view, hanging beside the windows. A light breeze blows, causing your hair and tie to move in a gentle wave. The breeze cools your skin after a long day at work, and you are just happy to know that you are about to make your way back to the comfort of your own home.

Both of these scenarios depict a typical element common to fantasy and modern worlds, namely a castle and a skyscraper. Both scenes use practically the same wording, with basic substitutions to fit the setting. Even with these minor substitutions, I am willing to bet that you found the fantasy scenario much more appealing than the modern scenario. In fact, you may not have even finished reading the modern description because it bored you. So, why is it that even with only minor word differences, the modern scenario did not keep your interest? There are two likely explanations, one of which is obvious and another that is subtler.

First of all, when you read the fantasy scenario, you probably visualized a setting far away from where you are currently located. You might have imagined an old English castle, set atop a hill against a mid-afternoon skyline. When the wind began to blow, you may have seen the grass swaying with the wind, or even some hawks gliding overhead. You probably did not see an overabundance of people in the scene, perhaps only some peasants hailing your arrival. Now, go back to the modern scenario. More than likely, you imagined a crowded city during a mid-afternoon weekday. You probably did not see much happen when the wind blew, but you probably felt the people passing around you, heard the horns blowing in the background, and maybe even coughed at the exhaust from a departing bus. In both scenarios, you have filled in the blanks just by using what you know. I did not need to mention the grass around the castle, because it often surrounds the castles that you have seen in pictures. Likewise, I did not even have to mention how busy the skyscraper's environment

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was, because you already know that skyscrapers are typically found in the heart of a busy city. You are filling in the details of the scenario with what you already know or can guess about it, and these details have connotations of their own. Therefore, one reason that the skyscraper scene is not as appealing is because of a negative image based on the details you have added to the description.

The second and less obvious reason that the modern scene was less interesting is because of the words I used to describe it. Sure, I only made a few substitutions so the content fit the setting, but these simple changes detracted from its appeal. The words I substituted (such as "skyscraper" for "castle" and "advertising billboards" for "banners") are still only nouns, but they hold a negative connotation. After all, most of us would much rather see a castle than a skyscraper. Hence, the second reason why the modern scene seems less appealing is because of the connotations attached to modern words.

As a game master (GM), these two factors will affect your campaign and your players in the same way they have just affected you. Your players, too, may see your modern campaign as an uninteresting chore if you simply rely on quick descriptions of the characters' surroundings to support your campaign. Keeping players motivated, however, is not an impossible task. You can fill or replace those blanks, and there are words that you can substitute to leave a compelling

impression in your players' minds. In addition, you have an arsenal of visual aids at your disposal that you can pull out during any session to supplement your descriptions and bring life back to into your campaign. All of these are simple methods that cost little or no money. The ability to create better descriptions already rests within your own mind, and visual aids may already be sitting under your nose. But, just in case you want me to fill in the gaps for you, here are some suggestions for bringing your modern campaign back to life.

Filling in the Blanks

The ability to set the scene and set it well is an essential tool in any GM's toolbox. You need to be able to describe your setting in such a way that you cover important details without losing your players' interest in the process. This means that you must force your players to visualize what you are seeing in your mind without boring them with details that have no relevance to the scene. Many GMs lose their players' interests because they are skipping the details that are important to creating a first impression of the setting. Without creating that first impression, you leave blanks in the description that players will fill with information they know about similar situations that they have experienced, just as you did with the modern scenario above. I like to refer to these blanks as "personality tags," since the missing pieces are what make your setting unique. This means that every scene should have its own "personality" that sets it apart.

Just because you want to add personality tags to your scene in order to make it more appealing does not necessarily mean that it has to convey a 100% positive image. Your goal is to make your campaign interesting, and doing so may require that you create a negative impression of your scene. Let's go back to the opening description of the skyscraper for a moment. When I described the wind beginning to blow, I did not mention anything in the environment that moved along with the wind. I only pointed out how the wind was affecting the character. Unlike the castle scene, not many people imagine grass or

trees swaying in the heart of the city. In this case, as the GM, you must consider what kind of city you want to portray. For example, if you want to create the impression in players' minds that this is a dirty, polluted city, then you might add a sentence or two discussing how litter from the afternoon lunch hour is blowing across the street. Or, to take an opposite approach, you might mention that flowers planted in cement flower boxes near the streets have started to sway as a result of the breeze. This implies that the city has undergone a beautification effort, which leads players to believe that this is a city that cares about the environment. The litter and flowers are both personality tags for this city, and both convey a message about the atmosphere of the city.

Some proper nouns that appear to be personality tags at first glance may just be blanks waiting to happen. For example, a GM may tell her players that they have landed in Paris, and are about to take a trip to the Eiffel Tower. She may intend for her players to think of Paris and the Eiffel Tower as the personality tags. I have never been to Paris, however, so if a GM stated this fact to me, I would simply guess about what the city looks and feels like based on what I have seen in pictures and what impression I have about France. In this case, Paris is not a personality tag to me, because I have never experienced the city for myself. On the other hand, if the GM told me that I am entering Paris, a city where artists paint on the sidewalks and many streets are constructed of brick, then I have a clearer impression in my mind about Paris. The personality tags in this case are the artists and the brick streets, and Paris simply becomes the name of a location.

Of course, you will never be able to fill in the blanks entirely unless you are willing to recite a novel, and that would just bore players further! The key to creating the impression you want in your players' minds is to focus on what makes your setting unique, then describing those elements so that the details are obvious to your players.

Substituting Words

Even when you supply enough details to establish your setting properly, some players may still not be excited with your campaign. Regretfully, this is an effect of the modern genre in which you have chosen to run your game. The majority of gamers are interested in fantasy, and most modern games are not as high in fantasy as many players would like them to be. However, there are some minor word substitutions that you can make in order to appeal those with a craving for medieval fantasy.

Believe it or not, you can add a fantasy flavor to elements in a modern setting by using words that have a fantasy ring to them. For example, consider a subway. Some of the most obvious features of a subway setting are the underground tunnel, the dark atmosphere, and the crowds that make it difficult to reach your train on time. When I consider these aspects, I tend to think of the subway as an "urban dungeon." While a subway may not hold the riches and suspense that a stereotypical dungeon holds, it certainly has similarities. The substitution of the phrase "urban dungeon" for "subway" would work particularly well with an abandoned subway tunnel that the characters are about to explore.

Non-player characters (NPCs) are a great way of providing word substitutions. For example, a disgruntled journalist might write about a CEO that he has come into contact with. If a character picks up the newspaper that the journalist writes for, the character might read that the CEO under discussion is the "king of the corporate castle" on 6th street. In this case, "king" refers to the CEO, and "corporate castle" refers to the large establishment where the CEO works. By referring to the CEO and business in this manner, the players may think of the business as a monarchy or tyranny, where the CEO's word is law and the employees are his subjects. It may also imply that the CEO's place of work is in a rather large building that towers over the other buildings. Although the players know that the CEO works in the city for a large business, the words "king" and "corporate castle" convey an image to the players that

modern words cannot describe fully. Adding flavor to your campaign in this manner keeps fans of medieval RPGs interested.

Admittedly, it does take thought and creativity to find words that can be substituted effectively without going over the top. For example, a GM could state that a biker is riding his "two-legged steed" instead of "motorcycle," but this borders on ridiculous. Word substitution must be specifically tuned to your campaign. Therefore, a phrase like "two-legged steed" may work if the biker is part of a motorcycle gang known as the Knights. As an alternative, you may consider creating new names for manufacturers of modern products. For instance, the biker may not refer to his motorcycle as a "two-legged steed," but he can ride a bike manufactured by Unicorn, Inc. or the Pegasus Corp. The key to word substitution is to find something that works within your campaign, because it is often difficult and not as effective to generalize these types of words.

Adding Visual Aids

Perhaps the best way to make your players stand up and take notice of your setting is to supplement it with visual aids. Sure, you can buy pretty maps and models to give your setting a three-dimensional look, but there are much more affordable supplements you can use to create a more unique effect. The best part of living in the modern world and running a campaign with a modern setting is having access to free supplemental materials.

A great way to increase player interaction and replace words with pictures comes in the form of junk mail. Yes, I said junk mail. Every week, you probably receive advertisements and flyers for sales and restaurants in your mailbox. Before throwing your junk mail in the garbage, consider what use that flyer may have in your campaign. Do you think your players may stop at a restaurant for a place to eat? Then save those food flyers so your players

have something to look at when they make their decision. Save junk mail that you think has potential in any campaign you plan to run down the road, and keep it in a special folder or envelope. Then, when a situation arises where your players need to find a place to eat or spot a flyer by coincidence, you'll have a visual aid immediately at your disposal.

If you have an Internet connection, then the web is also a great visual aid that you can add to your campaign. There may be instances where a character wants to research a certain topic. In this case, you can allow the player to perform some quick research on the Internet. Not only does this give the player the ability to learn about something, but it also adds to the level of interactivity that your players experience. If you are proficient in website development and HTML, you can even go as far as to create your own web page that players can look at during game play. This is extremely useful when players want to learn more about a certain organization you have created. After all, the first place that many people begin their research nowadays is the Internet.

Finally, sound also makes a great addition to most modern campaigns. Although it might not become an essential element during a session, you may want to consider having a radio nearby during game play. Music is a large part of everyone's life, whether you are just a fan of a certain band or you play in your own group. Chances are, your players' characters have their favorite music as well, and they will want to listen to some music from time to time. In addition, turning on the radio at random during a session gives the game an "on the fly" feel, as you never know what will be playing at the time. A good time to incorporate music is when the characters are traveling in a vehicle and just want to listen to some music during their trip. The music that is playing at the time may even create an entertaining conflict between characters, since it is likely that everyone will have their own tastes in music and will not want to be forced to listen to something they cannot tolerate.

environment. Instead of searching for the right words to describe what your characters are looking at, try to find the actual thing (or a close representation of it). Work on your campaign supplement portfolio over time, and chances are that your players will attend session after session just to see what visual aids you will come up with next.

Conclusion

Even though you may face tough challenges as you try to develop a great modern campaign, you also have these three resources available to you that fantasy GMs do not. First of all, consider the scenes that you are planning to use in your campaign. What impression are you trying to create? What image are you hoping that your players will develop in their minds after you describe the area? Use nouns and adjectives that reflect what you see so that players will share your vision. Second, you may want to adjust your words so that they appeal to fans of fantasy. What types of buildings and areas are you placing into your campaign? Are there any structures or areas from the past that are similar? If so, substituting medieval descriptors for modern ones is a great step at making fantasy fans happy. Finally, remember to use visual aids as reinforcement. If you want your players to spot a flyer by chance, then consider having a concrete version of that flyer available. Anything that you find lying around the house could become the next great visual aid in your campaign. If you are running a modern campaign that looks to be on its deathbed, these techniques are sure to breathe some life back into that suffering campaign.

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A picture is worth a thousand words,
and this is just as true in the gaming

by Pike Stephenson

Player Characterization : Phobias

It's a warm summer day, and you're out playing tag with your friends. One of them dares you to chase them as they take to a tall oak tree. He darts up the branches like a squirrel, quickly disappearing into the dense leaves. You halt, lick your lips, and call to him to come down and play fair, but he refuses and calls you a coward. You look up, your eyes trailing the mountainous tree as it stretches higher and higher until it brushes the clouds. A lump builds in your throat, and you realize you can't swallow. Again, your friend calls to you. You can't ignore the dare, so you step up to the tree. With clammy palms you reach for the first branch, a thick one, low to the ground and easy enough to climb up on. Above it rests another, just within reach. Slowly, you move from branch to branch, sticking close to the ancient tree's trunk. After a few more, you stop and absently note where your foot rests, and you see the ground, so far down, miles below. The wind picks up and you begin to sway. The branches shiver, as do your arms and legs, a steady quake that rattles your teeth. You grab the closest, heaviest branch in a desperate hug and begin to whimper. "Please don't let me die," you say through clenched teeth.

"Don't worry son," replies a comforting voice, as a strong pair of hands wraps around your waist and hauls you back down to the ground, a few feet below.

We've all experienced fear in some form, a sensation that raises our awareness, quickens our pulse, and compels us to perform irrational actions that we might not otherwise consider. Fear is a normal emotional response, a built-in survival mechanism that protects us from our own curiosities. Fear is a reaction to a

real, dangerous situation. For example, you are trying to cross a busy street when a fast moving vehicle suddenly changes lanes and races toward you. Fear triggers a physical response, and you run for safety. Once the car has passed, so has the fear.

Anxiety is similar to fear except for one notable difference: there isn't an actual threat present. Anxiety is the anticipation of future danger. Anxiety is natural, for example, when you're waiting to talk to your boss about a raise, or when you are about to meet your current steady's family for the first time. A little anxiety helps us prepare for stressful situations, but sometimes it can grow out of proportion and become too intense. It can hang on your thoughts for long moments or even hours. It can interfere with your ability to perform daily routines and tasks, and it can make life almost unbearable. At this point your anxiety has become a phobia.

A phobia is an intense, unreasonable fear of an object, place, or situation. It causes the individual to avoid the object of fear, often times at great cost to self, property, friends, and family. The phobia occupies the individual's thoughts and becomes an important part of the person's day-to-day routines. Common symptoms associated with phobias include panic, shortness of breath, trembling or shaking, sweating, chills, nausea, and feelings of detachment.

Phobias present myriad role-playing opportunities for both players and game masters. A phobia offers a different dimension to the character, opening the doorway towards challenging gaming sessions and broadening the scope of the character's personality.

Adding a phobia to a character can also have a dramatic effect on the rest of the gaming group. If played tightly yet sparingly, it could encourage them to reach more intense levels of role-playing.

The list of potential phobias is mind-boggling. Some are quite common, such as the fear of spiders or enclosed spaces. The following is selection of uncommon yet playable phobias. The playability issue is important as an unusual or even bizarre phobia, such as agyrophobia (the fear of streets or crossing streets) or mnemophobia (the fear of memories), could detract from a game and become nothing more than comic relief. While lighter moments are not necessarily bad, it is important that that they do not harm long term play.

Keep in mind that that these are suggestions to help add or increase dramatic tension in a role-playing setting and are not intended to make light of serious psychological ailments that afflict millions of people.

Algophobia: Fear of Pain

Nobody enjoys being hurt. Pain is a physical sensation that any normal person would avoid, but with the algophobe avoidance takes on an entirely new meaning. Like first time parents, algophobic individuals baby-proof their living environment, removing all risk of personal injury. No sharp-cornered coffee tables or exposed electrical outlets grace their homes. Bookshelves and similar furniture are securely mounted to the walls, and knickknacks are sparse to non-existent. Moving beyond the confines of home is an adventure not taken lightly. Without control over

the environment, the algophobe is presented with countless hazards that others would simply ignore or would never have considered. The mere thought of hospitalization, doctor visits, or trips to the dentist sends shivers down an algophobe's spine. There isn't any real threat, and yet these individuals "know" something out there can and will cause them pain.

Common behaviors:

- Maintaining vigilant (if not paranoid) surveillance of one's surroundings to minimize physical risks
- Wearing thick or heavy clothing to prevent minor injuries and abrasions
- Avoiding crowds, parties, large social engagements, or anything that may involve unprovoked physical contact
- Abstaining from personal hygiene habits that require the use of a sharp object close to the skin, such as haircuts, shaving, or trimming nails

Examples of algophobia:

- 1) Tammeron is a wizard of high reputation, well known for standing behind his comrades cloaked in magical invisibility and blasting the enemies. What isn't known is that years before, Tammeron was an apprentice scribe to a sage. One evening as he was eagerly transcribing a scroll, a group of bloodthirsty mercenaries raided his employer's home, taking with them many documents and Tammeron. They were trying to locate a particular scroll, and they tortured Tammeron relentlessly with the very tool of his trade, a quill, until the scribe fell into a catatonic state. After a lengthy recovery, he turned his attention towards magic, vowing to never fall victim to another. Yet, he still finds it unbearable to hold a quill and relies on his well-paid apprentice to handle most of his writing duties.

- 2) Michael spent a lifetime hunting for the Jewel of Niberia, trekking through the jungles of the Congo. One particularly hot and humid day, Michael stumbled upon a rare breed of ant that swarmed about him, crawled throughout his clothes, and bit every inch of his flesh. The poisons they excreted coursed through his veins like a wild fire. Michael has never recovered. He left his profession, disbanded the team of treasure hunters he worked with, and moved to a safer region. Michael's new home is locked tight and absolutely bug free. To this day, he can still feel the phantom tingle of their feet marching across his skin.

Atychiphobia: Fear of Failure

Imagine a cue ball slamming into a set of fifteen tightly racked solids and stripes, scattering them in all directions along the pool table. They bounce off each other and rebound against the bumpers, as some disappear into random pockets. Life can appear that way to an atychiphobic person, how one action can set forth a cascading effect of reactions. For those who suffer from this phobia, every decision must be carefully deduced, planned, and controlled so that failure is not an option.

We all wish to succeed at our endeavors, but for atychiphobes the prospect of failure is disastrous. Most people can deal with failure, but those suffering from this phobia crumble, fold upon themselves, and hide away. To prevent this, they analyze every predicament to death. Then, and only then, can they feel confident that success is the only possible outcome.

Common behaviors:

- Worrying about every decision, no matter how big or small
- Avoiding decisions, especially those

involving "no win scenarios"

- Leading a very passive, unspontaneous lifestyle
- Repeating past mistakes until the "correct" outcome is achieved

Examples of atychiphobia:

- 1) William lives with the shame of a choice he made that cost the lives of 123 soldiers and innocents. As a Remote Combative Tactician, he was assigned to monitor the movements of the Omega Squad as they invaded the stronghold of a powerful terrorist cell. Satellite surveillance scans told him that the northern entrance hall was empty, but there was also a large amount of electromagnetic interference that could have garbled any human signatures. He expressed his concerns to the field commander, who "took them under advisement" and proceeded with the mission. William knew it wasn't his fault, but he watched the time-delayed satellite images as the squad was mowed down and the building set ablaze. Now, William replays the details, working through what he could have done to prevent their deaths, what he could have said to make the commander take notice and heed his words. William has requested a transfer to the local think tank where he can spend more time analyzing combat scenarios. He cannot allow such a tragedy to occur again.
- 2) Carla believes she is an utter failure. No matter how hard she worked, no matter how great her effort, she always failed in one respect or another. These failures weren't often disasters; they were little things, like missing the new office fashion trend or buying the wrong coffee for the boss. Life was

one miserable mistake after another, and she vowed never to stick out her neck and make a fool of herself again. One day the unthinkable happened: she developed super powers! Think of all the good she could do! There was no need to be failure anymore! Soon Carla's newfound abilities were put to the test as a bus careened down a busy street towards an unsuspecting crowd. She flew to the rescue and clamped her newly strengthened hands tight on the bus's bumper and with a powerful pull... ripped off the bumper! The bus slammed into the people who were unable to flee. Even with her newfound superpowers she failed. How can Carla ever hope to succeed?

Automatonophobia: Fear of False Representations of Life

What if hordes of flesh-eating undead minions, animal-like anthropomorphic races, sentient androids, scores of robotic guardians and assistants, or artificially intelligent computers that facilitated our various needs actually existed? Nearly every gaming genre has creatures like these, and while imagining these creations isn't difficult, what would it be like to live in a world full of things that looked human enough but operated on their own wavelength? Soulless computers and robots would have no compulsions about harming or killing a person. Mindless zombies might seek and destroy anyone who got in their way. Sophisticated androids might see humanity as a stain compared to their own perfection. These prospects scratch the surface of this phobia. There are individuals who view items as common as a department store mannequin or a ventriloquist's dummy with the fear and revulsion. Wouldn't you find it unnerving if an aluminum-alloyed biped gently slid its cold arm under yours, and with a preprogrammed smile and synthesized voice asked you, "Would you allow me to assist across this busy street?"

Common behaviors:

- Regarding with fear anything non-human that represents itself as "human"
- Distrusting humans that put their faith in these creatures or constructs
- Acting violently toward said creatures

Examples of automatonophobia:

- 1) Jarl lived with his family in the country, outside the smells and commotion of the city-state of Tutopia. Life was good until a band of adventurers raised the ire of an evil priest. The priest called upon an army of undead, pulling their lifeless, rotten forms from the ground. To Jarl's horror, some of the corpses belong to his family. The adventurers took refuge in Jarl's home, and for three long days and nights, the creatures' howls haunted Jarl. On the third day, the undead breached the rear wall of the house, with Jarl's grandfather in the lead. In the ensuing chaos, Jarl found himself face to face with the hollow, lifeless eyes of his grandfather's corpse. As he blacked out all he could see was the decaying face of the man he once loved. He woke the next morning with a headache and sore ribs. The smell of death was thick in the air, and the image of his grandfather haunted him from that moment on.
- 2) In the movie *I, Robot*, Will Smith plays a detective who is disturbed by others' ability to put their lives in the hands of cold, unfeeling machines that operate without a human's conscience. They may have been programmed to follow certain protocols, but that doesn't prevent any system failures, does it?



Autophobia: Fear of Being Alone

We live in a world full of crowded cities, with people scurrying about from home to work to play and back home again. There's always someone present, whether its friends, family or co-workers, and that's just how the autophobic person likes it. Without the constant din of another's conversation, or even just their presence, the autophobe panics. The television or stereo can't help drown out the frantic thoughts of what could happen when they are alone. They could trip and break their leg or smash their head wide open. If a stranger came to the door, who would defend them? When you are alone, anything can happen.

Common behaviors:

- Never letting the party die down
- Always managing to be the center of attention
- Surrounding oneself with a constant flood of friends, associates and employees
- Dating compulsively, gliding from one lover to another

- Firmly attaching oneself to a person or group of people by becoming easily accessible and completely indispensable

Examples of autophobia:

- 1) Sarah has a gift and a curse. She has been able to read the thoughts of others for as long as she could remember. Whenever she is near people, their mental "chatter" bounces along with her thoughts. She has made counseling her career, as she can see the truths that people often avoid speaking. Sarah has also found great comfort in the company of the chatter, so much so that when ever she is alone the empty static in her mind makes her feel as lonely as if she were abandoned at sea. Sarah makes a habit of staying busy, booking longer sessions, and attending multiple conferences (as well as sharing more than a couple of beds), anything to avoid being alone.
- 2) Mican is the sole survivor of a meteor shower that crippled his ship, the *Astronomous*, and killed the entire crew. Thousands of space rocks bounced harmlessly off the ship's hull, but a few tiny fragments damaged the ship's star drive, communications array, and the cryopods that held him and the rest of the crew. It was a miracle that he ejected while others slipped into the abyss of an eternal sleep, but Mican doesn't see it that way. The ship was scheduled to cruise in hyperdrive for six months to save on supplies and time, but now it will take at least six years for the ship to reach Protos 5. If the ship's oxygen recyclers and nutrient dispensers can keep up for the remainder of the trip, Mican may survive. Every night he paces the cold, empty ship, alone in his thoughts. The ghosts of his crew offer no comfort. If he survives, Mican has vowed never to be alone again.

Gerascophobia: Fear of Old Age

Life is a cycle: birth, youth, adulthood, old age, and death. We all know it, and yet try our best to avoid it. We dye our hair, dress up in the latest fashions, and speak the slang of present, but still age catches up with us. Gerascophobia is often seen in middle-aged people that fear the debilitating effects of age, such as Alzheimer's disease, heart attacks, and other ailments. Those suffering from gerascophobia often fear the solitude that comes with time, as friends and loved ones pass on. As they become more reliant on the protection of others, unable to dress or feed themselves, they become increasingly restless and scared.

Common behaviors:

- Never dressing one's own age
- Acting and speaking as the youth of the day
- Following a strict regimen of exercise and diet to keep fit
- Maintain a youthful appearance, perhaps through surgical procedures

Examples of gerascophobia:

- 1) Kadmus spent his entire life striving to become the Archmage of Megalithapotania. With his powerful spellcraft, he fought and survived several wars and multiple invasions, and the country grew to rely on his talents. As the years passed, however, he came to realize that time was his greatest foe. How could he maintain his mastery of the craft as the cruel hand of time wore away the grace and intellect that he held so dear? With each passing season Kadmus could feel the vitality leached from his bones. Though trickery and illusions hid his age, he could not deny that his talents were waning. As his sixtieth winter arrived, Kadmus was no longer able to hide the truth. He went into seclusion and buried himself in his work. He had to find the spell, the right mix of magic to prolong his

life and to keep his title of Archmage.

- 2) Daring and reckless were how the media described Dillon's treasure hunting adventures. Exploring the heart of the Amazon, braving wild animals and savages, and penetrating the great temples of ancient races were like a day at the office for Dillon. How could he risk his life, day after day, hunting fables and myths? No one knew that his quest for the unknown was driven by the memory of his father. The man that once proudly held Dillon on his shoulders as they sailed through calm and storm was hospitalized at the age of thirty five with a rare degenerative disease. Dillon watched in horror as his father melted into a vegetable, kept alive by feeding tubes and respirators. Dillon had visited his father nearly every day, but his adventures kept him away from home longer and longer still. People called him daring and reckless, but no one knew he was hoping to make each of his exploits his last.

Hedonophobia: Fear of Pleasure

How can we enjoy ourselves when others are suffering in misery? It is this guilt and doubt that prevents the hedonophobic individual from enjoying any form of pleasure. Whether due to an accident that hurt someone or just an overwhelming guilty conscience, hedonophobes refuse to enjoy even the simplest of pleasures. They may envision themselves as evil or dirty for participating in such hedonistic acts. Until everyone can live happily, free from the ills of a harsh reality, they will never truly be happy.

Common behaviors:

- Maintaining a dark, somber mood
- Staying detached from others by avoiding any close friendship or companionship
- Putting others needs before one's own, often in a self-sacrificing manner

Examples of hedonophobia:

- 1) A plague swept across the land, turning millions of innocent victims into flesh-eating freaks of nature or, if they were lucky, killing them. Phillip was spared from the horror that destroyed his beautiful wife and daughter. He doesn't understand why, because he deserved to die. When the plague was unleashed, he was on a "business trip" with his mistress. He knew that this relationship would destroy his family, and it literally did. He should have been home, holding them close as they all slipped away. Now, he is a survivor, alone with his shame. He can never allow himself to feel the joys he once knew.
- 2) In the television series *Angel*, the title character is a vampire who has been cursed and has regained his soul. He now feels pain and anguish for the countless atrocities he committed. He feels compelled to make amends for his crimes, and he does not allow himself to feel any form of happiness, as he believes he does not deserve it.

Heliophobia: Fear of Sunlight

The sun chases away the shadows of the night, pierces the clouds of passing storms, and warms the lands after harsh, brutal winters. But to some its presence brings a fear that is utterly foreign to sunbathers. Early man feared and revered the sun as a deity that granted its radiance and light to those who were loyal and obedient. It rested at night, and if angered, disappeared (or so solar eclipses were perceived). Since then have learn a great deal about the sun, but its dangers are no less real. We know that skin cancer is prevalent and that age spots or wrinkles come early to those who spend too much time in the sun. During the peak of summer, its rays can sear flesh from bone. The sun's ultraviolet rays bring trouble, disfigurement, or even death. One cannot be too careful.

Common behaviors:

- Dressing from head to toe to protect every inch of skin from the sun
- Refusing to go out in the daytime, preferring to handle work or play time at night
- Experiencing odd mood swings during brighter weather. (Heliophobes are bitter or despondent during brighter weather, as most people act when the sun is hidden behind heavy, dark clouds.)

Examples of heliophobia:

- 1) Medical science has come a long way in the treatment of diseases, viruses, and the like, and yet one thing is still elusive: cancer, that evil cellular decay that rots away at people from the inside out. After her latest DNA scan from the downtown Med-kiosk, Julie felt confident that she will live to see her 100 birthday in perfect health. Still, as the sun's ultra-violet rays beat down on her, she can't help but feel her life sizzling away. The summer sun looms overhead with no relief in sight. Julie has stocked up on all the latest sunscreens, has dressed in the longest, heaviest of clothing, and has come close to heat exhaustion. Life is too precious to take any chances, and Julie prays that the sun will soon go away again.
- 2) Do'rok had led his tribe with great pride and strength. They had traveled across many lands in search of a new home, one easy to defend and in which they could raise their cattle. They had escaped the floods and black skies that nearly destroyed their tribe to find a land bright and warm. High above, the Yellow God had greeted his people and life was good. Many days passed and the Yellow God looked down on Do'rok's, his unyielding gaze watching the people. Do'rok suspected that they might have upset their god, for the streams ran dry and the cattle began

to perish. They sacrificed what remaining cattle they could spare but to no avail. Do'rok cursed the Yellow God, defiant at its evil glare. Then it closed its great eye and covered the lands in the blanket of night and Do'rok shuddered for he knew that he had truly angered the great Yellow God.

Pharmacophobia: Fear of Medicine

We rely on doctors to help us stay healthy. We shop for vitamins, diet pills, and pain relievers to help us cope with stress and lead active lives. But what you are putting into your body? Do you really know, or do you simply trust the companies that produce these products or the government agencies that vouch for their claims? Some of those suffering from pharmacophobia fear what that little pill might contain. People have died due to improperly prescribed medications or product tampering. When you trust the unknown, you give up a great deal of control. And that's just what those medications are: unknown.

Others who suffer from this phobia believe they could become addicted to medicine. They might be prescribed a drug for an illness or pain relief after a serious accident and then find themselves in desperate need of the medicine. Which is worse, the sickness or the cure?

Common behaviors:

- Distrusting all prepackaged medicines or prescription drugs
- Believing strongly in natural or herbal remedies
- Studying various types of body therapies, such as meditation or yoga

Examples of pharmacophobia:

- 1) Teagan prides himself on his good health. He is trim, fit, and free of anything artificial. Most of his friends, however, are trend-clones, little sheep following the latest

synthetics for better living. He has watched in disbelief as Tokyo Blue robbed the life from their eyes and has seen the intensity and ferocity they displayed after a hit of La Tigra. It seems like everyone enjoys life in the fast lane, but not Teagan. He spent several years on an experimental drug for asthma that left his memory spotty at best. He is off the drug now, but he still falls into lapses where he loses seconds or minutes. Teagan pursues a life free of any synthetics or pharmaceuticals. Nothing artificial will ever enter his temple again, even if his life depends on it.

- 2) Psyche's pain is as intense as her psychic gifts are powerful. It feels as if a white-hot knife is being driven into her brain every time she takes over the body of another. Psyche has tried to dampen the pain with various drugs, but they nullify her abilities as well. Worse yet, she can feel the drugs invading her body. She can trace the tiny particles as they travel through her blood stream. The thought of it turns her stomach into knots. She can't let the pain control her, and she won't allow the microscopic soldiers inside her. The people of the city need Psyche, and no true hero would let her own selfish problems get in the way.

Nyctophobia: Fear of the Night or Dark

Darkness hides the unknown by obscuring or inhibiting our ability to see. We rely on our vision to get us from point A to point B, to tell friend from foe, and to enjoy color and depth. Remove our vision for a moment and our mind begins to play tricks upon us. Our other senses appear to be more acute. We can hear the scrape of a boot heel nearby or feel the humid breath of someone, or something, standing behind us. Take away our sight and we are as helpless as babes in a crib. It is understandable to be apprehensive in the darkness, but the nyctophobe's

fears go beyond the norm. Nighttime can bring dreams of things we can hardly understand or control. Night terrors, waking up from a dead sleep to full-blown shrieking for no apparent reason, aren't uncommon. Concerns about sleepwalking, or even the fear of never waking up again can consume a person's waking hours. For those suffering from nyctophobia, their greatest fear is the unknown that remains out of sight. Who knows what hides in the shadows of the night?

Common behaviors:

- Planning all trips so that they occur during daylight hours
- Having ample illumination within the home
- Never venturing out at night for any reason
- Imagining what dangers exist in the darkness, from attackers to wild animals to something unspeakable

Examples of nyctophobia:

- 1) It was supposed to be a simple game of hide-and-seek. Joey's brother told him to stay in the closet so no one would find him. Joey didn't think about why his brother locked the door with all his friends nearby, laughing when they should have been hiding. Mom and Dad were at a dinner party and wouldn't be home until really late. Nobody came to find him, and he sat there alone in the cramped, unlit closet. He called out to the others to give up and start a new game, but still nobody came. Joey scooted to one side of the closet when something sharp scraped his arm. He screamed as another creature, flat and heavy, dropped over his head and wrapped itself around him tight. Little feet scurried over Joey's toes and the creatures of the closet poked him and laughed as Joey cried for his brother and his parents. He cried so hard and so long that his eyes hurt and his

mouth ran dry. Then something clubbed the door, hard, a deafening boom that shook the closet and rattled Joey's teeth. It hit the door again and again, and Joey screamed.

Joe wakes up in his apartment. His sheets are twisted around his legs and all the lights are still on. Another thud booms from above, and Joe can hear his neighbors arguing. He looks across the room to his closet, at its doorless threshold and the series of lights beaming from inside, and he can still feel the darkness envelope him as it did thirty years ago.

- 2) Carmeilliken stands at the entrance to the Caves of Chaos, peering into the umbral curtain that cloaks its interior. The local baron has chartered him to rid the cave of its vicious denizens so the people of Willowood could live in peace. Carmeilliken is an adventuring spellslinger, and he has faced many threats in his short career, never flinching from the odds. He has only one reservation: the dark. He isn't precisely afraid of the dark, but he has to face the reality that his abilities are useless if no one can see them. Carmeilliken's forte is illusions, the bigger and brighter the better. He never realized that this was his way of dealing with a hidden apprehension about the blackness of night. Yet, as he stands at the entrance of the cave he finds himself face to face to the truth he has ignored. Yes, Carmeilliken is terrified of the dark.

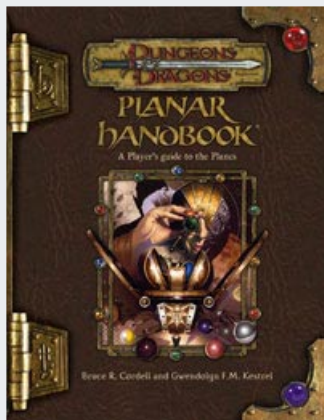
These are only a few of the phobias you could incorporate into a new or existing character. The key is to find one that is playable and not disruptive to the other players. Role-playing can be a challenging, satisfying experience, especially when shared with people full of enthusiasm and a flair for the dramatic. Use this article as a tool to that end and watch the fun begin.

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by Lance Kepner

Review: Planar Handbook



Authors: Bruce R. Cordell & Gwendolyn F.M. Kestrel
Publisher: [Wizards of the Coast](#)
Review date: 8/26/2004

Reviewer's Bias: I received a review copy of this product and have played in many games that have reached into the planes.

From the back cover

Explore Never-Ending Realms of Adventure

Only the most exceptional characters dare tread the infinite paths of the planes. From Sigil, the City of Doors, to the Blinding Tower at the heart of the Plane of Shadow, to the Elemental Plane of Fire's storied City of Brass, countless perilous locations in the multiverse await bold heroes armed with remarkable talents and abilities, more than a little courage, and above all, knowledge.

This supplement for the **D&D** game provides everything you need to create and play characters prepared for the odyssey of planar travel, including new planar races, feats, equipment, spells, and magic items. The Planar Handbook also introduces the power of planar touchstones, along with details and advice for visiting dozens of planar sites.

Introduction

The Planar Handbook is supposed to be used primarily by players, while the *Manual of the Planes* was a DM's bible to the planar reaches of the *D&D* cosmology. So one would expect a plethora of player-oriented material such as feats, spells, weapons, classes, prestige classes and the like. But we are presented with few new ideas and mostly re-hashed material from the *MotP* (*Manual of the Planes*). If this was Wizards of the Coasts' attempt to bring the material that made *Planescape* the best campaign setting in history (from my point of view) it is a terrible attempt. If you were hoping that the flavor and mystique of the *Planescape* setting could find its way into *D&D*

Review snapshot

CLASS: Sourcebook

STR: 14 (*Physical*). Standard WoTC hard cover.

DEX: 14 (*Organization*). Standard WoTC layout, should be familiar.

CON: 10 (*Quantity of the Content*). A buffet of crap is still crap.

INT: 12 (*Quality of Content*). Look at it from the poor sot in your group who actually bought it and then laugh at them.

WIS: 8 (*Options & Adaptability*). You might use it, if you're a DM who uses Player's Guides. If you're a player think about becoming a DM to use this book.

CHA: 14 (*Look & Feel*). At least its pretty to look at, it takes the pain away from my brain.

How we rate our reviews

Scoring definitions.

18 = *Superior*. Best of the best.

16 = *Very Good*. Part of a Baker's Dozen.

14 = *Good*. Most gamers would like this.

12 = *Fair*. Some gamers would like this.

10 = *Average*. Most gamers would be indifferent.

8 = *Subpar*. Flawed, but not without promise.

6 = *Bad*. Most gamers would dislike this.

4 = *Very Bad*. Among the Dirty Dozen.

2 = *Inferior*. Worst of the worst.

3.5 in products such as this, you are mistaken and you should not buy this product. In fact, if you liked *Planescape* at all boycott this product. It's a travesty to all that was pure and good in the setting. If you don't care about *Planescape*, or never even heard of it, then this material might be somewhat new to you and you can live in blissful ignorance. If you are still reading this, by this point, you must be interested in either the crunchy bits, or are new to the multiverse that is the *D&D* cosmology. I invite you to continue on and find out if this product is worth it (it's not but humor me while I try to find a reason).

Chapter One: Races

The planes are full of interesting and varied races. That's a fact. We know this from *Planescape*, we know this from the core books, and we know this because it makes sense. So in a product such as this, it would

seem appropriate to list some of the more common races. Sure Aasimars and Tieflings are listed (as they are in almost every other WotC product that even mentions "planes"), but the other races are just "bleh". OK... so the Bariaurs are here, a long staple of the planar multiverse. I wouldn't have even minded a reprint of the planetouched, but where are the modrons? Half-elementals? Surely we could have seen them updated from their 3.0 counterparts.

And then we have the new races. The Buommans, a race that has taken vows against vocal communication, and yet who sing every chance they get. If a player came to me and said he wanted to play a Buomman I would probably just stare at him and blink, maybe even blink twice before I cringed at the thought of any of my players singing. Not only is it next to impossible to roleplay, its utterly unplayable. Maybe at higher levels with telepathy at will, but you might as well cross it off the list of playable races. And then we move on to the mephlings; cute little buggers and possibly useful, but for the +1 LA you might as well go with a half-elemental template to get some much better abilities. The Neraphim are a race that has evolved from slaadi in Limbo. They do have a cool ability that allows them to camouflage themselves and charge thus denying their opponent his dexterity to armor class; neat ability but perhaps a bit on the "stretching it" side. Shadowswyfts are natives to the Plane of Shadow (I guess the Shadar'Kai allow them) and have no real reason to be a +1 LA with penalties in light. Spikers (from the Miniatures Handbook) make an appearance, as a fully spec'd out race. While their spikes are interesting they pose many potential problems but thankfully they are a LA +0. The best race (and I'm being facetious) is the Wildren. The Wildren are "beings descended from the union of partially transformed dwarf petitioners and celestial badgers." Blink. Blink. Blink. Yes... dwarf petitioners and celestial badgers. Go ahead, take a moment to digest that or laugh hysterically and come back. It's OK I'll wait.

The rest of the chapter details out some of the monster progression as race-class levels as pioneered by Sean K. Reynolds and appearing in *Savage Species*

(although he goes unaccredited). The listed monster classes are the avoral guardinal, chain devil (kyton), hound archon, janni, and lillend. It's kind of nice they reprinted these in this book, but I would have liked to see some others.

If races that can't talk and celestial dwarf-badgers are your thing, this book is for you. In fact stop reading and go buy it right now. For the rest of you, see if Chapter One is just a fluke, or foreshadowing.

Chapter Two: Classes and Feats

The first idea presented in Chapter Two is the notion of planar substitution levels. These are basically levels that are taken instead of your base class level, granting you different abilities. For example, you could take a planar substitution level as a fighter at 4th level, give up your 4th level base fighter abilities (those in the special column) and gain the benefits of the fighter planar substitution level. It's actually a nice idea to incorporate planes into a campaign while still maintaining some degree of integrity with the core classes. The abilities granted are extremely useful (clerics can learn to spend turn attempts to turn summoned creatures) and a welcome sight to melee classes that are often behind the mark when it comes to planar adventuring. No new core classes are presented.

The feats section has two types of feats listed, heritage feats and general feats. The general feats are pretty bland, with only a few of them actually seeming useful. The summoning feats are good for thaumaturgists and the Neraph Charge duplicates the ability of the Neraphim. The nonverbal spell feat seems broken, but I'll let you figure out how. The planar touchstone feats allow access to the benefits of visiting planar touchstones as presented later in the book. The heritage feats bump up your ability that is

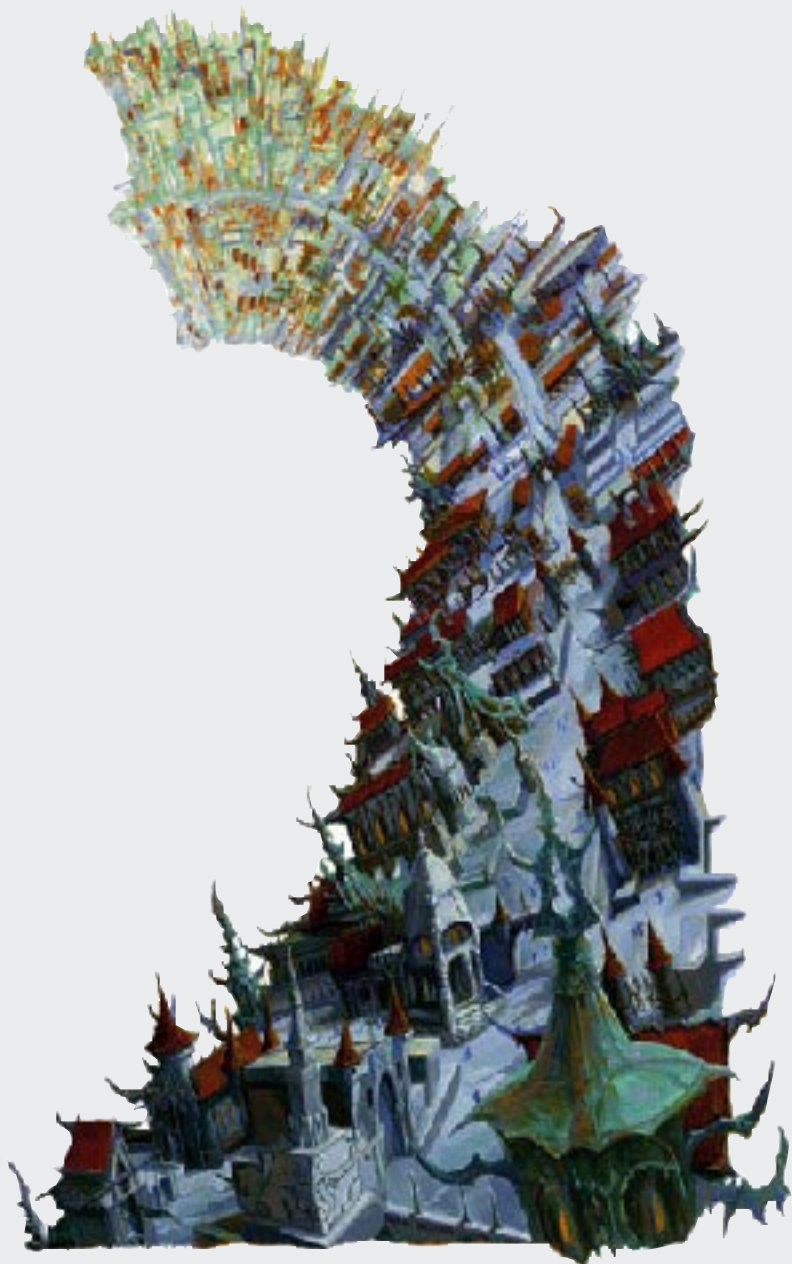


related to a specific origin. For example the air heritage feat allows you to increase your fly speed by 30 feet. These feats do nothing if you are not descended from the specific element or origin.

With so many interesting options in the multiverse I expected many more feat choices than were presented. The heritage feats are filler through and through, they could have been accomplished by one feat with a chart instead of individual listings.

Chapter Three: Prestige Classes

Opening the book, the Prestige Class section brought me hope since the first entry is The Athar. I was immediately filled with hope that all of the factions of Sigil would be presented, and possibly stat blocked out in an example. I was disappointed. Not all of the factions make an appearance, I am not sure why (I found out later). The Guvners, Harmonium, and Mercy Killers are strangely missing and they were some of the most popular factions. The Sigil factions are detailed out a bit in this section before the specific



prestige class entry is listed. The faction PrC's are decent and have some interesting abilities while trying to maintain the flavor of the orders. There are only two PrC's listed that are not part of the factions, the Astral Dancer and the Elemental Warrior.

What could have been a very good section of the product left a sour taste in my mouth. Why weren't all of the Sigil factions present, especially the ones so focused on melee? Could it be left for another product? Or is it something more sinister?

Chapter Four: Equipment and Magic Items

The equipment section begins with a small note on the availability of these new items, which actually provides a helpful insight to DMs running planar campaigns. There are nine total weapons listed, three of which are exotic weapons. Of note are the annulat, an exotic ranged weapon that looks like a chakram, and the Jovar, a greatsword with 18-20 crit range and multiplier of x2. Of course, the Jovar is only (or should only be) available to archons from which the weapon originates.

There are three new types of armor listed. The first is hooked armor that looks like a spikeling's skin. Then there is a neat armor type called sectioned armor. This suit of armor can be removed in sections to provide the three different levels of armor protection, light, medium and heavy.

The final armor type is mechanus gear,

providing the highest armor bonus of the listed armors (and possibly the highest of any wizards product) but lowers the wearer's speed dramatically.

The rest of the chapter details equipment both mundane and magical as well as lists planar traveling vessels. Actually this section provided tons of useful information and items. The magical weapon and armor abilities are not a complete waste, but do we really need four magical bonuses that affect elemental types? Maybe, but it makes me go "eh". The vehicle listing is interesting and usefull if you want to detail some astral vessels, although I am glad to see that they didn't just copy and paste the material from the Spelljammr source released in an old issue of Polyhedron.

Chapter Five: Spells

The spells chapter starts off with a new domain for some of the planes and then begins to list the new spells. While the majority of the spells are new, some are carry-overs from the *Manual of the Planes*. Some of the higher level spells are pretty impressive, but overall many of the spells focus on just summoning a planar being (or beings) to fight for you. If summoning an archon or a horde of demons sounds interesting then these spells might be for you. But the general flavor of the spells sticks to the planar setting and the book should be commended for sticking to its roots.

Chapter Six: Monsters

Most of the monsters listed are templates. I am always a fan of templates, but find that they tend to be more work than not, and make a solo appearance in a game and then are never heard of again. Same can be said for some monsters, but it seems like the designers at WotC are stretching for ideas. Axiomatic and Anarchic creatures, a positive and negative energy template, and the list goes on. There are some interesting monsters, like the void ooze and the energons, and some of the monsters listed are animals for the planar mounts detailed earlier. Overall, chapter six is less than impressive but at least its here.

Chapter Seven: Planar Sites

This chapter details out several of the planes major locations as well as details planar breaches and planar touchstones. The first section gives a brief cosmological overview of the Great Wheel multiverse. It's here because this is supposed to be a player book and not a DM book. This information is already in the 3.5 DMG as well as the Manual of the Planes so if you have those books the first few pages of this chapter can be skipped.

The detailed locations I spoke of are the City of Brass, Sigil, and Tu'narath. The City of Brass has a city map and an overview of the laws, layout, themes, rulers, and history of the fiery metropolis. Sigil is listed in more detail than anywhere previous (barring the *Planescape Campaign Setting*) and Tu'narath (the githyanki city on a dead god floating in the Astral Plane) also has a workup with a map. Remember back when I mentioned the factions of Sigil? Well, in this section we find out that all that great history and feel of *Planescape* is taken away and replaced with a WoTC-Mart brand sticker. For some reason the Lady of Pain (who thankfully goes un-stat'd) decreed the factions void. So there are no more factions allowed to operate in Sigil. If you've never played *Planescape* or don't care, you should (because you are missing the best setting ever). If you are fine with this change, good for you. If you are like me, first pick up your jaw from the floor, reach around feebly for your eyes that have popped out, and try to reconstitute your brain. I just want to say to Bruce and Gwendolyn, ever hear the phrase, 'If it ain't broke don't fix it?'. Am I being overly dramatic? Probably, but it still gets my goat (you know, the \$100+ goat that I paid for the *Planescape* boxed settings). Sure, I know that Monte Cook, who also designed said campaign setting wrote a book called *Faction War* but I try to keep that memory locked away in a box under my bed. Maybe one day I'll throw it off a cliff... hey it worked in that one movie, and that was a man-eating prehistoric monster monkey.

Enough of my insane ranting, back to the review. The next section details planar breaches, a phenomenon that occurs when, for some reason *cough* Orph *cough*, one plane breaks through the multiverse into another plane causing some weird stuff to happen and making anyone in the area utter the infamous last words, 'Oh snap!' A random chart is provided for all your annihilation needs. Thank you. Please drive through.

The largest section of this chapter, and the majority of the book, is planar touchstones. This is actually an interesting idea that has absolutely no reason to be in a book for players. Basically the idea is that there are pocket planes around the multiverse that can be attuned, or sync'd by special people (those with the feat). By visiting these places they can gain or unlock some benefits, such as darkvision, spell-like abilities, or various other bonuses. Of course encounters are common on these touchstones, so bring some friends. These are actually useful for DMs and there are numerous planar touchstones listed, one for encounters from level 4 to 14.

Art

Cover art by Matt Covatta is great and really captures the feel of the planes. If you are looking for big time WotC favorite artists like Wayne Reynolds or Todd Lockwood, don't pick up this book, they simply aren't in here. But the artists' works that are included do not disappoint and are full color and live up to the WotC standard. There are no full-page artworks included like those in the *Complete Divine* or *Complete Warrior*. You may also find that the captions are quite interesting for the art. The maps are not superior quality but are still Todd Gamble's work.

Conclusion

First and foremost I feel that this book partly lied to me. It's subtitle is "A Player's Guide to the Planes".

I feel that this book caters almost completely to the DM. The monsters are no use to players, neither are the planar touchstones for the most part.

There is no information on how a player can create a planar breach, and the PrC's listed are for factions that for the most part don't fully exist anymore. The only really useful player information is the races, feats, equipment, and spells chapters, which are not that impressive. Hands down, this is the worst WotC product to be released for the new line. Yes, even Deities and Demigods was better. At least you weren't misled when you bought that product. I've played in many planar games, and this book doesn't have anything that excites me as a player in a planar setting. There is really nothing in the 192 pages that I could take to my DM and say with huge puppy dog eyes, 'Pweeeese!' Bottom lines, 1) Bruce should stick to psionics, and 2) save your money for something better like *Beyond Countless Doorways* from Malhavoc.

Where to buy

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by Melissa Piper

Review: *Nature's Wrath*

About: 32 pages, electronic PDF, black-and-white interior, \$5

Author: John Alger

Publisher: [Bloodstone Press](#) (2004)

Review date: 09/01/04

Reviewer's Bias: I received a review copy of this product.

From the Back Cover

"This d20 supplement features rules for dozens of naturally occurring poisons and diseases. Detailed descriptions of toadstools, malaria, hemlock and much more fill these pages. *Nature's Wrath* is an ideal supplement for enhancing environmental dangers of your game."

Introduction

Need a poison to slow down your players? How about using a disease that can erupt to epidemic proportions? If your campaign is in need of some illnesses to keep things interesting, then *Nature's Wrath* may be the PDF for you. Within the pages of *Nature's Wrath*, you will find descriptions and tables covering microbial, plant, and animal poisons, diseases, and symptoms. There are even variant rules that you can use to keep your campaign from getting too predictable. This guide to poisons and other ailments is a game-master (GM) supplement that fits into any d20 System game. The newest version of *Nature's Wrath* has been revised so that it is compatible with the v.3.5 rules.

Presentation

Nature's Wrath is a 34-page PDF product by Bloodstone Press. It is divided into three chapters that discuss poisons, diseases, and ailments, respectively. The first page of the PDF (the "cover") depicts a pencil illustration of a healer attempting to heal and ailing man recovering in bed. The illustration resides on an emerald-green field, which is spruced up with a decorative sponge effect. The contents of the product are written in a two-column format in a font similar to Times New Roman. Page numbers only appear on odd-numbered pages and are written in a bolder version of the Times New Roman lettering. Although there are only two illustrations throughout *Nature's Wrath* (one of which is the same illustration that appeared on the cover), both are nicely-done illustrations by William McAusland.

Poisons

The opening chapter of *Nature's Wrath* discusses poisons. Before the descriptions of the actual poisons are presented, however, the author takes the time to define the terminology used in the accompanying tables, such as "Onset," "Initial Damage," and "DC." Although these terms are familiar to much of the d20 fan base, this is an excellent step for those who are just trying to learn the rules. It is not often that you will find an author that does not assume you know all the rules, and I give this author brownie points for taking the extra step.

The main types of poisons discussed here are contracted from toadstools, shellfish, and plants.

Review snapshot

CLASS: Campaign Supplement

STR: NA (*Physical*). This score does not apply to PDFs.

DEX: 14 (*Organization*). Product has a table for almost everything and is easy to read.

CON: 10 (*Quantity of the Content*). Only 34 pages.

INT: 15 (*Quality of Content*). Information presented was detailed and complete.

WIS: 17 (*Options & Adaptability*). Can be adapted to any d20 campaign of any setting.

CHA: 8 (*Look & Feel*). Black-and-white interior with inconsistencies in organization. Plain appearance.

How we rate our reviews

Scoring definitions.

18 = **Superior**. Best of the best.

16 = **Very Good**. Part of a Baker's Dozen.

14 = **Good**. Most gamers would like this.

12 = **Fair**. Some gamers would like this.

10 = **Average**. Most gamers would be indifferent.

8 = **Subpar**. Flawed, but not without promise.

6 = **Bad**. Most gamers would dislike this.

4 = **Very Bad**. Among the Dirty Dozen.

2 = **Inferior**. Worst of the worst.

Directly before the descriptions of poisons is a table listing all of the poisons, with their onset, initial damage, secondary damage, and fort save DC soon after. These poisons are arranged by origin (toadstool, shellfish, and plants), and then alphabetically from there. Descriptions of each poison are presented afterwards, but the table pretty much takes care of the information you need to know as a GM.

My favorite part of this chapter is the final table, which lists the poisons again and the other types of fungi and plants that they are easily confused with. In order to properly identify a poisonous plant or toadstool, a player must succeed a Knowledge (nature) check. Therefore, this table also includes corresponding DCs, the highest of which is 22. You can also learn what terrain the poisonous substance commonly grows on by reading this table. Not only do these tables make the product easier to read, but they also provide enough information so that you do not have to rely on external sources to find any additional information you may need.

One gripe that I have with this chapter is that it makes a reference to "Chapter 12" on several occasions. For example, one sentence discussing the table of poisons reads, "The symptoms (in parentheses) are abbreviations for optional additional penalties from Chapter 12." However, since there are only three chapters in this PDF, I am not sure which book is being referred to here! Since the opening page of *Nature's Wrath* states that the "core books" (plural) of D&D are required in order to use this product, my guess is that the product is referring to the *Dungeon Master's Guide (DMG)*. It would have been helpful if this was explicitly stated, however.

Diseases

If poisonous toadstools and plants are not your flavor, then Chapter 2 may prove to be more interesting. The second chapter discusses diseases that will ail characters with a variety of effects. This chapter opens with two variant rules for healing and curing diseases, both of which are meant to make characters more susceptible to disease with lessened chances of healing immediately. Basically, this task is accomplished through a simple rewording of the "Remove Disease" spell. For quick comparison, the core rule for curing diseases is presented on the left, with the two variant rules appearing on the right.

Once again, this chapter includes definitions of the terminology that will be used in the accompanying tables. From there, each disease is listed in a table alphabetically, along with the disease's symptoms (which appear as abbreviations), incubation period, damage, and fort save DCs. The tables in *Nature's Wrath* are great, since practically each chapter is summarized into one easy-to-reference table that reduces the need to read through every description. There is even a table at the end of the chapter that lists the frequency of each disease and the method through which each is transmitted.

Some of the diseases that you will find listed here include well-known diseases such as Anthrax,

Hepatitis A, B, and C, Diphtheria, and Malaria. There are also diseases listed here, such as Polio, that have practically been eradicated but were much more common during the earlier centuries.

Conditions and Ailments

The final chapter of *Nature's Wrath* summarizes the symptoms of the diseases that were presented in the previous chapter. Much to my dismay, when I first scanned the table of diseases in Chapter 2, I could not find any interpretations of the abbreviated symptoms. I was ready to report about this fact until I flipped to Chapter 3, which is where all of the symptom abbreviations were hiding. Each symptom is described here, so you do not have to look up anything in your medical book of symptoms and diseases. In addition to descriptions, you will find the penalties that players receive as a part of the symptom he or she is suffering from. And, as always, a table summarizing each symptom and its accompanying abbreviation appears at the end of this chapter.

Conclusion

After finishing *Nature's Wrath*, I was both pleased and a bit disappointed. Although the tables are a nice touch and add to the readability of the product, the organization of the chapter headings and text are inconsistent. On one page, the headings could be bold, while they could be plain on the next. The product looked as if it was simply typed in Word, which gives the entire product a plain appearance.

The material found within the pages of *Nature's Wrath* was well written and complete. I found few problems with the writing and editing, which I was pleased with. I recommend this product to GMs who are looking to add natural poisons and diseases to their campaigns. Players will not find much use for it, though, since all material found throughout the product is left to the discretion of the GM. If you are looking for a quick reference to ailments in d20 format, then I suggest that you give *Nature's Wrath* a try.

Where to buy

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by Melissa Piper

Review: Bloodlines



About: 120 pages, PDF, color interior (printer-friendly version included), \$10.

Publisher: [12 to Midnight](#) (2004)

Reviewed by: *Nick Mulherin*

Review date: 09/10/2004

Reviewer's Bias: I received a review copy of this product. This is not a playtest review. Warning: This review contains spoilers.

From the Back Cover

Welcome to Pinebox, Texas. There's gold buried in these hills...or at least, that's the local folklore. Join the Apollo Geocaching Challenge to race against other teams in search of a time capsule buried 100 years ago. Do you think you can succeed in 24 hours where two generations of treasure hunters failed? The race is on and the competition fierce. But be warned: there's much more to Pinebox (and the competition) than meets the eye. Some secrets are best left buried and some family trees best left unshaken.

Introduction

The player characters (PCs) are summoned to Pinebox, Texas, for a geocaching contest (essentially a treasure hunt using GPS). As it turns out, a cult masquerading as the Pinebox Historical Society organized the contest as a way for the cult to secure a book and lens required for a dark ritual. Over the course of *Bloodlines*, the PCs will come into conflict with the cult's members and ghosts from Pinebox's past.

Presentation

Bloodlines is a 121-page PDF file with extensive bookmarks and a hyperlinked table of contents -- this page count includes nineteen player handouts and eight maps.

Anneth Lagamo's cover depicts the ghost of a young woman, Nicole Blackwell, in a graveyard, her finger to her lips. Overall, Lagamo's cover is tasteful and appropriate, fitting the adventure well. The interior art, by Sergio "Obsidian" Villa Isaza, isn't as good as the cover (the depictions of people are slightly more cartoony), but works. Particularly effective, in my opinion, was Villa Isaza's use of color in combination with black and white, such as the purple shading in the picture on page 41 of the ghost of Nicole Blackwell assaulting James Rodriguez or the antiseptic green-brown of the blanket in the picture of Imogene Glass on page 54.

The product's layout is impeccable -- clean, crisp, and easily readable. The margins are wide, and sidebars

Review snapshot

CLASS: Adventure

STR: NA (*Physical*). It's two PDF files, one regular, one printer-friendly.

DEX: 10 (*Organization*). Standard organization, but good use of the electronic format.

CON: 14 (*Quantity of the Content*). Outstanding, copious support material in the appendices. A lot of extras.

INT: 12 (*Quality of Content*). Good ideas, rough execution in the early going. Extremely linear plot. Excellent handouts and maps.

WIS: 10 (*Options & Adaptability*). An enterprising GM could do good work with Pinebox as a setting for *d20 Modern* or even *Call of Cthulhu*.

CHA: 16 (*Look & Feel*). Clean and crisp, with excellent layout and good art. Occasional minor typos and stylistic flaws.

How we rate our reviews

Scoring definitions.

18 = **Superior**. Best of the best.

16 = **Very Good**. Part of a Baker's Dozen.

14 = **Good**. Most gamers would like this.

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2 = **Inferior**. Worst of the worst.

are placed in helpful locations, near the text they expound upon. In short, I found the look of *Bloodlines* to be slick and professional.

Frequent typos such as missing words ("The price for such tampering was [that] Blackwell's own memories [were] magnified for every memory stolen"), swapped pronouns (Norma Wallis's gender changes in the read-aloud text before the ritual), and awkward word choices (a "blatant alcoholic"?) affect the product negatively. The author has the tendency to overwrite a little bit, when the complexity of the adventure would demand a simpler, more expository style. In the end, this is a minor quibble, but, given the outstanding art and layout, it's a little disappointing.

GM's Preparation

This section includes some very nice material for the GM as he gets ready to run *Bloodlines*, particularly the sections on setting the mood and potential plot hooks to get the PCs involved. My one main concern here was the extensive summary of the plot as the author saw it happening -- it reinforces DuBose's assertion (in the Author's Introduction) that this is a highly linear adventure. His description of how things are supposed to go suggested to me, in its detail, that the plotline as he imagines it supercedes the actual play of the story.

In other words, I felt that the adventure's story, or what it wanted to tell, was more important than how the players wanted it to play. I'm sure this results from the complexity of the scenario that's been written. I needed to read this section twice to make sure that I had a pretty good handle on what was going on. The danger of having such a complex plot is that, in order to make sure that all the plot lines fit, there's almost no choice but to make it a railroad -- there are too many hints and clues that demand a certain timeline for the PCs not to feel like they've been lead by the nose. After reading this, I initially felt that, in the hands of an inexperienced GM, this adventure would probably be a disaster. There is just too much back-story and plot to juggle.

The Adventure

Bloodlines is divided into three sections: The Cache, The Cult, and The Haunting. The first section, the search for the cache (the book and the lens, which, according to local folklore is the Blackwell gold)

consists of a series of encounters that introduce the PCs to various folks in and around Pinebox, TX, culminating in the retrieval of the book and lens. Part II, the Cult, deals with the players discovering that a cult has used them as its pawns and climaxes at the scene of the bloody ritual. The last section reveals the historical grudge underlying the conflicts of the previous two sections, resulting in a confrontation between the ghosts of Robert and Nicole Blackwell.

I had a lot of misgivings about the main part of this adventure, including, but not limited to its linear plot. One thing I did like, however, was the small checklists presented at the end of each scene, which told the GM what the most important things to have happen during that scene were, such as Spot checks, information that should be given out, and so on. I liked this because of the complexity of the adventure -- it'll help to keep the GM running the campaign grounded.

Unfortunately, my main concern with *Bloodlines* reared its head again here: the directions often indicate that the GM should "reveal" a clue or otherwise take an active role in making sure that the PCs know the things the adventure needs them to know. As a matter of fact, non-player characters (NPCs) often are the only source of clues and have to, more or less, tell the players where to go next. For instance, Vera Bock tells the PCs in the first section of the adventure that the fake Bible verses on the Blackwell tombstone are actually coordinates, pushing the PCs to the next part of the adventure. The players have no opportunity to find this information out for themselves, but have to rely on an NPC to tell them the answer to the puzzle.

Players are frequently discouraged from trying out different things. For instance, if they decide,

after they finally find the Blackwell homestead, to go to it without speaking to the current landowners, there's only a 5% chance they'd be able to find it. This seems more like an excuse to keep the players on plot than anything else, punishing them for wandering away from the module's story. Again, the problem is a linear plot -- all roads lead to the same place. The players have to go to the current landowners to get to the land--there's almost no way around it.

Sometimes, the railroading of the adventure is even more blatant. The scorpion attack at the end of Part 1 comes to mind immediately. The PCs receive no saves, no chances to avoid getting knocked out and poisoned -- even if they aren't close enough to the well to be attacked by the scorpions, a magical effect still knocks them out long enough for the bad guys to do their thing. This is part of a consistent pattern of the players losing their agency as a result of the plot's needs rather than their own actions. The arrest at the beginning of Part 2 functions in a similar way -- it's almost like a cut-scene in a video game where the players will get to watch the story being advanced. I can only speak from my experience, but the players I have played with would balk at either of these events.

The only other major gripe I have with this section of the adventure is the lack of stats in the adventure -- they're all contained in Appendix 1 and can be downloaded as part of a [set of initiative cards](#) available on the 12 to Midnight website. I really feel the presentation of some basic stats in the adventure, hit points and a page reference for the character at the very least, would have been helpful.

Although I was discouraged with the adventure as a whole, I should mention that Part 3 was, by far, the best section of the main adventure. It's far less linear, events can take place out of order (for instance, the shuffling of Nicole's exposition and the seance, the latter of which may not even happen if the players don't want to do it), and the final confrontation between Nicole and Robert, through their proxy, Molly, and the PCs, is completely open-ended and could result in any number of conclusions to the adventure. It's not enough to save the two parts before it, but it

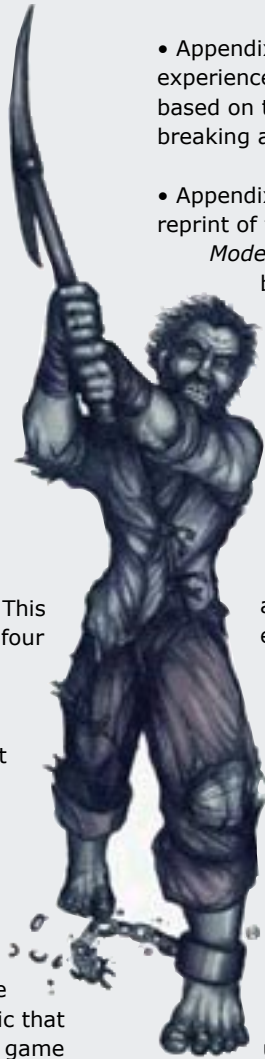


does show what *Bloodlines* could have been and the quality of material the folks at 12 to Midnight are capable of creating.

Appendices

A number of appendices follow the main adventure:

- Appendix 1: Cast of Characters. Full stats and histories for all the characters presented in the adventure. It's a nice appendix, but *some* stats do belong in the text itself. A particularly nice touch here is the "Character Speak" section included for each person, which gives a couple of sayings or a bit of dialogue to help the GM play the character.
- Appendix 2: Cast of Creatures and Cults. This section includes the lost soul template and four different manifestations for it (lesser, poltergeist, ABE, and phantom) as well as some barebones information on Zatha and Zatha's Chosen. The information on the cult is oddly placed here and would probably have served better as a side bar earlier in the adventure.
- Appendix 3: Magic & Artifacts. This section details the magic system used in *Bloodlines*, which has been taken from Mongoose Publishing's *OGL Horror*, a choice made because of the "benign" view of magic that the system used in the default *d20 Modern* game takes.
I like 12 to Midnight's use of the OGL to reprint enough of the *OGL Horror* magic system to make sure that *Bloodlines* is as useful as possible to people playing through it (many of which may not have Mongoose's book). It's a nice touch, and a creative GM could extrapolate an entire magic system based on the snippets included here.



- Appendix 4: Experience and Mechanics. Includes an experience chart that gives totals for each encounter, based on the party level and information on locks and breaking and entering.
- Appendix 5: Vehicle Movement and Combat. A reprint of the basic rules for this topic from the *d20 Modern SRD*. Again, this is a nice use of the OGL by 12 to Midnight. It allows the GM to have less books at the table and focus on the adventure.
- Appendix 6: Player Handouts and GM Maps. The handouts are well-designed and appropriate. Newspaper clippings look like newspaper clippings, fliers look like fliers. The sheer number of handouts impressed me, and I think they'd go a long way to drawing the players into the adventure. Like the handouts, the maps are extremely well-done.

If the adventure's first two sections matched the quality of the last section and these appendices, 12 to Midnight would have an outstanding product here. The care taken to put together the useful, detailed handouts, maps, and rules supplements found in this last section is the best part of this product.

Conclusion

Ultimately, any review of a module ultimately needs to consider what the function of a module is: does it provide a story for the PCs to take part in or is it a scenario or environment the PCs can react to? For me, the most successful modules are the latter, not the former. *Bloodlines*, through the first two sections of the adventure, felt more like a story that the PCs got to take part in -- the plot's more or less predetermined and the module goes to lengths to give the GM ways to keep the players "on the map." Despite the weaknesses of the adventure provided, the work does,

however, present a thoroughly-detailed, potentially interesting world for a GM to use and the climax of the adventure is neat and almost worth the trouble to get to. The production values are top-notch, and the care taken to provide well-made player handouts and good maps is appreciated. Still, *Bloodlines* suffers because of the weakness of the early sections of the adventure and its determination to follow a predetermined course. It might play best as a one-shot adventure used in between campaigns or for a change of pace.

Where to buy

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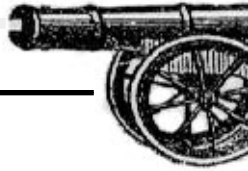
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Racial Reunion

An editorial by Dak Tumble

While visiting my dearest aunt on the other side of the city last week, I happened to cross paths with a rather strange looking gnome. Considering the event a chance meeting, I continued on to my destination blissfully unaware as to the events that were going to unfold that very night.

My aunt Fimble is, indeed, an eccentric woman. Having lived in the planes for many a year will do that to a gnome. In any case, her face was full of excitement as she told me the news that the Tri-Annual Semi-Contiguous Quarterly Meeting of the Planar Tribunal of United Gnomes was going to be held in the City of Silven tonight!

Why, I nearly lost my breath (and not from saying the name). A chance to meet my brethren from all across the multiverse was a chance not to be missed.

I promptly returned home and dressed in my finest gnomish garb. I thought that a pleasant green robe with gold bands across the length would go well with my orange and purple custom jumpsuit.

When I arrived at the gala I was astounded to see so many of my fellow kinsfolk. As I wandered around I quickly became aware of a problem—I was confronted numerous times by a gnomish race I had never seen before. At first I thought it a fluke, a transgression of my backwards plane. But more and more races and variants started teleporting, plane shifting, and even gating in. (What a view of Miss Yuppl's underside as a gate wind caught her dress!)

All of a sudden I found myself staring at over a hundred gnomes, each and every one a different variation. Why there were desert gnomes and rock gnomes and deep gnomes and whisper gnomes and dark gnomes and half gnomes and elf gnomes and dragon gnomes and goblin gnomes. Why, I even saw a formian gnome!

I've lost all faith in my race. We've stooped to the level of elves in our breeding habits.

Man Disappears In Center Rhombus

Yesterday in the Center Rhombus a man disappeared into thin air. No magical residue was detected, and the man has not been seen since.

"It was the strangest thing," says Lilly the Flower Seller. "One moment he was talking to me, or trying to at least, as his friend kept butting in. The friend was annoying, but the guy who disappeared was very nice and charming. I would have given him my entire basket of flowers. But his friend was crude and repulsive. He just kept butting in and taking over the conversation."

"Sometimes the friend would even leave quickly, only to return at the most precious of moments in our conversation," she says.

"Then, while talking to the nice man, the friend butted in just as he was paying me a compliment and poof, he disappeared," she relates.

No word on the man's location. Silven authorities are still investigating. If you have any information please contact the Sheriff's Office.

"He was such a nice man; I hope he comes back," Lilly said.

Book Burning Mayhem

In a recent rash of attacks on local libraries, Silven Crossroads has outlawed all forms of book burning.

"This fad must stop," the Mayor said in a smoky press conference Saturday. "This is a violation of rights. It is a travesty to all that is good and pure with our civilization. If this continues, what will be next? Women's bras?"

The Mayor continued, "I hereby outlaw all forms of book burning. And in addition, to stave off this from ever happening again, I hereby also declare book writing as heresy against the state."

Reaction to these decrees has met with some skepticism and anger from the community.

"I just don't get this town," says Orph Maloney. "It's so chaotic. Maybe that's why I like it."

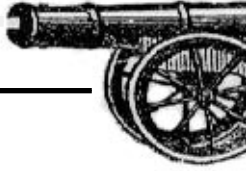
In the local schools teachers are confused as to what to do with the books they currently have.

The Fodder Cannon is a monthly humor section by Lance Kepner and Dana Driscoll. Readers are encouraged to contribute their own amusing shorts. Send to adriayna@yahoo.com.



the fodder canon

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Local dwarves are unsure of whether stone tablets qualify as books.

And gnomes around the city are banging pots and pans in an effort to scare out the demons from the city.

The demons are so far not cooperating.

World Disappoints Local Druid

Amber Nyght, a local druid with Lodge #478, recently underwent a world-tour trial to see if the world really was made of sunshine, rainbows, and lollipops. She traveled far and wide and returned just a short while ago.

"My journey uncovered many mysteries of the natural world," says Nyght.

"Like how faeries are actually murderous beings intent on world domination. And how trees should not be awakened. And how squirrels should definitely not be awakened. And how there are no lollipops in the clouds, only giants that don't like lollipops. And so many other great things."

Nyght says she valued her time on the road, but is glad to be back home in and around Silven. "I did manage to see a lot of sunshine, and even a rainbow or two. But the elusive lollipop earth theory baffled me right up until the end. But I am going to continue my pursuit as I hear this place called Sigil really looks like a lollipop," finished Nyght.

Public Poll:

What is your favorite thing about autumn?

Orph Maloney, Wizard Extraordinaire

"The Plane of Leaves is simply fantastic this time of year."

Dak Tamble, Bard Wonder

"Her nice, curvy.... Oh, that autumn."

Michael Moore, Secular Humanist

"If there's something wrong with it, I'll find it."

Polly, the pirate parrot

"Squawwwk."

Xave, Bookburner

"Autumn always reminds me of the way burning ash floats freely in the still air."

Greetings Fellow Freedom Lovers!

Eldor responds...

A letter to runt mayor Gremply Slivers has been intercepted by one of our agents, and I am sad to report that it does not bear joyous news. Rather, it appears that the King in Eldor is no more a friend of Prompeldia than the bucktooth halfwit himself is. The *Prompeldia Post* reprints the letter in full, for your edification:

Mayor Slivers,

It has come to our attention that a rogue scribe is making vicious slander against the throne in your city. If you cannot deal with such an issue, perhaps it is time Eldor did.

Recall our agreement, Slivers. If Prompeldia becomes unstable, we shall be forced to take measures to return it to the fold.

His Eternal Majesty the King in Eldor.

This seems to suggest that Eldor's failure to reclaim the city was not entirely accidental. One is forced to wonder why the throne would be so eager to be publicly humiliated. Our crack team of reporters will have to look into this further. The *Prompeldia Herald* sure as hell won't, being far too busy 'reporting' on what the leading ladies of the city are wearing on their fat, oily bellies.

Here are the headlines from around the world.

-Editor X

Kalamar: Blackfoot Society Strikes Ineffective Blow

The secretive Blackfoot Society, dedicated to "removing the shackles of monarchy from this land," are claiming responsibility for the death of minor noble Stephen Harutor, cousin to Duke Falamar Harutor of Rosaleta. The official story from the Harutor family is that Stephen tragically choked on a peach stone last week whilst lying in his chambers.

A high-ranking Blackfoot member, who refused to be identified, had this to say: "Peach stone? No way. We were the ones who killed that parasite. The people of Kalamar deserve freedom from tyranny! Kabori puts his shoes on the same way I do!"

When informed that Emperor Kabori I has a slave put on his shoes each morning, the Blackfoot member terminated the interview in a fit of what can only be described as 'pique.' It is believed he intended to purchase a large bag of peaches and a shoehorn.

Brandobia: Gnomes Demand Representation

A revolutionary gnome group has risen up in Inolen, responding to what they call "the tyranny of the tall." The gnomes are demanding representation in the Brandobian government and are threatening to remove all gemwares and jewelry from the land unless their claims are met with action. The Brandobian response has been lukewarm, with insiders claiming that "those gnomes are in for a world of hurt if they try to take us on."

A march has been planned for the coming month, with the number of attendees predicted to be "upwards of 500 wee folk." Eldoran militia have been put on full alert in case the protest escalates into racial violence. "Gnomes claim to be peaceable folk", reported area farmer Thom Thistle,

The Prompeldia Post is a newspaper from the world of Kenzer & Co's Kingdoms of Kalamar setting. It is written entirely in character, from the point of view of an editor and publisher in the town of Prompeldia. The reporters from the paper are entrenched in various locales around the continent, from where they report back to the mysterious Editor X (who grates under the thumb of a crimelord mayor) through an undisclosed system involving divination and teleportation magic.

The stories may not always be accurate (due to the vast distances and general unreliability of magic, sources and reporter bias), but hopefully they will sell the editor enough papers to keep in business.

If there is anything you'd like to see reported in the Prompeldia Post, or if you have a story to break to the readers of that city, please send in on to Shane Cubis at rubikcubis@bigpond.com He'll forward it on to Editor X at his earliest convenience.

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sharpening up his pitchfork. “They say they just want to talk to badgers and shine up some gems. I seen ‘em dancing in the woods, killing a man’s dog and drinking it blood. Gnomes is no good, and the sooner they’re gone, the better off we’ll all be.”

There are as yet unconfirmed reports that the gnomes may have allies in their cause. Stirrings in a nearby dwarven settlement seem to indicate that they take umbrage at Brandobian racism and that conflict may not be too far away. So far we have seen no response from the elves, kobolds or the halflings.

Svimohzia: Druidic Knights Threaten Prince Atavius

An order of knights, devoted to nature and bonded to local druid Miznamvho the Elder, has commanded Prince Atavius and his retinue to leave the Vohven Jungle on pain of death. A representative of the knighthood, who referred to himself as the ‘Lord Snake-Knight,’ proclaimed Atavius and his retinue intruders and told them that their expedition was doomed to failure.

“Yooou, winged prince” intoned the knight, dressed head to toe in the skins of reptiles. “You will die in the Vohven. The idol is not for you.” Atavius responded with a boast that he would destroy the knighthood if they stood in his path. At this point Versus fainted, and our embedded reporter Ibus Canesh decided that, as he put it, “discretion was the better part of the valour.”

Atavius returned to the encampment minutes later, claiming that he had “sent that snake hissing back to his master.” Canesh informs us that double watches were posted that evening, but there have thus far been no more encounters with the druidic knighthood. He further advises that he is reconsidering his role in the expedition, in view of the prince’s apparent disregard for his own life.

Reanaaria: Dead Raksasha Found

Early morning risers in Zoa were shocked to find the corpse of a raksasha lying in the middle of a main road, reported local constable Ziggifred Stillwauer. The raksasha was found lying face down, still clad in blue robes, with an ornate dagger protruding from its back. The dagger, which is crafted of obsidian and has an intricately carved ivory handle, is currently being studied by a court appointed diviner.

“It is not so much that we wish to punish the murderer of this raksasha”, claimed Stillwauer. “We are more interested in having some questions answered, such as the relationship between raksasha and attacker, and the reason why a raksasha would be skulking around our fair town”.

A member of group Disciples of Avrynnner is helping the town guard with their enquiries. No charges have been filed.

The Wild Lands: Clerics Unite in City of Loons

RYNOSHOK: King Joto’s longstanding ban on open religious worship was challenged this month by a bizarre coalition of clerics. Followers of the Rotlord and the Church of the Silver Mists issued a joint declaration demanding to be allowed free worship in the dominions of Shynabyth. The alliance, believed to be the first ever between the opposing faiths, came about in response to “the draconian tactics of the king in attempting to deny the power of the gods.”

On the day of the declaration, weather around the Rynoshok region was unseasonably changeable, alternating between blue-sky heatwaves and black, thunderous rainstorms. Many citizens have quietly voiced their support for the churches, although none have been as outspoken as the heretofore hidden leaders of each faith in Rynoshok. “We may not see eye to eye

on certain issues”, stated Dream Weaver Gendrick. “We differ on the appropriateness of murdering children and spreading disease, for example. One thing we are united in is the belief that the gods are all-powerful and deserving of our veneration.”

Pestilent One Hagrief added, in a speech punctuated by a hacking cough and the spitting of phlegm, “We demand that Joto rescind his ban on open worship, lest he suffer the fate of hubristic leaders come before him. The Rotlord remembers all.” It seems that the cause of the churches may have an ally in King Joto’s son Sobryn, who has agreed to speak to his father on behalf of the clerics. Sources indicate that he has asked them to ramp down the rhetoric and maintain a low profile during the planned discussion.

FINAL WORD

Just before we went to print, we received word that Slivers knows we intercepted his mail. He is apparently planning a raid on our presses, if he can find them.

Good luck, runt!

We’ll bring you all the coverage on ‘Gremply’s Hunt’ next issue!!

-Editor X

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Silven Trumpeter Magazine

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Next issue
 November 01,
 2004