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Editor's Note: March 1, 2005

Welcome to the 19th issue of the *Silven Trumpeter*!

Time passes, and things change. This past month, Dana Lynn Driscoll chose to step down from her position as Editor-in-Chief in order to devote herself to her Ph.D. studies. We will all miss her work here in the *Trumpeter*, and I think I speak for us all when I wish her the best of luck in wherever her path may lead.

My name is Elizabeth R.A. Liddell, although those of you who have seen me in the guilds or worked with me know that I go by Lyz. I've been gaming for about ten years and writing for nearly that long, and I am very excited to be working as Editor-in-Chief for the *Trumpeter*.

Filling Dana's shoes (even with her guidance and assistance!) is proving to be a challenging task. I'm very thankful that I have a strong staff of editors to help me out as well as a cast of creative, dedicated writers each bringing their unique work to our table. I hope you'll all be patient with me as I learn the tricks of the trade, and I hope I can bring you a *Trumpeter* with the same high standards of quality that it has always had.

This month's issue is filled, cover-to-cover, with all the sorts of tasty treats you've come to expect from us! You'll find short fiction ranging from the dramatic to the hilarious, new material for use in your d20 games, and a wide spread of product reviews.

So, until I find my own tagline of closure, happy gaming!

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

The Adventures of Starlanko the Magnificent

by Matthew J. Hanson

The Adventure of Redreck the Fierce

I Promise There Will Be Pirates

"So are you going?" asked Redreck the Fierce's long time friend, Starlanko the Magnificent.

"I don't know," Redreck replied. He swigged a shot of whiskey. Redreck and Starlanko sat in the common room of the Ambrosia Inn. They had been discussing a bard called Correlius of the Shining Song. Redreck's favorite bard and Correlius were scheduled to play the next town over. One part of Redreck very much wanted to attend the performance, but another part worried about Starlanko.

"Don't worry about me," Starlanko said. "I'll plan to take it easy the next few days. The scariest part of my weekend is going to be meeting with Bargle, and that will be more unsettling than actually dangerous."

Bargle was another wizard, one who Redreck did not trust. If it were up to Redreck he would steer clear of Bargle, but Starlanko insisted it was good business, and Redreck did not pretend to understand business the way Starlanko did.

"I won't start any trouble," Starlanko said, "and if any comes to find me... I've still got Candessa to protect me."

This was little comfort to Redreck. He did not think Candessa Voliar, another wizard who was traveling with Starlanko and Redreck, was a bad person. She was friendly; she sometimes talked too much for Redreck's taste, but most people did. Redreck doubted her dependability when push came to shove. A month ago they had all been involved in a large battle with a small army of drow. Candessa spent most of the battle tucked in an extra dimensional space. Redreck did not fault her for it; some people were not meant to lead a life of combat, but he could not trust Candessa to be a protector.

As if proving his point, Candessa descended the staircase from the private rooms and crossed to Redreck's table.

"I'm going out," she said. "Don't wait up for me."

"I've still got Funbane to protect me," Starlanko said. Redreck looked at Starlanko's belt. The scabbard that normally housed Funbane, Starlanko's talking sword, was vacant. "Okay, so I threw him in a hay wagon. We had a disagreement. But he'll be back tonight, I'm sure." The sword always returned to its owner at midnight.

Redreck sometimes felt sorry for Funbane. Not because Starlanko could treat the sword coldly. It was the dynamic of their relationship. Redreck knew that despite Starlanko's occasional griping or teasing, the wizard regarded the sword as a friend.

Redreck pitied Funbane for the lack of power it must feel. The sword was given intelligence like any living creature, but only the least of magical enchantments in terms of fighting power. Redreck had long ago acquired weapons that suited him better on the battle field, and in a life where the cost of failure could be the deaths of his friends, Redreck had to choose the option that gave him the greatest edge in combat. So the sword hung at the belt of a wizard who never drew the weapon. Funbane was unable to fulfill his true purpose. Redreck thought it must be like a soldier being forced to watch a battle but not being able to join the fray.

Redreck noticed that Starlanko was tapping his left pinky finger against the table. It was a sign that there was something heavy on the wizard's mind. Perhaps now was not the time to be drinking. Redreck flipped over his empty glass.

"No, it's nothing."

Redreck doubted Starlanko would hide a matter of security. The wizard might want Redreck to go to Escondale, but Redreck did not think Starlanko would go so far as to hide a real threat.

If Starlanko was not anxious about matters of safety, he was probably concerned about matters of a more personal nature. For some reason Starlanko had developed an infatuation with Candessa. Redreck nodded to the door from which she had recently left.

"No, it's actually not about her. Really, it's nothing important."

Redreck decided to relax and take Starlanko at his word. Perhaps Starlanko was finally getting over Candessa. The thought comforted Redreck. He knew that Candessa would only end up hurting Starlanko in the end. The warrior was not sure what his friend saw in Candessa.

But Redreck was hardly one to admonish.

"If you don't want to go for yourself," Starlanko said, "which I'm sure you do," and he was right, "go for me. I've got the meeting I have to attend, but get me his autograph. Hold on." Starlanko rummaged through his *bag of holding*. "Here it is." He found a copy of the *Ballad of the Dark Horse*, a song written by Correlius of the Shining Song. "If you come back without his signature I'll be very disappointed."

"Okay," Redreck conceded. He went upstairs to retrieve his possessions, then within minutes he was on the road to Escondale.

The tavern hall was large. It was not entirely full, but Redreck noticed more people gathered than the last time he attended one of Correlius's concerts. Redreck was torn between his urge to get a good seat, and his urge to remain inconspicuous. He was even traveling without his trusty broadsword, an act that was almost unheard of for Redreck. In the end Redreck decided upon a seat close to the front, but far off to the side. Assuming the performer looked straight out, his gaze would pass right by Redreck.

While he waited for the performance to start, Redreck sipped from a tall glass of mead. There was a din of voices all around him, but the speakers were of no consequence, and Redreck lost himself in his inner thoughts. At last the lights were dimmed. The audience applauded as Dennara of the Diamond Strings entered. She was the accompanist to Correlius of the Shining Song, and would play her lute while Correlius sang.

Then Correlius entered, and the applause crested, then faded away. Correlius thanked the audience, then nodded to Dennara.

Dennara began to play her lute. Musical notes drifted from it and flowed throughout the hall. Correlius began to sing.

The notes rang pure, and sweet. His voice had all the beauty of the sun rising over the snow-capped Morlian Mountains, all the powers of a waterfall, and all the fragileness of a lily blooming in spring. When the bard sang, Redreck lost himself. There was no tavern around him, no friends a city away. Redreck no longer saw the man performing before him; even the lyrics were lost..

As he grew accustomed to the experience, Redreck's mind drifted back to the physical world. He knew where he was, and how he got there, and most of all why he was there. Redreck watched Correlius's performance just as intently as he listened to it. It amazed Redreck that such a divine sound could come from such a mortal frame. The throat that created the resonance, the lips that formed the sound. They were just like the parts of any other man, and yet Correlius was able to use them for so much more.

Redreck was so gruff and battle-ridden that even his lips had scars

Maybe not just like. Redreck was so gruff and battle-ridden that even his lips had scars. Correlius's features were not damaged the way Redreck's were. They were cleaner. Softer.

The performance went on for nearly two hours, and while the singing continued Redreck was content. He felt a slight twinge of loss when Correlius announced he was about to play his last song, the *Ballad of the Dark Horse*.

Of course. Starlanko had given Redreck the copy to autograph. He knew that Starlanko probably did not truly care whether Redreck obtained an autograph or not. The wizard had probably only used it as an excuse to get the warrior out the door, but Redreck had said he would get an autograph, and he was a man of his word.

The last notes of the song faded away. Correlius thanked everybody for attending, and left the stage.

Redreck hastened for the exit. He knew he would have to act fast. Some bards like to linger after performances and mingle with their audiences, but Correlius liked to leave quickly.

"Excuse me, Correlius." Redreck caught the bard just as he was preparing to leave. Correlius seemed different close up. He was more real, Redreck realized. The Correlius he watched so often on stage was an abstraction, but the man before him was a real human.

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"My friend asked me to see if you could autograph this." Redreck held out the parchment with the copy of the song.

"Of course," Correlius said. "Anything for a fan. What is your friend's name?"

"Starlanko."

"Starlanko the Magnificent?"

"Yes."

Correlius chuckled at an unseen joke. "And just what is your name?"

"Redreck."

"Did you enjoy the show, Redreck?"

"Yes."

Correlius finished his inscription and handed it back. Across the top the parchment now read, *To Starlanko the Magnificent. Sorry you couldn't make the show, but thanks for sending your friend Redreck. It was my pleasure.*

Redreck thanked the bard, and was about to turn away, when a cloaked and hooded figure spoke up from the other end of the alley.

"Be ye the one called Correlius of the Shining Song?" the figure asked. Two others in similar cloaks flanked the speaker.

"Who wants to know?" Correlius asked.

"The lads call me No-Depth, on account of the eye. But all you need to know is that I've come with a message from Captain Blargoth. The captain says to enjoy your life while you can. For it won't be lasting much longer." The speaker flung off his cloak to reveal a frilly shirt, and a red handkerchief tied round his head, a cutlass at his side, and a patch over his left eye.

"Oh dear," said Correlius. "More pirates."

"Arrrr!"

The two other cloaked figures proved to be pirates as well. Correlius quickly wove together a magical song and the two henchling pirates fell to the ground unconscious. Undaunted, No-Depth drew his cutlass and charged.

Redreck interposed himself between No-Depth and Correlius. While trying to reach the bard, the pirate received a painful blow to the jaw.

"Have at ye!" No-Depth shouted. He slashed at Redreck. It drew blood, but by Redreck's standards it was only a scratch. Redreck retaliated with two more quick punches that both landed true.

Meanwhile Correlius was weaving another magic song. Redreck felt his muscles quicken, his reflexes sharpen. It was similar to the experience he felt when Starlanko the Magnificent cast *haste* upon him.

The pirate No-Depth cut Redreck again this time the wound sliced deeper. Redreck was still far from worrying about the injuries, but he decided he had had enough. He grabbed the pirate's wrist and wrenched the cutlass from No-Depth's hand.

No-Depth knew he was beat, and fled. Redreck would have none of that. He threw the pirate's cutlass after him, and it lodged in the scurvy dog's back. The pirate staggered a few more paces, then fell to the ground unconscious.

"My hero!" Correlius exclaimed. "Oh dear, you're hurt. Here, let me make it all better." Before Redreck could protest, the bard cast another spell. He touched Redreck's wounds and the cuts healed. The pain lessened. "How's that?"

"It's better." Redreck stretched his muscles. There was still a small twinge. "But I'm not at full."

"I'm sorry," the bard said, "I only ever learned *cure light*. Here, let me try again." Once again he cast the spell, and once again his fingers glided across Redreck's scarred chest. "How's that?"

"Good."

Correlius paused slightly, then said, "I should probably be going."

"More pirates?" Redreck said. "Does that happen a lot?"

"It's not a big deal really. I'm just being hunted by pirates is all."

"Why?"

"It's a long story," said Correlius.

"I'm a good listener."

Correlius sighed. "It was a long time ago. You see, I've been training to sing ever since I was a boy. When I was young I had a rich soprano voice, and there was talk among the elders about... making it permanent. I wasn't looking forward to that. So, late one moonless night I sneaked out from my room and ran away. I did not have a good idea of what I would do, but I remembered hearing songs about sailors. They sounded so rugged and manly. When I was young I dreamed about being rugged. I thought I just had to get into the right company, and suddenly muscles would just burst out of me. I've since come to be more realistic about my goals."

"I think you're just fine," Redreck interrupted.

"Thanks. Coming from you that's something," Correlius said. Then he continued his story. "Anyway, I remembered the stories that I had heard, so I decided to stow away on a sailing ship. I didn't know one ship from another, so I chose one based on the name. I was still in my manly phase, so I went with the manliest name I could find: the Bloody Skull.

"I crept on and hid myself in an apple barrel, in which I drifted off to dreamland. I awoke to the sound of an explosion. I crept from my hiding place and went to the window, a porthole actually. I peered out to see a merchant ship, and it was being peppered by spells and arrows from the Bloody Skull, which later turned out to not really be the Bloody Skull. It was actually the Black-Eyed Susan, but that name was so closely identified with looting and pillaging that they used the name Bloody Skull when berthing in lawful ports.

"I did not realize I was on the infamous *Black-Eyed Susan* at the time, but it was clear from the look of the other vessels that this was no military conflict. It was a pirate raid, and I was on the ship that was doing the raiding.

"I did not know what to do. I had yearned for adventure, but I did not think I could resort to piracy. I also knew that if they caught me I would surely be forced to walk the plank, so I returned to my apple barrel and contemplated how to make my return to civilization.

"I lived in that apple barrel for three days with nothing to eat but apples. I couldn't even make an apple tart or an apple cobbler, just plain apples. But on the fourth day I awoke to discover that we were being taken ashore.

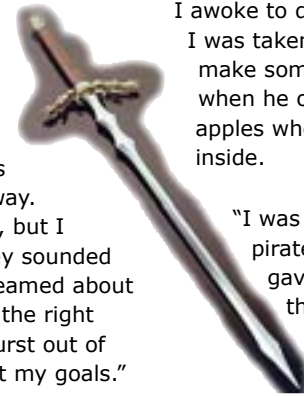
I was taken to the pirate chef, who was planning to make some sort of apple strudel, but to his surprise, when he opened the apple barrel, he found that the apples were half eaten, and a young boy was hiding inside.

"I was dragged before the captain, a cutthroat pirate called Captain Blargoth. The captain gave me an ultimatum. I could either join their pirate crew, or fall to the depths of Davy Jones' Locker. It was not much of a choice, so I joined up. I was still so young at the time that the Captain realized I could not participate in actual piracy.

At first they tried to make me a part of the sailing crew, hoisting the main sail and all that, but alas, I proved too frail for that rugged work. Only a few days into my tenure the pirate's cook was gobbled up by a giant squid that attacked him after Captain Blargoth threw the cook overboard. Being that I needed to prove myself useful, the position fell to me. I managed to do quite well if I do say so myself. While I was not cooking I would also lead shanties while the men worked, sing ballads when they rested, or dance a jig when the situation called for it.

"On it continued for five years, until finally the guilt of sailing with pirates became too much for me to bear. I waited until we again anchored off a civilized port. Then I snuck from the boat, changed my name, and picked up the life of a traveling minstrel.

"It seems I could not escape forever. You see, I know the location of Captain Blargoth's secret island, where the pirates store all their ill-gotten pirate booty. They fear



that I will reveal their secrets, so they have hunted for me all these years. Now that they have found me, I fear I must go into hiding again. And just when my career was starting to pick up."

"No," Redreck said. "You've run long enough. Now it's time for you to fight back."

"But what can I do? Captain Blargoth is a fierce warrior."

"It's okay," said Redreck. "I'm a fierce warrior too."

It was not hard to find the *Black-Eyed Susan*. It was the same boat Correlius had sailed on all those years ago, though it was registered under a different name. To anybody who checked the ship's identification it was the *Axe of Carnage*, but the name could not hide the despicable nature of the *Black-Eyed Susan*.

Redreck was clad in full armor, with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other. He also brought his bow, his morning star, and several daggers, just in case. Correlius was tucked closely behind. The bard seemed to fear that he would be instantly abducted if he strayed more than a foot from Redreck.

It was still late at night, so nobody was on deck. This combined with the gangplank being down made it easy for the bard and fighter to board.

Redreck stood in the middle of the deck. "Hello!" he called.

Like rats, pirates scurried from every nook and cranny. They immediately recognized Correlius, and though they did not advance, they shouted jeers and insults like "land lubber;" "mutinous blowfish," and "your mother's so stupid she thought buccaneer referred to the price of corn."

Then somebody shouted, "Make way for the captain!" and the pirate rabble hushed. A line parted and Captain Blargoth sauntered through the clearing.

She wore a large-brimmed hat with an ostrich feather on the left side, and a blue overcoat with tails. Her pantaloons were tucked into her tall boots. Her brown, curled hair was cut to shoulder length. Captain Blargoth's right hand was missing, and in its place was a sharp

hook. A green parrot perched on her shoulder.

"You spoony bard! Ye didn't think ye could outrun us forever, Pretty Pep?"

"I'm not running anymore," Correlius said.

"Aye, I can see that now, can't I," Captain Blargoth said. "Now you're just cowering behind others, not even able to stand up for your own self." Her words were meant to be an insult to Correlius, but they gave Redreck a source of pride. He considered it a privilege to fight for those who could not protect themselves. "And just who do ye be that puts himself 'tween a lion and her prey?" Captain Blargoth asked.

"Redreck."

"Redreck, eh? Ye look like a good fighting man. We may have use for you on our crew. What do ye say?"

"I don't work with pirates."

"Pirates? Do you see any pirates, Polly?"

"Raa!" squawked the bird on Blargoth's shoulder. "No pirates here."

"Nay, we be but humble merchant sailors trying to make out an honest living," the captain said. "But we'll kill ye if ye don't step away from the bard."

Redreck raised his sword.

Captain Blargoth turned away. "Kill him."

The pirate mob rushed at Redreck. For several rounds there was a clattering of swords against steel, a bard dodging as best he could, and a whole lot of cleaving. In less than a minute almost the entire pirate crew lay flat upon the deck, battered and bleeding.

"I must admit I'm rather impressed," said Captain Blargoth. She had migrated to higher ground. "It's almost as though me men could barely hit you. It must be on account of that armor ye're wearing. I wonder why I didn't think to put any of me men in armor?" Blargoth's hook magically transformed into a metal hand as she

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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grabbed hold of a rope and swung towards Redreck. She kicked him in the chest and knocked him clean overboard. "Oh yes, maybe it's on account of the water." Captain Blargoth turned to Correlius, "I'll hate to spill your blood, Pretty Pep, but I'm afraid ye know too much."

"Excuse me, Captain," said the first mate, a bearded pirate who had "withdrawn" during Redreck's onslaught. "Shouldn't we be making him walk the plank? I mean, isn't that the piratey thing to do?"

"We're berthed in harbor. If he walked the plank, he'd just swim ashore, and what good would that be?"

"We could sail further out."

"Even if we unhitched now it would take hours, and we haven't finished loading up on supplies."

"I know, Captain, but some of the boys and I have been talking, and this wouldn't be the first of our complaints."

"If you've got any complaints to be making, ye should be making them to me!"

"Well, Captain, about all this fresh fruit you've got us eating?"

"Aye? What about it?"

"Well, how are we supposed to be getting scurvy if we keep getting our proper allotment of vitamin C?"

"That's the point, ye mangy barnacle. Scurvy's a debilitating disease, and if left untreated could prove fatal."

"All the same, Captain. When me and the boys call ourselves scurvy dogs we'd like to be able to mean it."

Meanwhile, Redreck the Fierce was on the sea floor below the *Black-Eyed Susan* trying to undo his armor. He and Correlius had discussed the possibility of being thrown overboard, and Redreck had decided it was worth the risk. He knew that he could hold his breath for over three minutes with no effort and could usually take his armor off in that time or less.

Along with his armor, Redreck left most of his weapons on the ocean floor. He took only his bow and arrows, and a single dagger. There was a twinge of loss for his equipment, but he knew he could come back for it after the proper bestowing of a *water breathing* spell.

Back on deck, Captain Blargoth and her first mate had finally reached an agreement. "Okay, how about this: I'll kill the Pretty Pep right now, and ye still have to eat your two servings of fruit, but as a concession I won't slit open your gullet. Agreed?"

But the mate did not answer. There was a *thwenk* and an arrow pierce his throat.

Blargoth turned. "I didn't think I'd be seeing ye again this side of the Hades."

Redreck fired an arrow at Blargoth, but she dodged.

"Arr! Have at ye!" she cried, and charged upon him. Redreck dropped his bow and drew his dagger. Blargoth attacked with both cutlass and hook. Most of Correlius's more powerful spells had been spent for the day, but he sang a song that somehow made Redreck feel greater, which may have been the edge he needed. With neither party wearing armor, blows were easily landed on both sides. It soon became a fight of attrition, seeing who could stand the punishment longer. As it turned out, Redreck had the higher endurance.

"Ye may have bested me, and all me men, but I'll have the last laugh yet." Captain Blargoth clicked her heals together and flew into the air. "Ye'll rue the day ye crossed me blade!"

Redreck picked up his bow and fired several shots after her, but it was no use. Captain Blargoth disappeared into the night.

"I'm sorry I let her get away," said Redreck.

"Don't apologize. You did far more than I could ever ask for."

"She'll be back."

"I know." Correlius looked Redreck in the eyes, but it only lasted a second before Redreck looked down and kicked at the floorboards. "You know. I wouldn't mind having a big strong man like you around. If you'd like to travel with me for a while..."

Redreck scratched at the back of his head. "I would, but I've got another friend I'm looking after."

"I should have known somebody like you would already..."

"We're just friends. But I don't think... maybe you could travel with us for a while."

"I'd love to, but my career's just starting to take off. I've

got gigs scheduled, and I shouldn't cancel those."

"Okay then."

"Hey, Redreck. Would it be okay if I sent you a *sending* sometime? Maybe if we are in the same part of the kingdom we can get together sometime."

"I'd like that."

"And... before you go... for saving my life and all, I've got a reward I'd like to give you."

"What?"

"This." Correlius stood on his tiptoes and used Redreck's shoulder for support, but it still wasn't quite enough height.

"Oh, sorry," Redreck said when he realized what was going on. He bent slightly downwards.

Correlius's lips were tender and warm.

"You know," said Redreck. "It's not a good idea to ride cross country at night. I should probably stay at least until morning."

"Well, I'd hate to put you in danger."

An Eagle Warrior's Oath

by Khaz Axson

Part 2

*** *The proud city of Ravenholt has fallen. Its once glittering towers lie in smoking ruins, consumed by dragon fire and overrun by the assembled might of the wicked Timborian elves. Great woolly mammoths grind the population underfoot while dragons circle Ravens Valley, searching for survivors to sate their appetites. From the destruction, one hero emerges: Bron Straker, eagle warrior and dragon slayer, along with his avian mount Screech, the last of an ancient race of giant eagles. Together they seek to fulfill their oaths to their home and peoples as they wreak havoc among the invading Timborian elves. Please join us for the exciting conclusion of "An Eagle Warrior's Oath."****

Agnariel Timbor was invincible. The elven king, seated on a platform high atop his black woolly mammoth mount and surrounded by his personal bodyguard of soldiers and war sorcerers, casually looked down on the ruined human city of Ravenholt, where his elven reavers raped and pillaged at will.

Shielding his eyes from the rising sun, Agnariel saw a pair of dragons break from formation to swoop down on the eastern quarter of the city. Turning behind him to his personal sorcerer, the frost elf king impatiently nodded his head in the dragons' direction.

Unlike the dragon riders, who were armed and armored in traditional frost blue, Timborian magic users preferred to wear flowing, blood-red robes trimmed in black. The sorcerer bowed before replying to Agnariel's unspoken question. "I have sensed the loss of another wyrm, my lord," answered the spellcaster. His eyes down, he didn't

notice the look of annoyance flash across his lord's pale, frost blue face.

Before Agnariel could ask his next question, the answer shot through the smoke in the form of an eagle and its rider. The frost elves watched eagerly as another dragon broke formation to engage the renegade eagle. The giant reptile would surely rend the bird to shreds, ending any resistance.

They watched as the eagle dodged the dragon's clumsy attack and went on the offensive. Sparks flew as the eagle warrior's blade made contact with dragon scales once, and then again. A collective gasp of disbelief escaped their lips as the raptor disengaged itself from the injured beast and headed directly for them.

"The human must be mad or suicidal, my lord. Surely he does not intend..." The sorcerer never finished the thought as Agnariel lost his composure. He backhanded the stammering elf across the face, sending him flying off the platform to the ground below.

Clenching his fists in frustration, Lord Timbor screamed down at his battle sorcerers, "I have lost half my dragons this day, and you make feeble excuses!" Spittle flew from his mouth as he raged at the assembled spellcasters, "Your warlocks have flown six dragons into oblivion!"

Tagnariel Timbor, Lord Timbor's general and younger cousin, as well as his chief rival for the frost elf throne, shouted a warning to his king from his own woolly mammoth mount. "Agnar, you need to dismount now!"

he said. Tagnariel pointed at the feathered missile and its human rider bearing down on them as it left the slower pursuing dragons far behind. The younger elf turned to the archers and battle mages and shouted, "Archers, fire at will! Sorcerers, prepare defensive spells! Protect your king!"

Glancing sidelong at his rival, Agnariel drew his curved sword and faced the hurtling eagle. He seethed at the use of his childhood nickname instead of proper title, but his confidence grew as he felt protective magic begin to ripple around him. "You would like that, wouldn't you, *cousin?*" the king muttered. He spat the final word as though it left a lingering unpleasantness in his mouth. "For my people to see me leap out of danger's way in some undignified manner? Not this day, Tag. You will not steal my thunder. Today I carve my name into history."

"Brace yourself, human!" Screech yelled back to Bron as it saw the waves of magic surrounding the frost elf king ripple like heat rising from a forge. The bird could also see that the spell was not complete and the casters would not have time to finish their incantation before impact. Extending its talons, the eagle felt the protective spell give way. It collided with the frost elf king as though he were a fish in a lake.

The elf tried to twist away, but the eagle's right talon tore into Agnariel Timbor's breast plate. The force of the impact sent the elven monarch hurtling from the back of his mammoth.

Momentum carried the bird and its rider past the assembled frost elves to the edge of a small stand of pine trees, where they hit the ground with bone-jarring force, sliding across snow and muddy earth. They came to a stop in a pile of feathers and blood. The collision with the mad frost elf had broken the eagle's leg, and the king's razor-edged blade had sliced along its underbelly. At least one of the archers had aimed true, as a crossbow protruded from the bird's chest, blood leaking from a punctured lung.

Even though the jolt was cushioned by the body of his mount, Bron was stunned by the impact. Unaware of the full extent of the eagle's injuries, he used his sword, still gripped in his right hand, to stand woozily on unsteady legs. His entire body aching, he shook the fog from his

brain and stared down at the prone eagle, noticing the red mess spilling from its abdomen.

"I am the last of my kind, Bron Straker," rasped the dying bird in a barely audible voice. It was the first time the eagle had called him by name. Dark red blood flowed from its hooked beak and nostrils.

"Do not let the death of my race be in vain."

Bron stared in dazed disbelief as the light faded from the proud bird's fierce eyes. The harsh reality of his situation slowly sunk in.

"This is where I am going to die," he said.

He didn't feel the way he thought he should feel. There was no fear, no regret, no panic or sadness. There was just cold, calm rage. He heard shouts in a language he did not understand. Bron gripped his gore-encrusted sword and slowly turned to meet his death.

Looking up the slight rise he had just slid down seconds before, he saw at least two dozen archers and twice that number of foot soldiers spreading out in a semi-circle as they advanced down the hill. The remaining six dragons now circled above, awaiting their orders.

Dabbing blood from a gash in his forehead, Agnariel Timbor looked down at the pathetic human and briefly admired the man's tenacity. Scorched from dragon fire and bleeding from at least a dozen injuries, the warrior from Ravenholt still stood, ready to battle to the last.

"Take him alive," ordered the frost elf king. "I will enjoy torturing this one at my leisure."

As he spoke, the human's head snapped up, and their gazes locked briefly. Agnariel could see the fiery determination in the man's eyes as he suddenly charged his frost elf attackers. The cornered prey had turned on the predator.

Even though he didn't understand what was said, the imperious, pompous tone in the frost elf's voice set something off in Bron's head.

Growling incoherently, his vision waving in a red haze, the human tore into the surprised elven elite. Wielding his sword with both hands, the enraged human hewed through foes like a lumberjack through saplings. He

As the frost elves fell from the human's ferocious attack, a red-robed sorcerer appeared on the hill and began to mouth the words of a spell.

fought with the desperation of the damned, with the strength of a man with nothing to lose. Dead elves piled up around him as he dodged and weaved through their defenses. He bled, but he refused to relent. With each stroke of his blade, Bron thought of a lost loved one: his wife, his son, his parents. He killed the elves for all the good people of Ravenholt that had lost their lives this day. Through all this, he kept Agnariel Timbor, the source of his ire and the cause of his pain, in his sights.

As the frost elves fell from the human's ferocious attack, a red-robed sorcerer appeared on the hill and began to mouth the words of a spell. The mage's high-pitched crooning became a rhythmic wailing that sent chills down Bron's spine. The foot soldiers gratefully withdrew as he continued his peculiar incantation, leaving the savage, blood-covered human alone among their dead.

Knowing he was doomed if the sorcerer finished his spell, Bron shouted at the frost elf king. "You need foul sorcery to bring me down, frost elf pig?" he barked in the common tongue spoken throughout the continent of Ta-Teharun. "Is that pretty sword at your side just decoration?" Bron bellowed. "Is there none among you who can face me in honorable combat, or has all the honor been bred out of your vile race? Bron saw anger flash across Agnariel's face, and he spat toward the elven king, punctuating the insult.

Agnariel raised a hand, and the sorcerer's stopped his incantation. "I am not bound by hollow, baseless codes of honor embraced by the lesser races," he replied. "We follow no moral creed. Honor and morality is a weakness

possessed by the Illunar elves. That weakness is the only reason you humans have been allowed to thrive and overpopulate this earth. That same weakness allowed my ancestor, Sarel Timbor, to ride forth from Thantwilanoria in exile. Thantwilanoria will feel the consequences of their weakness, as your people have felt them today."

"Sounds like a lot of fancy excuses, thrown around by a cowardly fop of a false king!" Bron responded. "Human

kings earn their thrones through the strength of their sword arms, not through some questionable blood claim. You are a cowardly dog, and your victory will be short lived."

Several of the assembled soldiers bristled at the insults directed at their king and their lineage, but Agnariel also noticed a number of thinly veiled smiles. Was there already a plan to usurp his throne?

"Allow me to part this filthy human's head from his body, Agnar!" said Tagnariel, speaking loud enough for most of the onlooking elves to hear.

Agnariel seethed. Now he would have to accept the human's challenge. To refuse after his cousin's offer would be suicide. Some among them already looked to Tagnariel as the stronger of the two, and allowing his cousin to fight for him would seal his fate. Glaring at his cousin, Agnariel drew his sword. "I accept your challenge, human," he said, and he smiled as cheers erupted from his bloodthirsty soldiers.

Shoving Tagnariel roughly out of his way, the king gracefully slipped his white fox fur cloak from his shoulders, revealing the signature ice-blue armor of the Timborian elves.

"Hold my cloak, *Tag*."

Now it was Tagnariel's turn to be embarrassed, as he subserviently bent to retrieve his older cousin's discarded garment.

Bron shrugged off his own scorched, eagle feather cloak and spun his sword on its wrist thong as he watched his opponent approach.

The elf moved with catlike grace and speed, also spinning his sword, while pulling a broad, curved black blade from his belt. The edge was crusted with a noxious green substance that could only be poison.

Bron circled to his right, stepping over frost elf corpses, taunting his adversary as he moved. "It would seem your rule is more fragile than you think, eh, pig?" Bron grinned wolfishly. "Political climate a bit stormy?"

Agnariel answered the taunts with steel, attacking with magically enhanced speed. Bron barely had time to parry the overhead slash aimed at his head. As their blades met with a ringing clash, the elf swept his knife in front of him from left to right. Bron used his greater bulk and strength to push the elf back, and he felt the poisoned blade cut through his leather vest, but it did not reach the skin.

Anxious to keep the elf on the defensive, Bron launched an offensive flurry, slashing and hacking, back and forth, up and down, keeping his feet moving. He tried to gain the higher ground, but Agnariel was skilled. He expertly parried and dodged, giving ground but not retreating. All the while he kept his poisoned blade poised to strike, waiting for an opening in the human's ferocious assault.

Determined to wear the elf down or shatter his sword, Bron continued to batter his smaller opponent, until the elf went down on one knee, holding his sword up before him in a desperate attempt at defense. Seeing his opening, Bron stepped in and swept his sword low, aiming below Agnariel's upraised weapon, only to feel his blade cut through nothing but air. It had been a ruse.

The elf leaned back and brought his sword down on Bron's blade, pinning the tip to the ground, while the blade in his left hand sliced horizontally, slicing deep into the bicep of the human's right arm.

Bron felt the blade tear through his flesh and muscle, cutting tendons and ligaments and rendering his sword arm useless. The sword fell from his limp grasp and dangled from its wrist thong. He could feel the poison coursing its way through his blood stream, at first tingling, then burning. His legs suddenly felt weak, and drawing breath became difficult as his chest began to constrict. He took a couple of staggering steps backward before falling to his knees.

Sheathing his sword, Agnariel watched as the poison took effect. The frost elf casually approached the dying human, bent over and grasped the man's hair with his right hand, and placed the bloodied blade of his knife to Bron's neck. Leaning in close he whispered, "After I kill you, I will have my necromancers reanimate your filthy, louse-ridden corpse. Then I will shred your spirit to shreds and hunt down your soul. I will deliver it to Zareesha myself so that she may torment you for eternity in hell."

Bron's left hand slid slowly up his thigh as he met the frost elf's gaze. "I'm not dead yet, pig," he growled, hate burning in his eyes. With his last effort he brought his left arm up.

Protruding from between his index and middle fingers was a short, sharp push knife. All eagle warriors, carried them to cut away saddle straps in a hurry. This one cut through more than saddle straps. The blade punched through fine chain link, into Agnariel's abdomen, between his belt and breast plate. Bron twisted the blade, searching for the elf's vitals as the first arrow hit him in the chest. He fell back as Agnariel sought to hold in his bowels, a look of shock on his pale blue face.

Through a bloody haze, Bron saw Tagnariel Timbor's arm fall, and another arrow hit him in the shoulder. He fell to his back, reaching to the sky with his left hand. He thought he saw the ghostly image of an eagle before everything went black. Bron Straker, last of the eagle warriors of Ravenholt, breathed his last breath.

Far to the south of Ravenholt, under the protective boughs of the great pines bordering Ravens Valley and the outskirts of the Graode Mountains, Argemon the blind seer stood facing the burning city of Ravenholt.

His aged, milky white eyes turned to the sky. At his side was a woman, a cowl pulled over her chestnut brown hair, covering her pretty face. Her dark eyes were moist and red. In her arms she held a child, a boy, no more than a year old, who was contentedly sleeping in his mother's arms.

"He will never know his father," she said softly.

Argemon reached out and stroked the boy's dark hair. "He will know of him, Shianna," the old man responded. He turned away from the valley, and said to the child, "They will sing songs of your father's heroics, Grom, son of Bron."

Argemon put his hands on Shianna's shoulders. "You saw the dragons were widening their circles over the valley, searching for survivors. If not for your husband's heroics, we would never have made it out of the valley. It's almost as if he knew," the old man finished softly, as if talking to himself.

"That does not make it any less painful, Father," Shianna responded. They walked in silence for a little while.

As they reached the clearing, Argemon leaned over and whispered in his daughter's ear. "You need to be strong now Shianna, not only for Grom, but for them," he said, nodding toward the hundred or so escapees from Ravenholt who had gathered here. He paused before continuing. "And for the unborn daughter you now carry in your womb."

Shianna snapped her head around, eyes wide with surprise. "Are you sure, Father?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, my dear. Now, let's get started. We have a long day and perilous journey before us." The old man started walking down the trail that led through the wooded foothills of the Graode Mountains, sweeping his gnarled staff before him, and the weary survivors began their long trek.

In amongst the band's meager supplies, buried beneath the dried food, medical supplies, and water skins on one of the small, mule-pulled supply wagon, packed with warm furs and hay, were fifteen unhatched eagle eggs.

Through the Lens of History: Using History for Better Gaming

Vision XVI: Wolfskins and Berserks Warrior Types of Ancient Germany and the Nordic World

by Sean Holland

"Berserks snorted as the battle began,
wolf-warriors howled and shook weapons."

-Haralds saga Hárfagra

Humanity has always looked to animals for inspiration: as swift as a hawk, as brave as a lion, as loyal as a hound. Warriors especially have looked to the animal kingdom, calling upon the strength and perceived virtues of animals.

In this article, the Lens will look at how warriors of the German tribes and the Norse used animal imagery, especially the wolf and the bear.

Part I - The History

Evidence for the various types of animal warriors is in some cases fairly slender, with most information drawn from legends and sagas or inferred from other sources.

The wolf is a common symbol and shares a resonance with warrior groups from the Native Americans to the steppes nomads of central Asia. Wolves hunt in packs, are hierarchical and loyal to their pack-mates; all good things for a warrior band to emulate. The wolf is also a skilled hunter, master of its terrain and a hardy traveler - again all good skills for a warrior. By taking on the nature of the wolf, warriors sought to make themselves better warriors; faster, fiercer and more deadly, like the wolf.

Those who became wolf warriors wore the skin of the wolf, its skull as a headdress with the skin draped across their back. Sometimes the fur of the forelegs was tied across the warrior's chest, others it would be sew to the sleeves of his clothing. Some wolf warriors fought

without any armor at all, wearing only the wolf skin and relying upon speed for protection. Others wore the wolf skin over mail or armor. The wolf skin both symbolized the warrior's link with the wolf and made them look ferocious and frightening in battle. The wolf warriors probably barked and howled to build their own courage and unnerve their enemies, they may even have danced to summon the spirit of the wolf to aid them.

There seemed to be no standard weapons used by the wolf warriors. Germanic and Norse wolf warriors used the same sorts of swords, axes, spears and shields as other warriors. Because they were an elite warrior society within a warrior culture, Wolf warriors were expected to be able to strike hard and fast. They may have been used as shock troops and it is possible that they were often part of the bodyguards of chieftains and kings.

It may have been a tradition for those who followed the wolf to strike out on their own. It may have been common for young warriors, sometimes from different tribes, to gather together as wolf warriors and act as adventurers and bandits. Some may even have been able to take their success in war to claim their own land and found a new tribe. For instance, youthful wolf warriors who were seeking a new homeland for themselves may have founded the Germanic Alamanni tribe. (Alamanni means "all-men" in the sense of coming from everywhere, not as in all-male.)

Even the Romans traced the founding of their city to two brothers, Romulus and Remus, who were suckled by a she-wolf. The army of the early Roman Republic fielded *velites*, who acted as skirmishers, they were youths armed with javelins and protected by wolf skins and shields.

Where the wolf warriors were part of a group (a pack, if you will) bear warriors were rarer and often fought alone as champions, such as Bothvar Bjarki ("battle bear") the champion of the 14th century Danish King Hrolf. Like the wolf warriors, bear warriors wore the skin of their chosen animal, a more impressive feat as bears are harder to kill than wolves.

The term *berserk* may have originated as 'bearsark' or bear shirt but that is disputed (it can also mean 'bare shirt', i.e. without a shirt or armor). The bear warriors share a reputation for savagery and toughness with the berserkers. Both were said to be able to shrug off edged weapons without harm and slay many times their own number of foes. Those who wore the bearskin seem to have been the largest and strongest of warriors and preferred large weapons (when they did not tear their foes apart with their bare hands).

Both types of animal warrior were well respected by their allies and feared by their foes. In legend, both bear and wolf warriors had the ability to change form into their respective animals, making them even more fearsome in battle. There may have been other types of animal warriors in the Germanic tribes, such as buck and martin warriors, but only the barest of evidence about them has survived.

Part II- Breaking it apart and putting it back together

The bear and wolf warriors make for interesting foes if the characters are fighting tribal enemies. They are fierce and loyal, forming the elite of a tribal military force. But they are also likely to be honorable and fair, at least in their own light. They should be noble, if dangerous, foes.

Equally, the players could choose to play members of a new band of wolf warriors out to build their own reputations and, possibly, more. Such a campaign would give structure to the characters' travels, as they seek adventure and deal with local tribes and chieftains.

For a more unusual campaign, one or more of the characters may be inspired to start a new society of animal warriors, perhaps calling upon an animal such as the lynx or the wolverine. Such a campaign would involve both spiritual and metaphysical quests to find the essence of the animal and political challenges as the new society attempted to make a place for itself in the greater society.

Supplemental Material:

Germanic Wolf-related names

Isangrim ("Grey-Mask")
Scrutolf ("Garb-Wolf")
Wolfdregil ("Wolf-Runner")
Wolfgang ("Wolf-Gait")
Wolfhetan ("Wolf-Hide")
Wolfhroc ("Wolf-Frock")

Supplemental d20 Material:

New Feats

Bear Warrior [General]

You stand as the bear, unafraid and alone, able to defeat any foe.

Prerequisites: Ability to rage, Base Attack +6, Con 15.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus on Intimidate checks (raised to +3 when wearing a bear skin) and +2 to saves against fear. While raging you gain Damage Reduction 2/bludgeoning and the ability to make a *demoralize opponent* attempt as a free action, once per round.

Note: The Damage Reduction granted by this feat will stack with that gained from the Barbarian class. So a 13th level barbarian with this feat, while raging, has DR 5/bludgeoning or DR 3/- whichever is most effective against the attack.

Wolf Warrior [General]

You have learned the way of the wolf, making you a better warrior.

Prerequisites: Base Attack +1, Survival 2 ranks.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus on Intimidate checks (raised to +3 when wearing a wolf skin) and gain +4 saves against fear when in the presence of one or more other members of your wolf band. You further gain a +1 bonus to all Charisma based skill checks when dealing with both wolves and wolf warriors.

Wolf Warrior Pack [General]

Like the wolf, you know how to hunt and kill as part of a pack.

Prerequisites: Ability to rage, Wolf Warrior.

Benefit: You gain an additional +1 to attack when flanking a foe, this bonus is increased to +2 if the person you are flanking with also has this feat. While raging, if you and another person with this feat flank an enemy, you both gain +1d6 of sneak attack damage on your attacks against the flanked foe. Further, you are immune to fear while raging in the presence of one or more other members of your wolf band.

Lights, Camera, Action!

Cinematic Deconstruction of d20 Modern

by J. Carpio

It's a new year and time for another trip into the cinema fantastic. One of the promises I made to myself over these past few months was that I would eat, crow and play the one system that I have been against from the beginning: d20. As I am writing this, I am a few weeks into the d20 Modern campaign that I started with my gaming group. I don't mean just to pick on the system and give it a negative word. What I am saying is that the system is not as broken as a lot of people tend to make it seem, and with the right tweaks it can be as cinematic as the next system.

I think personally my bitterness regarding d20 stems from the fact that it is too mainstream, that nearly every company is pushing their product in the OGL direction and jumping on a train that will eventually fall off a cliff when the tracks start to get warped. By now, the over-flooded RPG market has over 5,000 d20 supplements and rule books. When you consider the mainstream companies and indie designers that pump out new stuff on a weekly basis, the number of supplements just goes up and up.

So, I have collected a pretty good d20 library over the past few years. I did not buy the books to play as much as I used them as source material for other things I was doing at the time (GURPS, Fuzion, Unisystem, etc). Although I do not like the system, that's not to say the material within its supplements is bad.

Just before the holidays, I acquired a copy of *d20 Modern: The Roleplaying Game*. This is not my first copy, mind you. The last one went away on a eBay frenzy a while back, because I swore never to run the system. Did I end up giving my money to WotC twice? Well, yes, but I guess a lesson learned is never cheap.

Anyway, my gaming group had been getting a little restless. I had been doing a lot of one shots, but never stuck to one storyline, so interest had been falling by the wayside. I needed to give them something that would stick in their role-playing gullets. After crawling through my "Closet O' Games," I came across my new copy of d20 Modern and decided, "What the hell?"

I had to re-educate myself on the rules. It had been some time since I last looked at them, and although the basic concepts are pretty simple, once you start getting into things like feats and attacks of opportunity, the game can bog down. d20 in general looks like a revamped version of what we found in the original editions of D&D and AD&D. The problem, in my opinion, is that WotC tried to focus too much on the tactical side of the game and left a lot of the role-playing bits to "GM discretion."

So I re-read the rules, participated in some chats with other d20 players on various message boards about how they were handling the rules, and finally felt comfortable with the fact that I was going to run this game. I had no argument from the players with the choice of system, as they seemed to own copies of the book. One of my players even went out and bought a copy!

The prep work was not too bad. I copied down a few stat blocks for the combatants, downloaded some interesting alternate rules and feats off the net, and with a few notes on the campaign typed and printed out, I was ready to run.

What I learned in that first run taught me some new things about a system that I am surprised to find myself actually enjoying. I am a person who does not like to modify rules until I understand them. I found that the d20 system is not as broken as I had thought...it just needed a few more ingredients.

I wanted a pulp/HK action movie feel to the game, but when I played purist with the mechanics it did not perform as I wanted it to. If you want to run a really gritty game with a high mortality rate, then run the rules as is. d20 Modern is well formulated for playing out non-cinematic adventures. Granted, you have action points to allow you re-rolls and give you a better edge, but you are not going to be able to play out your favorite John Woo film by the book. Below are some thoughts on the system and some of the additions I have used (or plan to use) to bring about a more Hollywood-like feel to this very tactical-minded system.

Action Points:

d20 Modern gives the option for the GM to allow a player character to use action points. These points allow the PCs to alter fate a bit in their favor in order to make the actions and choices they make in the game have more impact. According to the d20 Modern SRD, the system allows the player to use action points to do one of the following:

- Alter a single d20 roll used to make an attack, a skill check, an ability check, a level check, or a saving throw.
- Use a class talent or class feature during your turn for which the expenditure of 1 action point is required.

A character can only spend one action point in a round. If a character spends a point to use a class feature or feat, he or she can't spend another one in the same round to improve a die roll, and vice versa. The action point allows the player to roll a d6 and add it to the roll. It might not seem like much, but in a crunch those extra 1 or 2 points added to the outcome could make or break a scene.

Personally, I do not see what sort of action these points allow. Using this method the points would be better named "survival points," as they allow the player to

survive situations, not take action. As the character gains experience he or she gets to roll additional dice when using an action point, but in my opinion you need the extra dice at lower levels, not when your character is already proficient with his or her abilities.

The GM might allow the following house rules to make things a bit more "action-oriented." Allow the player to re-roll the d20 to better the chance instead of adding a d6 roll. The player still might still miss the DC, but at least there is the chance of actually getting a better roll. If the re-roll does not seem fair, then allow the players to roll 1 d6 for every level or two levels they have under their belts. This also allows the players to have that Pulp Hero factor, where at a certain level of experience they can pretty much change the fate of the world and never fail a roll.

Action points should also be used to give the player a chance to do a re-write. By burning an action point, the player can give his character's perspective of the story, or point out a plot twist that might fit in nicely with the current action. Players should be encouraged to use action points like this. It adds a nice story-in-the-round feel to the game and can add to all the players' enjoyment by allowing them to GM by proxy for a moment or two. The GM is, of course, the final arbitrator of what goes on in her game, but I have seen many a time where a player will come up with a plot twist that makes the story better.

Lastly, the GM can use action points to allow the player to take a flesh wound instead of a killing blow. A character will only be knocked silly if he takes his Constitution score or more in non-lethal damage. It can be beneficial to allow a player to take a hit that would normally kill him and just knock him unconscious. Again, this use of the action point can be vetoed, but can help the GM achieve a more cinematic flow in her game.

Circumstantial Bonuses:

The d20 rules state that the GM can give a circumstantial bonus of +1 or +2 to a player if the action seems appropriate, or it is used above and beyond the scope for which it was meant. While this is a great thing when you are trying to squeak by a moderately high DC, it does not do much when the pressure is on and you need to succeed against multiple odds.

Taking the cue from great RPGs such as *Feng Shui*, *Wu Shu*, and *Exalted*, the circumstantial bonus can be handled in a more cinematic and exciting way. With the GM's approval, the player can stack on what I like to call "frills." A frill might consist of knocking a glass of wine into the air as the player begins to shoot his pistol, or the player might describe falling backwards and knocking the table into midair as she pulls her twin 45s and shoots through it to surprise her opponent. Each heartbeat of the action can add a frill; it's just a matter of the players' creativity and what the GM will allow.

As the player describes her action, she may opt to add a frill to the action to add a +1 bonus to the roll. The players can add as many frills as they have levels, so a 5th level character can add up to +5 in frills during an action. The GM might wish to limit the use of frills in his or her campaign to make things a little difficult for the players, but in general they are harmless and allow the players to achieve higher odds at lower levels.

Mooks:

These are those fun guys whom the players mow down like bowling pins. They are the stage dressing, the cannon fodder, and the group of private mercenaries that the hero always seems to take out with only a scratch to show for the effort.

The idea of disposable villains is almost psychological. In the case of movies, it gives the viewer the illusion that the hero is a total badass and can mow through the bad guys like a weed whacker through dandelions. In an RPG, the mook is a device to give the players a bit of self-confidence and massive amounts of minor experience, but also serves as an appetizer for the big baddie yet to come.

I handle mooks with a simple formula. Create a generic thug: nothing special, just some low-life with some basic skills and weapons. You will want to make the level appropriate to the player characters so as to not overpower them or give them too hard of a time (remember, these are the characters' chew toys for the session). The scale I have been using is if the party is between 1st-level and 3rd-level, make the mooks 1st-level; if the party is 4th-level thru 7th-level make them 2nd-level, and so on. The levels should only be in place for skill and feat considerations.

Other d20 Alternatives

Since the focus of this article is *d20 Modern: The Roleplaying Game* by Wizards of the Coast, I did not want to stray too much from the core system when talking about house rules and alterations. There are other d20 games out on the market as well as a few good supplements that can make your life a lot easier.

Over the past four years, d20 has spawned a number of mutant children, so there is a lot of material free or otherwise. Take a look at some of those resources and pick and choose. The core mechanics are more or less the same, and after a while you can have a d20 game that fits your GM style and budget.

Big Eyes Small Mouths d20 (BESM) by Guardians of Order is an excellent choice for running very cinematic, anime-style games. It takes away a lot of the conventions put into place by D&D and the d20 Modern rules, makes the system totally free of classes, and gives a point-buy system that makes characters more to your liking and not cookie-cutter. You will still need a copy of the core d20 rules either way, but it gives you a wonderful change of pace.

Mutants and Masterminds by Green Ronin gives another wonderful set of rules created using the OGL model of d20. What this game offers us is a great point-buy system (like *BESM*), plus the ability to create items and gadgets. Just pick a power, add a few extras and boom!, you've got an instant bit of coolness. The system is primarily for supers role-playing, but if you are planning to do low-level pulp or gritty comics (like *The Punisher*), this book fits like a glove.

The real mechanics come into play with hit points and the ability to hurt the other characters. A mook should have no more than 4 hit points per level, so a 1st-level mook would have 4 HP, a 2nd-level mook would have 8, and 3rd-level mooks would have 12. These low amounts of hit points ensure that the players can slice through them like a hot knife through butter.

This is not all. It would be annoying if the GM had to keep track of each mook that the players are beating up on, so any damage that does not equal or exceed the mook's total HP does not kill him. The mook is just symbolically wounded and is available to beat up on the players in the next round. The GM may want to assign a -1 or -2 penalty for any of this symbolic damage, but in most cases it is unnecessary.

The next part of the formula is handling damage to the characters. As Hollywood has shown us, the cannon fodder usually cannot hit the side of a barn, but once in a while they do get lucky. In game mechanics, the mook cannot even touch a player character unless the GM rolls a natural 19 or 20 and cannot do critical damage even if the weapon dictates it falls into this critical range. Roll damage as normal, lather, rinse, and repeat.

This is a modification of the d20 mook rules used by Robin D. Laws in his d20 crossover book *Burning Shoulin*, and I highly recommend the book for its other bits of high flying, Chinese wire fu Wuxia style rules adapted for the d20 system. If you are into the "Wire Fu" of Hong Kong cinema, this supplement is for you.

Feat Purchases and Use:

Feats in the d20 system are the meat and potatoes of your character concept. These are the special things that allow your character to kick ass and take names, to stand above the rest, and to perform heroic actions and deeds. It is a shame that the system limits these abilities by restricting the number of feats you can have and by giving them unobtainable prerequisites at the characters' lower levels. These rules are there for a reason, and a player can become too powerful if feats are abused. However, there are a couple of things the GM can do to help a player get his concept into motion without forcing him to wait three levels before the character can be played as conceptualized.

My suggestion is to sit down with the player and find out why this character would be totally lame if he did not have the requested feat. If it all sounds solid, as the GM you may allow the player to sacrifice either a couple of points of attributes or future experience points to buy the other feats needed to take the more advanced one. This should only be allowed at character generation and not after play has begun. A good rule of thumb is to allow 1-2 character points or 100-200 experience points per extra feat taken.

The feats that require action points to activate should, in most cases, be allowed to work without burning the point. Treat this as you would a circumstantial bonus: if the player is doing something cool with the feat, allow him to pull it off without using up that precious action point.

Attacks of Opportunity:

Sometimes a combatant in a melee lets her guard down. In this case, combatants near her can take advantage of that lapse in defense to attack her for free. These free attacks are called attacks of opportunity (AoO). My honest advice on this is to ignore this rule. Attacks of opportunity are just another way that companies use to try and push a future war game release, or add unnecessary baggage to their rules set. Most d20 and OGL rules sets toss them out with the bathwater.

Here are just a couple of suggestions about eliminating or altering the AoO in your game. Unfortunately, a lot of feats do revolve around the AoO mechanic. This is not a hard obstacle to overcome, but one that can be challenging - especially if a player's special attack relies on the AoO (such as a thief's backstab). My suggestion is to keep a few of the elements of the ability, like the threatened area, the 5-foot rule and flanking strategies and just put the rest to bed.

If your players don't rely on the AoO and have no objection, just do away with them. Your combats will run a lot faster and smoother, and you won't have to have the AoO debates every time someone challenges the rules. If all else, allow the pistol guy to use his pistol in an AoO. It's kind of annoying and unfair that the only one who can take advantage of the attack of opportunity rule is the thug with the baseball bat, and not the highly trained assassin with his Glock.

Other Notes:

As with any game, your job as the GM is to have fun and make each and every game entertaining for your players. The golden rule is that "rules are made to be broken," and that sometimes goes double for role-playing games. Rules are in place to give structure and playability, but if you cannot enjoy your investment (and yes, games these days are quite the financial investment) then you might as well have your friends over for Monopoly night. My advice is geared to making your d20 Modern games a bit more enjoyable and not over-burdened with failures and rules that bog down play. My advice: learn the rules and start to deconstruct. After a while, you will have something that is priceless: a system that works for you, and not you for it.



Interview with Malcom Craig of Contested Ground Studios

by Nash J. Devita

I have recently been in touch with Malcolm Craig, line developer at Contested Ground Studios and developer of the game *a| state*. Being as that he is in Scotland and I in the United States, a tête-à-tête was not possible. Thankfully, he was willing to conduct a small e-mail interview with me.

Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about who you are and what you do inside the company on your own and as a company as a whole?

Hello! I'm Malcolm Craig, *a| state* line developer at Contested Ground Studios, Scotland's latest foray into the games industry. I decided to write a role-playing game because mushroom collecting was too toxic and slightly damp. Game writing is drier but books don't taste as good in an omelette...

...or perhaps not. Anyway, I'm essentially the guy who persuaded a bunch of talented people to join me on a road into the unknown and collaborate on producing what has become *a| state*. Luckily, no one has punched me yet. The rest of the company consists of Paul Bourne (our digital art maestro), John Wilson (business manager, web coder and contributing writer), Iain McAllister (currently writing the 'Mob Justice' RPG and editor in *a| state*) and Gregor Hutton (senior editor and contributing writer). CGS is very much a collective effort, with everyone contributing their particular skills, talents and imagination. They're a great bunch of guys.

Can you give us an overview of *a| state* and how the utilized system works?

a| state is a dark urban world, a nameless city from which you cannot escape. Oh, you can try to escape, but all that happens is you disappear at the borders of The City. The majority of the residents of The City live in gaslit slums, in rotting, derelict concrete towerblocks

or damp, dank brick tenements. Numerous burghs (with name like Mire End, Fogwarren, Long Pond and Dreamingspires), parishes, industrial areas, macrocorp domains and wastelands go to make up the complex geography of The City. There is no central control, with only a few local governments controlling any more than a handful of burghs. The eight macrocorps control most of the access to resources, trickling them out from their domains like Iron Bastion, Luminosity Tower and Konkret. The City is haunted by myth, legend and folklore. The dark shadows of The Shifted stalk the alleys and canals. The apocalyptic legends of The Shift and The Bombardment haunt The City up to the present day.

As for the system, it's pretty much a simple percentile system, a type familiar from quite a few other games. The rules themselves amount to no more than 12 pages, although character generation represents a much larger section of the book. Characters are created by writing down the history, background and personality of the PC, rather than by starting with numbers. And there's no rigid set of rules saying what professions, careers, education a particular character must take. Many different careers are presented (like the ghostfighters, mudlarks, lostfinders or activists), but the player is at liberty to tailor them exactly as they wish. While none of this represents a startlingly innovative approach or anything fundamentally new in mechanics, I feel it fits the setting quite well.



What were your primary influences for *a| state*? I get a very *Blade Runner* feel from it. Is this intentional?

The influences on *a| state* have been many and varied. In terms of literature, perhaps the biggest influences would be the likes of Charles Dickens, Mervyn Peake, Joseph Conrad, Iain Banks, M R James, Arthur Conan Doyle, Cordwainer Smith, Philip K Dick and China Mieville. The last name there is one that has proved a bit contentious. Some have pointed out similarities between the marvelous *Perdido Street Station* and *a| state*. I read *PSS* when it came out (which was when I was about half way through developing *The City*) and was just stunned by the creativity and audacity. I was also a little bit worried that there may be some similarities between *PSS* and *a| state* which may be a bit close for comfort. Luckily, Mr Mieville is an extremely friendly and helpful chap and reassured me there was no problem and that we were obviously both fans of the same authors and literary styles (the previously mentioned Dickens and Peake being obvious examples). Hence, China Mieville appears in the 'thanks' section on the credits page of *a| state*. For those of you who have never read his stuff, I'd really urge you to do so, it is absolutely marvelous, truly wonderful writing.

As with any setting which in some way reflects parts of our own world, non-fiction writing was also influential in the development of the feel and look of the world of 'The City'. I've always had a passion for history, so its natural that some of the stuff I've read would come through in the game world. This can range from the fairly dry and dull academic end of the spectrum (like the thrilling *Post Victorian Britain, 1902 to 1951* by L B C Seaman or the heart stoppingly exciting *Local Government in Britain* by Tony Byrne) to the genuinely involving and moving area of historical writing (such as the marvellous *Stalingrad* by Antony Beevor and *Mind Forg'd Manacles* by Roy Porter).

It's true that *Blade Runner* did exert an influence over the feel of the setting. Personally, I think its one of the defining works of the cinematic art form. I couldn't begin to think how many times I've watched it! I am a big fan of films, so there plenty that have crept into my mind whilst developing the setting: *Angel Heart*, *Batman* (the Tim Burton version, not the brightly coloured 'KAPOW!' 1960's one), *Great Expectations* (Charles Dickens makes an appearance again), *Hell Is A City*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *La Dernier Combat*, *Nikita*, *Stalker*, the list really could go on



and on. Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* really did amaze me with its visual look when I first saw it, cinematographically it's one of the best films I've seen in years. There are many grossly underrated films out there that contributed in some way to *a|state*: *Jacobs Ladder* and *Angel Heart* are two exceptionally fine psychological horror films which never seem to get the credit they deserve. In films and games, horror should never just be about mutilated corpses, gribbly tentacular blobs and hockey mask wearing men with axes, it's all about suggestion, uncertainty and mood. The best way to produce horror in a game environment is through fear of the unknown or by subtly altering the familiar to produce unease.

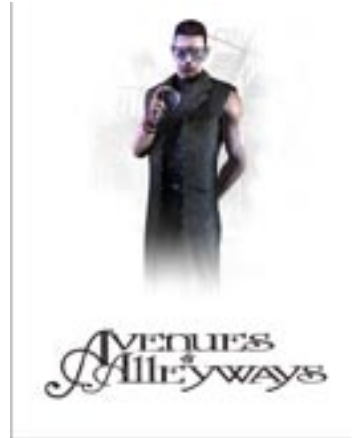
The entire punk ethic has also played a very big part in *a|state*, in terms of music, attitude and so on. Paul is also a talented musician; having played bass in the marvelous Scottish punk band *Turtlehead* (he also designed their albums, making him very much the renaissance man of CGS).

But it's really the punk ethic of change and revolution which features most heavily in *a|state*. Then again, the entire indie RPG scene is quite 'punk' in it's own way. Lots of people doing it for themselves, producing stuff in back rooms and garages, getting stuff out there because they want to, rather than because a big company tells them to.

You mentioned a great list of influences, both print and film. Were you familiar with all of them, including the history texts, previous to writing *a|state* or did you discover some of them through suggestion, web search, etc. in the course of developing *a|state*?

Well, *a|state* grew out of two things in particular. One is that, essentially, it takes influence from all the things I love in literature, cinema, etc. In addition, I've always had an interest in history, society and so forth, so some of it came from the subjects I studied at university (history, sociology and politics mainly).

In regard to the main fiction influences, such as Dickens, Conrad, Peake, Ballard and so on, I'd read most of the works cited as influences prior to actually writing the game. For this I've really got to thank my



father, who encouraged me not only to read anything and everything, but also gave me his entire collection of SF novels when I was a young lad. I've got a lot to thank him for. Some works were read, such as the previously mentioned China Mieville, during the time I was fleshing out the basic structure of the game. Others that I perhaps hadn't read for years, I was suddenly reminded of by something that had been lodged at the bottom of my mental filing cabinet! I finally got round to re-reading a lot of Franz Kafka stuff whilst writing *a|state* and was reminded of exactly how good he is (particularly *In Der Strafkolonie*, perhaps one of my top ten short stories). Someone described *a|state* as 'Franz Kafka meets *Dark City*', which had never struck me before, but which I kind of like. *Dark City* was one of those films I had to consciously avoid watching while writing *a|state*, just in case! In fact, I watched it for the first time in years last month. It was great to see it again, marvelous film.

There were books that were recommended to me whilst writing, and some of them certainly made me wonder why I'd never read them before! Stuff like the *Borribles trilogy* by Michael De Larrabeiti (which mad me wonder how it was ever promoted as a series of book for children. Policemen cutting the ears off of kids so that they'll grow up?)

Sadly, I had to read some of the more boring history books while I was at university. I wouldn't want people to think I read *Local Government In Britain* for fun! Reading a lot of historical stuff (particularly books focusing on the grimmer bits of history) really makes you realize that nothing you portray in a game world even comes close to some of the things that have happened in our world.

Ever since I was a kid, I've been interesting in films. The first movies I remember watching was when I was about five or six years old and BBC2 ran a series of old SF films at 6.00pm on a Monday night. Classics like *Forbidden Planet*, *The Thing From Another World*, *Invaders From Mars* and *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*. I was fascinated by them. As a kid you have this great sense of wonder, where effects and plot don't matter, it's all about the 'wow factor'. I still get that sometimes, reading books and watching films, you hit something that you think is fantastic. It's a shame that the childlike sense of wonder grows less and less as you grow older. I hope I manage to hold on to mine for a while yet. My passion for films even felt its way into my time at university. I couldn't believe it when that actually allowed me to do my honors dissertation on *Hollywood's Cold War: American movies during the Cold War and their influence on American society and culture*. It was just an excuse to babble on about *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Kiss Me Deadly*. I still can't believe I got away with it.

When did *a|state* first come out (over-seas or in the US)? In Addition to that, do you have any previous work in the role playing industry? If so, what is your previous experience and when did it / they occur?

The *a|state* main book came out in February of 2004 and was released simultaneously across the world. As for myself, my previous work in the games industry amounts to a grand total of zero. I did have a few small bits and pieces appear in various places, but nothing of any real significance. *a|state* has been my first real foray into the 'professional' RPG world. Paul, on the other hand, has worked in a number of fields. He's done digital artwork for RPG companies such as BTRC and produced book and album covers. Gregor, now our senior editor, co-wrote an independent game called 'Frenzy' back in the mid nineties. Iain, our 'Mob Justice' line developer and co-editor, has had credits in works such as *Spycraft* and *Shadowforce Archer*.

So what do you think is one of the most important elements when designing a game and how do you reflect that within your own game?

A role-playing game should (and this is purely my personal opinion) be centered around a rich, involving game world with loads of opportunities for interesting



play. I'm not much of a systems guy, so setting necessarily takes precedence for me. That's not to say that there isn't a place for games where the 'crunchy' elements are at the fore. Many people enjoy this style of game, but as a gamer, it's not what attracts me to any particular RPG. All of my favorite games very much setting-driven: *Blue Planet*, *2300AD*, *Jorune* and so on.

The above is reflected somewhat in the fact that I like not providing stats for everything. OK, so this may sound a bit at odds with what the designer of the game should be doing, but to my mind, there are certain things which should be left vague and mysterious. For example, I have been asked quite a few times if / when we are going to provide stats for the Shifted (the mysterious entities in *a| state*), as they are not presented in the main book. My answer to this is always that they are so strange and mysterious, so rare and so downright alien to the human mindset, that stats are somewhat pointless. And in addition, I always find that reducing a 'scary monster' to a bunch of numbers takes away from the horror and strangeness. Then again, I'm perfectly happy for people to come up with stats for the Shifted in their own games!

The first supplement to *a| state*, *Lost Finder's Guide to Mire End* was recently released. Are there any (shortly) upcoming titles you can tell me about?

We're currently working on the second supplement for the game, entitled *Avenues & Alleyways*. *A&A* is the first of our really big additions to the world of The City, in that it presents another 30 fully detailed areas, loads more background information on life in The City, more adventures nuggets and other useful stuff. The key to *A&A* is presenting new and interesting city areas, areas which will have their own unique feel and adventure possibilities. It would be all very well just to churn out a load more grim slums and so forth, but what we really want to do is make The City more of a fully rounded environment.

Working on *Avenues & Alleyways* has been great because it has provided an opportunity to bring the vision of other writers into the world of The City. I mean, I could churn out a load more areas, but having

one person doing all that could easily make the setting stale and repetitive. Whereas, getting fresh, new ideas from others helps to bring the setting alive and keep in vibrant. City areas like Nothing Gate, Ringtown and Machine Quarry have all come from other writers, which delights me. One of the great things about writing a game is seeing what other people make of it. There's stuff that GMs and players have submitted to us that really takes my breath away, taking the existing setting elements and doing something really imaginative and interesting.

The second major supplement for *a| state* will be *Iron Ring*. As those who have read the game might have noticed, there's a certain element of mystery running through the setting; The Shift, The Bombardment, the inability to leave The City and so on. Now, it would be easy just to either leave these as mysteries or to provide a single explanation of what is going on. However, the available evidence can fit more than one theory for the whys and wherefores of The City. So what *Iron Ring* does is provide three plausible explanations for the existence of The City. GM's can chose which one best fits their campaigns, or use an explanation of their own. *Iron Ring* will also serve to provide new opportunities, mysteries and adventure ideas. I'm really very excited about it.

Is there anything you might like to add to the interview? Is there something I may have missed that you think is pertinent or would just like others to know?

Well, just to show that Contested Ground Studios aren't a one trick pony, we're currently working on a few other projects. As well as writing *a| state* stuff, I'm currently working on another RPG called *Everlasting Empire*, which is a sort of HG Wells-meets-Dan Dare-meets-Arthur C Clarke kind of thing. Men with moustaches and pipes boldly going where no men with moustaches and pipes have gone before! It's actually good fun and makes a change from the darker themes of *a| state*. Our other major project is *Mob Justice*, written by Iain McAllister. It focuses on an America where prohibition never ended and history took a radically different turn. Triblys, zoot suits and bootlegging galore!

So, that's kind of it for 2005. 2004 was a great year, getting *a| state* launched, getting our first supplement out and so on. The support we received from so many

people (including Silven Crossroads, thank you!) has been wonderful and really encourages us to keep producing stuff. In 2005 we aim to build on that, expand *a| state* even further and start heading in new directions. It's all very exciting. I may need to invest heavily in Colombia's most famous product to keep going. That's coffee, not Colombia's other famous product, before anyone asks.

*I once again want thank Malcolm Craig for all of his time and the interview. We also patiently await the next books for *a| state*, a game that has quickly become one of my favorite RPGs, as well as the others briefly described (I am espically looking forward to reading 'Mob Justice'). If you are yet to check this title out, please do so. You can find my reviews of the core book [here](#) and Lost Finder's Guide to Mire End [here](#).*

Xeniform Invasion: Invasion of the Templates

Mahamba & Smith

By Jerel Hass

CSX Case File #3: Mahamba

"Look out! It's coming right for us!!!!"

The Mahamba is nature's last line of defense from man's constant encroachment. Abnormally aggressive and destructive, a Mahamba is a gargantuan version of one of nature's first children.

Sample Mahamba

Combat

Improved Grab (Ex): If the Mahamba successfully hits with its bite attack, it can attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity.

Swallow Whole (Ex): If the Mahamba starts the turn with a victim successfully grappled by its bite attack, it can attempt a new grapple check to swallow its victim. If the check is successful, the victim takes 1d8+12 points of bludgeon damage and 1d8 points of acid damage per round from the Mahamba's digestive juices. A swallowed creature can cut its way out with a light slashing or piercing weapon by dealing 30 points of damage to the Mahamba's digestive tract (AC 16). Once the creature exits, muscular action closes the hole; another swallowed victim must cut a new way out.

A Gargantuan Mahamba gullet can hold 2 Huge, 4 Large, 16 Medium or Small, 64 Tiny, 256 Diminutive, or 1024 Fine or smaller victims.

Trample (Ex): Reflex half DC (34), damage 3d6+36 bashing points of damage. The save is Strength-based.

Creating a Mahamba

Mahamba is an acquired template that can be added onto any animal, hereafter referred to as the base creature. A Mahamba uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

Size and Type: The base creature's size increases to Gargantuan. Make all necessary stat changes found on

the chart below; the type remains unchanged.

Hit Dice: +15 Hit Dice (d8, average 60hp), +11 base attack, 17 Skill points, +8 Fortitude, +8 Reflex, +4 Will)
Speed: Change speed; Biped to 60 ft., Quadruped 70 ft., Flier 150 ft., Swimmer 80 ft.
AC: See chart below.

HD	DR
15-17	5/-
18-25	10/-
26-35	15/-
36+	20/-

Attack: Creature retains all natural attacks, increased based on new size. If the base creature does not have a natural attack, it gains a Bite attack (3d8) melee damage and Slam attack (3d6) melee damage.

Damage: Increase based on size change.

Space Reach: 20ft/20ft

Special Attacks: The Mahamba retains all special attacks of the base creature, modified by ability increases. All Mahambas also gain Improved Grab, Trample, and Swallow Whole.

Special Qualities: All Mahambas retain all special qualities of the base creature. All Mahambas gain damage reduction based on the chart below. Finally, after their death all Mahambas revert to their natural size within only a few minutes.

Abilities: Ability gains are based on the size of the base creature. See chart below.

Template: Mahamba

Mahamba Crocodile

Gargantuan Animal

Hit Dice: 18D8+162 (234 hp)

Initiative: +1

Speed: 70 ft., Swim 80 ft.

Armor Class: 20 (-4 size, +1 Dex, +13 natural) touch 7, flat-footed 15

Base Attack/Grapple: +13/+17

Attack: Bite +27 melee (3d8+24) or tail slap +27 melee (4d8+24)

Full Attack: Bite +27 melee (3d8+24) or tail slap +27 melee (4d8+24)

Face/Reach: 20 ft./20 ft.

Special Attacks: Improved Grab, Trample, Swallow Whole

Special Qualities: Hold breath, Low-light vision, DR 10/-

Saves: Fort +30, Ref +12, Will +6

Abilities: Str 43, Dex 12, Con 29, Int 1, Wis 12, Cha 2

Skills: Hide +2, Listen +7, Spot +7, Swim +27

Feats: Alertness, Skill Focus (Hide)

Climate/Terrain: Warm marshes

Organization: Solitary

Challenge Rating: 8

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Advancement: N/A

	Str	Dex	Con	Nat. Arm	AC/At
Fine	+34	+0	+14	+9	-12
Dimin.	+34	+0	+14	+9	-8
Tiny	+32	+0	+14	+9	-7
Small	+28	+0	+14	+9	-6
Med	+24	+0	+12	+9	-5
Large	+16	+0	+8	+7	-4
Huge	+8	+0	+4	+3	-3

Skill: Skill gains are based on the animal type.

Challenge Rating: +6 to base creature's Challenge Rating.

Combat

Improved Grab (Ex): If the Mahamba successfully hits with its bite attack, it can attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity.

Swallow Whole (Ex): If the Mahamba starts the turn with a victim successfully grappled by its bite attack, it can attempt a new grapple check to swallow its victim. If the check is successful, the victim takes half bite damage and 1d8 points of acid damage per round from the Mahamba's digestive juices. A swallowed creature can cut its way out with a light slashing or piercing weapon by dealing 30 points of damage to the Mahamba's digestive tract (AC 10 + ½ natural armor). Once the creature exits, muscular action closes the hole; another swallowed victim must cut a new way out.

A Gargantuan Mahamba gullet can hold 2 Huge, 4 Large, 16 Medium or Small, 64 Tiny, 256 Diminutive, or 1024 Fine or smaller victims.

Trample (Ex): Reflex half DC 10 + ½ HD + strength modifier, damage Slam attack + Strength and a half. The Save is Strength-based.

Description

A Mahamba can be born of any species of animal or beast. At the height of their growth they have reached the gargantuan level of nearly 20 ft length and height. The Mahamba still has all the normal markings and features of its original species, but expanded. One major exception that is common in all Mahambaa is into its eyes. Staring in the eyes of a Mahamba is like staring into the eye of a hurricane or looking directly into a lightning bolt. Even normally docile animals project this sense of inner rage and power.

Adventure Hook

The adventurers are sent out into the Louisiana swamp to track a rumor of Final Church activity. While air-boating on the swamp, the heroes come across several other airboats, all of them battered and inoperable. Investigation of the boats reveals that the boats belonged to another group of investigators. Along the shore of the swamp near the boat graveyard, the heroes discover signs of the Final Church, and signs of something very large and very destructive.

Encounter

I have encountered a Mahamba, and no matter what scientific jargon our scientist may apply to it, I know it for what it truly is: a focus for nature's fury. There is nothing sane behind the eyes of the Mahamba; I have stared deep into its bottomless black pools of tormented chaos. Some internal rage drives them: maybe it's their enlarged medulla oblongata, or some chemical imbalance caused due to their tendency to grow in or near toxically polluted environments. Whatever excuse you come up with for its behavior, a Mahamba does one thing well and that is to destroy, and not just anything - just things created by man. A Mahamba is completely fearless, attacking without cause or provocation and rarely fleeing unless severely outnumbered. Their behavior can be atypical of their species, even polar opposite; a Mahamba rarely shows any significant behavioral patterns of the species they appear to derive from. Instead, a Mahamba takes on a very primal behavior of kill-eat-breed, where killing overrides the desire to eat and the desire to procreate is merely an afterthought. The Mahamba is horrific step outside of Darwinian evolution.

Habitat/Society

No sound scientific reason has ever been given for the reason for the existence of the Mahamba. The corpses exhumed by the CXS scientist have shown no signs of any known genetic manipulation or mutation. Instead, the corpses appear to be normally healthy, unusually large versions of their species, albeit with incredibly powerful muscular and skeletal structures. What infuriates the scientist to no end is that there is absolutely no pattern to their occurrences. A Mahamba may occur in any known species of animal on any continent. However, a few commonalities have been found that many hope to use to find a pattern. First, Mahamba are inevitably drawn to human populations, whether they are born nearby or not. Second, a Mahamba has an accelerated growth rate, growing from infant to adult in a matter of only a few months and from adult to death in about half that time. During their accelerated growth, the Mahamba must consume an enormous amount of food. This usually results

in the decline of the Mahamba's species' primary prey. Third, only one Mahamba has ever been known to exist at a time; this, however, may be more wishful thinking than actual fact. Finally, all Mahamba are androgynous and carry one pre-fertilized egg. After reaching adulthood, the Mahamba bears this offspring as appropriate for its species. This Mahamba offspring does not immediately grow into a Mahamba, but instead goes through a standard growth cycle. However, if the parent dies during the child's growth, which is typical due to the Mahamba's life cycle, the child will begin to change into a Mahamba itself. As of yet no CXS scientist has put any scientific theories for this occurrence, but some talk about pheromones triggering hidden genes.

CSX Case File # 4: Smith

Based on David Tormsen "Smith."

Every four hours someone is reported missing. It could your best friend, or maybe a beloved family member. It might even be someone you wouldn't have noticed missing, like a homeless man or the guy in the IT department you only see when your computer gives you the blue screen of death. The seeming disappearance of people in such a small world as ours has become so common that the police make you wait 24 hours before filing a report. In many cases the people just show back up, maybe from an unannounced sabbatical, and sometimes people just never come back. However, in some unusual cases the people return, but different. And strangest of all is when they return and call themselves "Smith."

Creating a Smith

Smith is an acquired template that can be added onto any Humanoid, hereafter referred to as the base creature. Resisting the Downloading process requires a Willpower check (DC 15).

A Smith uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

Size and Type: No Change

HD: No Change

AC: Typically, a Smith is outfitted with a Kevlar vest.

Base Attack/Grapple: All Smiths are programmed for combat and therefore gain a +2 bonus to their base attack bonus.

Attack: All Smiths are programmed with the use of all martial weapons, firearms, and a vast range of martial art styles.

Special Qualities: *Possessed*: Due to the struggle between the Smith program and the original personality, the Smith

Sample Smith

Smith Conspiracist

Medium Human, Smart Hero 4, Investigator 1

Hit Dice: 4d6+1d6

Initiative: +2

Speed: 30 ft.

Armor Class: 17 (+2 Dex, +4 Concealable Vest, +1 Defense bonus) touch 12, flat-footed 15

Base Attack/Grapple: +5/+5

Attack: Unarmed attack +5 melee (1d4), Colt 45 +7 ranged (2d6), or hatchet +5 melee (1d6)

Full Attack: Unarmed attack +5 melee (1d4), Colt 45 +7 ranged (2d6), or hatchet +5 melee (1d6)

Face/Reach: 5 ft./5 ft.

Special Qualities: Profile, Savant (Investigate), Exploit Weakness, Possessed

Saves: Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +3

Abilities: Str 10, Dex 14, Con 11, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 7

Skills: Move Silently 7, Drive 10, Computer Use 10, Investigate 15, Listen 10, Sense Motive 8, Spot 10

Feats: Armor Proficiency (Light, Medium, Heavy), Martial Weapon Proficiency, Personal Firearms Proficiency, Combat Martial Arts, Alertness, Attentive

Challenge Rating: 7

must be able to connect to a mainframe in order to upload and replenish its control over the host. The Smith needs two pieces of equipment in order to complete this task. The first is at least a T-1 connection to the internet: anything slower and the Smith risks corruption of its data due to the uploading time and static in the line. Second, the Smith uses a specialized retina scanning device to allow for the transfer. This equipment looks very similar to a web cam. The transfer takes 12 hours to complete, and while transferring the Smith is unable to react to external stimuli. If the transfer is interrupted, the host personality may attempt to overthrow the Smith by making a Willpower

Adventure Hook

The heroes find themselves being followed by a van of men in dark suits, resembling MIBs, in the middle of nowhere. Before they can do anything, the driver of the van suddenly suffers a seizure and crashes. Only one of the men survives. If interrogated, he will only give his name – Smith – and demand to be released. As time goes by, his attempts to escape become increasingly desperate. At one point, the man suffers a seizure himself and croaks "Help me...my name is Lucas Walker...help..." before returning to a normal state. Investigation reveals that Lucas Walker was a conspiracy theorist who disappeared two months ago. Can the heroes help Lucas re-emerge, and what information can he give them? Or will Smith escape and come back with more of his kind?

save (DC 15). If successful, the Smith program is deleted; if failed, the Smith still controls the host, but at a -4 to all rolls due to an incomplete transfer. The Smith must attempt these transfers once every two days; for every day past the second, the host personality can attempt to regain control. The host can attempt a Willpower save (DC 20, -2 for every day missed past the second). If successful,

the Smith program is deleted and the host regains control; if failed, the host goes dormant for two days.

Saves: The Smith program adds a +2 to the host body's Fortitude and Reflex saves.

Abilities: The Smith program allows for better use of the body, giving a +2 to Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution. However, due to the limited abilities of the AI, it forces Intelligence to 12, Wisdom to 10, and Charisma to 7.

Skills: The Smith program comes loaded with the following skills that add to the host's skills: Move Silently 7, Drive 10, and Computer Use 10.

Feats: Due to the Smith's combat training, the host gains Armor Proficiency (Light, Medium, Heavy), Martial Weapon Proficiency, Personal Firearms Proficiency, and Combat Martial Arts.

Level Adjustment: +2

Description

For the most part, Smiths appear to be exactly like their host, even drawing on the mannerisms that the host contains in its memories. This makes it incredibly hard for CXS agents to spot and distinguish Smiths. However, the close study of Smiths and their AI has given the CXS a few key points to look for. Most Smiths develop a near obsessive-compulsive cleanliness, especially when it comes to their appearance. Smiths also have a tendency to gravitate toward dark colored sunglasses. These dark tinted glasses help to disguise the host's control over the Smith's ocular expressions. A

Smith without its glasses may show fear, anger, or even sadness even though his mannerisms and voice suggest nothing. Last but not least is that the Smith is relatively simple and only in its basic stages of growth. Due to the AI, a Smith may show a drop in Intelligence, common sense, or personality from that of the host.

Encounter

Any CXS agents dealing with a known Smith threat are to treat all unidentified encounters as possible Smiths. Even identified encounters are to be treated with suspicion. Smiths are normally outfitted with light firearms and a Kevlar vest by the organization in control of the AI. Typically, a Smith is used for espionage purposes and will not be outright hostile. A Smith encountered in combat will first attempt to subdue its victim, dragging the body back to be loaded with the Smith AI. If the Smith is unable to subdue its victim, it will attempt to retreat. If retreat is impossible, a Smith will not allow itself to be taken alive if it has control over the matter.

Habitat/Society

Many organizations have gained access to the Smith AI program and reprogrammed its loyalties to their own goals and beliefs. Using the Smith AI, these organizations have placed key pawns in positions of power all over the United States, Canada and Europe. What is unknown to these organizations is that they are not in complete control of the Smith AI. A sentient Smith AI exists in the vastness of cyberspace. This "True Smith" was the first developed in an attempt to create a perfect agent program that could save years of time and millions of dollars in training. After gaining sentience, the True Smith created simplified versions of itself and left them to be discovered by others. Using subtle manipulations of the Smiths, the True Smith has completely assimilated or deleted those responsible for its creation. Today the True Smith watches and learns through its other Smiths during their downloading process. The True Smith continues to manipulate the Smiths, but only to test out what it learns.

Zen and the art of fighting crime

by Christian R. Bonawandt

The 7-Eleven across the street from my apartment has got to be the safest convenience store on Long Island. Every night during the summer, and every Saturday regardless of season, it crawls with teenagers. They're not dangerous—just loud and annoying. But that's because the Paki that owns the place is always telling them that a superhero lives down the block.

What's sad is that it's true. What's worse is that he means me.

Four months and I was getting pretty good at this hero thing. I had made and beat up my first arch-nemesis, stopped two muggings, captured a wanted sex offender, broken up a small gang fight, and prevented a murder—although the last one might not count, as I only found the guy in the trunk of the car after I beat up the killer-to-be for nearly running me over while I was "on patrol."

Still, I was doing alright. But someone should have told that to the girl who came into the 7-Eleven that day, ninja-kicked the cashier in the head, and ran off with all the money in the register. Especially since I was next in line (with a case of beer in each hand).

Normally I stop those kinds of things. Three things worked against me in this case, though: 1) the beer; 2) her superhuman speed; 3) she was hot.

The girl was out the door and half-way down Deer Park Avenue by the time the beers crashed and spilled all over the already-sticky floor. I tried to nonchalantly bolt out to my motorbike and chase after. Nonchalant bolting seems more difficult in front of two dozen gawking teens.

As soon as I got on my bike, I saw her duck down Cambridge Street. Cambridge leads into a maze of short, oddly-angled side roads that are easy to get lost down if

you've never been there before. A smart person would have made a quick left on Wellington and a right down Claremont. Claremont has a lot of side streets; it would have been easy enough for her to pick one, park her car, and wait in hiding until I passed her by.

But she wasn't from around here. She went straight down Cambridge; I got on the street in time to see her hang a right on the boulevard. By the time I swung around, she had slowed to a normal jogging pace and had fished out the keys to a silver, '99 Dodge Neon. It seemed odd at first that a person who could run at fifty miles an hour would even bother with a car, aside from the fact that running that fast was extraordinarily conspicuous.

A keen memory is not among the numerous talents I possess as a superhero. I had completely forgotten to put on the mask that I carry around with me. Our relationship therefore began with the line, "So how do you see at this time of night with sunglasses on?" in reference to her chosen method of disguise.

She responded with a leaping kick to the chest. I blocked . . . with my chest. The motorbike disappeared from beneath me. My back gave the concrete a hefty high-five.

She zipped back toward her car. I charged up a short beam and hurled it at her. I missed--deliberately--and created a brand-new pothole in front of her. She tripped in it. Her 30mph momentum sent her flying past her car by about fifteen feet. Her glasses bounced from her face, vanishing into the darkness of someone's nighttime lawn. I jumped up and began charging up another bolt of energy, just in case.

She was up and already at her car door again. My little neat-o superpower has a sort of acidic effect. I didn't

want to melt her hand off, so I let the energy fizzle out and opted to grab her around the waist and neck. My Sifu had only switched me out of the Tai Chi class and started me on Kung-Fu about two months prior, so I wasn't too good at the holds. The girl slipped out of my grip and slammed her knee into my gut. Thankfully, the kick wasn't super-fast, so I only reeled about two feet back.

The next ten kicks, on the other hand, were pretty fast. I blocked maybe two. The rest met my ribs with full force. I fell sideways, landing on my elbow.

For half a second she stood over me. In the dim street light, I saw her face: round, with high cheeks and dark, elliptical eyes. She looked at least part-Asian.

Her gaze shifted quick from me to my bike and then back to me. I didn't have anything distinctive on me, but she must have recognized the ninja bike. She said, "You're that Cobalt idiot" before shin-kicking me out cold.

My roommate, Dane, found me some time later. He cut right to the chase: "You forgot the beer, Chad."

"Had another blast from the past," I quipped.

The whole superpower thing resulted from a giant government experiment. I was one of fifty kids that got genetically "tweaked." At age ten, they cleaned up our memories and set us loose on the world. Eventually, our powers started popping up. I'm one of only two that somehow remembers some of what happened at a place called the Sanders Institute.

Thing was, I didn't remember a girl that looked like her. And believe me, I would have remembered a girl like her.

In the morning, I called in sick to work and went on patrol. Normally I don't go on patrol during the day, but this girl had me perplexed. If my childhood memories were just normal memories, I wouldn't have been so bothered by the fact that I didn't remember her. Maybe she had been fatter or had dyed her hair or got a nose job or some other very explainable phenomenon that would keep me from recognizing her. But my memories of the Sanders Institute were painfully vivid, often playing

{ "She's the Chinese Speedy Gonzalez," I said. "And I don't remember her either." }

out like horrifying family vacation videos. I could pull up the names and faces of forty-nine kids with textbook clarity. She didn't fit a single one.

I found Milton Tugger at the Wyandanch train station, sleeping in the backseat of a random Toyota. When I tapped the window, Milton jolted, mussing the thick layers of blankets he was somewhat hiding under. His jaw, lip, and neck were ragged from a few days of not shaving. His eyes were blackened from a few days of not sleeping.

Our gazes locked. He propped himself on his elbows, bent his knees as though ready to bolt. I held up one hand and charged it. The ominous yellow glow said more than any words could, especially to Milton. Milton raised his hands in submission. He walked out of the car without even opening the door (that was his power). The limp in his left leg was faded, but still apparent. Wrinkled jeans covered the scar he had gotten on the first—and only—day that Cobalt and The Untouchable had squared off, in the Waldbaums parking lot.

"Who's that?" Milton asked, reading my surface thoughts. The lucky bastard had developed two wholly unrelated powers. Most of the other super beings that we knew of only got one, including myself. His mental abilities allowed him to naturally break down the artificial amnesia that we had been given. Between the two of us, I figured we could piece something together about the girl.

"She's the Chinese Speedy Gonzalez," I said. "And I don't remember her either."

Milton shrugged. He took a couple glances to the left and right. There wasn't anyone around. At 10:30 a.m., most of the commuters are long gone. As much as two hours can pass between trains until around 4-ish. Anyone hanging around was likely unemployed and/or a thug, and most of the latter don't come out until well after noon.

His hand moved idly to his tasseled, un-groomed hair. "Is

that what you came all this way for?" he asked.

"You don't think it's weird that neither of us knows her?" I responded.

Milton shook his head. "We don't know The Truth, either. You never found that odd. Then again, The Truth doesn't have a rack like that."

The "modifications" of different Sanders Institute kids manifested as a variety of abilities. My power was an acid-like beam of energy. It hit harder and became more caustic as I charged it up. It was a very dangerous power, and would have been worse in the hands of someone who wished harm on other people. Milton, on the other hand, was no real danger. The worst thing that he could do was to turn intangible as you tried to grab him. You might trip and skin your knee.

The international phenomenon who billed himself as "The Truth" also had powers. He was like a reckless Superman, magically appearing where there was danger, resisting insane amounts of physical assaults (including gunfire), doing significantly more damage than seemed necessary, and finally, literally, teleporting into oblivion. Not remembering The Truth didn't bother me as much because he never stopped by Long Island. In photos, he looked to be at least thirty—a half-dozen years older than those of us from the Sanders Institute.

"I was thinking," Milton said, rubbing some crust from his bloodshot eyes, "we're probably not the only 'graduates' of Sanders. You're girl looks like she might be a few years younger than us."

"There was at least three attempts at this, then," I mused.

"Probably more." Milton's words got somewhat lost in a yawn.

An uncomfortable silence followed. No one really got

close to each other at the Sanders Institute; we were separated more often than not. But I still knew Milton, and our mutually traumatic history created an awkward bond that made it hard to hate him. Technically, this guy was my worst enemy. We had only fought once, and it was my first real super-hero-like effort. It worked though—he ended up arrested and, despite escaping later, hadn't committed a crime since.

For a second I felt Milton shuffling around in my head. It was like a feather was being rubbed over my brain. It tickled in an invasive, almost disgusting kind of way. It made me want to deck him.

"Did you try staking out C.W. Post?"

I squinted at him.

"There was a Post sticker on her bumper." Milton paused, then began to grin. "You didn't notice?"

"Your telepathy is getting better," I said. "Picking out things I saw and didn't even really notice."

His head bobbed in mild, silent laughter. "Maybe you're just a lame detective."

I waited a second before heading back to my bike. "Nice to see you helping out," I said, as I started her up. "Maybe one day you'll decide to fight crime, instead of committing it."

Milton gave me a look like he ate something sour. On second thought, I wished I hadn't said that last part.

"I really ain't a bad guy, Chad. You know that," Milton said.

As much as I understood what he meant, a youth spent on 80's good guy/bad guy cartoons compelled me to

defend my position. "You did rob like a half-dozen banks."

His red, sleepless eyes got a little bit wider. There was some anger in his voice, and a burden of fatigue. "No one got hurt. I just walked in and walked out. It wasn't a lot of money, and those banks were all insured."

I held out my palms in submission. Milton kept going.

"Look at me, Chad. Haven't I paid enough for my piddly little crime against humanity?"

Public recognition as a wanted criminal, living in hiding, unbathed, unkempt, too paranoid to sleep—Milton had overpaid his debt to society. I guess that I probably should have at least nodded before I rode off.

The C.W. Post campus of Long Island University is stuffed in the middle of one of the wealthier areas of LI's Gold Coast. It's probably the worst place in New York for a college, as there aren't any affordable bars or enterprising businesses in a twenty-mile radius that might actually welcome either educated young adults or rowdy kids looking for a good time. As a result, most of the people who went to school there were idiots from out of state who didn't know any better (the lush, green campus looks gorgeous in brochures) and lazy kids from upper-middle class families who know they can practically sleep their way to a Bachelor's Degree.

Cruising around the campus, my mask would have been beyond conspicuous, so I opted for dark sunglasses and a hoodie. It may have been mid-March, but at a few minutes past 11 a.m. the sun was streaming down through the clouds in fiercely-bright, yet surprisingly cool, rays. The large sloping hill that was the visual centerpiece of almost any reference to the school was chopped up for aerating. Endless, perfectly parallel rows of holes slaughtered the otherwise flawless sea of grass green that was the campus's signature. On top of the hill sat the early the 1900s home of Margaret Post, daughter of the cereal magnate, looking weary and weathered.

My bike parked behind the commons, I wandered around the Humanities building and what looked like one of the Sciences buildings, peering into classrooms. I strolled

casually around, as though I wasn't really interested in what was inside the rooms. A dusty, somewhat moldy backpack from my few years of community college served as my only disguise. Security guards eyed me with far less suspicion than they did the scattered groups of black kids who loitered around the entrance to the Humanities hall—even though the kids probably went to this school.

At twenty past noon, the doors began to leak open, and a flood of guys and chicks three to six years younger than me clustered the halls. The deluge of bodies included a smattering of people ranging from my age to much older. It was a sensory overload. Everywhere I looked I felt like she was probably just out of my sight. She could have been sandwiched between the nuggets of under-dressed, over cosmetic-ed girls gravitating toward the commons. Or on the other side of a bulky football player or wrestler-type. Maybe she had slipped out a side door and headed down one of the paths toward another building or a parking lot just out of sight. My neck was starting to ache, as I forced my head in every direction at once. Everyone began to look the same.

Some kind of ESP made glance back at the entrance to the Humanities building one more time. I did a double take. It was definitely her. She wore jeans and a baby tee—nothing fancy—with a dark blue denim jacket. A wide side-satchel hung off her shoulder like an oversized purse. In clear daylight, her face seemed more cute than sensual and mysterious. Dark eyes and dark hair, with subtle, natural highlights. No makeup that I could see. I was second-guessing the whole Chinese thing. Maybe she was Asian—a second-generation mixed race, perhaps.

The girl moved numbly down one of two hooked stairways that curved like tusks from the face of the building. She appeared lost in her thoughts. It made it easy for me to tail her to the student commons. In the slow-moving cacophony of students I went utterly unnoticed. She made her way smoothly, almost mechanically, to the second floor. A decent-sized alcove balcony overlooked a hallway jammed with students eager to snag a greasy lunch between classes. Three half-sized, uneven pool tables and a handful of uncomfortable-looking couches of various sizes occupied the alcove. My subject dropped herself into an open couch cushion, next to a short, well-dressed black girl. Half a dozen students, including the girl next to her, greeted her by name, but I only managed to pick it up when it was uttered by a large, leather-clad,

red-haired headbanger-type in faded black jeans and an Ozzy Osbourne shirt that looked much too weathered to keep holding together for long. His voice was resonant and projecting in a way that implied a tremendous penis. Aside from intimidating me, it made her smile instantly.

I moved past her and yanked a paperback William Gibson novel from my backpack, throwing myself into a single-seater.

By ten after one the place was nearly deserted. I picked up several pieces of information. The girl's name was Lara. She was majoring in Psychology, and her father had heart problems. She didn't get along with her mother, and, thankfully, the redhead was a close friend, but definitely *not* her boyfriend. When he got up to use the bathroom, I made my move.

Strangely, my stomach was knotted. In spite of all the danger that I had put myself in night after night as a superhero, I had never felt this nervous. It didn't matter to me if I got hurt. Pain and death were just not the kind of things that frightened me. But *she* made me nervous. The weakening kind of nervous. The kind that you got in high school before you asked someone out.

I sat across from her, where the redhead had been (facing the restroom). Through my sunglasses, I stared directly at her.

She glanced up from a spiral notebook, the pages covered in neat and organized blue ink. "Can I help you?"

I snatched her wrist with my left hand and hopped into the empty seat next to her. My right hand charged for a quick second—just long enough for her, and no one else, to recognize my "ID."

Her eyes rolled in their sockets. "You wanna' do this now?"

Actually, I had no idea what I wanted to do right now.

She lowered her voice. "You take this superhero thing a little too seriously."

"That guy whose skull you cracked? He's a friend of mine."

"The Indian at the 7-Eleven? Do you even know his

name?"

I did! I just couldn't remember it at the moment. Switch gears. "How much do you make every night doing this?"

"More than you do!" She paused; a little bit of the tension suddenly slipped away. "But if you really wanna' know, not even \$200."

I slid down into the gap. "Is it worth going to jail over?"

She put the notebook down, stuffing a pen in the spiral binding. She crossed her legs and turned her body a quarter of the way toward me.

"First, let go of my wrist. I'm not running anywhere. It's not like you're going to get the police to come arrest me right now." I complied, and even went so far as to take off my shades. "Second, who the hell made you Long Island's morality patrol?"

The point struck my philosophical Achilles' Heel. I arguably had no good reason for telling her what to do. But it was the right thing to do. And doing nothing would have been worse than committing the crimes themselves, especially when I had the power to stop them.

"I didn't come here to threaten you," I said, which was a lie; I had just now decided against it. "Think about how close you came to getting caught and taken down. Now imagine I had been waiting for you, instead of being caught completely by surprise."

A deep and resounding "Ahh" made me jump half off the couch. The redhead had emerged from the restroom, and was relishing the joy of emptiness. He sat on the arm of the couch opposite us and stretched a bit. "When do you want to get together and work on the Poli-Sci project?" he asked Lara.

"Saturday's my only free day." Her eyes left me for only the slightest second.

He nodded, eyes toward the ceiling in thought. "I don't think I'm working this Saturday. Call me. Lynn gets out at four, so we can do the project, pick her up, and then hang out." Abruptly, the guy seemed to notice me. "Oh, hey, I'm Josh," he said, as he extended his hand. "Chad."

Nobody said anything for a second. Josh's mouth curled in thought and he tossed a knowing glance to both of us. "Think I'll head out," he said. To me, "Nice to meet ya, Chad," and to Lara, "I'll see you tomorrow. Say 'hi' to your dad for me."

She said she would. We both waited for him to disappear down the stairs. "Not the kind of person I pictured you'd be friends with," I said.

"You don't get it!" she hissed, shaking her head in violent frustration, "And I don't have time to explain it to you."

The notebook landed sloppily in the side-satchel, its cover catching on the opening and bending as she lifted the bag's strap onto her shoulder. At the same time, she stood and marched toward the door. At any moment she could have just super-speed-run from me. As hurried as she appeared, Lara made no attempt to use her power. She was perfectly confident that I wasn't going to do anything to her. And, realistically, what could I have done?

I got up and followed her.

"My father is very sick," she said, not the least bit surprised that I had followed her. "He needs a quadruple bypass, which he won't do because his kidneys will fail, and he refuses to be on dialysis. The doctor won't allow him to go to work, so he's on disabled retirement at 55 years old. His pension is a pittance."

Outside, March's cool air sent a chill up my back. The sun stabbed my eyes, and the leftover briskness of winter stung my nose. The shades came out of the hoody pocket and slipped onto my face almost automatically.

"What does any of that have to do with robbing 7-Elevens?" I asked, genuinely interested in the answer.

Again the frustrated head shake. "I can't afford this degree."

"It's called student loans." I had no intention of mentioning that I was a college dropout.

She stopped suddenly and turned on her heels to face me. She got right up in my face, our noses almost

touching. I could smell her perfume and a hint of coffee. My body went electric and for a second I honestly believed she was going to kiss me.

"Why should I?" she snapped. "There are people popping up all over the U.S. with powers like yours and mine. We got some nuts genuinely interested in taking over the world. Some are causing trouble just because they can. And the only 'super-villain' you've ever duked it out with escaped from prison more than two months ago and has yet to be heard from. Oh, but you have to concern yourself with one poor woman who's taking a shortcut. For all the crap life has thrown at me and my father, I deserved a little easy money."

"Be honest with yourself," I said. "It's only a matter of time before someone as unique looking as you gets IDed. The cops don't have to be able to catch you to wreck your life. Take The Untouchable, who you just mentioned. I spoke to him this morning. He looks more like a homeless beggar than a super-villain. That's because that's exactly what he is. He can't go anywhere without being recognized. He'll never hold down a real job, get an apartment or live like a normal person ever again. Sure, he can just walk out of any prison any time he wants. Big deal! Where's he ever gonna go? You don't wanna be like him. You're way too pretty and your dad is way too sick for you to go down that route."

I had barely finished the last sentence before she stormed away from me. She jerked out the remote for her car and clicked it. The silver Neon flashed its lights and beeped in response. She opened the door and heaved her side-satchel into the passenger seat.

My hand on the door to keep her from closing it, I asked, "What nationality are you?"

She paused, one arm on the steering wheel. "Russian," she said. "But you probably thought I was Asian." Her arm came off the wheel and settled with the other one on her lap. "What the hell kind of superhero are you? Shouldn't you just try and kick my ass? What's with all the lecturing?"

"You're too pretty for that."

Inwardly, I gagged, disgusted at my own cheesiness. Those dark eyes drifted in my direction, eyebrows pulled

high above them. I shrugged and laughed, and she realized that I was laughing at myself. Her high cheeks lit up as she cracked a smile.

"I have trouble justifying what I do," I admitted. "But I'd have a harder time justifying not doing it."

She nodded. "So you save the world by pushing your moral beliefs on other people." The words were scathing, but the tone was not.

"In this case, I'm not so much saving the world as saving you from yourself."

There was another quick silence, where we both just gazed oddly at each other. "I'm not giving you my number," she said, and for a second she seemed to be kidding.

"No prob," I said, "I know where to find you."

I ducked down and kissed her cheek before strutting off toward my bike. She tried to pull away from me, but I had super speed.

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Reviews, Reviewsreviews!

This month we take a look at...

d20

The Book of Iron Might

Who needs *eldritch* might? Barbarians, fighters, rangers, paladins, and other warriors meet their foes head on, relying on nothing but their cool nerves and skill at arms. They would say a good sword arm is worth a thousand spells.

d20 Modern

Blood and Brains

Blood and Brains takes the form of a guidebook written by the National Center for Reanimation Prevention and Control (NCRPC) for zombie hunters and details character options, appropriate equipment, zombie FX, and the different types of zombies. The book is meant to cover all types of potential zombie infestations from a small, localized problem (such as dancing zombies, as in the video for "Thriller," perhaps?) to a zombie apocalypse (*Dawn of the Dead* and the such).

Non-d20

White Wolf: World of Darkness – Antagonists

The name of the book clearly states what is contained within. Have you seen it all before? I think not. *Antagonists* offers a great deal of detail on a number of grand enemies for your coterie.

Key 20 Publishing – Wyrds is Bond

Magic hits the streets via gangs. This may sound like a game that is not for you. I thought that, initially. I have been turned completely, however. Hopefully the following review can do the same for you if you feel as I once did.

How we rate

Scoring definitions for d20 products:

- 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.*

Scoring Definitions for non-d20 products:

- 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.*

read on...



The Book of Iron Might

About: 64 pages, perfect-bound softcover, \$14.
Publisher: [Malhavoc Press](#) (2004)
Reviewed by: *Nick Mulherin*
Review date: 2/14/2005

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

From the Back Cover

Who needs *eldritch* might? Barbarians, fighters, rangers, paladins, and other warriors meet their foes head on, relying on nothing but their cool nerves and skill at arms. They would say a good sword arm is worth a thousand spells.

Any party's strength rests on a foundation of cold steel, mighty thews, and strong hearts. *The Book of Iron Might* gives you a whole new way to look at combat, showing you how to create combat maneuvers for called shots, daredevil stunts, and other thrilling actions on the fly. This book also includes:

- Three new types of feats for combat-oriented characters
- New uses for skills that increase your options in a fight
- The ironborn, an exciting new character race
- An innovative new stunt system

The book of Iron Might covers new ground in the d20 System rules — no other book provides this look at combat. If you liked the *Books of Eldritch Might*, don't miss this essential companion volume.

Introduction

Mike Mearls's *Book of Iron Might* details two new subsystems (one for maneuvers and one for stunts) and a slew of other new options (feats and a new player race) for the d20 System. Like Malhavoc's first two *Books of Eldritch Might* and the *Book of Hallowed Might*, the main focus is on providing players and DMs with new options for their game as opposed to plot hooks or adventure fodder.

Presentation

Like other Malhavoc Press products, *The Book of Iron Might* has a clean layout. The font is clear and readable, and intrusive bells and whistles, such as busy page borders or detailed background art, are absent here. I found no typographical or style errors in the book; both the writing and editing are superb.

Kieran Yanner's cover art depicts a giant ironborn warrior with a sword and shield standing behind a human female warrior wielding a mace. The art is excellent (Yanner has long been one of my favorite artists working in d20 gaming), but the colors used make the picture seem dark — the cover's a hodgepodge of grays, browns, and blacks, which dominate it so much that the white cloak the woman wears is almost too eye-catching. Each time I look at it, my eyes return to her cloak — I didn't even notice the ironborn behind her until I sat down to look at the cover for this review.

The interior art by Kev Crossley and Scott Purdy is all black and white and has a dirty, sweaty feel to it. Although the art is good, it doesn't feel pretty (save for the pictures of the ironborn in chapter two, which have a cleaner look). The characters depicted kick up dirt, yell, scream, and bleed. For a book focused on melee combat, this worked really well. Pictures I particularly liked included the warrior using a sling on page 19 (I don't think I've ever seen a picture of a sling-wielding fighter in any role-playing book), the ironborn paladin and rogue on pages 25 and 32 (there's a real palpable sadness in the paladin and the rogue looks sneaky, even for a construct), and the fighter diving onto a troll on page 59 (great

action shot with an implicit story, as opposed to the posed adventurers in so many products).

Organizationally, the book presents things in an interesting manner — maneuvers and stunts, which are similar thematically, are presented in chapters 1 and 4, while the new race and feats are in chapters 2 and 3. I would have put the maneuvers and stunts nearer to each other, as they're similar thematically, but this doesn't matter too much in the long run.

Maneuvers and Stunts

Most of the book focuses on these two subsystems, maneuvers and stunts, as ways to add some flair and style to melee encounters in game. Maneuvers detail ways for characters to somehow gain an advantage over their opponents (such as tripping them or throwing sand in their eyes) or perform tricky attacks (called shots, for instance), while stunts deal with using the environment to a character's advantage (running along a balcony or climbing up a giant's back). As a set of rules, these systems piggyback on the existing combat rules — almost any way you slice it, you're adding a level of complexity to the rules. Groups that find d20 combat to be too detailed and involved already are probably going to be put off by these systems. That said, the complexity exists mostly in their application — they don't add new stats or anything like that to the game; they essentially use existing rules and tropes in new ways.

Maneuvers consist of four parts: the effect, its drawbacks, its effects in game terms, and its visual description. The effect would be what the maneuver is designed to do, such as a blinding attack. These effects have a base penalty applied to the attack roll; for instance, a blinding attack has a -30 penalty on the attack roll, which is then mitigated by the drawbacks applied. For drawbacks, then, the DM or player would need to think about whether that shot takes longer, if the character needs to let his guard down for it (drawing attacks of opportunity), if it can be dodged or resisted, and so on. For the blinding attack, folks might decide that it takes a full-round action (reducing the penalty by 5), draws an attack of opportunity from the target and fails if that attack is successful (reduces penalty by 10), and might only cause blindness and not damage (effects only, another 5 points off). After the application of the drawbacks, the penalty to attack becomes -10, still pretty severe, but

far more manageable. In game terms, the attack's going to functionally blind the target for 1d4 minutes (2d4 minutes on a confirmed critical). Descriptively, the attack might cause a loss of an eye, a deep cut above the eyes, loss of vision due to concussion, or something similar. In the end, the sizeable penalty and the threat of failure because of a successful attack of opportunity mitigate the bonus somewhat — it's a costly trick to attempt, as it's all or nothing — if you fail, you do no damage.

I created this maneuver on the fly as I wrote this review, and I am definitely still concerned about its balance, and that's one of the catches in the system. It's prone to abuse. Mr. Mearls admits as much by explaining potential ways effects could be abused, eliminating the automatic success on 20 rule (if the campaign uses it, it doesn't apply to maneuvers), and even modifying or removing the *true strike* spell. The other critical problem with the system, also noted in the text, is the complexity. Creating these on the fly could bog down combat immensely. Suggestions presented include pre-creating them (the book includes a number of pre-made maneuvers) and giving the party a set group of options for combat. I like this suggestion and might actually tie it into the campaign's story a little bit. Perhaps the blinding strike described above needs to be taught to the fighter; he needs to know exactly where and how to hit, something he needs to learn from an expert or a book. This option would give warrior players a bit of a carrot, just as wizards could learn spells mid-game from old spellbooks or other wizards.

Stunts are a little bit less complicated than maneuvers, although they require some more DM adjudication. Basically, they're free-form uses of skills during combat and require skill checks or conjoined skill checks (two skill checks made at the same time — for instance, climb and jump), such as jumping from a balcony onto a troll in the room below or running up a wall to propel yourself over and behind an opponent. The rules are simpler than those for maneuvers (it is, essentially, just a skill check or two) but require a little thought in setting DCs, which could bog things down a bit as well. The great thing about these is that they use existing skills to replicate something that isn't currently in the rules. It's a new subsystem, but it doesn't introduce new rules.

The Ironborn and Feats of Iron Might

The other chapters of the book are devoted to a new PC race (the ironborn) and a selection of new feats (arcane battle feats, battlemind feats, and fighting style feats). Like the warforged from [Wizards of the Coast's Eberron Campaign Setting](#), the ironborn are constructs, created through the use of ancient and powerful magic. The similarities more or less end there. Whereas the warforged are presented as being quasi-organic (both wood and metal are used in their construction), the ironborn are distinctly mechanical and somewhat robotic in their nature and description. The other difference is a design choice — whereas most warforged are the same (unless the warforged scout is being used as a PC race, perhaps), ironborn are inherently flexible, with their starting abilities depending on a package selected by the player. Some might be acrobats while others are designed to cast arcane spells, and each of these options grants different abilities to PCs. I like this way of designing the race; it does add a touch of extra work in character generation for a player working with the ironborn, but it fits in nicely with their back story and the idea of a construct. Machines are, after all, created to do something specific.

The new groups of feats do a couple different things. Arcane Battle feats, which are available to both fighters and wizards as bonus feats, make the warrior-mage archetype viable in a different way than other products (through the use of feats rather than a prestige class). They do have a rather high-fantasy feel to them, and low-magic campaigns might find them too flashy, but they allow a warrior-mage to be competent and mystical in combat without forcing the player to cripple his BAB by multi-classing to wizard, or his caster level by multi-classing to fighter. On the whole, they seem balanced within themselves, and I liked the use of BAB to determine uses per day, duration, and saving throw DCs.

Battlemind feats represent specific forms of training that some warriors might pursue outside of typical martial prowess (the book recommends these feats for paladins, monks, and rangers). To model this training, each feat must be pre-selected two levels before it can be taken. One level before it's gained, it grants a method bonus (a minor perk, such as a +1 bonus to a related skill or action). When it comes time to select the new feat, the character seeks out a trainer to gain the full benefit. Once

pre-selected, a character must follow through on his selection. Again, the benefits seem balanced, and, additionally, the inflexibility of the system (feat selection is pre-ordained) acts as a balancing point, too.

Finally, Fighting Style feats are designed to mimic specialties in certain types of combat over the course of a career by granting a range of techniques as a character's BAB increases (one technique at +5, +10, +15, and +20). They are a different way of mimicking the ranger's fighting styles for the other combat classes and could even work well alongside them. A ranger with the Archer Fighting Style and the archery feats would have that many more options, as the abilities don't overlap. For instance, the Fencer style, which seems to have been influenced by *The Princess Bride* a bit, includes the daring maneuver technique, in which you, for example, fight left-handed even when you aren't left-handed, in order to impress your opponent, potentially causing a morale penalty in him. Out of all the feats presented in this book, I liked these the best, as I hadn't seen this particular implementation of the idea before and felt that it was pretty elegant.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this book is about options, and any time you add options to a game, you run the risk of making it more complex than it needs to be. People that think that d20 combat is too complex probably won't like a good chunk of this book, but for people that are running pulp-influenced or swashbuckling campaigns might find the stunts and maneuvers to be a nice addition to their game. Although it's designed for fantasy gaming, I could easily see this book being used in a d20 Modern campaign or even a *Star Wars* game. Aside from the ironborn and Arcane Battle feats, it's pretty genre-neutral.

CLASS: Supplement

STR: 14 (*Physical*). Sturdy, well-made.

DEX: 16 (*Organization*). Clear, easy to navigate, especially within chapters.

CON: 14 (*Quantity of the Content*). Presents a lot of new material, a lot of it (race, feats) ready to plug-and-play.

INT: 14 (*Quality of Content*). The added complexity of stunts and maneuvers is not going to appeal to all gamers.

WIS: 16 (*Options & Adaptability*). All options, extremely adaptable.

CHA: 18 (*Look & Feel*). Malhavoc's presentation and design are superior.



“Blood and Brains: The Zombie Hunter’s Guide”

About: 66 pages, full color PDF with print version, \$6.95.
Publisher: [RPGObjects](#) (2004)
Reviewed by: *Nick Mulherin*
Review date: 1/31/2005

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

From the Back Cover

zombie (ZOM-bee): n. 1. According to voodoo belief, a supernatural power that can enter into and reanimate a corpse. 2. A corpse revived in this way. 3. One who looks or behaves like an automaton. 4. Target practice.

Our professionals at the National Center for Reanimation Prevention and Control (NCRPC) have done all the hard work so you don’t have to - chopping, hacking, chainsawing, and blasting the bloody gibbets off of the shambling undead, all to make your life a little easier. If you’ve got a case of the zombie blues, this book’s the cure.

Blood and Brains: The Zombie Hunter’s Guide is a d20 Modern supplement full of zombie hunting goodness, including:

- 10 new occupations
- a new organization (The National Center for Reanimation Prevention and Control)
- 16 new feats

- plenty of stuff to blow zombies up with, including the trench spike and Shaolin spade
- seven new combat techniques
- five new advanced classes
- three psionic powers and 37 spells
- madness and trust rules
- five new FX items
- and of course, lots and lots of zombies (over 20), including a random zombie generator. So what are you waiting for? Grab your shotgun and your axe and start the dezombification process in your local town today!

Introduction

My life, as of late, seems to be inundated with zombies. Or, at least, the cinematic kind. With the remake of Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* and the zombie-flick spoof *Shaun of the Dead* fresh in my mind, I found it amusing that I’d be reviewing Michael Tresca’s *Zombie Hunter’s Guide*. It only fits. Of course, should my co-workers and family start to mention, casually and between gurgling noises, that they could “go for a bit of brain,” I imagine I’d be far more worried than I am now. All in all, an odd coincidence, I suppose, as I’ve never really been a zombie type of guy, really.

Blood and Brains takes the form of a guidebook written by the National Center for Reanimation Prevention and Control (NCRPC) for zombie hunters and details character options, appropriate equipment, zombie FX, and the different types of zombies. The book is meant to cover all types of potential zombie infestations from a small, localized problem (such as dancing zombies, as in the video for “Thriller,” perhaps?) to a zombie apocalypse (*Dawn of the Dead* and the such).

Presentation

The book looks professional, without feeling antiseptic, something that I’ve found to be true of all the RPG Objects products that I own. Jeremy Simmons’s cover is simple, but pretty effective, depicting the shadow of a zombie set against a brick wall and locked in the crosshairs of a gun. Smaller art, including two decomposing corpses and a few weapons (shotgun and chainsaw) for use in exterminating the walking dead, surrounds the main art. Although it’s neither the best or most exciting cover art I’ve seen on a product, it is appropriate and well done. For a PDF product, I’m not

sure that one can really ask for more. John Longenbaugh’s interior art, all grayscale pencil and ink stuff, is nice, although there’s not much of it, and what is there is rather static (a Necromancer posing with a zombie or a Bokor with two or three zombies).

As far as style and tone, Mr. Tresca’s writing is fluid, highly readable, and enjoyable, even if the humor sometimes feels a bit forced (such as in the Professions section of Chapter 1). I did not notice any glaring spelling errors or other typographical mistakes.

Characters

Blood and Brains presents a number of new professions, advanced classes, and feats. On the whole, the new professions, with their emphasis on roles for teenagers, seem to make the product more appropriate for a cross-genre type game (half-slasher flick, half-zombie flick with a good dose of ironic distance, something like *Scream* meets *Night of the Living Dead*). I’m not saying this to knock the product but to advise people looking for a deadly serious treatment of zombies. You won’t find it here.

The advanced classes and feats were a mixed bag. I liked the Bokor a lot and the Zombie Hunter well enough, but was substantially less interested in the others. The Mad Scientist fills an appropriate role, but I felt as though it could be done with a few feats, skills, and spells instead of an entire 10-level advanced class. The same could be said for the Necromancer, which could be done just by accepting the appropriate spells and feats from the core rules or this book. I’m not even sure why the Psychokinetic is in here (aside from its prerequisite of having the Scream Queen profession). My biggest concern with the new feats was their specificity — a lot of them are really only appropriate for a zombie-killing game, and others didn’t work at all for me. For instance, Backhand Slash allows you a free attack of opportunity on a creature behind you, but the d20 system doesn’t have built-in facing rules for combat. The idea’s great, but it mandates an increase in complexity in an already complex combat system (in order for the feat to be of value, characters must have facing, and it must have an impact on how and where they’re allowed to attack).

Zombie Hunting and Zombie FX

These two chapters are nice, but don't provide a lot of exciting material, in my opinion. The first chapter spends a lot of time describing weapons and their effects on zombies. If you can think of it, chances are it popped up in here, too. It's thorough, but not earth-shattering. I did, however, like the inclusion of prosthetics in this section and could see porting them over into another modern game. The highlight of the Zombie Hunting chapter for me was the critical hit tables for undead. It's a great idea, simple and well-designed; rather than doing excess damage, characters do cosmetic damage, smashing off legs, cutting off ears, and damaging nerves. I would have liked the table to be more clearly presented (it's a bit odd at first glance to line up the subtable with the maintable), but I could see this as being a lot of fun for the GM and the players. It translates the gore so prevalent in the genre into concrete mechanics for the game. Good stuff.

In the FX chapter, I enjoyed the new FX items, particularly the *shotgun of zombie slaying* and the *zombie powder*, the latter of which has a fantastic amount of flavor information that ties it into the Bokor advanced class. Of the spells, I found most of them to be nothing more than direct ports of appropriate spells from the d20 SRD (such as *gentle repose* and *death watch*), but did like the last four spells: *zombie belch*, *zombie blight* (although the description of the spell goofs when it says that only good and neutral characters are hurt by the spell — d20 Modern uses allegiances, not alignments, and characters may not have any allegiances to good or evil), *zombie drain*, and *zombie fever*, even though they're probably going to be best used by NPCs, not PCs, as it would be pretty odd to have a zombie hunter going around casting *zombie fever* on zombies and townfolk.

The thing I liked least about these two chapters (and, indeed, the book) was the introduction of Madness Rating as a mechanic and system. The insanity rules from *Call of Cthulhu* and *Unearthed Arcana* work far better for me and would work just as well in this game as they do in others. The rules work in similar ways, and I'd rather just use the others. They're cleaner and better codified in my opinion. That said, I did like the guidelines for Trust that followed the Madness Rating rules and thought that they could be ported nicely to just about any game where survival's at a premium.

Zombie Field Guide

On the whole, this was my favorite chapter in the book. It has a nice assortment of new monsters and some nice rules for customizing zombies. Of the new monsters, my favorites were the hsing-sings and the Sumatran rat monkeys, both of which could be a lot of fun in a pulp game with an emphasis on exploration and lost civilizations in mountains and jungles. I also liked the trillians, which had that 1950s/*War of the Worlds* alien feel in their dress and powers. They probably wouldn't work for a game set in the current day, but they could be cool if used in the right time period. The only monster that gave me pause was the bloodsucking wind, which could be very nasty in a campaign with little or no magic — with lots of hitpoints, DR 10/-, invisibility, high saving throw bonuses, and no save on its energy drain ability (this last could, I hope, be a goof), it'll wipe the floor with most parties. Likely, it'd be better used as a plot device than a combat encounter.

The highlight of the chapter (and the book) for me was the zombie template and accompanying material, including the tables for random zombie creation (allowing random modification of type, defenses, vulnerabilities, movement, hardiness, special abilities, and so on). There are a lot of different ways to modify zombies here, and all of them have notes on their game effects and the impact they have on the zombie's CR. For instance, a zombie with TV travel can travel through television signals from one TV to another at the cost of +2 CR; a zombie that explodes into tiny worms on death might cause a PC to become infected with creeps at the cost of +1 CR. It's nice and modular. The back end of this section includes a number of sample zombies that a GM can spring on his players, from bloodsucking zombies to cryonoid zombies (the cryogenically-frozen come back to life and powered by lightning) to Nazi zombies and Templar zombies. What's nice about these examples is that they suggest a number of different settings for a game with zombies, aside from a vanilla, any-town modern game, and that they show how the rules for customizing zombies can work. I should note that *Wizards of the Coast's Libris Mortis* does this, too, but not as extensively and with little overlap (the bloodsucking zombie and the bloodthirsty zombie are similar, but that's about all).

Conclusion

If you're looking to run a game centered around a zombie attack using d20 rules, *Blood and Brains* is extremely thorough, and its treatment of zombies along with the zombie critical tables could be adapted to most any standard d20 game. The rest of the book probably won't translate well to non-modern genres or would at least require a good deal of work to fit into a fantasy or swords and sorcery game, although I could see the Bokor and its accompanying material being modified for a fantasy game as a type of necromancer. All in all, it's a fun book and does exactly what it sets out to do.

CLASS: Supplement

STR: NA (*Physical*). This score does not apply to this product.

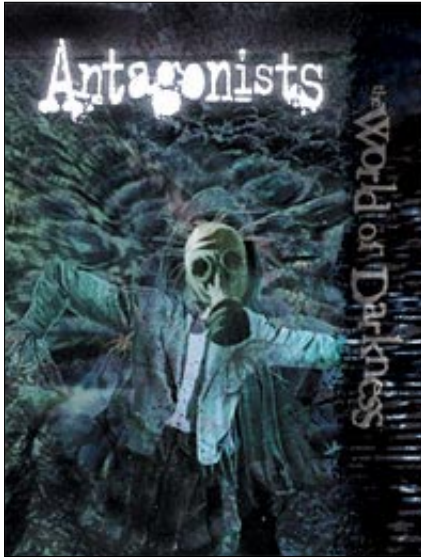
DEX: 14 (*Organization*). Excellent organization, strong use of bookmarks.

CON: 16 (*Quantity of the Content*). Tons of new ideas and rules.

INT: 12 (*Quality of Content*). Sometimes the content is little more than reprinted rules from the SRD and some of isn't necessary or executed well.

WIS: 12 (*Options & Adaptability*). Aside from the last chapter, most material wouldn't work outside the modern genre.

CHA: 14 (*Look & Feel*). Clean and professional.



World of Darkness: Antagonists

Authors: Pamela Collins, Aaron Dembski- Bowden, Jonathan McFarland, & Morgan A. McLaughlin
Publisher: [White Wolf Publishing](#)
Reviewed by: *Nash J. DeVita*
Review Date: *January 31st, 2005*

Reviewer Bias: This title was received for review purposes. This is the first supplement book for World of Darkness that I have read and reviewed.

Antagonists is the first supplement book from the World of Darkness. 132 page, hard cover with interior black & white illustrations from some artists I am familiar with and some that I am not - Sam Araya, Durwin Talon, Avery Butterworth, Michael Gaydos, Travis Ingram, and James Cole. The cover work was once again provided by Becky Jollensten, Mike Chaney, and Matt Millberger.

From the Back Cover

"The shadows go deeper than you can possibly imagine.

Kill me, but know this: There is no going back now.

-Preston Callahan, occultist and suspected demon worshipper (deceased).

This book includes:

- Story hooks and suggestions usable for any World of Darkness chronicle.
- A look into the myriad possibilities of the supernatural.
- Toolkits for building enemies, rivals or pawns for all types of characters.

For use with the World of Darkness Rulebook."

Presentation

Antagonists' cover features what appears to be a scarecrow wearing a gas mask. This image is set upon a background of dark grey clouds. The title is in stark opposition to the cover since it is in pure white.

All of the interior artwork is black and white. Most of the pieces are half page, either across or taking up the space of one full column of text. Many, though not all, of the illustrations are perfectly placed when in comparison with the surrounding text.

Content

This book is very simple in its ideas, layout, and execution. This simplicity is what makes this book damn near perfect. It is what it needs to be and tries to be nothing else.

Antagonists is broken down into four chapters – one for each general classification being presented. Each chapter is then broken into topics – general traits, common tactics for both player and storyteller, and finally specific 'breeds' of the genus.

Also, specific 'character creation' tips are provided. These can cover everything from how to spend attribute points to what specific backgrounds are a good idea and what kinds of supernatural powers can be possessed (in the instances that there are actually powers).

Chapter One – The Living Dead

Zombies. No horror book is complete without zombies. They get first honors in this book, actually. Also included here are golem like Imbued, Revenants (spirits who possess bodies), and more Zombies. Vampires could technically be included in this chapter. Thankfully, the authors opted to leave them out being as that they have a line of books all to themselves.

There are multiple methods of zombie creation. A few are touch upon. Also discussed are some of the possibilities for creation of Imbued and Revenants as well. Yeah – disease!

Sadly, what to do with the zombies that are left 'alive' after the siege is not discussed. Any of you who have seen *Shaun of the Dead* know exactly what I am talking about.

For any Storyteller who really wants their players to sweat or any player who expects to run into this sort of enemy, I HIGHLY suggest reading [The Zombie Survival Guide](#) by Max Brooks. It is a fantastic read that brings a lot of details into proper light.

There are roughly a half dozen specific examples of these kinds of characters given at the end of the chapter. These cover all of the broad classifications of 'living dead'. I was very happy to see one of the characters from the opening fiction detailed here.

Chapter Two – A Need for Vengeance

Think *Hunter: the Reckoning* without the powers. These are real people who have seen the truth. They have seen the beasts for what they are and hunt them like animals.

Friends are good. Letting anyone get too close to you is bad. This is a hard line to walk and can easily lead to a mental breakdown. This is not something uncommon for 'hunters'.

Why do they hunt? A great number of people, whether they wish to admit it or not, are xenophobic. Those people who are not like them are not to be liked. The more different the creature, the more it can be hated. Of course, violence due to lack of understanding is far from the only reason, I'm sure. More than one of these beasts has ripped one man's family to shreds in front of his eyes or whatever horrible event you can imagine.

How does a human stack up against a supernatural being? If approaching the situation without a plan, almost as well as going toe to toe with a bull-dozer. Plans have to incorporate friends, enemies, and even the law. Make that – *especially* the law.

Once again, there are about a half dozen sample characters that run the gamut. These individuals come from all walks of life, not just the poor, military trained, holy, etc.

Chapter Three – The Righteous and the Wicked

So, the last chapter dealt with normal people. This one deals with those backed by spiritual power. Notice that I did not say 'holy'. This power need not be from God. This power need not be supernatural either. It can be as simple as action based on belief or it can be as complex as 'magic' through ritual.

In a reality in which the supernatural exist there will likely live (or 'live', as the case may be) some supernaturals who seek power of mortals. One of the fastest ways to feel powerful is to have followers. This is the most basic idea behind a cult, though a cult need not be based around a supernatural individual.

To have a cult, you must have people. How to recruit (or brainwash) followers and keep them is addressed early on in the chapter. Actually, this is discussed even before the different types of cults and actions of cults.

There are a great number of different cults out there (in reality and in the World of Darkness). Some are religious, others seek magical power they believe to exist (reasonably or not), and still those that have nothing do with religion but are another 'organization' all together (secret or overt).

Just as there are many types of cults there are many types of cult leaders. What makes a good cult leader is pretty straight forward, no matter the kind of cult. One must be charismatic, have (or feign) concern for his followers, and have a strong idea of what lines can and can not be crossed by his followers.

There are a few cults described, one for each type, and a cult leader for each type as well.

Chapter Four – Fear Given Form

This final chapter can be viewed from a couple of different directions. It can be viewed as intended, as a collection of 'real' monsters that can have no classification. It can also be viewed as 'everything that didn't fit'. How you view it is up to you.

This chapter breaks the mold of the previous three in many ways. It still has the common tactics, but that is short when compared to the rest of the book. In fact, each monster that is presented here is like its own 'genus' of monsters. Since there is only one of each being or group of beings, there is no need for specific examples. Each is given a background, description, story hooks, and stats.

It is obvious where some of the antagonists given in this chapter came from. Others, on the other hand, I have no idea where the inspiration lies.

Conclusion

Though the title of the book is fairly boring, it is straight forward. There is no real need for a fancy title. It is called *Antagonists* because that is what it contains - nothing more, nothing less.

I am very pleased with this title because it does not try to be what it isn't. The authors clearly had no misconceptions of what the book was meant to contain. It contains only what it should and presents it in a very clear and enjoyable fashion.

I would have rather seen this done as a paperback instead of a hardback. I believe that all upcoming releases in the WoD line are to be hardbacks, however, even if only 120 or so pages.

Archetype: Enemy Supplement

Body 9 (*Game Mechanics*): The core rules are followed.

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

Spirit 9 (*Look & Feel*): Some of the art was lacking. There could have been a little more art, too.

Attack 9 (*Value of Content*): This book would have been better done as a paperback.

Defense 10 (*Originality of Content*): Some was expected, some was not.

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

Magic 10 (*Options & Adaptability*): Enemies abound in *Antagonists*. There is at least one that can be used in any WoD game.



Wyrds is Bond

Authors: Jason L. Blair

Publisher: [Key 20 Publishing](#)

Reviewed by: *Nash J. DeVita*

Review Date: *February 16th, 2005*

Reviewer Bias: My background with this title is a strange one. When I first heard of this title I passed it off as garbage. I really did not want anything to do with the title. That was pre-Gen Con 2004. I spoke with the kind folks at the booth briefly while at the con since I was familiar with Key 20 from their title Little Fears. I was inquiring about the other products he had at the booth and we came to 'Wyrds is Bond'. I asked about it, maybe looking for a reason to like it, maybe looking for a real reason to dislike it. I still can't be sure. What I was told had me intrigued, however. Wyrds is Bond sounded much deeper than I had originally expected. I had to know more. Once my schedule allowed it, I began reaching out to make some other contacts in the industry and got in touch with Jason who was more than happy to send me a copy. Now, my desire to actually play this game is great! I just have to find the right group. Yes, I have gone from wanting nothing to do with the title to truly wanting to play it.

Wyrds is Bond is a roughly ninety (90) page, long perfect bound paper back of standard height and width (unlike Little Fears which was an odd height and width). Leanne Buckley and Carlo Barros provide the rough comic book style illustrations that are found throughout this book.

From the Back Cover

"Trade the pointy hats for X caps.

Trade the guilds for gangs and staffs for Glocks. Trade the folklore for funk and the history for hip-hop. Trade tomes for CDs, bards for DJs, trade minstrels for MCs. Trade what you think for the harsh reality.

This is a world where slingers peel each others caps for the secrets of the streets. This is a time just before it all went commercial and everybody and their mama had a record deal.

This is a world just one beat from our own where magic has hit the mainstream and slingers- turned- rappers are getting gold records while sowing discord among the elders.

This is a world where saying too much can cost you your life. Take it from me, kid, life on the street ain't no plaything and you have to work for your payday.

On the street the most important thing you have is your wyrd."

Presentation

The cover features an African-American individual who, while not physically threatening, manages to be quite imposing looking. He is wearing a (Malcolm) X hat and a branded shirt (Enok is a fictional clothing brand within the game world). He is flashing his gang sign. The hand that he is signing with is billowing grey smoke. I think what makes this man so imposing is the lack of color in his eyes. They are eerily solid white.

The illustrations between the covers are fairly similar in style. They are 'comic book style', black and white illustrations. I love the look of the art for the feel of the game. I particularly like the DJ on page 90!

I really like the page border images. It is a collection of brick, a very common sight for anyone spending a good portion of time in any city within the United States. I can not think of any other image that would not distract from the feeling of the text. This, in fact, slightly enhances it.

Content

One must keep in mind when reading this title that it is a work of fiction that deals with a very serious lifestyle, that of a gang member. No matter what power one has, life on the streets is tough and this book does not try to make light of that situation, thankfully. *Wyrd is Bond* touches upon real gangs briefly but most of the material for the game is up to the GM to include or choose not to include. It does not try to be a treatise of real gangs or real gang life, though it does discuss them briefly.

Somewhat on the same note, players and GMs alike must decide what level of 'street' they really want to use in the game so as to not make it seem farcical. There are a number of terms that are used in current street lingo that some people may very well be offended by. The use of those words is just one of the many decisions that must be addressed to have an over-all acceptable comfort level for all participants.

The title opens with a piece of short fiction to help get the reader into the world of *Wyrd is Bond* and, to a degree, the general feel of life on the streets. This short tale tells of an individual who becomes introduced to magic through song and has in run-ins with various gangs and gang members.

Chapters, or Tracks as they are called here, one and two are of the utmost importance for all possible players of this game to read. These two short chapters summarize, quite well, what *Wyrd is Bond* is and is not as well as the basic background and what has changed from the real world.

The heart of the book really begins with Track three: I'm your Slinger. This gives a somewhat closer look at slinging gangs and the differences from 'normal' gangs and how slingers can fit into each.

The seven (7) slinger gangs that are available are detailed here. Each has a very different take on life and how to wield their power. The Crows are focused on material goods above all else while The Ghosts are primarily concerned with the well being of their neighborhoods and local residents. The D-Men push dark trade, such as guns and drugs, since they work for/with demons. They are directly opposed by The 3xStars who despise cruelty and unnecessary violence. This is just a

small portion of the gangs available and their views. As you can see from these few examples, however, there is a great dichotomy and even greater opposition.

Track four goes into the system. The system is really interesting, in my opinion. The most basic rolls are done on three dice. Each of these dice is assigned to one of three traits: Order, Power, and Pay Back. Order tells character initiative, power tells strength, and payback, well, payback gives tons of fun options.

The fifth track is fairly standard. It is the GM's chapter. It discusses NPCs, the feel of the game and how to keep it, possible plot hooks, etc.

The sixth and final track is also pretty standard. In it, two fairly complete scenarios are provided for quick and easy use.

Conclusion

Though there are a couple of items that are not discussed as thoroughly as they could/should be, this is a fairly complete book. That is quite a feat for a 90 page title!

I am saddened that the one item that bugged me early on was not discussed. If characters are members of different gangs, how could/should a GM go about telling a story around them equally?

Beyond that one issue, I am clear on things after just one read through. Yes, the writing, though some of it is 'written in street' is easy to read and easier to understand. This fact helps make clear a setting that is so unfamiliar to the vast majority of the people who would be playing this game.

Archetype: Core Book

Body 10 (*Game Mechanics*): Fresh ideas. Nice simple system.

Mind 10 (*Organization*): I was confused on a couple of items briefly.

Spirit 10 (*Look & Feel*): Great for the subject matter. Attack 9 (*Value of Content*): This is a great, complete game for \$20.

Defense 11 (*Originality of Content*): I've never read anything like it before.

Health 9 (*Physical Quality*): Perfect bound paper back.

Magic 11 (*Options & Adaptability*): Many stories are ready to be told.

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