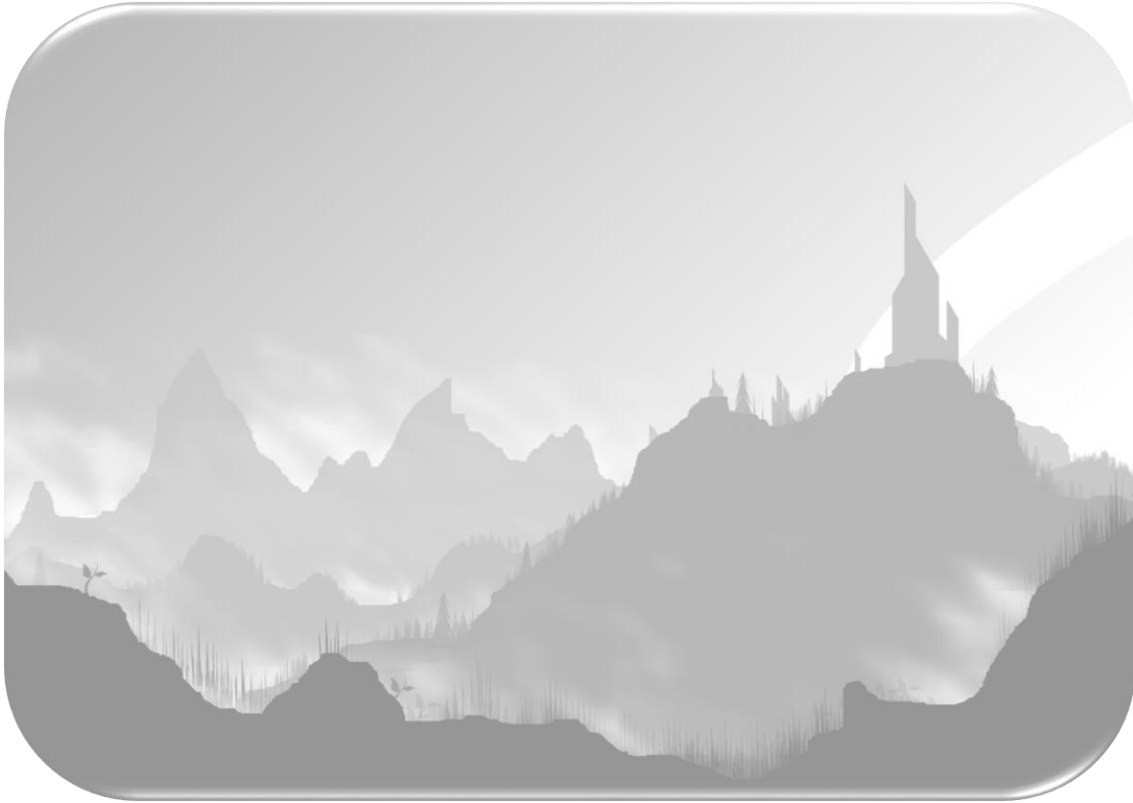


SURVIVAL AND TRAVEL VARIANT RULES

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CYPHERTM
— CREATOR —
S A S T E M



INTRODUCTION

The Cypher System shines for its flexibility and adaptability, but it lacks an important element to any setting which includes adventure and exploration: rules to determine the outcome of overland travel and tables listing the dangers lurking in the untamed wilderness. In this document I propose a new approach to step-by-step overland travel, mostly inspired by the “hex-crawling” campaigns common in the older days of the hobby.

WHAT YOU NEED

To properly utilize this document, you’ll need some sheets of hex paper and two copies of the map you want your PCs to explore: one is yours and contains the position of settlements and dangers in the area, the other is blank except for the outline of the coastal areas and is to be given to the PCs. I suggest using hexes with a radius of roughly 4 to 5 millimeters.

Chapters:

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| -1 Terrain Hostility | -5 Diseases |
| -2 Overland Travel | -6 Buildings And Vehicles |
| -3 Actions in Travel | -7 Random Encounters |
| -4 Ambient Damage | |



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1 – TERRAIN HOSTILITY

Hostility is a measure of the peril posed by a terrain or area, a quantification of its capability of hurting, stopping or maiming the PCs. Terrain hostility is assigned by the GM however they see fit and ranges from 0 to 4:

0. The area is safe guarded or protected and poses no life-threatening risk.
1. The area is safer than most and life-ending threats are rare.
2. The area is unexplored, populated by hostile creatures or simply dangerous.
3. The area is actively hostile and most of those who venture there perish.
4. The area is a death trap, the pinnacle of lethality for those unaware.

Hostility influences many factors, to name a few the speed the terrain can be traversed at and the average level of the creatures lurking there. Firstly, however, a good GM should learn how to assign terrain hostility based on a series of questions:

- Is the terrain populated by hostiles?
- Does the area house a powerful foe?
- How is the geology?
- How is the climate?
- Who lives here, if anyone?
- Are there fortifications or roads?
- Are there societies nearby?

Once these answers have been answered, you can evaluate the approximate hostility of the terrain in a scale from 0 to 4. Remember that this distinction is not set in stone and can be twisted to either suit your needs or compensate for an error: one point more or less is not game-changing. To have a better grasp on the concept of hostility, consider the following examples:

A hamlet has a hostility of **zero**, as the local militia keeps most of the townsfolk in check and guarantees order and safety.

The nearby hills have a hostility of **one**: the occasional dangerous beast is sure to roam by, but such an occurrence is improbable.

The dark forest has a hostility of **two**: mysterious creatures lurk in the dark...

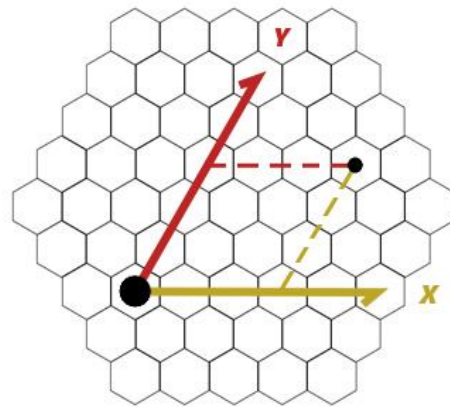
The mountain range has a hostility of **three**: many who venture there don't return.

The forbidden shrine of Ashaok has a hostility of **four**: certain death.

When in doubt, consider how close the nearby inhabited or civilized area is and behave accordingly. Also, some civilized areas have a higher hostility such as cities and metropolises.

2 – OVERLAND TRAVEL

To properly track the movement of characters on a map, the first step is to divide said map into equal hexagons. Each of those represents an area with a diameter of roughly 6 miles, or 10 kilometers. A group of fit individuals can, on roads, travel for up to four of those hexes (for a total of 24 miles, or 40 Km) in the span of an adventuring day. Each hex is large enough to house various points of interest, which you can list on a reference sheet and localize on the map via a set of coordinates. As hexes don't fare well in an orthogonal coordinate system, it's better to use a distorted one (if you are using one at all):



But how does this relate to the concept of terrain hostility? Simply put, to each hex corresponds a hostility level from 0 to 4, assigned in relation to the danger posed by natural (or supernatural) forces in the area. When mapping hostility you have two choices: make it known to the players or not. In the former case, they can perform better-informed choices regarding which path to take to a specific destination, in the latter you have a higher degree of control over the narrative and you can force the party into dangerous areas they would have otherwise avoided.

Characters move across the map following a sub-set of specific travelling rules, the most important of which is the **travelling day**. Each day of travel is divided into 5 discrete blocks: morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night. The PCs can "spend" one or more of their collective travel time to perform a set of large-scale "actions", much like a turn in combat, the simplest of which is movement. These actions shall be examined in the next chapter.

Each day of travel forces the PCs to consume **two complete meals**, which are tracked in the form of rations. Failure to do so causes ambient damage to them, as explained in the relative chapter.

3 – ACTIONS IN TRAVEL

The PCs can spend their travelling day performing a variety of actions, aimed towards survival or exploration. Each action “costs” the group a certain amount of collective time, specified in the list below in brackets. Note that, normally, nighttime is devoted to resting and standing guard, but it, too, can be “spent”. If one or more PCs don’t sleep, they suffer **ambient damage** and don’t recover any spent recovery roll, as usual. In the following list, the term **H** indicates the terrain hostility. The actions one can perform are:

Foraging (1). Foraging provides a number of rations equal to the result of a Survival or Hunting check minus the terrain hostility, times the number of people who are foraging. For instance, a trained individual who scores a 13 on the d20 could succeed on a level 5 check, meaning they will find 5 rations worth of food for each member of the hunting expedition. If the terrain has a hostility of 2, the amount of food rations per individual is reduced by 2.

Travelling (H). Travelling to a nearby area requires to spend a number of time slots equal to the hostility of the hex of destination (minimum 1). Moving within the same hex doesn’t require any consistent time. Attempting to travel while in hostile weather, such as a thunderstorm or sandstorm, requires a Survival check, whose difficulty is the lowest of 2d6 plus the terrain hostility. If the check is failed, the group becomes **lost**.

Exploring (1). Exploring a hex requires a Survival or Cartography skill check, the difficulty of which is determined by the GM. The difficulty can also be determined by rolling 2d6 and adding the lowest to the terrain hostility, to provide more dynamic challenges. If the exploration is successful, the group find one or more places of interest (if any) present in the hex. If they fail, they become **lost**.

Building (1). By making a Masonry or Construction skill check with difficulty equal to the terrain hostility, you can create a level 1 shelter for the group. The shelter can house an amount of people equal to the number of builders. Rules regarding buildings and vehicles are presented later in this document.

Reinforce (2^{LV}). Reinforcing a building takes a number of time slots equal to 2 to the power to the level of the building, meaning a level 2 building takes 2 time slots and the time needed doubles for each level. A building needs to be improved step by step, one level at a time. Each time a building is improved, a member of the group must make a Masonry or Construction skill check with difficulty equal to the terrain hostility, plus the level of the building. This means a level 10 building requires 511 days of work to build from scratch.

4 – AMBIENT DAMAGE

Ambient damage is caused by environmental sources. As such, it ignores armor and it represents the effects of a long exposure to the elements. Ambient damage is usually might-based, but extreme cold or starvation could also be represented by a loss of Speed.

Whenever a character takes **ambient damage**, roll 2d6 and pick the lowest, then add it to the terrain hostility. Sources of protection, like some cyphers or powers, may offer protection against ambient damage.

Sources of ambient damage:

- Skipping a meal;
- A night without sleep;
- Staying in a cold or hot environment without countermeasures for more than one time slot;
- Being **lost** and failing to find the way.
- Hailstorms, sandstorms etc...

Being **lost**, in particular, is caused by external factors (such as failing to explore a hex) and causes the group to be lost within the hex they are currently residing in. A lost group cannot explore the current hex nor travel to another one willingly. The group may attempt to find the way with a special action:

Finding the Way (H). By using a number of time slots equal to the hostility of the **current hex**, the leader may attempt a Survival check against a difficulty equal to the lowest of 2d6 plus the terrain hostility. On a success, the group is no longer lost. On a failure, they take ambient damage.

5 – DISEASES

Diseases are a common enemy of explorers and the Cypher System allows for enough flexibility to create them quickly and easily. Whenever a character would contract a disease (because of questionable hygiene or a GM intrusion), assign a level to the disease as if it were a creature. The character must make a might-defense roll against contagion first. Then, after each night, they must repeat the roll against the disease.

On a **success**, the disease loses potency (and one level). On a **failure**, the character takes might or speed damage equal to the level of the disease and it increases by 1 level.

If the disease level reaches level zero, the character is healed. If it reaches level 10, the character falls one step on the damage track for each subsequent failure.

Feel free to apply further penalties to characters who fail a roll against a disease, such as blindness or nausea, as you see fit.

6 – BUILDINGS AND VEHICLES

Buildings and Vehicles work in a very similar manner, as their primary purpose is to shield or shelter the crew or inhabitants from harm. As such, the rules regarding their creation and utilization are fairly similar.

Firstly, all buildings have a level from 1 to 10, which influences their resistance to harm and the degree of protection they offer to their inhabitants. Rules for creating buildings also apply to vehicles and are explained in chapter 3, under “building” and “reinforce”.

Acting while inside a building grants a series of benefits and liabilities:

Defense: all characters inside buildings or vehicles gain armor against all outside sources equal to the structure’s level. This includes ambient damage caused by the environment, such as extreme cold or a hailstorm.

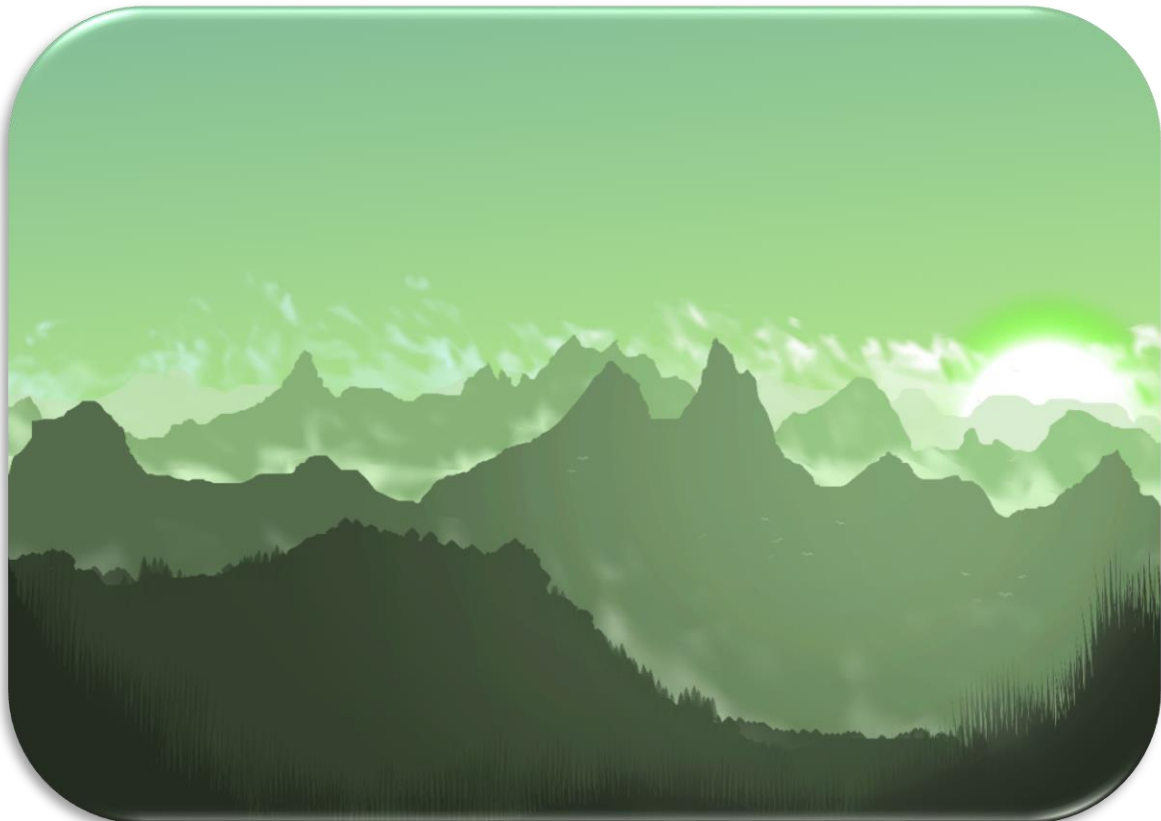
Offense: many buildings and vehicles are equipped with implemented weaponry, which are always classified as heavy. These weapons deal damage equal to the level of the structure. NPCs may use the building’s weapons too, provided they are proficient in their utilization.

Movement: Vehicles can move up to a short range each round, or a long range if travelling on a straight line and on even terrain. Some vehicles may be capable of flight or other

forms of peculiar movement, depending on the materials available to the group and their crafting ability. Vehicles need **fuel** to function, which can be provided by any source compatible with the engine. When in doubt, assign a level to the fuel found by the characters and decrease it by 1 for each time slot used for travel.

Damaging building an vehicles is as easy as making an attack roll against them. Attacks against immobile buildings always hit, those against vehicles must be compared to the level of the pilot. When a structure reaches 0 health, its level decreases by 1, it gains health as appropriate for its new level and it ceases granting all its bonuses, including protection and movement. A damaged structure can be restored to its former level by repairing it, which takes a number of time slots equal to half the time needed to upgrade it. You may assign armor to a building depending on the hardness of the materials employed to build it, from 0 (wood) to 3 (steel).

Breaching may happen when a creature forces their way inside an occupied building. If they do so, they choose whether to take ambient damage equal to the level of the building or attempt a skill check against the same difficulty. Creatures inside a building ignore its defensive properties and can’t be targeted by its implemented weapons.



As an example, a level 4 structure (be it a vehicle or a building) takes $1 + 2 + 4 + 8 = 15$ time slots to complete and 4 checks whose difficulty depends on the environment and level of the building. Once completed, it provides 4 armor to those inside against all external sources of damage. The structure also has $3 \cdot 4 = 12$ health, meaning it can take 12 points of damage before being breached and ceasing to give any protection. Now, an attacking creature may decide to enter the structure forcibly (taking either 4 damage or making a level 4 ability check), in which case they may ignore the defensive bonuses of the structure. On the other hand, they may opt to attack it directly. If the structure takes 12 damage, it becomes a level 3 structure, gains 9 health and is considered breached. Repairing a breach requires restoring the structure's original level by means of re-upgrading it. A structure is completely destroyed only when it reaches level 0, meaning it must take $12 + 9 + 6 + 3 = 30$ points of damage.

7 – RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

Random encounters are usually frowned upon by the role-playing enthusiast, but that's just because most GMs fail to recognize them for what they are: story elements, like any other. Random encounters should never be used to just prolong a session or give the characters something to do: they must provide a form of emergent narrative which makes the PCs question and fear the environment they find themselves in. In this chapter, I'll explain how to create a dynamic random encounter table and how to make use of such to expand, rather than slow down, the story.

Firstly, one needs to keep in mind the following points to create a good encounter:

Not all encounters are combat: this seems obvious, but a random encounter table should include also positive and neutral outcomes for exploration. Meeting new NPCs, finding lost equipment or simply spotting an interesting natural landmark helps immersion.

Use random encounters only when necessary: don't feel the need to use random encounters at every step of the journey, but limit them to one per adventuring day or even less. Random encounters are particularly good when used to make a situation worse: stom the PCs from sleeping with one, or make a pack of rapacious abominations attack the group while they are scaling a cliffside.

Build up to the encounter properly: no one wants to hear "a bear appears". Describe the dark, looming shadows of an immense mammal in the forest and tease your players with it. This will also give them a chance to prepare for a fight.

Use GM intrusions when you need things to really go south: a well-placed GM intrusion means you can literally throw your PCs from a bad situation to a desperate one. A random encounter happening at the *worst possible time* is a great wake-up call for bored players.

Second, but just as important, you must create a solid **encounter table** filled with interesting events. To do so:

Rely on multiple die rolls, such as $2d12$, instead of a single $d20$ roll. This way, the events in the "middle" of the table will be far more probable and you can place properly dangerous encounters on its edges.

Create interconnected encounters: when writing about a creature the PCs can find, it's usually a good idea to add an element of dynamism by linking it to another encounter on the same table. For instance, don't just write "A pack of wolves", but "a pack of wolves stalking a wounded [...]", where [...] is another creature rolled randomly on the table or chosen by you.

Create both positive and negative encounters, possibly devoting the upper half of the table to positive ones and the lower half to harmful ones. Even better, use "neutral" encounters when possible and allow the actions of the PCs to dictate whether they end up as a boon or a bane for the group.

Tie the encounters with the story you are trying to tell: no one wants to fight giant rats while traversing the land of Sorrowfalls to slay the Giant King of Abaltha. Use creatures and NPCs linked to the story, character background or subplots.

Use random encounters as seeds for side-quests and subplots: don't just throw a couple of bandits at the PCs, but give one of the bandits a letter signed by an old enemy of the party who commissioned the cutthroats to slay them for a discrete sum of money. What if the animals attacking the group all have a strange tattoo? What if the goblin pit trap contains the remains of a nobleman from a nearby town, whose body was never found?

When in doubt, roll: sometimes the PCs need to be kept on their toes. Sometimes you want things to go south without using an intrusion. If you are desperate, roll and come up with something. This way, the PCs may think they are facing a random occurrence, when in reality you are guiding the plot forward.

That being said, in the next page you'll find an example of what I use as a random encounter table in one of my campaigns. When in doubt about a creature level, consider using the lowest of $2d6$ plus the environmental hostility.

The image displays four identical horizontal rows of graph paper. Each row is a 10x10 grid of squares. The bottom row of each grid is shaded gray, while the other nine rows are white. The grids are separated by small gaps.