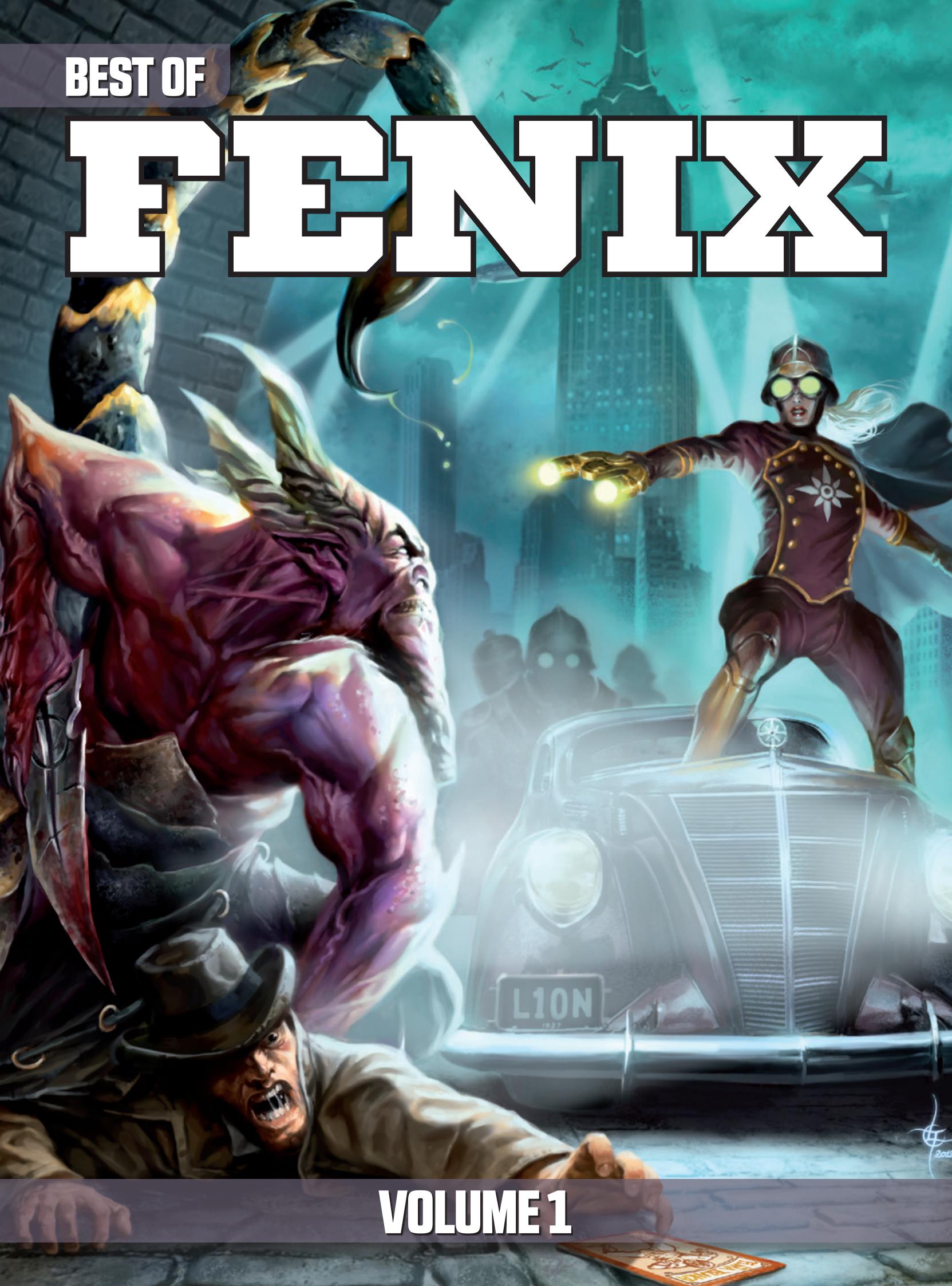


BEST OF

# THE BEST OF E3NIX



VOLUME 1



# GAMING THROUGH A SWEDISH FILTER

*Fenix is a full color gaming magazine from the cold north: Sweden. Six times a year for more than a decade we have released a new printed issue full of gaming material, reviews, interviews and our comic strip Bernard the Barbarian. The magazine has only been released in Sweden, and most of the material has subsequently been in Swedish only.*

*The name Fenix is Swedish for "phoenix". We chose the name since we - Anders & Tove Gillbring - had just finished working on a membership magazine for a Swedish gaming organization. The phoenix reference felt appropriate, since the end of that magazine did not mean we were dead and gone - quite the opposite. After years of doing a magazine for somebody else, and prioritizing news from the organization above gaming material it was a treat to be our own bosses and make all of the executive decisions on the content.*

*Five years ago we made a policy decision to include gaming material in English as well, without translating it to Swedish every single time. The reason for that particular change was one man. Ever since then Kenneth Hite spoils our readers with a new article to every issue of Fenix (in the tradition of Suppressed Transmissions). A couple of years ago we added Pete Nash to our mixas well. He is providing ever interesting new gaming material connected to RuneQuest 6 (much in the tradition of RuneRites).*

*Best of Fenix is our way of celebrating the first decade as a gaming magazine. In the first three volumes of Best of Fenix you will find some of the best material we have previously published in the Swedish magazine - but this time all in English and in hardcover. In order to make the volumes more accessible for an international audience, we have excluded all material to games only available in Swedish. That said - if you ever stumble across a Swedish game translated to English, you really should give it a try!*

*The language have gone through an English filter, thanks to Pete Nash and Jessica Augustsson - gamers with English as their first language. Anytime you believe we are making sense, it is thanks to them. If you find any lingering errors or inconsistencies, we are to blame for some last minute revision or translation.*

*This book would not have been possible without all the people who crowd-funded us. During the campaign, we were able to add more material as we reached new stretch goals. After that, we could not help ourselves but provided extra bonus material as well. We hope you will enjoy reading this final result.*



## BEST OF FENIX WAS MADE POSSIBLE THANKS TO OUR CROWDFUNDERS

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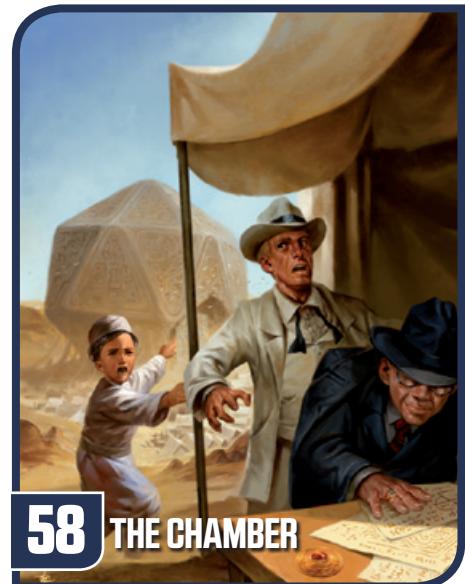
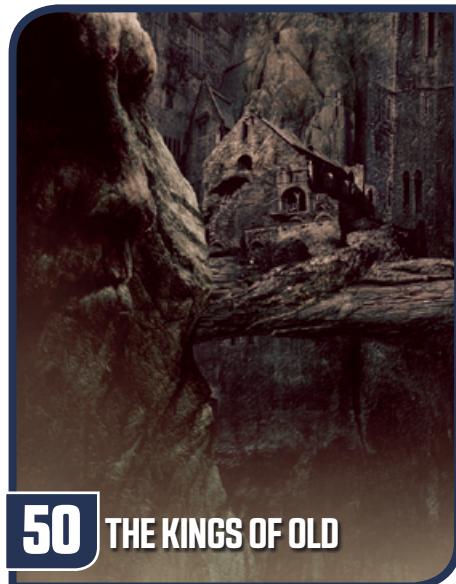
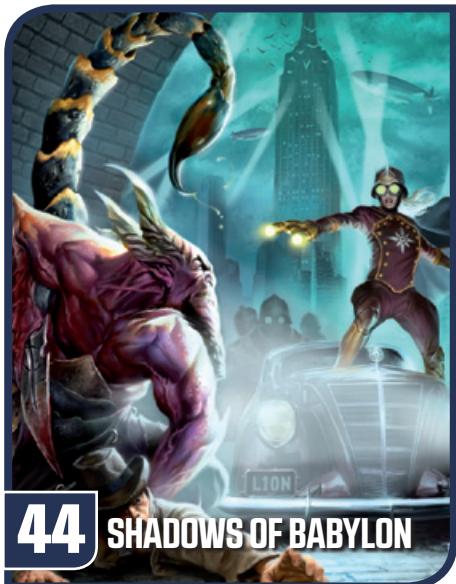
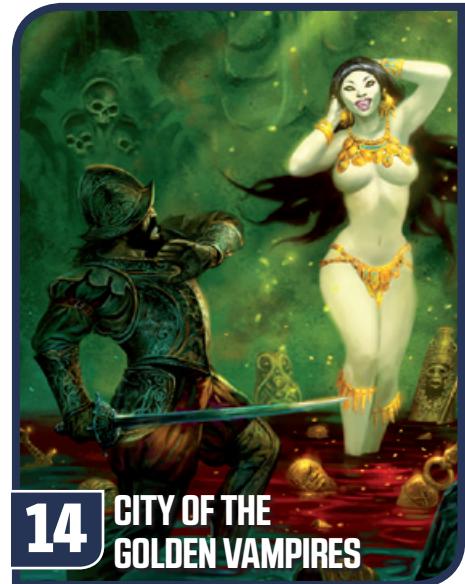


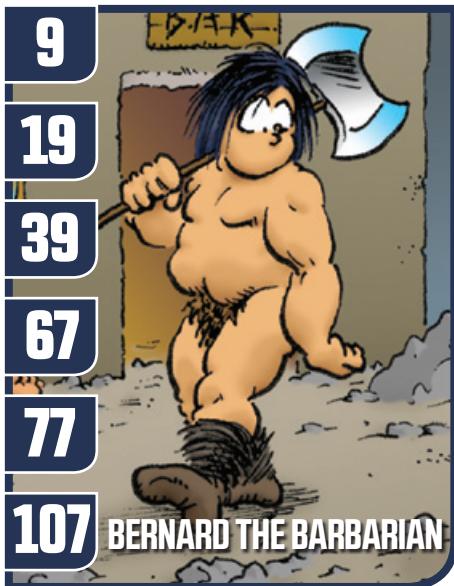
## ABOUT THE COVER

We have no clue what we would do without Lukas Thelin, the talented illustration artist we at Åskfageln (our company is named after a mythical bird - the Thunderbird) are happy to have as our inhouse lead artist. Lukas is responsible for the bulk of our illustrations and our number one cover artist. This particular image was developed to accompany Kenneth Hite's article *Shadows of Babylon*, and was originally the cover on our issue with on *Urban Fantasy*. As always when Lukas makes a cover, we encourage you to go looking for details in it, since you will always find some easter eggs hidden in the images.

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## BEST OF FENIX





## ONCE UPON A TIME

## IN THE NORTH

TEXT KENNETH HITE

ILLUSTRATION LUKAS THELIN

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION FENIX 4/2011

“Times will continue to change. There is no northern boundary beyond which commercial enterprise cannot go till North meets North on the opposite shores of the Arctic Ocean as East has met West on the Pacific.”

— Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire*

**N**obody expected it to happen so fast. And they definitely hadn't expected it to come from the Sun. The New Carrington Event washed over Earth in 2045, the largest solar storm ever observed. Computers crashed, satellites fried, economies choked and tottered. Then came the Jenkins Event, and the Troedsen Event, and then they just started naming them like hurricanes, and then they stopped naming them because the Storm Wars had started and they had other, bigger worries. Chinese and American radiant weapons didn't broil the atmosphere – the sun storms were already doing that – but they broiled a few cities in a few countries before the Party collapsed in Xian and the generals took over in Denver. In the twenty years after the Peace, even the sun storms settled into a new normal of ominous omnipresence, of aurora borealis visible in Miami and Cairo. Technology settled into its new normal of everything triple-hardened and land-linked in fullerene cables, of air travel only in emergencies, of solar foil on car hoods and rooftops and rechargeable coils in everything from blasters to locomotives.

The tropics were simple hell, but most of them had flooded when the seas rose. Everywhere else just moved south on the weather map: Baltimore had Miami's old weather, and Miami had Belize's, and Belize was underwater. With the Gulf Stream flowing past Africa now, northern Europe only heated by two or three degrees Centigrade – nothing compared to the ten or twelve that the Arctic

regions climbed. The Arctic regions, now, they were something else. There, melting glaciers and changing salinity actually *lowered* the sea levels. All those Siberian ports, dug out by Soviet slave labor a century ago, were suddenly miles inland, and the Lena and the Yenisey cut new channels through the muddy plains to the sea. New lands emerged, breaching the surface for the first time in a million years. The Northwest Passage opened up, but old channels closed: Ellesmere Island became Ellesmere Land as Greenland expanded.

But who did the new lands belong to? Not just the new lands from the Arctic seabed, but the suddenly melted tundra, where the permafrost broke up and the soil breathed, and suddenly wheat could grow after some geneengineered clover started the nitrate cycle. Wheat and soybeans could grow there, in the Yukon and the North Slope and Greenland and Kamchatka. The clover that fed the soil also fed musk oxen and reindeer; the new ranches spread across Canada, Siberia, and Lapland. Grain and meat loaded onto trains in the new boomtowns: Murmansk and Narvik, Norilsk and Churchill and Juneau. It could feed the crowded cities in the new tropics, Dallas and Rome and Odessa and New Nanjing sweltering in the hurricanes and jammed into the concrete warrens built for the refugees and built up by their children.

And there was more: rare earth lodes, and cobalt group deposits. Platinum and cesium and chromium and lithium and everything the world starved for, unlocked by the re-

treating ice. Gold, always magnetic in its own eldritch way. Titanium in Greenland; cobalt in the Taymyr. Oil and gas for the last limping combustibles, and selenium and gadolinium for solar foil and hard-bubble chips. The big lanthanum boom in Novaya Zemlya started it, and then the thorium strike in Baffinland drew 25,000 Americans tired of rationing and crowd-zoning, and more than a little tired of the generals in Denver.

The move was on: “Go North, young man!” The Canadian government tried to stop the Americans, or at least corral them; the Provisional Committee in Denver almost tore itself apart trying to decide whether to crush American emigration or Canadian resistance. Alaska stepped lightly, flying the flag and paying tribute, but in Fairbanks and Barrow folks started saying openly that it might be time to try elections again. The Russian government couldn't even try to stop the Chinese pioneers, but the Ten August Republics found it easier to harass and hijack each others' expansionary efforts – er, “fraternal harmonization of the trans-Amur” – than to cooperate. Siberian cities cut their own deals, and betrayed their own foes, and the North's geopolitics began to crack and melt like its permafrost had. The New European Union made threatening noises after Greenland declared its independence; Sweden and Finland and Estonia established early transit quotas and enforced them reliably and honestly, but NEU saberrattling over Spitsbergen and border closings on the Baltic kept the Scandinavians on edge. ►



The great powers scowl as their boldest citizens strike out for the North, homesteading and prospecting and escaping. They grumble about “environmental devastation” as they greedily devour the minerals and food shipped south. But for now – for right now – they can’t do anything about it. Now – right now – is the time of the North, for the best and bravest of mankind to make a new world where the coastlines are unmapped again, where the lines of latitude meet, where the sun is always coming up.

“The element that most clearly defines the western is the symbolic landscape in which it takes place and the influence this landscape has on the character and actions of the hero. This is, I think, why this particular formula has come to be known by a geographical term ... [This] symbolic landscape is a field of action that centers on the point of encounter between civilization and wilderness ... settled society and lawless openness.”

– John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*

This setting, as you may well have figured out, is a Western moved a century into the future and restaged in the far North. This time around, though, these pioneers might be anything: not just Americans, but Canadians, Europeans, Russians, Chinese, Korean, Japanese – anyone from the northern hemisphere can get to the North if they try. India’s urban masses and Rajput ranchers alike come north on repurposed oil tankers, riding out the tropical storm belt with fellow “Northbounders” from Yemen and Senegal and unloading in the no-man’s-lands of Greenland and Siberia, in boom ports like Ittoqqortoormiit and Magadan. From there, rails reach north into the melting glacier valleys and thawing permafrost plantations, stretching out for mining camps and new towns, but building railways is hard where no government offers right-of-way and subsidies, and where night-time temperatures can still freeze metal to skin.

Just because the Arctic is warmer doesn’t mean it’s warm. Sure, in July now coastal Greenland gets into the teens, and Siberia and the Canadian Northwest Territories get into the *twenties*. In July. But the average year-round temperature in Barrow, Alaska is still *freezing*. The January temperature

in Spitsbergen (currently embroiled in a “range war” between NEU- and Russian-backed gangsters over newfound chromium deposits) has shot up since the Event – to the pre-Event temperatures in Anchorage, Alaska (about -6°C). The cold replaces the desert heat as the overwhelming environmental danger in this Western: going out without an insulated tent or enough knowledge to dig out an igloo means going to your death six months out of the year. Look at Westerns like *Jeremiah Johnson*, those set in Montana or in the high Rockies, for inspiration; read up on the Donner Party and the Yukon Gold Rush.

The grandeur of the towering glaciers of Greenland replaces Monument Valley; the whisper and creak of the ocean and the ice becomes the new soundtrack instead of the howl of the coyote and the buzz of the cicada. Frontier towns are low and prefabricated, spread over with solar foil glinting in the dazzling sky at night; the saloons dug into the ground and braced with stone. Near the saloon, the sauna; near the sheriff’s office, the SnowCat park. A town a little richer, or a little more strategic, than its neighbors might even have a thorium-salt reactor, a slightly upgraded version of the reactors once found only on nuclear submarines. Elsewhere, solar foil drinks up whatever the angry sun can pour out; lithium and lanthanide batteries charge up in the summer, and keep a trickle of heat going in the winter. While it’s not enough electricity to keep the cold at bay everywhere, it’s enough to keep most of the lights on, the libraries running, and a few vehicles charged. And a few more weapons.

The cowboy’s six-shooter still exists, but hauling bullets into the Arctic isn’t easy or cheap. Blasters can be recharged from the reactor head, or from solar foil if you’re patient. The most common is the Norinco ZM-66, a Chinese heavy pistol churned out by the millions as standard armament in the final throes of the Storm Wars. But Raytheon and Samsung and KBP have their own models, and a gun that can start a fire is no minor convenience when you’re alone in the North. Not that you’re alone often – every frostbuster travels with a husky dog or a string of them if he can. The Novosibirsk Commune has finally re-bred the Kuznets horse, giving the Arctic “ox-boy” a heavy, reliable mount that can take the cold. Strings of Kuznets mares (or canisters of Kuznets ova) are worth their weight in rare earths anywhere above the Circle, crashing the price of Canadian Rustic ponies, which eat and travel light enough for the thin fodder and thinner ice up North, but can carry less.

But the Canadian Rustic remains a good ranch pony everywhere the open range still exists – and as more new lands emerge from

the Arctic sea floor and Siberia increasingly melts out of Moscow’s grip, the open range grows. Herds of reindeer and ovibos (not called “musk oxen” any more, at least not in supermarkets) roam ranches across Yakutia and Nunavut, to be driven to whichever market their meat will bring the best price in the hardest currency. Japanese and Korean slaughter-men set up enormous robotic abattoirs on the shores of Kamchatka and Baffinland, crewed by Filipinos and Nigerians hoping to earn enough to rescue their families from their drowned homelands. Ox-boys drive the ovibo herds for thousands of miles to collect tax-free gold from the bosses of a slaughter-town that exists only for three weeks before the container ships pull away for the season. These quick-towns throw out fullerene networks and dump the south’s digital crop onto hard drives and dedicated players; vids and news and data of all kind to be taken back North and nursed through the cold winter. Vagrants and varmints plague these towns, as they do the mining boomtowns and the genetic farms growing frost-proof vegetables and UV-resistant fish.

In the North, it’s not the natives that pose the biggest threat. The hard-eyed men in Berlin and Moscow and Denver and Xian send blaster rifles and disruptor bombs to the “Inuit Liberation Front” and the “Saami People’s Army” and the “Irtysh Soviet Brigade” to slow down the North, to smash the new world building there, to stall their rivals, and to create pretexts for incursion. But even if every single Inuit wanted to “go Apache” and fight the new settlers, there just aren’t enough of them to do it. No, for the most part, it’s newcomers and first-comers, Arctic garrisons left without pay after the Storm Wars, or icebreaker crews turned pirate or cannibal or worse. It’s these outlaws and their kind, like the Greer Gang, that come whooping down on a farmstead and drive off the stock and kill the kids. It’s bandits like the Inaksesiya Bratva that ambush the trawlers ranching salmon and crab in the Bering and the Beaufort Seas when they make landfall; criminals fled North like “Fat Fingers” Jiang or made there like “Black” Alvar Tuovinen that rob prospectors or bomb rail lines.

“No law above the Circle,” they say. In many ways, that’s welcome news: the generals in Denver, the oligarchs in Moscow, the Eurocrats in Berlin, the mandarins in Xian can’t quite reach all the way to the Pole. Their taxes don’t get collected; their radio orders can’t breach the auroral static; their angry claims get ignored. Their aircraft crash in the high storms, or fry in the constant lightning. Their soldiers freeze, or get lost, or simply melt into the snow to become Northerners themselves. Perhaps a Mountie or a Rikspolisen officer or

an Alaska State Trooper can provide a gun or a badge – but there aren't many of them. In the North, the world can still breathe free, even if the air it breathes is mighty cold. But that means every man and woman in the North must make their own justice, at the barrel of a gun if need be.

"Witches have known of the other worlds for thousands of years. You can see them sometimes in the Northern Lights. They aren't part of this universe at all; even the farthest stars are part of this universe, but the lights show us a different universe entirely."

– Philip Pullman, *The Golden Compass*

Boots crunch on the ice crystals and the thawing furze; eyes narrow behind the tinted snow-goggles; the Thinsulite gloves are off the right hand only. It's blasters at thirty paces, at high noon on a day that lasts six months. The classic Western showdown maps perfectly to the new North, as do plenty of other Western tropes. Prospectors, revival preachers, and soiled doves with hearts of gold remain the same; bounty hunters, fur trappers, and gamblers likewise. Chinatown in the American railhead becomes, perhaps, Indiatown in the Shanxinese frontier post in Siberia; Falun Gong leaving a splintered, resentful China might become the new Mormons for chi-driven *Dogs in the Vineyard* games. The patent-medicine drummer becomes the wildcat genetic engineer; the dime novelist becomes the blogger; the Pinkerton becomes the Wackenhet; the wagon train becomes the reconditioned icebreaker or converted tanker. All of these elements can come right out of a standard game of *Western* or *GURPS Old West*; of *Sidewinder* or *Aces & Eights*.

Or you can begin to drift things just a little bit. Not too much at first: Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* – or Cecil B. DeMille's *Union Pacific!* – are pretty much cyberpunk narratives already, with their corporation-driven technology and corporation-created villains pushing into the pure West. Marc Laidlaw's cyberpunk novel *Neon Lotus* takes place in Tibet, not the Arctic, but cold is cold, and resistance is resistance. Although the solar storms have crashed the Web everywhere fullerene landlines don't reach, that only makes information more valuable. Certainly predatory corporations, just as much as



## TOP FIVE PLACES TO GET INTO A GUNFIGHT

### Ambarchik Autonomous Commune

A former gulag, abandoned as a ghost town in the 1970s, Ambarchik controls the mouth of the Kolyma River. As the Arctic warmed and the river became ever more vital, rival Russian mafya and pirate *bratva* ("brotherhoods") each tried to take over the town. Now at least five *bratva* vie for control, and the gold mines inland send troubleshooters into town to buy or blast passage when they must.

### Nautilus City, circa 80°N by 100°W

Abandoned oil tankers, an old Soviet spy trawler, and a hundred other ships beach on land risen from the Arctic seabed, land belonging to no one. Land surrounded by natural gas fields, enough to power the North for centuries. Wildcatters, idealists, drifters, corporate stooges, government thugs, and more jockey for power in a town without law.

### Pechenga, Russia

Energized by the Siberian Thaw, a Finnish revolutionary movement wants to return this port (lost in 1945) to Finland. Russian Interior Ministry troops are busy holding down Murmansk, so FSB death squads try to break the Finns with quick raids and extreme renditions.

### Qaanaaq, Greenland

Formerly Thule AFB, now a wide-open frontier town. The trailhead for ovibos and the cannery for Arctic char provide jobs for miners washed out of their claims; saloons, feelie parlors, and casinos provide opportunities to spend money for miners who struck pay dirt.

### Skagway, Alaska

The major transshipment point for oil, gold, and gas from Alaska to the rest of the United States. With electronic banking unreliable in the solar-storming North, tsunamis of cash flow through local banks – followed by crews of heavily armed bank robbers, some with bigger agendas.

resentful governments, seek to colonize the North: not just mining and oil but datacorps and banks, try to drain the North's resources into the hot, wet south. Like railroads and land barons in the Johnson County War, they hire their own gangs and gunfighters, turn their own memeticists and agitators loose on the frontier.

Or you can start edging a little further toward biopunk: toward *Transhuman Space*, *Trinity*, *Blue Planet*, and *Bioshock*. The North is at the forefront of genetic engineering, not just for crops and farm animals but for greater human durability in the Arctic. Improved cold resistance in blood and subcutaneous fat, nictitating membranes to cut snow-blindness, UV-resistant skin, ability to store vitamins in fat cells - all of these shifts are common recommendations by Northern ob./gen. specialists. More radical transhuman designers in cutting-edge Reykjavik or Greenland's wide-open "sin city" Sisimut add direct solar energy cells, fur, and even gills to the mix. And nobody quite knows what the genelabs in newly-independent Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk are brewing, finally freed from all oversight except the almighty Eumark.

If you'd like, you can take this setting another half-turn toward *Shadowrun* by adding some geneengineered "fantasy races." Russian genelabs grow rusalki: tall, thin, psionically gifted, amphibian humanoids, designed as spies, or pleasure-models, or prospectors for underwater mineral lodes. Instead of dwarves, use saru: self-aware monkey-like bioroids, machine savants programmed to maintain the infrastructure and computer network of a depopulated, geriatric Japan. And why not add trolls as well, built by a Norwegian-German biotech contractor as Arctic shock troops for the NEU: tough, thickset, night- and cold-adapted, with gorilla muscles, long orangutan-style arms, baboon fangs, and the ability to eat corpses for forage. One more: During the latter stages of the Storm Wars, a plague broke out in Oregon: sufferers turned green and grew a new set of bony dentrifices as their skulls reshaped. The plague was retroviral, rewriting the victims' genetic code; they developed pack instincts, and appetites for human flesh. The generals blamed the outbreak on a Chinese bio-bomb; the surrender party blamed a U.S. military bio-war experiment gone wrong. In either case, Oregon Retroviral Carriers - or ORCs - were penned up, put to hard labor, or enlisted, based on the local commander's whim. Any of these specimens of *homo mutandis* might rebel, reprogram, desert, or escape, heading North to make a new life for themselves. Whether such things appear in your North is up to you. You can leave all these extra variations in the deep background, or on the

drawing board; they can be player characters, NPC gangsters, or weird encounters.

Or they can be magical creatures. The solar storms might have done more than melt the North and heat the Earth; they may have recharged the world's mana field. If that mana is most readily accessible, or most easily measured up in the auroral stream (as in Philip Pullman's *Golden Compass*), then the North has yet another draw: it's where magic works. Or where it works best. See *The Barsoom Project*, the second *Dream Park* novel, for accessible Inuit magic in a science-fiction context. The magic might be subtle: spirits and charms, a lucky brush from an Arctic fox or a malevolent tupilaq built of hide and sinew to spy and wound. Or it might be overt and large-scale: angels summoned by the HAARP facility in Alaska; jotunn stamping around wielding rune magics; Finnish witches whistling up storms and animating buildings. Perhaps the angakkuit, the Inuit shamans, have sung Greenland free, and weave spells around the Circle keeping the jets and missiles at bay. Gunslingers pack blasting rods instead of Glocks; magical polar bears fight duels in armor; alabaster towers rise from the restored Thule. Anything is possible in the North, with will and skill and aurora-light in your eyes.

*"A large thing, I am told, vaguely like a man, yet infinitely unlike him. Details are very distorted and unreliable. It is said to have been an air elemental, but there are weird hints of something of incredible age, that rose out of a hidden fastness in the far north, from a frozen and impenetrable plateau up there.*

*Of this I can venture nothing. Dr. Jamison mentions a 'Plateau of Leng' ..."*

- August Derleth, *"The Thing That Walked on the Wind"*

Or perhaps it is darkness in your eyes, the darkness of the six months of night, the darkness of the cold waters under the glaciers in central Greenland. Western settings can turn to horror, after all: *Deadlands* shows us that, as does the movie *Ravenous*. And as *30 Days of Night* reminds us, so can the Arctic. Even in the most innocuous version of the setting, the North is full of tales of the Wendigo: the cannibal spirit that possesses those caught alone in the wilderness, the wind-demon that howls out of the sky smelling like predator and bur-

ning with hunger, the suicidal blackness that puts the gun in your hand when you hadn't even known you brought it with you on the SnowCat. The sailors putting in at Dutch Harbor and Verkhoyansk and Kirkenes tell their own stories, of manlike things living underwater, revived by the waning cold. The Margyr, demon of Inuit and Norseman alike, all cold wet claws and greenish-black hair, pulling men overboard or whispering in the voice of dead mates and lost lovers.

It's the work of a moment to introduce a full-blown cult of Ithaqua into the North, possibly in the guise of the Inuit sky deity Torngarsuk. If you can find a copy of the old Pagan Publishing campaign *The Walker in the Wastes*, updating it from the 1920s to the 2080s may take some doing, but the payoff will be worth it. Otherwise, get a copy of the *Ithaqua Cycle* anthology and get reading, possibly joined with Brian Lumley's *"Rising With Surtsey"* to incorporate Arctic Deep Ones or even Cthonian matriarchs creating the Arctic tectonic uplift for their own purposes. The melting Greenland ice cap can reveal the ruined castles of Clark Ashton Smith's *Hyperborea*, complete with formless avatars of Tsathoggua and ebon stelae carved by the hand of Eibon himself. Remember that H.P. Lovecraft's own *"Call of Cthulhu"* features a cult of Cthulhu amongst the Inuit of Greenland, and both *"Polaris"* and *"The Horror in the Museum"* mention the lost polar civilization of Lomar, home at one time to the fearsome Great Old One, Rhan-Tegoth!

Discovering Clark Ashton Smith's Commoriom or Lovecraft's Olathöe is only the start of the weirdness you can add to this setting if you have a mind to. The legendary North is alive with possibilities, from crashed UFOs (a la *The Thing From Another World*), to a Nazi Redoubt powered by the mysterious Green Ray, to a lost Viking colony living in a volcanically warm and fertile valley, to the Magnetic Mountain of Jules Verne and *Arabian Nights* alike, to a frozen Captain America. And don't forget the biggest possibility of all: the height of High Strangeness, the Hole at the Pole! Yes, ever since Edmond Halley, the entrance to the Hollow Earth has been firmly fixed at the North Pole. Symmes and Bernard and all the other dreamers believed you could just sail into the Hole, but they didn't count on the glacial cover capping the entrance. But now, under the radiant lash of the angry Sun, the glacier has withdrawn and the Hole is open once more. What could lie within? Atlantean survivors? Dinosaurs and sea serpents? Gateways in time and space; a universe of adventure, all waiting inside the top of the world. Further up, and farther in: the North extends in all directions, the eternal frontier.

**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN**

vs. FENIX



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** - A FAMILY AFFAIR



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** CARRIES ON



# MYTHS & LEGENDS

TEXT DAVID BERGVIST  
ILLUSTRATION JOHAN EGERKRANS

Myths and legends make up the bulk framework of most role-playing game fantasy worlds. They provide hordes of mythological and strongly mythologically inspired creatures who populate these games – such as elves, dragons, trolls, gnomes, dwarves, centaurs, fauns, and so on. When we look at ancient religious mythology, we find even more stuff, borrowed into nearly all our favorite fantasy worlds. J.R.R. Tolkien and many of the other early writers who defined the genre were well versed in germanic, celtic and nordic mythology, and based large parts of their most successful works on this knowledge.

As a game master playing contemporary fantasy roleplaying games, you will do well to pay some attention to these fairy tales, myths and legends from our real world, because if you get to know the origins of your typical fantasy elements, you will be able to dodge rote stereotypes and find new and interesting ways to use the familiar stuff.

This article presents a few of thoughts and tips about how to use myths, fairy tales and legends in your roleplaying games. I'll talk about basing adventures on specific myths, and will also present two creatures from norse mythology that you may not have heard about.

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Näcken is in his stallion form, he is known as the *Bäckahästen* (The stream-horse).

## TERMINOLOGY

Firstly, we need to straighten out what exactly we're talking about. What are myths, legends, fairy tales? What unites them?

They are all stories about a fictionalized reality, and the different words more or less denote how much "truth" one can be expected to find within them. In this article I won't bother much with distinctions, but just treat them as approximately the same thing.

It is however important that any myth contains an ambiguous amount of truth. A verifiable truth is not a myth, but neither is a complete and obvious lie. There has to be a "kernel of truth" somewhere; something that might sometimes make people doubt their ordered view of the world, to act "better safe than sorry" when about to set out into the dark, alone. This trait - the *Not Knowing, Not Really* - is the key element to exploit when using myths and legends in your game. We'll get back to that in a moment.

It's also worth pointing out that myths and legends come in a variety of complexity levels.

The simplest forms are basic, groundless superstitions, such as "Kill a spider, it will rain". The most advanced make up entire epic poetic cycles, such as the *Edda*, or the *Gilgamesh Epos*.

This article mainly focuses on the medium complexity myths, those that tell stories about certain strange creatures. However, nothing will stop you applying the tips to the simpler or more complex kinds of myths as well.

## THE TRUTH?

Some researchers claim that all myths are in fact covered-up symbols for something in the real world. The theory goes that mythology, allegory and fairy-tales were used in order to speak about subjects and phenomena that were otherwise unacceptable topics of everyday conversation. For that purpose, the old stories are filled with hidden messages - their true meaning in fact. Often, of course, these hidden themes are sexual in nature. Stories about werewolves are in fact stories about the

inexplicable mental, emotional and physical changes of puberty; *Little Red Riding Hood* actually warns little girls about the dangers of rape while wandering alone in the forest, and the Night-Mare might be a circumspect way to address the issue of involuntary nocturnal emissions.

Certain non-sexual, but still highly taboo, topics are also recurrent, such as the specific ghost stories about Mylingen - the ghost of a murdered newborn child, haunting and repriminating the mother, demanding sacrifices of blood and beautiful clothes, and with a wail so horrible it turns hair white and shatters minds. A tale obviously meant to discourage young mothers from killing their unwanted babies. Stories about the Changeling might be a way to come to terms with physical deformities or Down's Syndrome.

Obviously, many stories might teach several wisdoms at once; *Little Red Riding Hood* might just as effectively warn against wandering off randomly, alone in a big forest (seldom a good idea), and to have a healthy respect for predatory animals.

However, these are just the opinions of researchers, about myths and fary tales of our own, real world. The “actual facts” might certainly be something quite different in your roleplaying game setting! The monsters and creatures of the stories might actually exist, nevermind psychological interpretations and freudian symbols. This is actually quite likely; most roleplaying games state this as fact. But ideally, your players – or at least their player characters – should be in doubt as to what and who from the stories “actually” exists, and what does not.

## PURPOSE

What exactly is the purpose of your constructed legend in your game? Do you want to call attention to some in-game taboo subject or dilemma? Do you want to tell a tale of cunning and wit? Do you just want to set a certain tone? Or do you just want a cool Monster of the Week, with a certain unique touch? All these goals may be reached through a properly prepared and delivered legend.

## LEGENDS IN ROLEPLAYING ADVENTURES

A good legend can be of excellent use as a basis for an adventure, in and of itself; just let the characters meet the Big Bad Wolf or the Leprechaun themselves, but it may arguably ideally be used as an in-game legend. Delivered in the form of innocent flavor, an unimportant detail, just some stupid story delivered by some drunk at a tavern, the legend grows from there, gradually seeming more and more relevant as more and more evidence and creepy details seem to crop up throughout the characters’ journey.

## To plant a legend

First things first. The characters (and the players!) must know the legend, at least partly. This can be achieved in several ways. The most obvious ones are by hearing an NPC recount the tale, perhaps after sharing a meal or a pint, or having the PC:s read it after finding it in some old book.

A good plant should be done in a way as not to give the legend too much credibility or seeming importance. The old woman telling the tale might be obviously drunk, or senile; the old tome might be clearly labeled as one of children’s bedtime stories.

A successful plant provides lots of information that will come in useful much later, when trying to understand what is really going on, while at the time seeming completely innocuous.

## Clues and allusions

Sooner or later (preferably later!), events start to transpire that suggests there is some truth behind the stories, though never entirely conclusively. The alternative “perfectly reasonable explanation” should still be there. The PC:s might hear a distant fiddle in the forest, that same day when the girl disappeared. It might just be some random fiddler practicing alone in the woods after all. It doesn’t have to be connected. Because the Nåcken doesn’t really exist. Does he? And that almost finished house that was found razed during the night, surely that must be the result of some really cranky neighbors. It couldn’t possibly be connected to that old legend about the Vittera-road. Could it?

The key to success is to increase the players’ uncertainty about what is true and what is lies or delusions – not to deliver certain proof of either!

## Confrontation, aftermath and consequences

Finally, the adventure must end, and the characters will encounter the source of the mystery – or at least that’s the way it appears! Maybe they will really meet a naked man, playing a fiddle while sitting on a rock in the rapidly flowing waters of an ice cold mountain stream, who swears and retreats from the Word of the *Bible*. Perhaps they will finally see the small translucent humanoid figures silently dance upon the mirror-calm waters at midnight. The legend comes true, and all the lessons it teaches seems to apply completely.

But don’t stop there! A mystery solved, however fantastical the truth, is magic dissolved, and a legend can only survive in at least partial obscurity and doubt. Leave some questions unanswered, and leave some room for “rational” disbelief. Don’t let the adventure end with the characters being 100% certain that the experience was real, or that it was not.

Ideally, there should be very convincing evidence at hand that supports two or even more theories about what really transpired. Someone might stumble across a rumor that a half mad young fiddler disappeared in these very woods some time ago, who possibly might have assumed the role of Nåcken. The local authorities might have published a study warning people from buildning anything at this particular spot, because of the risk of unstable ground that might pose a hazard for buildings erected upon it.

One great example of a really well played real/not real controversy is the movie “*Pan’s Labyrinth*” (“*El laberinto del fauno*”). In the

end, it’s impossible to know whether the fantasy elements of the movie were just the really lively imaginings of a girl who needed to escape her horrible reality, or if it was all real.

## TWO NORDIC LEGENDS

Here follows a description of two, in my opinion, especially interesting legends from my nordic home, the Vittera and the Nåcken. Both might be used as a basis for roleplaying game adventures, either in a contemporary or a historic setting.

## Vittera

Vittera are a people similar to ourselves, who live close to us, yet at other times and spaces. They keep their livestock to graze in the fields during the winter, when no humans or human cattle can be there, and they are mostly active during the night. They are invisible to all humans, except those who possess The Sight, because the Vittera live in an invisible, parallel, “close by” part of reality. They dress like ordinary farmers, but they are partial to the color grey, with red details.

The Vittera usually do not bother us, nor we them, but sometimes our worlds clash. This happens at specific junctions between our worlds, the Vittera Crossroads and the Vittera Roads. These places are sometimes stretches of paths through the forest, or other visible roads, but sometimes they are just some seemingly random (though always relatively small) area in the wilds. Weird and sometimes violent things happen to people, vehicles and buildings in these places.

The classic story is one of a new house being built on newly developed land, at a place named by locals a Vittera Crossroads (and usually after dire warnings being ignored). The construction work then suffers unending delays and setbacks due to inexplicable instances of sabotage, theft and random destruction, all occuring at night when no human witness can say exactly what happened, and sometimes demanding impossible feats of strength (such as flipping over a full size digging machine).

Another common legend about the Vittera is the one about that completely straight road stretch where an unlikely number of lethal single traffic accidents occur every year. That stretch that was built right on top of an old known Vittera Road.

Stories of the Vittera are common in the northern parts of Sweden, but bear a distinct resemblance to other creatures of myth, such as the vätter of southern Sweden and “The Small Folk Under the Earth” of Gotland. They are also similar to some stories about fairies and elves from the British Isles.

## Näcken

The Näcken, whose name means something like “The Naked One”, is a powerful forest-dwelling spirit or entity of unclear origin, and stories of him are common across all of rural Scandinavia. He assumes the shape of a beautiful young man who sits naked in or close by rapidly flowing water, such as a stream or whitewater river, and plays the fiddle.

He can bind any creature to his will using his magical music, and often uses it to force his victims to drown themselves, allowing the Näcken to claim their souls for his own and forever denying them entrance into Heaven. The Näcken is feared and respected by all creatures and spirits of the forest, and none of them will cross him if they can do anything to avoid it.

Some stories tell us that the Näcken is a great shape-shifter, able to assume a number of shapes at will. He can become a beautiful, strong stallion, pearly white or sooty black, or a well-dressed dapper young human fiddler.

When in his stallion form, he is known as the Bäckahästen (The stream-horse), and possesses the ability to lure humans (and preferably young ladies) to mount him. When they do, they immediately stick to the back of the horse as if by a powerful glue, and have no choice but to follow the Bäckahästen back to his stream – and to a watery grave.

In his human form, Strömkarlen (the stream-man) wanders the land to visit human settlements, posing as an ordinary wandering musician, and plays his fiddle at parties, dances and weddings, in exchange for food and coin. Then suddenly he might decide to play a special magical tune, the “*Näckens Polska*”, that renders any listeners unable to stop dancing to it – until they have worn down shoes, feet, legs, bodies and necks, and all that remains of the merry gathering is a deep circular trench in the floor, displaying the dancers’ heads in a row. The only thing that will save those listening to “*Näckens Polska*” from this gruesome fate is if someone who is unable to hear the music (being either deaf or wearing some kind of earplugs) makes his way to the fiddler to cut his strings with a knife to stop the tune.

The Näcken is not very imaginative when choosing a human undercover alias, and always calls himself something relating to water, such as Herr Bäcke (Mr Brook), Porle (“The purling one”) or Strömmme (“The streaming one”). Clever people might therefore suspect who he is, and take precautions accordingly, such as placing an attentive guard, armed with a knife and stoppered ears, close by the fiddler. Driving him away, just in case, is also an alternative, but not one that most people prefer. The Näcken is, after all, the best

fiddler in the world, and no one can provide finer music for a wedding.

The Näcken may also teach human fiddlers to play like him. This skill is very coveted by all who carry a fiddle and bow, because one who can play like that will never lack for money, coin or company in bed. There are several ways to learn how to play like the Näcken:

### Play by the stream

This method means that the fiddler sits down by the gargling, purling stream and listens to the sound of the water for the notes of the Näcken. Then he follows the tune on his fiddle. If the Näcken appreciates the efforts of his presumptive pupil, he will start playing louder and clearer, and perhaps even appear out of the water in order to play with the human fiddler. By closely following the Näcken when he plays, this method enhances the skills of the human fiddler to almost match that of the Näcken himself, in just three nights of playing.

### Leave your fiddle by the stream for one night

If the fiddler leaves his fiddle by the stream for the night, the Näcken cannot resist magically enhancing it so that it will produce fantastic music afterwards. It’s important not to forget one detail though: To mark the fiddle with one drop of christian blood. This is important because the Näcken sometimes decides to just swap the fiddle for one of his own, looking just like the original; and a mortal who plays the fiddle of the Näcken pledges his soul to him forever. The Näcken cannot replicate christian (baptized) blood though, so if the blood mark is still there, the fiddler will be safe.

### Three drops of blood

Finally, a fiddler who carries no iron on his person can sacrifice three drops of his blood in the stream on Midsummer’s Eve in order to summon the Näcken. When he appears, he will teach the human his magical tune, “*Näckens Polska*”, a beautiful tune with eleven stanzas. This is the tune that magically compels mortals to dance, but it also compels the fiddler who plays it to never stop playing it – if he should ever start playing the 11<sup>th</sup> (especially beautiful) stanza, spelling certain doom for both himself and anyone hearing it. After learning this tune, the Näcken demands that the fiddler promise to always start playing the *Näckens Polska* whenever he is asked to play. If he keeps his promise (and manages to never start playing

the 11<sup>th</sup> stanza; which is exceedingly difficult because the whole tune builds up to it), until the following Midsummer’s Eve, and then plays all eleven stanzas by the stream, the Näcken reappears and rewards the fiddler for his excellent character and self control by teaching him every tune he has ever heard. And the Näcken has heard many, many tunes through his long immortal existence.

In conclusion, the Näcken is a pretty complex character. He is part devil, part water spirit, part trickster, part fertility deity and part patron saint of wandering musicians (and especially fiddlers). He especially likes to play his “*Näckens Polska*” to people who treated musicians badly, though also does it just for fun. Sometimes he’s carefree, playful and cruel, and sometimes sad, longing for a Heaven he will never see.

## FURTHER READING

The Time Life book series “*Myth and Mankind*” describes the religious mythologies of all larger cultures. Recommended reading for those who wish to use or create complex mythology, and not just single legends and stories.

*The Scion roleplaying game*, by White Wolf. Recommended for those who wish to mix and match mythologies as they please.

And finally, check out [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%A4cken). Just search, and be lost for days.



## CITY OF THE GOLDEN

TEXT KENNETH HITE

ILLUSTRATION LUKAS THELIN

## VAMPIRES

“Over the Mountains of the Moon,  
 Down the Valley of the Shadow,  
 Ride, boldly ride,  
 The shade replied,  
 If you seek for Eldorado!”

—Edgar Allan Poe, *“Eldorado”*

## ORIGINAL PUBLICATION FENIX 5/2011

**E**veryone knows of El Dorado, the mysterious country of gold in the heart of South America. But El Dorado, “the gilded,” began as the name of a man, and became a city, then a country. Before we return it to the form of man – though more than man – we should refresh ourselves with a dip in the waters of legend.

On the shores of Lake Maracaibo in 1529, the German explorer Ambrosius Dalfinger asks a local Indian where he got the golden ornament he wears. No fool, the Indian responds with the story of a different tribe, far away, where there is so much gold that the king himself is painted with it, “el hombre dorado,” The Gilded Man. El Hombre Dorado, goes the story, must wash a coating of gold dust off his skin into the waters of a still mountain lake every year as an offering to the sun god. For a wonder, the nameless Indian was describing an actual ritual, practiced by the Chibcha people on the shores of Lake Guatavita several hundred miles inland, in what is now Colombia. Dalfinger was only the first would-be looter to die trying to find that legendary lake full of gold: he took an arrow in the neck in 1533. After several failed and fratricidal expeditions, the conquistador Gonzalo Ximenez de Queseda reached the

Chibcha capital of Tunja in 1537, looting it of its golden treasure. Even after this success, however, Queseda continued his quest for El Dorado, mounting two more expeditions without result and dying embittered in 1579.

At some point it occurred to the Spanish to ask: where did the Chibcha get their gold? What still greater golden city, El Dorado the Gilded, sent its dust to the golden king? Here, more legends came to the fore; a mutineer named Martinez left marooned in the jungle in 1537 emerged with a deathbed tale of a golden city, Manoa, in the center of a much larger Lake Parima, somewhere to the east. It was Martinez’ story that drove the next cycle of El Dorado searchers eastward into Venezuela’s Guiana Highlands, indeed a rich source of gold. One searcher, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, had spent much of the 1570s hunting down renegade Incas in the Peruvian highlands, searching for his own mythical golden Lake Patiti. Sarmiento decided that Manoa was a far-flung Inca outpost, and he had the poor fortune to get captured by an English ship in 1586; Sir Walter Raleigh heard his tale and promptly set about planning his own expedition to the Golden Land, consulting alchemists and magi such as Thomas Hariot and John Dee.

Raleigh sailed for the Caribbean in 1595, kidnapping Queseda’s nephew Antonio de Berrio from Trinidad. With Berrio’s information, Raleigh proceeded up the Manamo River in Venezuela, christening it the River of the Red Cross. Raleigh eventually reached the Orinoco, but supply shortages and the dangers (from the Indians, the Spanish, and the oppressions of nature) forced him to turn back before he ever found Manoa. Raleigh spun this failure into renewed prestige for Queen Elizabeth, but when King James came to the throne, Raleigh found himself jailed in the Tower on murky charges of atheism and treason. Raleigh somehow wrangled royal permission for one last attempt, which collapsed when his men attacked a Spanish fort without orders, raising the alarm all along the coast. Raleigh returned to England, and to his execution.

With the dissolution of Raleigh’s alchemical plans, Manoa goes through its own transformation, moving into northern Brazil and becoming a lost Egyptian city over a rich silver mine. This, at least, was the tale of Roberio Dias, a mestizo who claimed that his father, the Indian Muribeca, had learned of them from his father, a Portuguese sailor. Dias had enough money to bribe his way out of ▶



# TOP 5

## POSSIBLE OTHER ABILITIES OF GOLDEN VAMPIRES

You can give your golden vampires any power you care to: they might be able to shapeshift into vampire bats (native to tropical South America) or jaguars, jump across the clearing, turn to lake mist, or tear a musket in half. Here are five less common vampiric abilities that reflect the alchemical origins of the bloodthirsty fiends of El Dorado. Ignore what you don't like, and introduce the rest as a surprise for your players.

### Ductile Flesh

Gold is the most extensible and malleable of the metals. It can be pulled into long wires, or it can be beaten into micron-thin sheets. Golden vampires can extend their limbs, fingers, and necks for yards; this can look exceedingly horrible if you plan the encounter right. They can also reshape their skin and alter their build to resemble anyone they have seen, pass through the tiniest cracks and mesh, and use their extensible fingers to grip victims in an unbreakable coil of metallized flesh.

### Finding Treasure

Because of their connection both with subterranean demon-figures like Chibchachum (the Lord Under the Earth of the Chibcha) and with the True Gold, alchemical vampires can find buried treasure and locate gold. Not only does this keep them in funds, they can track a victim by their wedding ring or gold fillings no matter where they hide.

### Immune to Sunlight

Gold is the metal of the Sun, both to the Chibcha and to European alchemists. When the vampires emerge from the rubedo, they share a mystical kinship with the Sun – it no longer burns or otherwise endangers them.

### Know your Inmost Wish

To Jung, alchemy was the quest to purify the true self. A golden vampire can read the innermost thoughts and aspirations of any human it encounters. Depending on the human, this might not be a particularly noble or pure aspiration – and the human might not know it himself. Imagine El Dorado as a version of the Zone from *Stalker*: most humans who find it wish only their own death, in their inmost hearts.

### Parching Thirst

The gods of the Sun send fevers and parching thirst to those who they would destroy; the vampires of the Sun can do likewise. This works best if, by analogy, the vampire can afflict any victim in eyeshot; the target collapses with thirst and fever, sweating and choking until the vampire removes its baleful golden gaze.

prison rather than disclose the location of his Mines of Muribeca; and after he died in 1622, a cottage industry sprang up in searches for Muribeca (which, like El Dorado, became a place rather than a person). In 1753, after a ten-year search, Francisco Raposo discovered a “cyclopean” lost city somewhere in the Mato Grosso of southern Brazil (clear across the continent from the first El Dorado rumors), complete with mysterious white men and an unknown treasure. Or so he claimed, in a document he filed with the Viceroyalty describing his discovery. This report was promptly lost until 1865, when Sir Richard Francis Burton’s wife discovered and translated it. Burton’s subsequent trip into the interior is one of his least well-documented.

Another British adventurer stirred up by Raposo’s report was the theosophist and mystic Colonel Percy Fawcett. One of Fawcett’s expeditions, into the Brazilian interior looking for mysterious monster tracks, gave Conan Doyle the inspiration for *The Lost World*. Fawcett also drew inspiration from British pulp writers; H. Rider Haggard gave Fawcett a basalt idol which he claimed was found in a Brazilian “lost city” – Fawcett took it to a psychic, who proclaimed it Atlantean. Between psychometry and Raposo’s report, Fawcett was eager to venture deep into the Mato Grosso jungle searching for the lost Atlantean city he referred to as “Z.” He set out with only his son Jack and Jack’s friend Raleigh Rimmel in May of 1925; his last communication with the outside world occurred on May 30. On Fawcett’s peculiar insistence, no search party went after him until February 1927, by which time he had vanished as surely as Raposo’s city, the last casualty of El Dorado.

“Though the Golden King of the Philosophers seems dead, he yet lives, and cries out from the deep, ‘He who shall deliver me from the waters ... him will I grant life everlasting.’”

– Michael Maier, *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (1617)

So much for the legend of El Dorado. What can we do with it? Some possibilities insinuate themselves, a few suggestive themes. In 1598, a publisher named Nicholas Barraud used depictions of Raleigh’s voyage into Guiana as illustrations in an alchemical text: the search for El Dorado mirroring the search for the Philosopher’s Stone, the Red

Elixir, the Secret of Life. The final stage of alchemy is the rubedo, the reddening, as the stone passes through a bath to incarnate the Sun – a perfect analogy of the Chibcha ritual of Lake Guatavita.

And what do we know about Chibcha rituals? They beheaded their enemies, and decorated their temples with such trophies. They staked slaves to the ground during the construction of new temples. They raided their enemies for young boys specially trained by Chibcha priests to “converse with the Sun.” Those young boys wound up also beheaded, their blood spattered around the temple interior – and on more of those stakes. During droughts, the Chibcha yet again sacrificed a youth, coating the rocks of the sacred lake or mountain with blood. Combine rubedo, alchemical transformation, and blood rituals somehow contained by impalement and beheading: El Dorado is the City of the Golden Vampires. At its heart is the sacred lake (possibly a large stone basin) full of powerful alchemical blood, the true Red Elixir. Bathing in the lake turns base matter to gold – and weak human flesh to undying vampire muscle and sinew.

Thus the truth, or at least one possible truth, behind the lie and legend of El Dorado. What does this portend for your players? How can you use it in a game? The City of the Golden Vampires can take any number of guises, play any number of parts, over the centuries of its existence. In the next section, I provide four possible stories to stage in that setting, or rather four possible scrims to show the setting against, each in its own era. They are not necessarily all connected to each other; rather, consider them four possible futures of the City laid out above.

## 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries:

### TIERRA RUBEDO

Supported from the sea and bristling with cannon, the Spanish can hold Cartagena and Maracaibo forever. Some local Indian tribes, tiring of serving as cattle for the vampires, welcome Spanish overlordship: the crosses and consecrated ground of the mission churches seem to keep away the worst of the attacks. Further inland, the cannibal tribes have long adapted to – even worshipped – their golden rulers: they fight with frenzied abandon, firing arrows coated with paralytic poison. They take the victims prisoner, passing them ever higher in the northern Andes, destined to slake the vampires’ thirst. These prisoners are the only Europeans to see the City of the Golden Vampires, and they do not return. Indeed, every would-be conquistador expedition sent into the interior

disappears or flees back down the mountain passes, flails across the swamps, bloodied and maddened. The hinterland between the Pacific and the Orinoco becomes known as “Tierra Rubedo,” the Land of Reddening.

Even with the known dangers of venturing into Tierra Rubedo, the imagined rewards drive men on. El Dorado surely holds vast riches: gold, emeralds, cinnabar, and perfumed woods come down to the tribes in between the Spanish and the vampires, traded for steel and dyed cloth, for salt and silk and furs. And for slaves: the trade from Africa to Cartagena is the vilest of a vile business, but it pays better than even the silver mines. The most feared and blasphemous pirates swoop down on Spanish treasure ships and sell the crews inland for another fistful of emeralds. Necromancers flee the Inquisition, bringing books of lore and slaves of their own to trade to the vampires for black alchemical secrets. Bold thieves set out to see if they can snatch a few stones or ingots from a border keep; mercenaries offer to train the vampires’ vassals (or their victims, but the vassals pay better) in pike and cutlass; Jesuits seek to convert another clan to Christ from the worship of Chibchachum and Zadacoa. And every few years another company of would-be conquistadors, burning with holy zeal and golden greed, plan the assault on Tierra Rubedo that will surely succeed this time, by the grace of God.

This is, to all intents and purposes, a low fantasy setting with pirates, druids, and barbarians, and a Dark Land of Evil square in the middle of it. Europeans might have their own magic (sorcery or necromancy, for example), or be dependent on Arawak Indians and African slaves for their ancestral versions of voodoo. God might grant His clergy healing and other miracles; or native shamans might be able to use the plants and mosses in the rain forest to create amazing salves and potions. Weapons and armor range from arquebus and half-plate to blow-guns and war paint. Use *Skull and Bones d20*, the *Savage Worlds* RPGs for *Solomon Kane* and *Pirates of the Spanish Main*, or your favorite pirates-and-vampires supplements for more inspiration.

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century: THE SHADOW OF SANTA SANGRE

Although the Chibcha held out for decades, they finally fell to the patient onslaught of the Catholic Church and the Spanish cannon. The Spanish drained the lakes, but never found the troves they had expected; the gold was always just gone missing, always over the

next ridge. The Church burned a few vampires at the stake, but could never entirely convince itself it had rooted out the whole demonic taint; some local witches confessed under the Question to serving “los vampiros,” some ranchers and prospectors brought back sightings of golden shadows fading into the jungles and mountain caverns. Fire and looting died down; the Spanish settled in. And as happened throughout New Spain, the new settlers found themselves marrying into the local aristocracy. True, the absolute ruling class – the bishops and governors, the holders of royal monopolies on emeralds and gold – married wives from Spain and Germany. But the second rank – the ambitious soldiers, the industrious merchants and builders, the scholarly clerks and engineers – they married the Chibcha ladies. Their children drank deep of their mothers’ traditions and customs, and their mothers lived a long time. The upper class kept to themselves in the Palacio and the Cathedral; always they dreamed of retiring to Madrid or Corunna. The creoles, the children of the land, spread their blood to the new towns and cities; eventually they dreamed of taking their land for themselves ... and for their blood.

In 1821, taking advantage of a revolution in Spain, the creoles proclaimed their independence in a bloodless coup d’etat. (Mostly bloodless; some of the royal governor’s staff were never found.) The former Spanish province of New Granada became the Republic of Santa Sangre. After the traditional scuffling over boundaries with Ecuador on the south and British Guiana on the east, Santa Sangre settled down to its new nationhood. Unlike most of the new nations of Latin America, Santa Sangre kept its financial house in order, paying its debts to British railroad companies and French shipbuilding firms in gold and on time. Industry expanded, especially in the port cities of Cartagena and Maracaibo – and visitors swore the capital of Bogota was more advanced yet. Experimental chemists and engineers began visiting Santa Sangre, and some of them stayed. The unique alloys and combustibles produced by Santa Sangre laboratories found their way into aerostats and land-walkers in America, Prussia, and even the Japanese Empire.

But all does not necessarily shine bright in Santa Sangre. Although regular elections produce Presidents and Prime Ministers from both parties, Gustavo La Dorada has been Finance Minister for decades – like his father before him. Santa Sangre reluctantly abolishes slavery in 1889, along with Brazil – and the eastern provinces occasionally ripple with rebellions that seem more desperate than most. The factories in the Andes have an inexhaustible appetite for workers – and

ever more laborers never return to their villages. Imperial Brazil, Britain, and America all wish to see Santa Sangre humbled, as do many other great powers. Their agents, along with rival inventors, labor activists, adventurers and explorers search for the secret of Santa Sangre.

This is our vampiric El Dorado at the heart of a steampunk land of mystery suitable for *Savage Worlds*: Rippers, Airship Pirates, *GURPS Steampunk*, or other similar games: make Santa Sangre as inaccessible as you wish. Perhaps folk in the Bogota highlands around the capital all speak Chibcha, rather than Spanish; perhaps rumor hints at a “true capital” somewhere in the forest; perhaps Santa Sangre, like Japan, forbids foreigners to reside anywhere but its designated ports. In country, of course, the vampires rule through their Spanish consorts. Their alchemical lore is the mysterious source of whatever steampunk technology you introduce into the world: the Red Elixir is an inexhaustible power source, while the Aureo Rubedo strengthens steel and makes lightweight alloys suitable for giant robots and zeppelins alike. But of course, it all has to come from spilled human blood: the entire industrial world of this world depends on literally draining the veins of Santa Sangre’s workers.

In a particularly dark world, Santa Sangre’s secret is no great secret: the other powers are trying to develop their own vampiric alchemies and death-driven technologies, rather than trying to destroy the City of the Golden Vampires.

## 1920s and 1930s: THE LOST CITY OF V

Somewhere in the interior of South America is a city that will make you immortal. Not “famous forever,” literally immortal. This is the story of the Lost City of V, told at Adventurers’ Clubs and Geographic Societies in New York and London – and in sealed offices and dark chambers in Berlin and Moscow. Old archives are unsealed, wild rumors tracked to their source. Every drunk from Buenos Aires to Panama City has an audience for their wild tales of golden cities in the jungle. Rival expeditions have already come to blows on the docks of Cartagena and the streets of Caracas; gunshots are exchanged deeper down the Orinoco and the Amazon. And deeper yet, a golden vampire sleeps at the bottom of a lake that looks like boiling blood under the tropical sunset, waiting for new slaves to abase themselves on the shore.

This legend can kick off a pulp campaign for *Spirit of the Century*, *Hollow Earth Expedition*, *Pulp Hero*, or *GURPS Cliffhangers*,

to name just a few options. Other options rotate our golden vampires out of medieval alchemy and into modernist monstrosity: Perhaps the golden vampires are Atlanteans, or aliens, or psychopathic Aryan supermen, or all three. Could the golden vampires have been androids built by unguessable precursors? Time-travelers evolved for a horrific future, guarding the lake where their DNA first formed? Turn the golden vampires into servitors (or constructs) of Tsathoggua or Shub-Niggurath, and twist El Dorado into an alien necropolis suitable for *Call of Cthulhu* or other Lovecraftian games.

Of course, the Lost City of V might be a vampire legend, not a mortal one. Finding the Lost City of V, say the elders in weak moments and the new-fledged kin in greedy ones, renews a vampire’s connection to the blood. All weaknesses are washed away; a single drop of blood from the Lost City revives dead flesh and powers dead muscle for a month. Perhaps, they whisper to each other, it even washes away vampirism, restoring true life at last. This can just be a fleeting rumor in a *Vampire* game, or the center story line of a Princely expedition or vampiric civil war.

Or finally, perhaps the city itself is the vampire: drinking the hopes and lives of explorers and conquistadors: Dalfinger, de Ordas, Herrera, Aguirre, Orellana, Quesada, Raleigh, and scores more, along with their men and bearers and slaves. For a hundred years it glutted itself on such men, then it lay satiated and bloated for a time. Now it craves another feast, and its dreams and visions trickle out of the jungle and down from the mountain valleys. It has planted its contradictory journals and its disorienting maps, slowly grown in the minds of men lost in the jungle and released to tempt more prey. The city smells the greed on the wind, slavers at the rival universities and dictatorships planning their expeditions, and waits behind its walls, where tiny veins of gold and scarlet glow and wane in time to the roaring, pulsing tide of the scarlet lake at the city’s heart.

## Six Months From Now: THE MURIBECA FACILITY

Somewhere in the jungles of Colombia or Venezuela, or maybe it’s Brazil after all, a multinational pharmaceutical company studies a dizzying array of plants, lichen, fungus, and other unique products of the rain forest’s variegated ecology. Following native rumor, the corporation finds one immense plant – maybe it’s a creeper, or possibly a forest mold, could be a fungus – stretched over the bottom of a dry lake. The locals use

it to stanch wounds and draw out infection; observers report seeing the tendrils of the plant seemingly drink the blood and pus from a gash. Such a thing interests the company; they buy the lake or run off the locals, and string up some hurricane fences and motion detectors.

Inside the wire, corporate botanists and biochemists start testing, exposing the plant to blood under every kind of laboratory condition. They run DNA samples, recombining what they can on-site, and sending the rest back to Atlanta or Amsterdam for further sequencing. Pieces of the plant travel all over the world, researchers keeping in touch constantly, always feeding it blood. Finally, they hit on the correct combination, lost since Quesada’s men slaughtered the local Chibcha and drained the lake looking for gold and emeralds. The lake starts to refill with red, viscous water. The researchers find themselves going down to the shore, moving in the old ways, opening their own veins, walking into the muddy maroon swamp. Perhaps they drown or behead a worker or six, again in the old ways. Perhaps they drive a stake through the heart of one particularly recalcitrant biologist, pinning her to the bottom of the lake and pouring her blood into the thirsty rootlets.

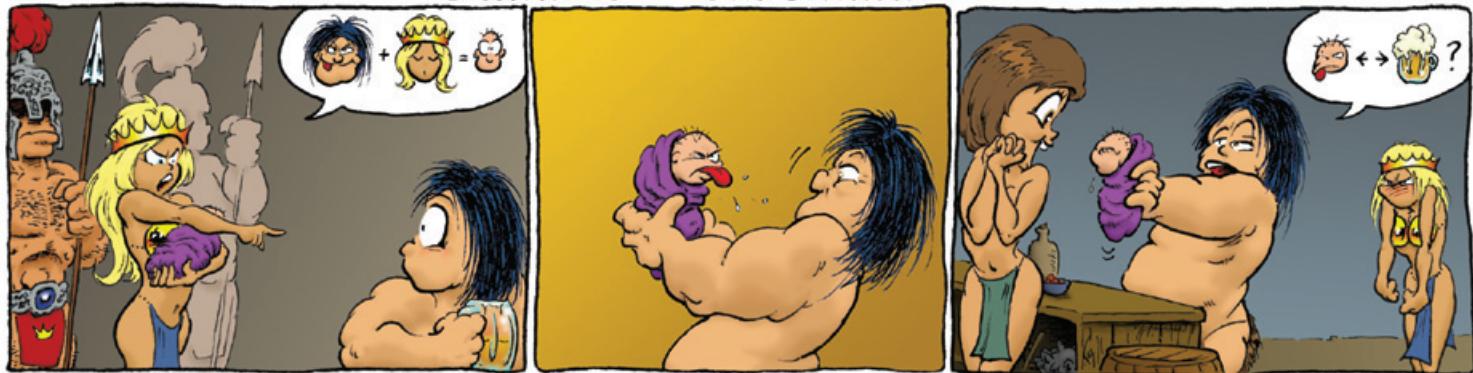
The company’s scientists start bringing bigger samples out of the jungle, infecting their colleagues all over the world with a desire to come to the facility. There, they can work all night and never tire. There, they can finally understand the plant at the heart of their experiments. There, they can master the mysteries of blood.

This is a modern-day campaign seed that can introduce vampires into any setting from *Delta Green* to *Dark Champions*. Or make it a story arc for *Hunter: the Vigil* or any iteration of *Werewolf*. The plant and its minions could be a Big Bad for a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* RPG game, or a weird rival for a *Vampire chronicle*. The plant and its vampire consciousness are distributed all over the world in the corporation’s labs, and those of its research partners and affiliates. It drains and twists the corporation’s personnel, even while it fills the corporation with unnatural life: research grants and investment capital are flowing in for such a promising wonder drug. The plant might be an aspect of some dark plant god, or just an inhuman parasite slowly extinguishing human independence – and once its DNA is on sale in every drugstore in the world, what then? Possibly only a desperate quest to the heart of darkness in South America can turn the tide, scouring El Dorado clean with fire and poison before its promise of gold and life destroys everything.



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN**

SPAWNING



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN**

PURGED



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN MEETS CONAN**





# CRAC DES DRACA

TEXT CHRISTOFFER KRÄMER

ILLUSTRATION OLA LARSSON

Had the six Knights of the Order of St. John not been such newcomers to Outremer, they might have been able to read the Arabic signs above the gates and stopped in their tracks. Had the Saracens been less reluctant to depict living beings, they might have had a forewarning of the potential danger ahead. Had the knights not been so piously preoccupied with their divine mission, they might have hesitated at the great portal.

Instead, they continued on. They continued on because God willed it, and because it would serve the Order of St. John. And by doing so, they woke something that should not be awakened.

**"And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."**

Revelation 12:9

Only one of the six survived this first meeting, and that only lasted long enough for him to ascend to the fortress on the surface to tell his brothers what had happened. That there, beneath the castle of Crac des Chevaliers, the Devil had been unleashed into the world, and any salvation was no longer possible.

The dragon sluggishly roused himself from his deep lair and into the fortress that had grown up around him while he slept. Having woken in a bad mood, he ambled around through stone halls and corridors, crushing and devouring any creatures he happened upon; some who wandered around in a raving frenzy, some who attacked him with bows, swords and spears, and some who wept and prayed to God. When there was no longer any movement in the castle, and the demon's hunger was sated, he dragged himself out into the great courtyard and allowed the scorching Syrian midday sun to warm his dark scales as it had not done in a very long time.

During the next month, the dragon made himself at home in the fortress. With great pleasure, he read the letters and texts the creatures had left behind, studied all the maps that decorated the walls, and happily gathered all the gleaming treasures and armour that had been scattered along the castle walls and in the great rooms. When he had finished, the dragon decided it was time to investigate the world around him. Lazily, effortlessly, he spread his articulated wings and left his nest—which would hereafter be known as Crac des Draca.





When, in 1176, the six knights found their way down into the interiors of Crac des Chevaliers to explore the possibility of expanding the fortress downward, they had no idea that their actions would forever change the face of history. At that time, the Knights of the Order of St. John were one of the most powerful forces in a weak and splintered Crusader State, surrounded ever more by the well-organised Saracens. Despite the fact that the Crusaders, with the help of the Order of St. John and their friend Raymond II, Count of Tripoli, were conquering Saladin at Homs, not far from Crac des Chevalier, the Crusader State of Outremer, which had been founded less than a hundred years prior, was entering its final days.

The Order's discovery in Crac des Chevaliers would do nothing to change this, but it did cause more than one person to wonder if this was perhaps the end of days for the entire world.

## ALTERNATIVE REALITIES A WORLD OF WHAT IF?

I've long been fascinated by alternative realities and counterfactual history. It always starts with a "What if?" and then swells rapidly into a large detailed fantasy in which new possibilities present themselves. Fortunately, I'm not alone in this. The question "What if?" fills the pages and ideas of literature, films and even games, giving me many opportunities to revel in the vivid imagination of these types of stories:

- What if Hitler had won the war?  
*The Man in the High Castle*  
by Philip K. Dick.
- What if Jules Verne was right?  
The recent film of  
*Journey to the Center of the Earth*.
- What if the Indians took over Mars?  
The campaign world *The Red Planet*  
from *Best of Fenix, Volume 3*.

*Crac des Draca* began as just such a "What if?" My wife Maria and I had seen an illustration of the inspiring Ola Larsson, shown to us by Anders and Tove – the same illustration is featured on the previous page. We brainstormed a bit on the image and what was taking place within it, when Maria said, "They look a bit like Crusaders. What if some Crusaders encountered a dragon?" And thus, an alternate history was born.

This setup is perfect for gaming. The Crusades State of Outremer already has all the dramatic ingredients needed: power struggles on a near-global scale, religious conflicts on several levels, human hardships, meeting

of cultures, war, heroism and infinite evil, sex, intrigue, and the promise of forgiveness of sins and ultimate paradise. Add to this a real-live dragon and how can you go wrong?

When we set about writing it, however, the article began to shift focus somewhat. What began as a relatively ordinary description of this alternate reality with a plethora of campaigns and adventure ideas added in, has instead started to focus more on the tales that can exist in such a world where religion is an all-encompassing force. Hopefully, this will benefit all types of campaigns where religion plays a large part, if one – contrary to expectations – were to decide that the Crusades + a dragon = true.

The format is: First, a factual background for the Crusades State of Outremer, then a section that covers the "alternate" history, i.e., what happens when the dragon makes his entrance into the already infected conflict. When this background is established, we can delve into the medieval person's faith and conclude with a number of questions that will hopefully trigger the imagination further.

We hope you enjoy it!

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### The Crusades – A Short Summary. How short? Very!

Though the Crusades State of Outremer is nearly a thousand years in the past, we have a great deal of information from and about that period of time. There is no lack of material to immerse oneself in, and we can say with a good deal of certainty that we both know quite a bit about many of the events that took place there, as well as the motivations behind a number of those events. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, I will give a short overview of the crusades so as to give a basis for our alternate history. Short, that is, in relation to the material and complexity, but still hopefully thorough enough to provide a solid base on which to build the alternate reality. If you wish to know more about Outremer, the information is just a click (or library visit) away.

### 1095 – Europe Begins the First Pilgrimage to the Holy Lands

Though Jerusalem had been in the hands of the Muslims since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Christians made pilgrimages to the Holy City without any major problems (other than the usual dangers pilgrims encountered on long jour-

neys to unfamiliar lands with limited law and order). Pilgrims were welcomed in Jerusalem as they meant an influx of money, and Jesus – or the prophet 'Isâ, as he was known within Islam – was a revered figure in many circles, and therefore worth a pilgrimage. This changed, however, in the beginning of the 9th Century as the Seljuk Turks took control of the area and made it very difficult for the pilgrims to reach Jerusalem. This horrified Pope Urban II in Europe, and at the Council of Clermont on November 27, 1095, he gave an emotional speech urging crusaders to liberate the Holy Land and the Holy City. The response was enormous. Everywhere, people fastened a fabric cross to their clothing as a sign that they had heard the summons, and the battle cry "God wills it!" echoed throughout Europe.

Organising a Crusade is no easy task, and many of those who took up the cross were, to be blunt, more of a hindrance than a help. Nevertheless, during 1096, a number of armies departed. The journey wound its way through the Balkans and through Byzantium, where relations with the Christian Emperor Alexius I Comnenus were strained, to say the least. Once the armies had finally reached the Middle East, they took different routes and achieved different results, but in the end, several areas came under control of the Crusaders, including the County of Edessa. After a great siege, the main forces conquered Antioch and then marched on toward Jerusalem, which was also taken after a short siege on July 14, 1099. The conquest of Jerusalem was a massacre in which all inhabitants – Muslims and Jews alike – were slaughtered by the victory-drunk Christians.

The goal of the Crusades was now achieved and many who had taken up the cross were satisfied and felt the mission was accomplished. Back in Europe, power and status awaited them, along with their loved ones. Most Crusaders returned to Europe, and those who chose to stay were forced to create a small, vulnerable state in an area where the hostility surrounding them was understandably great.

### The Crusader State of Outremer is Formed

Once Jerusalem was taken, work began to transform small conquered areas and cities to one unified state with a functioning governance – a task that was easier said than done. From the start, there was a struggle for power. Would the new state be under secular or ecclesiastical control, and who then would become the leader? Two primary candidates came to light, by virtue of their titles from Europe, but in the end, Godfrey of Bouillon won ➤



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the greatest support and became the reigning head. During Godfrey's time, the kingdom expanded, and when, upon his death, he left everything to his brother Baldwin, it had begun to resemble a single homogenous state. Baldwin successfully continued the mission to expand the kingdom with many triumphant battles against the Saracens.

## The Formation of the Crusader State

Under Godfrey and Baldwin, the kingdom was patterned after the western European feudal model with counties and vassal states. When Outremer was at its largest, it consisted of:

- The Principality of Galilee
- The Lordship of Oultrejordain
- The Lordship of Sidon
- The County of Jaffa and Ascalon

Ruling these areas were prominent vassals who, in exchange for the power and wealth their areas provided, were loyal to the king of Jerusalem.

## Other Crusader States

In addition to the largest and most central Crusader States were a number of other, smaller ones. These states supported each other, for the most part, as Christians and Crusaders, but there were also a number of power struggles and intrigue among them. Periodically, the areas were also formally subordinate to Jerusalem in matters of foreign policy, even if they retained their autonomy. These other Crusader States were:

- The County of Tripoli
- The County of Edessa
- The Principality of Antioch

## Keeping Power in the Family

When Baldwin died, he was without sons and heirs, and his rule passed instead to his relative (probably a cousin) Baldwin of Bourcq. He continued to expand the kingdom and then left it to his daughter Melisende and her husband Fulk V Count of Anjou, on the condition that their son, Baldwin III, was named co-sovereign. Fulk, who held the actual power, was not well liked, and only through force and cunning was he able to maintain power over the Crusaders. He battled with both the Saracens and the Christians to retain the kingdom's sovereignty—something he did quite successfully. Soon after Fulk's death, Melisende and Baldwin III retook control of the kingdom, and things became progressively worse.

## The Second Crusade

1144 the Turks captured one of the established Crusader States: the County of Edessa, creating much anxiety in Europe. In order to recapture Edessa and further strengthen the Christian domination of the Holy Land, the Second Crusade was launched. The enthusiasm was still great and many took up the cross. They primarily organised themselves into two armies in defence of the Holy Land: one German and one French. Both armies reached the area but the German Army was nearly obliterated in a massacre early on. The French army and the remnants of the German soldiers finally reached Jerusalem, and after much discussion, they decided to attack Damascus, which was the largest Muslim town near Jerusalem. The siege of Damascus became an embarrassing fiasco and was ended in under a week. The majority of the surviving participants from the Second Crusade gradually trickled back to Europe, keeping quiet about their exploits.

## Open Power Struggle over Outremer

As if the fiasco of the Second Crusade was not enough, the Crusader State was now thrown into an open civil war between mother and son. First, the conflict led to Melisende and Baldwin III dividing the land between them, but later, Baldwin laid siege to his mother in Jerusalem. He won the battle and took full power. When both Melisende and Baldwin III later died, Baldwin had no heirs, and the rule passed to Baldwin's brother Amalric I. In order for Amalric to become king, however, the Jerusalem council Haute Cour insisted he annul his marriage to Agnes of Courtenay, whom they considered to be too closely related to Amalric. Their children Sibylla and Baldwin IV, however, were counted as genuine and consequently became important pieces in the upcoming power struggle.

When Amalric died, he was succeeded by Baldwin IV, also known as The Leper King.

## The Struggle for Power Ruins Outremer

From Amalric's death and the young Baldwin's accession to power (with an appointed guardian regent, called a Bailil) in 1176, until Baldwin's death in 1184, an intense battle for power raged on among various factions with many different motives. There are two primary interpretations of the power struggle:

1. It was a family feud where different factions of Baldwin's family fight for power, without any ideological or religious undertones.

2. It was a political and religious fight between Outremer's "old" Orientalised aristocracy and the religious hardliner newcomers (even if some of these were not newcomers at all, but simply allied with them).

The truth is likely somewhere in between. It is in any case indisputable that clear battle lines appeared during Baldwin's short reign. The factions consisted of:

## The old Orientalised aristocracy.

This group sought greater peaceful solutions with the Saracens under the leader Saladin. Some of the most prominent personalities were:

## Baldwin IV – The Leper King

From a very early age (long before accession to power), it was clear that Baldwin was a leper, and his health declined steadily during his reign. This did not stop him from initially being a warrior king with a number of minor victories over other leaders in battle, including Saladin. As the years went on, Baldwin's health deteriorated more and more as he lost fingers and limbs, and became afflicted with blindness, all due to the leprosy. During the final time of his life, Baldwin was depicted as being "carried in a barrel". Before he died, he named Baldwin V, Sibylla's son with Guy, as co-regent with Sibylla.

## Raymond of Tripoli

Raymond belonged to one of the oldest and most prominent families in the kingdom of the Crusaders. He served a short time as the guardian regent for Baldwin IV, and when Baldwin died, was extremely interested in who would succeed him. Raymond is frequently described as perhaps the most Orientalised of the Crusaders, with relatively close ties to Saladin, among others.

## The Ibelins

Balian and Baldwin Ibelin were prominent players with close ties to Raymond of Tripoli. The Ibelins were at the center of many schemes that took place in Outremer, and they cleverly positioned themselves for future power through strategic marriages. Both brothers were also distinguished warriors.



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## The Newcomers

This group had a more hardball approach to the Saracens and actively sought out conflict with Saladin. A key element to this group was there support for the newcomer Guy of Lusignan as regent.

## Sibylla

Sibylla, Baldwin IV's sister, was married at the age of sixteen to William Longsword of Montferrat, cousin to the kings of both Germany and France. The marriage rapidly produced a son, Baldwin V, but William died soon after. This gave her the best standing in the entire kingdom since her little brother Baldwin IV would not produce any heirs and the power eventually fell to her. Sibylla seems to have used her position as "trophy" very cleverly and emerged the winner of most of the kingdom's schemes and power plays. When she married Guy of Lusignan, he had a legitimate claim to power after Baldwin's death.

## Guy of Lusignan

Guy was the newcomer who gave the faction its name. Raised in France, he journeyed to Outremer sometime during the 1170s, and arrived right in the middle of the power struggles. When Raymond of Tripoli and the Ibelin brothers tried to pressure Sibylla to marry into the Ibelin family, she instead married Guy, and he was thrown directly into the fray. When Baldwin IV died, and Sibylla stood to ascend to power, it was demanded that she have her marriage to Guy annulled—which she did, on the condition that she could then freely choose her own husband. Once she was crowned, she exploited this concession and again married Guy, placing him firmly in power. Guy was closely allied with Raynald of Chatillon.

## Raynald of Chatillon

Raynald of Chatillon played an important role during the larger part of the time of the Crusades and was constantly a source of conflict and controversy. He was known for his boldness and aggression, and achieved both spectacular victories and spectacular losses. After one of these losses, he was imprisoned by the Saracens for 17 years. When he returned to power, he allied himself with Sibylla and Guy, and played a large part in helping Guy to become king. It was Raynald who provoked Saladin to attack, which led to the fall of the Crusader State, and it was also Raynald who convinced Guy to march toward that fateful loss at Hattin.

## Knight Orders

### A Power to be Reckoned with to the End and Beyond

Parallel to, and intricately interwoven with, the various clans vying for power in Outremer were the established orders of knights who had a great deal of authority and influence in the area. First among these, during Outremer's days of glory, were the Hospitalers (the Order of St. John) and the Knights Templar. Both these orders combined the life and aspects of the religious orders with the ideals and weapons proficiency of knights. During a large part of the 12th Century, these orders were extremely prominent in Outremer, both politically and militarily. Based in forts located all over the Holdy Land, they guarded caravans, aided pilgrims, and maintained a basic order in the conquered areas. No king of Outremer acted without first consulting the heads of these orders. They were often on the same side of any given issue, though sometimes they sided with the various factions in the power struggles that took place. The fact that some of the most influential schemers and planners of intrigue were members of the orders of knights did nothing to simplify the situation.

## The Knights Hospitaller (Order of St. John)

The Knights of the Order of St. John arose from a hospital organisation that had existed in the Holy Land since the 7th Century. In the beginning of the 12th Century, they received the official status as the hospital order, and soon thereafter, the order evolved a military branch tasked with protecting hospitals and the pilgrims who travelled in the area. The Knights Hospitaller bore black tabards with a white cross.

## The Knights Templar

The Knights Templar were founded by Godfrey of Saint-Omer and Hughes of Payens in 1119 and immediately received the support of King Baldwin II. The area surrounding the Al Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount, from which their name was derived, was granted to the order, whose purpose was to provide safety to the many pilgrims who travelled to the Holy Land. Before long, the order gained great influence and wealth, and were considered—before the battle at Hattin—the area's strongest single force. The Templars bore white tabards with red crosses.

## Saladin

### "Righteousness of the Faith"

The one man who, more or less by himself, came to signify the end of the Crusades was none other than Salāh ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb—or simply Saladin, as the Crusaders called him.

Saladin was a kurd from Tikrit, born into power and wealth, thanks to the successes of his father and uncle. He received the best possible education, both academically and militarily, and quickly learned to navigate the dangerous and intrigue-filled Muslim world where the Sunnis and the Shiites regularly opposed one another.

By being bold and aggressive, like his father and uncle before him, Saladin soon began to win military victories and gain popularity. With a great deal of luck (or perhaps the mercy of Allah), Saladin frequently managed to be in the right place at the right time to further bolster his power. Before Saladin had turned 45, he had taken firm control over the entire Muslim Middle-East from Egypt to Syria, and could then begin to tackle the problem of driving out the Christians.

As Saladin fought the Crusaders—sometimes winning, sometimes losing—he became known for his moderation, his reason, his grace and generosity. Even the Christians against whom he fought reluctantly admitted that Saladin possessed many of the knightly ideals that prevailed at that time, and he was a highly respected opponent.

This did not stop Saladin from being merciless when he deemed it necessary, but he did not commit unnecessary bloodshed just for the sake of it.

## The Battle of Hattin

Following a number of inflammatory attacks on caravans, carried out by Raynald of Chatillon, the truce with Saladin, the leader of the Saracens, was broken, and Saladin led an attack against the kingdom.

Raymond of Tripoli and Guy of Lusignan—who had nearly come to open conflict with one another after Guy's ascension to power—united, along with other knights like the Ibelin brothers, and looked for ways to defeat Saladin. Saladin tried to lure them and the great Christian army away from the water by attacking Raymond of Tripoli's fort at Tiberias and taking Raymond's wife hostage. Raymond knew from experience that Saladin was known to treat his prisoners well, and spoke out against attacking Saladin, realising he could free his wife at some later time. Guy, however, decided to go out to meet Saladin in the desert wilderness.



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The enormous Christian army was constantly besieged by mounted Saracen archers, and when thirst and exhaustion had finally set in, the Saracens massacred them, and in doing so, doomed Outremer to extinction.

Many noble knights, including large numbers of Hospitallers and Knights Templar, were taken prisoner. Foremost among them are King Guy and Raynald of Chatillon. The latter was killed by Saladin himself, as revenge for Raynald's many transgressions.

## The Fall of Jerusalem

After the battle of Hattin, the remaining Christians were no longer able to keep Saladin at bay, and soon, the most important Crusader cities had been conquered, including Jerusalem. Upon entering Jerusalem, all Christians were given safe passage out of the city, unlike the previous massacre of Muslims and Jews when the Christians took the city less than a hundred years prior.

## The Third Crusade

After the fall of Jerusalem, a new religious fervor moved through Europe and people in unprecedented numbers took up the cross, and this time, the Crusades were led at a much higher level than ever before. Europe's three most powerful rulers—Richard the Lionhearted from England, Philip II of France, and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa—joined together in a common cause. The people of Europe simply could not see how the Saracens could possibly stand against such a formidable force.

Frederick Barbarossa was a veteran of the ill-fated Second Crusade, and knew enough to ensure he was thoroughly prepared. Having managed to reach Asia Minor and achieved an initial battle against the Turks, he became ill and fell from his horse and drowned while crossing the Salef river. This event led many in the German army to return home, and the armies of the Third Crusade thereby lost an important leader and a large part of its force and strength.

Philip II Augustus and Richard the Lionheart's armies left later than Frederick Barbarossa's, but they journeyed by sea and reached Acre in 1191. Acre was under siege by the Christian forces, and with Philip and Richard's additional troops, Acre surrendered and bought its freedom with a ransom sum that Saladin promised to deliver. Philip returned to Europe—to deal with some matters at home, and because of an ever-growing conflict with Richard regarding leadership of the Crusaders—leaving his army with Richard the Lionheart. Richard

continued on toward Jaffa, but not before executing the more than 3000 prisoners of war from Acre who were still being held for ransom. This outrageous deed stained Richard's reputation despite later victories. Jaffa was conquered when Richard won an important battle against Saladin, but the victory was short-lived, as it did not provide any strategic advantage. Richard realised that Jerusalem was easy to conquer but impossible to hold in the long run, once the Crusaders returned home, but the pressure from the other Crusaders to retake the Holy City nevertheless compelled him to move in that direction. The attack on Jerusalem, however, came to naught when Saladin again attacked Jaffa and forced Richard to come to its defence—which he did boldly. In the end, though, both Richard and Saladin had burned through most of their resources and neither of them were any longer in a position to inflict more damage on the other. A three-year truce was negotiated and Richard returned home to deal with his rebellious brother John and his friend the Sheriff of Nottingham...

The Third Crusade resulted in a minor success for the Christians, but far from the glorious goals they had set for themselves.

## The Further Crusades

Over the next hundred years, Europe continued to send Crusaders to the Middle East at regular intervals. Usually, Jerusalem was the target, but sometimes they turned the attack towards other Muslim areas such as Egypt. The ultimate purpose of these further crusades, however, was always to recapture the Holy Land. The final six Crusades only ever managed to strengthen their position in the Holy Land in the short term, and when the Mamluks of Egypt finally captured Acre during the Ninth Crusade, the Christians lost their final foothold in the area. The Crusader States' tale was over.

## AN ALTERNATE REALITY

### What if?

What if everything in Outremer was just as I described, with power struggles and constant battles with hostile surroundings. What if all the people living there were exactly those people briefly outlined above.

Now imagine what would happen if, in 1174, just a few years before Baldwin IV became king, the Hospitallers in Crac des Chevaliers managed to awaken a dragon.

A completely new world comes to life, one that is even crazier than the reality, and that's saying something...

## The Dragon

The Dragon aroused by the Hospitallers is a gigantic winged reptile with gleaming red scales. Both wings and head have horny outgrowths, and its eyes glow in the dark. When the dragon opens its maw, a burst of flame more than twenty meters long sweeps out, burning everything in its path, including stone. The dragon claws its way forward on strong, muscular legs and sharp talons. Despite its enormity, it can be surprisingly fast over short distances. The dragon flies without care with slow, powerful beats of its wings, more laboriously at first, and then picks up frightening speed when entering steep dives, which is why dragons prefer to start from higher positions. Behind the glowing eyes hides an intelligence and slyness that allows the dragon to easily get an understanding of anyone it encounters. It can smell fear and reveal a lie by reading the heartbeat and perspiration of the person before them. It recalls events so far back that mankind's collective memory cannot reach, and it casually registers everything it passes. It can secrete hormones that affect people it meets without their awareness, and its voice functions like a magical musical instrument it can play to invoke in people emotions such as sadness, excitement, fear, and more.

Despite all this, the dragon is not invincible. Its somewhat softer belly is vulnerable to attack, as are its eyes and open mouth. A burst of targeted arrows or a well-placed lance or spear could cause it severe damage. The dragon is aware of this, however, and keeps a careful eye out for missile weapons. Those who still attempt to injure the dragon will suffer the consequences, as will anything and anyone that happens to be in their vicinity. Terror, which spreads extremely rapidly, teaches people how it will go for those who dare to attack the dragon, as well as for any who harbour such fools.

The dragon has fairly primitive impulses even if it seeks to fulfil these with relatively sophisticated means. It desires safety, comfort, a stable food reserve, stimulation, and affirmation. It has a need to feel powerful and in control, and wishes to dominate those it comes into contact with in order to achieve this. For this reason, the dragon requires human sacrifice. Not because humans are its only, or even its preferred diet, but because it wants to establish power and control. In the same vein, it desires humans for stimulation and affirmation. No other creature can challenge and titillate the dragon with its actions, its strong emotions, and its more or less clever attempts to outsmart the enormous reptile the way humans can. Consequently, the dragon wishes to surround itself with enemies. It wants to hear their flattery and make them feel as if they have a chance of winning.

Is the dragon evil? The dragon is...a dragon. ▶



O. LARSSON 2009

## Christianity's First Meeting with the Dragon

If the dragon had encountered other people at another time, perhaps the meeting would have ended differently. Perhaps other people would have fled and the dragon would have remained dormant a few millennia more. But at that time in that place, things could only go one way. When the Knights of the Order of St. John saw the dragon, they believed it was the Devil himself. These men who cautiously made their way through the gigantic portal beneath the castle were a brotherhood for whom the Bible was as certain and natural as their violent mission in the world. When they caught sight of the dragon, they saw a creature that St. John described in chapter 12 of the book of Revelation:

*... And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.*

*And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.*

For the brotherhood, there could be no doubt. Fear, perhaps, but not doubt. A warrior of Christ who encounters the Devil can do one thing only.

None of the six knights survived long at this first meeting, and the dragon woke in a most unpleasant mood. The black-clad men with the white cross, and all others who may bear such a symbol, would never be forgiven, for dragons hold grudges and their memories are long. The dragon and Christendom could not have met under worse circumstances, though it's difficult to imagine any other outcome.

## OUTREMER

### The Christians React

While the dragon returns to sleep beneath the Syrian sun, messengers race from Crac's courtyard to Jerusalem. From here, the news spreads quickly to all corners of the earth. In Jerusalem, Amalrik quickly gathers the important men and women to counsel. When irrefutable evidence is presented, none hesitate—something must be done. Old enmity is put aside and rivals over power stand side by side. An expedition is sent to Crac while the patriarch of Jerusalem immediately sets course for Rome and the papal seat.

No one in the expedition could have prepared themselves for that first meeting. This group was stronger than many other victorious armies during Outremer's history; the king himself is in the vanguard and bears the true cross as a protective shield. Yet none of the military geniuses in the expedition knew how to tackle such a unique problem as a dragon, and this is their downfall. The dragon swoops down from Crac and before a defence can be mounted, the field is a blazing inferno. Massacre is unavoidable. When the remains of the expedition flee back to the Holy City, many knights of renown are abandoned. Left behind in the burning grasses are nearly a hundred Hospitallers, two dozen Knights Templar, one Ibelin brother, a cousin of Sibylla, the patriarch's brother, and many more. No loss is greater, however, than the king himself, and the true cross he bore. Many believe this is a sign that all hope is lost.

## A New King and a Time of Waiting

After the first crippling defeat, Haut Cour, Jerusalem's governing council is gathered, along with the leaders of the Hospitallers and the Knights Templar. Baldwin IV is crowned at just 13 years old, and Raymond of Tripoli is appointed as his Bailil along with Raynauld of Chatillon. A new strategy is adopted: while waiting for word from the pope, any conflict with the dragon is avoided and all cities, towns and villages are fortified in anticipation of what the dragon might do next. Grains and emergency supplies are stored in secure warehouses and conflicts with the Saracens are mostly ceased, even if this may mean concessions.

Despite the fact that both Raymond and Raynauld vowed to put their bickering aside in the seriousness of the moment, it does not take long before the frayed nerves and stress of constant waiting causes them to break

out in a fight. After a while, any news would be better than all the nervous anticipation and continuous inner conflict. Finally, after weeks of useless back-and-forth discussion, there is news.

## The Dragon Takes Outremer

A rider arrives from Antioch with a message that both shocks and horrifies. The dragon has attacked the city at dawn and set it alight. It swept systematically and deliberately back and forth over the city time and time again and burned it so thoroughly that the fires eventually raged out of control and decimated the entire city. The death toll is appalling and the dragon seems to have done this for no apparent reason. No demands were placed on the city, nor was anything taken. The only discernible purpose seems to have been the destruction itself.

During the next month came more news of the same variety. Tearful stories of devastation and terror. Cities and villages set fire for no reason. Finally, when the desperation had become so great that a new expedition to face the dragon was in the works, an explanation was forthcoming. A knight from Toron, exhausted and rambling, arrived with a new tale of the dragon's deeds. After having rested, he is at last recovered enough to relay the message he was sent to deliver. He describes how the dragon has attacked Toron and how the fortress was defenceless against a winged creature for whom even the thickest stone walls are meaningless. The dragon had savagely assaulted Toron, and killed and devoured most of its defendants. The knight had been allowed to live, however, as the dragon wanted to send this message: All cities, towns and villages in the area must pay tribute to their new master. For every citizen, they must pay 100 grams of gold, to be delivered to Crac before the next full moon.

After so much destruction, this news comes almost as a relief, and makes the situation with the dragon seem manageable, with some level of human logic. The dragon is greedy, they think; it is a simple robber baron, and as such, it can be dealt with. A quick count reveals approximately a half million people in Outremer, meaning 50,000 kilos of gold. They posit that the dragon cannot possibly conceive of this number and they can likely get away with reducing this number considerably. And if the gold is delivered to the dragon a little at a time, more can be learned about it, and eventually find a weakness to exploit.

Haut Cour eagerly begins to organise the tribute. Greed is something they understand and can relate to.



## How much is too much?

Just in time for the next full moon, a caravan of pack animals rolls up to Crac's castle gates. The total weight of the gold is more than 25,000 kilos. Citizens of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas are collectively holding their breath.

A week goes by and then a messenger from the dragon arrives. He is pale and haggard, and explains that he is the only person from the caravan who has been allowed to live. Trembling from head to foot, he relates the news that the dragon is satisfied with the tribute, and that a similar amount must be delivered to Crac upon every third full moon. Outremer has bought itself some time, but at an extremely high price. Eventually, gold in such amounts will be difficult to acquire, and worse: by devouring all the men in the caravan, the dragon has implicitly indicated a demand for human sacrifices. How far must they go to appease the Devil? How much is too much?

## EUROPE

### The Dragon humiliates Frederick Barbarossa

Meanwhile, in Europe, there has been an ongoing, lengthy and difficult power struggle between the secular and ecclesiastical factions. Frederick Barbarossa has positioned himself against Pope Alexander III and supported several antipapal leaders in a row.

When news of the dragon reaches Alexander some months after its first appearance, it also reaches the very well-informed Frederick Barbarossa, who instantly recognises its importance and begins to scrutinise his own actions. Is it feasible to oppose the papal seat in the light of what has happened?

Frederick Barbarossa shuts himself away for three days of strict fasting. When he finally emerges, he has made a decision to journey to Pope Alexander III in a veritable Walk to Canossa.

At the papal seat, barefoot and clad only in a tunic, Barbarossa prostrates himself on the floor of St. Peter's Cathedral and humbly kisses Alexander's feet. With him is the anti-papal Paschal III, whom he actively supported, and Barbarossa delivers him to Alexander for judgement. Additionally, Barbarossa gives Alexander his sword and offers to travel personally to the Holy Land to battle the dragon if the pope so wishes.

The enormity of this extremely symbolic act is missed by no one, and all worldly power in Europe closes ranks loyally behind the pope.

## The Third Council of the Lateran

In Rome, Pope Alexander III convenes the Third Council of the Lateran to discuss the news from the Holy Land. Bishops across the Christian world gather to discuss the theological ramifications of what has happened. What few outside the council know, however, is that the Revelation to John has already been consulted and debated in secret during the past few years as more and more bishops have considered the signs of Revelation to be fulfilled. Now that the dragon has appeared, these previously whispered opinions have been given free reign and all the portents are being reported:

### 1. 1156

A reign of hail and fire destroys the entire city of Dublin.

### 2. 1163

A burning mountain crashes into the sea off the coast of Libya and annihilates a dozen coastal villages. All ocean life in the surrounding area dies.

### 3. 1167

In eastern Russia, a star plunges from the heavens. It obliterates everything it touches and the sky above the Earth darkens. The weather is not back to normal for more than a year.

### 4. 1168

The Tigris and the Euphrates rivers dry up inexplicably, and the region is plagued by drought and starvation.

### 5. 1173

Recurring downpours flood the Tiber and put the Vatican under water for several years in a row.

### 6. 1174

Crete and Cyprus are awash with locusts, which destroy all crops.

Reactions are mixed and opinions differ. For many, it is obvious that the end is nigh, while others are afraid but doubtful. What is clear, however, is that the disagreements will not remain hidden once the council is dissolved. Alexander must act forcefully in order to avoid worry and panic. A Europe which is afraid that the end of days has come—whether or not this is the case—will benefit no one, and lead only to chaos and misery for all. At the same time, Alexander cannot deny the existence of the dragon, and thereby Satan's presence on Earth. When the council is over, Christendom gathers to hear Alexander speak.

## Ex Cathedra

*From Peter's chair, as Christ's representative here on Earth, we are now speaking to you in this, humanity's most difficult time. In the Holy Land, the beast, that ancient serpent, who is known as Devil and Satan, has risen out of the darkness. "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having*

*great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time." Now is the time of tribulation, because in the face of the devil, there is no escape nor respite. The Lord himself cast this beast out into the desert, and we who follow him and his testimony must now do the same when its fury affects us. "And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."*

*The time for our wandering in the wilderness has come, and from St. Michael's Sunday, all faithful are recommended to join in a 40-day fast. This is also a time for confession and penance, for the time when we all face our Saviour may be near. But, like the Lord, we will shall conquer and Satan will be brought down. We, Bishop of Rome, successor of Peter, and emissary of Christ, call on all faithful souls to take up the cross and gather yourselves into Christ's new army, which shall journey to the Holy Land, God's own country.*

*At the head of this faithful band will be the newly formed Knights of the Order of St. Michael. We place in their hands all our power and authority. With the Spear of Destiny and the True Cross, which awaits them in the Holy Land, they will be victorious in the name of Christ. He who falls on this sacred mission will fall with their sins forgiven and the Lord shall grant him a place by His side. "And they loved not their lives unto the death."*

## A Religious Wave Sweeps the Globe

In the wake of Alexander's speech, a religious wave like nothing seen before swept through Europe. So many people take up the cross and want to join the army of Christ that it creates chaos and confusion. Churches and monasteries are flooded with people seeking confession and penance, and gifts to the church reach an unprecedented level. Many of the continent's foremost knights apply to the Order of St. Michael, but only a small minority are granted admission. Others are given command over portions of the Christian army and begin to prepare themselves for the Third Crusade. The secular powers submit unconditionally to the leadership of the Holy See.

Riots are now breaking out across Europe. Infidels, particularly Jews, are persecuted and the Church does not stop their massacre as it had on previous occasions. Allegations against those who are said to be following in the footsteps of the beast increase dramatically.

ly, and witch burnings become commonplace across large parts of the continent. The hunt for heretics intensifies and in many places the situation is used as an excuse to purge the ranks of unbelievers and demand trials and executions. A new movement of hostages arises in northern France and spreads like wildfire throughout the Christian world. People gather into large processions where they flagellate themselves with whips, punishing themselves to receive forgiveness for their sins. In parts of central Europe, this movement becomes so prevalent that society is nearly paralysed.

## The Knights of the Order of St. Michael

At the behest of Alexander, the Order of St. Michael is created, and Frederick Barbarossa's offer to seek out and battle the dragon is

accepted. As the leader of the Knights of St. Michael, he is given the unlimited resources of the pope and tasked with gathering all the best knights in the world and richly equipping them in order to slay the dragon.

Frederick accepts the mission with religious zeal. Since many of Europe's finest are applying to enter the Order, Frederick narrows the selection down to a mere few of the very best fighters. With carte blanche from the Vatican, he brings in the continent's most skilled armourer and has soon produced weapons and equipment of a calibre few could ever afford. With that same authority, Barbarossa requests relics from churches and cathedrals from all over Europe. Though everyone has felt the seriousness of the situation with the dragon, this last request causes offense, but Alexander III is adamant: the Order of St. Michael will receive whatever it asks for. Soon, solemn processions depart from Santiago de Compostela, from Cologne, from London, from Milano, and from many other cities, and make their way toward Rome where the relics are collected by the Knights of St. Michael.

There is a sense of impatience and many desire that the Order of St. Michael depart as soon as possible, but Barbarossa stubbornly refuses. "If the dragon is to be slain, we cannot rush off unprepared." And while the weapon smiths spewed out smoke and relics were collected, new information about the dragon and its deeds continuously seeps in from the Holy Land. When the time is ripe, Barbarossa does not intend to fail.

## A Mountain of Gold

The gifts to the church pour in, and Alexander and his closest advisors secretly decide on an alternative plan whose privacy is of utmost importance. Despite the enormous theological problems and implications, they decide that, whether or not the Third Crusade or the Knights of St. Michael are successful, they will send an emissary to the dragon with a bribe. The dragon will be offered a mountain of gold, larger than anything previously collected. Perhaps with such a tribute, the dragon can be convinced to go away. As the leader for this expedition and this unprecedented cargo of gold, Alexander gleefully selects Paschal III. Based on the news that reaches the Vatican from the Holy Land, there is little likelihood of the plan succeeding, or of the emissary returning alive, but nevertheless, no stone should go unturned. Meanwhile, maintaining the secret is vital, not only because such a large amount of gold would be extremely tempting for bandits, but because the Vatican cannot be seen to be negotiating with the devil.



## The Army of Christ Stands Ready

Though the organisation is huge and the preparations are lengthy, finally the army of Christ is ready to go, and the Order of St. Michael is ready to lead, and the pope blesses those gathered at St. Peter's Square. Now everything is in God's hands.

## THE WORLD OF THE SARACENS

### The Saracen's View of the Dragon

The news of how the dragon took possession of Crac des Chavaliers quickly reaches Syria where Saladin has cleverly manoeuvred himself into the position of sultan of Syria and Egypt. Saladin has already begun to prepare for battle with his final rivals, and then intends to turn his eye on the Crusaders and become Islam's sword against the Christians.

The dragon, however, turns Saladin's plans on end, and he is forced to return to the mosque along with the Quran scholars of Damascus. After intense debates and negotiations, they finally come to a careful conclusion: Either the creature they've received reports of is the beast mentioned in the 27th Surah, chapter 82 of the *Quran*, and as such, was sent by Allah to tell the infidels that they did not believe the signs they had seen, or it is a hitherto unknown but terrible creature that should be studied carefully before any action is taken.

In either case, the interpretations give way to joy and contentment. Either Allah has shown his greatness by fulfilling the prophet's words and revealing the infidels, or the Christians have been set upon by an incredibly dangerous enemy that they will need to deal with in some way.

## Disappointing News

Before long, Saladin hears the same message as the cowering King Baldwin in Jerusalem: the dragon is burning and destroying cities in Outremer. Saladin knows better than most that in many of these cities dwell true believers under the thumb of the Crusaders. This news dampens his spirits and leads to new discussions. Is it possible that Allah, in his desire to teach the infidels a lesson, would also be willing to kill his faithful servants? No conclusions are reached and Saladin cautiously continues to strengthen his position in Syria while carefully following the development in Outremer, and waiting for an opening.



## IN THE NOW

### What happens in the Holy Land?

In an alternate reality where the passage of time flows in another channel than our own, there are many possibilities and potential tracks. Here are some of the possible streams. Use those that fit into your particular reality.

### An Unexpected Development

No one in 1174 could have foreseen where Outremer would be just a couple of years later. Many speculated as to what would happen when the Third Crusade reached the Holy Land. Some believed that the Knights of the Order of St. Michael would cast the dragon down into the underworld, as predicted by Alexander III. Others thought that the end of days was upon them and that the Beast would soon rule over all the living. None could have predicted how this would go.

### AD 1179

Young King Baldwin IV still rules in Jerusalem. He is regent now, without a bailil, though in this difficult position, he sometimes wishes both Raymond and Raynald were there. Criticism of the king is harsh and there is no solution in sight.

The Holy Land has been transformed into a garrison. Christian soldiers have been stationed in each village, each city, and each town. Each rooftop and turret is occupied with archers and heavy crossbows. Day and night, they watch the skies, and often the alarm goes up, evoking fear in those who attempt to sleep: Dragon! Dragon! The nervous waiting is endless and the sun is without mercy month in and month out. Lack of supplies is beginning to be a huge problem, as arable land is more and more frequently prone to fires, and the Saracens are doing all they can to block transports to Outremer.

No force in the world has been able to cast the dragon out of Crac, despite innumerable futile and gruesome attempts. At the top of Crac des Draca, as it is now called, the dragon

looks out upon domains it now views as its own. The courtyard is covered in mankind's largest collected treasure, but no thief dares approach. Before the army of Christ arrived to the Holy Land, the tributes were punctual, but recently that has all changed. The dragon has been challenged and the overwhelming power now positioned against it has forced it to be cautious. The situation has become a cat-and-mouse game that amuses the dragon, and for the most part it stays in the castle's courtyard, enjoying the sun's warmth and pondering its next move.

The Knights of St. Michael lick their wounds and consider their next move as well. No other force has come closer than they to defeating the dragon. On more than one occasion, they have injured the beast, albeit at a terrible price. Frederick Barbarossa lies awake at night, grinding his teeth in an attempt to find the dragon's weakness. Whispered rumours abound as to how he is losing his mind.

Saladin has now managed to become the Saracens' unopposed leader and has turned his attention to Outremer and Al-Quds. The

Christian grip on the Holy Land has never been greater, but their enemy has never been stronger.

After much careful watching and praying, Saladin has come to the conclusion that the creature is not the beast from the *Quran*, but he has also determined that it is intelligent and rational.

Given the idea that "my enemy's enemy is my friend", Saladin has decided to pursue an arrangement with the dragon. The rumour among the Saracens is that such a meeting is imminent. The rumour among the Christians is that it has already taken place.

## The Spear of Destiny Vanishes

When the Order of St. Michael reaches Jerusalem, they have already received the news of how the True Cross was lost in the dragon's first attack. It is a great loss and causes a brief slump in morale and conviction, traits the knights normally value as additions to their regular armour.

When a caravan from Antioch arrives to Jerusalem carrying the Spear of Destiny, the knights' faith is again emboldened. With the help of the Order's armour-master, the relic is restored, and is once again a spear of the highest quality.

During the Knights of St. Michael's first and most successful attack on the dragon, the Spear of Destiny is used. Witnesses among the survivors describe how the young Robert Longsword, brother-in-law of Sibylla, plunged the spear into the dragon's belly just before he is crushed by the beast.

Since the spear is never found afterward, it is believed to be in the creature's belly still. Tales abound that the spear, with God's help, is slowly but surely making its way deeper into the dragon's body and that when the spear finally reaches its heart, the Holy Land will be free.

## The True Cross is Discovered

During the reinforcement of David's Gate, near the Holy Sepulchre, a young bricklayer accidentally destroys an old wall and discovers a void inside. From the void shines a radiant light that makes all the builders stop in fear and wonder. When the void is examined more closely, they discover a broken and stained piece of a beam surrounded by such a bright light that it hurts to look directly at it. Before the patriarch has even managed to arrive on the scene, the entire Holy City knows that the Lord's miracle has occurred and that the True Cross is returned to them. A few even dare to question whether the previous cross was indeed the true one when comparing it to this newfound one.

## Baldwin's Exodus

The joy over finding the True Cross grows further when miracles begin to take place in its presence. One of the priests who helped remove the cross from its hiding place recovers his sight in one eye; a worker who had also helped is miraculously cured of the boils that had plagued him.

The True Cross clearly has amazing powers. No one is more pleased about this than Baldwin, the Leper King. Despite being only 18 years old, he is extremely weak due to his disease, and has already lost fingers, and his face has become disfigured. For him, the True Cross means the possibility of a long life, which he previously could never even have hoped for.

The cross was brought to Baldwin, who basked in its radiance and gently touched the rough wood of its surface. Yet no miracles occur, and the whispers begin. Soon, the whispers have spread throughout the Holy City and transformed into cries and shouts. The king is clearly not in God's graces, and this explains for many why they have not yet defeated the dragon.

In one instant, the king has doomed himself, and the newly appointed patriarch Heraclius seizes the moment. The king is forced to abdicate and is banished from Jerusalem. In shame and disgrace, he rides out of the Holy City surrounded by those loyal to him. Exactly where he goes and what he does remains a mystery.

## The City of the Beast

Less than six months after the dragon's first attack, the first ones appeared. Those who admired the dragon and feared its power. Rather than fight, they chose to capitulate and transform their fear into worship, which they demonstrate with the mark of the dragon on their hands or foreheads.

Initially, there were only a few of them, reviled and despised, but when the dragon attacked and slaughtered everyone in the town of Nin – except for those bearing the sign of the beast – this changed quickly. Their numbers grew and soon they were in the majority in most places, and bloodshed followed.

Tripoli was the first city to fall completely under the mark of the beast, and soon it became the City of the Beast. No one who was not marked was permitted to live or shop there.

When the dragon demanded tribute, people from Tripoli sacrificed themselves willingly to their master, and when the dragon wanted an army to fight under its banner, they were quick to take up weapons.

## The True Cross versus the Sign of the Dragon - Under the Sun

The existence of the dragon was bad enough in and of itself, but an enemy city full of traitors in the middle of Outremer was just a step too far. When Tripoli raised the flag of the dragon, the Crusaders were forced to act. Many also believed it was a chance to bear the True Cross into battle.

In garrisons across the land, soldiers eagerly awaited the opportunity to break the monotony of watching the skies. Anything was better than simply waiting for an attack. Things were quickly organised and before long, the army processions were headed toward Tripoli.

When the army reached the City of the Beast, they spotted an army gathered to meet them. From long lances waved banners with the dragon's image, and there was row upon row of foot soldiers wearing strangely shaped helmets. It was unthinkable that such a relatively small city like Tripoli could have succeeded in creating such an enormous army.

Before the Crusaders even managed to form up properly, the defenders of the City of the Beast dashed forward in a brutal attack with no thought for their own welfare. Even the Christian army stood no chance against such a fanatic horde, and soon both the centre and right flanks were broken.

It would most certainly have been a huge loss for the Crusaders had the patriarch Heraclius not chosen just that moment to unveil the True Cross. Surrounded by a force of Knights Templar, Heraclius raised the relic in all its radiance above his head, and even the most rabid of the dragon's followers ceased their attack. Some fell to the ground while others wept, and still others turned and fled. What had looked to be a crushing defeat quickly turned into a disorderly, undecided end. But the True Cross had shown its strength, and soon there would be new battles.

## Arrival of Richard the Lionheart

Back in Europe is a man who has grown weary of simply sitting and waiting for news from Outremer. Though he is soon to inherit a great kingdom, his restless temperament prevents him from waiting any longer. With some money he has collected, and a number of loyal knights, he sets off toward the Holy Land, against his father's will.



Along the way, his ship is lost at sea in a terrible storm, and after a day, Richard washes up half-conscious on the coast of Cyprus. He is the only survivor. Richard is convinced that it is God's will that he should live and that he was spared for a specific purpose: to kill the dragon.

Encouraged by this thought, he continues on and after many detours, he finally reaches Outremer. His original plan was to join with the Knights of the Order of St. Michael, and then seek battle with the dragon, but with everything that has happened, he knows he must re-evaluate this. Richard instead decides to disguise himself, and alone, seek out the dragon and kill it.

For several weeks he travels on foot through Outremer. Many dangers lurk around corners for a lone traveller in a war-torn land full of people with many pent-up frustrations. But Richard the Lionheart knows that he is invulnerable until he reaches the dragon, and so, without fear, he continues on.

Soon, people are spreading tales up and down the coast about the stranger who personally conquered an entire cavalry troop of the

dragon's warriors, about the man who defied the commandant in Tyre, about the one who wanders alone in the night.

Finally, Richard reaches Crac des Draca and fights his way past the dragon's many followers. When he reaches the courtyard, he finds himself all alone with the dragon – and the dragon has been expecting him. No dragon was slain that night or the next.

Richard the Lionheart spent a full week at the castle, and when he leaves, it is the dragon, very much alive, that opens the fortress gates for him.

Richard travels to Jerusalem where he makes a public speech stating that he has actively defended the Holy Land. In consultation with Frederick Barbarossa, the patriarch Heraclius, and the leaders of the Orders of knights, Richard urges caution. "The dragon claims it can read your heart. There are no secrets that the dragon does not know."

While Richard remains in Jerusalem, there are attempts to persuade him to marry Sibylla, the young King Baldwin V's mother, but Richard declines, politely but firmly.

## The End of Days Devout

Another growing problem in the Holy Land and Europe are those who call themselves the End of Days Devout. Originally, the group consisted of but a few theologians, but as time went on, the movement spread both within and without the church. The End of Days Devout are no friends of the dragon. Quite the contrary—they believe it is the very beast mentioned in the book of Revelation. However, they don't view the dragon's presence as something bad, because if the dragon is a sign that the end of days is upon us, then it must also mean that the Saviour will soon return to create a new Heaven and Earth, which is clearly something to rejoice. As the group does not act in any manner contrary to the papal efforts to slay the dragon, they are not a problem per se, but many are offended at these people who rejoice in the end of times. The group continues to foment anxiety. Strong emotions are aroused in the Holy Land and Heraclius has forbidden the group and threatened to excommunicate any who adhere to their beliefs.

## A QUESTION OF FAITH – THE MEDIEVAL GALLERY

Imagine someone from today's Europe who does not believe in oxygen. Someone who maintains that it is utter nonsense that there is an invisible gas everywhere that we would almost immediately die without. Such a person probably doesn't exist, and if they do, there is likely something wrong with him or her. To not believe in oxygen is insane, deviant behaviour. This is exactly like the medieval person's relationship with God. There was no one who does not believe in God, and if such a person could be found, they were likely crazy. For those of us living today, in generally more secular times, it can be difficult to not transfer our modern view of religion—as an individual choice, something that can be relative, and interpreted differently for each person—to the past. But if you wish to play a medieval character and truly understand their point of view, it is good to leave this modern view behind.

The starting point must be that God exists and is important for each person. Then there are incredibly many interpretations of the meaning of God's word and the church's teachings, and how that affects a person's life. People can lose faith in the church as an institution, they can doubt, debate, and interpret Biblical texts, but they will never assume that they will not be accountable for their lives before God on the final day.

At the same time, people are always people. Just because you believe in something, are convinced that there is a set of rules and precepts to follow, know in your heart what is waiting for you after death, does not mean that you will act consistently and logically in your everyday life in the same way your faith and conviction might indicate. People are the victims of all sorts of motivations and weaknesses. They want one thing and do another. They sin and hope everything will be all right anyway. They are human. And alone with one's own thoughts, they must deal with this, before the God they know exists.

Here are examples that demonstrate a breadth of opinions and interpretations regarding the concept of God and how faithful people look at their surroundings. Use as inspiration for non-player characters in your own scenarios.

### Brother Oren Guglielminetti

Oren is the third son from a family of merchants from Pisa. He currently serves in the Church of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. Monastery life is quite pleasant if one allows a little bending of the rules from time to time. It also means a bit of status, and doesn't involve too much heaving lifting.

**God:** God is the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is the giver of life, and the one who takes life away. God is the Alpha and Omega. Or something.

**A good life:** A good life is a life of moderation. Work and pleasure, austerity and celebration, seriousness and mirth. One must live life to the fullest and enjoy it whenever possible. At the same time, one must understand that there are limits to what one can expect from life. God deals one's hand at birth and one must simply play the cards the best one can.

**Death:** Death is an emptiness at the end of time, where, Jesus will resurrect everyone, and for those who can reach Heaven, purgatory awaits so they can atone for the sins they committed when they were alive.

**The dragon:** The dragon is perhaps a more a primitive mythical creature from ancient times than anything sent by the Devil. Maybe it is possible to conquer it if it is studied carefully, or perhaps it will die on its own.



### Johan Bären

Johan Bären is the son of a veteran Crusader from the Second Crusade, Wilhelm Bären. He has travelled from German more to make his father proud than because of some burning desire to fight for the Holy Land. Johan hates Outremer with a passion. He hates the climate, he hates the dry air, he hates all the ungodly people, and he hates the double standard among those who hold power in Outremer. Despite this, he is a conscientious knight who does his best to perform the tasks given him.

**God:** Johan fears God and feels constantly unable to fulfil the demands God makes. He knows that God sees into his heart and he is also aware that God does not find the love there spoken of in the *Bible*.

**A good life:** A good life is a life without hardship, where one is allowed to live their life, raise a family, and teach one's values to the coming generations.

**Death:** Death is the final watershed. In purgatory, the wheat will be separated from the chaff, and those who are found wanting in God's eyes must face hell.

**The dragon:** The dragon is not the Devil, but is sent by the Devil. That is why this is not the end of days. People cannot imagine what the end of days will really be like.



### Katheryne Boileau

Katheryne is the wife of Henri II of Compane, a nobleman and member of the Haute Cour. Katheryne is Henri's third wife and has just arrived from France. Though she is only 16 years old, she has managed to take control of Henri's household and finds the Holy Land pleasant in many ways. Katheryne's closest handmaid is a Saracen woman she has become very intimate and friendly with. This friend has given Katheryne good advice and calmed her fear of childbirth, which surely awaits her if her attempts to avoid it do not work. Katheryne has nothing against Henri, and knows she could be much worse off. She secretly hopes, however, that Henri will continue to be a very busy, debonair older man long enough for her to create a good situation for herself. After that, he might as well die a glorious and dignified death so that Katheryne can position herself well for her next marriage.

**God:** The Father is a very frightening, all-powerful, all-seeing force that knows all one's missteps and that sternly disciplines anyone who strays from the correct path. The Son, however, is a forgiving and kind force who lifts his followers so they no longer need to bear their heavy burden alone. The Holy Spirit is the wind that blows sweeping changes through one's life.

**A good life:** A good life is when one can choose one's own way in accordance with God's will and mercy.

**Death:** Death is frightening, and a constant presence. One must prepare for death carefully so that it is as mild as possible. By praying to Mary, mother of God, and by giving alms to the poor, one can diminish one's worry as well as any potential punishments.

**The dragon:** The dragon is fascinating and terrible. It is the Devil, but it can be conquered.



## Legars Dudep

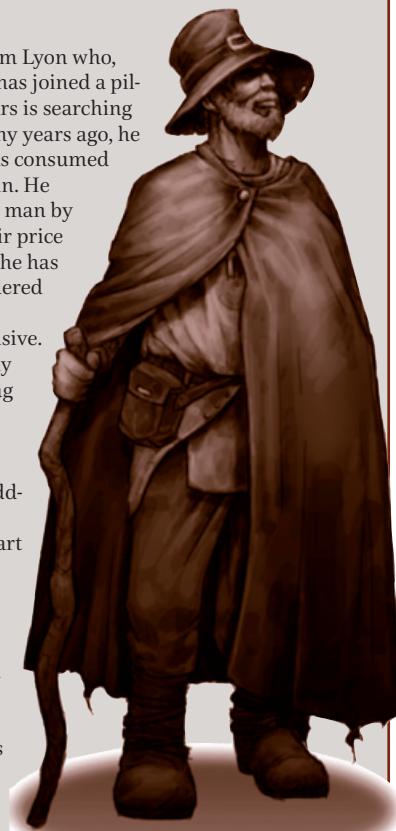
Legars is a textile merchant from Lyon who, after many years' preparation, has joined a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Legars is searching for forgiveness for his sins. Many years ago, he took his wife's life when she was consumed by unstoppable disease and pain. He furthermore cheated his fellow man by routinely deviating from the fair price of textiles. During many years, he has wished for death, and has pondered committing suicide.

**God:** God is unattainable and elusive. Legars feels that he is constantly there, just out of focus, watching him, but when Legars tries to focus on Him, He disappears. God communicates through incomprehensible signs and riddles, and every man is therefore obliged to look into his own heart to find answers.

**A good life:** A good life is working every day, and not thinking too highly of oneself, but simply playing the role one was placed on this earth for.

**Death:** A curse and a gift.

**The dragon:** The dragon represents everything evil in people's hearts. It can never die.



## Ichak Lev

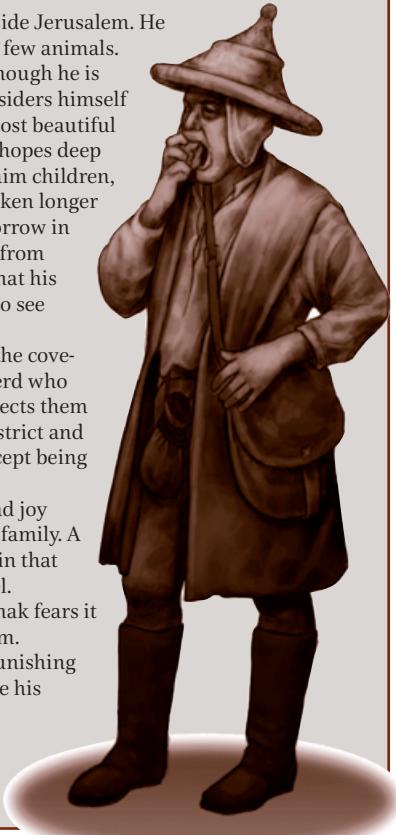
Ichak lives in a village just outside Jerusalem. He has a small olive orchard and a few animals. Ichak lives a simple life, even though he is not necessarily poor. Ichak considers himself blessed with the kindest and most beautiful wife a man could want, and he hopes deep down that God will also grant him children, even though this has already taken longer than expected. Lev's greatest sorrow in life is that his father was taken from him too soon, and Lev's joy is that his mother has lived long enough to see him married.

**God:** God is the one with whom the covenant is signed. He is the shepherd who watches over his flock and protects them in the darkness. He is also the strict and grudging God who does not accept being put aside.

**A good life:** A life of celebration and joy with family. A life at work with family. A life that does not break the chain that represents the children of Israel.

**Death:** Death is a mystery, but Ichak fears it only when doubt overcomes him.

**The dragon:** The dragon is God's punishing fire against those who persecute his chosen ones.



## Sulaiman ibn Muhammad

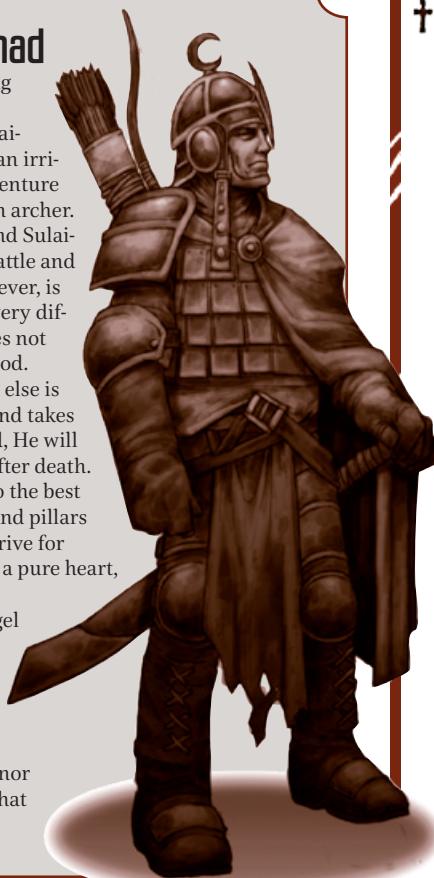
Sulaiman ibn Muhammad is a young man who lives in the shadow of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. Sulaiman began his life as a labourer on an irrigation project, but a longing for adventure sent him to join Saladin's army as an archer. The military life is hard, however, and Sulaiman has seen many friends die in battle and hardship. The biggest sacrifice, however, is that life on the battlefield makes it very difficult to start a family. Sulaiman does not give up hope, and puts his faith in God.

**God:** God is the yardstick by which all else is measured. He gives with one hand and takes with the other. If one submits to God, He will provide a good life and eternal life after death.

**A good life:** To live by the Holy Koran to the best of one's ability, and follow the path and pillars that hold up the faith. One should strive for wholeness, and if one does this with a pure heart, God will forgive one's shortcomings.

**Death:** When God commands, the angel of death comes and takes one's soul to God. This is a blessing, but not something one should long for, because it is a sin to not live out the time God has given.

**The dragon:** The dragon is neither God nor Satan. The dragon is an evil power that must be destroyed.



## Guillaume de Tours

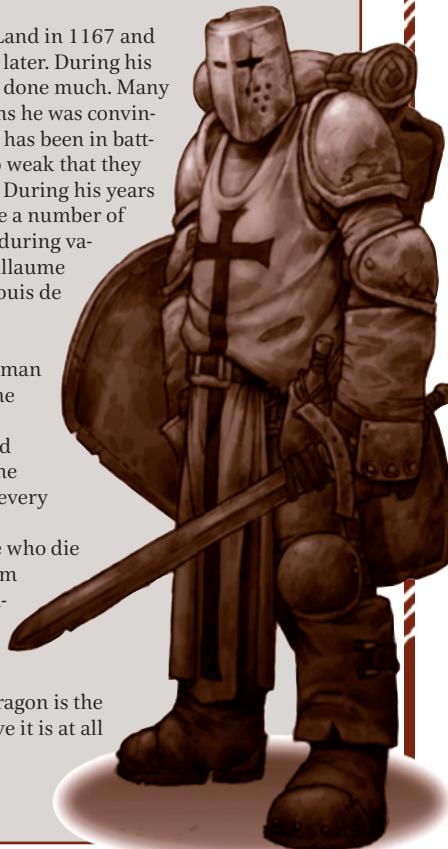
Guillaume journeyed to the Holy Land in 1167 and joined the Knights Templar a year later. During his time in Outremer, he has seen and done much. Many times he has ridden out on missions he was convinced would be his last, and often he has been in battles against opponents who were so weak that they were more massacres than battles. During his years in the Holy Land, he has sent home a number of valuables that he has come across during various raids. From time to time, Guillaume has the company of his sergeant Louis de Beuf in his bed.

**God:** Guillaume believes that God's mercy knows no bounds, and that man can never experience or observe the love that God has for them.

**A good life:** A good life is a life devoted completely to trying to live up to the faith and expectations God has of every person.

**Death:** Death comes to all, and those who die can, with God's love, go to meet Him in Heaven. Despite this belief, Guillaume is afraid of death and constantly fights the mortal dread the experiences in life.

**The dragon:** Guillaume believes the dragon is the Devil and therefore does not believe it is at all possible to defeat it.





## SUMMARY

The recipe for this alternate reality is clear: Take an authentic Outremer. Add one dragon. Stir and see what happens. But what can you do with this material? There are several possibilities:

- Inspiration for your own alternate realities.
- Closer examination of the Crusades and the medieval person's faith.
- Campaign environment where you can set your own stories.

If you want to use this alternate reality, or some version of it, there are many suitable themes to take a look at. I present some of them below.

## What is good and what is evil?

Why is the dragon considered evil for pillaging villages in the Holy Land when it was a good thing when we did just that a few years prior? How can it be good for a warrior in Outremer to act in a way toward the local population that one personally knows is evil? Is it good to kill someone who, through his own weakness, has become a tool for something evil?

## Atonement

Many come to the Holy Land because the Pope promised that those who took up the cross would have their sins forgiven. Which sins do people want to be forgiven for? What can they have done that would persuade them to leave their homes and travel to the other side of the sea for forgiveness, and how does this affect these people in their daily lives?

What happens in the meeting between a person seeking forgiveness for a sin he or she has committed, and a truly sinful person who is completely convinced that he or she is acting according to God's will?

What is needed to atone with oneself?

## Morality in the Last Days

Is morality more important during the last days? Or less important? Will people who believe the end is nigh behave better with higher morals, or will they become more self-serving and amoral?

What happens when my desire to be good and altruistic collides with my need to protect those closest to me?

## ADVENTURE-SEEDS FOR CRAC DES DRACA

Outremer and the dragon also offer many adventure-filled opportunities:

### Killing the Dragon

The dragon is at the castle Crac. Like Smaug, he must be slain. God wishes it! How is it possible to get close to such a powerful and intelligent creature? What are its weaknesses and what obstacles must we overcome in order to even get close enough to try?

### Prize of the Millennium

In just a few short years, the dragon has amassed a larger treasure than anyone has previously laid eyes on. And more gold is on its way from the Vatican in an attempt to bribe the dragon. How can one get one's hands on all this gold—and get away without becoming the most wanted person in the world?

### Struggle for Power in the Dragon's Shadow

The dragon's actions in the Holy Land have created countless opportunities for the ambitious. War against the dragon has claimed many victims among Outremer's elite, and people are searching in desperation for new solutions where previous authorities have failed. Do the characters belong to some faction in the struggle for power, or do they play the various factions against each other?

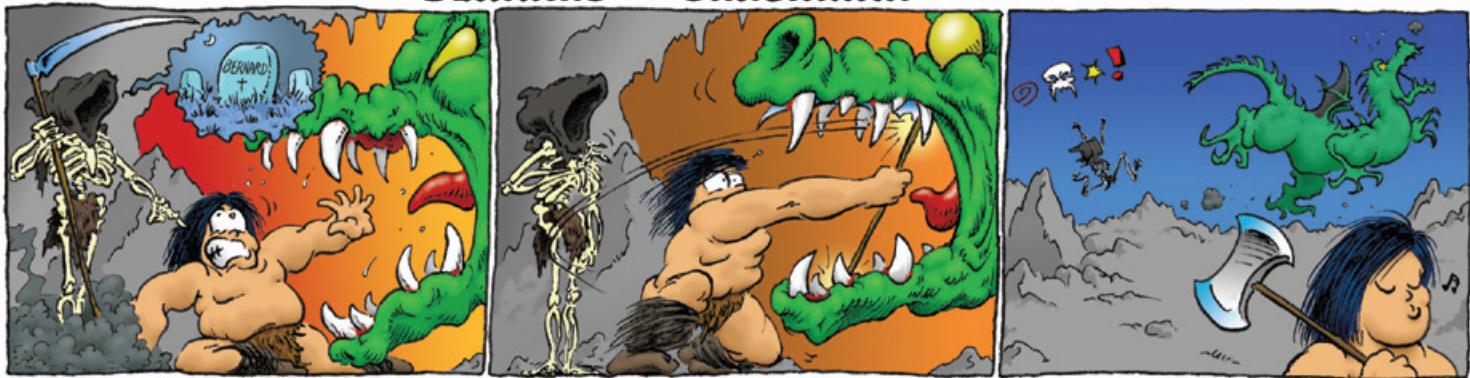
### Cast out the Infidels, or My Enemy's Enemy

As the sword of Islam, it is your duty to free Al-Quds and the surrounding cities from the infidels. Allah has waited for a long time for someone to succeed. Now, when your enemy has another powerful foe, it is time to act. Is it possible to join the dragon to defeat the infidels, or is the dragon so abominable that it is your enemy and the Christians your friends?

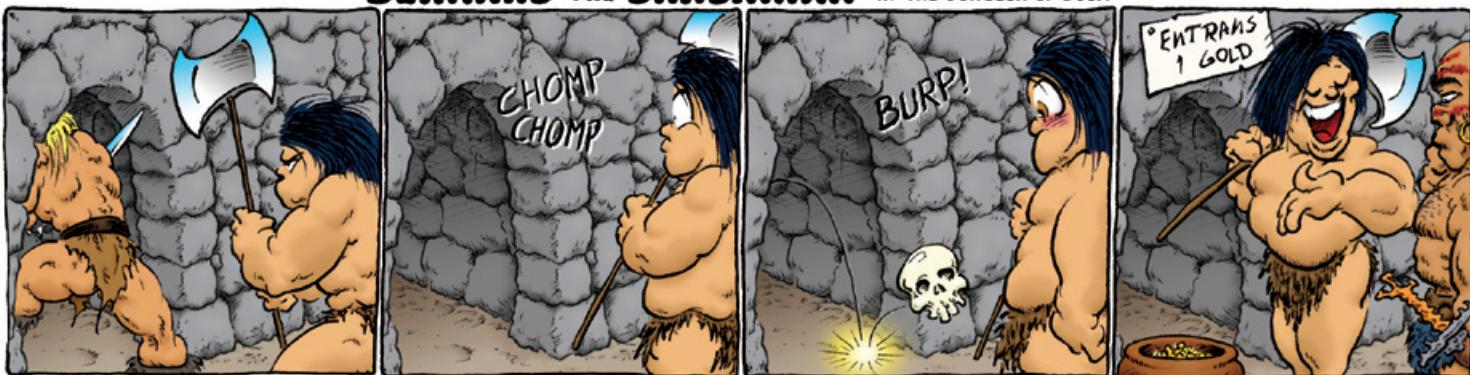
## CONCLUSION

The period of the Crusades is a fascinating time in and of itself. Few settings are grander, and it allows for a multitude of different stories to be told. The dragon is also an impressive backdrop against which many tales can play themselves out. Together, they create something larger. Something that titillates and sets the imagination free. Good luck!

BERNARD THE BARBARIAN MEETS DEATH



BERNARD THE BARBARIAN AT THE DUNGEON OF DOOM



BERNARD THE BARBARIAN MAKES A POINT



## ARTICLE FOR RUNEQUEST

TEXT PETE NASH

ILLUSTRATION KRISTOFFER ENGSTRÖM

## SPELL SINGERS

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION FENIX 1/2014

In this issue we present a mercenary group of sword wielding, sorcery singers, which can be utilised as foes in established campaigns, or perhaps an organisation that Player Characters can aspire to join. These spell singers have nothing to do with the series written by Alan Dean Foster, but since he is a great author anyway, I highly recommend almost all of his books. For those further interested in song-based magic I cautiously suggest *the Spellsong Cycle* by L. E. Modesitt Jr.

## THE SIRENS OF SYRACUSE

The Sirens of Syracuse are an infamous mercenary troupe of spell-singing warriors that spend their entire lives wandering and fighting, alienated by most common folk, in search of mercenary work. According to rumour they sell their tongues and blades in exchange for children, who are taken back to the iron-grey monastery of Syracuse located high in the most remote and isolated mountain range of the world. Those fosterlings that survive the training become spell-singers themselves, continuing the order.

Currently lead by the incomparable Thelxiepi, a statuesque woman of keening voice and icy countenance, the Sirens have cut a bloody path through history. They have turned the tide of many battles, though at great cost to even their own side and have even destroyed renowned wizards and diabolical monsters. As mercenaries they fight neither for good or evil, but only for those who are willing to meet their dreadful price.

Foes often abandon their plans when hearing that the Sirens have been commissioned to fight against them, yet the spell-singers are not always victorious. An arch-mage of sufficient power can sometimes defeat them from afar, or cunning tricks such as rendering an army permanently deaf can make them immune to the siren's songs.

## Name

The Sirens of Syracuse

## Nature

The order first started out as a reclusive group of elderly monks, who practiced over-tonal singing as a method of tapping mystical powers, eventually developing a crude ability with magical shouts. Practices changed however with the first woman granted admittance to the order, whose voice seemed capable of more potent effects. Further research was performed augmenting the choral abilities of their members, primarily through surgical experimentation upon the vocal chords.

Since those times the order has mastered many melodious and sorcerous techniques which have drawn attention to their remote monastery from those seeking them as entertainers, bodyguards or battlefield units. Such mercenary work is dangerous however, so all spell-singers are trained in the use of weapons for self defence. Magically potent, capable warriors and often dangerous to their allies, the Sirens are highly regarded and greatly feared.

## Organisation

The Sirens have changed greatly from their first days as a small order of grey bearded old monks. Nowadays their numbers are formed

solely of females and eunuchs, male members all being castrated before puberty in order to ensure a higher vocal range. There is no stigma for a castrato within the order as both sexes are viewed with equality, progression based solely upon vocal ability. Ranks are as per the brotherhood rules (see *RuneQuest 6* page 286) but have different names; these being Aspirant, Accompanist, Choralist, Melodist and Diva.

The diva of the Sirens generally remains at the monastery unless the entire order is employed, such events occurring during major wars or if the monastery itself is threatened. Otherwise the Sirens are hired out in small groups numbering between 1d6+6 members depending on the task. These are comprised mainly of Accompanists, with several Choralists and a sole Melodist in overall command. Due to their extreme deadliness, this is normally enough to deal with most problems.

## Hiring

The Sirens are unusual in that they have several services they sell. As entertainers, spell-singers are paramount amongst all vocalists. So beautiful and entrancing is their music, that they can charge thousands of silver pieces for a single performance – the majority of this money being sent back to their monastery to support the order. Hired out as a bodyguard or a military unit however has a far more sinister and painful cost. Either the eldest pre-pubescent child of the person being guarded (their first child if they are yet to have children), or, a child from each family who will benefit if a village, city or country is saved. Thus only the most desperate ever condescend to hire the Sirens, often invoking the hatred of their own people at the appalling price.

## Membership

All membership requirements are standard, as per the *RuneQuest* rules.

## Aspirant (Common Members)

Aspirants live like ascetic monks, dressed identically in coarse woollen robes, eating plain foods and working hard from sunrise to sunset performing all the menial tasks

required to keep the monastery running. Almost all aspirants begin as children ranging from the ages of 7 to 14 who have been taken in payment for services rendered. Soon after their arrival they each undergo a delicate and risky series of surgeries, slicing and grafting their vocal chords so that their throats can produce several notes concurrently. Male children are incidentally castrated at this time too. Those children whose vocal ability survives the surgery are trained twice a day in early morning and late evening in the arts of singing. Children whose voices are irreparably damaged find solace amongst the grown up aspirants who remain at the monastery, content with a peaceful well provided for life. Those who cannot adapt are honoured with a concert performed by the greatest singers at the monastery, who whisk the soul of the child off to a wonder-filled, if bittersweet, end.

#### Accompanist (Dedicated Members)

Upon reaching the age of 15 those children who survived the surgeries with pitch perfect voices are promoted to Accompanist. They abandon the tasks of menial labour, instead practicing with weapons on a daily basis. Their singing training also develops, learning how to sing chords and form the aural glyphs which unlock a spell-singer's magic. Their most important lesson is how to protect themselves from their own powers. Once they demonstrate a basic competence aspirants are expected to engage in mercenary work, albeit under the aegis of higher ranking Sirens.

#### Choralist (Proven Members)

After proving themselves both in skill and surviving several expeditions outside of the monastery, an accompanist is promoted to Choralist. At this stage a choralist may, if they desire, sell their services as an independent musical entertainer or as a bodyguard, providing an employer is willing to meet their shocking price. Once their contract has been concluded (or the employer performs some act to invalidate it), they are expected to return directly to the monastery – thereupon making themselves available for more mercenary work.

#### Melodist (Overseers)

A choralist who reaches mastery in several of the order's skills is rapidly promoted to Melodist. The primary responsibility of a Melodist is to act as commanders of small mercenary troops, negotiating strategy and recompense with those that hire them. Melodists may also perform bodyguard work, but usually only to employers of significant status who often gift the monastery with additional rewards over and above the base cost. In return, the melodist gains opportunities to overhear ➤



political and military information which can serve the Sirens in good stead. Elderly melodists that grow too old to journey on campaign, serve the order by teaching the aspirants, accompanists and choralists

### Diva (Leader)

The grand master or mistress of the order engages in the tricky business of negotiating with those desiring to hire the services of the spell-singers. Refined diplomatic skills are required due to the suspicion and fear in which the Sirens are viewed. Some divas have been forced to meddle in national politics in order to prevent concerted action against the remote monastery, although attempts still infrequently occur, driven by those who regret the price they once paid or seek to reclaim a long lost child.

### Restrictions

All members of the Sirens of Syracuse swear an oath to protect and serve the order. Whilst they are not forbidden from entering casual relationships whilst on duty outside of the monastery, no Siren may marry or otherwise leave the order. Despite this, many members can claim friendship with people they met on tour and correspondence is encouraged, if only for the news on current affairs it brings. Any Siren who deliberately sunders his or her ties with the order is generally hunted down and returned to the monastery for punishment.

### Skills

The Sirens give training in skills of Courtesy, Influence, Insight, Invocation, Lore (Strategy and Tactics), Sing and Willpower; although members are expected to learn all they can of foreign cultures and languages when sent on mercenary duty. The order trains its members in its own Spell-Singer combat style (Scimitar, Longsword, Dagger and Thrown Dagger - Formation Fighting trait) available to members of Accompanist rank and above.

### Magic

Members learn the arts of spell-singing (see later on). Spells learned are Accompanist: The Descant Drone, Song of the Sirens, Dire Discordance; Choralist: Melodic Manifestation, Cries of the Crocotta; Melodist: Hymn of Falling Stone, Wail of the Banshee.

### Gifts

Impervious (to mental spell effects), Swiftness

### Allies and Enemies

Nobody favours the Sirens of Syracuse save those desperate enough to hire their services, and then only temporarily. Likewise few are foolish enough to declare the Sirens outright enemies, for fear of a Melodist arriving in their private chambers singing the Wail of the Banshee.

## USING SPELL-SINGING

Spell-singing is a variation upon the sorcery system, but instead of Shaping uses the Sing skill to manipulate its spell-songs. Learning to control each vocal element is an art which requires countless years of practice as well as time spent mastering the song mantras; complex note sequences in order to induce a specific magical effect.

Although these throat songs sound like an unearthly droning mixture of fluting chords of whistles crossed with deep growling chants, to a discerning ear they can convey the passion and energy of the singer. Progression in the order teaches the spell-singer new and more dangerous songs.

### The core precepts of Spell-Singing are:

- The magical effect of a song mantra has an indefinite Duration, lasting for as long as it is chanted.
- The magic of a song mantra cannot be aimed, rather it indiscriminately affects everyone or everything within its Range, provided they fail their resistance check against it, or willingly allow themselves to succumb.
- Chanting mantas prevents the singer from communicating verbally, or from using any other type of magic. However, it does not prevent them from performing physical skills, even violent ones.
- Magic Points used by mantras do not begin to regenerate until the song is concluded.
- A song mantra's magical parameters may be manipulated as per the Sorcery rules, except shaping points are calculated using the Sing skill instead of Shaping. Neither Duration nor Targets are available parameters.
- Unlike traditional Sorcery, the Intensity of a song mantra is part of its manipulation costs.
- More than one mantra can be chanted concurrently, provided each new song started places a number of manipulation points into Combine, equal in value to the number of existing songs already being chanted.

For additional atmosphere, a GM can change the names of the shaping parameters to follow musical notation. See the *Mantra Manipulation Table*.

## SONGS OF POWER

The following song mantras are those practised by the Sirens. Availability is restricted by rank in the order, to prevent terrible accidents from occurring. Note that anyone rendered completely deaf (by whatever means) is automatically immune from the mental effects of these spells - that is to say those requiring an opposed Willpower to resist.

### The Descant Drone (Spell Resistance)

The first song mantra taught to all aspiring spell-singers, this is perhaps their most important magic as it protects them from the indiscriminate effects of songs not only sung by their companions, but also their own personal chants. As such, this is usually the first power invoked in any battle situation.

### Song of the Sirens (Draw Humanoids)

Whilst certainly not the most lethal of their powers, the Song of the Sirens has become infamous for the cunning strategic applications to which it has been placed over the course of history. Its mournful strains have an almost irresistible alluring effect upon listeners, compelling everyone within range to travel to the presence of the spell-singer. Whilst less useful for drawing enemies into ambushes, since the ambushers themselves are affected by its magic, it has been used to entice an entire army into a bog and one fateful battle in a mountain pass forced thousands of men to jump to their doom from the cliffside path upon which they marched.

### Dire Discordance (Imprison Reversed)

Opposite of the Imprison spell, the Dire Discordance creates an area of horrifically painful cacophony of jarring melodies, pre-

## MANTRA MANIPULATION TABLE

Points of Shaping	Timbre (Fortune)	Pitch (Intensity)	Loudness (Magnitude)	Cadence (Range)	Rhythm (Combine)
None	1	1	Self	None	None
1	2	2	1m x POW	2 Spells	None
2	3	3	3m x POW	3 Spells	1 Extra Roll
3	4	4	5m x POW	4 Spells	1 Extra Roll
4	5	5	10m x POW	5 Spells	1 Extra Roll
5	6	6	30m x POW	6 Spells	2 Extra Rolls
6	7	7	50m x POW	7 Spells	2 Extra Rolls
7	8	8	100m x POW	8 Spells	2 Extra Rolls
8	9	9	300m x POW	9 Spells	3 Extra Rolls
9	10	10	500m x POW	10 Spells	3 Extra Rolls
10	11	11	1km x POW	11 Spells	3 Extra Rolls
Each point...	+1 Intensity	+1 Magnitude	Continue Pattern	+1 Spell	Continue Pattern

venting entry and forcing those within who fail to resist, back to its perimeter. Although this dissonant music causes no direct damage, it inflicts one Difficulty Grade on any mental skill attempted by those remaining within range. Used cleverly it can break formations of warriors or completely drive away creatures possessing INS rather than INT.

#### **Melodic Manifestation (Phantom Sound)**

Using this power a spell-singer can create an audible illusion of fantastic scope. Anything imaginable from barely heard whispers or soft scratching of scuttling insects, to more grandiose noises such as thunderclaps or arias sung by angelic voices. Applied artistically, these phantasms can be used to entertain audiences in concert with the spell-singer's own musical rendition, making an unforgettable experience. Utilised more offensively this mantra can induce paranoia, despair or outright fear.

#### **Cries of the Crocotta (Palsy)**

A warbling song of piercing notes, it enters the minds of listeners twisting and paralysing their bodies with mystical resonance. The high pitches almost resemble animalistic laughter, but inflict no lasting harm to those that succumb. It is often used to render everyone within range incapacitated whilst the Siren hews down attackers who pose a direct threat to them or their wards. In part, this is what makes spell-singers such effective bodyguards. Note that this mantra is slightly modified to the base spell, being resisted using Willpower, not Endurance.

#### **Hymn of Falling Stone (Wrack)**

Another of the song mantras which makes the spell-singers so feared upon the battlefield, the Hymn of Falling Stone uses key base frequencies to set up destructive vibrations in stone, crystal and ceramics. It acts as per the Wrack spell, but only causes damage to those particular substances. When gathered together and singing in chorus, a unit of spell-singers can soon collapse city walls, even mountains!

#### **Wail of the Banshee (Sever Spirit)**

A hideous, bloodcurdling aria of screeches, the most potent of the Sirens' mantras is capable of slaying hundreds, friend or foe, upon the battlefield. Its universal and arbitrary is what makes it so rarely used by the order, save for most dire of needs. Even then the chief spell-singers are reluctant to invoke its power, since it not only kills soldiers, but everybody and everything, down to the worms and plants. Effect. Wail of the Banshee is based upon the Theistic miracle rather than a Sorcery spell.



# SHADOWS OF BABYLON

“The king spake, and said, ‘Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of kings by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?’”

– Daniel 4:30

TEXT **KENNETH HITE**  
ILLUSTRATION **LUKAS THELIN**

**T**he epitome of urban fantasy is surely a city that is itself a myth: both grounded in baked brick and gilded in magical radiance. Of course, you can see flashes of such sights in the great cities of the new millennium: San Francisco, Hong Kong, Nairobi. But often the fantasist seeks urban myth in the past, cities sunk deep in centuries: London, Tokyo, Moscow, Istanbul. Surely, then, our road is clear: travel back still further, to when urbanism and fantasy were one and the same, to an era when the gods themselves raised cities by the first river banks. Let's travel back millennia: back to Babylon.

Nobody knows when Babylon was founded; its original site almost certainly lies underneath the Euphrates River. When the first Akkadian-speaking settlers arrived around 2500 B.C., they found a place called ‘Babillu,’ and decided that it was the “gate of the gods” or *bab-ili* in Akkadian. Why? Because Babylon, even then, was touched by magic, by fantasy, by Powers outside our comprehension. Sargon of Akkad, the first empire builder, boasted that he “built Babylon in front of Akkad” – 600 years later, Hammurabi the Great built a Babylonian Empire where Sargon had ruled. By Hammurabi's time (circa 1750 B.C.), Babylon held 65,000 people; it was the biggest city in the world.

The Hittites sacked Babylon 150 years later, and thus began centuries of foreign rule. However, Babylon remained the most important city in Mesopotamia: the Gate of the Gods, the Sacred City, the City That Grasps the Bridle of Heaven and Hell. Hammurabi carried these titles and more away from the Sumerian city of Nippur, the previous nexus of divine power in the Land of Two Rivers. Babylon's god Marduk overthrew Nippur's god Enlil, assuming many of his powers in Heaven, and writing himself into Enlil's myths. For over a millennium after Hammurabi's dynasty fell in 1595 B.C., possession of Babylon made its holder special in the eyes of the gods, conferring a sort of “high kingship” on its rulers: much like occupation of Rome in late antiquity, or of Jerusalem during the Crusades. Even the fearsome Assyrian emperors had themselves crowned both in their home city and in Babylon until, in 703 B.C., the Babylonian king Marduk-apla-iddin (Merodach-Baladan in the Bible) rebelled against the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib. Sennacherib thought he solved the problem of Babylon by leveling the city in 689 B.C. and deporting its population to Nineveh, but his sons recoiled at his blasphemy and toppled a statue onto him eight years later.

Sennacherib's successor Esarhaddon rebuilt Babylon and received his crown from ➤

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the hands of Marduk, but Marduk was not appeased. Assyria began a steady decline, tearing itself apart in civil war. In 612 B.C., Nabopolassar overthrew the Assyrian Empire and restored Babylon to independence and greatness. He attempted to reanimate Hammurabi's city, rebuilding its walls and ziggurats, even using the ancient Akkadian language at court. (This would be like a modern king of Sweden attempting to revive the court of the Ynglings, including using runes instead of the Roman alphabet.) Nabopolassar's builders and priests invented archaeology, excavating ancient temple walls so that they could be restored to their precise original configurations. At its height under Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's population reached 150,000, once more the largest city in the world. Nebuchadnezzar expanded Babylon's empire from the edges of Persia to the border of Egypt, capturing Jerusalem and transporting the Jews to "Babylonian captivity" in his immense, cosmopolitan capital. Perhaps the Ark of the Covenant joined the captured idols of Nineveh, Damascus, and Tyre in the Esagila, the temple-palace of Marduk.

Marduk could not hold back all invaders, however: the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. Xerxes put down another rebellion in Babylon in 482 B.C. by diverting the Euphrates to flood the city; he desecrated the temple of Marduk, and like Sennacherib died for it, as his empire began to crumble until it (and Babylon) fell to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. Like other conquerors, Alexander received a crown from the hands of Marduk, and he consulted with the astrologers and magicians of the city to restore Marduk's sacred precincts. He wished to make Babylon his capital city – under his rule its population reached an all-time high of 200,000 – but died there of a fever before he could consolidate his empire. Alexander's successors built a new capital, Seleucia, and moved most of Babylon's population to the new city in 275 B.C. By the time the Parthians conquered Babylon in 141 B.C., no priests remained in the ruins; Marduk received no sacrifices.

Today, Babylon is marked by three immense mounds in the desert plain of Iraq, located about 85 kilometers south of Baghdad. Archaeologists studied the site on and off from 1812 to 1989, uncovering ziggurats and temples, tracing the lines of Nebuchadnezzar's walls and gates. In 1983, Saddam Hussein began to "reconstruct" the city, burying much of it underneath a Disneyland of bricks signed with his own name; the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 badly damaged Saddam's reconstruction and likely pulverized an unknowable amount of the ancient city.

"Below I have hardened the ground for a building site,  
I will build a house, it will be my luxurious abode.  
I will found therein its temple,  
I will appoint its inner rooms, I will establish my sovereignty.  
When you come up from the Apsu for assembly,  
You will spend the night in it, it is there to receive all of you.  
When you descend from heaven for assembly,  
You will spend the night in it, it is there to receive all of you.  
I will call its name Babylon, which means the houses of the great gods,  
I shall build it with the skill of craftsmen."

– the god Marduk, in the *Enuma Elish*

Babylon, the Wonder of the Mountains and the Sea, was deliberately cosmopolitan. Transplanted populations, royal ambassadors, and merchants from Greece and India dwelt there in its great days. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon covered 17 square kilometers, surrounded by magnificent double walls. (If you believe Herodotus, who after all was there, it covered more like 500 square kilometers. Suburbs and gardens may allow us to split the difference.) Within those walls – 300 feet high, according to Herodotus – were orchards and abattoirs, blacksmiths and embalmers, slave pens and observatories, thieves and sages, and everything else on the random urban encounter table. Here are only a few major locations in the City of Opulence, and their possible echoes in a city of today:

### THE RIVER EUPHRATES

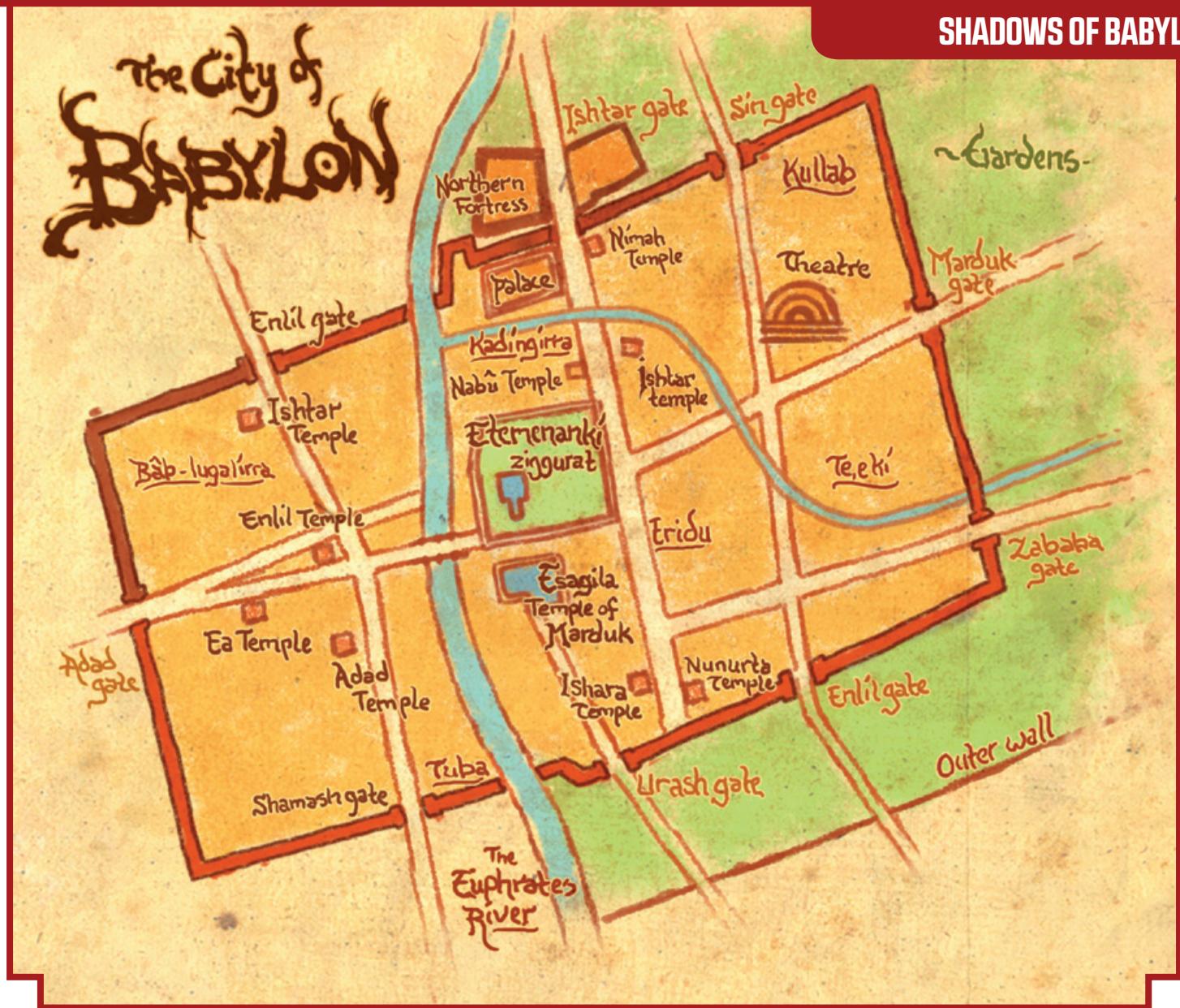
Babylon lay on both sides of the River Euphrates, and its floods shaped the city as much as any invading army. Under Nabopolassar, the whole river was walled into a brick channel; he spanned the river with a stone bridge (on asphalted brick supports shaped to minimize river erosion) and undercut it with a tunnel lined with marble, linking palaces on the east and west sides of the city. Nebuchadnezzar dug a canal all around the city walls to serve as a moat; other canals watered the fields and gardens of the city to ensure a plentiful food supply. The *gugallu*, or canal inspector, was one of Babylon's most important officials dating back to Akkadian times; a mystical *gugallu* controlling the flow of magic or ley lines or mana could remain a powerful figure in a modern urban fantasy game, even in cities without canals.

### THE HOUSE OF THE NEW YEAR

Also known as the Du-azaga, the "place of fate," or the Bet-Ekribi, the "house of prayers," this temple complex lay outside the walls, about 200 meters north of the Ishtar Gate along the Processional Way. Fragrant and specialized trees surrounded the House, possibly referring to Babylon's ancient title Life of the Forest, or Root of Life. Every year at the beginning of spring, all other gods left their temples across Mesopotamia and travelled to the House for the Akitu festival. During the Akitu, they met in a conclave and once more acclaimed Marduk king of the gods. Whether Odin and Amaterasu, or Elvis and Marilyn, still arrive at Du-azaga on April 6 remains unknown – until you decide for your game.

### THE ISHTAR GATE

Nebuchadnezzar built this massive gateway as the main fortified entrance to Babylon, on the north wall across the Processional Way. Excavated between 1902 and 1914 by Robert Koldewey, it has been removed and reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. In its original site, the gatehouse may have been seven stories high; Nebuchadnezzar covered it with blue glazed bricks and reliefs of dragons, lions, and aurochs. The gate itself was cedar wood, fitted with bronze. Travelers between the urban and the fantastic should keep a corner of their eye out for dragons, lions, and aurochs in airports, or inhale a whiff of cedar and bronze in the train station.



## ESAGILA

Meaning “House of the Raised Head,” the Esagila was the temple compound of Marduk. Measuring 180 x 125 meters, it comprised 2 large courtyards (70 x 40 & 40 x 25 m) and the “holy of holies” holding Marduk and his consort Zarpanit, the mother-goddess of the rising moon. Hammurabi, the Assyrian emperors, and Nebuchadnezzar all considered it a microcosm of the entire created world, and brought wild animals and strange plants from beyond the rim of their empires to decorate and dwell within it. It even held a microcosmic “sea,” the Abzu, a large pool representing primordial chaos and the waters of the earth. The *shatammu*, or temple manager, of the Esagila was a powerful official in Babylon, since the priesthood of Marduk owned much of the city’s land. Thinking of the priesthoods as megacorps with magic can help with a modern-day or cyberpunk incarnation of Babylon; the Esagila might be any designed enclosure representing the world from a zoo to the UN building to a diplomatic space station.

## ETEMENANKI

Its name means “House of the Foundation of Heaven on the Earth,” but the Etemenanki is better known as the Tower of Babel, the “tower to reach unto Heaven” from the Bible. The seven levels of this ziggurat reached 91 meters into the sky, rising from a square base 91 meters on a side. Each level represented one of the seven planets, painted that planet’s sacred color; on the top was a cedar and gold temple to Marduk with indigo walls. The lord of the ziggurat was the *ensi*, a title that generally means “governor” (and varies over the millennia between religious and secular authority) but literally means “interpreter.” The *ensi* interpreted the patterns of the stars, the will of the gods, and the dreams of the king. From the peak of Etemenanki, Babylonian astronomers mapped the planets’ motions, described the zodiac, and divided the calendar into months, weeks, days, and hours we still use (with only slight modifications) today. It represented the “holy moun-

tain” connecting Earth to Heaven. Under the Persians it fell into disrepair; Alexander wanted to rebuild it, but died before he could begin. It took a century to build, much like the medieval Gothic cathedrals; it dominated the city like a modern skyscraper.

## THE HANGING GARDENS OF BABYLON

Modern archaeologists believe the Hanging Gardens were a legend, or perhaps a misplaced reference to the palace gardens of Nineveh, but their place in the Seven Wonders of the World keeps them mythically more than real. Supposedly, a mountain princess married to Nebuchadnezzar was homesick for her lush native land; to delight her, he built a two-hectare simulacrum of her Persian forests on top of a 70-foot tall outcrop of natural stones. As a myth, the Hanging Gardens might flourish anywhere: parks, penthouses, or any green place in between.

## MONSTERS OF BABYLON

They who repair  
To Babylon, and from the Angels learn  
Mysterious wisdom, sin not in the deed.

– Robert Southey, *Thalaba the Destroyer*

Babylonia, being a flat, treeless mud plain, had no fairies or elves (although the Sumerian mulla may have been something like a will-o'-the-wisp). Instead, it has a plethora of disease spirits to be alternately placated and prevented. A bowlegged dwarf shows up in many Babylonian carvings, but whether he represents a race or a single demigod is unknown. But if it has few demihumans to decorate an urban fantasy game, Babylon has monsters aplenty.

Babylon, the medieval Arabs believed, no longer had a Tower reaching impiously to Heaven, but instead held a Pit down into Hell. Allah hung the angels Harut and Marut by their heels in the Pit of Babylon for the sin of teaching mankind sorcery, and for succumbing to mankind's temptations. These not-quite fallen angels are only the most gigantic of the monsters of Babylon; such creatures come into their own in urban fantasy and deserve some explication here.

### Ekimmu

Ekimmu (aka *edimmu*) are probably originally Assyrian; they are spirits of the angry dead who possess or haunt the living, draining their blood, vitality, or luck. They parallel some vampire legends, but resemble gaunt, skeletal figures rather than glamorous lovers.

### Girtablullu

Girtablullu (aka *aqrabuamelu*) are the best villains in the Gilgamesh story, angry warriors with the head and torso of a man and the armor and tail of a scorpion. Girtablullu also have taloned feet like vultures; some have wings. Like many Babylonian monsters, they could also be invoked as protection against disease spirits or against their fellow monsters. Nevertheless, these are your orcs.

### Kulullu

Kulullu are half-fish, half-man beings who live in the ocean, the river swamps, or the artificial Abzu lake in the center of the Esagila. Powerful sorcerers and sages, they teach men esoteric arts and tools; they have their own eerie agenda. Ancient astronaut theorists believe them to be aliens from Sirius; their name indicates a connection to Lovecraftian evil.

### Lilitu

Lilitu are angry, winged female demons who kill children and pregnant women by poison or by befouling the air. They haunt deserts and open country, but enter the cities when plague demons open the way for them. A variant, the *ardat-lili*, more resemble succubi than harpies. Their queen gained quite a reputation in Hebrew myth as Lilith.

### Rabisu

Rabisu crouch in alleys and entranceways, waiting to seize unwary passersby. They are demons, but take solid form while lurking in shadows. They resemble the redcaps of Scottish legend, or the ghouls of later Arabian lore.

### Sirrush

Sirrush is the more familiar name, but is actually a very common mistransliteration of the word *mushussu*. In either version, it refers to the Babylonian dragon: a thick, reptilian body with the hind legs of a raptor, the forelegs of a lion, and the head and tail of a horned snake. The sirrush attends to the city god: it is a source of wisdom, power, and terror. In the Apocrypha, the prophet Daniel defeats a sirrush by exploding it.

How many miles to Babylon?

Three score miles and ten.

Can I get there by candle-light?

Yes, and back again.

If your heels are nimble and light,  
You may get there by candle-light.

– traditional nursery rhyme

When you bring Babylon into your urban fantasy (or vice versa), you are walking a Processional Way paved by millennia of legend and myth. Building on the foundations laid in the Bible, Babylon has three main levels of meaning in the symbolic realm: cosmopolitan hubris of the Tower of Babel (or *Babylon 5*), the earthly prison of the Babylonian Captivity, and the city of the Antichrist, or at least of the “Whore of Babylon” who represents the fallen state of mankind in the End Times. These towers rise over the ancient Babylon, City of Ritual and Earthly Paradise, casting as wide and as deep a shadow as you could want for your game. Babylon echoes through the mystical poetry of William Blake (“the Walls of Babylon are the Souls of Men/Her Gates are the Groans of Nations”) and the political reggae of Bob Marley (“Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire”). You can build a lot out of Babylon bricks, in other words.

## BABYLON, THE HOUSE OF THE GATEWAY

Starting with perhaps the most mundane possibility, imagine a time portal between ancient Babylon and your city setting – which might be modern Baghdad, or it might be anywhere. Time portals hardly have to obey geography, after all. Possibly it's a hyperspace gate opened by studying cuneiform found in an ancient tomb or on a new-raised island. It's opened to lay a pipeline through, of course, but it doesn't just bring back oil. It also opens the way for gods and monsters, either overtly or as the secret cargo of Babylonian immigrants to the future. In this kind of campaign, perhaps the “fantasy world” behind the wainscoting turns out to be another physical world – one as superior in magic and demonic arts as our world is in technology and science.

Such a campaign might resemble *Shadowrun*, or *Dark Conspiracy*, or even a weird version of *Mage* as the oil-fueled Technocracy squares off against the gugallu magi. Borrow a hint from *Torg* and have Babylonian magi trying to reconsecrate modernity to Marduk

while Médécins Sans Frontières tries to battle disease-utukku with recombinant DNA therapy. Or take a leaf from Wraith: only moderns possessed by ekimmu can operate on both sides of the gateway, but the ekimmu seek only death and destruction.

## BABYLON, WHICH HATES INJUSTICE!

Or perhaps the connection goes the other way. After the fall of the Etemenanki, Marduk leads the gods in search of a new Tower to Heaven, and finds one – in 1931, in New York City, when the Empire State Building opens. The skyscrapers are the new ziggurats, reopening the paths from heaven for the Babylonian gods. This can be a wild pulp setting, featuring sky-gods living in hanging gardens on the city roofs, and bold aviators battling lilitu or the monstrous lion-headed Imdugud bird. Just like in ancient Babylon, images of wrestlers keep demons at bay: demon-fighting heroes must wear tights and capes! Translate Sidereal magic from *Exalted* to the modern zodiac, blend in White Wolf's old *Adventure* RPG and go wild!

Or it can be a setting of secret and subtle horror as ancient gods seep down onto the cities, their talons sinking into mankind's banks and businesses just as the temples did in Nebuchadnezzar's time. Marduk opens the pit of Abzu to reconnect his new Tower, and the rabisu crawl into tenements while girtablullu arm themselves in the subways, and kulullu plot in the sewers and beneath the harbors. The shatammu turn a blind eye to the encroaching demons, preferring build cults and count dividends. This might be a *Call of Cthulhu* mod, or a *Deadlands Noir* build. Inanna is the original gorgeous dame in distress, after all.

## BABYLON, WHICH KNOWS THE ORDINANCES AND DECREES

Steampunk it up instead: in 1815, architects proposed a 110-meter tall, 22-level ziggurat for Trafalgar Square in London rather than the relatively restrained column there now. (That's one level for each year of the Napoleonic Wars ... and for each of the Major Arcana in the Tarot.) Perhaps in some alternate history the Trafalgar Pyramid opens the way for Nabu, Lord of Scribes, to capture William Blake's Babylon-on-Thames for his father Marduk, while the kulullu reveal arcane secrets of steam to human rebels and conspirators ... for a price.

Ley lines and canals spread across Britain and America, Sweden and Prussia. Ziggurats

rise in Paris and Vienna; ensi interpret the will of Marduk for czars and presidents. Some factory towns – Providence and Manchester, Eskilstuna and Chicago – remain free, if you don't count the fish-men in bulletproof tanks behind bank and factory doors. And once a year, more gods assemble in London for the Akitu, and imprison just a little more of the human world. Play this world with your favorite steampunk ruleset, from *Runepunk* to *Iron Kingdoms* to *Clockwork & Chivalry*. Or amp up the angst with *Hero-Quest*, *WFRP*, or *Narosia*, or any other game in which men feel the breath of the gods as they pray not to attract them.

## BABYLON, THE CITY WHICH RENDERS NOT THE ARROGANT PERFECT

Perhaps Babylon is an opportunistic infection, lying in wait in the clouds of pulverized cuneiform tablets kicked up by tank treads and blown aloft by helicopter rotors. Soldiers, humanitarians, and profiteers in Iraq breathed in the sacred names of gods and the atropoic emblems of demons. First Saddam drained the Abzu, the Euphrates marshes where Eden once flowered, then American JDAMs and MOABs blew open the Pit of Babylon. In the new millennium, the monsters of Babylon clung invisibly to the land's tyrant and seized the new invaders by the soul. They spread their cult in the post-invasion chaos, they spread back to home ports and Western cities. In that connection, doesn't MI6 headquarters at Vauxhall Crossing in London (built after the first Gulf War, when British soldiers marched through the ruins of Ur) look a lot like a ziggurat? Perhaps the ekimmu run the intelligence services now, and we have a lovely *Night's Black Agents* setting on our hands.

## BABYLON, THE CITY WHOSE BRICKWORK IS ANCIENT

Or perhaps the gods and monsters of Babylon possessed the archaeologists, just as they did Nabopolassar and Nabonidus 2500 years earlier. Under important buildings such as temples, gates, and palaces, Babylonian (and Sumerian) urban designers buried *temenu*. These were brick boxes holding "nails" of bronze or clay designed to cosmically fix the city in place, along with statues of the kings and ensi who founded or rebuilt the temple or palace. The *temenu* identifies the sacred location, ensures its connection to man and to the gods ... and blocks infiltration of the city by

underworld demons. When Nabopolassar's diggers found a *temenu* of Sargon, they had priests who knew the ancient rites: they built a new temple to hold him, and even with that, Nabopolassar's empire was virtually possessed by the shade of Hammurabi. When Robert Koldewey or Leonard Woolley dug up *temenu*, they brought them back to Berlin or London. The entire Ishtar Gate is in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, while figures from the gate are in Detroit, Istanbul, Gothenburg, Paris, Munich, Toronto, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Providence, Boston, and New Haven. And that's just one vector, just one goddess.

## BABYLON, TO WHICH THE CLA- MOR OF ALL LANDS IS THE SAME

One of Babylon's neighborhoods was named Eridu, after an older rival Mesopotamian city. Although records are spotty, it's entirely possible that many of Babylon's quarters were named after or represented other cities: Babylon was, in a very real sense, every city in the world. The Tower of Babel, remember, joined all mankind before fragmenting human languages; the Babylonian Captivity encompassed not only Jews but every subject people of Nebuchadnezzar's empire; the Whore of Babylon seduces and degrades all humanity. Babylon haunts all cities at once, bleeding in over the beltways and motorways (chariots rode around Babylon's walls) and welling up through the rivers and canals (the Euphrates flows out of Eden, into every river in the world). Rabisu lurk wherever you don't recognize a doorway; each hoodie or sweatshirt conceals a scorpion exoskeleton; ardat-lili stalk prey on street corners; sIRRUSH breathe out the naphtha-petrol the cities must inhale or die.

Babylon is everywhere, in every tick of the 60-minute hour (invented by the Babylonians) and every fold of an astrology column. The crescent of Islam, the Maltese Cross of the Crusaders; both Babylonian emblems. Traffic and bureaucracy replicate both the chaotic Abzu and the lawgiving Nabu; colored lights blink on and off in the highest reaches of our postmodern ziggurats. In the *GURPS Madness Dossier* setting, the Babylonian Anunnaki sleep behind the scrim of human history, waiting to awaken at any moment and controlling mankind in the meanwhile through linguistic programming. Other games could posit other metaphysical conspiracies: Marduk could be the grandest of Exarchs in *Mage: the Awakening*, or Lucifer in *In Nomine*, or the First and Last Godwalker in a cosmic-level *Unknown Armies* game. Whoever grasps the hands of Marduk, they do so in the court of Babylon, Entrance to All Lands.

ROLEPLAYING

LONG HAVE I DESIRED TO LOOK



LONG HAVE I DESIRED TO LOOK UPON

**THE KINGS OF OLD**



# TO CREATE THE RUINS VISITED BY THE ADVENTURERS OF TODAY

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When Frodo and the fellowship of the ring struggle to bring the One Ring to Mount Doom, they are constantly moving through the ruins of an older, more powerful civilisation. Temples, colossal statues, and city ruins are everywhere you look, which helps very much to set the mood.

In the same way a character is given a background when it is created, in order to have a means of explaining their behaviour, a world must be given a background in order to adequately explain why it works the way it does. Usually, a world—much like a character—has gone through several different and widely shifting stages before it has settled into its current state. The ruins travelled through by today's adventurers, the archaic texts they encounter, the artefacts they unwittingly (and mistakenly) wear as adornment on their codpieces are all part of the ancient bones of the world which you, the game world's constructor, have created. Just like archaeologists and paleontologists of today, your players, with the help of all these other things, will attempt to create an image of how the world once looked, and it is therefore worthwhile to carefully think through how things used to be, what they have become, and what they one day will be. Inevitably, the players, like scientists in all times, will draw a number of erroneous conclusions based on what they find, but this is all part of the enjoyment of creating and burying ancient cultures. So that your world-building can be as impressive as possible, so that the mosaic of your world can be as multi-faceted as possible, and so that your players' conclusions about the past can be as entertaining as possible, this article will hopefully help you in the making of your ruins.

### WHO IS THIS ARTICLE FOR?

This article is written broadly so that it can be used in any type of other-worldly campaign, though sci-fi, fantasy, or other similar cross-genre dimension-hopping speculative fiction is most fitting. The advice and ideas surrounding the creation of advanced cultures from the past are likely most useful for game masters or writers who engage in world building, and the concrete examples at the end can be tweaked and modified as desired according to taste and to suit the world being created.

### ROLE OF THE RUINS IN YOUR CREATED WORLD

Imagine a world where everything is new and fresh. Every piece of land is untouched and waiting. Each spadeful of earth is the first and never will you find a shard of pottery that was buried there centuries before. Every new building is the first of its kind, and the word 'ruin' hasn't yet been invented, for there has never been a need. Does such an idea seem exciting or even possible? Yes, perhaps if you're playing a story in which you are the first to colonise a new planet or world, but otherwise, not really. We know that there has always been someone or something that has come before, and that has left traces of itself behind that affect us in various ways. We are today the sum of all previous experiences that have taken place, and our culture reflects in many ways those who came before us.

Fantasy literature and film often stresses those who came before. The idea is that advanced cultures go in cycles, and that these advanced cultures tend to succeed one another, interspersed with periods of decline. A typical feature of the genre is that these ancient cultures are described as being more powerful, and the setbacks they faced are portrayed as being extremely difficult. Consequently, we get scenes in which the heroes wander among ruins from a mightier time than anything that could be imagined today. The past becomes somewhat mystical, and the future offers either more setbacks (as in *The Lord of the Rings*) or promises a return to the greatness of the past (such as in David Brin's novel (and the less successful film of the same name) *The Postman*). A third alternative is that the story is set in a period of decline and life is so difficult that the story never really manages to take a stance regarding the future because the characters are so busy dealing with the present (as in *Mad Max*). Ruins then serve as a reminder of everything that has been lost. Regardless of the direction of the story, ruins

of previous cultures help to set the stage for the present, and with this in mind, it is useful to consider the following:

- Where in the cycles of peak cultural advancement and low point of cultural decline do you intend to set your campaign?
- What function do the ruins have in your current story?

### RUINS ARE LIKE ONIONS — MANY LAYERS

Once you have decided what role the ruins will play in your campaign, it is time to decide what they will look like and what function they will have. At this point it is appropriate to remember that each civilisation tends to build in and around the ruins of the previous one and that traces of previous cultures are therefore mixed among the layers. It is therefore important to think about one or more cycles of previous cultures in order to determine in which way their remnants have been mixed together. To help you get started you can use the descriptions below of typical examples of ruin creation for an advanced culture, typical effects of the fall of cultures, and common issues that rise when one culture builds itself up in the ruins of the previous one. For extra clarity I also include a number of follow-up questions.

### POWER STRUCTURES OF AN ADVANCED CULTURE

What does an advanced culture need in order to build pyramids that stand for thousands of years, to inspire argonauts who defy gravity or to leave behind black obelisks on deserted planets?

#### Power and Riches

The advanced culture must either have a very strong central power figure, such as a king, emperor, pharaoh, etc., with the ability and wherewithal to tax a broad population, or it must be as cosmopolitan as possible so that there are a number of competitive elite types with enormous bank accounts and a great need to prove themselves, or have one or more religions with economic and political muscle to flex.

#### Questions

Who was it who held the reins of power in your world in the past? Was it shared by several different people or factions, and if so who? How did these powers relate to each other?

## Will

This emperor or king, these ruling elites or esteemed religions must – like French presidents of today – have the will to manifest their power in the form of enormous architecture. This might be in the form of building monuments to their own vanity (tombs, palaces or temples), or it could be about creating buildings that tame nature and enhance civilisation (roads, aqueducts, dams or harbours), or it could be about improving culture (theatres, arenas, bathhouses or libraries).

## Questions

What did the rulers in your world use their power for? What did they want to build and why? To what extent were they able to build? Was there concurrence among the powers and the rulers, and in which way did this affect construction? Was there competition or cooperation?

## Highly Developed Organisation of Work

Vast numbers of people (elves/dwarves/Alpha-Centauri/etc.) must be able to be organised in an effective way. Logistical problems on an enormous scale must be able to be solved so that each person can ultimately become an effective cog in a great machine.

## Questions

Was all this work done voluntarily or for salary, or were slaves used? How was the issue of safety solved? Was there unity among the workers?

## Educated Specialists

At all levels in this undertaking, there must be highly educated specialists to provide expert knowledge. The number of experts required also points to the need for experts who can pass on their knowledge to others through written and symbolic language, apprenticeship programs, university and so on.

## Questions

What status did these specialists have? Were they forced to give up their knowledge or did they share willingly? In what way were these specialists formed by the world they live in? Did they drive development or did development drive them?

## Advanced Technology

Technology must have been transferred from previous generations and cultures and refined by the specialists mentioned above.

## Questions

How advanced was the technology they had access to? How much of this technology has been developed further and how much of it has been lost?

## Cultural Conformity

A certain amount of cultural conformity is expected, which shows just how great power and how much influence the ruling element had. This could be reflected in a dominant style of theatres spread across the known world, or that temples owned by a certain religion are all devoted to the same divine principles, etc.

## Questions

How does the cultural conformity manifest itself? Can one see geographically how large the spread of a certain ruling power has had by interpreting the architectural style of monuments and structures? Can one see intermingling of different styles in different places?

## THE FALL OF AN ADVANCED CULTURE

What happens when an advanced culture inevitably falls as an effect of internal or external conflicts:

## A time of chaos and division

Cultures rarely fall into decline with a bang. Usually, it is a long, drawn out process punctuated with many different groups fighting for power within the Kingdom in combination with external enemies forcing their way in from outside. When several ruling factions are competing with one another, and it is unclear who is in charge, this can give rise to chaos and anarchy. People stop taking mutual responsibility for a society that no longer cares about them, and they fall back on seeing to basic needs: life, food, shelter.

## Questions

Which groups are responsible for the internal conflicts? What are the conflicts about? Are there any external enemies and if so, who?

## A Time of War, Conquering and Plundering

Once a culture finally collapses, the brigands and confidence men come out of the woodwork. In the power vacuum that is left, it is the strong willed who succeed and the regular man hunkers down and tries to survive the best he can. War and conflict rages on between groups or individuals seeking power, and in the waves of plundering and subjugation that follow, much of the current civilisation's patina is lost. Riches, art, literature, theatre and architecture run the risk of being lost and destroyed.

## Questions

What types of riches are the most sought after in times of war; what is valued loot and what is ignored? What is destroyed and what will be left alone?

## A Loss of Educated Specialists

Without access to a strong central government and a stable society, the ability to pursue funded higher education is lost. In a time of war and conflict, there is a drastic decline in trade and consequently, more affluent groups (e.g., merchant classes, traditional aristocratic classes, etc.) are reduced or have disappeared altogether, and with that loss, a culture also loses the need for trained specialists in a variety of fields. There simply is no longer time to hire a master stonemason to extravagantly adorn the facade of city hall when war and looting is common practice.

## Questions

What groups of specialists are hardest hit? Does these specialists' knowledge disappear entirely, or does it find its way to other realms and advanced cultures? Are there new specialist professions that thrive during a time of chaos and conflict?

## Decline in Technology

The same causes that result in a decline of educated specialists will also result in a decline of technology. To understand, manage and develop technology requires trained specialists and the transfer of knowledge that is rapidly disappearing with the fall of the advanced culture.

## Questions

Which technologies will disappear rapidly and which will have the most longevity? Are

there areas—geographically or in the community – where technology has managed to be preserved longer than in other places? How can technology be preserved for as long as possible?

### Structures Rebuilt for Other Purposes

After the fall of an advanced culture, when the chaos and the worst of the conflicts have died down, when the robber barons have amassed their money and titles, people must get on with their everyday lives as best they can. While the marvellous bathhouses might have been enjoyed by many doing the height of civilisation, it is not feasible that hundreds of years later, after the aqueduct has collapsed, people continue to view the building as a bath house out of any sort of deference to cultural heritage. It is more likely that the building will take on some other purpose. Perhaps the bath house will be used to store grain, serve as the Emperor's new torture chambers or a foundry to make cannons and other weapons.

### Questions

What was the structures that survive chaos and conflict be used for? What is the most comical usage of a great structure from an advanced culture?

### The Daily Grind Takes Over

Frequently, life's everyday problems provide little time to even think about the past. "The temple of the Perseids may have been the most beautiful building in the known world at one time, but now it is mostly a ruin and we need the stone for our new barn." People will simply demolish a structure and use the stones for other significantly less extravagant purposes.

### Questions

What types of things might be especially susceptible to this type of plundering? Are there structures that people, despite the circumstances, do not want to destroy, and if so what would these be?

## WHEN NEW CULTURES ARISE IN THE RUINS OF THE OLD

Sooner or later, a new culture inevitably grows up in and around the ruins of the old. It may take centuries, but periods of chaos, conflict and stagnation do not last for ever. The

interesting thing is how the new emerging powers relate to those of the past. Following are a few examples of how new power centres might relate to the old ones:

### Old Power Centres Often Are or Become the New Power Centres

Centuries may come and go, but with surprising regularity, new power centres wind up in the exact same place as the old. Really this is nothing strange. Power centres wind up where they do for a few simple reasons: water and food sources and population numbers, strategic geographic placement or religious importance. Because these change little over time, the ruins of advanced culture X often become the base of advanced culture Y.

### Questions

What is it primarily that makes the power centre what it is – what factors control why the centre is where it is? Do the power centres shift over time, and in that case why – what is it that has happened to cause a shift?

### Old Symbols Become New

Insofar as all the buildings and monuments still exist from an older time, they are frequently used by the new civilisation. Not infrequently, these become the unifying symbols used to build a new nation. "We were once that proud people who conquered all the lands the sun touched. In Crystal Square stood the giant sundial which ruled all time in the old world. The square remains, and today we inaugurate a new, greater sundial to show that time has returned to us."

### Questions

Which symbols are the ones highlighted by the new culture? Are there places and symbols that people try actively to forget? What purpose is there by associating oneself with parts of the old civilisation? Do rivalling groups vying for power have their roots in traditions and groups from the previous culture?

### Old Styles Becomes New

As with symbols, styles too may be copied from the old culture in order to lend a certain legitimacy or historical gravity – but the new style is not quite the same as the old because much time has passed, and technology, materials and tastes have changed. Terms such as Neoclassicism or Gothic Revival demonstrate this behaviour, as does the concept Renaissance.

### Questions

What bizarre new styles become popular in the reborn culture? Do people dress in New Age, transbrutalist coats with re-atlantean adornments? What elements from the past make a comeback, and how do they affect art and literature?

### Ancient Ruins Repurposed

As part of the rebirth and recreation of the old, ruins can be resurrected with new interpretations. The old bathhouse that served as both grain storage and cannon foundry is returned to its former glory, carefully restored by a new group of trained specialists. Meanwhile, time and tastes have moved away from the concept of public baths, so the new bathhouse becomes an exclusive spa with private chambers where the wealthiest and most decadent patrons can have all their wishes fulfilled for a hefty penny.

### Questions

What types of things most deserve to be resurrected? In what way can I enhance myself by enhancing something from the past?

### Crazy Conclusions

Despite the new groups of trained specialists and educated historians, archaeologists, metaphysicians, mages and holists who attempt to recreate knowledge of the past, the time since the decline of the previous culture until the start of the present one has perhaps removed all traces a little too efficiently. In some areas, there are so few puzzle pieces left that it is no longer possible to see the whole picture, and the best we can do is speculate and presume. It is not uncommon to draw crazy conclusions from ruins and their meanings, and then base new architecture and cultural expressions on these erroneous conclusions.

### Questions

Which crazy conclusions about the past are popular in your world right now? Are any of the interpretations politically or economically motivated? Is it possible to base an adventure on these misinterpretations? What happens if someone comes out with new and perhaps more correct interpretations—how would these be viewed among those in power and among the regular citizens? Is there any advantage in interpreting the past?

## MAGES AND ANTI-GRAVITY PLATFORMS

### Covering the Fantasy Angle

When we discuss fantasy and science-fiction, it's easy, as a world creator, to think ahead and ignore all of the above steps. Why bother with socio-economic factors surrounding previous cultures and their incredible ruins when the genre already contains fantasy elements that eliminate any need for strong central powers and ruling elites? With a mage in the party, it's possible to just throw up a whole bunch of pyramids, and with a simple anti-gravity platform, a wall can be constructed that makes the Chinese hide beneath the undergrowth in shame, right? Well, it's not exactly that easy. Even fantasy and science-fiction have a kind of internal logic, and these worlds tend to follow some form of natural law, with features of Marxist historiography. Most fantasy worlds limit magicians' enormous powers by connecting them to some kind of power source, requiring sleep or meditation, making spell components rare, or creating a variety of other inventive hindrances. Mages can create fantastic things, but there is always a cost, and in the end, it is always a matter of egoistic human needs. Of course a mage could say an incantation and create a bunch of pyramids, but the value of this in time and power used is perhaps not worth it with respect to the toll it takes on the mage, or the satisfaction she gets of doing it. What is the value of a whole sea of gold coins if the mage must give ten years of her life to the monotony of it? The concept is similar for technology in science fiction. Of course an anti-gravity platform could be used to build a magnificent wall, but what is the purpose if everyone else also has access to their own anti-gravity platforms? Every era has its own set of circumstances and fantastic solutions, but it is difficult to beat the combined power of an advanced culture with basically unlimited resources.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN YOUR PLAYERS BEGIN TO TROMP AROUND YOUR RUINS

Accurate knowledge about past cultures is seldom available to players. This is because the past culture is so far back in time that the knowledge has been lost, or the time the players exist in is so comparatively primitive that they simply do not understand the past, or a combination of the two. Precise knowledge is also not worth searching for from a player's point of view. Just because you,

as a world creator, have actually thought through how the past was constructed, does not mean there is necessarily any reason to tell your players about this. A large part of the atmosphere regarding the previous civilisations lies in their mystery and uncertainty. If previous advanced cultures leave behind a detailed description of how all of their impressive feats were performed, they would lose a great deal of their mythological shine. After all, consider how it would be if Egyptologists had discovered this sign two hundred years ago:

To all future cultures who wish to know about our impressive Nile culture: We have carved in stone a detailed description of how we built the pyramids so that you don't have to wonder and speculate about it for years to come.

Removes some of the excitement, doesn't it?

## EXAMPLES OF RUINS YOU CAN SHAMELESSLY STEAL

It never hurts to have a few good examples of ruins to fall back on, which can, as needed, be modified, transformed, or even totally changed, so you can use them in your campaign without having to put too much time and energy into creating new ones. Following are a few examples with some adventure ideas.

### The Cliff City of Tal-Quinn

#### General

Beyond the sulfur fields in Osmagosis, almost as far from the world's larger centres as you can get, is the cliff city of Tal-Quinn. Getting there without technological means is nearly impossible, and yet that is precisely what thousands of people once did.

#### Facts

Carved into the Sharaf massif, a mile-high chain of volcanos with almost no vegetations, someone has created homes, public spaces, warehouses, and gigantic temple-like structures large enough of a colony of more than half a million people. The lowest premises in the giant complex is underground, while the highest lookout posts are over fifteen-thousand metres high. In total, more than 10 million stairs have been carved throughout Tal-Quinn, even though large, perfectly cylindrical shafts indicate other ways to move up and down within the complex. At about three-thousand metres' height, in line with the

created-by-natural-forces Quinnal bridge, lies Tal-Quinn's only outdoor structures, some relatively modest structures for housing and storage purposes.

#### Mystery

There are no signs of how the residents of Tal-Quinn got their food. In almost total isolation, and with extremely limited means of livelihood, the city of Tal-Quinn is a true mystery.

#### Solution

The solution to the mystery of Tal-Quinn has been lost over time.

#### Adventure Ideas

- In their search for the legendary artifact/stolen prototype/key to the forgotten language/truth about the city's creation, the party's trail of clues leads them to the deserted cliff city of Tal-Quinn. The problem is that the spaces there are nearly endless, and the extreme isolation has caused the city to become a home to some very peculiar individuals and groups that do not like to be disturbed.
- Hunted and outmanoeuvred, the players search desperately for a place where they can wage their final battle. Tal-Quinn turns out to be the perfect place, and if the group can reveal the cliff city's buried secret, they may yet win a surprising victory.

### The Wells of Persaga

#### General

In far-off Persaga are some of the most anonymous, but simultaneously most impressive structures in the known world. They are the ruins from a distant culture that even the locals don't know much about, and not even their oral traditions can tell of what the structures' purpose was. Many rumours abound, of course, but for most, the wells are a mystery.

#### Facts

Scattered across the country in an almost perfect circle are 28 enormous wells. Each well is exactly 21 metres in diameter and is 54 metres deep. The walls of the wells are clad in stone blocks, and along each one, a very narrow (just 36 centimeters wide) spiral staircase leads to the bottom. Because the wells are very old, time has treated each one differently. Some of the wells have caved in

and are filled with rubble, and are now only vague outlines in the landscape. Others have been filled with water and are merely suspiciously circular, deep ponds. More unusual are the rare wells that have been incorporated into newer structures, such as the cathedral in Tirandar, built directly above one of the wells, and the castle of the sorcerer in Bandasak, built atop another.

### Mystery

Each well is precisely 26 kilometres from the next, and they are, with the exception of one well, placed in an exact circle with a precision that must have required very sophisticated methods of measurement. The well breaking the perfect pattern is "misplaced" by nearly a half a kilometre. Nowhere, geographically or manmade, is large or high enough that all these wells can be seen simultaneously with the naked eye. In today's Persaga, most inhabitants are completely unaware of the circle. They know only of one or a few individual wells.

### Solution

The solution to the mystery of the wells has been lost over time.

### Adventure Ideas

Why were these gigantic wells built? What is in the center of the circle? Why is one well misplaced—if the builders were as sophisticated as the architecture and measurements indicate, they should have been able to place the last well correctly also, shouldn't they? What would happen if the wells were restored, and a new well was constructed where the misplaced one should have been? What are the wells beneath the cathedral and the sorcerer's castle used for?

### The Heart of the Iannadin Ravine

#### General

The Iannadin ravine lies on the borders of the mighty Foshuad desert, and is an almost perfectly vertical ravine with nearly 100-metre high rock walls in some places. It is one of three parallel ravines that separate the desert from the vast Afra mountains, and it is due to its amazing centre that it is widely spoken of.

### Facts

At the centre of the Iannadin ravine, a previous culture has constructed a nearly

100-metre high and about 20-metre wide (gradually narrowing as it goes up) stone wall which completely shields the ravine on the west side. In this way, a dead end is created that is reached by entering the ravine from the east. Standing in the center of this blind alley is like standing within an open temple with the sky as the ceiling. The feeling of reverence is reinforced by the fact that every centimetre of the ravine's walls, and the constructed stone wall, is adorned with ornaments carved into the stone. People, animals, and mythological creatures swarm from the sandy floor of the ravine up to the heavens. To even try to estimate the number of unique statues is a Sisyphean labour, and local legends say that the one who can say exactly how many statues the ravine holds will have their greatest wish fulfilled by Ael the Almighty.

### Mystery

Who built the stone wall and what was its purpose?

### Solution

The heart of the Iannadin ravine was built by artificially leading all the smaller streams in the area into this ravine. The stone wall functioned as a dam, and slowly but surely, the water level rose in the ravine. After more than thirty years, the ravine was an enormous fresh water reservoir, and on the surface of this great sea, stonemasons worked on rafts. As the work progressed, the water level sank gradually, until the entire ravine was covered in its stone decorations.

### Adventure Ideas

- The player characters are commissioned by a wealthy merchant to find the answer to the ancient riddle of the exact number of statues in the ravine. But how can they be counted without interfering with the incredible number of taboos there are surrounding the site, as well as those who make pilgrimages to the ravine?
- The statues are now beginning to erode, after the centuries of weather and wind, and as this happens, the kingdom is beginning to suffer a number of incidents and accidents. The clergy confer, and decide that the statues must be renovated, each and every one. The task of organising this is open to anyone who feel compelled to do so, and the rewards will be tremendous.

## The Stylite Fortress of Gudjaran

### General

In the mountain regions separating the two rival kingdoms in southern Maipal stands the stylite fortress of Gudjaran. High above the ground level, atop several flat stone pillars, linked together with suspension bridges, is a defensive complex that has never been taken. It is said that he who controls the stylite fortress of Gudjaran holds the key to the entire region.

### Facts

The stylite fortress of Gudjaran is a gigantic defensive structure consisting of several separate but connected forts built on the tops of 22 individual 38-metre high, equally cylindrical sandstone pillars. The distance between the pillars varies between 7 and 32 metres, with an average of about 16 metres, and in total, the stylite fortress covers approximately 4000 square metres. The different forts are linked together with large drawbridges and suspension bridges along with myriad other communication and transportation lines that crisscross the entire fortress. The individual forts were built at different times, and they have used various materials to build structures of different architectural styles, but they consist overall of the same pale yellow sandstone that the pillars are made of. The control of the stylite fortress has alternated throughout history, but presently, the fortress is ruled by the religious warrior order of the Heatherfire.

### Mystery

From a distance, the stylite fortress of Gudjaran appears as if it were one of those impossible constructions. How could people ever have carved out such incredible pillars? How could they have been able to lift up to the tops of these pillars the enormous amounts of materials to build the fortress?

### Solution

It is difficult to imagine how people could have shaped nature after their own will in this way, and the amount of stone needed to be removed in order to achieve these free-standing pillars makes one dizzy just thinking about it. In the end, it is not so impossible after all. The sandstone pillars are natural Karst formations where weather, wind, and chemical erosion takes place over periods of hundreds of years, wearing away

the surrounding, more porous materials and thus creating these pillars of harder sandstone. The only thing the people did—and it is really no less impressive for that—was to systematically even out the pillars to near-perfect cylinders, and to flatten the tops to equal heights. The impression that these centuries of toil gives is that nothing is beyond human ability, and that is exactly what the engineers of the stylite fortress had in mind. The stone remnants from the gradual leveling of the pillars was used, bit by bit, to construct the mighty fortress.

## Adventure Idea

One of the two bickering rulers in the area around Gudjaran has decided to take control of the stylite fortress in order to once and for all tip the balance of power in her favour. She soon realises, however, that just as in the past, the fortress is not so easily taken by military power alone. Other, more flexible solutions will be needed. The player characters are hired to do just that, but not long after they have begun to come up with a solution, they are contacted by the leader of the rival kingdom, who has heard whispers of the plan, and he offers them a great reward if they will instead do the same job, but for him. The warrior order of the Heatherfire has spies in both kingdoms, and it is only a matter of time before the player characters' mission reaches their ears.

## The Stepped Pyramids of Belsomparat

### General

Belsomparat is a modern megacity with skyscrapers of steel and reinforced concrete/gigantic ancient boulders/nano-joined biomass. Stretched out over countless square miles is a population of millions and millions of people in a bustling metropolis. Within this city are the most corrupt slums and most luxurious palaces. Public transport winds its way through the area like a gigantic spider web, and the aether is filled with communications on all frequencies and channels, both technological and metaphysical.

### Facts

Right in the centre of Belsomparat are 17 stepped pyramids in a variety of sizes. The largest competes with the highest skyscrapers at 170 metres, and the smallest reaches a mere 40 metres above the ground. The average height is around 90 metres, and the size of the bases varies with the height. The



houses surrounding the pyramids pop up like weeds, filling every surface right up to the edge of the pyramids, but never farther than that. The pyramids are completely free from human influence. No extensions are visible anywhere, no fences, no antennae or flashing billboards. The street grid and the expanded transportation system has been adapted to flow around the pyramids, and no tunnels go beneath them, despite the logistical problem their existence creates. The 17 stepped pyramids are untouched.

### Mystery

Why do the pyramids remain untouched after such a long period of human development? Why are the pyramids not adapted to fit the current socio-economic factors? Why have the pyramids not been torn down to create a luxury palace for some robber baron? Why are the pyramids not full of visitors from near and far, climbing their every surface and admiring their ancient charm while eating pyramid ice cream from nearby ice cream trucks? And why, WHY, do the people of Belsomparat—known for their constant talking—never speak of the pyramids?

### Facts

It is obvious to anyone travelling to the city that the pyramids geographically dominate Belsomparat. Despite this, the people of the city live as if the pyramids do not exist. Strangers to the city always marvel over the fantastic pyramids that they could not read about in any guidebook or brochure. They

cannot understand how anyone can avoid speaking of them, or why anyone would even want to talk about them. But strangely enough, they always leave the city without a single photo of them, and when they tell their friends back home of Belsomparat, they mention the lovely weather, the inexpensive handicrafts, and the picturesque Potala river that runs through the old part of the city. And nothing else.

## Adventure Idea

The player characters have been connected to the security department of an extremely popular entertainment program. An adventure show, known throughout the world, will finally be set in the city of Belsomparat. On foot and in the air, the competitors will move through the city performing tasks along the way. As always, the show is used to advertise the city and the country as much as possible, with many sweeping images of the city's beautiful skyline. The characters' job is to see to it that the recording continues without disturbances from nearby fans or desperate fortune hunters. This time, however, the filming is having problems. The camera equipment is constantly breaking down, and the person responsible for both A and B photography is behaving progressively and alarmingly more bizarre each day.

## FINAL WORDS

We hope this has inspired you in the creation of your world, to help make it rich and vibrant, enlivening the adventures soon to take place there. Good luck!

# LEGACY OF THE APOCALYPSE

# THE CHAMBER

TEXT CHRISTOFFER KRÄMER

ILLUSTRATION LUKAS THELIN

Imagine there is a force/product/entity in the universe so destructive/horrible/malevolent that it potentially has the power to destroy the world as you know it – not just now, but also so far into the future that you can't even imagine what kind of people will live then. Imagine that you somehow have managed to contain this threat – bottle it up, box it in and keep it under locks. What would you do to discourage people to release it again, long after you were gone, long after everyone that remembered were gone, long after the memory of your whole society had vanished from the world? How would you keep the nosy, power hungry, stupid, clumsy or just plain unlucky humankind from actively or accidentally enter into the *chamber*?

*The Chamber* is an article that studies this dilemma. In one way it's a hands on discussion on how to contain something lethal and discourage anyone from breaking that containment. In another way it's a philosophical discussion on how language and culture changes so much over time that it's almost impossible for us to even imagine who our future descendants will be – and what they will be able to do.

Finally it examines the question if you, as a game master, ever could introduce such an element and then manage to dissuade your players from examining it, once they knew of it. They are players after all.

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**I**magine you belong to a nomadic culture from the area now known as Chad. You have just experienced something horrible – something that nearly wiped out your entire clan and its culture, and that something has the power to do it again. Fortunately, you were able to limit the damage and you have collected the source of all the misery into a few sealed urns. But what will you do now? You have no way of knowing how to destroy this power, but you also know you cannot allow these urns to be opened ever again. They must be preserved in a location so secure that they can be safe from breaking, whether through accident or act of nature. At the same time, people must be warned. Not just people in the surrounding area, but also strangers passing through, as well as future generations. This presents new problems: How can we warn people so that we can be certain they will listen? Can we be sure that a warning of great peril written in your language and iconography, from your point of view of the world, is enough to prevent people from searching for this source? What if it instead entices people who believe your warnings are simply made to scare away looters and treasure hunters?

Now, take a step back and consider how such a culture—likely an animistic/polytheistic hunter-gatherer people with recent vague influences of Christianity—might express a warning about death and destruction. What types of images would be carved into the walls to alert people?

Finally, imagine that you are a modern archaeologist performing excavations in the area. Perhaps you find a cave, sealed with an enormous boulder, and filled with images and inscriptions written in a language you do not understand. What sorts of pictures would potentially keep you from further excavation?

The dilemma above was perhaps best illustrated in Michael Madsen's documentary *Into Eternity*. In the documentary, the source of all misery is nuclear waste, the urns are lead-reinforced containers, and the cave is a specially created underground chamber in northern Finland, but the ultimate problem is the same. How can we keep people, with all their curiosity, stupidity, and potential wickedness, away from a place for timespans as long as 100,000 years? How can we even imagine what type of world, culture, and creatures will be wandering the earth after such a long time, when most of the knowledge we have is less than 5000 years old? This is an impossible task, and is therefore extremely fascinating. This type of riddle can play a natural part in any type of post-apocalyptic campaign. So, here follows a short description of such a place, with a number of questions for the game master to ponder.

## THE CHAMBER

### The Discovery

The chamber is found by chance because of an unexpected change, large and impossible to predict or prevent. For example:

1. A volcano erupts and creates a crater more than a kilometer wide.
2. An asteroid collides with another, is broken into two parts, and one is heading straight toward an inhabited solar system.
3. Mad King Kung Tzoltov III enlists his court magicians to drain the entire Hadorni Sound.

### Questions

Where can you ever hide something so that it can never be found again? How deep must you dig to keep future cultures from digging even deeper? How well can today's cultures imagine the changes brought about by the future's science and technology? And most importantly, what guesses are made by a people when they attempt to predict the future, and what consequences will those guesses have?

## The Gate

The entrance to the chamber is sealed with a gate designed to keep visitors out—it is both reinforced/locked/barricaded, and there are signs and symbols warning people to stay away. For example:

1. The gate consists of several doors, each constructed of different materials and equipped with various kinds of locks. The front gate is adorned with a number of illustrations of upside-down torches and the word “άδης” appears several times.
2. The gate is impossible to differentiate from the rest of the asteroid – only by scanning it multiple times is it possible to find the apparent entrance to the tremendous cavity.
3. Outside the descending entrance is an enormous block of stone measuring more than 40 square meters and weighing thousands of tons. It is difficult to even imagine what would have been needed to put the stone in place. On top, the stone contains rows of text in a number of unknown languages and many symbols are repeated over and over again: a falcon, a pair of closed eyes, and a half-moon.

### Questions

Do you want to hide the entrance so that no one will ever stumble across it, or do you want to create an entrance that frightens people away? How do you create an entrance that will frighten future cultures/species/intelligences that do not necessarily share one's own frame of reference? And most importantly, what does a culture decide will be generally applicable warnings when they're sitting and speculating about the future?

## The Structure

The chamber is clearly built with the idea that it should last a very long time, both with regard to material and architecture.

It is most likely designed like a Russian matryoshka doll, where once you manage to get through one layer, there is always yet another layer just inside. And with each passing layer, the attempts to warn people away become more and more desperate. For example:

1. The walls of the sloping chamber are covered with paintings. People walking in a straight line down the corridors. The farther in they go, the more their bodies begin to be destroyed. At the final door, the people have turned into skeletons lying in a pile.
2. The asteroid is structured much like boxes within boxes. Each new layer is pressurized with a new gas or filled with a different fluid (all corrosive and destructive for anything or anyone). The materials used in the various layers are also rare metals and alloys.
3. The space surrounding the central chamber is built like a great labyrinth. At each juncture is a skeleton of an animal molded into the floor. The doorposts of the central chamber are shaped like half-moons and above them is the image of a falcon.

### Questions

When creatures have already penetrated into areas they should not be, what can then be done to turn their curiosity into fear or caution? Are there any images of death and destruction that will be understood fully as a warning, or will these all be interpreted as attempts to scare off visitors that in turn trigger greater curiosity? Primarily, how great is a culture's imagination when it comes to predicting the frames of reference for people in the future?

## The Central Chamber and the Ark

Farthest in, behind the strongest door, is the heart of the chamber, and here is where you will find the ark or container that has been kept hidden from the world. What can be done to deter those who have gotten this far? Examples:

1. The central chamber is made from once piece of molded copper and it is only possible to enter by cutting through the metal. Inside is a small chest surrounded by statues of people with clear expressions of terror, trying to protect themselves from the chest.
2. The central chamber is made of a material that emits extremely high doses of radiation. When the chamber is opened, holographic projections are activated, and these show beings (and mechanical constructions) of various types who open a metallic cylinder, and all of these beings are instantly obliterated.
3. In the center of the labyrinth is a stone chest surrounded by 99 blank stone slabs. If anyone sets foot on any of the slabs, they are immediately teleported to one of 99 other places on the planet, some as far as thousands of miles away.

### Questions

Is it worth it to kill those who try to solve the chamber's mystery? How many prevented deaths is it worth, in such a case? It is a question of simple mathematics: Is it worth it to kill a million people if five million people can be saved? And finally, is the entire operation of creating, hiding, and protecting this place the thing that makes it more likely to be found? Will some form of minimal oral tradition live on (for hundreds or even thousands of years) about a place that requires such incredible protection?

### ABOUT CULTURES

In the previous article – *Long Have I Desired to Look upon the Kings of Old* – I wrote an article on how to create ancient, extinct cultures whose ruins remain in the worlds of today's adventurers, and how these cultures could often consist of several layers, like an onion, with garbled languages, symbols, and colours. If you want to create a post-apocalyptic campaign, many of the tips in this article may prove useful – particularly if you decide to create an adventure that is based

on the concept of the apocalypse's deadly legacy (with some form of dangerous/lethal/cataclysmic object that has been hidden away in order to protect future generations).

Above all, as a game master, one should definitely take a moment to ponder the cultural frames of reference – from what type of culture did those who built the chamber and sent the warning come from? An orthodox Christian emperor in Byzantium would probably use a completely different type of language and symbolism (e.g., the Book of Revelation, the devil, etc.), than would an ancient Norse chieftain (e.g., references to Niefelheim or Hel, perhaps).

## THE RAVAGES OF TIME

Just as it is extremely difficult to predict thousands or even tens of thousands of years into the future and attempt to determine what people must potentially protect themselves from, as well as how to communicate this danger to future relatives, it is also equally difficult to know whether the thing we are worried about will even pose a problem in the future. It is far from certain that the thing within the chamber will be dangerous for those who open it, since things that are dangerous to some species can be harmless to another. It could very well be that the biological weapon designed in a laboratory, and then hidden in shame, will be completely neutralized due to some new scientific development just a hundred years later. This too is something the game master should consider.

## CREATING AND PLACING A CHAMBER IN YOUR POST-APOCALYPTIC CAMPAIGN

To create a chamber and use it in your post-apocalyptic campaign can be an interesting test for the players. There is, after all, a built-in curiosity/urge to discover/problem-solving mechanism in most roleplaying games, and an unspoken contract between players and game master in most groups that says, "The game master does not introduce anything that does not have some kind of purpose." Allowing the players to find something that was meant to be buried for all time, and covering it with all manner of warnings – written from the viewpoint of the past, with all its cultural references – is a great way to test how far the players are prepared to push the boundaries of their characters. After all, why would the game master allow them to find such a chamber if it was not actually meant to be opened?

Good luck!



# WEREWOLVES OF DACIA

TEXT KENNETH HITE  
ILLUSTRATION LUKAS THELIN

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**"According to Strabo, the original name of the Dacians was Daoi. A tradition preserved by Hesychius informs us that daos was the Phrygian word for 'wolf'."**

– Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis: The Vanishing God*

In an earlier Age of the world, twin brothers were born, the heirs to a throne. A usurper buried their mother alive under the Earth and ordered them killed, but they had been stolen away by a kindly shepherd who left them in the forest to hide. There, they were suckled by the Wolf Goddess, Luperca, who adopted the boys as her own. When they grew to manhood, they slew the usurper and freed their people. They decided to build a city of their own in Tyrrhenia, where the River Tiber was narrow enough to cross and wide enough to travel on, on good ground ringed by seven hills. But during a quarrel over which hill to build on, one brother slew the other in a fit of rage.

If the murderer had prayed for forgiveness, and held games to honor his brother's death, the story might have turned out differently. But he did no such thing, and claimed the city as his own, alone. The murdered brother sank into the Earth and cried out to his mother for revenge. His foster-mother, Luperca, heard his call, and came. Luperca wrapped him in a wolf skin and carried him to the gates of Avernus, the Underworld, ruled by Orcus the Devourer. She bought him passage through the Underworld, and brought him a thousand miles away to a land ringed by mountains, north of Thrace. She promised him not just a city of his own, but a whole country, and she gave him a new name: Zalmoxis, from the Thracian word meaning "animal skin." He emerged from a cave and the people of that land worshipped him as a god and listened

to his teachings. For 54 years, he taught them certain secret arts, and the ways of war, and to venerate the Wolf as their own mother. He called them "Daoi," meaning "wolves," and his country Dacia.

Then Zalmoxis decided to take a bride. But not just any bride; his wolfish nature became consumed and fascinated with Bendis, goddess of the Moon. Again, he called to his mother; again, she came. That day, Luperca hunted the Moon, driving it into the path of the Sun and freezing it in an eclipse. Then she leaped up and swallowed Bendis, bringing the goddess in her jaws to the cave of Bucegi, where her son Zalmoxis waited. Luperca told Zalmoxis to wait there for her return, and keep Bendis safe until then. Luperca took the ring of sunlight from around the moon's shadow. For nine days, she smelted it into white gold, to make a Ring that could bind the Moon forever in marriage, and give its wielder power over the Sun as well. But before she could bring the Ring to her son, Zalmoxis' wolfish nature won out and he ravished Bendis in the cavern beneath the Mountain of Kogaion. At that moment, the full moon over Kogaion turned blood red for three days. When the blood drained from the moon's face, the moon stayed full and bright. It has been full and bright over Dacia ever since then, for over 700 years. The wolf-warriors Zalmoxis had trained took their new bestial forms and stayed in them, undying lords of an endless night under a silver moon.

The sight of the moon pinned in place both

day and night, neither rising nor setting, over Kogaion, unnerved those who saw it at first. But for centuries, as Zalmoxis' wolves warred among themselves for primacy, the countries of men could forget that the moon once rose and set. The Dacian packs remained behind Isarnodur, the Iron Gate at the entrance to Dacia where the Danuvius runs swift. The Greek cities warred with each other, and with Persia. The Persians conquered the East, and then Alexander conquered the Persians. He brought together Greek philosophers and Persian magi, Babylonian astronomers and Hebrew sages, in his great city of Alexandria-in-Egypt to calculate a way to restore the Moon, to find hints or reports of the Ring that could free Bendis and the world of men. During Alexander's reign, he searched for the Ring in all corners of his empire. He died of poison before he, or they, could succeed. Then, 54 years after Alexander's death, things changed again. The curse of Zalmoxis, the wedding-gift of Luperca, began to spread.

Over the Carpathian Mountains around Dacia, and Isarnodur, the moon stayed dark for 54 more years. Then a sliver, then a crescent, then a half, then full, all for 54 years, as gray and watery daylight showed itself while the sun crossed the sky. Farther out, in the lands of Moesia and Dardania, and in the cities of the Getae on the coast of the Black Sea, there was a greater semblance of daylight and the full moon lasted only 27 days. Still farther out, in a ring of grassland running through Pannonia and arcing all the way



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east to Sarmatia, the full moon lasted only its accustomed three days, and only the tarnish of the blue sky by day – and the unmoving, unsetting moon – betrayed anything amiss to the eye.

But many still sensed something of the matter, deep in their bones and blood. Those who bore any of the marks of the werewolf, inside or outside – born on the seventh day, a single eyebrow, born under a birth caul, fingers of equal length, crossed the path of a werewolf, mark of the pentagram on the hand or body, drunk from a wolf-print or seen an Evil Eye, harboring wolfish thoughts of greed and lust and hunger – became wolflike killers under the full moon. Some changed shape, others grew their fur on the inside and stayed cunning. All such killed, in frenzy or in ambush or by stealth. When one in five, or even one in seven, people in a country are cursed to become killers for 27 days – it frays the bonds of merchant and temple alike. Cities fell to riot, hills to vendetta.

Past the three-day ring, as the full moon over Isarnodur waned to gibbous, the effect worsened again 216 years ago, and spread. Now, the full moon lasts only eight hours in Thessalonica, but it recurs every three days. In Pergamum and Dalmatia, the full moon lasts for barely an hour, but recurs every eight hours: thrice daily, a fifth of the city plots the death of the rest. In Athens, the full moon's wolf madness lasts but six minutes, but it returns every hour. The curse finally vitiates itself in Aquilea and Ancona, at the north end of the Adriatic: every six minutes, those possessed of lycanthropy become murderous beasts for forty seconds. In such countries, civilization becomes impossible; packs of murderous cannibals prey on wandering families, or go mad with feral hunger. They serve only Orcus, and no other gods, though these Orcii yet fear the name Zalmoxis. These are the lands of Umbraea, the lands of the Shadow.

**"The martial ritual designation triumphed at the moment of the greatest political and military expansion of the kingdom. It was the triumph of the young 'wolves.' Julius Caesar had well realized the danger represented by this new military power, and he was preparing to attack the 'wolves' of the Danube when he was assassinated."**

– Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis: The Hidden God*

Such have matters stood for centuries. The City on the Tiber waxed to rule all Italy, then waned as the moon over the Carpathians waxed. Carthage broke it, perhaps, wresting a victory at Zama, a gift from their gods fed

on holocausts of human sacrifice. Bands of Germani, driven south by hordes of Orcii, sacked the City. The great soldier-consul Marius broke them and pushed them out of Italy, but the damage was done. If the City had ever had a name, it lost it then: it became Urbis Tyrrhis, simply the City in Tyrrhenia. Its consuls tore the City apart themselves in civil war, brother against brother for fifty years as the werewolves poured out of Dacia and conquered Moesia and Pannonia and Sarmatia, Thrace and Illyria and Noricum, under Burebista, their new great king. Only Spartacus' army of gladiators, cutting their way north out Italy and out of slavery, could or would stand and fight the Orcii and werewolves. And even then, Spartacus was killed, and his Spartaci were left as men without allegiance, ranging across the West protecting the free lands as best they can.

Mithradates of Pontus held the Dacians back in the East, with mighty herbs and elixirs, and with the powers of the magi and armies of Amazons behind him. Even Decaeneus, Burebista's sorcerer supreme, could not break Mithradates' cohorts, fed as they were on moly and garlic and wolvesbane. In the West, a new threat arose as the moon came to fullness over Isarnodur. Cruach, a druid corrupted by dark studies, opened the way to the underworld Avernus in Gaul, whistled a horde of demons out, and created his own Orcii loyal to his runes and geas. Only an army under the City's brilliant consul Julius Caesar kept the Averni from sacking the City in their turn. He defeated his rivals, unified the lands of the City, and traveled to Egypt to seek an alliance with Alexander's successors against Dacia.

Decaeneus, some say, is an avatar of Zalmoxis himself, a shadow walking the upper world while his body stays trapped in the midst of his rape of Bendis, searching for the Ring that will free him and grant him power over all the Earth. Whether he or Burebista truly rule in Sarmizegetusa, the royal and holy city of Dacia, is unknown to mortal men. Burebista commands the armies, but Caesar and Mithradates broke those armies. Then Decaeneus' paid assassins slew the consul Caesar; his worm-tongued conspirators betrayed Mithradates to an ambitious son. But Caesar and Mithradates had held out just long enough. The moon over Isarnodur began to wane, and only those werewolves who could change their own skins through charms or power of blood could count on the might of Luperca in battle anywhere beyond the Carpathians.

The Alans, a Sarmatian tribe from north of the Caucasus, rode west and into the seas of grass in Pannonia, staking a claim to the three-day belt between the Dacian conquests

and Umbraea. They wear bracelets of cunningly chased gold, mined by myrmidons in Hyperborea and wrought by Amazon witches to channel wolfish thoughts away. They carry silver-tipped spears and arrows, sovereign proof against werewolves since Alexander's day. The riders of Alania are riven by clannishness and pride, but welcome warriors from all lands into their ranks – the City's general Lucius Artorius Castus, exiled by the consul Caracalla, has risen to high position among them.

Caracalla has driven many good men out of the City with his erratic ways and increasing paranoia. The other lords of the West – the consul of Hispania, the vergobret of Belgica, the ard rhi of Prydain – distrust his word and keep their own armies close against attack from Avernus or the City. In the East, Caracalla has thrown the weight of the City behind the solar cult of Helios-Ge-Baal, despite the clear insanity of its theocrat Basianos, lord of Syria, who believes himself to be a reincarnation of Alexander and rightful king of Egypt. Needless to say, the current Ptolemy and Cleopatra disagree forcibly; scholars from the City find it harder to get access to the Library in Alexandria as a result. Pontus, Armenia, and the Amazons remain tight allies against Dacia and the City alike; Carthage and the pirates of Umbraea wait like coursing hounds for the call from Decaeneus.

And yet there is reason to hope. In this, the 972nd year since the founding of the City, the moon over Isarnodur turned dark. Only the mightiest of werewolves can raven in the Carpathians and the coast; a way into Dacia cracks open for the bold for the next 54 years. Admittedly, there are still the marches of Moesia or Dardania to pass through, or the monstrous tides and storms of the Black Sea to weather. (The nearness of the moon makes the sea dangerous in any phase.) There are Burebista's human armies: conscripts and slaves of a hundred tribes, to be sure, but a quarter million of them stand guard even when no werewolf watches. One cannot simply walk into Dacia. But a brave fellowship, with a keen stratagem or the right magical protections, could strike into Dacia and bring back vital knowledge – perhaps even a clue to the whereabouts of the Ring. Indeed, every lead must be followed up, every Dacian black codex sifted for clues, every weak spot of the enemy destroyed now, say the savants of Alexandria. For if this opportunity passes, then in 219 years the moon will once more shine full over the Iron Gate. At that time, the curse of Zalmoxis will expand once again as it did before. And the City will fall forever, the Orcii flood across the lands of West and East alike, and the world plunge into a great Dark Age, lit only by an ever-full, ever-shining werewolf moon.



"The Vulture Cataphracts are commissioned to fly about the country and bring before the king any stranger they may find, so of course they arrested us and brought us before him. When he had looked us over and drawn his conclusions from our clothes, he said:

'Then you are Greeks, are you, strangers?' and when we assented, 'Well, how did you get here, with so much air to cross?' We told him all, and he began and told us about himself: that he too was a human being, Endymion by name, who had once been abducted from our country in his sleep, and on coming there had been made king of the land. He said that his country was the Moon that shines down on us.'

— Lucian of Samosata, *A True History* (c. 150 A.D.)

In this age, the wars of men and werewolves hold the stage, with the ravening Orcii trapped somewhere between by their cursed appetites. But there are other beings in the world: tree-wights in the great alder forests of the North, stony ghillan in the deserts of the South, myrmidons in Hyperborea and sirens in Libya. Too, solitary beasts such as the phoenix, unicorn, basilisk, and kraken know much and speak some of that to their chosen — or fated — heroes. But three other races may yet have some part to play in these affairs, and all seek the Ring for their own ends.

The first such race are the Selenites, the inhabitants of the Moon come to Earth when Zalmoxis captured their home and held it fast. They are tall and bald, with ears like leaves and beautiful eyes they detach from their sockets to seek out beauty and horror wherever they find them. They have a hollow abdomen instead of guts and stomach, subsisting only on liquids: dew for a preference, but they will taste stronger stuff. Some Selenites grow lustful or angry on Earthly wine, or thirsty for human

blood. Their bones and frames are light; the skilled among them can fly on wind currents with a carefully held cape or spread toga. Rich and exalted Selenites wear glass clothing; the poor make do with bronze or copper, worked like wet paint by the Selenites' arts. Their armor is hardened, lacquered shells and husks of beans and nuts they grow stronger than steel; their weapons are the sword, javelin, and lance. They brought down with them from the Moon their three-headed vulture steeds, and their fleas-of-burden larger than any elephant. When they die, they turn to smoke and flow upward to the Moon to dwell there as fog. The Selenites seek the Ring to free Bendis and the Moon, that they may return to their lunar palaces. For now, they live on mountain tops where the cold, thin air reminds them of their captive home. King Endymion keeps his court atop the Alps; other Selenite nobles rule along the Pyrenees, the Caucasus, and the Mountains of the Moon in far Aethiopia.

The second race are the Fauns, blend of goat and man dwelling deep under the roots of

# TOP 5

## PLACES THE RING MIGHT BE

Where's the Ring? That's up to you. But here are some guesses that might be true in your game.

### A Dragon Hoard

Although there are dragons in Libya and in Prydain, the Ring is surely in the hoard of the greatest dragon of all: Ladon, who guards the Golden Apples of the West and the Golden Fleece of the East. Ladon knows the secret places of the Earth, where uttermost East and West meet. There, he keeps his greatest treasures, heaped up about him. Should one disappear, cities would burn as he searched for it.

### Hyperborea

The ring is Apollo's property, as it was made from the golden rim of his Sun's chariot wheel. He keeps it in his temple at the top of the world, guarded by griffins until he can find out how to restore this stolen shard of his power.

### India

Everything else is in India: manticores, unicorns, people with dog heads or faces in their bellies, empires of elephants and valleys of jewels. Why not the Ring?

### At the Bottom of the Sea

The Ring lies fallen in the muck at the bottom of the Black Sea. Or some other sea. Or in the belly of Cetus, the great Whale. Get your *Odyssey* on; add mer-folk and Deep Ones.

### My Pocketses

The Ring is somewhere that nobody recognizes it: lying on a merchant's table in Gades, or in the ear of a spoiled princess in Petra. It might lie neglected in the corner of a burnt-out villa in Corinth, or sit wedged on the finger of a eunuch slave in Capri. Tracing it involves looking for tiny omens, and maybe for people the werewolves never seem to attack.

Europe's forests. Short, hairy, and mercurial, the fauns spend their time composing eerie musics and dancing in wild abandon. Fauns have horns and hooves, but (except when fighting for mates) fight with axes, slings, and sickles. They are surprisingly strong and wiry, and agile into the bargain. Some warlike fauns have begun wearing Selenite armor; others wear cunningly tooled scale mail of leather boiled hard. They know all the arts of every plant and herb, from mandragora to dandelion to fly agaric, and are gifted healers and warlocks. Any spell cast in song or scent, a faun first made. Zalmoxis' passage under the Earth drove many of them above ground for the first time; others had lived long in the great woods of Italy, Germania, and Gaul. They command no kingdom of their own, although some German tribes have interbred so much with fauns that, for example, the sons of the Quadi stand a head and a half shorter than most men, while men and women of the Andori sport delicate, curling blue horns. The Fauns seek the Ring not for the moon but for the sun: with its power, they can grow their plants in all weathers, and extend their forest demesnes throughout the wastes, or even all across the world of men.

The third race are little-known and less seen. They dwelt in the islands of Prydain when it was Albion, and even before that. They still dwell in those islands, in burrows and barrows under hills and behind thorn hedges, harvesting their weeds and strange fruits for their feasts. They can eat anything, but prefer their own food, cooked their own way, with their own flavors. They drink their ale and mead from bell-shaped beakers, and inhale gums and incense in pipes. Despite their love of such intoxicants, they cannot be harmed by poisons of any kind, and cannot become werewolves. They are called Coblyn, or Holbytlan, words meaning "dwellers in holes" to the Britons and the Belgae. They are small, even smaller than some fauns, and their feet are covered with scales like those of snakes. Their eyes are small and narrow, snakes' eyes; their arms are slightly too long for their size, and their legs slightly too short. Some Holbytlan paint or tattoo themselves with woad, but no matter how brightly painted, if a Holbytlan wishes to hide it takes the eyes of a Selenite to find him. Their scaled feet move utterly silently over rock, earth, and foliage, and can cling to the most unlikely spots in the walls of a cave or ruin. Their weapons are the short bow, the dagger, and the lariat, although they do not go to war as a rule. In the hands of a Coblyn, any stone can become a dagger or an arrowhead, though flint or obsidian is still best. They value steel bodkins, though, and happily use them if available. The Holbytlan seek the Ring as a trophy from both Sun and Moon; they wish to use its magic to make

themselves completely invisible from both. Then they can do as they like in Prydain, no matter how the Britons there press and breed.

"Then Morgoth of Huan's fate bethought long-rumoured, and in dark he wrought. Fierce hunger-haunted pack he had that in wolvish form and flesh were clad, but demon spirits dire did hold; and ever wild their voices rolled in cave and mountain where they housed and endless snarling echoes roused."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lay of Leithian*

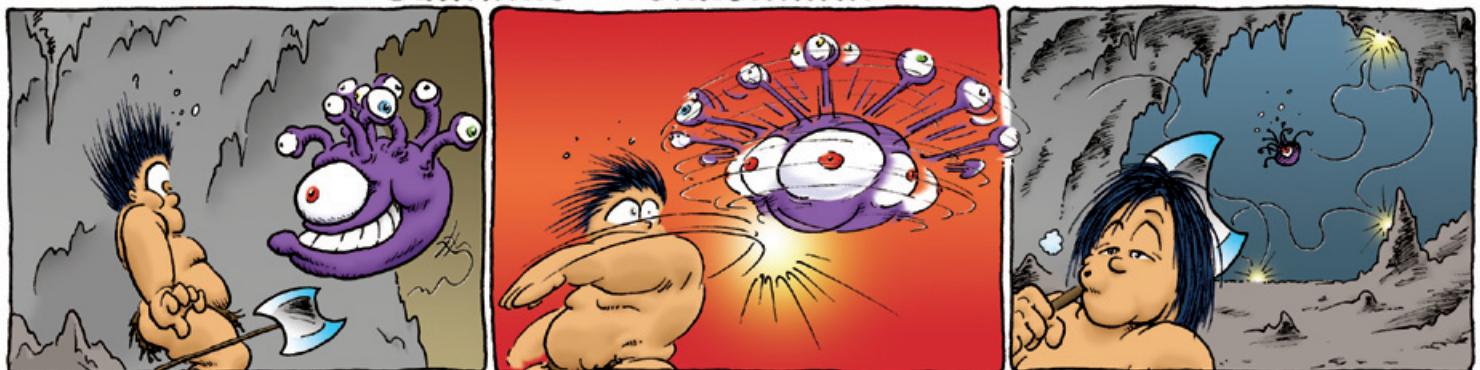
By now it should come as no surprise that this setting is a riff on Tolkien's Middle-Earth, warped through a classical sensibility with a hefty helping of werewolves. As such, you should be able to play it using anything from *Legend* to *D&D* to *The One Ring* to *Eon*. The only tricky part might be adapting the various races: the Orcii can just be orcs with a splash of zombie, and the Holbytlan a simple stew of halflings, kobolds, tieflings, and troglodytes depending on what races you have to work with. The Selenites and the Fauns split up the standard elf and dwarf signifiers in rather different ways, but it shouldn't be too hard to sort out. Most Fauns have some sort of druid-like gifts; most Selenites can fly and detach their eyes for "spy eye" clairvoyance.

You may also want to reverse the moon orientation — I left "full moon makes werewolves" because that's what our modern myth demands, but it almost seems more logical that they would flourish in the new moon, when Greek and Roman myth insisted such dark magics worked. The period of the full moon (or whichever phase you select) increases by cubes farther into Dacia from the Alans' three-day zone: Dacia proper will be under a full moon for 157,464 years, and in the vault where Zalmoxis and Bendis are trapped by his rape, the moon is "full" for 3.9 quadrillion years! No wonder time stopped. On the outward side of Alania, the length of the full moon period drops off by one-ninth each time: 8 hours, then 53 minutes, then 5.9 minutes, then 39.5 seconds. (I liked the feel of that pattern better than with cube roots, but feel free to change it if you value smooth curves more than I.) If you don't have the Roman calendar conversion in your head, the year is 219 A.D. Although it's pretty clearly a nationalist product rather than a purely archaeological one, I recommend Ion Grumeza's history *Dacia: Land of Transylvania: Cornerstone of Ancient Eastern Europe* if you can find it for plenty more on weird barbarians, Zalmoxis the Deathless God, and the great and final war between the two sons of the wolf.

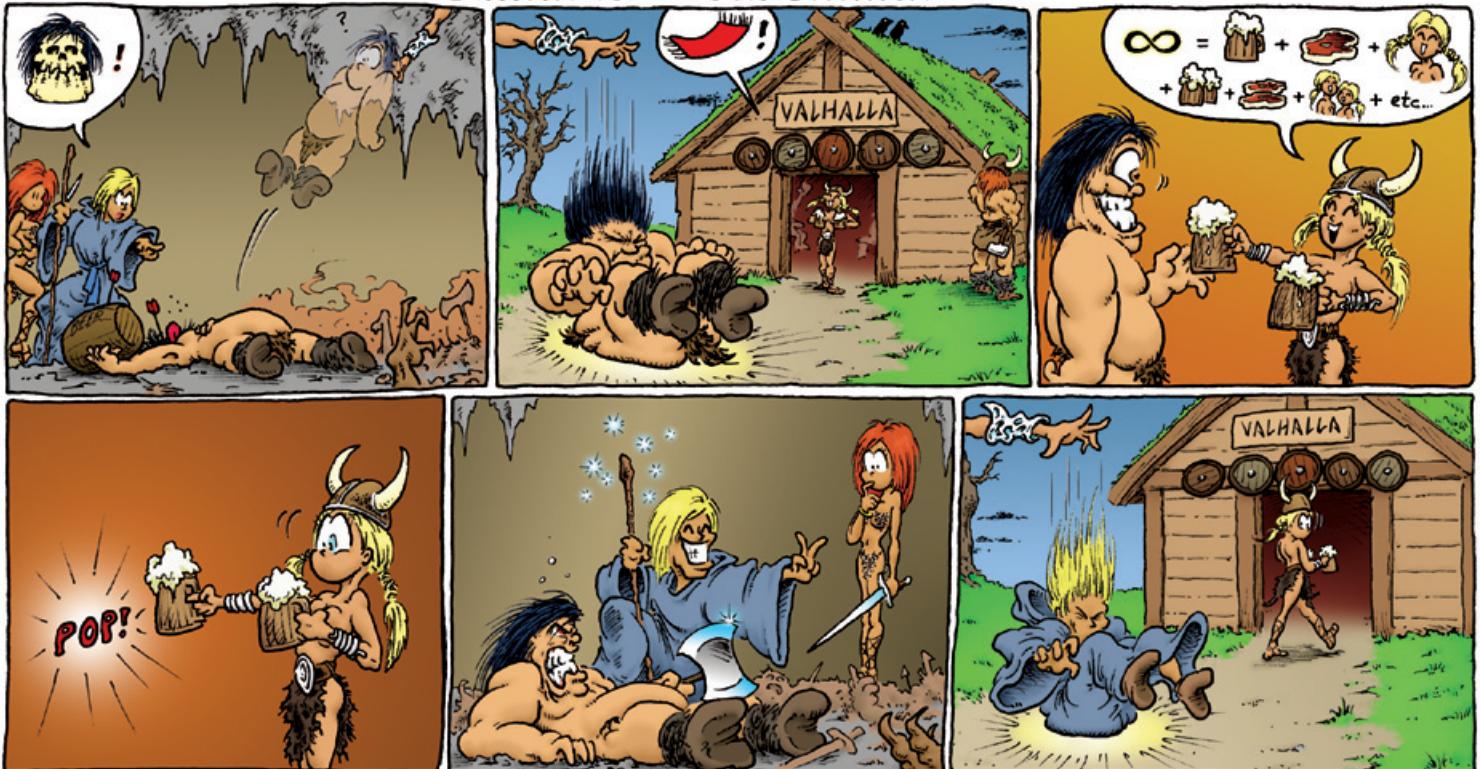
**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** VS. MEDUSA



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** LOING AND BEHOLDING



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** DEPARTS



From an idea by Krister Sundelin



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# MASTER YOUR STYLE

**HOW TO IDENTIFY AND CONTROL YOUR GAMEMASTER STYLE**

TEXT THOMAS ALLVIN

ILLUSTRATION LUKAS THELIN

A good way to develop yourself as a gamemaster is to identify your own style. No two gamemasters are alike, they all have their unique way of designing scenarios, describing settings and events, and steering the game forward. If you have been a GM for the same group of players for a long period of time, they will have started to recognize your specific "GMing Style", and consequently form a number of assumptions about how the in-game reality works when you are at the helm.

## SOME EXAMPLES

- Most NPC's are dishonest and unreliable and always try to trick or mislead the PC's in different ways.
- The PC's can shoot their way through most adventures, even non-action scenarios based on detective work or diplomatic intrigue, as long as they are persistent or reckless, and have brought enough fire-power.
- All bad guys, no matter how evil, are acting rationally in pursuit of well-defined objectives and are thus open for rational arguments, if only the PC's can find the right ones.
- The PC's never start the adventure with enough knowledge, and must therefore start by collecting information and intelligence.

As you can see from these random examples there are almost an endless number of ways for a GM to, consciously or unconsciously, set his or her own mark on a gaming world. These marks are both an advantage and a disadvantage.

It's an advantage since the GMing style gives the game world a certain consistency that makes it seem more real, allowing players to make assumptions how the setting works. Rules,

conventions and consistency permits a degree of pseudo-reality in an imaginary world.

It's a disadvantage since the players can use their knowledge of your style to predict what is going to happen in an adventure. They will soon learn which type of NPC they can trust, when a plot twist is to be expected and that their arch enemy is waiting behind the double doors straight ahead, not behind any of the smaller doors on the side. By detecting the small signals that you subconsciously emit during the game, the gamers will know when an action scene is coming up, when it's advisable to search a room for hidden objects or when they should look over their shoulders. It's similar to when a movie audience can hear from the musical score that the monster is about to show up. Another consequence of certain styles is that they might promote certain behaviors that are not very healthy in a longer-term perspective.

It's therefore quite useful to identify your own GMing style. This will make it possible for you, at chosen moments, to break your own conventions thus creating more interesting and unpredictable adventures; whilst also fixing those GM behaviors that have an adverse effect on the game as a whole. To illustrate, I will go through some common ways in which a specific GMing style can influence the in-game reality.

## DOCTOR LIVINGSTONE, I PRESUME?

In movies, the plot is at times driven forward by "dramatically correct coincidences". Two old acquaintances bump into each other on the street in a city of 10 million inhabitants, the secret agent infiltrates the enemy headquarters just in time to overhear a secret meeting, and the jedi learner crashes his ship just a few hundred meters from the jedi master's condo.

Does "dramatically correct coincidences" play an important role in your scenarios? Disregard the coincidence that in many cases sets the plot in motion: the PC's are drinking beer at the inn just when the mayor enters to search for "a few good men", the PC's happen to witness when the heir to the throne is kidnapped etc. The key question is if also the rest of the plot is driven forward by these kinds of coincidences, or if it is mostly progresses by the rational decisions of the PC's and their adversaries. In other words: will the PC's randomly bump into someone that can tell them where the kidnappers are hiding out, or will they have to find their own way there (while the kidnappers try to throw them off track).

If your scenarios are nothing but a sequence of random events that you conjure up in order to create exiting action and suspense, there is a risk that the gamers stop behaving in a rational way, at least in a long-term strategic sense (they might still behave rationally in each separate situation). If the gamers know that the main bad guy will sooner or later make a dramatic entrance, they will stop searching for him. On the other hand, if the adventure is only driven forward by the rational actions of the different parties, then there is the potential that the gameplay becomes a bit cold and sterile. After all, your normal everyday life is different from a game of chess, since your reality is affected by different unexpected events that happen seemingly for no reason.

Rationally minded players might also try to avoid risks through careful planning, which of course takes away suspense and drama. Another consequence might be that the players accidentally choose the "wrong" way, away from the adventure, thereby suspending the suspense and drama by mistake. To put it in concrete terms: how long would you let the PC's stake out a building where they think that the terrorists will strike next, according to a tip that only you know is false?

The solution is to try to find a middle road. The main plot of the adventure should in most cases be driven forward by logic and the actions by the players and their antagonists, but you should also make sure to have

a couple of exciting random events prepared to throw at the players if the game gets boring.

Another problem with random events can be that the players simply don't accept them as such, but instead assumes that some external force is behind it all. This might be more or less likely depending on the genre. In genres such as comedies and classic adventures (Star Wars, Indiana Jones), where the individual events and set pieces are more important than the machinations of the plot, the players (or the audience) usually accepts more or less random events and coincidences. But there are other genres, for example thrillers and mysteries, where almost everything happens for a reason, and where only a fool would believe in coincidences. Examples from the movie world would be Inception and The Matrix.

If it's not clear to everyone which kind of genre your adventure belongs to, you can put your players in the right mindset by sending the appropriate signals at the beginning of the game. Starting the adventure with a random event, such as the mayor bumping into the characters for no apparent reason and giving them a mission, then you establish a world where strange things happen for no apparent reason. However, if the characters pick up hints suggesting that the mayor actually selected them very carefully for this task, and just pretended to bump into them by chance, then your players will learn not to believe in chance.

## I'VE BEEN EXPECTING YOU, MISTER BOND

In the movie "On her Majesty's Secret Service", a bored security guard is sitting at his desk when the elevator suddenly chimes. When no one comes out from the elevator, the guard walks over there to check what's going on, only to get the elevator door in his face when Bond jumps out and swiftly deals with him; a standard scene in any action movie, to be sure, but would player characters have acted this way? Most would never have approached the elevator without their weapons ready. Maybe one of them would have moved closer to the elevator, while the others would have covered him or her with their guns. It's difficult to catch the players by surprise, because they always suspect the worst!

So how should the gamemaster direct the NPC's? The guard's behavior in the example above is quite realistic - not even a security guard in the bad guy's secret lair can expect a visit by British secret agents at every moment. In a roleplaying game there is a risk of unbalance if the PC's can never be caught with their pants down, yet all the NPC's are unsuspecting and naive. Some

gamemasters therefore play their NPC's as extremely vigilant and suspicious. These NPC's are never ambushed, always double check the PC's bluff, refrain from eating or drinking anything offered by the strangers, and always have a Magnum .45 within reach. This approach will surely bring balance to the game, but risks making the players irritated. They might suspect the gamemaster of being unfair, and there is limited fun in designing traps and cunning plans if enemies never walk into them.

The best solution is probably for the gamemaster to create a simple system where he or she can settle the matter with a roll of a dice; perhaps modified if the NPC has any specific reason to be suspicious, if more than averagely stupid or intelligent and depending of the quality of the PC's plan.

Another way to make the situation more interesting is to make the difference between success and failure less distinct. The PC's may be able to lead the bad guys to the abandoned warehouse, but they turn out to be more heavily armed than the PC's thought they would be. The PC's might convince the security guards that they are electricians who need to enter the building to perform maintenance, but after 15 minutes the real electricians arrive and blow their cover.

## WELCOME TO THE NEXT LEVEL

In an adventure of the most basic format, the plot, aim and challenges are all clearly set out from the beginning. The players know what is expected of them, who the bad guys are and where the hidden treasure is located. Many gamemasters find this to be a bit too simple, and therefore create several hidden layers throughout the game. A friend turns out to be an enemy, the employer turns out to be just a front for someone else, reality turns out to be nothing but a digital simulation, and so on.

All this is very well, but if something is repeated often enough it becomes boring and commonplace. If your scenarios always have hidden layers, the players will spend the first half of the game looking for them. They will mistrust every NPC they encounter, they will search through each other's belongings, they will never follow instructions exactly as given and they will generally act paranoid. Therefore you should throw in a more straightforward adventure every now and then to "reset" the player's expectations. This is a better strategy then to try to up the ante and make every adventure even more layered than the last one, since this will lead to extremely complicated scenarios and confused players.

The exact opposite is of course not to recommend either. If all aspects of your



adventures always are what they seem to be, then the players will never pause for thought. They will never reflect on the fact that they were just given two different accounts of the same event, that the "crime lord" they are about to whack looks a lot like an ordinary office worker with three kids, or simply that everything just seems too neat. Instead, they just steam ahead, guns ablaze. Be wary of these symptoms, and serve the players a balanced diet!

### RISKY BUSINESS

Most PC's would be classified as risk-prone by most insurance companies. Yet some players seem to be extra willing to expose their characters to unnecessary danger, especially if the alternative would be to use the good ol' brain. This might be particularly common with more inexperienced players, but also those that can't seem to come up with a better plan for the moment. Are people disappearing from the graveyard in the middle of the night? Well, then one of us should go there in the middle of the night and check it out. Is that moon actually the Empire's new space station? I can't believe our luck, load your weapons! This kind of player are always challenging for a gamemaster. You assumed that the PC's would sneak into the fort using stealth; however they storm up to the main gate. You think the PC's will run away when the mighty Balrog appears; instead they just stand there with a smug smile on their faces and draw swords.

So, where does the GM style fit into this? Well, in the same way that "society" can be blamed for youth crime and unsocial behavior, the gamemaster can be partially blamed for PC's with suicidal tendencies. The process works like this: roleplaying games are essentially about exciting adventures where danger is always near, so it's only a matter of time until a PC does something more or less reckless. The question is if the player has to pay a price for this recklessness? Most gamemasters would hesitate in killing off a whole group of PC's even if this would be the result of a correct consequence of their actions. Creating new PC's always takes time, and maybe the whole campaign has to be scrapped because of the result, so why not let the players get off easy? Maybe the Death Star is currently evacuated due to a fire drill?

The problem with this solution is of course that it rewards careless behavior, thereby generating more of it. If the PC's always make it out unharmed from the most difficult situations they will never stop and think before confronting danger the next time. After all, it's a lot of work to find information about the strength and number of the enemies, so why do it if it doesn't affect the outcome?

If you realize that the game has been caught in such a "death spiral" of suicidal shenanigans and lucky escapes, swift action is needed. One suggestion is to intervene, and directly communicate to the player that "Your character realizes that it would be suicide to confront the dragon armed only with a fruit knife. Maybe you should plan a bit more?" If you prefer you could let a NPC deliver this harsh message. If this doesn't help, you should consider killing off the PC's once, hopefully making their successors more careful.

### ORDINARY WORLD

How is the ordinary, common reality in your world presented? How much in-game time is spent on more or less colloquial tasks? When the PC's get up in the morning, are you just noting that they probably have breakfast or do they have to play out going down to 7-11 to buy coffee and bagels? Or is no one thinking about breakfast at all because a squad of stormtroopers has already breached the airlock and the PC's are making their way to the escape pod?

Genre is of course of important. If the focus is on action and heroics, long discussions with customs bureaucrats and detailed visits to the ATM would just slow everything down. But in more realistic games, these things could help anchor the world or maybe (if so desired) instill the feeling that the characters are small, ordinary people set against a powerful system. However many gamemasters are unable to modify their style to suit genre. For example, in games that take place in present time (or in other modern settings, like Cyberpunk), it might be extremely important to know if the PC's have licenses for their heavy weaponry or not - what if they get checked by the police? You should think carefully about how present ordinary life is in your game, and if it actually fits to the genre.

### TIME FLIES WHEN YOU'RE HAVING FUN

A gaming session constantly changes time-scale. Depending on how interesting a certain part of the game is, the description of events may become more or less detailed. Sometimes you use a very rough time-scale ("A couple of months passes..."), sometimes real time (for example during dialogues between PC's and NPC's), or even more detailed for combat time. These changes take place on the meta level of the game, which means that the players are aware of it but not their characters. In most cases the switch from one scale to another is unimportant and don't cause

any problems, but sometimes they might give away the intentions of the gamemaster.

Suppose that you normally describe a trip from point A to B by saying "Ok, you take a cab to the airport", but this time you describe every turn the cab makes and also how the people on the sidewalk look. The players will immediately be alarmed by this new time-scale, since it seems to suggest that something dramatic will happen between A and B. This is of course not good if your intention is to catch the players by surprise. What can be done to rectify this? There are two obvious solutions, neither of them perfect.

The first is to use a detailed time-scale all the time. Then the players will regard the detailed time-scale as the normal state of being. The problem is of course that a lot of game time will be spent on unnecessary and boring stuff. The second is to make the switch-over so abrupt that the players don't have a chance to react. With this method case the players will be surprised, but on the other hand they won't have any chance to affect the situation, which will make them feel helpless. It is also less elegant storytelling-wise.

**GM:** "You are all on a train from Berlin to Rome, and you recently passed Geneva. Blam! The cabin door is forced open and three SS soldiers runs inside...!"

**Players:** "Eh... what cabin door? Aren't we in the restaurant cart? Is it night or day?"

A better method is to switch to a detailed time-scale in advance so that the players' initial suspicious are deferred. A good trick is to first introduce some other element that justifies more detailed storytelling. Maybe the PC's bump into an interesting NPC, receives a telegram or notices a newspaper article of interest. Once you have established time and space in a detailed scale you can go ahead and launch the action.

Don't forget that you can bluff and use a detailed time-scale as an atmospheric setting device. By describing a routine situation in every detail you can make the players sit at the edge of their seats. This is a good method if the players seem a bit too relaxed. You will create suspense without actually telling them anything that is the least threatening or strange. In the similar way you can create tension in ordinary and non-eventful situations by asking small questions such as: "By the way, are you carrying any weapons?" or "Are you still standing by the door or are you further inside the room?" Questions that seem to suggest that the game at any time could switch to a very detailed scale, such as 2x2 meter squares and 5 second time-segments.

## I'M NOT PARANOID, I'M HOLISTIC

Do your scenarios usually contain elements or side-tracks that are not related to the main plot? Or is everything that happens in some way or another connected to the main quest?

Most movies are constructed according to the later model. Characters and events that feature briefly in the beginning of the movie always turn out to be critically important to the story later on. If the camera lingers tenderly on a power-tool during the opening shot, you can be sure that Steven Seagal will use it later to bash bad guys into a pulpy mush. Movies work that way partially since they are limited to a couple of hours. There is no time to waste on things that are not relevant to the main plot, and less relevant scenes usually end up on the cutting room floor.

Many gamemasters think along the same lines. Why spend time preparing and setting up things, characters and events that are not important for the adventure?

Well, one good reason is that the players are more self-aware than movie characters. Steven Seagal might look longingly at the power-tool in the introductory scene, but he is not yet aware that he will be using it to kill evil terrorists later. Steven is just on vacation with his niece, right?

But the players know. They are just waiting for the plot to kick into action and the pieces of the puzzle to start falling into place. And if your mind works as a movie director's, the players will assume that all the pieces belong to the same puzzle. Exactly how they fit together will probably become apparent later, or come to think of it: it's not even that important. This is basically the world-view of a conspiracy theorist, and could lead to an irrational and sometimes unfortunate behavior.

An actual play example of this is when players, who couldn't figure out exactly who was behind a series of attacks against them, simply kidnapped and interrogated one of the many mysterious characters that they had encountered earlier. They were accustomed to a world where everything and everyone is connected to the main plot. In that context, an action that in the real world would have been seen as desperate, if not psychotic, became very rational.

For these and other reasons it's always a good thing to make the world that the PC's encounter a bit larger than the current scenario. There should always be persons, events and things that do not belong to the adventure in question.

## DIAL M FOR MURDER

After a series of action scenarios you decide to create a detective style adventure for your players. The problem is that the players are not aware of this change of genre, so instead of carefully examining the dead body and the murder scene, then interrogating possible witnesses, they roam around aimlessly with weapons in their hands, waiting for the enemy to attack. Consequently, the adventure grinds to a halt.

How do you avoid this? It might feel a bit forced to actually tell the players "This will be a detective story, so keep your eyes open!" Instead, you can use the beginning of the adventure to send the right signals, thereby establishing the genre. You could describe very carefully what every NPC is wearing, outline every room in detail and describe exactly what people are saying and how they are saying it. Don't do it casually, but with emphasis. Say things like "On the way in, you notice that the window facing the yard is closed, but not locked from the inside so it could probably be opened from the outside". These kinds of descriptions signal to the players that they have to have an eye for details to succeed with this adventure.

One example: I once led an adventure where the PC's were searching for an agent that had vanished. They talked to different NPC's about what had transpired during the latest couple of days. One of these persons was actually a traitor, and therefore gave an erroneous version of events to cover his crimes. This wasn't immediately obvious, but would become clear if you compared the different accounts, especially the time designations for different events. The problem was that the players didn't take any detailed notes of the conversations, probably waiting for the shootout to start. Neither did they try to reconstruct the events of the previous days. This could be prevented by signaling at an early stage that time designations were important, or by stressing the way the NPCs were acting during their accounts.

If you want to switch genres to a more action oriented adventure, you could just throw the PC's into an intense action scene that makes any analytical thought process impossible. If that doesn't fit, you could try a "briefing room scene", where an authoritarian NPC explains the situation and what needs to be done. These are commonplace in action movies, and can function as "pointers" to the gamers. Methods of how to signal other genres, such as horror or diplomacy, should be contemplated.

A self-aware gamemaster can identify many other GM styles than the ones described here. The trick is not to blame derailed, failed or boring sessions single-handedly on the players, but to consider how your own GM style made the players behave as they did. This is a healthy exercise for both new and experienced gamemasters.

# WRITE YOUR OWN ADVENTURES

*This article describes the way I write adventures, and what methods I use. I don't mean I use them every time, or that all of the adventures are derived from the same template, but rather that I keep these methods in the back of my mind, and return to them should I get stuck, or if I'm going to write for someone other than myself. Every tool that works is a good tool.*

TEXT ÅSA ROOS  
ILLUSTRATION LUKAS THELIN

## SYNOPSIS

Synopsis is an English word, meaning summary. Writing a synopsis is a good thing, for several reasons. It gives a clear picture of the adventure's plot, a distinct plan for what scenes I am going to write, which game master characters that are important to the adventure, and all things necessary to drive the story forward.

- **What is the catch?** What is it that draws the main characters into the story? What is it that makes them want to explore my adventure? If I do not know this, motivating the players might prove difficult.
- **Is all the information there?** I do not write *"Discovering the secret causes them to lose all faith in the Swedish judiciary system"*. Obviously, the secret is important, so I will include it in the synopsis.
- **Write from beginning to end.** All the important scenes: introduction, confrontation, climax, and ending have to be included. This means I must know where I want my adventure to go, before I write it. Of course the adventure may change during play, but if I don't know roughly how it is going to end, or why it is going to end this way, it could make it hard for me to structure the scenes.

When writing, I almost always use questions as my starting point. This forces me to think, and sometimes the answers give me unexpected plot twists.

Who are the main characters? Are they player characters, or a game master's character? Who does the story revolve around? Keep in mind that it is not necessarily the main characters that need to be focused on. Maybe they have simply been hired to get rid of someone, or perhaps the lead role is played by a place, or an object?

What defines the game master characters? Are they heading towards their doom? Are they looking for something? Is there an obstacle they must overcome?

What is the driving force for player characters?

What is the driving force for the person that the story revolves around (if this is someone other than player characters)?

What do the player characters have to gain? Or to lose? How will this affect the world around them?

Is there a secondary storyline, or further motives amongst the characters? If so, what are they?

What is the dramatic peak of the main storyline? Does a sword have to be broken? Does the dragon have to be slain? Will the shrewd criminal be put to justice, and convicted for the crimes he or she committed? 

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What do the player and game master characters want to achieve? What basic needs do they want to satisfy? If you have several main characters this is a great opportunity to find out how their different reasons intertwine, and works for or against these characters. Do the characters have personal driving forces? And how do these forces push the story forward? This is an important point. Without a sequence of events, the adventure will not feel relevant. Keep in mind that this is not necessarily about a physical development, it might also be about emotional development.

At what point do the player characters or the main characters face a crucial decision? When reaching the climax of the story, a crucial decision that changes the game master or game master character is often required.

What decision must your player character or main character make?

## OPEN, OR LINEAR ADVENTURES

What is an open adventure? I define an open adventure as a scenario which allows the players themselves to choose where in the world they want to go, based on the information provided by game master, and the information in their character sheet. It means that the players aren't locked to a fixed sequence of events that the players cannot prevent. They do not always have to go to a certain place, to activate the next event in the adventure.

A linear scenario on the other hand, contains a number of scenes that has to be presented in a certain order to ensure that the adventure works all the way, and to make sure events that are supposed to happen, actually happens.

## OPEN ADVENTURES

### Benefits

- An open adventure provides the players with the option to go where they choose, act as they want, and play with locations, events and game master characters. In brief, an open adventure gives the players a lot of agency, the ability to control what they want to experience.
- An open adventure is enjoyable for the experienced game master, who likes to improvise, and make the adventure their own.

### Drawbacks.

- The players may feel that there is a lack of objective to their actions. Since they have the power to go where they want, they may also find themselves lost. They are not being guided towards their goal, as they themselves decide what that goal is.

- The game master needs material to work with. This may prove demanding to a writer who wants to give players and game masters a good open adventure. For example, looking at *The Armitage Files*, an adventure from Pelgrane Press, which by my definition is an open adventure, there is about five times as much written material if compared to one of the very linear adventures in *Hard Helix*.
- The time aspect. An open adventure may be hard to time, and could drag out. Especially if the players have no clear goals.

I leave it up to you to decide which manner of writing is the best, but keep your target group in mind. If the game is aimed at beginners, it might be easier for them to play a linear adventure, as they receive guidance on their actions. A more experienced group will probably want to take control of their gaming experience and shape it by their own preferences, thus an open adventure will suit them better.

I personally try to stick to a hybrid of the two, which can be hard enough as it often means that the volume of text grows rapidly. At the same time I am a game master who likes to improvise my stories, and I enjoy letting the players run fairly free. It is usually more fun for both game master and players, when creating an adventure together.

## THE ADVENTURE IS THE MECHANICS

In certain contexts and role playing games, mechanics and story are so close that the mechanics are adapted solely to tell a certain kind of story, or even just one specific story.

The purpose of using mechanics so closely attached to a story is most of the time that the creator of the game means to give the players a specific experience. Amplifying the gaming experience in this manner can provide really intense, and special, gaming sessions. But it limits the type of story that can be told. The more you attach mechanics to the story, the less flexible it becomes, but also better at conveying that which it was meant to.

In order to make an adventure with integrated game mechanics, it is important to really figure out which mechanics that work with the story, and makes it stronger. Should there be a game master? How are events activated? Do the rules lead the game, or do the players?

## CREATING SOMETHING THAT THE PLAYERS CARE ABOUT

My biggest challenge is to create something that my intended audience cares about, and

how it affects them. As a writer, I aspire to amuse my audience (and if it is not your preference, you might want to reconsider), and most of the time, the things my players want are the following:

- To experience a new place, be a part of a story they have never been a part of before.
- To be someone they can not be themselves.
- To perform acts they could never otherwise perform.
- To feel able and intelligent, and to be in control of the adventure.

There are other reasons for role playing than these - for example having fun or socializing with friends - and as a game master it is my job to consider the needs of all my players as I write the adventure. When I write for others, these are generally the four points I try to observe.

Most media, such as film, books, theatre and TV-series, are of course able to bring their audience to places they have never seen before, but only a few are able to fulfill the latter two points; amusement parks, masquerades, live action role playing games, computer games, and of course role playing games. If I as a writer can realize these things, I have succeeded. How well I do it depends on the elements I add. I can share my philosophies and political views, I can shock the players, and console them, I can challenge them, and their curiosity. But it is the four point above that gives me, as an author of adventures, the ability to mesmerize the players with my stories.

## THEME

I believe that a story should have an overall theme in order to keep together.

What is my adventure about? Good versus evil? Is this enough? Do I want to engage my players? If so, I try to give them a theme they understand and are interested in.

I try not to give in to the temptation of using old clichés. I often work at finding new stories, or at least new takes on old stories. Do we really need more adventures that begin at an inn? A question I often use when writing is "can the opposite also be true?" - meaning that if the players are going to rescue the princess and kill the dragon (a cliché in itself) I will ask myself if they should try to rescue the dragon and kill the princess instead. Thus creating a less predictable story. When you are writing you can choose to use politics, war, or jealousy as your theme, the options are endless. Try to find a theme that engages you personally, this way, you will probably find your way to a story that affects not only you, but your players too. Choosing themes will not affect *how* you tell your story, but it sets the guiding principle.

## MOOD

When you've created a theme that works, it is time to set the mood. It could be easy going and humorous, or dark and terrifying. The key to setting the mood in a scenario is being consistent all the way through. Breaking a horror mood by means of a joke is almost certainly a guarantee that the rest of the game will not be particularly frightful.

## TIME

An adventure takes place in a limited amount of time. It could be as little as a day, or even a few hours. The point is that the adventure is limited to the time it takes to play out the scenes it contains.

## LOCATIONS

For practical reasons it is hard to let the player characters move over more than a limited amount of locations in a given adventure. If not because it will generate too large amounts of text in the adventure.

Exploring each location also consumes the players time, and every new location takes focus from the story and the adventure. Therefore it is reasonable to limit the amount of locations that the players are able to visit. Having less locations will also make adventure more concentrated.

Where is the place? Is it accessible? Could you walk down the street and enter through the doors, or would you have to go through a dangerous labyrinth to get to the right place? Defining the location of a place in relation to the players and the rest of the world can be a wise thing to do.

What is the name of the place? If I am looking to create associations I can name my place "lonely point", "sunny glade", and so on, this is not going to work in every context, but it could be worth considering. Even if the real name of the place is "15 Lake Street" there may still be a local name such as "haunted house". Depending of course, on the mood I want to set.

What knowledge does the place contain? Is there something about this place that the player characters need to discover, like a dimensional gate that lets them travel from the hell they were sent to by a demon? Or is it about a laboratory that reveals what the mad scientist has planned for the people he kidnapped from the village? Are these clues to solving a serial killer mystery? It is sensible make a bulleted list of all the things the players are about to learn or find out, and add it to the location description. Then I will be aware of what I need to convey to my players.

## SCENES

An adventure usually consists of a number of scenes. All these scenes create the sequence of events. A sequence of events does not move randomly from scene to scene. Every story has different acts. A beginning, a middle and an end. It is important to find the common thread for all these scenes, to create a coherent story.

Limiting the amount of scenes in an adventure will also make it easier for you as the author, to concentrate on the things that are important in order to push your story forward.

An adventure that focuses on the most essential scenes will also be a more energetic adventure.

## What is a scene?

A scene is a sequence of events that takes place in a particular location. For example, think about how a tv-series structures its scenes. Between the scenes there are cuts, and when a cut occurs we know it is time for a new scene.

## How do I construct scenes?

The first thing I do is name the scene. If the name lets me know what the scene is about, it will make it easier for me in a later stage, to switch the scenes without having to read through them, or even cutting the ones that I don't need.

The second thing that I do is sum up the scene. I will often write my scenes down on post-its or index cards, in order to be able to play around with order, structure and so on. I will write what game master characters that are in a scene, what handouts I will create for the scene, and in what location the scene takes place.

I do this in order to prepare for the writing. Knowing what I need to write will make it easier to pace out the adventure. If I am not going to write down the adventure for others to read, I usually settle for the synopsis, the rest I can keep in my head; but knowing what game master characters are present, the locations and the handouts, will make it easier to run the game.

I also used to write down the purpose of the scene. If my scene has a purpose, I will also know what it leads to.

Is the purpose to make the player characters curious about the enchanted cave? Or are they supposed to find the sacrificial dagger, which makes it possible for them to kill the monster? Are they meant to find the agent's pre-booked airplane tickets to the caribbean, or the drugs aboard the cessna?

## GAME MASTER CHARACTERS

Just like player characters, it is important that a game master character that plays a big part in the adventure, has a purpose to his or her presence.

Why is this particular game master character here? Is he or she the antagonist? A helpful detective? What does he or she want? What is their goal? Take over the world? In what way? How is he or she going to do it?

Getting the player to conjure up information from the game master's characters does not have to be easy, neither does it have to be a railway with scene after scene where the player characters find all the answers they need. They may have to struggle a bit in order to get their hands on the information they desire.

It may well be that the game master characters has something to hide from player characters, something they may require to solve the riddle of the adventure. Getting a grudging game master character to share information they wish to keep to themselves can be tricky enough.

## CONFLICTS

The core of every story is conflict. Note that conflict is not synonymous with violence. The threat of a break up, or a relationship in pieces could be as interesting as two solar systems at war with each other.

Without conflict there is no drama. Conflicts exist to be overcome with strength, intelligence or willpower. Obstacles can show up anywhere, during conversation, in time, in the form of traps or fortresses that the players must enter.

When you create obstacles, try to think in wider terms. An obstacle is not necessarily a physical thing.

## CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION

Climax is what the players should be anticipating during the whole time playing. This is where they have the opportunity to beat the bad guy, expose the conspiracy and marry the princess. The climax should exceed all the other pinnacles of the adventure.

The resolution is what comes after the climax. This is where the player characters claim their rewards, or get thrown in prison, depending on what the characters did and how the adventure passed.

## THE GOAL

The goal, which in many ways can be equivalent to the theme, is the actual purpose of the adventure, rather than the common thread that runs through it.

## Creating an Adventure using Tarot cards (or Harrow cards):

- **Card 1 is the villain or the villain's motivation.**

This card answers who the villain is.

- **Card 2 is the goal of the villain.**

What is the villain hoping to accomplish?

- **Card 3 is the hook.**

What brings the heroes into the adventure?

- **Card 4 is where the adventure is located.**

- **Card 5 and after are the henchmen.**

You can draw more than one card to represent them. Perhaps the first is the right hand person of the villain, and the second the henchmen?

- **The last card is the twist!**

What happens to the adventure if "what if?" is introduced.

This card represents an unexpected turn of events.

Lay the cards out on the table and interpret them. The meaning of the cards will most likely give you some basic idea of the adventure that you can use to write your scenario.



## TOOLS TO TELL A STORY

...or perhaps it should be more like "*tools to get ideas for stories*". I've written 51 adventures for my 20.000 characters project so far.

It follows that running out of ideas isn't that strange, right? One of the things I love with being creative with more than just pen and paper however is the fact that the more stuff one does, the more ideas one gets. I've actually noted a decline in my idea generation speed due to the fact that I'm no longer actively photographing or drawing, or for that matter making jewelry.

This means that occasionally I need to jump start my brain with tools and items that may seem unconventional - or perhaps that's just me thinking I'm an out of the box thinker. I might very well be inside the box. Or on the lid.

## Rory's Story Cubes and Rory's Action Cubes

*Rory's Story Cubes* - in any version - is a set of nine six-sided dice where the numbers have been replaced by images. The "game" is simple. Roll the dice and connect the images to tell a story. With a bit of practice this works for adventures too. The main difference is to think synopsis instead of fully fledged story, and to angle the story, or basis for a story, towards the adventure/ role-playing game you want to write for. Unfortunately the story

cubes are a bit limited - especially the story cubes with actions, so they're not in any way the perfect way to write a story. Besides, they don't give that much in the way of support but I have used them once to spark an adventure.

### Tarot cards

I love me some *tarot cards*! I have two *goof sets* and one *game set* of *tarot cards* that I use for inspiration. *Zombie Tarot* is fun and inspiring for horror games. *The housewives' Tarot* is awesome in its bitchiness and the *Mage tarot* is created based on the White Wolf game *Mage the Ascension*.

The last deck also details ways to use the tarot deck as a storytelling tool. For character creation a linear spread of three cards is recommended. Each card represents a possible aspect of the character depending on the card's contents. The same method can be used for any tarot card set or role-playing game. The meaning of the cards can be very inspiring. I've used this to make both NPC's and characters and it does open up the mind.

A spread of cards can also be used to create a synopsis or the start of an adventure. As with the linear spread for character creation, a celtic cross or circular spread can be used as basis for the adventure.

*Query* or the queried card is the starting point of any spread. In this version it can represent the protagonist or antagonist of the adventure. The following cards - in whichever spread you decide to use, can help you

decide the contents of your adventure. Just as with *Rory's Story Cubes* its a bit touch and go, but the tarot cards are a bit more detailed than the story cubes and they do spark a few more ideas.

Paizo have published a *Harrow deck* that can be used in *Pathfinder*. I find it inspiring just to look at, and it can be used to set up adventures. The *Harrow deck* has its own rules of divination, but I use the same spread as tarots because that's what I'm used to reading.

## Surrealist games

I'm not kidding, the Surrealists were on to something. They thought so far out of the box, I'm not even sure there was a box to begin with. Automatic writing, stream of consciousness, exquisite corpse etc.

These games really scramble your brain and can be surprisingly revealing. Stream of consciousness works best for me. Pen and paper and writing down everything - and I mean everything that comes to mind. This does however require a bit of filtering afterwards.

In general, surrealist games are good when you need to make unexpected connections. Respect the whimsy. It can be the one thing standing between you and your best adventure ever.

## Plot Twist Cards

Also a Paizo deck, but these are intended for play. I use them to make my adventures more interesting by adding - ta da! - twists.

Sometimes the role-playing games also have adventure generators that you can use to create adventures, or at least ways that the game master can use to construct adventures. *Solomon Kane* and *Mouse Guard* are just two RPGs that are very clear in their instructions as to how adventures can or should be constructed. For *Mouse Guard*, using the rules of construction, the adventures practically write themselves. Luke Crane is a brilliant designer from that perspective.

## Documentaries and fact books

This is pretty obvious isn't it? Reading fact books and watching documentaries actually works pretty well for getting ideas about both real world politics, religion and other areas.

Conspiracy theorists write very interesting from the perspective that they are often very out there. I recommend books from Disinformation since they are well researched, well written and coherent, which is not always the case with conspiracies.

**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** SHALT NOT



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** IN SLEEPING BEAUTY CASTLE



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** MEETS KING KONG



# LOVESHOWS FOR LAMBCHOPS

**ON THE ART OF USING MUSIC IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES**

TEXT MÅNS DANNEMAN  
ILLUSTRATION MAGNUS FALLGREN

## WHEN THE LAMBS ARE SILENT

I watched *The Silence of the Lambs* in secret, with no sound. It was not as scary as everyone told me! Years later I realized what I had done wrong. Music plays an obvious role in movies, but not as obvious in role playing games. To roleplay is to tell, and experience stories in the company of others. To feel more of certain feelings, to experience things we never could, or want, in "real" life. We watch horror movies in order to get scared without having to deal with psychotic cannibals. Or maybe we watch comedies to laugh a bit extra, without having to wake up in Las Vegas with a hangover, next to Mike Tyson's tiger. The stronger emotions the storytelling triggers, the more exciting it gets (up to a point, when it comes to unpleasant feelings). We probably won't finish or remember a movie or a book that doesn't affect us in any way. In role playing games, the story, the chain of events, and the characters themselves evoke emotion, but there are ways to amplify these emotions. This article aims to spice up your thoughts and ideas on how to create and amplify emotions in role playing games, using music. So, how do you make your lambs scream?

## DARWIN DANCES AND SINGS

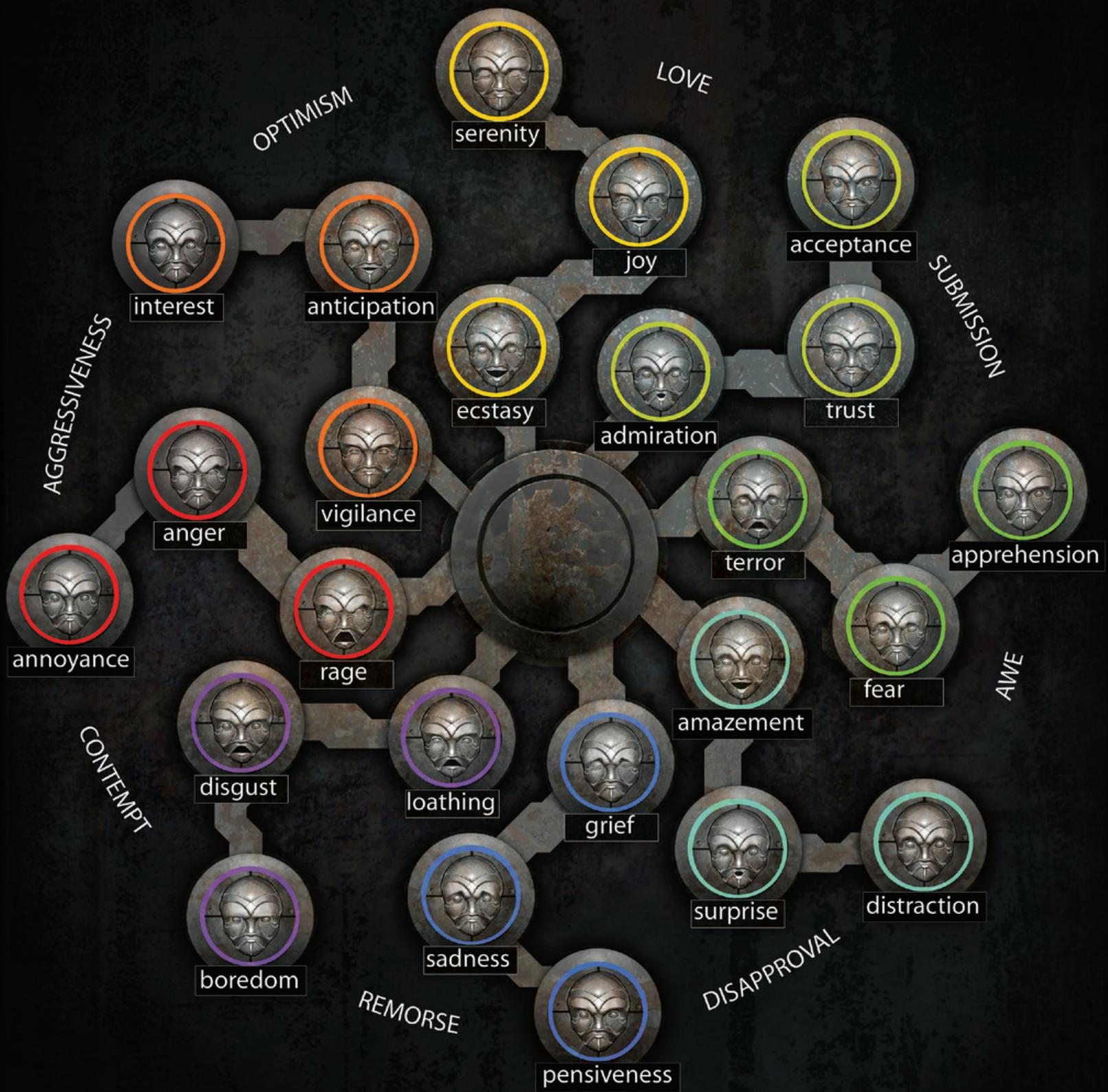
We seem to have an inherited ability to react to sound, song, and music. Some evolution theoretics alledges that song and music have played the part of the peacock's tail feathers, when it comes to sexual selection in humans, and that song may even have united social bonds, and made them stronger.

Distorted sounds have been shown to remind us of the warning calls of animals, and the screams of children that triggers the body's systems for fight or flight. An example is the screaming strings in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Very dull sounds can have a similar effect, maybe since they are similar to the sounds of predators. The characteristic "dum-dum-dum" in *Jaws* is a classic example on how to put this to use. Note also that the faster pace could be reminding of the faster pulse of a heart.

However, birds chirping, waves rolling and slow, steady-paced sounds often has a relaxing effect. The theory is that throughout history these sounds have indicated that no predators are around. Man has, accordingly, innate tendencies to react to sound, and you as the game master can use this.

## PLUTCHNIK'S "WHEEL OF EMOTIONS"





### PAVLOV'S BELLS

Man is a creature with the ability to learn and adapt to many different situations and conditions. We connect things to each other, for instance fear is connected to the place we saw a poisonous snake, or heard a lion roar. Naturally we also connect sound to different physical reactions.

Yes, I am talking about Pavlov's dogs, food and bells. A dog salivates when it is fed, a bell is rung before the dog is fed, and in time ringing the bell is enough to make the dog salivate. This is a simple example, but it is never the less about human behavior.

Physical reactions can range from salivation (just imagine biting into a wedge of lemon), faster pulse, tension in the shoulders, and emotions. Keep that in mind as you read the rest of this article, because it is one of the theoretical cornerstones of the usage of music as you master your game.

### EMOTIONS

It can often (depending on your game mastering style) be useful to think of what emotion you want to convey to your players. The emotion is made up from all the impressions that are described to the players, and from what they experience in the space (sight, hearing, taste, and tactile feeling, for example through the skin).

Emotions, especially in music, are multi-faceted. Checking a list of all the basic emotions may still help. An example of such a list is Plutchnik's *"Wheel of Emotions"*, which has been used in the advertising business to influence the behavior of consumers. Every emotion steers the individual towards a certain behavior - anger to attack, fear into flight, loathing into distancing, curiosity to exploration and so on. If you add positive and negative consequences to a certain behavior, you can explain the better part of human actions.

Feel free to use this model as an aid to the emotion you want to create or amplify. Perhaps sorrow, anger, happiness, disgust, expectation, admiration, calm, surprise, excitement, or why not fear?

### MUSIC AND MEMORY

If emotions can be connected to a certain song, we can use it in a variety of ways. We can use music that has a previous connection to a movie or a game. For example, listen to how music from previous blockbusters are used in trailers for new movies (in the *Watchmen* trailer for instance, *The end is the beginning is the end*, from *Batman and Robin* by the Smashing Pumpkins is used).

Thus, you can pick music from movies your players have seen. I recommend, however, that you avoid music so famous that your players can name the movies that they are from. You want the feeling that is connected to the music, via the movie, without them remembering and thinking about that movie.

Not only do you need to rely on previous associations, but you can also create new connections to situations, events, places, characters and so on, in the role playing game. Repeating may be needed in order to achieve this. Connecting a song to something may serve as a shortcut to an emotion and memories that you created previously. The descriptions of characters and environments may be more elaborate the first time, and later more sparing.

You can then play the song without the original stimuli, but still get the newly created and wanted association. This can contribute to making the storytelling clearer and more coherent. It can also be used to build expectation, which is an extremely important component of storytelling. Expectation can mean anything from insinuating that Jack the Ripper is roaming the streets, that there are orcs in the woods or that there is an old acquaintance in the bar. In film and opera,

this technique is called *"leitmotif"* and is used for instance by John Williams in the *Star Wars*-movies, and by Wagner in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

If you are playful, the players can choose the leitmotif of their characters themselves. Perhaps one for tranquil situations, and one for moments with more action. It is mainly the creativity and the imagination that puts limits to how you connect music to specific memories in the role playing.

### DOES MICKEY MOUSE HEAR THE MUSIC?

Who hears the music, and what is its function? Is it an intro/themesong, an underscore or sourcemusic? Note that all of these can be a leitmotif. The themesong can mark the beginning and the end of a gaming meeting, or that a part of a scenario has been played out. This sets the mood for a scenario or campaign. Background music is not heard by the characters and is there to amplify moods and emotions. Using instrumental music, or music with no clear lyrics, is often easier, as it does not interrupt the dialogue and the role playing in the room.

A difference to the specially written pieces in the movies, is that you may want to use them over and over again. Keep music in mind that holds up for repeated use. The blogger Will Hindermarch in *The DM is a DJ* calls these *"repeaters"* and separates them from *"dramatics"* as you more specifically use what happens in the song and weave it into the storytelling. However, the latter, he points out, should not get in the way of the role playing. A matter of preference, but I prefer a certain restraint when it comes to repeaters. I recommend not letting a whole album (for instance by Nox Arcana) play in the background of a game meeting. Let your use of music during play be well thought of, and moderately sparse.



If you want a certain sound image, play a song on repeat during a scene, but possibly lower the volume after the first time you played it. Remember that tranquil melodies calms you down, and complex, louder pieces winds you up. Source music, as opposed to theme songs and underscores, has a source in the game and can be heard by the characters. You may well use songs with lyrics, for example if the characters are at a bar where a troubadour or a jukebox is playing, and so on. If you are playing in a real or semi-real world, this proves way easier than in a completely fictional world, but even in these cases you can often borrow appropriate music from different sources. Remember that you are communicating through music.

Using both underscores and sourcemusic you can create expectations, and break these depending on the context. You can show that the characters have gotten themselves into some real trouble, that they are facing someone not at all as dangerous as they thought, that they have run into someone that they know, that something sad has happened, and so on. If well timed, there are also possibilities for comical elements. An obviously more grande composition than the situation calls for, a famous song, stongly connected to something specific, or just a silly song can all result in laughter.

Another way of using music is synchronization, or "Mickey Mousing" where the characters act in a precise way to different sounds within the music. This technique is probably more useful in movies than in role playing games, but it can be used to describe a scene or a situation in which the player characters are not acting. For example, in an introduction scene, or if you want to add a "movie clip" to your storytelling - even though roleplaying games are mainly the players' and game masters' shared stage, their shared imagination, and not a one man show. What ever you choose to do, first decide who hears the music, and the purpose of using it.

## THE GAME MASTER AS ARTISTIC CREATOR

Perhaps even more important than the theoretical and technical part, is what emotion you feel when listening to a certain song. What do you feel? What is happening? When, where and how? In or outside? Desolate or crowded? A large or small group of people? Are they interacting? Are they happy, or is there a conflict? What scenes are playing out in front of you? Is the mood right for what you had in mind? It has been said that Quentin Tarantino builds his scenes by listening to his chosen songs in this manner

Listen carefully through the songs before you play them and don't be misled by the context they are being played in. Just because they appear in a certain context, it does not mean that they won't be appropriate in another. A piece of bebop-jazz in a science fiction scenario, or a hard rock anthem may suit a medieval battle and so on. *A Knight's Tale* is an example of this. Go with your gut and the whole idea of the scenario. What atmosphere, and what touch are you looking for? You are the director, creator, and artist who sets the tone of the shared storytelling.

## SPOTIFY THROUGH YOUR TOASTER

A comment on the technical aspect. Use the best equipment you can. Music through your smartphone will not provide the same experience as a pair of substantial speakers with a crisp sound and heavy bass. Investing in a portable speaker for convention gaming, and visiting friends' summer houses, may be wise. You don't need Hi-Fi equipment, but stay away from the cheapest options, as their sound mostly reminds you of a toaster in heat.

Regarding the acces to music, there are amazing opportunities via for example Spo-

tify or Grooveshark. It is a different story than when one had to take a gamble and bought Bo Hansson's *Sagan om Ringen* on cd, via mailorder. Using Grooveshark you can search for the user "Ultimate RPG" who has built a large registry of music appropriate for role playing games. You often want to put your own touch on a game, through the choice of music, but this registry has such a range that you both find classics and new ideas.

Another source of music and interesting sounds is *Youtube*, even if it is not the easiest medium to operate. You can find a plethora of different exciting clips, for instance hour long recordings of caves, djungles and storms, in addition to NASA's claimed recordings of the cosmic radiation of the planets, played as sound. Or why not low-frequency sound under 20Hz, so called infrasound. Infrasound has shown to create physical discomfort in humans, and has been used in the horror movie *Paranormal Activity*. I want to urge you to be careful in this, as it is outside my competence. Who knows, maybe the toaster could make an appearance here after all.

## WHEN THE LAMBS ARE SCREAMING

Ok, let's see if we can make this little flock of sheep scream, and apply what we have learned. Take a vaguely familiar, creepy piece of music from a movie the players likely have seen. Preferably one with shrill sounds, and heavy bass. Kenji Kawai's *Ring*, from *Ringu*, could be appropriate (and in a later, action filled stage, *Genes* can be added or replace *Ring*). Play *Ring* as the lambs are grazing in the far corner of the paddock, as they huddle together at night, and the bushes are swaying at the edge of the forest. Associate it with threat. Remember that it is creepier if we only sense the danger. Lull them into false security, and when they think they are safe, let the birds stop chirping... and press play.



# BUT THIS IS WONDROUS STRANGE

TEXT PETE NASH

ILLUSTRATION KRISTOFFER ENGSTRÖM

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It is no secret that by far the greatest majority of roleplaying game settings are based in pseudo-medieval worlds full of European monsters and folk lore. Indeed, their ubiquity has become so staid that in some ways the game market has become rather boring. Why has this occurred and what can we do to change this bias?

In this issue's article we shall take a break from providing gaming material and try to open your eyes to the wonders of less familiar societies to inspire your game worlds, and indeed the amazing diversity of human history itself.

## ARE WE PANDERING TO THE ILLITERATE MASSES?

Back in the early days prior to the first role-playing game, proto roleplayers were actually wargamers. These were people who studied history and read widely, but the battles they fought were generally limited to those of the medieval, civil war and modern periods. Then along came *Chainmail*, a set of medieval miniature rules for folks who liked battles but wanted to add a little Tolkiennesque fantasy and Sword & Sorcery into their games. Seeing its popularity, Gygax one of *Chainmail*'s authors, teamed up with Arneson to create a new game which tapped into this fantasy medieval vibe, and unleashed it as *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Yet a few years after came several iconic settings which divorced themselves from pseudo-medievalism. First and foremost amongst these were the worlds of *Tékumel (Empire of the Petal Throne)* by Professor M. A. R. Barker and *Glorantha (RuneQuest)* created by Greg Stafford. Both worlds were unique for their time, drawing upon an in-depth knowledge of cultures alien to most players. Sadly although *RuneQuest* and thereby *Glorantha* gained significant traction in Europe, the States less so, the lands of *Tékumel* soon sank out of public sight. Most Americans seemed more comfortable with 'traditional' medieval fantasy tropes of *Tunnels & Trolls, Chivalry & Sorcery*, and of course *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*.

Why was this? Well, not only did TSR dominate the RPG market unchallenged for half a decade, but SF&F literature was now filling with stories influenced heavily by success of *Lord of the Rings*. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to view foreign or historical cultures from the perspective of one's own, so to a degree it is understandable that most Americans and Europeans were more comfortable with settings which were a part of their own cultural background. Thus setting bias was more about ease of immersion and secondarily the lack of availability of non-standard fantasy, than any reduction in the educational level of gamers.

## THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, HORATIO, THAN ARE DREAMT OF IN YOUR PHILOSOPHY

Since those early days of RPGs fantasy settings have diversified somewhat, often adding a blend of science fiction or post apocalyptic to their background, to add a soupcon of strangeness. However their cultures tend towards the monolithic, and exotic species often suffer the '*Human in a Rubber Mask*' trope. There is also a perceivable lack of imagination when creating societies which do not follow the usual monarchy or republic political systems, nor escape modern preconceptions of ethical/unethical behaviour.

In fact many new games being published nowadays are openly attacked for not representing modern behaviour, no matter the fact that such traditions are constantly evolving and cycling throughout history. What we passionately believe is morally correct right now, will be overturned by our children, and children's children. For instance, homosexuality has been in and out of vogue since it was first recorded five thousand years ago, as have

many other human concepts such as women's rights, intra-family marriage, slavery, human sacrifice, democracy vs autocracy, freedom of religion, even pederasty - which seems horrific to us today, yet was embraced by the founders of our western philosophy!

The fundamental twists of human society are invaluable when giving a game setting its unique flavour, whether to act as a foil for players (via their characters) to fight against, or to make the world exotic, unsettling and perhaps educational for those playing in it.

Indeed, both history and anthropology are the very best source for creating strange new ideas for RPGs, not only in the cultures so encountered, but for plot lines too. There was a time when the Classics (the literature of Ancient Greece and Rome) was preeminent of university degrees because within the works of those long dead scholars was captured an almost complete picture of human strife and consequence, whether it was war, politics, social justice, revolution, treachery or hubris. The higher echelons of the British Civil Service were once reserved for those with Classics degrees and for good reason. I've lost count of the number of scenario plots I've taken directly out of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita!*

Likewise some of the most popular books I've written have opened the eyes of the reader to foreign cultures and their truly alien perspectives on daily life. Can you imagine gaming in a bustling city which has no *police force* and within whose walls the army is forbidden to enter? Sounds implausible that such a place could function, no? Yet the city of Rome up until the end of the Republic did indeed lack any official law enforcement. Another example might be ritualised wars where the objective is capture, not kill your opponent; the forbidding of certain social classes from attacking enemies of a different status; or allowing single combats to occur in the midst of battle ignored by the other participants - as can be found in the cultures of Mezoamerica, the ancient Indus Valley and recorded in heroic Greek tales.

There is almost nothing strange or weird that a human society hasn't already done at some point in history. Matriarchal rule, child sacrifice, populations totally segregated by sex, geriatricide, you name it, it's been done before in *real life!*

## WHERE YOU SHOULD START

Some of the most entertaining and indeed inspiring books I've ever read have been the journals of explorers, especially those of the last two centuries. As an example, works like *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T. E. Lawrence and *Arabian Sands* by Wilfred Thesiger were my first insights into the complex and

seemingly contradictory aspects of Arab society. In fact my recent *Monster Island* Sword & Sorcery setting was based heavily on 19<sup>th</sup> Century books studying Polynesian culture and at some point in the future I hope to produce a setting based upon the *Mahabharata*, which I believe is one of the richest sources of myth and adventure ever written.

Of course gaining access to such literature, especially in Scandinavia, is almost impossible outside of a library, but there are plenty of wonderful books available on the internet from before copyright began, *Project Gutenberg* being a good place to start ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)). Enter 'Exploring' in the search box and you will be granted access to hundreds of works, both a delight to read and a bottomless source of idiosyncratic habits and rituals of now long lost societies. I mean how can you go wrong with titles like "*The Adventures Of The Chevalier De La Salle And His Companions, In Their Explorations Of The Prairies, Forests, Lakes, And Rivers, Of The New World, And Their Interviews With The Savage Tribes, Two Hundred Years Ago*".

There are books about the outlaw hunters of the Russian Pacific coast, Australian aborigines, secret visits to the Tibetan plateau, explorers living with Inuit peoples, and countless publications concerning the barbaric tribes of North and South America. All of which would be simple to adopt into a campaign world, whether as an outlying human nation or as the culture of a non-human race or species.

Can you imagine a fantasy game where the gnolls are the flourishing civilisation at the centre of the world, following Aztec beliefs and traditions, whilst the suppressed and hunted humans are primitive seal hunters and whalers living in the arctic regions? Blood sacrifices drawn from pulling barbed vines through your own genitalia, priceless golden treasures, skull-decorated ziggurats and mighty feathered headdresses - and the Gnolls might be the good guys in their own eyes, because if the blood stops flowing the world just might come to a titanic end! Base the entire campaign on the adventures and discovery of Hiram Bingham in his *Inca Land, Explorations in the Highlands of Peru* and there's a game you could play off the bat with a minimum of research. Actually, that sounds like so much fun I might have to run that myself!

It does not matter whether you have just picked up the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* or use *RuneQuest* which is inherently suited to modelling foreign cults and cultures. Read a little bit about strange and engrossing peoples of other times and places, knock up a rough map, jot down a short list of names, places and gods, then play it by ear. Go forth and break your ethnocentric shackles and see what the rest of the world has to offer...

# AUBEROND

TEXT CHRISTOFFER KRÄMER

ILLUSTRATION PÄR OLOFSSON

...It's been six days since our tracker and the final guards departed for the Peacock Spire Clan to find help. As we have heard nothing from them nor from the Peacock Spire people, we can only hope that their deaths were quick and that their souls can be found before they are doomed to wander for eternity, like the wretched Safhalad.

Our last bioseeker fell when he ventured out under the cover of darkness to the savage Hiatus grove, just outside our sanctuary, in order to harvest a meagre fistful of food for us. Not even his vast knowledge of everything that is hunting us could save him. His death was the final push we needed. Last night, we deliberated and mutually agreed that our clan was lost, and that we must do what we could to fortify other clans. Our priests and mages have therefore just left this plane in an attempt to travel in spirit to another clan. Their bodies lie cold before me and I pray that their souls can find a home in some other recently departed bodies in a safer place than this.

Because we have not had any creators here in many months, our air filters have finally given up. Thick clouds of rufu pollen have penetrated into the sanctuary and the air has become more and more difficult to breathe. My friend and devoted companion Sardakinn, who through all the battles and hardships has never strayed from my side, just forced her helmet upon me. Both she and I know that the helmet is a part of her Galvaraan and that when she and the helmet are parted, they will both die. But she does it to buy me some time. Time to end our clan's chapter in this world.

The air in the helmet tastes different, a bit organic, and I can feel how the coral tries to repel me, as some kind of foreign creature. It's like an illustration of the situation we Elfvaar are in. Our own world tries its best to reject us, to force us to leave, as if we were an unfamiliar organism and not Saladaar, the beloved pinnacle of creation that we thought we were. It will probably succeed in the long run, but we will not enter into oblivion without a fight. It is, however, the irony of fate that we Saladaar, in our struggle to remain, have become something other than what we were.

Sardakinn's skin, pale as the finest spider webs even under normal circumstances, has faded nearly unto transparency, and she breathes no more. I hear the sound of scraping claws on the stairs of our sanctuary and can only guess at what kind of abomination has crept down past undefended gateways. I will save this text, with the final power left in the crystal of my forefathers, in the hope that some other Saladaar will find it and add our clan's story to his chronicle.

I see my bane now, disgusting in its revelation, but I am not afraid. I may never have learned to fight, but my forefathers' songs have taught me all I need to know about dying.

– Tarfalfa, bard of the Rainbow Weavers Clan ➤

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### INTRODUCTION

*Auberond* is a fantasy campaign world that first saw the light of day at a local gaming convention in southern Sweden in the mid-nineties, after previously having been glimpsed only as a myth in one of my previous role-playing campaigns. The article on *Auberond* is structured so that the introduction talks about facts, description and atmosphere, and then at the end, goes into concrete tips on how to play a campaign in this world.

*Auberond* is a fantasy world far removed from the traditional high fantasy and is therefore not really focused on mysterious cave systems, busty princesses, noble knights, hidden treasures, bearded wizards, magic objects, and mystical quests given out at the Golden Pig inn. Instead, *Auberond* is, in short, about an elflike race that one day sees its paradise world of peace and harmony change to an apocalyptic horror where nature and all living things in it suddenly seem to do everything in their power to obliterate everything else.

The campaign world will therefore largely be about survival and puts great emphasis on how one changes as a person and a race when every day you run the risk of becoming totally extinct. No dwarves, orcs, or even humans appear anywhere in this world; only elves – or more specifically, *Elfvaar*. The campaign world contains magic of the relatively traditional variety, but it is also highly technological in a way that one might not ordinarily associate with fantasy. Many names and terms from the *Elfvaar* dictionary are used, in order to create a particular mood, and is in keeping with the Tolkien-esque fantasy spirit, even if Gandalf would not be welcome here.

### AUBEROND IN THE PAST

**“Our world was a playground and we therefore remained children.”**

In the past, *Auberond* was a paradise in every conceivable way. The world had a comfortable climate wherever one traveled, and everywhere you looked, you were surrounded by lush greenery. The soil was fertile and lovely crops, fruits, and nuts were available in abundance, sometimes with several harvests in a year. The forests and fields were full of scampering animals, and the seas and streams were overflowing with fish. There never seemed to be a lack of aromatic and diverse fish and wildlife for anyone wanting a change from the nectar of the paradise’s

fruits. Intelligent and semi-intelligent animals shared the world with the *Elfvaar*, and everyone lived in harmony. Unicorns and pegasi, gryphons and ents, and creatures of all species, managed to create strong bonds of friendship with the *Elfvaar*.

The lack of any struggle for survival made the *Elfvaar* a people who spent their time playing games, studying, and the fine arts. This made them a happy, laughing and wise people who loved everything that was good and beautiful. On no other world could you find anything like them. The songs sung by the *Elfvaar* to extol the dance of the fireflies at night, or to cherish the memory of a deceased loved one were so beautiful and perfect that they almost took on physical form. The works of art and literature they handed down and refined from generation to generation were in every unique part a piece of something divine. The games they played through the days and nights, by both the old and young, echoed throughout nature and most certainly contributed to making the whole world friendly toward the *Elfvaar*. If *Auberond* was paradise, the *Elfvaar* were indeed the *Saladaar* – the beloved pinnacle of creation – and this was the name they used when they spoke of themselves.

The *Saladaar* inhabited all of *Auberond* and preferred to live in clans that were based more on common interests and shared philosophies as opposed to more typical kinships. The clans’ settlements tended to be integrated with nature, and often stretched out over a broad area. Cities, in the traditional sense, were very unusual. Dwellings consisted of residential buildings and workshops for members of the clan. In addition to this, each clan had a number of similar constructions: temples, libraries, theatres, public baths, council halls, and sacred ancestral glades. Many clans had several of these buildings and the style from clan to clan varied widely. Like everything else, these buildings and public works of art were a source of creativity, making each clan society a jewel embedded in the local environment, in perfect harmony with it. The clans’ names were also reflective of their surroundings, or their artistic or philosophical orientations. With names like Azure Singers Clan, Crystalmakers Clan, Daydreamers Clan, Crescent Moon Clan, and Cascade Riders Clan, the clans also had plenty of opportunity to outdo each other when it came to creating beautifully adorned flags, banners, heraldic crests, and so on.

The clans were ruled by a clan council, but because very few conflicts arose in the *Saladaar*’s peaceful world, their function was strictly ceremonial. Among the clans, there was never anything more serious than a teasing eagerness to compete with one an-

other, and the clans had frequent exchanges with each other, both via physical travel as well as magical communication. Altogether, the *Saladaar* existed throughout *Auberond*, and with their network of interconnected clans, the *Elfvaar* were truly the planet’s masters.

### DE-EVOLUTION

**“In such harmony was our paradise that even we did not have a name for what befell us.”**

The mystery behind *Auberond*’s transformation is still unsolved. Perhaps the same gods who initially made the world a paradise finally became jealous of their creations’ perfect lives, and introduced a new cycle of de-evolution, unaware or uncaring about the suffering it brought about. The shift was gradual, stealthy at first, but has accelerated since then and now continues unabated. The climate was the first thing to change, from having been temperate, balanced and predictable to extreme, volatile, and erratic. Furious storms, freezing cold, and blistering heat suddenly became a part of the lives of the *Saladaar*. It was as if the entire planet had become awash with internal rebellion. Earthquakes and volcanic activity afflicted all of *Auberond*, and lava and sulfur gradually darkened the sky. Acid rain fell, spreading slow death, and from the world’s core came liquid and gaseous substances whose impact on the environment was at times slow and treacherous and others rapid and devastating.

Nothing living on *Auberond* could escape the metamorphosis, and mass death unlike anything seen before spread across the planet. What did not die, mutated and became stronger, hardened.

According to nature’s ancient and unwritten laws of the survival of the fittest, those unfit to continue were cast aside as those who were sturdier and more resilient dug in with determination. In the often-sterile environment that spread in the wake of these apocalyptic catastrophes, it was as if the only thing that took hold and grew was the new concept of ruthless exploitation.

Survival was now possible only at the expense of someone else. Animals gradually became more aggressive, preying on weaker creatures as food for them became scarcer, and plants – having lost the precious light needed for photosynthesis – found other ways to supplement their nutrient intakes. The few plants and animals that managed to find a way to survive the harsh new environ-

ment without killing other things developed defence mechanisms as deadly as the predators that hunted them. The ultimate result was a flora and fauna utterly in tune with the deadly world that Auberond had become.

## AUBEROND TODAY

**"All colours have faded to the blackest black, and with them, so too have our memories dwindled."**

If the Auberond of the past was a paradise, the Auberond of today can only be described as pure hell. Nature has taken on the most extreme and inhospitable traits: barren lava landscapes, burning deserts, impenetrable jungle marshes and tundra swathed in permafrost. Nothing is permanent, however, and the hell that is a reality today – and that we have learned to cope with despite its horrors – may be exchanged for another type of hell tomorrow. Nowhere is it possible to live in security and safety, nowhere is it possible to cultivate the land and trust the predictable cycle of nature, nowhere is it possible to close one's eyes at night without fear.

Venturing out in this world requires thorough preparations. The ground beneath one's feet can suddenly swallow you whole in fissures that have appeared overnight, deadly patches of quicksand, or worse. The air you breath can kill you with toxic fumes, aggressive plant spores and pollen, or invisible bacteria. The water might poison you or burn like acid, eating through your sensitive skin. The world outside is also filled with animals and plants that will not hesitate to kill you in order to survive, and they have had plenty of practice now, and are very good at it. Only with protective clothing and equipment, with specially designed gear, on recently reconnoitred paths and travelling in groups, does such a journey outside approach anything like "safe", and all too often, even this is not enough.

As countless Elfvaar died, their souls were not always able to be guided to the lands of their ancestors, and so the world became haunted by dangerous, lost souls called *Safhalad*. Even the chief guardians among the Elfvaar, equipped with the most powerful weapons, cannot defend themselves against such a horror.

The situation has become exacerbated by the fact that not all Elfvaar are able to cope with the tragic existence that Auberond now has to offer. Some of them have taken the final step in evolution and eradicated all traces of

their former beauty from their hearts in order to even attempt to exist without going crazy. These dark Elfvaar, called the *Malfashoud*, or the flowers of evil, by the Saladaar, have formed their own clans, and they are prepared to trample their former brothers and sisters if it will help them survive another day. In a world where the struggle for every little resource is continuously intensifying, such killing happens all too often.

To survive under these appalling conditions, the Saladaar and Malfashoud have left their cities and gradually sought out a few small and concentrated *haimaar* – sanctuaries. The majority of these sanctuaries are underground, though there are some hanging along the vertical cliff faces or up in the crowns of the enormous Darsufa trees. Often, the *haimaar* are located under, above, or nearby to their old dwelling places, and the ruins serve as a constant reminder of the situation the Elfvaar find themselves in. Within the *haimaar*, which have been designed or remodelled with security as the only requirement, the Elfvaar live in congested and insufferable surroundings. The space within them must be prioritised for food production and anything else necessary for the clan's survival. Comfort and privacy is always secondary.

In a desperate attempt to hold onto as much of the old culture as possible, the Saladaar have rescued the precious treasures from museums, libraries, and public spaces and placed them in the *haimaar*, filling them to the brim with art in the form of paintings, sculptures, books and textiles. The struggle for survival is taking place quite literally from within overflowing museums. In the case of the Malfashoud, the situation is the opposite, as they are actively trying to repress as much of the past as they can.

Despite the dramatically changed living conditions, the clans are still run in basically the same way as they were in the past. Clan councils still make the important decisions for the clan. The tribal council's function is, however, no longer merely ceremonial, but is needed for the clan's survival. Interest and participation is therefore much greater than before. The clans also spend a good deal of time maintaining contact with each other despite distances and hardships, and through this fragile connection, vital information about the outside world is shared from *haimaar* to *haimaar*. This communication also makes it possible for the clans to – at least theoretically – come to each other's rescue if needed. Over time, the network has become increasingly tenuous as the clans are weakened or wiped out, and fear looms that one day the contact with other clans will cease entirely.

## ABOUT THE ELFVAAR

### Traits, Characteristics, Etc.

**"Our bodies are pleasing to behold and in our eyes, eternity."**

### Appearance

With regard to appearance, Elfvaar resemble the traditional elves of fantasy. They are human-like in many ways, but generally taller, and more slender and delicate. The most noticeable trait is the pointed ears and pale skin. Mentally, the Elfvaar are intelligent, creative, and highly flexible. Average lifespan was previously approximately 200 years, but the harder conditions and high rate of frequent unnatural deaths has lowered this number to less than half that.

### Societal norms

The difference between male and female Elfvaar is the same as that of humans, and over and above those few physical differences, most gender differences have previously been more related to socialisation, gender roles, and tradition. As life for the Elfvaar changed and became more survival-centric, most of these traditional role differences have been erased and are now focused primarily on reproduction and the physical limitations pregnancy imparts. No jobs or roles in society are reserved for one or the other gender, but when it comes to reproduction, this is no longer a personal choice, but a necessity for the clan's survival, and is therefore a requirement.

### Mental

All Elfvaar have innate magical abilities that are more or less developed. Becoming aware of those abilities and evolving them is a time consuming process requiring a great deal of patience, which means that very few of them can genuinely claim to have any real magical powers. Those mages who devote their lives to magic, on the other hand, can become very powerful indeed.

### Spiritual

At the core of the Elfvaar belief system is a living ancestor worship. Souls of Elfvaar who have died go to *Hadesh*, a paradisiacal plane where they will live a carefree and peaceful existence for all time. It is, however, important for a dead Elfvaar's soul to be correctly guided to *Hadesh*, and this is done

in special ceremonies led by priests. When an Elfvaar dies, the soul goes first to a place that is a sort of limbo, which can be very dangerous. Elfvaar who die alone or far from their kin risk being unable to find their way home, and, depending on the individual's willpower and desire to live, their souls may gradually forget what they once were, and become lost and unsaved – a *Safhalad*. Most souls in these circumstances choose to seek refuge in other living beings, such as animals or trees, in an attempt to retain awareness of who they are for as long as possible, while a few choose to stay in limbo. Even for those who have found refuge, if their souls are not guided correctly, eventually their memories will fade and the only thing remaining will be an incredibly intelligent animal, or powerful plant, while those in limbo will simply fade to a pale shadow. In a dangerous world where nearly everything can kill, most Elfvaar fear meeting a *Safhalad* more than anything else.

The souls that reach Hadesh are believed to retain a great curiosity for those they left behind and that they are following the events on Auberond. Most Elfvaar are convinced that the ancestors also have the power to affect the real world and that they keep a protective eye on the living. In gratitude, the Elfvaar offer prayers and symbolic sacrifices to their ancestors, and many homes have small, richly decorated altars and shrines. There is a growing fear among the Elfvaar, however, that the changes in Auberond have somehow separated Hadesh from the real world and that the ancestors are no longer able to see or reach through the planes. This could also be the explanation for why the transformation has been allowed to go as far as it has. This fear is also reinforced with regard to the advancement of Valgaard, one last extreme way out.

### Valgaard

*Valgaard*, the force of the ancestors, is the most extreme example of how the Elfvaar's fight for survival changed their faith and way of living. The touching ceremony previously held when an Elfvaar died, when, with the help of ancient spells and the power of the mourners' love, the soul of the deceased was freed from the shackles binding it to the body, to be permitted to join the company of the ancestors in unbridled joy and enlightenment, has now changed. When an Elfvaar dies today, these ceremonies are held only in certain cases. The struggle for survival has gone on so long that not even the strength of the souls of those who died can be allowed to go to waste. Though it is not a spoken requirement, for no one can claim another Elfvaar's soul, nearly all Elfvaar choose to

allow their souls to enter special crystals harvested from Auberond's interior. Within these crystals, the souls' full power can be stored in the form of a pale blue glow, and then, like a battery, they can be used to drive the security systems, the vehicles, and even the weapons. The fact that the souls within these crystals is eventually obliterated, meaning they can never join the company of the ancestors, is a price the Elfvaar are willing to pay, and is an indication of their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their kin.

### SALADAAR & MALFASHOUD

**"Our shadows are alive  
and they seek our death."**

What was once a proud people, has, under pressure from the planet's de-evolution, gradually changed to two peoples: Saladaar and Malfashoud. Though they are in many ways so similar that they would be considered the same, they differ in a few crucial ways, and it becomes clear that they are two very different creatures.

### SALADAAR

**"Never before have such  
beautiful songs been written  
about such an ugly fate."**

Central to the group still calling itself the Saladaar is the refusal to change themselves. This is perhaps somewhat ironic considering that they have already transformed into a people who, instead of singing songs and playing games, devote all hours of the day to fighting for survival as if they were merciless battle machines.

This is, however, an extremely sensitive issue for all Saladaar, and they discuss it at length, as if they are working to convince themselves. The core of the rationale is: the Saladaar are and will remain a beauty-loving, singing, frolicking, and life-loving people no matter how much blood they must spill in order to preserve this fact. It does not matter that they no longer have any time to spend on the things they hold most dear and important, so long as they do not forget those things. Circumstances beyond the Saladaar's control may force them to live differently, eat differently, clothe themselves differently, behave differently toward one another, learn different abilities, engage differently with their surroundings, view death differently and see life with new eyes, but they will not let nature or the planet's de-evolution change

them in the flesh or in the spirit. While animals and plants have adapted, evolved and mutated rapidly since the start of the de-evolution, the Saladaar have remained physically unchanged. Not because mutations have not occurred, but because the Saladaar do not allow them to continue to exist. The consensus is that this may not be kind, but that it is necessary.

### The Network

Across Auberond, the struggle for way of living and life itself, as well as to be as strong as possible, the Saladaar try to be unanimous in their decisions. Central to this is keeping close contact and communication with one another, but in this dangerous world where each excursion outside the haidaar is a potential suicide mission, keeping in touch is difficult. This is where the priests and mages come in. With magic spells such as teleportation and spirit walking, the various clans can keep lines of communication open, though this is an energy-sapping process fraught with peril. The most powerful clans have solved this by setting up a permanent link by using a spell that is kept active using several ancestor crystals, which are slowly depleted. This communication link is called *Nodaan* – the network – and it can only work as long as new Elfvaar continue to die and add their spiritual energies to the crystals. During the last thirty years, the nodaan has not ceased a single time.

### Clans

Despite the difficult trials and tribulations encountered by the clans on Auberond, there are still many Elfvaar left. Some clans are large, with hundreds of members, while others are just tattered remains consisting of only a dozen or so. The list of clans that have been completely wiped out is long and constantly growing. In accordance with the Saladaar's desire to preserve what they once were, each clan carefully chronicles everything that happens, and these chronicles are deemed the clans' most important possession. If a clan faces potential destruction, it is vital that their chronicle be sent to another clan so that no detail is lost. A clan's chronicle is often viewed as being far more important than each individual member of the clan.

### Clan Examples

Next follows a few short descriptions of some of the clans. You can of course add any number of clans, and they can be of any size, have any type of power relationship, or be in any predicament you wish.



## The Azure Singers Clan

The Azure Singers Clan is likely the largest remaining clan in Auberond. With close to seven hundred members, the clan is even larger than it was during the time prior to de-evolution. This is primarily because the clan assimilates remnants of other clans who have already been wiped out. The clan includes therefore a number of Elfvaar from the Daydreamers clan, the Crescent Moon Clan, the Cascade Riders Clan, and so on.

The strength of numbers makes the Azure Singers Clan the only clan in Auberond that can actively and aggressively purge and broaden their own territory. The area in their haidaar, a cliff whose steep face towered over a beautiful lake, is limited, however, and the Azure Singers Clan suffers from a severe lack of space.

There are ongoing discussions within the clan about the potential advantages of dividing it into two, but the idea of leading an exodus from the Azure cliff in order to create a new hairaam is so daunting that no one wishes to take on such a task.

## The Crystalmakers Clan

The Crystalmakers Clan is a medium-sized clan with nearly two hundred members.

Their hairaam lies deep underground and is thought to be virtually impregnable to enemies from the outside.

The Crystalmakers Clan is central to the Saladaar network since this clan mines practically all crystals used for Valgaard. These crystals are delivered to the other clans via physical or magical means and the clan has more mages than many others.

Two threats against the Crystalmakers will soon present themselves: It is becoming harder and more dangerous to extract crystals as the mineshaft is getting deeper, and tectonic activity threatens to gradually pull the Crystalmakers' hairaam farther down into the ground, essentially burying the clan alive.

## The Dawnhunters Clan

The Dawnhunters Clan has fairly recently become a relatively small clan of just over sixty members. Previously, the clan was almost a hundred and fifty Elfvaar strong, but a toxic parasite took hold in their hairaam and killed a majority of the population.

One effect of this has been that the clan now has a larger supply of the Valgaard ancestor crystals than any other clan. The Dawnhunters' hairaam, an ancient cliff temple with many interconnected chambers has therefore become the center for a number of

mages who have travelled there and together they now work to develop a more powerful weapon than anything currently existing.

## The Peacock Spire Clan

The Peacock Spire Clan is a small and steadily declining clan with just under fifty members. The whims of fate have placed their hairaam, a freestanding granite spire, in the way of an unusually aggressive clan of Malfashoud led by what is rumoured to be a Safhald who found refuge in a creature resembling a dragon. Other clans have made attempts to come to the Peacock Spire's rescue, but to no avail. The battle and the spire are seen by many as a symbol of the fight that continues across all of Auberond.

## The Rainbow Weavers Clan

The Rainbow Weavers Clan is just one of the many clans that have disappeared completely. No contact with them has existed for a very long time, and nearby clans are gradually accepting the fact that another clan has met its unhappy destiny. The Rainbow Weavers were added to a list full of lost clans, such as the Water Lily Builders Clan, the Northern Lights Scribers Clan, the Dragonfly Sailors Clan, the Firefly Lighters Clan, and so on.



### MALFASHOUD

“We have seen the future and it is us.”

Malfashoud is the name given to the group of Elfvaar who abandoned the dogma of preserving the spirit of what they once were. Ironically, this means that they gladly accept the name given to them by the Saladaar, since they have no qualms with seeing themselves as Malfashoud, flowers of evil, in this new and terrible world. The core of the Malfashoud's beliefs is diametrically opposite that of the Saladaar. Their watchword is *change*, and they view themselves as a development of the Elfvaar race, with a better chance of survival in the long run.

The Malfashoud believe that they, unlike the Saladaar, have accepted the change that is happening on Auberond, and are working to maximise their chances of surviving. To carry the burden of preserving the ideals of what used to be, is in the eyes of the Malfashoud, a waste of time at this stage, and they feel it is counterproductive to continue to strive to return to those ideals. The memories from those times only cause pain, and in order to thrive, they believe it is better to start everything from scratch. Gradually, this desire to put everything behind them has become so important for the Malfashoud that – contrary to their own core message – they have expended a great deal of time and energy on creating new ways of living and new traditions.

The extreme emphasis on acceptance of all the changes occurring in Auberond and the total devotion to survival has also fragmented the Malfahsoud. All Malfashoud clans agree that it is acceptable to survive at the expense of the Saladaar because they are an older, unevolved – and therefore dying – breed.

The Malfahsoud have no plans to start any wars or actively seek to obliterate the Saladaar but if the Saladaar have something the Malfashoud feel they need for their survival, they believe it is okay to take it, even by force, if necessary, regardless of the larger consequences this may have for the Saladaar.

What the Malfashoud clans do not agree on, however, is whether this principle is also applicable among the Malfashoud. The most extreme groups advocate some form of eat-or-be-eaten dogma in the spirit of extreme evolutionism; it is deemed only natural for the Malfashoud to kill even their own clan members if this is favourable. In the long run, this will result in the survival of only the hardest, most well-suited and best-equipped Malfashoud. The majority of Malfashoud clans do not share this viewpoint and feel it

is wrong and punishable to attack other clans within the group. The larger problem is that the Malfashoud clans are small and have become difficult to keep track of.

### Radgast

#### The Change

Unlike the Saladaar, the Malfashoud put no importance on preserving physical or racial purity. Quite the opposite, they embrace all the physical and psychic changes nature subjects them to, as long as it benefits the group. Some clans actively seek out mutations within the group by performing biochemical experiments on themselves. Some of them have come so far with this work that there are now Elfvaar who are so fundamentally different from the others that they can hardly even be called Elfvaar any longer. This quest for transformation is called *radgast*, the change. As usual within the splintered group of Malfashoud, there are varying opinions about this quest, and as usual, this disagreement makes no difference. In the end, each clan will do as it wishes.

### Shamshathai

#### The Mobile Bands

A number of Malfashoud clans are organised similarly to their Saladaar counterparts, with a haidaar that is protected and used as a base for excursions. The majority of the Malfashoud clans have gone in another direction, however. In these cases, a clan, depending on size, is divided into one or several small, mobile bands of warriors, called *Shamshathai*, who can travel quickly, find temporary haidaar, and converge at predetermined times. This requires every band be very strong and flexible to any dangers that await them in the world outside. A natural culling has also ensured that remaining Shamshathai are finely hewn and feared by others. When comparing Saladaar and Malfashoud, the Saladaar simply cannot match the Shamshathai in the world outside, and the Shamshathai would be hard pressed to conquer the strongly fortified haidaar of the Saladaar.

### Example Description

Here are a few short descriptions of some of the existing clans. Like the Saladaar, the number of clans you can add is unlimited, and they can be of varying size, power relations, and specialisations. The range is also broader, allowing the game master to create a wider, more extreme variety of clans and groups.

### The Shadow Guardians Clan

The Shadow Guardians clan is the largest and potentially the strongest clan among the Malfashoud. The clan consists of just over five hundred members but since parts of the clan are among the Shamshathai, the number in their haidaar is never this high. The Shadow Guardians Clan's haidaar is in the catacombs beneath what once was Auberond's largest dwelling place, belonging to the Sunshine Guardians Clan, and the clan is also directly born out of the fragmentation that took place when the members in the Sunshine Guardians Clan went in completely different directions. The faction that remained Saladaar now calls itself the Sunbeams Clan and has created a haidaar in the hills a day's march from the former dwelling. Levels of hostility are high between the groups.

The Shadow Guardians Clan is considered relatively moderate among the Malfashoud. They advocate peace within the Malfashoud and do not actively pursue radgast. This has made them a target for the most extreme Malfashoud clans. No one, not even the Saladaar, deny the fact that the clan is the most powerful and influential among the Malfashoud, and this is attributed in many respects to the leader Sal Urdithuviel, perhaps the most clear-sighted and visionary leader of any clan on Auberond.

### The Night Screamers Clan

The Night Screamers Clan is the complete opposite of the Shadow Guardians, and are perhaps the most extreme of all the Malfashoud. The number of members is not possible to determine as the line between Elfvaar and others within the clan is fluid.

The Night Screamers Clan consists exclusively of Shamshathai and they practice radgast in its most drastic form with all possible types of savagery involved. There are confirmations that the Night Screamers Clan has Elfvaar who have evolved wings, but rumours surrounding the clan speak of far worse abominations.

Parts of the Night Screamers clan participate in the attacks on the Peacock Spire Clan and have close ties with the Safhalad who lead the attacks.

### The Iron Sailors Clan

The Iron Sailors Clan is a medium-sized Malfashoud clan with its haidaar at the base of a dormant volcano. The clan has just under three hundred members but is believed to be one of the most technologically advanced clan on Auberond. Among the clan's mem-



bers are crafters who know more about metallurgy than anyone else, and with the help of Valgaard, they have developed weapons, vehicles, and tools that revolve around electromagnetism. The interior of their haidaar is crisscrossed with organic cables that lead energy in different directions. The Iron Sailors clan was one of the first clans whose actions were deemed so extreme that they were cast out of the Saladaar and named Malfashoud.

Throughout the years, the clan has gone through a number of ideological stages, but as various groups of Malfashoud became more extreme, the Iron Sailors clan has gradually become more like the Saladaar again. Confidential diplomatic talks are underway to incorporate the clan into the Nodan network again. As this would change the balance of power between the Saladdar and Malfashoud, as well as within the Malfashoud, these talks are of course extremely secret.

## The Twilight Sweepers Clan

The Twilight Sweepers Clan is very small, consisting of less than eighty members, and containing only two Shamshathai who travel independently of one another.

The Twilight Sweepers clan has embraced the de-evolution and taken it to its limits, and the clan does not view any action that might increase the chances of survival as taboo in any way. They have actively obliterated other Malfashoud clans in order to assimilate their knowledge and resources, and they would not hesitate to do so again. Whether the clan's two Shamshathai are prepared to turn on each other is still to be determined, as they have not yet been in the same place at the same time.

## The Swamp Runners Clan

The Swamp Runners Clan is relatively large and is moderate for a Malfashoud clan. Their haidaar, as the clan name implies, lies in the depths of a swamp and is made up of platforms and artificial islands.

Few other clans have bioseekers who have so actively and efficiently implemented biological and zoological elements from nature in protection of the clan. Transport platforms based on gas-filled spores, insect-hurling weapons, and poison that breaks down the body's enzymes are just a few parts of the Swamp Runners' vast arsenal.

## ARCHETYPES WITHIN THE CLAN

*"Their hairaam was like a well-oiled machine. Everyone knew their place and their purpose."*

Each clan has an enormous number of tasks, but for the sake of simplicity, they can be divided up into seven archetype characters. All possible combinations are of course possible, as well as all conceivable unique characters outside these archetypes.

### Guardians

*"I am the last line of defence. My job is not to die for my clan, but to live for it."*

The guardians are the clan's armed defence, trained and equipped to stand up to all manner of enemies. The moment you see a group of guardians leave their hairaam to venture outside, you understand that the Elfvaar



GUARDIAN

SCOUT

PRIEST

CREATOR

have truly evolved as much as the rest of the world. Instead of flowing tunics, they clad themselves in organic armour made of coral and dragon bone; instead of musical instruments or books, they bear weapons whose ability to wipe out and destroy is far beyond what the original Elfvaar could ever have imagined. Guardians are trained from a young age to cope with enormous physical and mental pressures. They are educated in every conceivable battle method and learn to identify and neutralise all known dangers of Auberond. Given the ever-changing environment, their training is never complete, and each guard must also be prepared to convey what knowledge they have acquired to other guards. Guardians know they will likely never reach middle age, and are therefore very intense, making them perhaps difficult to spend time with. They usually specialise in one of the following categories:

### Bodyguards

Bodyguards are experts in close combat and protection. A common task for a lifeguard is to protect an individual, such as the clan's bard or primary mage, priest or bioseeker. Often, the lifeguard is also responsible for coordinating the escort of Elfvaar who must travel in the outside world.

### Defenders

Defenders are responsible for the hairaam and its safety. They are fortification specialists and also spend time teaching basic protection to other inhabitants of the hairaam.

### Sweepers

Sweepers are the guards who conduct raids, clean-up actions, and attacks in the outside world. They can be subtle, but frequently their campaigns deal with excessive fire-power and sacrifice.

### Scouts

*"I must see and identify our enemies before they see and identify us."*

Scouts are perhaps the loneliest of all the clan members even though there are likely more scouts than there are other members, such as bards or mages. In the world outside, they usually work alone and meet alone the kinds of dangers that most Elfvaar would prefer to meet in strong, well-equipped groups. Scouts often have a basic education as a guard, but there are a few who had their start as a bioseeker or even as a mage.

To move daily in such dangerous terrain surrounded by nothing but things that kill requires a special mental will and a tenacity that can only be achieved through years and years of training. Excellent observation skills and flexibility are vital for their survival, and even if a scout can fight as well as most guards, they are not always equipped for it, and therefore serve the clan better by hiding from enemies and reporting back what they have seen. The scouts are often the ones to meet new enemies first, from new, hostile things in nature, or even other Malfashoud, and a good scout can provide his clan with invaluable advantages in the inevitable battles.

Because of the scout's exposed positions in the outside world, they often have a familiar in the form of a lizard or a bird. If the scout should die, his or her soul, if it still has the presence of mind to do so, can enter the familiar and in so doing, return this precious resource to the clan. Scouts usually specialise in one of the following categories:

### Knowledge Bearers

A knowledge bearer always sticks close to the clan's hairaam to keep a constant lookout for any changes and enemies. All signs of new animals or plants are identified, tested, and, if possible, brought back to the clan.



BARD

BIOSEEKER

MAGE

## Trackers

A tracker is an expert at trailing prey and using this knowledge both for hunting and supplying the clan with food, as well as keeping an eye on the movements of enemies in the area. A tracker is typically sent out if another scout has gone missing, as no other member of the clan has the ability to see the faint traces a scout leaves behind.

## Infiltrators

An infiltrator has the extremely difficult and dangerous task of insinuating themselves into an enemy clan (Saladaar or Malfashoud) in order to gather intelligence, engage in subversive activities, or in extreme cases, assassinate someone.

## Mages

*"I protect my clan from the enemies within that are so easily overlooked for the enemies without."*

Unlike their clan brothers and sisters, mages move in many planes of reality and therefore have more opportunities, but also greater risks than others.

A skilful mage can use their magic to rend reality itself, but they must also contend with the nameless dangers that lurk in the shadows. Manipulating space and the laws of nature requires both an innate gift, an incredibly strong will, and an extreme dedication during advanced and often abstract studies. Few are therefore called to become a mage, and fewer succeed so well in their studies as to be able to shoulder the focus of the ancestors that is the hallmark of the mage. A clan that manages to educate several sufficient mages can count itself lucky and will soon be getting requests from other clans to educate their newly discovered talented young Elfvaar.

The gift of handling magic shows itself in several ways: visions, the ability to manipulate small objects in some way, or the being able to read others' thoughts. The most common sign, however, is some form of madness or other asocial behaviour, as young Elfvaar are frequently ill equipped to cope with these gifts.

Even mages learn to fight and handle weapons, just like nearly everyone else in the clan, but the large part of their studies is devoted to the mastery of existing skills and the development of new spells.

Each mage has the right to carry an ancestor crystal and use it to their best ability,

and many mages also subconsciously develop a connection to the crystal and the soul within. No one else in the clan is allowed to continually tap the energy of the ancestors' souls in this way.

Mages typically specialise in one of the following categories:

### Guardian Mages

These are battle mages whose power can be incredibly destructive. Fire, energy, and control over animals and plants is not uncommon. Guardian mages also receive battle training along with guardians and learn to deal with all types of combat.

### Elemental Mages

Elemental mages have a unique position in Auberond where nature has come to have such a massive impact. The mage who can learn to tame volcanoes and weather can make a great difference.

### Diplomages

Diplomages specialise in transportation and communication. Frequently, it is these mages who have contact with other clans, and are transported to other hairaam when necessary.

### Bioseekers

“Though I am aware nature is trying to kill us, I yet see the miracle in each minute detail.”

Bioseekers are scientists who constantly deal with dangerous objects. They are constantly moving on the edges of science and must repeatedly trust their instincts and at great personal risk provide the clan with new tools for its survival. The bioseeker’s job is to gather, identify, dissect, shape, and learn to utilise all the plants, animals, and other organisms that Auberond’s unbalanced ecosystem rapidly produces. Because the biodiversity is so immense and advanced, no bioseeker can possibly know or understand everything. They must instead narrow their focus fairly early on, and specialise their research into a few primary categories. Over time, a skilled bioseeker who survives the constant empirical game of death can become an unrivalled expert on Auberond and see their reputation spread from clan to clan. Such a bioseeker is worth their weight in gold, and is invaluable as a teacher and shaper of new generations. Because the bioseeker’s main task is about extracting useful knowledge from the environment for the benefit of the clan, it is not so strange that the bioseekers themselves have found more use than others for plants and animals in their research, and their equipment and tools. Bioseekers typically specialise in one of the following categories:

### Trappers

Trappers travel with scouts and guardians in the outside world, picking up new objects for examination. First contact with these objects can be very exciting, but also highly dangerous.

### Custodians

When objects are taken from outside, they must be kept safe until they can be examined. A custodian is as much a prison guard as an observer and the job includes always finding new ways to keep track of the deadly things stored there in the heart of the clan.

### Extractors

Extractors are the bioseekers who perform the actual experimentation and extract any useful information from the objects that have been collected. They must be both creative and have good communication with others in the clan in order to be able to tailor new weapons and tools to their specific needs.

### Creators

“I do not see how it can be done at all, so give me a day or two.”

Creators are the dedicated and handy Elfvaar who make sure the clan and the hairaam work logically. They put the weapons in the hands of their defenders, they outfit the bioseekers with the tools they need to dissect reality, they are, in short, the oil that keeps the wheels turning. Creators usually specialise in one of the following categories:

### Armourers

The armourers work in close contact with the bioseekers and manufacture armour from metal or organic material. With the help of Valgaard, they can create very advanced systems to the extent that it could almost be called science fiction.

### Engineers

Engineers build and maintain the hairaam as well as other buildings, structures and systems. They are experts at ventilation, plumbing, structural durability, and so on. Their expertise makes them additionally useful as siege and demolition experts.

### Mechanics

Mechanics build and maintain an entire fleet of vehicles and systems. They can fix anything, and of course destroy anything to the extent that it can no longer be repaired.

### Priests

“I guide my brothers and sisters in life, and their souls in death.”

The priest is both a spiritual and political leader of great importance within the clan. When critical, potentially life-altering decisions must be made, all turn to the priest to hear not only his opinions but also the voices of the ancestors and traditions.

Where priests used to provide comfort and guidance to other Elfvaar during their lives and preside over the ceremony to send their souls to the ancestors when they died, today’s priests lead the ceremony that helps bind their souls to the crystals.

The role of priest is not for everyone, and the selection of priests still follows old and mysterious principles. Through signs and revelations current priests learn about potential new ones in the clan, and then they watch the youth to keep an eye out for further

evidence. Sometimes this observation can go on for several years. If the candidate finally demonstrates the sense of responsibility and empathy required for this calling, and is additionally identified in further portents, the candidate is given a test of initiation. Exactly what this test consists of is known only to the priests who have survived it, but that it is in some way connected to the spirit plane is clear. If the candidate passes the test, they enter into rigorous training under strict ascetic circumstances. Priests typically specialise in one of the following categories:

### Ceremonial Masters

Ceremonial masters are the ones whose words are the clan’s most valuable, most poignant. They often act as the master of ceremony in clan councils and perform Valgaard on the souls of the dead. Over and above this, they are historians and interpreters of tradition, as well as spiritual guides, officiators of marriages, and more.

### Spirit Walkers

Spirit Walkers are priests who spend most of their time investigating the mysterious and highly dangerous spirit plane. They are specialists at searching and finding lost souls and fighting the Safhalad sometimes encountered by the clan. In some cases, they learn *Haderashad*, Corpse Walking, in which they take control of a dead body and use it from afar. If the body they have possessed should die (again), the Spirit Walker can return to his/her own body.

### Bards

“I live as a symbol for the others. I wear my ineptitude like a crown.”

Each clan has at most one bard and one or two bard apprentices. It is both an extreme burden as well as an extreme honour to be selected to carry forward this oldest and most well known of professions. Every day, the bard sees his/her brothers and sisters fight for their survival and is forbidden to do anything to help them in the battle. Every day, it is the bard who gives all the others the power to continue fighting. The bard’s primary task is – through his/her complete ignorance of the dangers of the outside world and total lack of training should s/he encounter those dangers – to remind all the others of what they once were and what they are really fighting for. The bard is generally the only Elfvaar who will not become Valgaard, the power of the ancestors, and will actually

be reunited with the ancestors with updates about what is happening in the world. The bard is at once an ideologue, a visionary, a historian, a link to the past, and assurances of continued protection for the future. The bard's knowledge of the past overshadows the priests' and s/he is a master of a vast oral tradition in the form of stories, songs, and poetry. It is rare that the clan has the time and ability to sit calmly and listen to this spoken treasure, but just knowing that such a precious thing wanders in their midst is often enough to encourage members of the clan. The bard always has one or more bodyguards, typically a point of pride for the oldest and most experienced guardians. The bard is often especially talented at one or more of the finer arts, but there are no "specialist" bards. Being a bard is special enough.

## THE GAME SYSTEM

**"The rules that govern our lives are known only to the ancestors who see beyond the veil."**

There is no finished game system for *Auberond*, but if someone out there is willing to cobble one together, they are more than welcome to do so. What follows is just a few suggestions and guidelines.

## Combat

Auberond is undeniably a place where the possibilities for combat are legion, so I would recommend using a system with well-established rules for all kinds of combat. Since many of the weapons the Elfvaar use are so extreme, a combat system that covers powerful firearms could be useful.

It is easy to build on a long list of possible skills and skill levels for the different archetypes and the game as a whole. In combination with a simple system for experience points, the characters have lots of possibilities to improve and take on new skills.

## Magic

*Auberond*'s magic system can be done in many ways and it is probably ultimately down to a matter of taste. An ambitious game master can sit down and create an enormous list with spells within each magic tradition, provide these spells with different costs depending on their strengths, and perhaps assign some spells to specific levels of experience, and so on. A less ambitious game master can probably put together an appropriate collection of spells from already-existing fan-

tasy games and then modify these in the same way with good results. A third option could be to create a magic system à la *Ars Magica* where the mages master different traditions and subjects, and within these traditions and subjects allow characters to create their own unique spells each time a situation arises. The most vital thing is keeping to the following: Magic is difficult, dangerous, and exhausting. A magician cannot perform an unlimited number of spells without needing to take a break or utilise an ancestor crystal.

## Belief System

The belief system of *Auberond* goes hand in hand with the magic system. Create your own miracles or curses for priests to master, or modify some already existing ones. Belief is, however, trickier than magic and so here are a few recommendations:

- On Auberond, you must differentiate between the power that provably and tangibly exists within the souls and the potentially divine and ancestral interventions that the Elfvaar are hoping for.
- Souls exist and they are powerful. When an Elfvaar dies, their soul is freed and travels to limbo, a type of spiritual plane. The soul keeps the previous body's thoughts and memories for a while after death and then gradually loses them, becoming a spirit without memory of what it was, and without empathy with anything other than itself – a Safhalad. A soul that possesses another living thing, such as a tree or an animal, maintains its thoughts and memories for longer, along with the creature's own thoughts, but the thoughts and memories eventually fade away. Left behind is a tree or animal that is unnaturally intelligent and powerful. A soul can be saved and guided back to one of the Spirit Walkers and placed into an Ancestor Crystal.
- Gods or ancestors with the ability to intervene in the world of the living is something the Elfvaar believe in, but the game master should ensure this belief remains a little uncertain. Perhaps the ancestors really do have the ability to watch over their living relatives and perhaps they don't. The important thing is what the characters believe, how that belief manifests itself, and what it means to them. A game master can definitely play on this belief and let things happen, randomly or supernaturally, which the characters will interpret as they wish.
- Miracles and curses are difficult, dangerous and exhausting. A priest cannot perform an unlimited amount of these without resting or using an ancestor crystal.

## Enemies and Monsters

Creating a monster book for *Auberond*, or trying to list all enemies and lethal things that lurk in the woods is unnecessary, and really a waste of time. Everything is dangerous, and the only thing really determining just how deadly and powerful various things in the game is how sadistic the game master is. To simplify a little, however, below are a few examples of some of the potential things a player might encounter:

## Nature Itself

Volcanic eruptions spew dangerous lava, darken the sky with ash clouds, eject stones as large as houses, and can explode at any moment with the force of multiple atomic bombs. Earthquakes cause devastating damage and following in their wake are lethal and sometimes invisible cracks, tsunamis, and more. Acid rain kills crops and makes any kind of farming in the outside world difficult and even poisonous. Sulphur fumes and other gasses can rise from below the earth and cause the air to become poisonous, flammable, or generally vile. Permanent and unfavourable climate (baking heat, permafrost), or extremely changeable climate makes journeys into the world outside difficult, and growing food on the surface essentially impossible.

## Botany

Various bizarre plants, flowers, trees, mushrooms, etc, have gone in one of 3 directions:

1. Some become carnivorous predatory plants to increase their chances of survival. This means something like triffid-style poison darts, ensnaring vines, flesh-dissolving enzymes, and other terrifying things.
2. Some develop diabolical defence systems to protect themselves against all other predators who wish to do them harm, and so they have become extremely poisonous, dripping with acid, equipped with razor-sharp thorns and spines, and they are fast, powerful, and deadly.
3. The final group of plants are perhaps not always lethal in and of themselves, but they can grow and spread swiftly and make trekking through them highly dangerous for the Elfvaar. They may make it difficult to see and breathe by spreading dense clouds of pollen and spores that grow so aggressively that they take root on whatever they land on, including Elfvaar. They may also grow so fast and thick that their roots and branches break even the strongest structures apart.

### Zoology

Like the plants, various animals will evolve in the same 3 directions:

1. The first become predators of the most diabolical type. Everything from dinosaurs to invisible killers, vile creatures that hunt in packs, insects big as houses and small as microbes.
2. Other develop defence mechanisms that are lethally poisonous, laced with acid, they might fling thorns, or damage the Elfvaar's vision and hearing, and more.
3. And the final group of animals move in swarms large enough to blot out the sky, and are deadly to all those who get in the way, no matter how peaceful they might be individually. Some of these may clog up vital systems of the hairaam with eggs, webs, sloughed skin, and other disgusting things.

### Thinking Creatures

Even the rest of the other thinking creatures who existed on Auberond in the past have gone through the de-evolution. Those who did not die out have had to adapt to a much harsher world. Chances are good that there are now highly dangerous gryphons, harpies, dragons, manticores, sphinxes, and more. The possibility exists, of course, that some of them might have managed to remain good and can become powerful allies of the Saladaar.

### Spirits and Ghosts

Safhalad on the spirit plane, and – if they possessed some type of animal or other living creature – powerful and usually evil creatures in all imaginable forms.

### Malfashoud or Saladaar

Depending on which side you want your clan to be, the Elfvaar of the opposite world view and ideology is of course one of your clan's toughest opponents.

### Technology

One of the best things about *Auberond* is the special environment and the fact that it allows players to walk that line between fantasy and science fiction. With Valgaard and the ancestor crystals, there is energy for variables beyond magic, biochemistry, and old-fashioned technology. Combining these four things allows for the possibility to create equipment that might feel very future-oriented, but still remains anchored in a fantasy environment. The technology

on Auberond encourages creativity. Very few ideas are too extreme, since the environment is just a background against which you can play out exciting stories with the theme "life and death", "ideals and reality", and so on.

### Weapons

Weapons in Auberond can easily be divided into four categories: ancestor weapons, magical weapons, biochemical weapons, and mechanical weapons. Many weapons are a combination of several different categories. Some examples:

#### Frakat kaan – The Burning Lance

This is something like a cross between a flamethrower and a lance. The pressure containers – protected by magic and equipped with ancestor crystals – store viscous magma. The guardian who fires this lance is protected by his galvaraan.

#### Dimshalui – The Stinging Rain

Uses containers of mature eggs of a highly aggressive and poisonous flying insect. When the eggs are about to hatch, the weapon is armed and stored for just over one week. The insects require more space than the eggs they've just hatched from, and this creates an enormous pressure, an incredible hunger, and an extremely pent-up anger in the insects. When the weapon is fired, the insects spray out in a straight line up to ten meters and mercilessly attack whatever is in front of them.

#### Darandaduur – The Blood Blade

A standardised melee weapon with a magically sharpened and invisible blade. This sword requires a lot of training to use, but is extremely effective against non-intelligent life forms.

#### Valfooshan – The Ancestors Womb

One, or sometimes more, ancestor crystals are fitted with an artificial defect, which, after some delay, will cause it/them to explode, releasing all their energy at once. This weapon is guaranteed to clear an entire area – but at a very high price.

### Armour

Armour on Auberond is usually biochemical or purely mechanical. Typically they have characteristics that are strengthened with the help of magic or ancestor power. Some examples:

### Galvaraan – The Living Armour

This armour is almost exclusively reserved for guardians. The armour is the ultimate bioconstruction. Galvaraan is built around a swamp coral and is grown specially for each guardian. The living organisms is self-healing and in symbiotic contact with its wearer. Within the galvaraan, air-purifying algae is grown, and the exoskeletal mechanisms run on ancestor crystals and spells in communication runes. The armour and the guardian soon becomes one until eventually they cannot be separated unless the armour is placed in a special container of swamp water.

### Mak tabaal – Moss of the Woods

Mak tabaal is a general name for a wide variety of armour built in a similar fashion. At its base, the armour is made of thin metal shields, or alternatively bones and scales from extremely hard-skinned predators such as dragons or preying tortoises. On top of these shields, a thin layer of tabaal is grown. Tabaal is a kind of common moss with a useful defence mechanism. When it is subjected to pressures such as a stab or a blow, it balloons out and becomes denser, making it a reactive shield. A single two-to-three centimetre-thick shield of mak tabaal can easily grow to more than a decimetre thick when necessary, and the weight of the shield does not increase in the process.

### Valvadiin – The Ancestral Flare

A protective spell connected to ancestor crystals that can further be connected to any type of armour. The spell creates a forcefield that can stand up to extreme temperatures, like missiles, as well as other penetrative attempts. The spell can be turned on and off by the wearer of the armour.

### Transportation

With the help of energy from ancestor crystals, the Elfvaar can produce all manner of propelled vehicles, but it is still nature that provides the most efficient means of transportation.

### Abishmaal – The Hovering Evil

Abishmaal is both a very effective means of transportation and a dangerous weapon, and it is a typical bioconstruction. In short, it is the name of a touch seedpod released from a type of tenacious mushroom that grows at the bottom of a sulphur swamp. The pods float up to the surface, encounter the acid-rich atmosphere, and a chemical reaction happens



in which the pods swell to a hundred times their original size, blow away in the wind until they meet something sharp, whereupon they pop, and their contents explode everywhere in a rain of acid. As a weapon, the pods are harvested beneath the surface of the swamp and then stored in breakable containers. These containers are then thrown like grenades. As a means of transportation, these same containers are broken, and the swollen seedpods are collected within a magical field and used as both a hovering weapon and a transportation platform.

## Mounts

A number of animals on Auberond can be ridden by Elfvaar, but because all of them are wild, and breeding with the purpose of creating tame versions of the animal is seldom possible, riding animals usually means finding temporary transport with highly unwilling animals, controlled through the use of chemical injections or magic. Examples of mounts include large lizards, giant insects, great cats, and enormous snakes.

## Research

Because Elfvaar living in the shadow of extinction need so much more than weapons, ar-

mour, and transportation, there is of course other exciting technological and biological equipment to spend their creative energies on. Communication, tools for construction, locks, devices for capturing and taming wild organisms, and so on. Simply continue in the same spirit as the items mentioned above. Combine nature's most bizarre elements with a little old-fashioned mechanics and slap on a few spells or ancestor crystals as needed.

## CAMPAIN SUGGESTIONS

*“Our lives had become the cruellest drama created to entertain perverse gods.”*

## Creating a Clan

Creating a clan is a reasonable first step for a game master wondering how to start a campaign in *Auberond*. The clan will be everything to the players, so it's a good idea to create an exciting and interesting group that they can identify with. When creating a clan, the following questions can be helpful:

- What is the name of the clan?
- What is the origin of that name – what is the clan's history?
- Is the clan Saladaar or Malfashoud?
- How big is the clan?
- Where is the clan's haidaar, and what does it look like (in a general sense)?

At this point, further questions can be asked:

- What is the clan's main survival problem?
- Who or what are the clan's main enemies?
- What are the demographics of the clan? How many clan members belong to each archetype?
- What is the morale level in the clan?
- What is the decision-making process? Is there unanimity? Are there factions that pull in different directions?
- What alliances and contacts does the clan have with other clans?
- Is there anything that makes this clan unique compared to all the other clans?

With these questions, a game master has a good basis to work from, and the process of creating a clan and pondering on these questions has likely already generated a whole host of ideas for campaigns and scenarios.



### Playing the Clan as a Collective

Auberond is a suitable campaign world for the kind of collective role playing that is found in games like *Ars Magica*. Basically, let the players play various characters within the clan at different opportunities and in different scenarios. In other words, one player can play a guardian in one scenario and then a bioseeker in another. Each time the player plays a new character, they give the character a special history, style, and soul. In this way, players gradually give life to more and more of the members of the clan, and step by step, they create the feeling of a collective that everyone can relate to. The game master also gets a lot of help with making non-player characters since many of them will have been played in a very unique way by a player at some point. Finally, this method gives a lot of room for creating good drama and interest since characters can easily be killed in a scenario without the player winding up being left out of the campaign or having to create a new

character. Having death be always present in this way allows for wonderfully intimate emotions, heroic death scenes, sorrow and doubt. Yummy!

### Elements and Issues

A death world like *Auberond* easily creates huge, complicated issues that can be built on and woven into the campaign. Is survival worth any cost? Exactly what is one prepared to die for? How important are ideals and principles in the larger scheme of things?

What rights do individuals have vs the rights of the group when facing great dangers? Can reactions to enemies make us do exactly the things we vowed we never would?

### A FEW SIMPLE CAMPAIGN AND SCENARIO SUGGESTIONS

Finally, here are a few short suggestions on campaigns and scenarios to get the inspiration flowing:

#### Campaign I

The Book of Death

The Last Chronicle of a Dying People

Even before the players have started making their characters, or even received the most basic information about the campaign, the game master brings out a thick hardcover book. This is best if it's a nice, beautiful hardcover of the type that can be found at a bookbinder's or an antiquarian bookseller's shop. The game master says that this book is the campaign they will be playing and that it is called *The Book of Death - The Last Chronicle of a Dying People*. The game master reads the final passage in the chronicle (cleverly pasted in, or similar) and takes the players on a journey to the last group of Elfvaar on all of Auberond in their final moments. With a bit of creativity, this last passage can contain scores of evocative images and situations from the campaign world that compels the players to look up characters and begin playing. At the same time, the game master sets the tone and framework for the campaign in a very clear way. The message is crystal clear – you are all doomed, you will all die sooner or later. This will

be an incredibly potent way to set the stage for the players as they time after time are tossed between hope and despair, triumph and failure in the campaign. Each time the players' characters have discussions about optimism for the future or pessimism at the world around them, they become aware that no matter what they try, nothing is ever going to work. They can take part in the dramatic build-up of the end of the campaign. The campaign can begin in a clan, follow that clan to its demise, watch as the players are forced to be assimilated into one or several new clans,

follow the game between the Saladaar and the Malfashoud when it becomes apparent that the two groups in their quarrel are still moving toward ruin, see the last great battle, and finally land in the final remains of the Elfvaar on Auberond.

In the last gaming session, the game master can follow the players all the way to the end where the final passage in the book is written by the last bard. And then, if desired, the game leader can create a twist that the players never would have suspected. Perhaps the last Elfvaar have something fantastic happen after they write the final passage and have prepared themselves for certain death? Perhaps something happens that turns the whole planet's development upside down and restores Auberond to its former glory. Maybe the *Book of Death* is just a history lesson for all Auberond's school children so that they never forget. Or perhaps they all die after all. Any scenario is a good one.

## Campaign II

### The Enemy of My Enemy

A campaign where the ambitious game master pits two different groups against each other. One group plays Saladaar and another plays Malfashoud. They each create a clan and a cast of characters. They are allowed to examine the world in a number of different scenarios and are tasked by the game master to shape hardline, extreme, and unforgiving life philosophies with regard to living and viewing the world.

When this is done, the game master gradually brings these two clans on a collision course with each other, while the world simultaneously spins toward its own demise at a dizzying speed. The two groups are given the possibility to play off each other, forge alliances with and against each other, deal with infiltrators and diplomats, and in this way, have a little serious, thinking opposition for a while. It is optimal if the players aren't even aware of each other's existence.

How the struggle between the groups goes and how this affects the players is of course completely up in the air. Maybe one side wins or maybe both sides lose. In any case, it is good if the game master gradually makes the world so harsh and dangerous to the players that they finally wind up in such vulnerable situations that they must begin to compromise their hard-won philosophies if they are to have any chance at survival. The main question is, is it so important to remain Saladaar/Malfashoud that they are prepared to die for it, and if so, what was the whole point in surviving in the first place?

## Campaign III

### We were Them

A short and simply structured Malfashoud campaign where players play a group of Malfashoud who pursue Shamshathai. After having established the group as ideological hardliners in a number of scenarios, the game master can start to move the players along in the campaign, as in the campaign suggestions previously.

During a raid on a hairaam, the characters find that the Saladaar clan that had been dwelling there has been obliterated by a power enemy/dangerous disease/some other terrible thing. The clan has, however, left behind a treasure trove of chronicles from a number of other wiped out Saladaar clans. With a bit of tricky GMing in the background, the players/characters make the mistake of starting to read these chronicles.

The campaign can now move into a bit of a free-form phase where the players are given new Saladaar characters for a scenario where they act out a story from the chronicles they have read. When the scenario is finished, they return to their Malfashoud characters. For each new chronicle they read – and they will of course read several more – they will receive new characters and experience new adventures. The chronicles they read obviously provide them with in-depth insight into how it is to live as a Saladaar and gradually their empathy will grow for these people, and the community that, despite everything, the Malfashoud once were a part of. It is difficult to hate an enemy who has been given a commonality and fellowship with oneself.

The campaign can end in many exciting ways. Perhaps the characters finally meet a group of Saladaar who have come to retrieve the very chronicles that have so deeply changed the Malfashoud clan's perceptions of their "enemies".

## Scenario Outline I

### The Clan that Disappeared

The players play a team that is sent on a rescue mission to a clan that has disappeared from the Nodaan. Their task is to:

- Reach the clan.
- Find out what happened to them.
- If the clan still exists, help them to restore communication.
- If the clan has been wiped out, find and retrieve the clan's chronicle.
- If the clan has been wiped out, find out what happened to them and learn from their mistakes.

## Scenario Outline II

### A Song for the Heartless

The players play a team of Saladaar that has been sent out on an infiltration mission. At the center of the infiltration is a bard who must pretend s/he has actual skills, but whose real purpose is to use his/her abilities in oral tradition and storytelling to plant within the enemy a subversive seed of longing for the past.

## Scenario Outline III

### At Any Cost

Explore the most extreme situations in *Auberond*. The players play multiple characters in a clan that has had to face enormously powerful enemies. A Safhalad that has possessed an already dangerous creature (such as a winged snake, dragon, etc.) wreaks chaos and destruction in the area, the number of dead rises drastically, and Elfvaar after Elfvaar is swallowed whole. The bioseekers cannot find any weak points in the creature, who seems to be virtually invulnerable, with scales and such, as well as having a large amount of the Elfvaar's knowledge and insights. All attacks against the creature fail. A very bold and clever plan must be crafted. The solution is up to the players, but one example could be to have a group of guardians attack the creature knowing that they will die. And when they have been killed and swallowed, and the creature returns to its lair, the guardians' bodies will be reanimated by spirit walkers who have been ready and waiting, and the guardians can slay the creature from the inside.

## MINIATURES

**“Our destiny cannot be measured on any scale.”**

## Tips

A campaign world with so much room for battle and action is of course suitable for using miniatures. There are many miniatures that would work for both the fantasy and science fiction genres. And you can always select and convert a few miniatures from GW's *Eldar* series.

## CONCLUSION

There is so much more that could be said about *Auberond*, and if anyone out there would like to fill in some of the gaps, and explore all the unfinished crevices, I would be just as curious as everyone else to see how that turns out! Enjoy!

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EXTENDED BY THE AUTHOR FOR THIS ANTHOLOGY

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# OZ IS DROWNING!

## AN APOCALYPTIC 1950s CAMPAIGN OUTLINE

“When man entered the atomic age, he opened the door to a new world. What we may eventually find in that new world, nobody can predict.”

Dr. Medford in the movie *Them!* (1954)

### INTRODUCTION

#### Game mechanics

This campaign outline is system-free. Several well-established role-playing games provide suitable rules (e.g. *Call of Cthulhu*, *D20 Modern*, *GURPS*, *System D6*, and *True20*).

#### Five campaign Premises

Every civilization is born, grows and declines, and one day it perishes. This article attempts to show what it could look like when our civilization starts to crumble under the pressure of an alien invasion and a changing climate. Its main source of inspiration is a disaster novel from the early 1950s: *The Kraken Wakes* by John Wyndham.

The campaign is staged in a cinematic version of Australia (“Oz” is a nickname for

that continent) derived from *Quigley Down Under*, *The Thorn Birds*, *The Flying Doctors*, *The Sword of Honor*, *McLeod’s Daughters*, and the movie epic *Australia*.

The campaign is not an RPG implementation of Wyndham’s novel; it merely uses some of its general ideas. The following premises establish the appropriate mood:

- **The invaders are incomprehensible and invisible.**

The aliens are supposed to remain enigmatic during the whole campaign: there will be no contact, no communication, no understanding. People will only encounter their machinery and experience the severe consequences of their actions. Humanity will never learn what the aliens look like or what qualities their civilization possesses.

- **Mankind is at a disadvantage.** Human technology is insufficient to reach the invaders’ settlements on the ocean floors. Down

there they are able to deflect all attacks by unmanned submersibles and nuclear weapons. The campaign deals with survival during a slow-motion catastrophe and attempts to build a new future in a changed world, not with defeating the invaders.

- **Disasters!** Terrible events occur and people suffer miserably. This is not a crisis one is able to resolve; one must endure it.
- **There will be no miracles.** No sudden scientific break-through will save the day.
- **Competence saves lives.** This is an era for heroes in the spirit of Jules Verne: competent people who, through whole-hearted efforts, will alleviate the situation locally during the global catastrophe. The game master should reward skill and ingenuity to make the gamers work in that manner.

### THE KRAKEN WAKES – A Summary

Extraterrestrials land in the oceans and establish footholds deep down in the abyss where humans cannot go. It appears that they must live under very high pressure. After some time, they begin to “terraform” Earth according to their needs, thereby causing climate disasters and rising sea levels.

The novel covers about ten years. The Cold War serves as background: the paranoid distrust between the West and the Communist bloc blocks all attempts to coordinate the struggle against the invaders.

John Wyndham uses several literary tropes to pace the story in an suspenseful manner:

- The protagonists are a married couple, two British journalists who cover events for their radio service. They thereby have plausible reasons for being present at several dramatic incidents around the globe.
- Humans never find out who or what those invaders are. There is no communication, no contacts between the two species. The aliens only reveal themselves through the consequences of their actions. The few material artefacts that humans see are most likely biological machines that reconnoiter the ocean coasts.

- The book ends with a question mark. The disaster has run its course, the continents have new shapes and climate, and a considerable part of mankind has perished. It is uncertain what will happen next, but the protagonists nurture a small hope that some sort of society can be rebuilt.

The novel’s disaster is a slow-motion event, unlike the sudden ends to civilization – meteor strikes, plagues or nuclear war – that are so common in science fiction.





### SOME NOTES ON THE COLD WAR

This gaming anthology is not the right place for a lengthy excursion into the Cold War, because thousands of books have already been written on that subject. I recommend Wikipedia to get an introduction into the woes of the 1950s.

However, it is worth pointing out that the 1950s was a ruthless decade. Its political rhetoric may appear shrill to us sixty years later because of the ever-present specter of nuclear war.

Uneasy peace exists in Europe after the end of the Greek Civil War in 1949, but in Asia there are several major armed conflicts, e.g. in Kashmir 1947, in Korea 1950-53, in French Indochina 1946-54, in Malacca 1948-60. Also, Israel and its neighbors have plenty of border skirmishes 1948-56.

The Soviet Union is characterized by Stalinist paranoia, whereas people in the West see the Communist bloc as an existential threat. Both sides brandish nuclear arms in their rhetoric, but whenever military commanders suggest using atom bombs (e.g. in Korea and Vietnam), those notions are immediately quashed by their political masters.

The goal of the US strategic plan for World War Three (see *Operation Dropshot* in Wikipedia) is to quickly devastate the Soviet Union and China by nuclear and conventional air strikes. The Soviet Union has similar plans for Western Europe, but a trans-Arctic air attack on the distant United States would be difficult to execute successfully.

The superpowers' intelligence organizations carry out clandestine activities everywhere in the world "to thwart enemy plots". Such operations range from spying to assassinations and coups-d'état. Because of misjudgments, such plans often fail or cause misery for common people in the targeted countries. For instance, Guatemala and Iran suffer CIA-led coups justified with anti-Soviet arguments, whereas in 1948 the democratic government in Prague is toppled by the local communist party with support from the Soviet Union.

The extraterrestrial invasion will shift world history into a new path. Many conflicts, such as the Suez War and the Hungarian uprising in the autumn of 1956, may not even occur. But the distrust between the Soviet Union and the West is so profound that they will find it hard to cooperate even when Earth is heading towards a huge disaster. After all, their anti-German alliance in 1941-45 had merely been a marriage of convenience with no genuine friendship and trust.

### ADVENTURES DOWN UNDER

The Commonwealth of Australia comprises Australia proper, Tasmania, some outlying minor islands and archipelagoes (e.g. Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands), colonial territories in New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, plus a vast unrecognized land claim in Antarctica. Australia of 1950s contains both European-style metropolises at the coast, like Sydney and Melbourne, and rural settlements in the desolate outback of the interior. This variation opens the door for all sorts of adventures, ranging from urban spy thrillers to pseudo-westerns and monster action.

Australia, being a member of the British Commonwealth, participated on several fronts in World War Two: North Africa and Greece 1940-41, New Guinea 1942-45 and Borneo 1945. In 1940-41 German merchant raiders prowled along her coasts and in 1942-44 Japanese bombers based on Bali repeatedly attacked the port of Darwin in the Northern Territory.

After the war, the federal government launches an ambitious program to attract European immigrants. Most of those that come are Britons, Greeks, Cypriots and Dutchmen that seek a new life far away from devastated Europe. The immigration policy aims at a "White Australia", an attitude that is uncontroversial in the 1950s. In the same way, most people view the discrimination of the Australian Aborigines as "normal".

Australia is a significant western actor in the Cold War. Most citizens support the close ties to the United States that were cemented in 1942. The country hosts British nuclear tests and missile experiments in several remote places. When Chinese Maoists rebel in British-ruled Malaya in 1948, Australia sends ground forces to support the colonial government. When North Korea invades South Korea in 1950, Australia contributes infantry and aircraft to the UN-led coalition opposing the attack.

The Soviet Union carries out several intelligence operations in Australia (see the *Petrov Affair* on Wikipedia). The Australian government is openly hostile to all kinds of communism and even tries to outlaw the local Communist Party. The disputes shut down the diplomatic relations between the two countries at a few occasions.

### Player Characters

#### The Government Men

Australia is a federal country, in which law enforcement is mostly handled by its states. The federal organizations available to the

game master for adventurous purposes are therefore limited to the ASIO (*Australian Security Intelligence Organisation* that handles both external espionage and internal counter-espionage), the CIB (*Commonwealth Investigations Branch*, a federal police with less than one hundred officers) and the military. Australia's professional armed forces have an outstanding reputation, earned in the Libyan Desert and the jungles of New Guinea during World War II and recently in the hills of Korea.

#### Journalists

Another campaign approach is investigative journalism. In the mid-1950s, Australia has no national newspaper, but the game master can create a fictional Sydney-based morning paper - *The Morning News* - that will finance investigations of whatever strange events are occurring. Its ambitious chief hires a few veteran adventurers to assist the journalists when they travel across land and sea in search to the great scope.

#### Private Investigators

A third strategy is to let a wealthy individual, e.g. a retired businessman, sponsor a team of private investigators. This fellow is suspicious of all the strange things he has read about in the newspapers and he believes that the government is covering up something. Therefore he recruits half a dozen adventurers and gives them a mission: find out what is really going on. The code name is *Project Minerva*.

#### Character Skills & Professions

A team of adventurers should contain a broad set of backgrounds and skills considering the variety of missions in the campaign, dealing with e.g. wilderness treks, urban espionage, scuba diving, air travel and ocean voyages. Keep in mind that a lot of male Australians participated in World War Two, so characters aged 35 to 55 may have extensive, though somewhat outdated, military experience.

A suggested set of team members:

- A *pilot* to handle air travel
- A *detective* for surveillance and investigations in urban locations
- A *paramedic* to treat those that get injured
- A *soldier* for close protection and heavy weaponry
- A *zoologist* to investigate any strange creatures appearing in the adventures
- An *engineer* to study peculiar devices discovered during the campaign
- A *bushwalker* to ensure that the team survives in the hostile outback

## Five Phases of collapse

A suggested campaign approach is to let the player characters initially witness some strange events surrounding the invaders' arrival and then let the federal authorities intervene gradually by organizing efforts against the approaching crises. The invaders, Mother Nature and the opposing political bloc will provide plenty of antagonists. The players will have a hard time predicting what new problems are about to appear and who is friend or foe.

### Phase 1: To Observe

During the campaign's first phase, the player characters observe the invaders' arrival without understanding what really is going on. Such observations will take place in civilian or military ships at sea or in aircraft. Strange light phenomena fall out of the sky into the ocean. If the adventurers check on nautical charts, all sightings occur where the ocean is deep.

The first UFO reports were published in 1947, so it will not be anachronistic if the adventurers propose extraterrestrial interference on Earth.

### Phase 2: To Experience

The aliens are almost as ignorant of us humans as we are of them. Therefore they start to explore Earth's coastlines with biorobots (semi-intelligent biological machines). The game master should let the invaders use several different investigation methods, because that will puzzle the players and spur them to capture alien devices. She may, for instance, introduce land-travelling biorobots or remote-controlled blimps that reach far inland. Their weapons may be high-pressure projectile launchers or vicious tentacular melee weapons. These biorobots are not indestructible, but it should require a lot of effort to incapacitate one.

### Phase 3: To Understand

In the next stage, the player characters will gather and analyze facts in order to understand what really is going on. That insight, even though it may be limited, will urge those in charge to "do something", that is to establish action and research programs that deal with the problems. However, matters are about to get far worse...

### Phase 4: To Suffer

Earth is hit by disparate disasters: shifting ocean currents, melting polar ice caps, cli-

mate change, rising sea levels, flooding of coastal plains and cities. There will be crop failures and famine, foul weather in unexpected places, and epidemics. Enormous human migrations away from the coasts will tear apart weak countries. But this is a slow-motion scenario and the disasters will therefore appear gradually over a decade.

Almost all of Australia's major cities are located at the coasts and they will suffer from terrible weather and rising ocean levels. Their inhabitants must flee to higher ground. The climate of the interior will change, too; in some places it will get rainier and in others stormier.

Indonesia will suffer even worse, particularly the densely populated island of Java. Hordes of boat people therefore head for the sparsely settled Australia. Those migrants are not really welcome, but there is little the Australians can do to stop them.

### Phase 5: To Remedy

The greatest challenge during the disasters is to develop and launch projects that will alleviate harm, i.e. to save lives, to protect vital infrastructure (e.g. mines and power plants) and to start reconstruction. The campaign will reach some sort of natural conclusion when the sea level stops rising (perhaps at 100 feet above the old one). Earth has then attained a new equilibrium and a new era begins.

### Complications

During phase 1 to 3, the Cold War will be an ever-present source of complications. Many conspiratorial issues will be debated in Australia, for instance:

- *"Are the climate changes a Soviet scheme to thaw the Arctic and open up Siberia for colonization?"*
- *"How will Mao's China exploit the developments?"*
- *"Are there KGB moles in organizations that pass on secrets to Moscow?"*
- *"Does the Kremlin collaborate with the invaders?"*

Inserting a CIA mole in the adventurers' organization may be a nice twist. Australia and the United States are allies, but during the Cold War even friends spy on each other. And it is fairly easy for an American to pose as an Australian, because many served here in 1942-45 and got to know the country thoroughly.

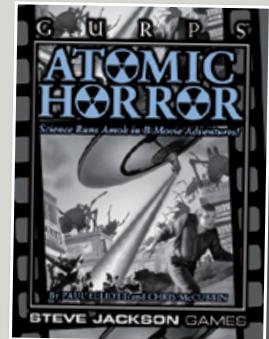
When phase 4 begins, Earth's governments are overwhelmed by the developments. Old problems fade away as new ones threaten to obliterate humanity.

## INSPIRATIONAL BOOKS & FILMS

The books and films listed below are well worth reading or watching when creating an *Oz Is Drowning* campaign:

### GURPS Atomic Horror

*GURPS Atomic Horror* (Steve Jackson Games) is a 1950s source book with some system-free settings and plenty of social and technological information. Highly recommended.



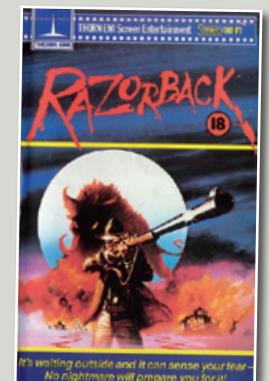
### The Thing from Another World

*The Thing from Another World* (director Howard Hawks) is an SF film from 1951. The crew of an Arctic research station gets into serious trouble with an extraterrestrial monstrosity. The movie has aged well; it captures the spirit of the period and shows what technology should be available.



### Razorback

*Razorback* (director Russell Mulcahy) is an Australian B horror movie from the 1980s. It takes place in the outback with the expected violent deaths, tough locals and a boar monster.



### Technology

The technology of the mid-1950s looks familiar, though a bit antiquated, to contemporary gamers: black and white television sets, transistor radios, punch-card computers, transoceanic air travel, and global radio communications. Atomic submarines cross the oceans, though they are unable to venture into their black abysses. Space technology is progressing by leaps and bounds and soon the first satellites will circle the globe.

Here are a few items worth considering when creating Australian adventures:

- Radio communication is essential in Australia's outback, because farms and settlements are so remote that telephone lines would be impractical. Each farm has a stationary long-range shortwave set. Walkie-talkies are also around, though their range is limited to a few kilometers.
- In the outback, battered military trucks are common, being surplus vehicles from World War Two. Most white children learn to drive them at age 13.
- Bush pilots appreciate robust planes such as the *Noorduyn Norseman* or the *De Havilland Beaver*. The amphibious *Consolidated Catalina* is a good choice when travelling long distances across the ocean. (Check Wikipedia for more information on all of these different aircrafts.)
- The Flying Doctors have been working in the outback for many years. Therefore medical care may arrive anywhere in the wilderness within a few hours, provided that you have a short-wave radio to summon it.

### Unidentified flying objects

Serious discussions about extraterrestrial life began among astronomers in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. H G Wells wrote the best-selling novel *War of the Worlds* just before World War One; the book was intended as a scathing verdict over European colonialism disguised as a Martian invasion of Great Britain. The first UFO observations were reported by US newspapers in 1947. (The game master decides herself whether or not such media reports are bogus or true accounts of extraterrestrial reconnaissance before the invasion.)

During the 1950s, UFO-logy is mainly an abode for cranks and charlatans. Some con men publish fraudulent books about encounters with visitors from Mars and Venus,

aliens who provide trivial advice about the problems of the nuclear age. A westerner who talks about UFOs therefore risks being labeled a crackpot. It will require solid evidence to convince the public that Earth really is under attack from space.

On the other hand, the air forces of many countries take the UFO issue seriously and carry out ambitious secret studies of such observations. This diligence is mainly caused by Cold War worries: *“Could that be super-advanced aircraft from the other side of the Iron Curtain?”* Many military organizations are therefore well-informed, but they, too, will demand solid proof.

### Astronomy

In the 1950s, astronomers have little knowledge of the true conditions on our neighboring planets, because they lack good observational data. But nevertheless they dismiss UFOs as hallucinations, misinterpretations of normal natural phenomena, or frauds, because they do not see any scientific indications that there is “somebody” out there.

Here is a brief summary on what a majority of astronomers think:

- Astronomers incorrectly assume that Mercury turns the same side towards Sun all the time (i.e. locked rotation).
- Venus is a little-known world because of its obscuring cloud cover, but the few available atmospheric data indicate a composition that is inhospitable to higher forms of life (e.g. no signs of oxygen).
- Mars is being thoroughly observed by telescope, but scientists disagree on the exact characteristics of its thin atmosphere and chilly climate. A common opinion is that Mars is an eroded world covered by deserts, perhaps with a primitive hardy flora. Nobody believes that it is the home of an advanced civilization, because by now it would have been detected by its electromagnetic emissions. And the infamous canals are dismissed as misinterpretations by Giovanni Schiaparelli and Percival Lowell caused by a combination of poor eye-sight, wishful thinking and imperfections in the lenses of their telescopes.
- The four giant planets beyond Mars are considered to be extremely inhospitable, each one of them surrounded by a swarm of rocky dead moons.

### ADVENTURE SEEDS FOR OZ IS DROWNING!

This section contains three adventure seeds that show the game master how to start an *Oz is drowning!* campaign. These adventure seeds provide the first encounters between humans and extraterrestrials. The players will gradually uncover the perils that mankind is facing.

The adventure seeds are written as outlines, which the game master can expand into full-fledged adventures.

#### Finding clues

It is frequently important that the players discover certain clues to be able to proceed. Therefore, if the adventurers invest sufficient time and use appropriate skills, they will find what they need automatically. In such a situation a failed skill check will merely indicate that the search required more time than was assumed.

#### M/S Celestina Adrift

##### The task

The Australian merchantman *M/S Celestina* is in trouble. Yesterday her radio operator sent an emergency message in Morse code from a position in the Indian Ocean more than 600 nautical miles west of Perth.

The emergency message spoke of a fire onboard, before it was suddenly interrupted. The adventurers are therefore instructed to fly there in a Catalina and investigate what has happened.

#### What really happened

The *Celestina* is a Liberty ship, a model that was mass-produced in the United States during World War Two. After the war, many such vessels were sold to small shipping companies all around the world – not the least to Australia.

The master of the *Celestina* is Anson McDonald, an Australian veteran from the trans-Pacific wartime convoys. His crew consists of a score Australians and Malayan Chinese.

The *Celestina* was steaming from Perth in Australia to Durban in South Africa with a cargo of canned meat and grain when her voyage was interrupted. A piece of a reentry heat shield fell off an alien space craft heading for the depths of the Indian Ocean. It struck the ship with great force. She got seriously damaged and a fire started, but she remained afloat.

## Polar station Zulu

### Does not respond!

#### The Task

#### Situation on Site

After five hours in the air, the Catalina approaches the location where the *Celestina* ought to be. After a while the adventurers will be able to discover the ship adrift and listing 10 degrees to port. The *Celestina* shows fire damage, but currently neither flames nor smoke are visible. The ship does not respond when hailed by radio and no sailors are seen on the deck. Several life boats appear to be missing.

If the adventurers board her, they will discover that she has been abandoned in haste. However, the fire that she has suffered seems to have extinguished itself. The forward cargo hold is badly damaged. An object has crashed through its top hatch with great force and started a fire among the grain sacks in it. The crew has tried to extinguish it by hosing it with sea water.

If the adventurers carry out an airborne search operation, they will discover the three missing life boats after approximately one hour. The boats are tied together and contain the complete crew. Nobody is seriously injured or missing.

#### Clues

During this adventure the game master may provide the following clues:

- A careful investigation of the damaged cargo hold results in the discovery fragments of an unknown material (an extra-terrestrial advanced ceramic – a substance that is completely unknown to human chemists in the 1950s).
- The sailors explain that they were watching a falling meteor when the forward cargo hold suffered an explosion. War veterans think that it resembled a detonating artillery shell. When the fire would not go out and the electrical system failed, thereby shutting off the water pumps, the captain ordered the crew to abandon ship.

#### Complications

It is not a trivial matter to climb from the Catalina's inflatable dinghies to the deck of the *Celestina* without any proper equipment, because the ship's sides are tall, wet and bare.

In the 1950s, Antarctic research had become "everyday science", even though carried out under extreme conditions. In 1949 Australia established Polar Station Zulu on the coast of its Antarctic territorial claim. The base is used by scientists from many universities for research on, among other things, glaciers, seals and penguins. Usually it is crewed by 30 people. Zulu communicates with Australia by short-wave radio. During summers, it is visited twice by a supply ship transporting goods and people.

One day the station does not respond when hailed by radio. The team of adventurers are asked to investigate and they head south in a Catalina. Their briefing papers contain drawings of the base installations and a crew roster.

Polar Station Zulu comprises six major buildings erected on an ice-free stretch of gravel beach and a safe distance from the shoreline. The base is professionally constructed and will hardly be damaged by the weather. There are backup generators and spare parts on site, so technical problems would hardly knock out the radio completely. Therefore, there must be serious trouble.

#### What really happened

Zulu has been the target of a surprising nightly raid out of the oceanic abyss: biorobots crawled ashore to investigate human technology. The invaders are currently researching humanity to understand how we might threaten them and how they best could neutralize us. The station was quickly wrecked and most of the crew was killed, but a few managed to escape inland. There are no photographs or other documentation of what happened.

#### Situation on Site

When the adventurers arrive at Zulu, they will find a devastated site with 25 corpses. Devices like the radio set and generators have been removed, some with force, some without. The human remains have been torn by violent tentacles or impaled by spears.

The crew had had five Australian army rifles, primary for hunting. These guns are now missing, but they must have been used in battle because there are scores of used cartridges scattered in the building where the crew barricaded themselves during the battle.

#### Clues

During the scenario, the game master may introduce the following clues:

- The biorobots used some sort of quick snail-style way of locomotion on dry land, thereby leaving slimy trails. The trails go up from the water into the ruins of the station buildings and back to the water. Waves have washed away any trails on the sea bottom.
- The manners in which the humans were killed indicate what weapon technology the invaders used. The biorobots launched harpoons over short distances with great force, and used clawed tentacles to rend and tear and to manipulate objects. (There are no traces of long-range weapons, because those currently available are designed for deep-ocean environments.)
- The biorobots have removed some large technological items (such as the radio) and the army rifles, because that is what the invaders want to study right now.
- There are no biorobot remains. Pieces of broken biomachinery were carried away into the sea; the invaders are security-minded.
- Five men are missing. They ran away in panic during the attack and may be tracked into the icy wilderness above the coast. Whether any of them has survived is up to the game master – it depends on her plans for the campaign. Survivors will give somewhat inconsistent accounts for the dreadful creatures that attacked the base under the cover of darkness.

#### Optional Soviet Complications

The game master may let the Soviet polar research ship *Akademik Barazin* turn up at the site. Moscow's radio intelligence agency has noticed that Station Zulu is unexpectedly off the air and they, too, want to know why.

During the encounter, the Soviet maritime officers are suspicious (particularly if the adventurers work for the private *Project Minerva*) because of the distrust between the Soviet Union and Australia, and therefore they are unwilling to cooperate closely or provide major assistance. The *Akademik Barazin* is a civilian state vessel and therefore her captain will only authorize use of force if the Australians pose an obvious threat to his crew. There are a dozen Kalashnikovs in the ship's gun locker for such emergencies.

### Razorback?

#### The Task

**Razorback** was originally an American slang word for boar. The word has entered Australian folklore, where it designates a huge boar that is more or less immune to bullets.

Before the first men arrived in Australia around 40,000 BC, its ecosystem contained several huge animals that since have gone extinct. For instance, the giant predator lizard *Megalania*, 15 feet long and weighing 700 lbs, was an ecological equivalent of the tiger. There have been anecdotal reports of modern sightings of that beast, but they are dismissed as folkloristic legends by serious zoologists. The razorbacks belong to the same category.

However, in this campaign there is a sudden flurry of separate and reasonable credible observations of a razorback roaming a piece of outback in the Northern Territory. Normally, such reports will be ignored, but considering what other strange things have been occurring, the adventurers are dispatched to investigate.

#### What really happened

Some days ago, a blimp-style biorobot landed a ground walker to take samples of the geology, flora and fauna several hundred miles inland from the north coast. The blimp then crashed in a sudden thunderstorm. The walker is currently heading for the ocean so that its samples eventually will reach one of the invaders' undersea bases. The biorobots have good control systems that make sure that they mainly move by night, but nevertheless the walker has been observed by a few Aborigines and whites and that is the source of the razorback reports.

### Situation on Site

The relevant wilderness area contains one crashed biorobotic blimp and one functional biorobotic walker heading north. The adventurers are supposed to find them and bring them home for investigation. To succeed, they must interview witnesses and scout the terrain from the air. It is suggested that the adventurers first find the wrecked blimp, because that will make them realize the seriousness of the situation.

### Complications

A few witnesses are ready to tell what they have seen, but the information they provide is partially contradictory (that is always the case in this type of investigations). No one has understood the true nature of the observed devices. Instead white Australians will portray them as a razorback, a military experiment, or a Soviet plot against the security of the nation. For most people UFOs are a silly notion, so anyone bringing up that angle risks being ridiculed as a crank.

Australian Aborigines are generally suspicious of white people representing the government, so they may be reluctant to speak openly. (After all, they are the target of open prejudice and discrimination.) They will not refer to the Soviet Union or UFOs in interviews. Instead they consider any strange phenomenon to have been caused by Australian military devices or by monsters from their own legends.

The Australian military are not willing to discuss classified information with civilians, so non-military adventurers will find it difficult to learn whether the strange events have been caused by military experiments.

### The Alien Blimp

This should be the first time the adventurers find a fairly well-preserved piece of invader technology. The blimp is a biorobot, a soft-skinned small "zeppelin", propelled by two rows of eight wings and possessing four powerful gripping organs on the underside. Its tubular body is about 60 feet long and it has been filled with hydrogen produced by internal glands. The front has an outgrowth with organs for seeing and hearing, including sonar, UV, and IR. Biorobots do not eat or breathe. Instead they have organic reserves inside in the body to be consumed on operations. These reserves last about two weeks.

The blimp was slammed into the ground by a sudden thunderstorm and killed instantly. It is partially broken and the hydrogen has leaked away. Therefore, even a skilled biologist will have a hard time figuring out how it originally had functioned.

### The Alien Walker

The ground-walking biorobot should be considered a monster that has to be knocked out in a fairly non-destructive way if it is to provide information on the invaders' technology. The adventurers may certainly kill it outright with a bazooka, but then its carcass would just be a useless mess.

### Appearance

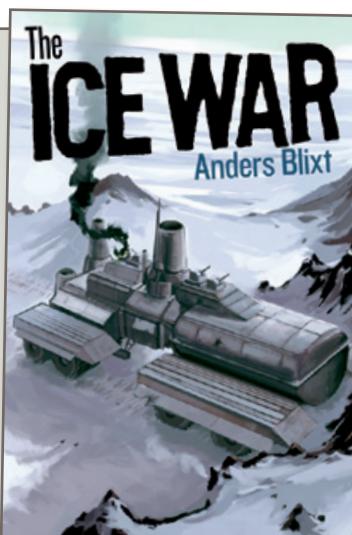
A ten feet long tubular body. Front and rear end each has an outgrowth with organs for sight and hearing, including sonar, IR, and UV. Six powerful legs. Top speed is comparable to a galloping horse. One pair of tentacles at each end for manipulation. Four storage pouches for samples on the "belly". The biorobot is not troubled by darkness, smoke or mist.

### Natural weapons

The walker is "programmed" for self-protection. For close protection: One attack arm with a chopping claw at each end (range about 5 feet). One spray organ on the back: it will squirt a liquid solvent up to 60 feet away (arc of fire 360°) The liquid attacks and dissolves the body tissues of terrestrial organisms, causing deep fearsome wounds. Cloth or plastics do not offer much protection. The biorobots has ten squirts in a gland. It takes one hours to "recharge" one squirt.

### Energy

Biorobots do not eat or breathe. Instead they have organic reserves inside in the body to be consumed on operations. These reserves last about two weeks.

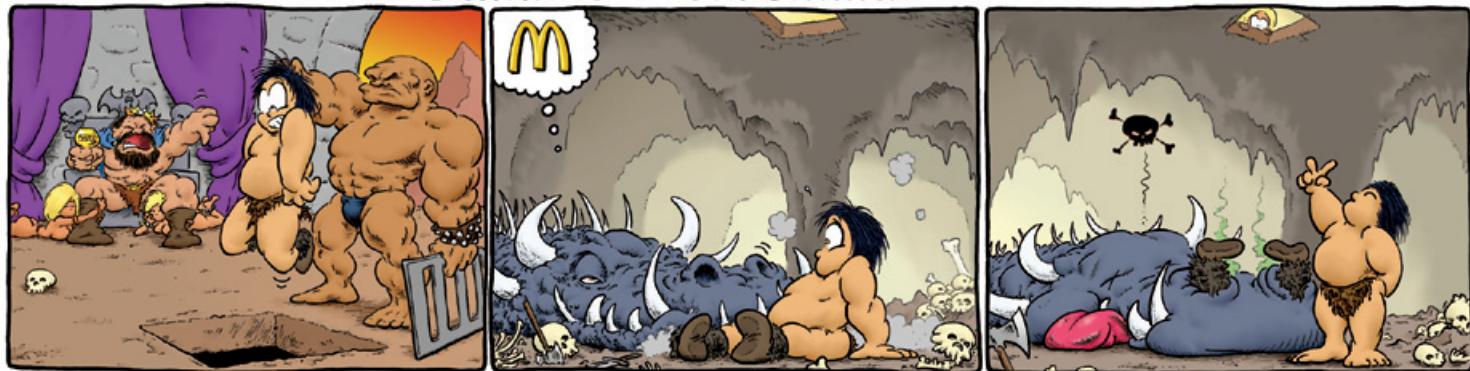


### More to read by Anders Blixt

Anders Blixt is an SF author and one of Sweden's most experienced RPG designers. He has a particular liking for alternate history fiction and gameworlds, often with retro touches. Saga Games has published *Oz is Drowning* (after the first publication in *Fenix*) and two of Anders's dieselpunk campaigns for its Swedish RPG *Parallel Worlds*. Anders's "alternate-Antarctica" spy novel *The Ice War* is available in an English translation as an ebook at Smashwords

(<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/517357>).

**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** BOOTING UP



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** AGAINST THE MAFIA



**BERNARD THE BARBARIAN** IN THE LAND OF THE APE-MEN



# FIVE MINUTES TO TWELVE

TEXT CHRISTOFFER KRÄMER

ILLUSTRATION LUKAS THELIN

Eva looked down at her watch again. Apart from looking a little too big to be an ordinary pocket watch, there was something else that was very strange: Instead of being numbered from one to twelve as a watch would normally be, this clock had only the number 12 all the way around – at least that was the only number she could read. Fascinating! She turned the watch over in her hand and enjoyed the way the metal casing felt against her palm. It reminded her of stones she sometimes picked up along the shore, polished unnaturally smooth by long years of waves and wind. Discreet hinges along one edge revealed that the backside of the watch could be opened, and though her nails were bitten short, Eva managed to slide one in under the edge of the casing and coax it open. Within was a jumble of cogs and wheels of various metals dotted with an intricate pattern of microscopic symbols. It looked as if it had just recently come from the watchmaker's shop. There was no sign of dirt or scratches. In the middle of the clockwork was a miniature image of a globe, so detailed that she could follow the coastline of South America, and in the centre – roughly in the middle of the Sahara desert – was a tiny hexagonal hole. Beneath the globe, attached with small catches, glimmered a small key. Eva's hands trembled as she removed the key and brought it up to the hole. The excitement of anticipation had crept up on her unexpectedly, and now the tension was unbearable. It was as if the entire world held its collective breath and she imagined that even the birds had quieted. The mechanism turned so easily with a twist of her fingers, as if it had been recently oiled, and Eva nearly jumped with fright when the lock suddenly clicked. At the same moment, it began to vibrate and became warmer to the touch. Eva turned it over again to look at the clock face. The small hand, shaped indeed like a slim, skeletal hand, glided soundlessly around in its circle much faster than it should. When it finally reached the final symbol, it stopped and the clock began to tick – as if it were just a regular watch. Eva replaced the key in its catches and carefully shut the hinged door. She looked again at the face. Five minutes to twelve – what could that mean? ▶

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**F**ive minutes to twelve is a campaign based around a mysterious artefact. This article contains a brief introduction of the artefact itself, along with some ideas on how it can be incorporated in one of your regular campaigns, or how you can construct an entire campaign specifically dedicated to the artefact. Enjoy!

### THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK

According to Terry Pratchett and – at least in spirit – other prominent observers of the human condition, we humans are just storytelling chimpanzees who shape the world with the stories we tell about it and about ourselves. A recurring tale in almost all cultures is that of the end of the world: Armageddon, Ragnarök, Acharit Hayamim, etc. So if the idea of, and the story about, the apocalypse are somehow imprinted in us as a species, perhaps there is a grain of truth to it. Maybe there is, as has been taught for thousands of years on the Indian subcontinent, a cyclical nature to reality, a predetermined rhythm of growth, prosperity, and ruin. Perhaps our memories of downfall is a future echo of something that has already happened before, over and over again. And maybe, just maybe, there is something that survives each cycle. Something that records events and keeps time. An ancient relic belonging to the universe's own horologist. This is *the doomsday clock*.

The clock itself is not so spectacular that it attracts any attention. It looks like a large pocket watch made of polished metal whose colour shifts somewhat depending on how the light falls upon it. The clock's face is admittedly not typical, but not really any more unusual than many other artistic clocks out there. The number twelve appears in all positions, though it is written in different number systems from different cultures. Each twelfth portion of the clock also has other small embellishments that tie back to that particular portion's culture. To the archaeologist or the historian, the clock holds many clues, but for the uninitiated, it mostly appears to be a piece of jewellery or artwork.

Upon opening the back, one might be impressed by the intricate exposed clockwork, but not until it is examined under a powerful magnifying glass or microscope can one tell just how intricate the clock's mechanisms are, or just how completely it is strewn with tiny symbols, many of them unknown to people today.

When the watch is wound – that is when its true peculiarities shine forth. And by then, it is probably too late. The minute hand winds silently around until it stops at five minutes to twelve (the first twelve at the top, that is)

and then begins to tick inexorably on. What is it ticking forward to? Why is it the end of the world, predicted by the twelfth culture's portion of the clock.

Fortunately, the clock is not a part of the predestination. The apocalypse may be inevitable in the long run, but it is possible to put it off. Especially if you know it's coming! A particularly sharp-eyed group of people (the characters!) could – with access to the doomsday clock – be able to predict the signs of the times and act in such a way as to ensure the ancient prophecies and tales of the end of days do not come to pass as foretold. The clock would strike twelve and the world would remain. At least for a short while, since the doomsday clock's minute hand inevitably slides toward the next five-minutes-to-twelve position, and a new culture's apocalypse appears on the doorstep. Over and over again.

### THE RECURRING APOCALYPSE

The doomsday clock requires a bit of research from the game master and the players. It would be good to begin with the apocalypses that players are likely most familiar with, such as the Christian Armageddon or the Norse Ragnarök. Starting with these can help familiarise the players with the concept and whet their appetites before starting in on the more complicated downfalls like the Babylonian end times or the fall of the Aztecs. Once they get to this point, they will have gained enough momentum that they will be able to bite off the ruin of the ancient Egyptians and Tibetans, as well as the final hours of the Maori and the Inuit.

For each apocalypse the characters manage to stop, a new one begins, and those characters who have been trying to find any little advantages (so, basically everyone) will start devouring information on mythology just to keep ahead of the pack.

### TIME SCALE – SYMBOLIC OR ACCELERATED?

Five minutes can seem like an awfully short amount of time to stop impending doom, but keep in mind that much of the time described in these end-of-days myths are mostly symbolic, so it can be assumed that this is the case even for the doomsday clock.

Note that five minutes to twelve is the equivalent of "in the nick of time" or "at the last second" or any other similar phrase that denotes time in a vague way.

In this version, you can imagine that as soon as the clock is running and is at "five minutes to twelve" the first signs pointing toward the end of the world appear.

Another and even more diabolical (and therefore more fun) method is to have the time be accelerated. Perhaps five minutes to twelve is the first time the clock starts ticking for a whole year. The players then have plenty of time to see the signs and formulate a plan to stop the end of the world. The next apocalyptic incarnation is then only eleven months, allowing less time to ponder and act. The third incarnation is only ten months, and so on. This will likely lead to a lot of crazy rushing around at the end.

### ONE-TRICK PONY OR A NEW TÉKUMEL?

How can you use the doomsday clock? As the game master, you can use the clock in pretty much any game environment you want – even one that's completely made up (since the apocalypse is likely as colourfully described in space as it is among the goblins and trolls in fairyland, and among the vampires and werewolves in the world of shadows). The big question is whether you want to use the clock as a one-time dramatic device (in a limited adventure) or as a recurring element (as a whole campaign).

### DOOMSDAY CLOCK AS FOCUS OF AN INDIVIDUAL ADVENTURE

If you use the doomsday clock as a main ingredient of a single adventure, you will have created a great matinee-style action scenario. The player characters find and clumsily manage to start the doomsday clock, and then guilty conscience and survival instinct persuade them to do whatever they can to stop it.

In this version, there is no time to allow years to drift by slowly, bringing signs of the apocalypse slowly to light. It is important to start the action right away and have Fenris wolves and Princes of Peace wake immediately once the clock has started the countdown. Obviously, their work is impeded by the fact that other groups want the clock for their own evil purposes.

A good way out of the doomsday mess in this type of adventure could be that the player characters – while they are attempting to put a stop to the first or second end of the world – desperately try to find a way to get the clock to stop ticking. Perhaps they won't be able to stop the apocalypse from happening, but at least they can put it off for a time. Maybe the final scene which ends the adventure will be the characters wrapping the pocket watch in a cloth and placing it in a box right beside the Ark of the Covenant inside the infinite warehouse.

## DOOMSDAY CLOCK AS A RECURRING THEME

Another way to use the doomsday clock is as a recurring theme in a campaign that is actually unrelated.

**Example 1:** The players are antiquarian experts in *Bookhounds of London* when they encounter and must try to stop the doomsday clock. They manage to get the watch to stop ticking and then they lock it in a lead box and dump it in the sea. Four adventures later, it shows up in the possession of cultists who retrieved it from the sea and started it up again...

**Example 2:** The players are fighting evil Nazis in *Operation Fallen Reich* and manage to steal the already running doomsday clock from the Third Reich's foot soldiers. The struggle to stop Nazism and its minions is still the main priority, but over and above this, they must now pay attention to the portents of doom appearing around them in the most troubled parts of occupied Europe. And the agents of Thule somehow manage to always be there to thwart them as they attempt to steal back the artefact.

By using the doomsday clock in this way, you've created a recurring device that can be used to hurry along other development in the campaign, or to create a potentially well-needed break from another portion of the campaign, or perhaps to weave together different themes of the campaign as necessary.

## DOOMSDAY CLOCK AS THE CENTRE OF A CAMPAIGN

The doomsday clock can easily be the central device of an entire campaign. Two quick suggestions for this:

### As if you weren't already late driving the kids to football practice as it is!

This campaign has the advantage of being about completely ordinary people in our completely ordinary world who, for various reasons, are present when the doomsday clock is first found and activated. They then wind up in a position where their fates are bound together with the clock's, whether they like it or not, and whether they like each other or not (preferably not). They cannot escape their fate, and as usual, people around them don't take their story seriously.

The only thing they can do is to gradually identify and deal with the apocalyptic crises that appear.

## Every Era has its Heroes

This campaign has a doomsday clock that just ticks through one apocalypse at a time and allows the game master the pleasure of continuously changing times and settings. The player characters begin in the past – perhaps ancient Greece where the doomsday clock could be found within Pandora's box. They can play heroes who must work to put a stop to a typical Grecian apocalypse. (Greek mythology can be a bit vague with such references, but you can always add a few Disney type Titans). When the end of the world is stopped and the players realise the clock is indestructible, it is sealed up in a container and cast into a volcano (or similar game-oriented solution).

Then the game master moves forward in time to the next iteration and new characters are created. For example, 600 years later, in a Rome that stands on the brink of collapse, a slave happens to dig up a metal object that had been encased in porous volcanic stone... The clock is activated again and the player characters must get in there and put a stop yet again to the apocalypse. After they have successfully staved off the threat once again, they think up an even more imaginative way of burying the clock for all time.

After another jump forward in time, and a new environment, the next session begins. Perhaps the setting this time will be during the Crusades: knights and squires in conflict with the noble Saracens encounter the clock, which has been found again, thanks to the clever game master's imagination.

In this way, a campaign can continue on into the present, and even further if desired, where even tomorrow's nanotechnological paradise is not free of the shadow of impending doom.

## CONCLUSION

Once you have begun to play with an indestructible cosmic clock, your imagination can quickly run away with you. What if someone figures out a way to affect the clockwork and make the clock go backwards? What happens then?

This is a question only you can decide the answer to. Good luck!

## INSPIRATION

There is no shortage of material concerning visions of the apocalypse or the end of times. For a quick introduction to various cultures' views of the end of the world, check out the link below:

[history.com/topics/the-end-of-the-world](http://history.com/topics/the-end-of-the-world)



# FENIX FIGHTERS

## A COMPLETE CARDGAME FROM GIGANTOSKOP

TEXT PETER HANSSON

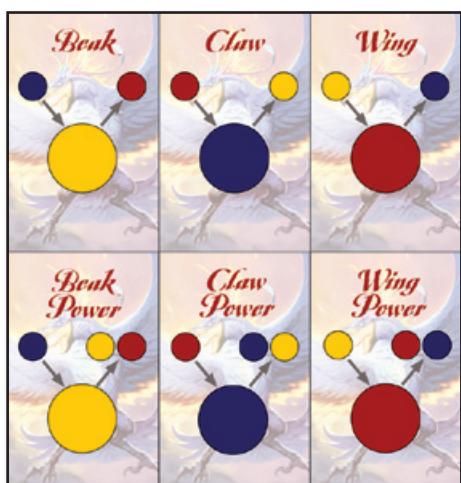
ILLUSTRATION MAGNUS FALLGREN

OLA LARSSON

ÅKE ROSENIUS

LUKAS THELIN

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION FENIX 2/2012



Each player has a set of six cards



Each player has a game board.

When the Swedish gaming magazine *Fenix* reached 50 issues we became the longest living Swedish magazine in our particular niche. We celebrated that with an issue full of complete games of different kinds. *Fenix Fight* was the contribution from the renowned Swedish gaming company Gigantoskop, with titles such as *Spank the Monkey* in their repertoire. The game play is a duel, where two players at a time face each other. It can also be played as tournaments.

### PREPARATIONS

Copy or cut out at least two game boards and two sets of cards (6/player) from the card stock appendix included in this volume of *Best of Fenix* (or print them out from your pdf-file). For a little more durability, we recommend placing the cards in plastic sleeves. You will also need four tokens per player.

Each player takes a game board and a set of 6 cards (BEAK, CLAW, WING, BEAK POWER, CLAW POWER, WING POWER). Each set is labelled with its own phoenix in order to more easily distinguish them from one another.

Place one token on square 0 of the point scale of your game board, and the three remaining tokens on the first positions of WING, CLAW, and BEAK (leftmost positions). Set aside the three POWER cards and place the three others in your hand.

### RULES

This is essentially a rock-paper-scissors game, but with a twist. You can of course play your cards randomly, but in order to win, you must be able to outsmart your opponent.

In each round, players secretly select a card from their hands and then they reveal their card simultaneously.

WING beats CLAW, CLAW beats BEAK, and BEAK beats WING. If both players select the same card, nothing happens (except in the case of POWER cards; more information fol-

lows), otherwise, one player will win. Note that the cards have the same ability to win, so that even if a player's opponents have POWER versions of their cards, WING, for example, will beat both CLAW and CLAW POWER.

The player who won the round gets the number of points indicated by the token of the played card. She then moves her matching token one step to the right. This means that the first and second time a player wins, she gets 1 point, but the third time, she gets 2 points.

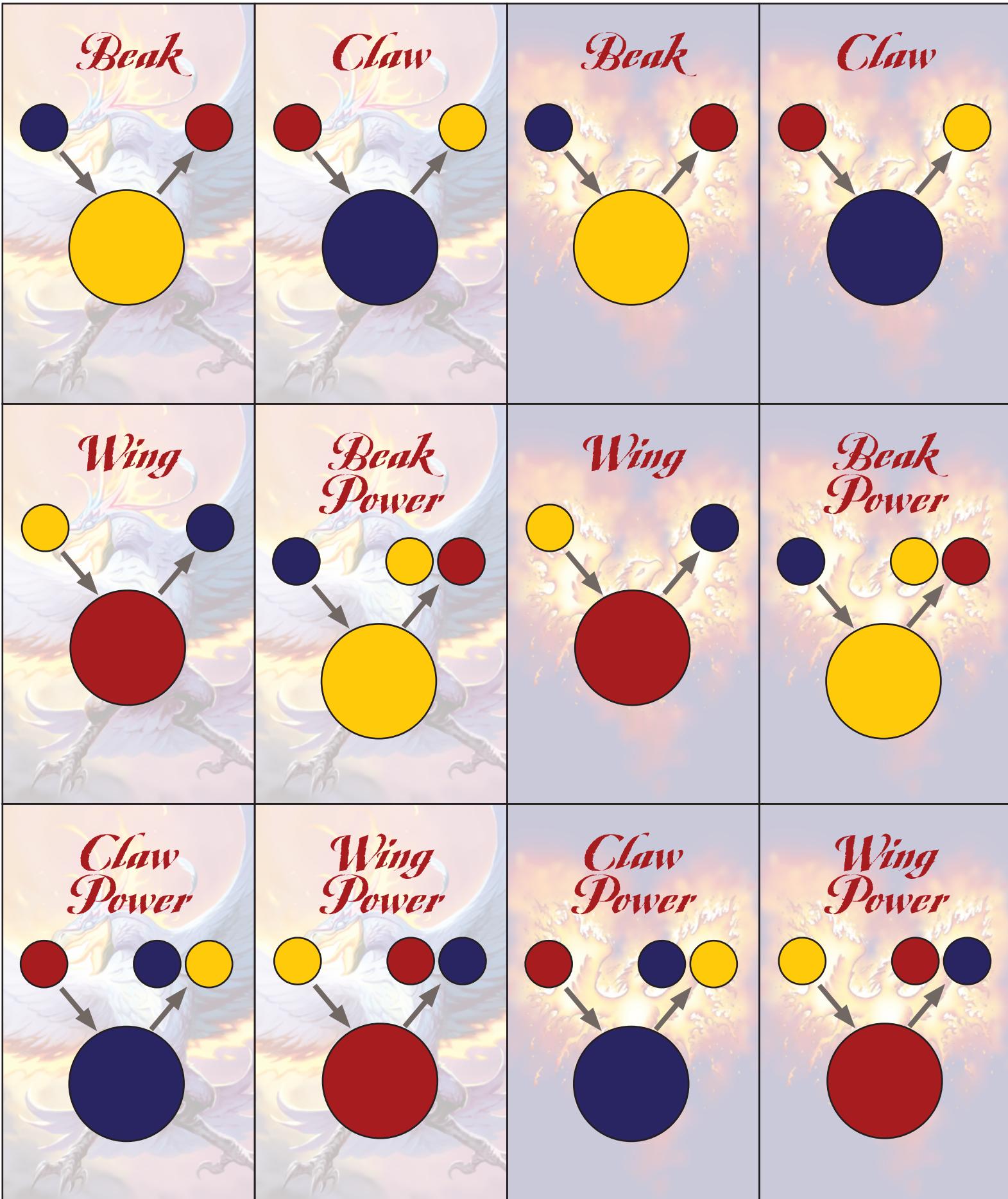
When the token reaches the square marked POWER, you can exchange this card from your hand with the POWER version of it on the table. These cards are "better" versions of the originals. In addition to them beating the same cards as before, they now also beat their own non-power versions. For example, WING POWER beats both CLAW and CLAW, but loses, as usual, to BEAK.

The first time a POWER card wins, the player gets 1 point and the token is moved, as usual, one step to the right. After this, it is no longer possible to move farther to the right and all additional wins with this card give 2 points.

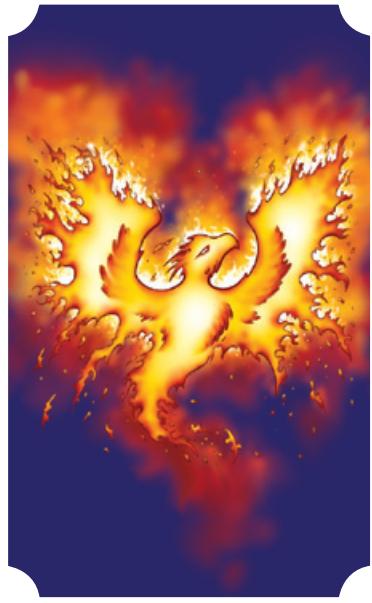
If both players play the same POWER card, both players win that round.

The first player to reach or exceed 10 points wins the FENIX FIGHT. If both players reach 10 points simultaneously, the one who has the most points wins. If both players have the same number of points, the battle continues until one player has more points than the other.

# CARDS FOR FENIX FIGHTERS



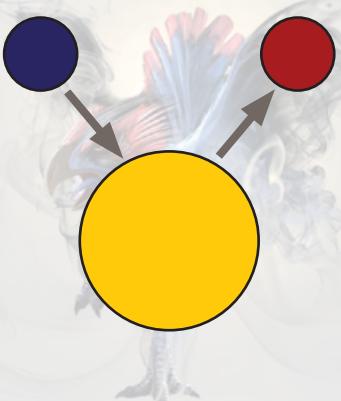
## WINGED WARRIOR



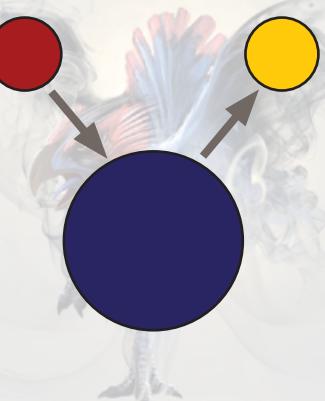
## THUNDERBIRD

# CARDS FOR FENIX FIGHTERS

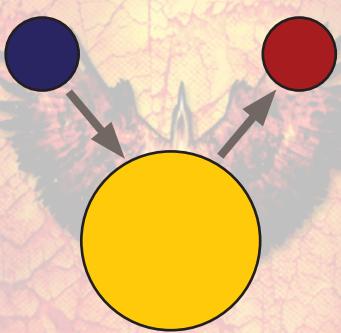
*Beak*



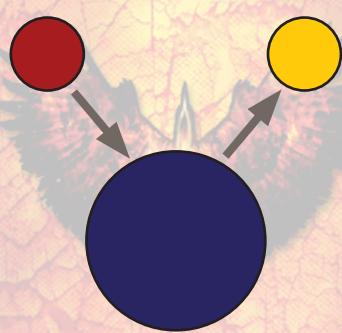
*Claw*



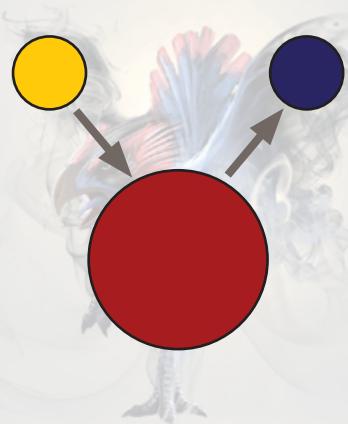
*Beak*



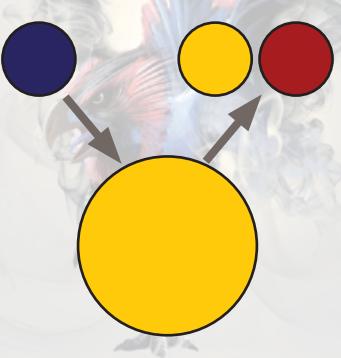
*Claw*



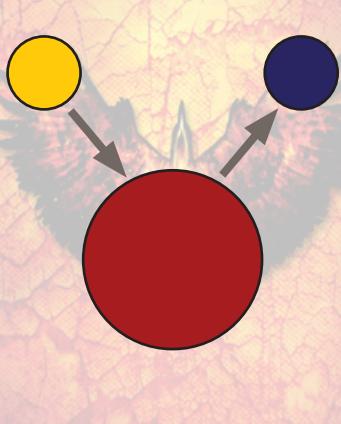
*Wing*



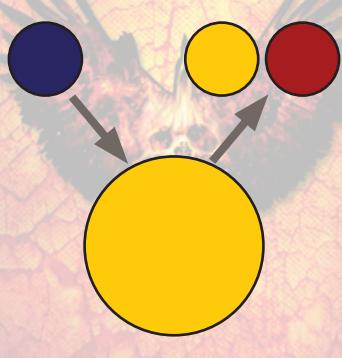
*Beak  
Power*



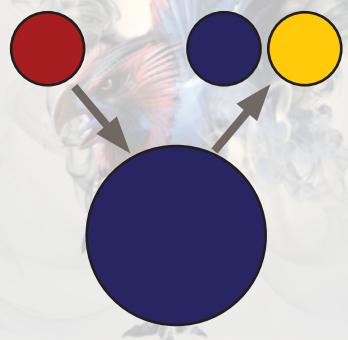
*Wing*



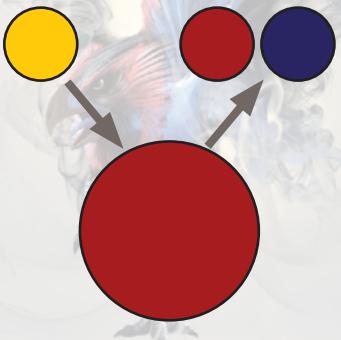
*Beak  
Power*



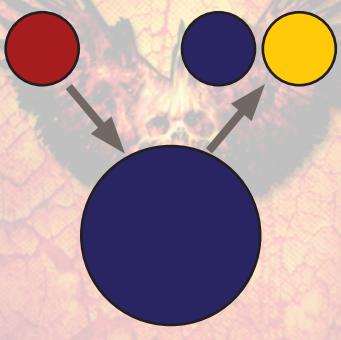
*Claw  
Power*



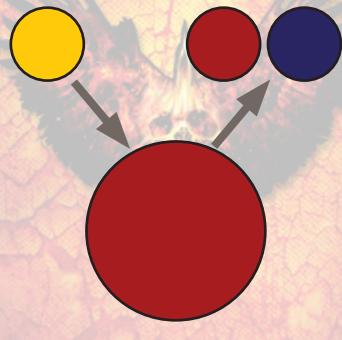
*Wing  
Power*



*Claw  
Power*



*Wing  
Power*



## SKULLZ



## KILLER CLAW

# Thunderbird

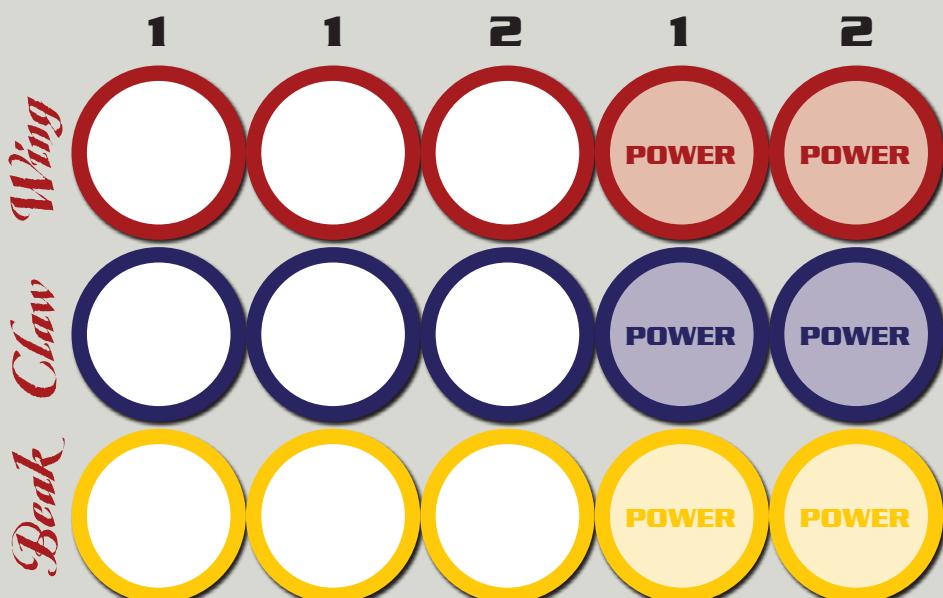


## POINTS

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
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# Winged Warrior



## POINTS

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
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# FENIX FIGHTERS



*Thunderbird*

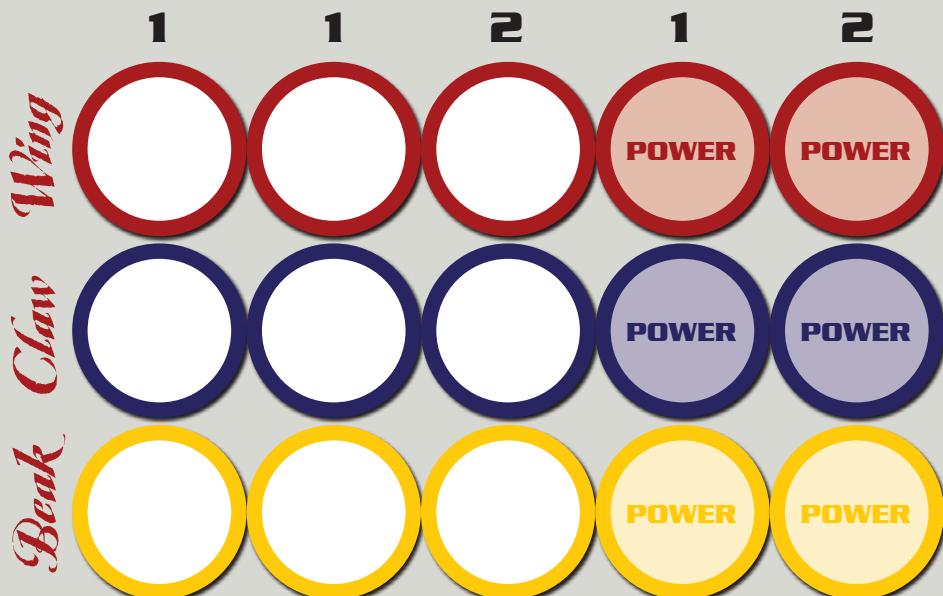
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# FENIX FIGHTERS



*Winged Warrior*

# Killer Claw

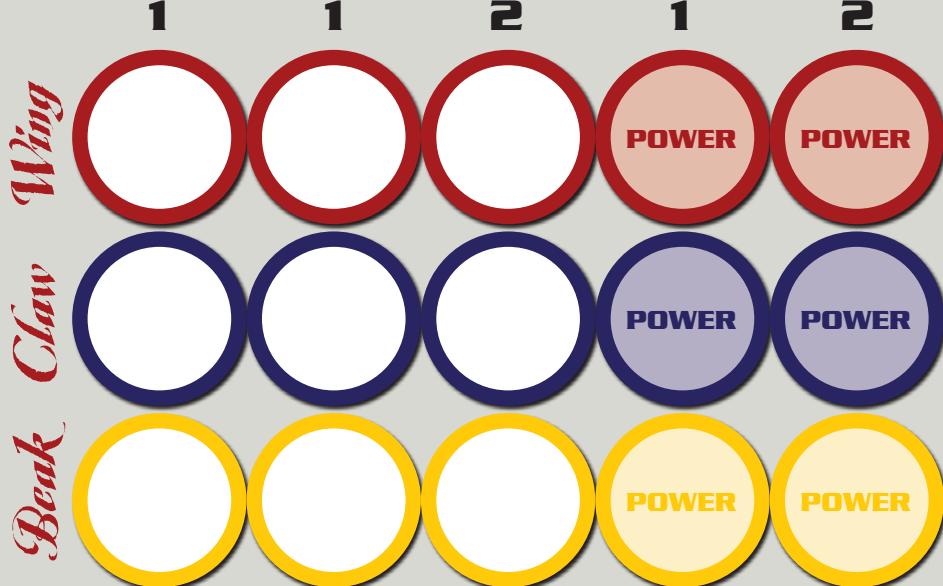


## POINTS

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
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# Skullz



## POINTS

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
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# FENIX FIGHTERS



# *Killer Claw*

# FENIX FIGHTERS



# Skullz

# BEST OF FENIX – VOLUME 1

*Best of Fenix* includes some of the best gaming material from the Swedish gaming magazine *Fenix* – translated to English. In *Best of Fenix* you will find inspiring material written directly for *Fenix*' readers by renown international game designers such as Kenneth Hite and Pete Nash, but also some of the best from the Swedish arena. To top it off, we got our own comic strip *Bernard the Barbarian*, created by Åke Rosenius and at least one stand alone game in every issue. In this our first anthology you will find myths and legends of different kinds, some true to classic source materials and others warped through a brand new filter.



## ARTICLES IN THIS VOLUME

- Once Upon a Time in the North
- Myths & Legends
- City of the Golden Vampires
- Crac des Draca
- Spell Singers in RuneQuest
- Shadows of Babylon
- Long Have I Desired to Look upon the Kings of Old
- The Chamber – Legacy of the Apocalypse
- Werewolves of Dacia
- Master Your Style
- Write Your Own Adventures
- Lovesongs for Lambchops
- But this is Wondrous Strange – to RuneQuest
- Auberond
- Oz is Drowning
- Five Minutes to Twelve
- Fenix Fighters – A Complete Card Game
- Bernard the Barbarian



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